



# Self-Doubt

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## Abstract

The need for understanding serves as a theme throughout social and personality psychology. It is reflected in people's striving toward a shared, social construction of reality (e.g., conformity, uniformity) that runs through so much of the history of theory and research in the field. Stemming from this core motivation, the literature is peppered with illustrations of the preeminence of certainty as a goal (e.g., clarity, consistency, consonance, and related constructs) and the ultimate objective of cultural consensus. Yet, the role of doubt in the form of shaky certainty about the basis for beliefs in attitudes – or doubts about one's self-esteem or self-concept – has increasingly taken center stage. This review takes the self-competence element (vs. self-liking element) of self-worth judgments as its focus and provides an integration of individual difference approaches and experimental investigations of self-doubt. Long neglected, self-doubt increasingly appears critical for understanding some of the surprising, ironic, and self-defeating cognitive, emotional, and behavioral findings seen in the achievement realm.

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*Four be the things I'd been better without:  
Love, curiosity, freckles, and doubt  
Dorothy Parker*

*The fundamental cause of the trouble is that in the modern world the  
stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubt  
Bertrand Russell*

Certainty and clarity are prized and desired, except when they aren't. A careful search for pithy quotations about the value of clarity reveals little, while the virtues of doubt are widely praised. Yet, the preeminence of certainty and clarity as a core human social motive (among social and personality psychologists) is revealed in the central spot accorded the need to understand (e.g., Fiske, 2004). People are said to wish to know things quickly and clearly and to predict things well enough to function in ordinary daily social life (e.g., Heider, 1958). The value of the shared, social construction of reality can be traced through the Festinger tradition (e.g., 1950, 1954, 1957) where disunity among people is psychologically uncomfortable and produces pressures toward uniformity (1950), lack of certainty produces social information seeking (i.e., affiliation) driven by the desire for clarity (1954), and ultimately one's own beliefs and behavior push people away from dissonance and toward consistency of beliefs (1957); indeed, people sometimes place a premium on certainty, clarity, and consonance (a satisfying sense of reality) in the face of objective facts to the contrary. Dissonance is dismissed even when the facts are clearly in conflict and impossible to reconcile – as when prophesy fails (e.g., Gal & Rucker, 2010).

People bother to make sense of themselves and one another (e.g., attribution; social cognition) to satisfy this core motive of understanding, setting the stage for the important

social objectives of controlling their own and others' behavior, establishing relationships, and ultimately functioning well in groups and prospering. It comes as no surprise, then, that **self-doubt is problematic** since it is inimical to this entire social enterprise. Yet, Robert Browning ("Prize the doubt; Low kinds live without") and many others remind us that **too much certainty is not to be prized. Even Biblical admonitions {"Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall"; Proverbs 16:18} characterize a healthy dose of self-doubt as wise medicine.** So, navigating between the Scylla of self-doubt and Charybdis of self-certainty turns out to be one of the self's life tasks. Many researchers have concerned themselves with how people embrace certainty and avoid self-doubt; however, our mission in this paper is to explore self-doubt and the strategies that people enact in order to cope with their feelings of self-doubt.

### *Distinguishing liking and competence*

Defining self-doubt is fraught with the same issues as defining virtually every construct in social and personality psychology (e.g., Leary, Terry, Allen, & Tate, 2009). Natural language and everyday discourse ensures confusion. However, the Oxford English Dictionary does a nice job defining doubt as

the (subjective) state of uncertainty with regard to the truth or reality of anything; undecidedness of belief or opinion. The condition of being (objectively) uncertain; a state of affairs such as to give an occasion for hesitation or uncertainty.

And when this state is connected to one's self, defined as

that which in a person is intrinsically *he* [in contradistinction to what is adventitious]; the ego; a permanent subject of successive and varying states of consciousness,

the quality that is so opposed to simple, straightforward social behavior comes into clearer focus. Self-doubt is the act or state of doubting oneself, it is a "subjective sense of doubt or instability in self-views" (Van den Bos & Lind, 2010, p. 124).

One further simple but crucial distinction is important to acknowledge in presenting contemporary research on self-doubt. Judgments of self-worth have been partitioned usefully into two dimensions: self-competence and self-liking. To oversimplify, self-liking is "the evaluative experience of oneself as a social object, a good or bad person;" self-competence is "the evaluative imprint of general self-efficacy on identity" (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001, p. 654). For the past five decades, many have assumed or held a one-dimensional view of self-worth or self-esteem, where general self-liking is equivalent to global self-esteem (e.g., Rosenberg, 1965), and feelings of self-competence are but one of its many sources. However, the Tafarodi and Swann (2001) model situates self-competence as a critical, unique dimension of self-esteem. Given that, self-doubt as we use the concept should be described as doubt about one's feelings of self-competence.

More recently, the literature acknowledges that judgments and feelings of self-worth are multifaceted (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001); subordinating the one (competence) to the other (liking and acceptance) blurs important distinctions. For our purposes, conflating the concepts of self-doubt and self-liking is problematic (and has been historically) because conventional measures of self-worth include them both. For example, the concept of belongingness has emerged of late (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) within the context of liking, acceptance and affirmation, but it remains distinct from notions of self-competence. From this vantage point one might offer a surprising hypothesis: it would

be no better to be ostracized from a group because one *is too able* than because one is *not competent enough*; from the exclusive belongingness vantage point the core consideration is the set of threatened needs (e.g., Williams, 2001), which are largely distinct from competence, each enmeshed with the need to belong.

Dweck and colleagues (e.g., Dweck, 2006; Dweck & Grant, 2008) provided a clear and compelling focus on competence concerns, rather than self-liking or esteem, in the early distinction they drew between fixed and growth mindsets. In the fixed mindset, people believe that their basic qualities, such as their intelligence or talent, are stable and unchanging. Such individuals typically spend their time documenting their intelligence, or talent, rather than developing them further. They also tend to believe that talent alone produces success, and they downplay the role of effort, learning, perseverance – the very prospect of change. In the growth mindset, people believe that the most basic abilities can be developed, usually through hard work, dedication, and learning. Talent is a starting point, but only that. The growth mindset is associated with resilience to challenges and failure, a greater appeal for learning for its own sake, and higher intrinsic motivation. Self-doubt about one's competence would appear inimical to establishing a growth mindset and problematic for generating feelings of intrinsic motivation. By definition, self-doubt is attention to one's self, a focus on "hesitation" and "uncertainty," and measuring oneself rather than fully engaging in tasks in an unselfconscious way.

We certainly recognize that the concept "self-doubt" can be complex and even elusive (Hogg, 2010; Wright, 2010). Here, we hope to be clear in construing self-doubt as doubt about one's own competence. Defined this way, we expect self-doubt to have implications for the self-competence component of self-esteem uniquely. Speaking colloquially, chronically self-doubtful individuals might be viewed as having a wide confidence interval around judgments of their ability. Rather than straightforwardly seeing themselves as incompetent or expecting poor performance, seeing themselves as gifted and expecting excellence, these individuals entertain the prospect that they are not easily able to point confidently, with precision, to their level of competence.

Importantly, self-doubt should also be distinguished from other related concepts such as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996). Self-efficacy is generally regarded as an expectation about how one will perform in a given domain; by contrast, self-doubt reaches beyond a specific sense of performance efficacy, reflecting an individual's investment – even rumination – over how to view themselves. Self-concept clarity refers broadly to the individual's clarity or certainty or consistency in the many self-images that, taken together, comprise one's self-concept. Self-doubt about competence is intended to signify a lack of clarity exclusive to the competence domain, albeit one that we regard as central to one's judgment of one's global self-worth (cf. Tafarodi & Swann, 2001). As we will describe below, the evidence shows that people strive specifically to cope with feelings of self-doubt about their competence, sometimes striving to reduce their uncertainties and, sometimes, even striving to sustain or to enhance their uncertainties. These findings run counter to the conventional wisdom that certainty and clarity are prized and desired and provide a nuanced view of the cognitive and affective life of the human social animal.

### **Capturing Self-Doubt Empirically**

So, in sum, uncertainty about one's competence and potential for success are now generally regarded as fundamental features of self-evaluation (Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Trope, 1986). As noted above, such uncertainty would be quite troubling given that "competence is

an inherent psychological need of the human being” (Elliot & Dweck, 2005, p. 6). Oleson, Poehlmann, Yost, Lynch, and Arkin (2000) tried to tap that individual difference with one component of a scale called the SOS (Subjective Overachievement Scale). Although most people surely experience doubt about their competence at times, some individuals might question it chronically. One of the two factors of the SOS was developed to tap that experience of doubt about competence.

The self-doubt subscale approaches the construct of self-doubt broadly, without referencing any particular strategy people might use to cope with it. Self-doubt is treated as a general sense of feeling unsure about one’s competencies, abilities, and thus outcomes in daily life that stem from those abilities. Individuals who experience chronic self-doubt are faced with the unsettling experience of uncertainty about their capacity to cause a desired outcome.

Moreover, the items comprising the self-doubt subscale ask about respondents’ preoccupation with the prospect of failure, the desire to avoid negative outcomes, and the self-implicating nature of failure feedback or information. For example, the subscale includes items such as “More often than not I feel unsure of my abilities,” “As I begin an important activity, I usually feel confident in the likely outcome” (reverse-scored), and “For me, avoiding failure has a greater emotional impact (e.g., sense of relief) than the emotional impact of achieving success (e.g., joy, pride).” Beyond self-efficacy beliefs about specific actions and outcomes, the self-doubt *subscale* was written to tap the self-relevant aspects of such thoughts and feelings.

Individuals scoring high on the subscale should lack a clear image of themselves as they are and as they might hope to be, as well as a reliable self-guide and plan for approaching successful outcomes, something possessed by those low in self-doubt. Consequently, the experience of self-doubt should focus attention on the self, undermining any easy engagement with a task at hand. One implication of this unclarity is the absence of a clear and strong desired self (Carroll, Arkin, & Shade, 2011); yet, high self-doubt individuals share with low self-doubt individuals a clear sense of what is undesired. Not surprisingly, we assume that self-doubt is often induced by features of the situation or context, particularly the social situation (e.g., Reich & Arkin, 2006). People high in chronic self-doubt may be more vigilant to such information and prone to feel self-doubtful when it is present, but the most casual remark might induce doubt in even the most confident individual. One of us routinely responds that way to the phrase “Are you sure?” when a decision has been made, and a vicarious form of this doubt is a crucial part of the drama of television game shows (“Deal or No Deal” for example). People who are burdened with self-doubt are not engaged with the environment in an unselfconscious way; they dwell on themselves and measure themselves constantly against a “competence” yardstick and will even turn to material possessions to shore up their identity (Chang & Arkin, 2002; Christopher, Drummond, Jones, Marek, & Therriault, 2006).

The metacognitive experience of temporary, situational doubt about one’s beliefs about the self can be instilled with simple manipulations. If people are asked to list many instances of their assertiveness, for instance, with others listing but a few, the ironic finding is that people asked to express more content supporting their assertiveness rate themselves *lower* not higher in assertiveness if they find it difficult to recall and cite the examples (Schwarz et al., 1991). The lack of ease in retrieving the examples is a cue, one entirely separate from the content of one’s beliefs, which points away from the conclusion (“I am assertive”) and turns a judgment based on content to a judgment based on one’s thoughts (“That was difficult to do”) about one’s beliefs about the self (“So, how assertive am I really?”). Similar results have been found when asking participants to report

on self-confident behavior (Hermann, Leonardelli, & Arkin, 2002). Ironically and remarkably, it is even possible to increase the confidence of individuals who experience chronic uncertainty by inducing them to experience doubt about their beliefs concerning lack of confidence (Wichman et al., 2010), or “doubts about their doubts.”

Recently, the self-doubt subscale was used to help illustrate the relationship between self-uncertainty and judgments of procedural justice (De Cremer & Sedikides, 2005). Individuals high in self-doubt who perceived a situation as procedurally fair reported less negative affect and more intentions to cooperate than those who were low in self-doubt; comparably, when personal uncertainty is salient, unfair procedures yield more negative and less positive affect than when personal uncertainty is not salient (Van den Bos & Lind, 2010). There is something about personal uncertainty concerning competence that makes people react more vigorously toward fair and unfair events and influences how people process interpersonal interactions. One favored interpretation is that fairness judgments are comparable to other forms of “worldview defense,” and that personal uncertainties are comparable to feelings of terror that stem from concerns about mortality (Van den Bos & Lind, 2010). This interpretation is congenial to us: mortality salience and ensuing terror management efforts seem comparable to people’s desire to subdue feelings of self-doubt and foster a sense of shared social reality that is satisfying, simple, and which will divert attention away from thoughts about oneself (i.e., fulfill the need to understand).

Research relating self-doubt to mindsets (Dweck, 2006) or implicit theories has generated some of the most intriguing guesses about what it is like to feel self-doubt in daily life. One recent study (Reich & Arkin, 2006) revealed that people readily infer others’ implicit theories about intelligence based on very slight slices of information. Specifically, the reactions of personally significant others to one’s own mistakes is one clear source of information about their judgments, both their judgments about the nature of competence and their judgments about oneself. When a person expects to perform well, perceiving that an evaluator maintains an entity theory of intelligence increases self-confidence. However, when a person expects to perform poorly, perceiving that an evaluator holds an incremental (i.e., growth) theory increases self-confidence. Thus, the perceived implicit theories of others serve as a source of self-doubt about one’s abilities, on the one hand, and self-confidence on the other. As we interact with people in daily life, we constantly assess how they judge us and attempt to understand the implicit theories that might be guiding their judgments. Self-doubt about competence might be one byproduct of that natural process.

Throughout, we have assumed that concerns about competence and abilities should be fairly universal. Both self-liking and self-competence seem so fundamental to the human condition that we would expect both facets of self-regard to have evolved largely without regard for culture. However, beliefs about competence, including how one illustrates or develops abilities, do vary across individuals and across cultures, and these distinctions seem likely to influence the experience of self-doubt. For instance, American students tend to rate their abilities the highest after putting forth minimal effort (Chang, Arkin, Leong, Chan, & Leung, 2004). They also tend to attributionally discount their ability after exerting a high amount of effort, which sets the stage for self-doubt about ability to arise. In contrast, Hong Kong students report the greatest ability in a domain after they expend maximal effort (Chang et al., 2004).

Other cross-cultural research shows that European Americans publicly downplay the effort they invest in a performance, especially when they are concerned about that performance. Asian Americans, in contrast, do not downplay their efforts (Pualengco, Chiu, &

Kim, 2009). Eastern and Western cultures appear to have different views about the consequences of exerting effort for attributions about one's skills and abilities. As a result, individuals are motivated to emphasize or downplay their efforts in accord with the cultural norms. For European American students, discounting ability after exerting effort may lead to self-doubt by creating uncertainty about the cause of outcomes when more effort is put forth. For Asian American or Asian students, because effort appears to imply ability, low effort may create doubt about one's ability. Thus, self-doubt about competence might be born of different conditions in different cultures.

Similarly, there might be individual differences in the genesis and experience of self-doubt between the genders, within the North American culture. For instance, there is some evidence that women report higher self-doubt on the Self-Doubt Scale (Oleson et al., 2000) than men (McCrea, Hirt, & Milner, 2008b; Oleson et al., 2000). In addition, though preliminary, findings suggest that women tend to place more personal value on effort and view effort as more important than ability or more culturally valued than do men (McCrea, Hirt, Hendrix, Milner, & Steele, 2008a; McCrea et al., 2008b). For men, the expenditure of effort may be more troubling, then, since they do not share this value as much and their abilities are drawn in to question in the presence of high effort. This may intriguingly mean that it is easier to prime self-doubt among men, in particular after they have completed a task that required them to expend a good deal of effort.

### **Self-Doubt in Action: Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavior**

People routinely encounter challenges throughout daily life. Obvious examples include high-stakes academic tests, athletic competitions, and conflict within meaningful personal or work relationships. People may experience doubts about their ability and their capacity to perform well as they approach and engage these tasks. For all the reasons described above, which taken together argue that feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty are aversive, we suppose that people who chronically experience doubt will develop some strategy to deal with that state. Even transitory feelings of self-doubt about one's competence are not likely to stand unchallenged, and one of the most compelling research arenas has been centered on how self-doubt concerns play a role in inventive, even ironic, cognitive and behavioral ways that people try to manage their experience of self-doubt.

#### *Self-handicapping*

Self-handicapping (Berglas & Jones, 1978) is perhaps the most widely cited strategy for managing one's self-doubt about competence (Oleson & Arkin, 1994). Because individuals experiencing self-doubt feel uncertain about their ability, and therefore their prospects for success, their self-image of competence is at risk. Self-handicapping provides the opportunity to obscure the plausible causes of failure. This strategy makes the handicap as likely an explanation for failure as one's incompetence, and so self-handicapping is appealing even in the face of failure. Indeed, the most popular and persuasive handicaps clearly interfere with performance outcomes (e.g., drugs, alcohol, procrastination), and so protecting one's plausible perception of competence carries with it the cost of not enjoying success. Preoccupation with the attributional implications of failure outweighs the desire to succeed, showing that the identity implications of outcomes can often carry more weight than the outcomes themselves.

Ironically, but intriguingly, the self-handicapping strategy serves to perpetuate feelings of self-doubt. Self-handicappers rarely receive, indeed they often eschew, diagnostic



information about their ability levels. And self-handicappers may often rely on what Jones and Berglas (1978) called the *mañana* fantasy: in time, when the spirit moves one, genuine effort might produce success. Jones and Berglas invited consideration of the alcoholic, who covets both a chronic handicap (the alcohol), and the idea that life one day will be ideal once the drinking stops, but is hardly ready to test prospects without the alcohol. Self-doubt compels the handicapper to never put his ability to a true test.

Berglas and Jones (1978) did not measure self-doubt in their initial demonstration of self-handicapping but rather inferred its presence. Yet, their classic non-contingent success induction taps into the heart of the self-doubt that produces self-handicapping. Some participants received enthusiastic success feedback from the experimenter on a test of intelligence, yet the test was comprised of some difficult and other unsolvable problems. Their experience was surely perplexing: they achieved success despite a clear feeling that their performance was uncertain, at best, and perhaps clearly inadequate. Later, they were given the opportunity to select one or the other of two supposed drugs prior to a second set of trials of the very same test. One drug was said to have the likely effect of enhancing intellectual performance; the other was said to have the likely effect of interfering with performance. Participants who faced a non-contingent success experience, where they inexplicably achieved success, tended to select the impairing drug.

More recent research continues to support the notion that self-doubt about competence underlies self-handicapping. For example, Oleson et al. (2000) found that scores on their Self-Doubt Scale have a strong, positive correlation ( $r = .56$ ) with a scale measure of self-handicapping (Strube, 1986); McCrea et al. (2008b) recently found a similar correlation ( $r = .60$ ) between the Self-Doubt Scale and Jones and Rhodewalt's (1982) Self-Handicapping Scale. Also, Lynch (1998) manipulated both self-doubt and whether participants staked their identity on competence (ability) or performance. In the presence of self-doubt, those whose identity was based on competence put in less effort prior to a test of novel ability than those whose identity was focused on performance, whereas their effort did not vary in the absence of self-doubt. Coupling self-uncertainty and self-evaluation based on competence promoted less practice, just as Berglas and Jones (1978) had anticipated.

### *Overachievement*

Self-handicapping is only one way to cope with self-doubt about one's competence. Overachieving is another, and Jones and Berglas (1978, p. 205) proposed that

the self-handicapper...may in many ways be similar to the overachiever. Each is fearful that failure will implicate competence. Each has an abnormal investment in the question of self-worth. One succeeds in avoiding failure through persistent effort, the other embraces failure as an alternative to self-implicating feedback.

So, faced with self-doubt and the implications of failure, people have more than merely one way to handle that threat. Among these, some people might strive to ensure that failure is prevented; others might opt to obscure its attributional implications. Unlike the self-sabotage of self-handicapping, subjective overachievement involves the exertion of extra effort in order to avoid failure. By definition, self-doubtful individuals are uncertain whether their ability alone can produce a success, so exerting an extraordinary amount of effort is one way to enhance the prospects of success and, with enough heroic single-minded effort, perhaps ensure it.

Like self-handicapping, overachievement ultimately perpetuates feelings of self-doubt. This is, in part, why the term *subjective overachiever* better fits this experience than the standard term *overachiever*. *Overachiever* implies only that individuals are out-performing their predicted performance. Imagine a regression line where ACT scores predict college performance, something that virtually all of our college student participants surely have themselves considered. Those students plotted above the regression line are objectively overachieving; those below the line are, objectively, underachievers. Subjective overachievers, on the other hand, are those who *think* and *feel* that they *may be* above that supposed, hypothetical regression line (i.e., their performance *feels like* it may outstrip their talent). Ironically, the self-doubt that inspires their extraordinary effort is the genesis of their self-attribution of “overachiever.” Subjective overachievers cannot know clearly whether their ability or their extra effort produced their successful outcomes. They are the architects of their own fate. However, while the self-handicapper wishes to underscore and sustain that uncertainty, the subjective overachiever may well create uncertainty as a byproduct of focusing on anything and everything that can forestall failure and ensure success.

Despite obvious differences in their phenotypic expression, self-doubt is the genotype underlying both self-handicapping and subjective overachievement. Of course, certain factors must differentiate individuals who adopt one strategy or the other, and these are specifiable (see Oleson & Steckler, 2010). Both self-handicappers and overachievers likely believe that approval from others and themselves stems ultimately from performance – since performance signifies one’s level of ability. However, self-handicappers may be more attuned to managing the attribution of ability directly, even foregoing successful performances, while subjective overachievers are more attuned to the performance itself. Recent research examining the contingencies of self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) of both overachievers and self-handicappers supports this distinction (e.g., Oleson, Booth, Grueneisen, Lynch, & Yen, 2009). These investigators examined both self-worth contingent on academic *performance* and self-worth contingent on academic *ability* and found that subjective overachievers reported that their self-worth was impacted by their academic *performance* while self-handicappers reported that their self-worth was based on their possessing high academic *ability*. High self-handicappers were less likely to report self-worth based on performance than were low self-handicappers.

Lynch (1998) found that the presence of self-doubt, when combined with concern for performance, led participants to exert much more effort prior to a test of a novel ability. Similarly, in a field setting where academic issues were clearly important, being high on both self-doubt and concern with performance (versus low on both) had a clear influence on studying and actual academic performance: after controlling for actual ACT scores, those high in self-doubt and concern with performance studied more, achieved higher grade point averages, and the relationship between their Subjective Overachiever score and academic performance was mediated by the amount of studying they did (Oleson, Lynch, Poehlmann, & Arkin, 2012). Overall, then, there is reason to believe that people who are uncertain about their competence and believe that others evaluate them based on performance might turn to overachievement to manage their self-doubt.

### *Impostor phenomenon*

The Impostor Syndrome (e.g., Clance, 1985) is still another experience that has been associated with self-doubt. Those said to suffer from the Impostor Syndrome struggle



with the sense that their successful outcomes are not an accurate reflection of their underlying abilities. Unlike the subjective overachiever, however, the impostor supposedly views her or his success as unearned and illegitimate. Individuals with impostor feelings often cite luck, timing, or good fortune as their key to success and are convinced that others are precipitous and perhaps deceived in ascribing their successes to their ability. So, even in the face of demonstrably successful outcomes, impostors may still harbor doubts about ability and fear that they are less capable than others assume. Correlational evidence supports this relationship between impostor feelings and self-doubt ( $r = .68$ ; Oleson et al., 2000). Impostor feelings are also strongly related to self-handicapping (Want & Kleitman, 2006).

### *Other enhancement*

Finally, “other-enhancement” (Shepperd & Arkin, 1991) has been identified as an attractive doubt-management strategy, one that enjoys some advantages over self-handicapping. When performance outcomes are relative or comparative rather than based on some absolute standard, a failing performance can be attributed to some advantage enjoyed by one’s opponent. This strategy may prove attractive, at times, because people do not have to sabotage their own performance, in absolute terms, to give or to see their opponent as enjoying some advantage, such as a “head start.” Attributionally, people can have their cake and eat it too, performing at their best while still staving off the anxiety of the self-implicating attribution of losing a contest to some competitor who enjoys some advantage. Even believing that one’s competitor enjoys an advantage satisfies the same desire to deal with the threat to self-competence judgments (Shepperd & Taylor, 1999).

In sum, impostor feelings, self-handicapping, other-enhancement, overachievement, and perhaps still other maneuvers may comprise a constellation of diverse yet common strategies that reflect comparable, but distinct, ways to manage one’s self-doubts about competence.

### *Stereotype threat*

Research on the phenomenon of stereotype threat suggests one of the most intriguing of sources of self-doubt; self-doubts can be viral and infectious, resulting from identification with a stereotyped group where questions about competence prevail. Stereotype threat refers to an individual’s concern that she or he might confirm a negative stereotype about an important group and the ironic performance decrements that can result from the anxiety borne of such concerns (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995). Specifically, Steele and Aronson first proposed that the activation of a negative racial stereotype might arouse self-doubts about ability in the stereotype-relevant domain. Across several studies, Steele and Aronson found that African-American participants underperformed compared to their White counterparts, but only when their performance was said to be diagnostic of ability or when race was made salient. On a word-completion task, African-American participants in that diagnostic performance condition generated the most self-doubt related completions, suggesting that identification with the stereotyped group was the source of uncertainty about their own competence.

As in self-handicapping and overachievement, individuals experiencing this stereotype-induced doubt might adopt certain behavioral strategies to manage feelings of uncertainty. Previous work on stereotype threat has identified disengagement and disidentification as

possible consequences of that threat; targets of stereotype threat might distance themselves from threatening domains and remove those domains from their identity (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). For instance, after repeatedly experiencing stereotype threat, a woman may no longer view herself as a “math person.” Rather than striving to undermine the diagnosticity of outcomes, someone may simply avoid any situation that could trigger self-doubt in the first place.

Furthermore, this behavioral response of disengagement suggests that the experience of self-doubt might depend on the domain in question and the importance that the individual attaches to that domain. For instance, two individuals may have the same non-contingent success experience, receiving a high grade on an exam without possessing an understanding of the material. However, success in the class may only be important to the identity of one of the students. Only the student who cares about the class, and thus finds the feedback self-relevant, should respond with feelings of self-doubt. Because the feedback carries no great weight for the uninterested student, he or she may simply accept the grade and move on without worrying about underlying competence.

### *Self-doubt in relationships*

We have focused here on self-doubt about competence and explored it for the most part in the context most available and familiar to psychological scientists in a university setting: academic achievement. But we believe that self-doubt should not be considered something found exclusively within an academic context. Rather, individuals might experience doubt about their ability and competence in any number of domains, and one where self-doubt appears to play an important role is close relationships. Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, and Ellsworth (1998) propose that individuals with dispositional insecurities might project the supposed source of their self-doubts onto their partners and subsequently feel all the more uncertain about the standing of their relationships. Across four studies, using measures of self-esteem and attachment style to capture self-doubt, they demonstrated that low self-esteem individuals reacted in response to self-doubts by calling into question their partners' positive regard for them and distancing themselves from their partners. Further research (Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001) revealed that individuals experiencing self-doubt in their relationships underestimated their partners' love, perceived their partners less positively, and were less satisfied in their relationships. This evidence suggests both that self-doubt exists in the intimate relationships domain and that self-doubt within that context (as in the contexts mentioned earlier) motivates behaviors designed to manage and cope with those feelings of uncertainty.

### **Coda**

The evidence is growing that people find ways to cope with and to manage their feelings of uncertainty about the self. Coupled with what is known about fragile and vulnerable self-liking, reflected in uncertain self-esteem, the evidence presented here concerning the role of self-doubt in self-competence judgments argues that the uncertain self (e.g., Arkin, Oleson, & Carroll, 2010) is crucial to a complete understanding of the role of the self in social relations. The historical emphasis on reducing uncertainty, whenever and wherever possible, turns out to be only a part of the picture; a full understanding of the self is enriched by including all facets of self-doubt and uncertainty in the mix.

## Short Biographies

Matthew Braslow is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Social Psychology at The Ohio State University. His research focuses on self-doubt and self-esteem, with recent work examining the role of uncertainty and threat in the phenomena of self-handicapping and overachievement. Matthew holds a BA in Psychology from Northwestern University and a MA in Social Psychology from The Ohio State University.

Jean Guerrettaz is a graduate student at The Ohio State University pursuing her Ph.D. in Social Psychology. Her research focuses on self-concept clarity and self-esteem. Current research explores the role of self-concept clarity in creating expectations about one's self-knowledge and how these expectations influence the experience of elaborating on important self-attributes. Jean holds a BA in Mathematics from Indiana University and a MA in Social Psychology from The Ohio State University.

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## Endnote

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