

**TOWSON UNIVERSITY**  
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**COPING WITH SELF-THREAT: THE IMPACT OF SELF-COMPASSION AND  
SELF-AFFIRMATION ON INTRINSIC CONTINGENT SELF-WORTH**

by

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## Abstract

Self-esteem varies interpersonally along with the dimensions by which people base their respective self-esteem, referred to as contingencies of self-worth (CSW). The present study sought to manipulate an intrinsic domain of CSW by implementing self-affirmation and self-compassion strategies. A total of 156 participants reflected upon a threat ( $n = 79$ ) or did not ( $n = 77$ ). Participants were also placed in a strategy condition of either control ( $n = 50$ ), self-affirmation ( $n = 53$ ), or self-compassion ( $n = 53$ ). Participants then completed the Contingencies of Self-Esteem Scale and a current feelings questionnaire. Results revealed that there were no significant main effects on intrinsic contingent self-worth. Secondary analyses revealed a significant effect of threat on extrinsic contingent self-worth and also an interaction effect of threat and strategy on negative affect. A major limitation was the use of a social threat to manipulate intrinsic contingent self-worth.

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## **Introduction and Literature Review**

Self-worth, alternatively known as self-esteem, reflects how one feels about him or herself. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction regarding oneself is generally a result of performance on a certain domain of self-worth; the more important the domain, the more significant the effect on self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

Understandably, having a sense of self-worth that is highly contingent on any domain(s) can lead to a general instability of self-esteem due to the emphasis that one places on a certain domain and the corresponding performance on that domain. The intrinsic domain of self-worth, however, is conducive to personal growth and promotes the idea of being the best person one can be (Vonk & Smit, 2012).

Inevitably, there will be occurrences during which one's self-worth - or their perception of their self-worth - is threatened. People seek strategies that help them deal with these threats in an effort to alleviate any kind of psychological or emotional pain caused by the aforementioned threat. Social psychologists have presented research supporting the effectiveness of self-compassion and self-affirmation in terms of dealing with a self-threat in a non-defensive way.

The implementation of self-compassion and self-affirmation exercises may lead people to increase their intrinsic contingency of self-worth due to the self-focused emphasis of the intrinsic contingency. Then, since intrinsic contingencies of self-worth promote personal growth, people will be able to both respond effectively to a threat and also improve their overall sense of self-worth.

This paper will review the literature on contingencies of self-worth, particularly the intrinsic domain, followed by an identification and review of self-compassion and

self-affirmation research and strategies. Then, I will propose a study to test self-compassion and self-affirmation in an effort to examine intrinsic contingent self-worth.

### **Contingencies of Self-Worth**

Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, and Bouvrette (2003) identified seven dimensions on which people may base their self-worth, referred to as contingencies of self-worth (CSW). These dimensions are family support, competition, appearance, God's love, academic competency, virtue, and approval from others. Importantly, these contingencies vary from one person to the next based on their personal values and beliefs. Some of the dimensions of contingent self-worth are particularly external, such as family support and approval from others, whereas some have a more internal nature, such as God's love and virtue. Contingencies of self-worth are important because they moderate the effect of positive and negative experiences on state self-esteem (Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002).

Using the aforementioned CSW scale, Crocker, Sommers, and Luhtanen (2002) focused on the academic competency aspect of contingent self-worth and found that both self-esteem and affect were influenced in academically-contingent participants upon hearing news about graduate school decisions (either positive or negative). Participants whose self-worth was contingent on academics showed an increase in both positive affect and state self-esteem upon hearing positive feedback and an increase in negative affect and a decrease in self-esteem upon hearing negative feedback. In participants whose self-worth was not contingent on academics, positive affect rose while self-esteem stayed at approximately the same level. This study revealed that the contingency of the participants

affected how they dealt with the threat and the effect that the threat had on their self-esteem and affect.

The effects of contingent self-worth are not restricted to academics, self-esteem, and affect. Crocker and Wolfe (2005) reviewed past research regarding the pursuit of self-esteem and its corresponding effects within the domains of learning, autonomy, relationships, self-regulation, mental health, and physical health.

Within the review by Crocker and Wolfe (2005), Crocker and Park (2004) reference a study in an unpublished manuscript by Park and Crocker (2003) which revealed that the pursuit of self-esteem based on approval from others only results in an increased focus on oneself as opposed to focusing on others, potentially leading to a dysfunctional relationship in general. In this study, two unacquainted participants were involved in a task during which one of the participants - the "target" - completed a GRE analogies test that they either failed (experimental condition) or did not fail (control). Afterwards, the other participant - the "perceiver" - tried to talk about a personal problem with the target. After the interaction, the perceiver rated the target participant on qualities such as compassion and helpfulness. In the event that the target was in the experimental group, had high self-esteem that was highly contingent on academic competency, the target was viewed as less caring or concerned by the perceiver compared to perceivers who interacted with low-contingent participants or participants of either contingency in the control condition. Similarly, Crocker (2002) found that people with high appearance-based contingency tended to engage in more physically harmful activities including excessive alcohol consumption and unsafe sex.

Furthermore, Luhtanen and Crocker (2005) found, via a longitudinal study using surveys, that there was a positive relationship between appearance contingency and alcohol use and a negative relationship between both virtue contingency and alcohol use and God's love contingency and alcohol use in college students between their first and second semesters in college. Therefore, participants whose self-worth was contingent on appearance were more likely to engage in alcohol use over the course of the study, potentially making appearance contingency a predictor of alcohol use, though not explicitly stated. In contrast, the contingencies of virtue and God's love could potentially be viewed as predictors of an absence of alcohol use since participants whose self-worth was contingent on those domains did not typically engage in alcohol use over the course of the study.

Typically, CSW is viewed as a trait, since individuals' contingencies of self-worth are assumed to be relatively stable (Luhtanen & Crocker, 2005). Buckingham, Weber, and Sypher (2012) showed that there are significant effects of threat on contingencies of self-worth, suggesting that self-worth contingencies can be adjusted on a situational basis. One of several experiments by Buckingham et al. (2012) had participants recall a time when they were ignored or rejected, and the results showed that participants with high self-esteem reduced their approval contingency, theoretically to maintain their high self-esteem when dealing with a threat.

As seen above, contingent self-worth has the ability to harm one's self-esteem, and it can also ultimately result in impaired interpersonal relationships. Research by Crocker and colleagues made clear that the pursuit of self-esteem by attempting to satisfy one's contingencies has the potential to have negative effects on the pursuer and may end

up negatively affecting the situation that the pursuer was trying so hard to achieve. This effect was seen in the relationship study by Park and Crocker (2003) mentioned above where, by trying to succeed on the domain of approval from others, pursuers actually made their interpersonal relationships about themselves and, thus, less about the people from which the pursuer was seeking approval. This resulted in a less-than-ideal interpersonal relationship as rated by the other participant in the study.

The Park and Crocker (2003) study showed how CSW, particularly of an external nature, can affect behavior in a negative way, thus becoming problematic. Crocker et al. (2003) stated that some contingencies of self-worth are particularly external due to dependence on others or superficial parts of the self. These external contingencies would include others' approval, appearance, competition, academic competence, and family love. The internal contingencies that Crocker et al. (2003) identifies include virtue and God's love. Vonk and Smit (2012) sought to identify a type of contingency that was based on positive inner qualities of the individual as opposed to potentially negative external situations.

### **Intrinsic Contingent Self-Worth**

Vonk and Smit (2012) posited that self-esteem should not be based on external contingencies. This view stems partly from a theory by Kernis (2003) that stated that the best kind of self-esteem is noncontingent. Ryan and Deci (2000) refer to this noncontingent self-esteem as *true* self-esteem within their framework of self-determination theory, which emphasizes intrinsic motivation and the pursuit of wellness based on being authentic and true to oneself, as opposed to the previously mentioned contingencies that are the focus of extrinsic pursuits. Vonk and Smit (2012) argue,

however, that even though noncontingent or true self-esteem does have its clear benefits, an intrinsically contingent self-worth model would be more beneficial to the individual than an entirely noncontingent model. Intrinsic contingent self-worth involves basing one's self-esteem on taking actions that match with one's personality and that result in personal growth.

Based on description alone, intrinsic contingent self-worth seems to have multiple advantages including being true to oneself and implementing and maintaining authenticity. On the contrary, extrinsic self-worth contingencies, as shown by Crocker & Wolfe (2005), have a plethora of potential negative impacts on oneself and relationships. For this reason, an increase in intrinsic contingent self-worth is preferred.

Within contingencies of self-worth, Jansen and Vonk (2005) created a measure to assess intrinsic contingent self-worth; the measure also assesses external contingencies similar to Crocker's measure. Vonk and Smit (2012) define intrinsic contingency as a situation in which actions match with one's personality and tendencies and the actions are also beneficial to personal growth. For example, on an item from the Jansen and Vonk (2005) measure of intrinsic contingent self-worth, participants rate the extent to which their self-worth increases or decreases based on "discovering a new side of myself."

In developing the idea of intrinsic contingency, Vonk and Smit (2012) tested domain-specific contingency of self esteem along with general contingent self-esteem, personal well-being, affect, authenticity, self-compassion, instability of self-esteem, hostility, and global self-esteem. A main component of their results included the idea that participants whose self-esteem was highly contingent on external factors showed lower stable self-esteem, higher negative affect, and more hostility, among several other

maladaptive aspects of self-esteem and well-being. In contrast, participants with high intrinsic contingency, as measured by Jansen and Vonk's (2005) domain-specific contingency of self-esteem, showed various positive aspects of self-esteem and psychological health, including but not limited to higher positive affect, more authenticity, and more self-compassion.

Research has shown that contingent self-worth can be adjusted in the presence of a threat (Buckingham et al., 2012). Since intrinsic contingent self-worth involves being true to oneself and acting in a way that supports one's personality, we will now examine strategies that could potentially be used to increase intrinsic contingent self-worth by way of fortifying one's idea about oneself.

### **Self-Affirmation**

One potential way to increase intrinsic CSW is through self-affirmation. Self-affirmation has been shown to increase positive attitude and reduce defensiveness, therefore it may also affect contingent self-worth because, according to Vonk and Smit (2012), non-contingent self-worth is defensive. According to McQueen and Klein's (2006) review, most people try to maintain a positive self-evaluation, and threats to the self are typically met with defensiveness or, at a minimum, psychological discomfort. McQueen and Klein (2006) sought to examine manipulations of self-affirmation in an effort to identify their categories and effectiveness. They found that, among qualifying studies, most manipulations involved responding to scales or questions, writing an essay, or imagining a particular experience. Upon investigating the results of the self-affirmation manipulations, the analysis found that participants engaging in self-affirmation typically showed positive effects such as reductions in prejudice,

improvements in attitude, and acceptance of counter-arguments. The analysis could not sufficiently say that self-affirmation significantly affected certain other cognitions, behavior, or task performance.

The maintenance of self-evaluation is directly related to - if not synonymous with - self-esteem. Therefore, if self-affirmation is implemented in an effort to increase self-evaluation or combat threats to the self, then self-affirmation should also affect self-worth and the dimensions upon which self-worth is contingent. A study by Armitage (2012) showed that female adolescents who engaged in self-affirmation manipulations reported significantly less threat regarding ratings of body shape and weight compared to female adolescents who did not self-affirm. Further analysis showed that a key cause of the reduced threat was due to females shifting their contingent self-worth away from the importance of appearance in terms of body shape and weight. Armitage's study did not measure intrinsic contingent self-worth, but, theoretically, participants engaging in self-affirmation could have shifted towards intrinsic contingent self-worth in the process of shifting away from the appearance contingency.

Schimmel et al. (2004) implemented a self-affirmation manipulation that successfully influenced intrinsic and extrinsic self-worth based on academic task performance, self-threat, and social acceptability. Their manipulation involved having the participants rank the importance of twelve self-definitions. Then, participants were instructed to insert their most important self-definition into sentence stems and complete the sentence as they saw fit. The intrinsic manipulation focused on the highest-ranked self-definition and how it made the participant feel or think. For example, if a participant's highest-ranked self-definition was "student", a follow-up question would be

"Being a *student* makes me feel \_\_\_\_." The participant would fill in the blank appropriately. The extrinsic manipulation focused on external rewards and the impact of other people. For example, using the "student" self-definition, a follow-up question would be "When I am a successful student, I receive \_\_\_\_." The results showed that participants in the intrinsic condition were significantly less likely to attribute potential failure to external effects compared to participants in the extrinsic condition, and that participants in the intrinsic condition actually performed better on an arithmetic task.

The manipulation by Schimel et al. (2004) revealed a successful manipulation between intrinsic and extrinsic domains of the self. A similar manipulation by McQueen and Klein (2006) had participants choose a value that was important to them among six choices: conscientious, friendliness, spirituality/religiousness, compassion, intelligence, generosity, trustworthiness, kindness, creativity, spontaneity, and hedonism. Next, participants wrote about the importance of that value and how they had used that value in their past behaviors.

Since Buckingham, et al. (2012) showed that CSW is a state idea and can be adjusted, the self-affirmation manipulation by McQueen and Klein (2006) could reasonably show differences in intrinsic contingent self-worth using the assessment created by Jansen and Vonk (2005).

### **Self-Compassion**

According to Neff (2011), self-compassion involves being kind and accepting of oneself, while also emphasizing an acceptance of commonality with others. By realizing how similar one is to those around him or her, the idea of being "average" or "normal" becomes a place of solace as opposed to a means of justification for inadequacy. Neff's

(2003) view of self-compassion identifies three inward competitions that comprise self-compassion: self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification. Self-kindness implies an acceptance of imperfection and a pleasant approach to personal shortcomings. As mentioned previously, common humanity involves accepting that all people are, at one point or another, inadequate. Mindfulness involves taking an objective approach to one's problems and truly experiencing the pain and emotion behind a threat.

Research has revealed that high levels of self-compassion are related to a general psychological well-being, including life satisfaction, happiness, and optimism among many others (Neff, 2009). Reciprocally, a study by Shapiro, Brown, and Biegel (2007) examined the effects of mindfulness on therapists on a personal level, with one of the examined dimensions being self-compassion. Specifically, the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program yielded less stress, negative affect, rumination, and anxiety while increasing positive affect and self-compassion.

Leary et al. (2007) showed that self-compassion acts as a buffer against self-threats or negative events. His studies suggested that people high in self-compassion consequently have a high level of acceptance of common humanity. Therefore, negative events can be processed through a common humanity perspective, resulting in less of a personal acceptance of the problem. Leary's Study 4 subjected participants to a potentially embarrassing task that involved being recorded while fabricating a children's story. In terms of self-compassion, participants with high self-compassion graded their performances and personality more favorably, whereas the opposite was true for participants with low self-compassion. Additionally, Leary also concluded that high self-

compassion yields lower reactivity to certain events, likely as a result of the common humanity aspect of self-compassion and the idea that inadequacy is normal and one event does not define a person.

Research on self-compassion has shown its effectiveness in dealing with threats to the self or negative events in general and has also revealed several benefits to psychological well-being. Intrinsic self-worth was also related to better general psychological health, so an increase in self-compassion may reasonably result in increased intrinsic self-worth as well.

### **The Present Study**

The present study examined the malleability of intrinsic contingent self-worth. To this point, research has not addressed the impact of self-affirmation and self-compassion regarding the increase of intrinsic contingent self-worth. Additionally, it is unclear if self-affirmation or self-compassion has an absolute impact regardless of situation, or if these strategies are effective only in the event of a threat to the self.

The study employed a 3 X 2 factorial design. There were three levels of "strategy" - self-affirmation, self-compassion, or control - and two levels of "threat" - threat or non-threat. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six possible conditions. In the threat conditions, participants were asked to write about a situation that involves a time when they were rejected. In the non-threat condition, participants did not complete this task.

After writing or not writing about their past rejection, participants in the self-affirmation condition were asked to select an important value, followed by the completion of a task that involves explaining why the selected value is the most

important and how it has been used (adapted from McQueen & Klein, 2006). Participants in the self-compassion condition were asked to reflect on the situation and engage in a reflective self-compassion exercise (adapted from Buckingham et al., 2015, unpublished). Participants in the control condition re-wrote excerpts from an irrelevant textbook.

Assuming that all manipulations are effective, I tested for two possible outcomes. The first possible outcome was a main effect of strategy such that participants in the self-affirmation and/or self-compassion conditions reported higher intrinsic contingent self-worth than the control condition. A second outcome was an interaction between strategy and threat, showing that the self-affirmation or self-compassion strategy was only effective in the event of a threat, and, therefore, would not be effective if a threat is not present.

## Method

IRB approval can be found in Appendix A.

### Participants

Participants were recruited using Towson University's Researchpool database and were age 18 or older. There was a total of 156 participants. The average age was 19, there were 121 females (78%), and 95 participants (61%) identified as being Caucasian.

### Procedure

Participants completed the Self-Liking portion ( $\alpha = .91$ ) of the Self-Liking and Self-Competence Scale (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995) and also the Self-Compassion Scale - Short Form (Raes, Pommier, Neff, & Van Gucht, 2010,  $\alpha = .83$ ) in the Towson University Researchpool database as a screening requirement for the study. The Self-Liking Scale is comprised of 8 items and ranges from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). The Self-Compassion Scale - Short Form is comprised of 12 items and ranges from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*).

Participants signed an informed consent form (Appendix B). All participants were randomly assigned to one of six groups: self-affirmation with threat, self-affirmation without threat, self-compassion with threat, self-compassion without threat, control with threat, or control without threat. The study was conducted using MediaLab software.

Participants in each of the threat groups were told to think about and describe a time when they were clearly ignored. Then, participants answered questions about the situation regarding their relationship to the person involved, how many people were involved, and how being ignored made the participant feel (Molden et al., 2009; Buckingham et al., 2012).

Participants in the non-threat groups were not given an additional task.

Participants in the self-affirmation condition selected their most important value/trait among seven choices: conscientiousness, spirituality/religiousness, intelligence, creativity, spontaneity, hedonism, or determination. Next, participants used this previously-selected most important value and wrote about why that value is important to them, including how the value has influenced the participants' behaviors or attitudes (adapted from McQueen & Klein, 2006).

Participants in the self-compassion condition were asked to list several common situations during which other people can be ignored. Next, participants were asked to take a few moments to reflect on the emotions that were likely felt during the event of being ignored. Participants then wrote a brief paragraph expressing understanding, kindness, and concern to himself or herself in a way similar to how they would offer consolation to a friend dealing with a similar event (Buckingham et al., 2015, unpublished).

Participants in the control group were asked to re-write random one paragraph excerpts from a marketing textbook.

After completing the manipulation task for their respective group, all participants completed a series of questionnaires. The first was the Contingencies of Self-Esteem Scale (Jansen & Vonk, 2012), which has a positive upward dimension and a negative downward dimension. The positive dimension asks participants to rate on a 7-point scale to what extent 16 situations or circumstances positively affect their self-esteem. The 7-point scale ranges from 1 (*has no influence on my self-esteem*) to 7 (*has a strong positive effect on my self-esteem*). Subscales include intrinsic (e.g., being skilled at what I do,  $\alpha =$

.77), capability (e.g., delivering a good performance,  $\alpha = .70$ ), physical (e.g., looking good,  $\alpha = .79$ ), and social (e.g., getting attention from others,  $\alpha = .72$ ).

The negative dimension asks participants to rate on a 7-point scale to what extent 16 situations or circumstances negatively affect their self-esteem. The 7-point scale ranges from 1 (*has no influence on my self-esteem*) to 7 (*has a strong negative impact on my self-esteem*). Similar to the positive dimension, subscales include intrinsic (e.g., going against my conscience,  $\alpha = .78$ ), capability (e.g., failing at a task,  $\alpha = .74$ ), physical (e.g., looking sloppy,  $\alpha = .78$ ), and social (e.g., feeling that others don't like me,  $\alpha = .86$ ).

Next, participants completed a current feelings questionnaire (adapted from Leary et al., 2007, Appendix C,  $\alpha = .883$ ), which asked participants to rate their current feelings on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). Items on this questionnaire spanned four subscales: happiness (happy, cheerful, delighted, pleased), sadness (down, depressed, sad, dejected), anger (irritated, annoyed, mad, angry), and anxiety (anxious, tense, uneasy, nervous).

Participants then completed another current feelings questionnaire with the same 7-point scale (Appendix D), though this questionnaire focused on feelings about oneself. Items were randomized, but spanned two subscales: state self-compassion (sympathetic, grateful, joyful, loving, connected, balanced, caring, open, understanding) and state self-esteem (competent, proud, useless\*, insecure\*, effective; \* - Reverse-scored).

Next, participants were given a demographic questionnaire that included age, gender, and race. Finally, participants were debriefed about the true nature of the study.

## Results

Intrinsic contingent self-worth, extrinsic contingent self-worth, and affect were all analyzed using 3 X 2 Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) with threat and strategy functioning as independent variables.

### **Intrinsic Contingent Self-Worth**

As mentioned previously, intrinsic contingent self-worth is divided into a positive upward dimension and a negative downward dimension. An ANOVA examining upward intrinsic contingent self-worth with trait self-liking and trait self-compassion as covariates did not reveal a significant effect of threat, strategy, or the interaction of threat and strategy ( $p > .05$ , Table 1). There was, however, a significant positive relationship between trait self-liking and upward intrinsic contingent self-worth,  $r = .252$ ,  $p = .002$ . An ANOVA examining downward intrinsic contingent self-worth, again with trait self-liking and trait self-compassion as covariates, also did not reveal a significant effect of threat, strategy, or the interaction of threat and strategy ( $p > .05$ , Table 2).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Upward Intrinsic Contingent Self-worth

Threat	Strategy	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Threat	Control	22.33	3.75	27
	Self-Compassion	21.81	4.34	26
	Self-Affirmation	20.81	4.96	26
	Total	21.66	4.36	79
No Threat	Control	21.74	4.85	23
	Self-Compassion	21.63	4.90	27
	Self-Affirmation	22.93	3.55	27
	Total	22.12	4.44	77
Total	Control	22.06	4.25	50
	Self-Compassion	21.72	4.59	53
	Self-Affirmation	21.89	4.39	53
	Total	21.88	4.39	156

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Downward Intrinsic Contingent Self-worth

Threat	Strategy	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Threat	Control	20.22	5.02	27
	Self-Compassion	21.38	4.86	26
	Self-Affirmation	19.69	4.51	26
	Total	20.43	4.79	79
No Threat	Control	17.74	6.50	23
	Self-Compassion	20.22	4.88	27
	Self-Affirmation	19.82	3.79	27
	Total	19.34	5.14	77
Total	Control	19.08	5.82	50
	Self-Compassion	20.79	4.86	53
	Self-Affirmation	19.75	4.12	53
	Total	19.89	4.98	156

**Extrinsic Contingent Self-Worth**

Social contingent self-worth was also analyzed since the threat manipulation had participants recall a time when they were threatened on a social, interpersonal domain. The social dimension of the Contingencies of Self-Esteem Scale was used as a measure of extrinsic contingency; this measure contains an upward and downward section. An ANOVA examining upward social contingent self-worth using trait self-liking and trait self-compassion as covariates did not reveal a significant effect of threat, strategy, or the interaction of threat and strategy ( $p > .05$ , Table 3). An ANOVA examining downward social contingent self-worth with trait self-liking and trait self-compassion as covariates did not reveal a significant effect of strategy or the interaction of threat and strategy ( $p > .05$ ), but did reveal a significant effect of threat:  $F(1,148) = 8.19$ ,  $p = .005$ , power = .811, partial eta square = .052. (Table 4, Figure 1). Participants who reflected on a threat indicated that their self-esteem was more reliant on a social domain ( $M = 21.29$ ) compared to participants who were not instructed to reflect on a threat ( $M = 18.96$ ).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Upward Extrinsic Contingent Self-worth

Threat	Strategy	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Threat	Control	23.67	3.05	27
	Self-Compassion	22.15	4.89	26
	Self-Affirmation	22.69	4.27	26
	Total	22.85	4.12	79
No Threat	Control	23.17	5.04	23
	Self-Compassion	22.93	3.55	27
	Self-Affirmation	24.26	2.36	27
	Total	23.47	3.73	77
Total	Control	23.44	4.05	50
	Self-Compassion	22.55	4.24	53
	Self-Affirmation	23.49	3.49	53
	Total	23.15	3.94	156

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Downward Extrinsic Contingent Self-Worth

Threat	Strategy	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Threat	Control	22.85	5.01	27
	Self-Compassion	19.89	5.35	26
	Self-Affirmation	21.08	4.95	26
	Total	21.29	5.18	79
No Threat	Control	17.65	7.09	23
	Self-Compassion	19.30	6.44	27
	Self-Affirmation	19.74	5.16	27
	Total	18.96	6.22	77
Total	Control	20.46	6.54	50
	Self-Compassion	19.59	5.88	53
	Self-Affirmation	20.40	5.05	53
	Total	20.14	5.82	156

**Affect**

A measure of affect was a compilation of the happiness, sadness, anger, and anxiety scales. Happiness was reverse-coded, and a higher score implies higher negative affect.

An ANOVA examining affect that used trait self-liking and trait self-compassion did not reveal a significant effect of threat or strategy independently ( $p > .05$ ), but the interaction of threat and strategy was significant:  $F(2,148) = 3.54, p = .031, \text{power} = .651, \text{partial eta square} = .046$  (Table 5, Figure 2). A test of the simple effect of strategy within each threat condition revealed no significant results:  $p > .05$  within both the threat and no threat conditions, independently. A test of the simple effect of threat within each strategy condition also revealed no significant results:  $p > .05$  within all three strategy conditions, independently.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Negative Affect

Threat	Strategy	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Threat	Control	56.70	20.50	27
	Self-Compassion	54.00	17.62	26
	Self-Affirmation	61.27	17.03	26
	Total	57.32	18.48	79
No Threat	Control	59.96	19.71	23
	Self-Compassion	58.07	18.30	27
	Self-Affirmation	56.11	17.19	27
	Total	57.95	18.18	77
Total	Control	58.20	20.00	50
	Self-Compassion	56.08	17.92	53
	Self-Affirmation	58.64	17.15	53
	Total	57.62	18.28	156

### Discussion

The present study revealed that self-compassion and self-affirmation did not have a significant effect on intrinsic contingent self-worth regardless of whether or not a threat was present. Both of these differences were minimal. These findings did not support the proposition that participants in the self-affirmation and self-compassion conditions would show higher levels of intrinsic contingent self-worth. Additionally, the interaction of threat and strategy in terms of intrinsic contingent self-worth was also not significant, thereby not supporting the other proposition which stated that the self-affirmation and self-compassion conditions would show higher levels of intrinsic contingent self-worth when faced with a threat. An interesting finding was that there was a significant relationship between upward intrinsic contingent self-worth and trait self-liking. Participants who report higher self-liking also report that upward intrinsic contingent self-worth items have a higher impact on their self-esteem. This is a reasonable connection, as participants who, literally, like themselves more could place a greater emphasis on actions that involve a confirmation of who they are as an individual or exploring a new side of themselves.

It is possible that the self-compassion and self-affirmation manipulations were not strong enough and, thus, did not have an effect on intrinsic contingent self-worth. The self-compassion manipulation may be more effective if participants had to focus on a present event, as opposed to reflecting on one from the past that could have varying levels of lasting impact among individual participants. Alternatively, it is possible that intrinsic contingent self-worth is simply hard to manipulate.

Since the threat manipulation involved recalling an event where one was ignored by other people, social contingent self-worth was also analyzed (and sometimes referred to as extrinsic contingent self-worth). While there were no significant effects on upward social contingent self-worth, there was a significant main effect of threat on downward social contingent self-worth. Participants in the threat condition had a higher social contingency score than participants in the non-threat condition. Higher scores in this domain imply that negative social events have a greater negative impact on one's self-esteem, so participants who recalled and discussed a time that they were ignored reported that social events had a greater impact on their self-esteem compared to reports by participants who were not directed to recall a similar event. This is an interesting finding, as Buckingham et al. (2012) have shown that threatened participants, especially those with high self-esteem, shift away from a social contingency as opposed to admitting that a threat would have a greater impact on their self-esteem. Additionally, Buckingham et al. (2012) found that threat increases social contingency for participants with low self-liking. The results of the present study align with this finding, though not strictly for participants with low self-liking. The difference in results between the present study and Buckingham et al. (2012) could be attributed to the different measures of contingent self-esteem that were used. Further, the Contingencies of Self-Esteem Scale used in the present study (Jansen & Vonk, 2005) has an exclusively negative measure for each contingency that the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker et al., 2003) does not have. The significant findings in the present study were found only in the negative scale.

Prior self-compassion studies (Leary et al., 2007) have shown that strategies similar to those employed in the present study often have an influence on affect. The

present study revealed a significant effect of the interaction of threat and strategy in terms of negative affect. Logically, one would expect that the presence of a threat would result in a minimum of increased negative affect. Since that was not the case in the present study, that may imply that the threat used was not strong enough. An alternative that may yield appropriate responses to threat would be creating a situation where participants are threatened on some domain in the laboratory during the actual study session.

The present study had several limitations. The Contingencies of Self-Esteem Scale (Jansen & Vonk, 2005) only uses four items per dimension, which limits the reliability of this measure. There were no more than 30 participants in any of the six conditions, and collection from more participants may reveal more accurate results regarding contingent self-worth. Similarly, the sample was made entirely of college students, which limits external validity. Further, many of the participants are likely contingent on social domains as a result of their current stage of life, which is not necessarily representative of the general population. The use of a social threat in an effort to change intrinsic contingent self-worth may have also been ineffective, but the social threat did have an effect on social contingency.

Future research should attempt to use a measure of contingent self-esteem that expands upon the four items used in the present study. A threat having to do with, for example, giving in to peer pressure or abandoning one's morals may prove more effective when analyzing intrinsic contingent self-worth and the variables that affect it. As mentioned previously, in terms of social contingency, creating a laboratory scenario that subjects participants to some type of actual social exclusion may prove more effective than simply recalling a past occurrence.

While the present study was unsuccessful in influencing participants to shift their contingencies of self-worth toward an intrinsic dimension, it did reveal potential future strategies for manipulating intrinsic self-worth. Additionally, it revealed peripheral effects regarding social contingent self-worth and also the impact of strategies on affect.

**Appendices**

## Appendix A



Date: Friday, November 13, 2015

### NOTICE OF APPROVAL

**TO:** Donald Gibson                      **DEPT:** PSYC

**PROJECT TITLE:** *Coping with Self-Threat: The Impact of Self-Compassion and Self-Affirmation on Intrinsic Contingent Self-Worth.*

**SPONSORING AGENCY:** None

**APPROVAL NUMBER:** 16-A043

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants has approved the project described above. Approval was based on the descriptive material and procedures you submitted for review. Should any changes be made in your procedures, or if you should encounter any new risks, reactions, injuries, or deaths of persons as participants, you must notify the Board.

A consent form:  is  is not required of each participant

Assent:  is  is not required of each participant

This protocol was first approved on: 13-Nov-2015

This research will be reviewed every year from the date of first approval.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Amy L. Taylor for".

Debi Gartland, Chair

Towson University Institutional Review Board

## Appendix B

**Psychology Department**

**Towson University  
8000 York Road  
Towson, MD 21252-0001  
t. 410-704-2634  
f. 410-704-3800**

**Informed Consent**

**Principal Investigator:** Donald Gibson, Department of Psychology, Towson University

This is a study in which we are examining your perception of yourself and your personality. In this study, you will complete a quick task asking about your perception of yourself, then complete a series of personality scales.

There are no anticipated benefits to individual participants, though your participation will contribute to the knowledge base of social psychology.

There are no known risks associated with participating in the study. Should you become distressed or uncomfortable, please terminate the session immediately.

The study should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete. You will receive 1 Researchpool credit for your participation.

Participants must be at least 18 years old.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You do not have to participate in the study. If you choose to participate, you may discontinue your participation at any time. You have the right to terminate or withdraw your participation without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled, including but not limited to influence of a grade or class standing.

All information about your responses will remain confidential. We will not show your information to anyone outside of our research team. This form will not be linked with the data that you provide to us during the study.

If you have any questions about the project, you may ask now or contact me at (410) 718-8406, my faculty advisor, Dr. Justin Buckingham at (410) 704-3214, or the Chairperson of Towson University's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants, Dr. Debi Gartland, at (410) 704-2236.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, affirm that I have read and understand the above statements and have had all of my questions answered.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED BY THE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS AT TOWSON UNIVERSITY.**

Appendix C

Please rate your current feelings on the following scale

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Not at all					Extremely	
<b>Happy</b>							
<b>Cheerful</b>							
<b>Delighted</b>							
<b>Pleased</b>							
<b>Down</b>							
<b>Depressed</b>							
<b>Sad</b>							
<b>Dejected</b>							
<b>Irritated</b>							
<b>Annoyed</b>							
<b>Mad</b>							
<b>Angry</b>							
<b>Anxious</b>							
<b>Tense</b>							
<b>Uneasy</b>							
<b>Nervous</b>							
<b>Calm</b>							
<b>Jittery</b>							
<b>Relaxed</b>							
<b>Peaceful</b>							

## Appendix D

Please rate your current feelings about yourself on the following scale

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Not at all					Extremely	
<b>Sympathetic</b>							
<b>Grateful</b>							
<b>Trusting</b>							
<b>Joyful</b>							
<b>Loving</b>							
<b>Connected</b>							
<b>Balanced</b>							
<b>Caring</b>							
<b>Open</b>							
<b>Understanding</b>							
<b>Competent</b>							
<b>Proud</b>							
<b>Useless</b>							
<b>Insecure</b>							
<b>Effective</b>							

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