

Dumb Talk Among Women: Perceptions of Its Normativity and How it is Mediated by Sources  
of Self-Esteem

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## Abstract

Self-esteem has many implications for how individuals present themselves in social situations. The current study aimed to investigate self-degrading dialog regarding one's intelligence, termed Dumb Talk (DT), in which women might frequently engage in and view as normative. The tendency for women to degrade their own intelligence may be mediated by the sources that they derive their self-esteem from—particularly the domains of academic competence and approval from others. Female college students were instructed to read a vignette in which three women engaged in DT. When it was the fourth woman's opportunity to respond, participants were asked to select how she would respond, and were asked about the normativity and social attractiveness of the woman had she responded with DT. Participants completed a measure of contingencies of self-worth that assessed sources of their self-esteem, and a measure of how frequently they engaged in DT. I hypothesized that female participants whose self-esteem was more dependent on social approval would view DT as more normative and would personally engage in it more, and that those whose self-esteem was more dependent on academic ability would perceive DT as less normative and would personally engage in it less. Participants who based more of their self-esteem on social approval thought it was atypical for others to engage in DT but normative for themselves to engage in. Participants whose self-esteem was more dependent on academic ability did not think DT was atypical and actually personally engaged in DT more. These findings suggest that regardless of which sources women derive their self-esteem from, women overall might view DT as a normative behavior.

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Self-esteem, as defined by Leary and Baumeister, is “a person’s appraisal of [their] value” (2000, p. 2). Because of its relative subjectivity, it does not always reflect one’s true abilities, and it is heavily influenced by the self’s perceptions of what others think about the self (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Self-esteem is shown to have a variety of functions and implications including links to well-being and positive affect, which allow for successful coping, being true to oneself and acting in ways that are congruent to those perceptions, maintaining dominance in relationships, and buffering against negative thoughts surrounding one’s eventual death. Indeed, self-esteem is believed to be a barometer of an individual’s belongingness to important social groups, serving as a warning of a person’s potential rejection and exclusion (Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

Though there is mixed data on whether men or women have higher self-esteem overall, sources of self-esteem do vary by gender. In a study conducted by Josephs, Markus, and Tafarodi (1992), student participants listed their best overall ability as well as their best ability in four different domains: athletic, academic, social, and creative. Students then had to predict the proportion of students at their school who were also highly skilled at this ability. Self-esteem was an additional measurement. Overall, men were found to have higher self-esteem than women. High-self-esteem-scoring men reported their best abilities in all four areas as being shared by the fewest number of peers (i.e., their strengths were seen as atypical), which significantly differed from the groups of women and low-self-esteem scorers. These findings are consistent with proposals that men derive their self-esteem from achievements that separate them from other individuals, and therefore, make them more unique. In a second study, Josephs et al. (1992)

demonstrated that women seem to derive their self-esteem not from being unique from others but instead having a connection with others. Participants in this study completed a measure of self-esteem and then an encoding task, where they were given a word and asked to write a sentence using the word as well as make reference to either themselves, the group with which they identify most, their best friend, or Ronald Reagan. After an interference task, participants were asked to recall as many of the words from the encoding session as possible. They found that women with higher self-esteem performed significantly better on the recall task when they were instructed to make references to the group with whom they identify or to their best friend, illustrating that self-esteem for women is associated with attachments with others.

In a meta-analysis conducted by Gentile et al. (2009), 10 domains of self-esteem were examined (rather than self-esteem as a whole) to assess possible gender differences in the sources of self-esteem. Previous meta-analyses had looked at gender differences in global self-esteem and have generally concluded that women are more deficient in self-esteem. The researchers in this meta-analysis concluded that women might not have a deficiency in self-esteem but instead just gather their self-esteem from different sources than men. The 10 domains included in this meta-analysis were appearance, athletics, academics, social acceptance, family, behavioral conduct, affect, personal self, self-satisfaction, and moral-ethical self and the criteria for literature was limited to research that utilized the top four most widely used scales for multifaceted self-esteem. The analysis showed that males scored significantly higher than females on self-esteem as related to physical appearance, athleticism, personal self (i.e., self-evaluation of one's personality without regard to one's body or relationships with others), and self-satisfaction (i.e., happiness and satisfaction with overall self). Females scored significantly higher than males in areas of behavioral conduct (i.e., the social acceptance of their behavior)

and moral-ethical self (i.e., perceptions of how moral the self is and how content one is with their spirituality or religiosity) (Gentile et al., 2009). Behavioral conduct takes into account appealing to others in a social group since one is monitoring their behavior so that it is appropriate to the setting and the people involved in that setting. Moral-ethical self also appeals to social groups in that morality generally accounts for the treatment of others. These results are again consistent with the notion that men's self-esteem seems to be more tied to their achievement as an individual, whereas women's is more related to social connection and potentially how women believe they are perceived by others.

If women's self-esteem is more associated with their social relationships relative to personal achievements, then various behaviors thought to be common among women, theoretically, could be motivated by the desire to connect with others. One of these behaviors is known as "fat talk" (FT), a term coined by Nichter and Vuckovic (1994). FT has been defined as, "informal dialogue during which individuals express body dissatisfaction" (Britton, Martz, Bazzini, Curtin, & LeaShomb, 2006, p. 247), and is a phenomenon that has been perceived as socially normative and expected, especially amongst younger women. Martz, Petroff, Curtin, and Bazzini (2009) conducted a study examining the perceived likelihood of FT occurrences and the pressure to participate in such dialogs. Participants read three vignettes and were asked in each one to imagine themselves with a group of friends who were either speaking negatively about their bodies, accepting the state of their bodies, or positively appraising their bodies. Participants then responded to each scenario with how likely the scenario would occur in their life and how much pressure they would feel to engage in similar discussion about their body amongst the group. Women reported that negative body talk was the most likely scenario to occur in their

lives. Women also reported they felt the most pressure to negative body talk compared to self-accepting or positive talk, and felt this pressure more than men (Martz et al., 2009).

Britton et al. (2006) examined whether engaging in FT would be perceived as socially normative. They had college students read a vignette describing a group of women degrading their bodies. Participants were then asked how the next woman to speak in the group should respond, and could choose either a self-accepting response (claims satisfaction with her body), a self-degrading response (claims dissatisfaction with her body), or make no comment. 42.4% of female participants said they would have responded with the self-degrade option if they were in the target female's position, whereas 28.8% chose the self-acceptance option, and 28.8% chose the no-information option. When all participants were asked how most women would respond, the self-degradation option was chosen significantly more. The self-degradation option was also chosen significantly more by all participants (78.1%) when asked which response would be perceived as leading most women to like the target female the most. On the other hand, when participants were asked which response would be most attractive to men, both genders chose the self-accept response at a significantly higher rate than the other two responses (Britton et al., 2006). Interestingly, when responding for themselves, women did not report a greater likelihood of engaging in FT. So, although they believed other women would do so, they believed they would not. Britton et al.'s (2006) study demonstrates that social norms in group settings place pressure to engage in FT. Since previous studies have linked having a connection to others with higher self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), it is plausible that engaging in FT to appeal to the group and form a connection has some link with efforts to increase one's self-esteem.

Nichter's (2000) ethnographic research on young girls indicates that FT can serve a variety of purposes including the diffusion of feelings, gathering support from peers, and

maintaining group identity, which all have implications for self-esteem given that women tend to acquire their self-esteem from relational connections. Cruwys, Leverington, and Sheldon (2016) had pairs of friends come into the lab, separated them into different rooms, and then instructed them to have a text message conversation with each other regarding 20 images of female celebrities. Messages from “Friend A” were actually predetermined script messages and were divided into three conditions: positive messages, negative messages, and neutral messages about the celebrity, so Friend A would respond to each of the 20 images in a manner consistent with just one of the three conditions. Responses from the participant to “their friend” were aligned with the condition to which they had been assigned. In other words, for example, if Friend A had responded to an image with negative body talk (FT), then the participant was significantly more likely to respond with negative body talk as well compared to other types of talk. Friendship group norms surrounding perceptions of FT were also assessed using a questionnaire in which participants rated how often females in their friend group discuss topics such as dieting, weight loss, expressing dislike for one’s body, etc. Amongst friends whose friendship group demonstrated norms that were in favor of FT, participants in the FT and positive body talk conditions rated their friend more positively than those who engaged in neutral talk. Friend groups that held anti-FT perspectives rated friends most positively when they engaged in neutral body talk. These findings demonstrate that friends who talk in manners consistent with the norms of the friendship group are rated most positively (Cruwys et al., 2016).

If a woman does not engage in self-degrading behavior like FT, or instead engages in self-promoting behavior, it is possible that she might be thought of as having little regard for others since she is focused on herself, which is reflected by the “modesty norm” for women (Janoff-Bulman & Wade, 1996). For example, Nichter (2000) found in her ethnographic research

that young girls reported concern that they would be separated from their group of friends if they did not participate in FT because it would imply that they were perfect or that they were bragging about themselves. In this instance, the modesty norm's embodiment in FT is at work in maintaining equality in relationships.

In the realm of more intellect-based domains, women have been shown to report more modest GPAs than men when asked to predict their performance for the semester (Heatherington et al., 1993). This was particularly the case when women believed their estimate was going to be shared with others, and would have to verbally state their estimate (as opposed to it being private, anonymous, or written down) (Heatherington et al., 1993). This suggests that impression-management concerns may guide dialogs of women across domains, particularly when there is a chance of being perceived as boastful.

The modesty norm for women can also be found in instances of self-disclosure. In a set of three studies, Miller, Cooke, Tsang, and Morgan (1992) examined the effects of gender of the participant and a target individual on perceptions of self-disclosure. In their second study, participants were instructed to read a statement in which the character was either male or female, and either bragged or positively self-disclosed, and then were to rate the character on a series of dimensions. Female characters were viewed more positively than males when they positively disclosed information about themselves, though were viewed more negatively than males when they boastfully disclosed information. Gender of the participant also played a significant role in these findings. Women who rated a female target viewed her as less feminine if she boasted rather than if she just positively disclosed, suggesting that women might be expected to be more modest in scenarios of personal disclosure (Miller et al., 1992).



Similarly, Gould and Slone (1982) had participants complete an anagram task, where half of the participants received an easy version in which they would succeed, while the other half received a difficult version in which they would fail on the task. Participants scored themselves so they were provided with feedback about whether they were successful or not. Participants were then asked how well they would expect to perform on the task in the future. Males who failed the task and believed that their scores would be shared publicly through a group discussion expected that they would perform better in the future than if they thought their results would have been seen privately by a professor. By contrast, when women failed at the task and believed their results would be publicized, they reported they would perform worse on the task in the future than if they believed that their results would have been kept private. When women did fail on the task, they additionally attributed their failure to lack of ability more so in the public condition compared to the private condition, which indicates a possible need to be modest when discussing one's personal abilities around others (Gould & Slone, 1982). Although such "playing dumb" has been shown to be a relatively common social behavior among both men and women, surveys of men and women show a belief that it is a more common tactic among females than males (Soltz, 1978). Note that the previous studies are somewhat dated, demonstrating a need to examine the normativeness of intellectual modesty ("dumbing oneself down" in public), and whether it is indeed, more common among women than men.

Gender stereotypes surrounding intelligence might provide a theory as to why women might be more critical of themselves – especially on exhibitions of intelligence. Guimond and Roussel (2001) examined gender stereotypes regarding science and language abilities by having participants complete a self-esteem measure, as well as rate their own ability in science and language. Females that believed that men were better than women in science (a traditionalist's

perspective on gender) tended to have lower self-esteem than females who endorsed this belief to a lesser degree. Additionally, females who held the traditionalist belief rated themselves as having lower abilities in science. These findings demonstrate that women who hold more stereotypical beliefs that women are less abled in intellectual areas, might be more inclined to doubt their own intellectual abilities. Such beliefs may begin to develop earlier in one's life, as demonstrated by the fact that one sample of male and female students estimated that their fathers were more intelligent than their mothers. Furthermore, when asked to estimate their own IQ scores, males reported higher self-estimates than females (Petrides, Furnham, & Martin, 2004). Cooper, Krieg, and Brownell (2018) corroborated the relationship between masculine self-concept and academic achievement, by showing that male physiology students had significantly higher academic self-concepts when comparing themselves to a groupmate with whom they worked most closely in class than did female students. Additionally, when controlling for differences in actual academic ability between the participant and the groupmate, men were 3.2 times more likely than women to perceive that they were smarter than their groupmate.

Women's modest attributions surrounding their intellect might be furthered by their awareness of these gender stereotypes playing a role in mate selection. Jonason et al. (2019) presented participants of both sexes with a statement about an opposite-sex target individual and varied whether the target's intelligence was above, below, or equal to that of the participants'. The participant then rated the target individual on how desirable they would be as a short and long-term mate. The researchers found that for a short-term relationship in comparison to long-term, men found women who were less intelligent than themselves more desirable. Women may find themselves in a multi-layered conundrum when it comes to dialogs about intelligence given social norms of modesty, gender stereotypes surrounding intellect, and pressure to maintain and

establish relationships. Indeed, women might experience pressure to dumb themselves down and engage in Dumb Talk (DT) for reasons that are connected to social acceptance, unless they derive more self-worth from their academic abilities rather than from gaining social approval.

Crocker and Wolfe (2001) suggested that one's self-esteem can be holistically analyzed using both trait self-esteem (self-esteem that is typically stable and accumulates throughout life) and state self-esteem (self-esteem that is conditional to the situation), to result in a global self-worth measurement where trait self-esteem informs fluctuations in state self-esteem. They also propose that people differ in which domains they base their self-esteem on and developed a model of global self-esteem suggesting that individuals have contingencies of self-worth. In other words, self-esteem is dependent on a variety of categories in which one perceives their own success or failure in living up to their own standards of each category. For example, an individual could derive most of their self-esteem from their appearance whereas another individual might derive more of their self-esteem from their athletic ability. Furthermore, individuals might act in ways to increase their success in a domain that their self-esteem is contingent on as well as avoid failure in those domains. How an individual reacts to an event or situation might also be dependent on how relevant the issue is to the domains that comprise their self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, and Bouvrette (2003a) developed the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (CSWS), measuring seven potential categories contributing to self-esteem: familial support, competitiveness, love from God, appearance, academic ability, virtue, and approval from others. This list is not comprehensive, but includes those categories most often mentioned in the relevant literature (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, and Chase (2003) assessed whether state self-esteem would be affected by grades received on assignments in college. Participants were initially measured on

self-esteem and contingencies of self-worth with a specific focus on the academic competence domain. Across three weeks, participants responded to an online questionnaire three times per week and whenever they received a grade. The questionnaire measured for grades received and thoughts surrounding each grade, daily self-esteem, affect, and identification with and feelings toward their major. Generally speaking, all students experienced an increase in self-esteem on days where they received good grades and a reduction in self-esteem on days where they received poorer grades. When a student rated themselves higher on academic competence with regard to their self-worth, these increases and decreases were more dramatic. In other words, when students' self-worth was derived more from academic achievement than other domains, successes and failures in academics had more of an impact on their state self-esteem than for those students whose self-worth was derived from other domains. More interestingly though, were the results that incorporated gender. Individuals in a gender-congruent major (e.g., women psychology majors or male engineering majors) reported a greater boost in self-esteem when receiving good grades. Women majoring in engineering who rated themselves high on academic competency, however, experienced the greatest drop in self-esteem when receiving bad grades (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, 2003). These findings suggest that when individuals encounter a situation that relates to a domain on which their self-esteem is based, they might be more reactive to the situation. The lack of gender-congruency of these circumstances may exacerbate these reactions as well, in terms of implications for self-concept.

Park, Crocker, and Kiefer (2007) conducted a study to examine how individuals present themselves with relation to self-esteem, academic self-worth, and achievement. Participants completed the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (with a specific focus on academic competency) and a measure for trait self-esteem. Participants were then randomly assigned to

complete either a very difficult remote associations test in which they would fail and be shown their score, or a control task in which they chose which word they liked the best from a list of words and received no evaluation. After completing the task, participants filled out a questionnaire measuring state self-esteem and a questionnaire assessing goals of self-presentation (how the participant wanted to be perceived by others). When low-self esteem participants based more of their self-worth on academics, they showed a greater desire to be perceived as competent in the control condition than after they failed the task. When high-self esteem participants based more of their self-worth on academics, they showed a greater desire to be perceived as competent in both the control and failure condition. These findings suggest that those with lower self-esteem might be less defensive of their intelligence following a situation that threatens their intelligence. Even further, those with high self-esteem might defend their intelligence regardless if their ego is threatened, showing that they might be more resilient in situations that could potentially threaten their intelligence.

Based on this body of research, I speculated that women might experience pressure to downplay their intellect (especially if others are doing so), only if they do not derive their self-esteem from academic areas. If women derive their self-esteem more from areas such as gaining approval from others, then they may be more inclined to downplay their intelligence since their self-esteem is less contingent on academic achievement. The purpose of the present study was to explore the phenomenon termed Dumb Talk (DT)—self-degrading dialog regarding one's intelligence—using a paradigm similar to studies of FT. Further, this study examined DT in relation to contingencies of self-worth, and more specifically, the domains of academic competence and approval from others. Participants read a vignette with varied responses that a female protagonist could make when studying with a group of female peers engaging in DT.

One of the response possibilities was a one that conformed to DT. Participants assessed the perceived normativity of DT (how typical and surprising they believed the response to be, as well as how likely they and other women would be to respond in that way). Participants also rated how likely the DT response would be to lead both women and men to like the target more. Additionally, participants completed the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale as well as a questionnaire assessing how frequently the participants engage in DT.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that normative perceptions of DT and personal engagement in DT would be positively correlated with the “approval from others” domain of self-worth. In other words, women whose self-esteem is more dependent on gaining approval from others will perceive DT as more normative and will engage in DT more. Hypothesis 2 predicted that normative perceptions of DT and personal engagement in DT would be negatively correlated with the “academic competence” domain of self-worth. In other words, women whose self-esteem is largely reliant on their academic achievements will perceive DT as less normative and will engage in DT less.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Ninety-three female participants were recruited for the sample. Initially participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses from a mid-sized southern university via SONA (an online platform). These participants received participation credit for their course. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic contributing to a lack of participants, researchers additionally shared the survey link through social media platforms, with the stipulation that only female college students take the survey. Participants who were recruited through social media were not compensated. The average age of participants was 19.77 ( $SD = 2.22$ ) and average GPA was 3.49

( $SD = .41$ ). The majority of the sample was Caucasian (84.8%), with a smaller percentage of the sample being African American (5.4%), Hispanic (4.3%), Asian (4.3%), and American Indian or Alaska Native (1.1%). Institutional Review Board approval was obtained March 11, 2020. This study is in compliance with current APA ethical standards (American Psychological Association, 2017).

### **Materials**

**Vignette.** An adaptation of the vignette in Britton et al.'s (2006) study was used in the current study. The vignette described a conversation between four female college students studying for a biology exam, which progressed into a conversation where three of the four women berated their own intellectual abilities (See Appendix A.). Participants were instructed to choose how they thought the fourth woman, Mia, would respond, and were given three choices:

Self-degrade (Dumb talk): "Yeah, I'm really scared for my grades this year, I have no idea what I'm doing at all, I feel like an idiot."

Say nothing (control): \*Says nothing and plays with her pen\*

Self-accept: "I'm pretty happy with my grades this year, I haven't been too worried about them"

**Normativity of DT Measure.** The Normativity of DT measure consists of four items, each of which is on a 7-point scale. The participants are asked to answer each question as if Mia had responded with DT. The first item asks participants how surprising Mia's response was (1 = *very unsurprising*, 7 = *very surprising*). The second item asks participants how typical Mia's response was (1 = *very atypical*, 7 = *very typical*). The third question asks the likelihood that most women would respond this way (1 = *very unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*). The fourth question

assesses the likelihood that the participants themselves would make a similar comment (1 = *very unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*).

***Social Attraction of DT Measure.*** The Social Attraction of DT measure was self-created and consists of two items, each of which is on a 7-point scale (1 = *very unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*). The first item asks participants how likely the DT response would be to lead most women to like Mia more. The second item asks the same question but about the likelihood of the DT response leading most men to like Mia more.

***Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (CSWS).*** The Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003a) assesses the degree to which participants base their self-esteem on each of seven domains (i.e., family support, competition, appearance, God's love, academic competence, virtue, and approval from others). The scale consists of 35 items, each of which is on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Two subscales (i.e., academic competence and approval from others) were of relevance to the current study. The academic competence subscale contained 5-items (e.g., "I feel bad about myself whenever my academic performance is lacking";  $\alpha = .80$ ) and the approval from others subscale also contained 5-items (e.g., "I can't respect myself if others don't respect me";  $\alpha = .83$ ).

***Dumb Talk Questionnaire.*** The Dumb Talk Questionnaire was adapted from the Fat Talk Questionnaire developed by Royal, MacDonald, and Dionne (2013). This measure contains 14 items (e.g., "When I'm with one or several close female friend(s), I complain that my GPA is too low";  $\alpha = .91$ ), where each item is rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*). The items are added together for a total score and higher scores indicate more frequent engagement in DT behavior.

### ***Procedure***



The survey was administered through Qualtrics, an online software website designed for the creation and administration of surveys. Participants provided informed consent then proceeded to read the vignette and answer the relevant forced-choice question. Participants then completed the Normativity of DT and the Social Attraction of DT measure. Participants completed the CSWS, Dumb Talk Questionnaire, and then a brief demographic questionnaire.

## **Results**

### **Forced-choice Assessment of Normativity of DT.**

Since one of the main questions of the study involved addressing how normatively women perceived DT to be, I first examined the forced-choice item addressing which of the three responses women believed the target, Mia, was most likely to employ following the dialog. Participants were asked to select whether she would engage in DT, say nothing, or respond with self-acceptance. The overwhelming majority of the participants endorsed DT (76.9%), with a smaller minority endorsing no response (18.7%) or self-acceptance (4.4%),  $\chi^2(2, N = 91) = 80.59, p < .001$ .

### **Main Hypotheses**

Descriptive statistics are presented for all of the measures (See Table 1). To test Hypothesis 1 and 2, a Pearson's Product-moment correlational analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between perceptions of the normativity of DT (surprisingness of the DT response, typicality of that response, likelihood that most women would respond in kind, and likelihood that the participant would respond in kind), social attraction of DT to other women and to men, personal engagement in DT, and the academic competence and social approval subscales of the contingencies of self-worth measure.

**Social Approval Subscale of Contingency of Self-Worth Scale.** Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the Social Approval subscale was positively correlated with both reports of the likelihood that a person would respond with DT, like Mia, as well as their own self-reported degree of participating in DT (see Table 2). Contrary to Hypothesis 1, there was a negative correlation between perceptions that Mia's DT response was typical and their endorsement that their self-esteem was more dependent on social approval. Also contrary to Hypothesis 1, there was no significant correlation found between either report of how surprising Mia's DT response was, nor the likelihood that most women would respond with DT, and the degree to which one based their self-esteem on social approval. Also, contrary to Hypothesis 1, there was no significant correlation between the likelihood that Mia's DT response would lead either women or men to like her more, and whether one's self-esteem was derived more from social approval.

**Academic Competence Subscale of Contingency of Self-Worth Scale.** Hypothesis 2 was not supported. That is, there were no correlations found between any of the measures assessing normativity of DT (surprisingness of Mia's DT response, typicality of her response, the likelihood that most women would respond similarly, nor the likelihood that the participant would respond similarly) and how much one bases their self-esteem on academic competence (See Table 2). Interestingly, there was a significant, positive correlation found between personal engagement in DT and the degree to which one bases their self-esteem on academic ability. Also contrary to Hypothesis 2, there was no significant correlation between the likelihood that Mia's DT response would lead either women or men to like her more, and whether one's self-esteem was derived more from academic ability.

**Exploratory Findings.** There was a positive correlation of moderate strength found between how much one bases their self-esteem on social approval and how much one bases their

self-esteem on academic competence (See Table 2). Significant inter-item correlations emerged between measures of DT normativity, including those between surprisingness and the likelihood most women would respond with DT, surprisingness and the likelihood the participant would respond with DT, typicality and the likelihood most women would respond with DT, and the likelihood most women would respond with DT and the likelihood the participant would respond with DT. Through examination of the means of the Normativity of DT measures (Table 1), the averages are quite extreme, demonstrating a possible ceiling effect and suggesting that women think DT is very typical.

### **Discussion**

This study was the first to explore the relationships between perceptions of the normativity of DT, personal engagement in DT, and contingencies of self-worth, particularly the domains of “approval from others” and “academic competence,” among young, college-aged women. I hypothesized that participants who based more of their self-worth on gaining approval from others compared to those who did so to a lesser degree, would perceive DT by a woman who is studying for a test with other women who are engaging in DT as more normative and would also report personally engaging in it more (Hypothesis 1). By contrast, I hypothesized that participants who based more of their self-worth on academic ability compared to those who did so to a lesser degree, would instead perceive DT by a woman in the same circumstances as less normative and would report personally engaging in DT less (Hypothesis 2).

Hypothesis 1 was only partially supported, as women with highly-contingent self-esteem on the need for social approval did believe that they would have a higher likelihood of responding with DT in that same situation and reported having engaged in DT in the past more so than those with less of this propensity. Hill, Hall, and Appleton (2011) found in their study on

contingencies of self-worth in relation to types of perfectionism, that participants that based much of their self-esteem on social approval tended to exhibit socially prescribed perfectionism as opposed to self-oriented perfectionism. Socially prescribed perfectionists hold beliefs that they can't live up to others' expectations and face external pressure to be high achievers, whilst self-oriented perfectionists set high standards for themselves rather than feel that these standards are set by others. The findings from my study might indicate that these participants high in need for social approval might have tendencies that err towards socially prescribed perfectionism. If these individuals feel that they can't live up to others' standards, they might have a proclivity towards self-degradation. Especially if a group of peers is engaging in self-degradation, gaining the group's approval would be of utmost importance, so aligning one's behavior with theirs would be most conducive to that goal.

These effects did not, however, extend to measures of social attraction, in that participants' whose self-esteem was more dependent on social approval did not believe DT would lead women or men to like the target female more or less, whereas Britton et al. (2006) discovered that participants believed engaging in FT would lead women to like the target female the most, whilst engaging in self-accepting dialog would lead men to like the target female the most. FT may hold more implications regarding the physical appearance of women. Standards of beauty for women typically include rigorous standards of thinness (Ferraro et al., 2008; Glauert et al., 2009), so much so that they are unattainable for most women. Overt standards for intelligence are less apparent such that discussion within female social circles about falling short of these strict body standards appears to be less of a prescribed norm than for FT. DT as a social norm, therefore, may not provide enough information about how likeable the target is for observers, regardless of gender.

Interestingly, although women who had higher need for social approval thought that *they* would be more likely to respond like Mia when she downplayed her intelligence, they thought this response was *less* typical than those with less need for approval. These findings were quite opposite to Britton et al.'s (2006) findings on FT, whose participants endorsed the norm for women to engage in FT, but when asked which response they would most likely implement, no significant differences were found, meaning that participants did not believe they would personally engage in FT but that it was normative for others to do so.

Higher need for approval women also did not see Mia's response as *less* surprising than those with lower need for approval with regard to their self esteem. One possible explanation for the lack of evidence for these speculations surrounding typicality and surprisingness of DT, is that most females thought the DT response was the most likely to occur when compared to saying nothing or endorsing more positive talk. Indeed, 76.9% of the participants selected DT as Mia's most likely response. Despite the fact that in this case they would be incorrect in making this assumption, women who derive their self-esteem from the approval of others might believe that they are in some way different from other women in their perceptions of DT, and also lesser than other women in their self-concept. Tice, Butler, Muraven, and Stillwell (1995) conducted a series of studies analyzing how self-presentation varies depending on the audience. Researchers had participants come into the lab with a friend and were randomly assigned to stay with that friend or were assigned to be with a stranger for the duration of the study. One participant was assigned to ask the second participant interview-structured questions about themselves and the second participant was to respond. After the interviewee responded, the interviewer was to write down their own responses to the question. It was found that participants who were with their friend, compared to those who were with a stranger, gave significantly more modest responses

about themselves. Even further, the second respondents' answers were highly correlated with the first respondents' answers, suggesting that the second respondent was quite influenced by the answers that the first respondent gave. This research suggests that individuals might be more likely to forfeit favorable self-presentation, and subsequently allow a threat to one's self-esteem, to those whom they have relationships with. As it further applies to the current study, individuals are more likely to respond in manners consistent with how individuals have already responded. With regards to basing one's self-esteem largely on social approval, if an individual is so focused on being perceived in a positive manner, they would be more likely to act in ways that would appease others (e.g., engaging in DT when others are doing the same, especially others with whom one has an established relationship).

Furthermore, if one derives their self-esteem from others' approval, this implies that their self-esteem comes less from their own recognition of their accomplishments since they need others to satisfy these recognitions for them (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). They might think it is atypical for other women to DT because they believe that other women recognize and appreciate their intellectual accomplishments more. Recall that women experience pressure to engage in behaviors that promote the maintenance of relationships (Nichter, 2000; Ambwani et al., 2017), as women tend to derive their self-esteem from sources that promote relational connections (Gentile et al., 2009). Highly social-approval-motivated women, who say that they would be likely to make a DT comment, and also engage in DT when other women are doing so, may be verifying that their self-esteem does not come from self-recognition or self-acceptance, but is more other-motivated. Therefore, the endorsement of a behavior that appeases others who are also self-degrading does not threaten their self-concept.

Despite the academic focus of the dialog among the peer-group used in the vignette, women whose self-worth was derived more from academic achievement did not perceive DT as less normative and did not endorse that they would personally engage in it less. Instead, these women reported that they personally engaged in DT *more* frequently than women with less self-esteem-contingent academic competence. One possible explanation for the lack of support for Hypothesis 2 was that participants in the sample were women with fairly high GPA averages who attend college. It is possible that most of the women in the sample value their academic achievements to a high degree, overall, and would therefore derive a lot of their self-esteem from their academic abilities. The mean for this sample of women approached 6 on a 7-point scale, indicating that many of these women did endorse that their self-esteem highly related to successful academic performance. Crocker and Wolfe (2001) found in their sample that on average, females scored 5.4 on a 7-point scale, suggesting that the current sample was more academic-oriented than some of the former samples evaluated.

Another explanation that leads off of the sample is that individuals who base their self-esteem on academic achievement might have higher academic standards and in turn be more critical of themselves when they do not live up to those standards. Vanea and Ghizdareanu (2012) conducted a study with university students that explored the relationship between high standards, self-criticism, and gender. The higher a person's standards were for themselves, the more they reported engaging in self-criticism. Additionally, women engaged in self-criticism more than men. If someone bases their self-esteem on academics, then they generally would act in ways to avoid failure and achieve success in that domain (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). They would likely have more strict standards for themselves with regards to their academics, and if they don't meet those standards, could engage in behaviors like DT to make up for that

discrepancy. It's also interesting to note that there was a robust positive relationship between one's self esteem being contingent on both social approval and academic competence. This suggests that women may not only set high internal standards for themselves, but might also perceive that others set high external standards for them. This might indicate that women experience pressure to engage in DT if they feel they don't measure up to their own and other's standards. Finally, Park, Crocker, and Kiefer (2007) demonstrated that those with self-esteem highly contingent on academic competence wished to be perceived as academically competent across all situations, whether she had perceived she had failed at a task or not. The current study did not provide evidence that the target woman was experiencing any actual academic failure. It is possible that women in the current study might not have felt that their self-esteem was being threatened so did not feel a need to defend it via reports of engagement in DT or how normative they believed it to be.

The predictions of the current study largely hinged on variability among participants in perceptions of whether a woman exposed to DT in a peer-group would respond in kind or implement a positive response or no response at all. Over three-quarters of the participants endorsed the DT option. This could mean that in general, participants believed that DT is normative. Therefore, regardless of differences in sources of self-worth, DT is viewed as a societal standard. Martz et al. (2009) found in their study on FT that women reported negative body talk as the most likely scenario to occur in their lives as opposed to positive body talk or self-accepting talk. The vignette in my study was modeled after Britton et al.'s (2006) regarding the normative nature of FT. My study found that a much higher percentage of individuals endorsed the negative response as compared to Britton et al.'s 42.4%, who said they would have responded with the self-degrade option if they were in the target female's position. What is



unclear is whether breaching the group norm of downplaying one's intelligence has more implications about bragging (something women are discouraged to do relative to men; Miller et al., 1992), than breaching the norm about downplaying one's body weight/size does.

Furthermore, cultural trends have begun promoting body positivity and awarding praise to those who don't body shame themselves, so perhaps, it is not as much fear of bragging that encourages self-degradation in female social groups, but rather pressure to be modest (Heatheringington et al., 1993; Gould & Slone, 1982). Future research should continue to investigate how FT and DT differ with regard to female friendship groups.

There are various limitations of this study, first being the sample. The manner of obtaining the sample was unsystematic (and a bit unprecedented) due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and convenience sampling is obviously not the most representative method to employ. The sample, itself, could have been larger and more diverse as well, although the topic of this study (pressure to downplay one's intellect), does seem particularly relevant to a young, educated, female population. It would be interesting to see if DT occurs among males, or shows cultural variability, which future research could aim to discover. Other limitations were that self-esteem and personal engagement in DT were self-report measures, and that the study design was correlational. Though most self-esteem measures are self-reported, it would be interesting for future research to attempt an experimental design where a vignette similar to the one used in this study was acted out using confederates, and type of dialog could be manipulated. This design might give a more accurate representation of the degree to which people actually engage in DT in real-life scenarios.

In conclusion, it appears that women generally view self-degradation about their intellect as normative in social settings where other women are doing so. Women may have tendencies to

derive their self-esteem from high internal standards that they set for themselves as well as experience perceived high standards from others, which has implications for negative self-image, potential mental health issues, and self-destructive behaviors or coping mechanisms. There has been a multitude of research revealing the commonality of FT, but this current research opens up possibilities that modesty pressures and fear of group opposition might encourage other forms of self-disparagement, that future research can address.

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Table 1

*Summary of Descriptive Statistics for Scores on the Normativity of Dumb Talk Measure (surprisingness of response, typicality of response, likelihood that most women would respond similarly, likelihood that participant would respond similarly), Social Attraction of DT (to women, to men), Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Social Approval, Academic Competence), Dumb Talk Questionnaire (DTQ)*

| Measure           | Mean | SD    | Minimum | Maximum |
|-------------------|------|-------|---------|---------|
| 1) Surprisingness | 1.96 | 1.366 | 1       | 6       |
| 2) Typicality     | 6.22 | 1.256 | 1       | 7       |
| 3) Most women     | 6.22 | .693  | 4       | 7       |
| 4) Participant    | 5.72 | 1.361 | 1       | 7       |
| 5) Women          | 5.72 | .918  | 4       | 7       |
| 6) Men            | 4.76 | 1.275 | 1       | 7       |
| 7) Approval       | 4.47 | 1.296 | 1       | 7       |
| 8) Academic       | 5.90 | .838  | 3       | 7       |
| 9) DTQ            | 2.59 | .734  | 1       | 5       |

Table 2

*Summary of Intercorrelations for Scores on the Normativity of Dumb Talk Measure (surprisingness of response, typicality of response, likelihood that most women would respond similarly, likelihood that participant would respond similarly), Social Attraction of DT (to women, to men), Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Social Approval, Academic Competence), Dumb Talk Questionnaire (DTQ)*

| Measure           | 1       | 2      | 3       | 4      | 5       | 6     | 7      | 8      | 9      |
|-------------------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|-------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1) Surprisingness | 1       | -.193  | -.408** | -.261* | -.273** | .050  | -.099  | -.108  | -.076  |
| 2) Typicality     | -.193   | 1      | .337**  | .133   | .340**  | .032  | -.247* | -.095  | -.126  |
| 3) Most women     | -.408** | .337** | 1       | .206*  | .340**  | -.157 | .035   | -.042  | -.162  |
| 4) Participant    | -.261*  | .133   | .206*   | 1      | .023    | .041  | .230*  | .135   | .464** |
| 5) Women          | -.273** | .340** | .340**  | .023   | 1       | .110  | -.067  | -.141  | -.068  |
| 6) Men            | .050    | .032   | -.157   | .041   | .110    | 1     | .005   | .038   | .057   |
| 7) Approval       | -.099   | -.247* | .035    | .230*  | -.067   | .005  | 1      | .445** | .271** |
| 8) Academic       | -.108   | -.095  | -.042   | .135   | -.141   | .038  | .445** | 1      | .307** |
| 9) DTQ            | -.076   | -.126  | -.162   | .464** | -.068   | .057  | .271** | .307** | 1      |

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$



## Appendix A

**Dumb Talk Vignette**

Imagine that four female friends are studying for a Biology exam together -- Anna, Kirsten, Liz, and Mia. The following conversation occurs between them:

**Anna:** Okay, so I think I understand osmosis.

**Mia:** Yeah, I think so too, but my problem is with mitosis, do you guys understand it?

**Kirsten:** I guess so, it's basically a matter of memorizing all the stages.

**Liz:** Yeah, there's a diagram in the book somewhere (flipping through pages). Ummm...let's see...ummm, yeah page 165. There's a diagram.

**Mia:** Oh, I remember seeing that - it was helpful. I really want to do well on this test. Does anyone know what Dr. Brown's tests are like?

**Kirsten:** I've heard they're pretty hard. My New Year's resolution was to get all A's and B's this semester, but this test might ruin my plan.

**Liz:** I made that same resolution, too. If I could just master this stuff about mitosis, I might be able to do it. I swear, I didn't think I was dumb until I took college classes.

**Anna:** Yeah, my classes are so hard! I'm trying to get good grades this year but that's never going to happen if I can't remember anything I read in that textbook.

**Kirsten:** I bet I've failed my last two quizzes in this class, I've been feeling really stupid lately.

**Liz:** My main problem is memorizing the terms...I can't seem to keep straight what each one means.

**Anna:** Yeah I've got that problem too, especially when I've never heard any of these words before.

**Kirsten:** These college classes are no joke!