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IN DEFENSE OF THE SELF

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Once upon a time, the topic of self-defense was considered the exclusive province of psychodynamic approaches. Not any more. Today, the areas of social cognition and self-defense have grown into natural allies, fertilizing each other with ideas and methods. From a theoretical standpoint, both areas are concerned with people's impressions of themselves and others, with basic memorial and judgmental processes, and with the interplay among cognition and motivation on one hand and self-regulation on the other. From a methodological standpoint, social cognition has been a consistent supplier of inventive experimental paradigms, while self-defense has not only served as an avid consumer of these paradigms but also has qualified them, extended them, and even added a few of its own.

Indeed, several laboratories, on both sides of the Atlantic, are intensely busy conducting research on, and developing theories about, the phenomenon of psychological self-defense (Koole & Kuhl, 2003; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). Among the critical questions being addressed are: How do people protect the self against undesirable feedback? How do they weigh their self-defense needs against the need to perceive themselves accurately? How effective are the self-defense strategies they employ and in what context do they deploy them? How do people differ in their use of such strategies and what personal or interpersonal consequences are entailed by these differences?

These questions, along with an emphasis on the cognitive underpinnings of self-defense, both explicit and implicit, are the guiding themes of this special issue. The eight articles represent some cutting-edge research on the topic, and feature both substantive theoretical contributions and innovative experimental paradigms.

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The special issue consists of three sections. The first section illustrates *basic cognitive processes in self-defense*. This section is a prime example of how assessment of memory and judgment not only advance the self-defense literature, but also inform basic social cognitive theorizing. Sedikides and Green kick off by proposing a theoretical model that attempts to account for the phenomenon of mnemic neglect, namely, the poor recall of negative feedback that is inconsistent with central aspects of the self. In their article, they purport to pinpoint the provenance of mnemic neglect: The negativity of the feedback, not its inconsistency with pre-existing self-views. Then, Wentura and Greve articulate, and furnish empirical evidence for, a theoretical explanation of how people cope with negative feedback, namely self-immunization. In their view, people strategically alter their implicit definitions of personality traits, construing traits on which they excel as highly diagnostic but construing traits on which they lag behind as poorly diagnostic. Lastly, Förster, Higgins, and Werth propose that, for prejudiced individuals high in prevention focus, stereotype-incongruent information that is socially relevant is experienced as a threat to efficient self-regulation and thus triggers self-defense processes. Indeed, such individuals manifest superior memory for such information and a propensity to experience agitation-related emotions.

The second section of the special issue explores *self-defense and self-regulation*. This section highlights the important point that self-defense is not an end in itself, but rather it serves to facilitate smooth and relatively unperturbed functioning. First, Schimel, Arndt, Banko, and Cook's research is relevant to interpersonal struggles to affirm the authentic self. They show that affirming or priming the intrinsic self calms evaluative concerns associated with threatening situations, whereas affirming or priming the extrinsic self increases evaluative concerns to the detriment of cognitive functioning and performance. Next, Koole documents that an action-oriented volitional style (compared to a state-oriented one) confers psychological benefits where implicit self-evaluations are concerned. Specifically, action-oriented individuals display more positive (i.e., more autonomy-related) self-evaluations in the face of self-threat and performance-contingent rewards.

The final section of the special issue centers around *self-defense and interpersonal processes*. This section illustrates nicely some vital interpersonal consequences of self-defense processes. First, DeHart, Pelham, and Murray show that levels of explicit self-esteem influence unconscious (i.e., implicit) dependency on partners and friends: High explicit self-esteem is robustly associated with an implicit preference for partners and friends, whereas low explicit self-esteem is associated with such preference only when the relational bond is strong and secure. Thus, the self-protective strategies used by high self-esteem individuals

appear to extend to dependency regulation processes. Then, Stapel and Schwinghammer unpack people's self-defensive toolkit where social comparison is concerned. They demonstrate how craftily strategic social comparisons can be. People's self-evaluations deflate when they compare themselves to a person who is unambiguously similar to them, but inflate when they have interpretive room for maneuver, for example, when they have the opportunity to compare themselves to someone who is only somewhat similar to them. Lastly, Vohs and Heatherton focus on another facet of social comparison. They report that, in the presence of threat, high self-esteem people make downward social comparisons, whereas low self-esteem people make upward one, and that, moreover, high self-esteem people are liked less by perceivers as a consequence, whereas low self-esteem people are liked better.

We believe that the special issue strikes a balance between solid theorizing, innovative paradigms, and informative findings. The special issue reflects the unbreakable connection between social cognition and the modern self-defense literature, the polymorphy of self-defense needs, and the ingenuity of the human perceiver in meeting skillfully and craftily those needs within the constraints imposed by the relational and social context. We hope the special issue stimulates further research in this important and exciting domain of inquiry.

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