The influence of self-esteem, shame and vulnerability in sustainable high performance

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Abstract
Is there a clear coherence between vulnerability, shame, self-esteem and life long sustainable high performance?
Introduction to the thesis

We know from recent research that vulnerability is the birthplace for creativity, innovation and change, and we know that high performance demands an open mind to changes in the field of high performance and a readiness to constantly be creative to challenge methods and theories to find new and better ways to increase performance. The research of self-esteem, shame and vulnerability combined with sustainable high performance seems to have a obvious connection and I would therefore like to highlight those connections and thereby invite others to do a further exploration on how this connection could be used in talent recruitment and the training of high performance talents, in sports, in business and among creative performers etc.

I have decided to focus my field research on actors/actresses and musicians and decided to leave out sports athletes. The reason for this is that the high performance period of most athletes are time limited due to age whereas actors/actresses and musicians can achieve sustainable high performance all trough their life. It is my belief that high performers have an increased threat towards the self and therefore lowers the vulnerability and thereby creates a non-authentic self-esteem, which creates a threat towards the ability to be creative and innovative and to change, which again creates a threat towards sustainable high performance. From the academic perspective I have chosen literature written by Mark Leary, Paul Gilbert,
Brene Brown, Bowlby, Neff and a few others. I am aware of that there are different views on the understanding of shame (e.g. Tracy and Robins believe that overreliance on attribution theory is enough to understand shame which has been challenged by Gilbert in his -A reflection on Tracy and Robins). It is my personal belief that the authors that I have chosen are the ones with the most in-depth knowledge in their field and from a self-reflective perspective I feel that their argumentation and theories are the ones that resonates the most in me and in my own history. This I have been aware of on a metacognitive level so that it has only had as little influence on my research as possible.
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The understanding of self-esteem

In the APA Concise Dictionary of Psychology it states that *self-esteem is the degree to which the qualities and characteristics contained in one’s self-concept are perceived to be positive. It reflects a person’s physical self-image, view of his or her accomplishments and capabilities, and values and perceived successes in living up to them, as well as the way in which others view and respond to that person. The more positive the cumulative perception of these qualities and characteristics is, the higher one’s self-esteem. A high or reasonable degree of self-esteem is considered an important ingredient of mental health, whereas low self-esteem and feeling of worthlessness are common depressive symptoms.*

The understanding of Shame

In the APA Concise Dictionary of Psychology it states that shame is a highly unpleasant self-conscious emotion arising from the sense of something dishonorable, ridiculous, immodest, or indecorous in one’s conduct or circumstances. It is typically characterized by withdrawal from social intercourse, for example by hiding or distracting the attention of others from one's shameful action, which can have a profound effect on psychological adjustment and interpersonal relationships. Shame may motivate not only avoidant behavior, but also defensive, retaliated anger. Psychological research consistently reports a relationship between
proneness to shame and a whole host of psychological symptoms, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and subclinical sociopathy, and low self-esteem. Shame is also theorized to have a more positive adaptive function by regulating experiences of excessive and inappropriate interest and excitement and by diffusing potentially threatening social behavior.

**The balance of self-esteem and vulnerability model.**

To understand the balance between self-esteem and vulnerability I have made a model - the balance of self-esteem and vulnerability model (BSV-Model). The model shows how self-esteem develops over a lifetime and at the same time shows the development of vulnerability. Throughout this paper I will argue why there seems to be an obvious connection between self-esteem, shame and vulnerability and use the BSV-Model as framework.

When we are born one could argue with reason that the infant is put in a feeling of being “the center of the universe” (omnipotence). When crying mom and dad immediately pick up the child and starts feeding and/or caring for the child. This creates a safe environment for the infant from which to start developing from the Ego where the individual is being enabled to deal with the external world such as perceiving reason, solve problems, test reality and adjust the instinctual impulses of the Id to the best of the Super Ego (Sigmund Freud 1856-1939). The Superego formation begins within the first 5 years of life and continues to develop throughout childhood and adolescence and into adulthood largely through identification
with the parents and later with other admired models of behavior. (APA concise dictionary of psychology)

Knowing that the individual has to develop from being “the center of the universe” to “just one of us in the universe” it is reasonable to argue that the self-esteem will take some “beating” during that process. The impact of the “beating” depends on the level of “safe environment” the individual grows up in and how the individual learns to cope with emotions such as sorrow, anger, anxiety, happy, guilt etc. The more a child is raised in the philosophy “you are not perfect, but you are wired for struggle and worthy of love and belonging” (Brene Brown 2012), the more mentally robust the child will be and the more robust the more flexible, and that shows a good psychological health, that supports the sustainable high self-esteem.

To understand why I suggest that self-esteem and vulnerability is closely connected we need to accept that in order to develop the Ego and Superego we need to be self-aware. We need to monitor whether we follow and live up to our own self-ideals. I would like to stress that my use of the word self is the ability to take oneself as an object of ones own attention and thoughts. However most conceptualizations of the self also include its executive, control functions. (Leary & Tangney, 2002b; Olson, 1999)

**Self-knowledge**

Neisser (1988, 1997) suggests that self-knowledge is based on five distinct forms of information, which he calls conceptual, private, extended,
ecological and interpersonal self-knowledge. An individual may direct its attention toward and process information about five specific aspects of itself, each of which essentially creates a different sense of self at the time that the type of self-knowledge is created. Mark R. Leary and Nicole R. Buttermore (2003) extends Neisser's suggestion by suggesting that it is useful to assume that each of the five domains of self-knowledge relies on a separate cognitive ability that evolved to provide a different kind of information to the organism about itself.

**Self abilities (Mark R. Leary and Nicole R. Buttermore)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Behavioral implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ecological</td>
<td>Processes information regarding the organism relationship to its immediate physical environment</td>
<td>Permits guided, contingent reactions to the physical environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Processes information regarding the organisms unreflective social interactions with conspecifics</td>
<td>Permits guided, contingent reactions to the presence and actions of conspecifics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended</td>
<td>Processes information regarding the organism over time</td>
<td>Permits thoughts about the organism in the past and in the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Processes information regarding private, subjective responses (e.g. feelings, thoughts, intentions)</td>
<td>Permits contemplation of internal stats; also may underlie inference about others private states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>Processes information regarding abstract and symbolic representation of the organism</td>
<td>Permits symbolic thought about the individual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The fear of disconnect**
We now know that the individual's self-esteem is influenced by the individual using self-awareness to monitor whether the individual lives up to the individual's own self-ideal. Another influence on the self-esteem is the fear of not being accepted/desired by others, the fear of being disconnected.
To understand a bit more about the influence of the fear of being disconnected, not being accepted/desired we need to look at shame and the purpose of shame. Gilbert (1986; 2002a) claims that the evolutionary root of shame lies in a self-focused, social thread system related to competitive behavior and the need to prove oneself acceptable/desirable to others. The influence of shame has proven to be so strong that individuals will risk serious physical injury or even death to avoid it. One of the reasons for this is that shame can indicate serious damage to social acceptance and a collapse in various social relationships. The evolutionary reasoning for shame can be tracked back to the belief that all animals must be able to detect and cope with social threats (Gilbert and McGuire, 1998). For many animals, attention to conspecifics that could do harm and be threats to them, is highly adaptive, and social anxiety, flight or submission/appeasement are salient defenses (Gilbert 2001)

To create awareness of the threat of others the social threat system (that triggers shame) must have at least 3 types of “self and other” focused cognitive systems/competencies: Theory of mind, Meta cognition and symbolic self-other representation.

Theory of Mind (ToM). ToM is an important social cognitive skill that refers broadly to the individual’s capacity to understand the mental state of others and to appreciate that these may differ from our own (Premack and Woodruff, 1978). Byrne (1995) states that ToM is one of the key elements
of human evolution as it gives us the ability to understand what might be going on in the mind of others, what motivates the other, what might the other value or devalue, what might they know about the self, what do they not know and it is valuable for us to know as that gives us the opportunity to think about how to manipulate them into liking us or to be wary. Closely linked to the ToM is our self-awareness and metacognitive abilities –To be able to reflect and judge one’s own thinking and feeling and to run simulation in ones mind. These 2 competences combined with the ability to symbolize the self and imagine the self as an object creates a collating mind (Wells, 2000).

All of this means that a threat to the self, whether direct (threat of rejection or violence) or more indirect and symbolic (attack on the self presentation) will stimulate basic defensive emotions such as anger or anxiety. This, blended with the symbolic self-presentation, will make the defensive emotion develop into self-conscious emotions of e.g. shame.

**From shame to vulnerability**

Brene Brown (2010) states that what underpins shame is excruciating vulnerability. It is therefore safe to suggest that (which has also been done by Brene Brown) there is a close connection between fears of disconnect and shame and if we truly want to connect then we have to be vulnerable enough to let us be truly seen. To dare being that vulnerable Brene Brown
(2010) claims that the individual needs to know that he/she is enough and at the same time believe that he/she is worthy of love and belonging. For the individual to believe that it is worthy of love and belonging three things need to be in place: courage to be imperfect, compassion to one self before others, and connection to others due to authenticity. It is highly interesting that Brene Brown’s (2010) research shows that the individuals with a high vulnerability fully embrace vulnerability and believe that their vulnerability was what made them truly beautiful.

**Summary of the BSV-Model**

When an individual is born its self-esteem is considered high and the individual can feel like the “center of the universe”. On the other hand the vulnerability is low as the individual has not developed the ego, super ego, or the self-ideal, nor does the individual possess the social cognitive competences to reflect about its own behavior and the behavior of others in the context in which the individual acts.

After a few years the individual starts to explore more of the self and the world and as a natural part of the process the individual will try to divide its love from being only love to parents into putting love into parents and a transitional object. During this process the individual will learn that love will not be given back and as a result the individual will experience vulnerability and a decrease in self-esteem. Combined with a lot of other life-events, this will influence the way the individual develops vulnerability and self-esteem. The life-events during the period from infant via childhood, youth and into young adulthood have a major impact on the further
development of the individual's self-esteem and vulnerability. It would seem normal for the individual to go through adolescence with a high vulnerability and low self-esteem. At the end of adolescence and the beginning of young adulthood the individual has learned to self-regulate it and the construction of the self is “finalized” (this is not to be seen as a rigid self-concept as it can change over time, depending on new life-events, influence by significant others etc.). The ideal start on adulthood is a balanced cohesion between self-esteem and vulnerability and ideally this cohesion will continue through the rest of the individuals' life.

In Figure 1 the BSV-Model shows what would be seen as a well-balanced life with the expected ups and downs in self-esteem and vulnerability. The red line indicates the vulnerability level, which could also be seen as the courage level or the accepted level of threat towards the self. The blue line indicates the level of self-esteem as seen from the individual's perspective/beliefs. The numbers on the vertical line indicates the threat level towards the self (as the level is not measurable the numbers are applied to create a visual
understanding) the horizontal line indicates timeline going from left to right, starting with the birth of the individual and ending at the age of 55 as the development of self-esteem ends at 55 (Gilbert, 2000).

It is important to point out that fig.1 shows the development over a well-balanced lifespan with an optimal upbringing that has created an individual that believes it is worthy of love and belonging.

The development could be much different and many different figures could be drawn and only the starting point would be the same.

One of the theories in performance psychology and my own experience with high performers show that low self-esteem has been a primarily unconscious driving force behind high performance. The danger in this is that the high performing individual has to lower the degree of vulnerability due to fear of not being good enough if truly seen (fear of disconnect) and as the individual is high performing the increase of self-esteem seems to be a easy defense mechanism used to avoid looking at one's true self and to distance others from being a threat to the self. If we look at fig. 2 it shows how a potential high performer could look. It is interesting to see the equivalence between the left and the right side of the figure as this could suggest that high performers driven on low self-esteem is likely to develop narcissism as the left side shows primary narcissism where the infants libido is directed towards the infants own body and its satisfaction rather
than the environment or object at this stage the infant forms a narcissistic ego-ideal stemming from his/her sense of omnipotence.

Likewise, what is interesting is that Brene Brown (2012) claims that vulnerability is the birthplace of creativity, innovation and change and by observing fig.2 we see that these high performers will have a limited high performance success in a changing environment. To understand Brene Brown’s statement we need to look at what it will take to come up with a wild or even crazy idea and present it to others with the risk of them thinking that we are crazy and thereby disconnect with us. The more vulnerable we dare to be the more crazy and wild ideas we dare to think and share.

**Field research**

In my field research I investigated profiles of high performing actors and actresses as I saw them as the most interesting area of sustainable high performance due to a continuously changing work environment, changing jobs (theatre, movies, TV, shows etc.) and changing genres within acting
(drama, comedy, science fiction, thriller, romantic etc.). It was important to my study that all the actors and actresses that participated in my study were recognized actors/actresses with a proven track record, preferably award winning. To get in contact with the actors and actresses I contacted the major agencies for actors and actresses in Denmark and asked them to send out an invitation to participate in my research to all their members with a proven track record. As a result 9 qualified candidates applied! It should be taken into consideration that all participants were volunteers and that they could have a special need and therefore volunteered and that could have an effect on the conclusion of my paper. I also tried to include musicians in my research but they were very reluctant to participate in the research interviews. I had a very interesting discussion about my project with one of the most famous Danish rock singers who had been on the Danish rock scene for more than 30 years. He said

“Michael, it is a very interesting topic you are looking at and I would agree that the music business could gain from understanding the underlying dynamics of sustainable high performance. But if we are not willing to participate you must try to understand that we write songs about our thoughts, our dreams, fears, our failures and us.... And almost every night we go on stage and give ourselves to the audience and perform our outmost as ourselves. We don’t want to open that box and find out why we do what we do, we just want to keep doing what we do as it has shown to work pretty well”
Another well performing musician (a singer whom we can call Peter) who has just released his 3rd album that hit the top 10 charts had his tour manager call me and say.

“*I have discussed you request with Peter and we have agreed that the band and Peter works very well together on the tour right now, and we do not want to stir things up*”
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The field research participants

I interviewed 5 of the 9 qualified participants face-to-face (1 male and 4 female) and 4 was interviewed by phone (3 male and 1 female). 3 of the female participants who were interviewed face to face continued a High Performance coaching process with focus on working with vulnerability, self-esteem and shame.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anonymous name</th>
<th>Male/female</th>
<th>Year born</th>
<th>Interviewed by Phone / Face to Face</th>
<th>Continued into further process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MS</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LB</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VH</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CF</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KT</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOE</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JS</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HV</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The initial talk before the interview

The first talk before the interview focused on creating the right connection with the actor/actress and give them an insight into the purpose of the interview and my project. I was surprised to realize that the minute the participant felt that it was a safe to talk all participants opened up more than expected. I was like all of the participants needed a place where they
could talk freely and with no fear of reading about it in the press the next day. It became clear to me in the initial talks that all the actors and actresses needed to talk and share their story and when I shared some of my initial thoughts in regards to my thesis all except one male started explaining why I was right (if we looked at other actors or actresses) but that it was not true with regards to themself. What also came to my awareness was that none of the participants had a job on hand and that all were scared that they would never get to a casting again and if they did whether they would succeed in getting the role. It was interesting to learn that all had good reasons for not going to a casting and if they did why it would be almost impossible to get the job. All reasoning was built on assumptions about other people’s thoughts.

**Examples of reasoning:**

**VH:** “there is still a lot of envy and rumors about me in the acting business and it is a small business in Denmark. I was happy when I got the lead in a big movie in my younger years as an actress, but that actually ruined my career because when the movie was not only nominated but also won the most prestigious international award the envy from others in the business made the casting crew chose other actresses because that would make it less complicated among the actresses on the set or at the theatre”. 
LB: “The TV-series got really bad press coverage and that will always follow me. The bad publicity was not due to bad acting but the script was bad and it was broadcast on national TV in primetime every Sunday. The most annoying thing about this is that the national TV that created the TV-series from script to broadcasting never helped us as actors or actresses to cope with the press so we were all “screwed” and again that has followed me ever since and will keep doing that! It’s hard even to get to a casting due to that TV-series and the lack of support from the National TV with regard to the press”.

CF: “I got my breakthrough as a drama actress in a drama TV-series and has done a lot of drama ever since, and now they take me in for casting to a lot of other stuff! Last time it was for a comedy show where I had to be funny! I’m not funny! And if you look at my age and look at the number of roles there is in drama then what are the chances of me getting a drama casting. At the same time my agent has 2 or 3 other high profiled female actresses around my age, so I’m at the end of my career if you look at my opportunities and chances.”
Conclusion after the initial talk
Even though all participants had volunteered to the project they all started up with being skeptical. There was a clear sign of fear of their privacy being reviled in a broader perspective than just the participant and I. when the participant felt safe they were all more than willing to share stories.

Hypothesis after the initial talk
The stories the participants shared in the initial talk all seemed to position them as victims in their own life due the thoughts and actions of others.

First interview
The first interview was focused on the candidate’s own belief in his/her own self-esteem and vulnerability. At the same time I would ask the participants to tell me about their childhood and how they grew up, this was to get an idea on the participant’s childhood learning on attachment. I would start the interview by spending 3-5 minutes creating a good chemistry and make sure the participant felt that he/she was in a safe environment.

First prepared question
To get an idea of what meant most to the participant with regard to his/her own high performance and personality, and to start the initial reflection processes in the candidate I prepared the following questions that were divided into 3 questions.
First part:

With regard to us talking about your personality regarding to your career and high performance, where would you like for us to start?

Second part:

If that is not the right place to start where would you then like for us to start?

Third part:

If you look at the 2 answers you have given me (repeat answer 1) and (repeat answer 2), then how do you see them being linked together?

Answers to first prepared question. (Examples)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Answer to question 1</th>
<th>Answer to question 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LB</td>
<td>That is difficult. I don’t know where I should start and what you would like for me to say. So what would be good for your project to talk about?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LB: After answer to question 1 was not accepted</td>
<td>Still difficult and a strange question! Then I think it could be good for your project if we talked about why I would like to become</td>
<td>Michael does it really makes sense for me to decide what I would like to talk about and share? Will this help you project?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1</th>
<th>Answer to question 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was repeated</td>
<td>LB: After answer to question 2 was not accepted and question 2 was repeated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t see the purpose of this exercise but you must believe it’s important since you keep insisting on the answer....hmmm well it’s not important but we could talk about me being resolute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LB</td>
<td>That is a even more strange question than the previous ones, does there really have to be a connection could it not just be two topics and that's it?... I don’t see a clear link and if any it would be that if I decide to become an actress then I'm stubborn enough to do what it takes to become an actress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>Answer to question 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>Where I would like to start? I don’t really know what you are looking for, could you help me a bit on that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP: After answer to question 1 was not accepted and question 1 was repeated</td>
<td>If anything then it could perhaps be my will to work as an actress even though its tough and very demanding and you are pretty much on our own.... is that what you are looking for?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>Answer to question 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP:</td>
<td>I’m willing to go the extra mile to become the best version of the character that I play. I don’t know if that sounds stupid but I do believe that others can trust that I will do more than my</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
outmost to identify my self with the character and put the character alive in the best possible way. If I'm cast in a role then I'm not the one letting the instructor or the rest of the team down by not performing.

These are only two examples of the reaction and answers to the first prepared question, but the reaction and answers were almost the same in all first interviews. As I saw this as a standard reaction from the participants I started to add another question after the exercise was over.

*Fourth part:*

- *It seemed to me as if you were struggling with this task. If you saw this as a difficult exercise could you then try and tell me what you found most difficult?*

*Conclusion after first prepared question*

There is a clear coherence between each participant’s answers and reactions to the first prepared question even though only 6 out of 9 participants were asked the question

- *It seemed to me as you were struggling with this task, if you saw this as a difficult exercise could you then try and tell me what you found most difficult?*

The coherence between those answers would make it fair to conclude that the participants were struggling with the exercise and the primary reason was insecurity of what I as a researcher needed for my project.
Hypothesis after first prepared question
I sensed that the participants were very sensitive to the need of doing and saying the right things measured by me. They needed my feedback to understand and feel that their answers were OK, in order to feel good about the final answers they had given. My hypothesis in this matter is that they do not feel that they are “good enough” and therefore my questions could be seen as an attack on their self-presentation, which would stimulate the basic defensive emotions such as anger or anxiety. Combined with the symbolic self-presentation this will develop the basic defensive emotion into self-conscious emotions such as shame. It would therefore seem reasonable for the participant to scan the situation by trying to avoid answering until he/she had a clearer view of what I as a researcher would like to hear. From the dialogue I had with the participants when I rejected an answer (e.g. with LB answer to first prepared question part one) it became clear that if I just said

*That is not an answer to my question! I asked: with regard to us talking about your personality regarding your career and high performance, where would you like for us to start?*

The participant would continue to struggle to give an answer and some anger would occur. If I was more informative in my rejection of the answer and said

*There is no right and wrong answer in this. It is not like I’m looking for a particular answer! The reason that I’m asking is to hear your thoughts*
on what you believe is important personality wise with regards to your career and high performance,

It was my experience that it became easier for the participant to answer my question except for one participant HV who said

- Are you sure Michael? If you already have a theory would you then not know what would be a right and a wrong answer?

Second prepared question

The second prepared question was built up around self-presentation and vulnerability. The first part was about letting the participant reflect on how they believe others close to them see them and then finally letting them reflect on how they see themself. Following that process they would be asked to reflect on what others might see as beneficial for the participant to change and finally what they themself would see as beneficial to change.

In the examples below I have put down the entire answer given from the participant and not only the chosen word as the exercise suggests

First part of the second prepared question

The participant was asked to reflect on “what do I look like in the eyes of others” and “how do I see myself” and the answers were put into a table summing up the answers.
**Step 1.**

The participant was asked the following question:

- *If it was not you but your spouse that was sitting here with me and I asked him/her what would be the 3 words that describe (the participant’s name) best what 3 words would he/she give me?*

**Step 2.**

The participant was asked the following question:

- *If it was not you but your agent that was sitting here with me and I asked him/her what would be the 3 words that describe (the participant’s name) best what 3 words would he/she give me?*

**Step 3.**

The participant was asked the following question:

- *We both know that it is not you spouse or you agent sitting here but it is you. So what 3 words would you say describe you best?*

**Step 4.**

The participant’s answers was then read out loud to him/her one at a time (e.g. the 3 words from the agent was read out loud) and then finally the 3 words the participant put on him/her self was read out loud.

After reading out the 3 words of another (spouse or Agent) the participant was asked:
-When you hear me reading it out loud to you, do you then still believe that those 3 words are the ones your (agent or Spouse) would use to describe you the most?

Example of summary table (I am)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agent</th>
<th>Own</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Loving</td>
<td>Caring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>High pace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High will</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Sociable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Second part of the second prepared question

In the second part of the second prepared question the candidate was asked to reflect on "what would others see me benefitting from developing" and "what do I believe that I could benefit from developing". All the answers were then put into a table summing up the answers.

Step 1.

The participant was asked the following question.

-If it was not you but your spouse that was sitting here with me and I asked him/her what 3 things do you believe that (the participant’s name) could benefit the most from developing what 3 words would he/she give me?

Step 2.

The participant was asked the following question.
-If it was not you but your agent that was sitting here with me and I asked him/her what 3 things do you believe that (the participant’s name) could benefit the most from developing what 3 words would he/she give me?

**Step 3.**

The participant was asked the following question.

-Now you are sitting here and I would like to ask you what do you believe that you could benefit the most from developing?

**Step 4.**

The participants answers was then read out loud to him/her one at a time (e.g. the 3 words from the agent was read out loud) and then finally the 3 words the participant put on him/her self was read out loud.

After reading out the 3 words of another (spouse or Agent) the participant is asked:

-When you hear me reading it out loud to you, do you then still believe that those 3 words are the ones describing characteristics your (agent or Spouse) would say that you could benefit the most from developing?

**Example of summery table (development)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agent</th>
<th>Own</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More open at castings</td>
<td>Less open</td>
<td>Less stressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less demanding</td>
<td>More listening</td>
<td>More understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More relaxed</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Self accepting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Answers to second prepared question (examples)
In the examples I have used I have chosen to present the entire answer from the participant and not only the words as the exercise suggests. I have highlighted the words the participant ended up choosing.

Summary table (participant CF)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agent</th>
<th>Own</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>I’m loving, passionate and talented</td>
<td>Caring he would definitely say that I am caring!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sociable would be the second word... and the third word would be passionate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and another</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and hard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>working</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Follow-up question on the Summary table (participant CF)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When you hear me reading it out loud to you, do you then still believe that those 3 words are the ones your (agent or Spouse) would use to describe you the most?</td>
<td>Yes that sounds right and it feels right, there may of course be other words that could be put in, but they seem like the right words. You might be thinking it is a bit too much but I have been in the business for many years and have learned a lot over the years. They have not all been easy times there have been some tough times as well.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary table (development) (participant CF)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agent</th>
<th>Own</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My agent!?.. No idea.</td>
<td>Hahaha.. What do I think I could benefit from developing? You would probably say that I should be better at answering your questions. ........ I could perhaps be better at prioritizing visiting my mother and sister, but there are also a lot of other tasks in life that I must attend to, my husband and I do have children you know! But if you have to put something on your paper you can put down patience. But Michael, I’m 52 years old and I do believe that it is OK to just be who you are and not</td>
<td>What would he say!? I do believe that he is happy with who I am and accepts me as me. I really do not know what he would say. Perhaps that I’m too unselfish but I don’t think that it is a problem for him as he benefits from me not being selfish. So I don’t have any words to add.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have a professional working relationship and we don’t walk around telling each other that we are not good enough. He knows me as a professional actress and I know I think I’m good and that is also why he watches out for casting opportunities for me. I don’t have any words on this one, and it’s a strange question as he is my agent! You could ask me what my mother would say and she would properly say something like CF should prioritize to come and visit her old</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mother more often. constantly strive to try to be something else.

**Follow-up question on the Summary table (development) (participant CF)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I understand from your answers that you do not have 3 points that neither you, your spouse or agent would consider beneficial for you to develop. Before moving on I would like to ask you if you have any comments you would like to add?</td>
<td>Michael I’m glad that you can understand that at 52 years of age you have seen and learned most of the lessons of life. I have developed a lot in my life, but it is interesting questions and I’m curious of what is next.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary table (participant MOE)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agent</th>
<th>Own</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hmmmm... what would he say? He would say <strong>flexible, funny</strong> and I think he would say that I was an Energizer <strong>bunny</strong></td>
<td>I know that I am <strong>hard working</strong>. I also believe that even though I’m the funny man, I’m very serious in my work so <strong>serious</strong> in also one of my words. Finally I will</td>
<td>She would say <strong>hard working, loving and fun</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
choose creative.

Follow-up question on the Summary table (participant MOE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When you hear me reading it out loud to you, do you then still believe that those 3 words are the ones your (agent or Spouse) would use to describe you the most?</td>
<td>Yep I’m the fun loving happy Energizer bunny with a bit of creativity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary table (development) (participant MOE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agent</th>
<th>Own</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Agent would be happy to see me do less of my own stuff so that he can book me more often to do his stuff (laughing) then he would like me to be prepared to pay him more (laughing) and if he could get me to be more serious at castings I think he</td>
<td>I should be cloned so that I could split my work into 2, then I could do more homework, or the clone could (laughing), and my wife would be happier (smiling).</td>
<td>Hmm... there would be something about me ding more work at home, but with the workload I have we know that is not an option. Then she might say that I should be more at home, but I’m sure that she would get tired of having me in the house every day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The influence of self-esteem, shame and vulnerability on sustainable high performance

would be happy
(smiling)
devlop, but it's
difficult just to select 3
development points,
but I will think about it.
(smiling), and the last
one could be that I
should be less of a
comedian but then
again, that is what pays
the mortgage (smiling)

Follow-up question on the Summary table (development) (participant MOE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Looking over the answers you have been giving me puts me in a position where I'm in doubt whether you are serious or just making a bit fun of it?</td>
<td>It’s easy just to make a few jokes and get on with it, but seriously, it is not easy for me to think about me not being good enough and focus on all my bad stuff. I’m happy in my life and I enjoy it as it is, so that is probably why I skipped over it so fast.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion after second prepared question
It can be concluded that the 9 participants saw the first part of the exercise as an easy task and they were all able to give quick answers with the use of few words. In the second part of the exercise all 9 participants were struggling and none of the participants were able to provide 9 words. There was no coherence between the defense mechanisms used by the participants but the most common reaction was frustration/anger directed towards the questions or me. The second most common reaction was avoidance of the questions by using words and/or humor. It is safe to conclude that all participants were better at identifying the behavior that
supported their self-image than the behavior that questioned our ability to live up to our own self-image and self-concept. As the self-concept is related to the self-esteem and as we know that a positive perception of self-image/self-concept creates a higher self-esteem, it is also safe to conclude that here is a high self-esteem.

**Hypothesis after second prepared question**

It is my hypothesis that the high self-esteem is not authentic, as it is not rooted in an open self-reflecting view of the self-image and self-concept. It seems clear that the participants have an avoidant reflection towards some supporting thoughts and actions towards the self-image and self-concept. I would suggest the degree of avoidance is reflected in the vulnerability level. This meaning that a high degree of avoidance would reflect in vulnerability by a low vulnerability level. The reason for my hypothesis about the self-esteem not being authentic is aligned with the thoughts about avoidance and vulnerability. I would suggest that that participant with a high self-esteem would have the mental health and strength and thereby the courage to be vulnerable and therefore not be in the need for avoidance.

**Third prepared question**

From a psychodynamic perspective it becomes interesting to understand if there is something in the history of the participant that prevents them from using their self-esteem as ballast in their vulnerability. The third question is therefore focused around their story and especially around their childhood. As the questions could be different from participant to participant depending on their answers, I have decided not to put in examples of the
questions and answers. The important part in the third prepared question is to investigate the history and hear about the special life events from the participants.

**Summary of third prepared question**
All stories were related to an insecure childhood with following topics:

- Domestic violence
- Drinking problems in the home
- Family abandoned by the father and no contact was ever established
- 1,5 year younger brother with major health problems and the mother was single
- Feeling alone and being bullied in school
- High expectations with regard to behavior and achievements

**Conclusion of third prepared question**
When the participant’s stories are examined, it becomes apparent that there is a pattern to the critical stories seen from the participant’s point of view. Likewise, there is a pattern with regard to the participant's need to state that they have learned to take care of themselves. 8 out of the 9 participants has experienced or is experiencing attachment difficulties in their adult life. There was a tendency by all participants to use a lot of words and to make sure that I saw the participant as a victim and a saviour in the stories they told.

**Hypothesis after third question**
It would seem like there would be a history of low self-esteem issues in regard to the degree of experienced attachment in the childhood. This
would also explain the participant's need to take control of the degree of attachment and the story I heard and attached to. My hypothesis is that the participants suffer from attachment insecurity and have a defensive reaction to threats to their self-esteem. This makes it difficult for them to answer the questions in regard to their own development points and makes it difficult to take responsibility for difficult events in their lives. The participant needs to be seen as the self-image and self-concept created by the participant, and any other perception of the participant will be seen as a threat against his or her the self-esteem by the participant.

**Fourth prepared question**
The fourth prepared line of questions are linked to the participant's level of self-compassion. I consider self-compassion as being one of the main required capabilities in sustainable high performance. In the row of questions I use the test made by professor Kristine Neff (2012). The 26 questions are to be answered with one of five answers.

**Answers:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>About half of the time</th>
<th>Fairly Often</th>
<th>Almost all ways</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Questions:

1. I’m disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.

2. When I’m feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that’s wrong.

3. When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through.

4. When I think about my inadequacies, it tends to make me feel more separate and cut off from the rest of the world.

5. I try to be loving towards myself when I’m feeling emotional pain.

6. When I fail at something important to me I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.

7. When I’m down and out, I remind myself that there are lots of other people in the world feeling like I am.

8. When times are really difficult, I tend to be hard on myself.

9. When something upsets me, I try to keep my emotions in balance.

10. When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people.

11. I’m intolerant and impatient towards those aspects of my personality I don’t like.

12. When I’m going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need.

13. When I’m feeling down, I tend to feel like most other people are
probably happier than I am.

14. When something painful happens, I try to take a balanced view of the situation.

15. I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.

16. When I see aspects of myself that I don't like, I get down on myself.

17. When I fail at something important to me, I try to keep things in perspective.

18. When I'm really struggling, I tend to feel like other people must be having an easier time of it.

19. I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering.

20. When something upsets me I get carried away with my feelings.

21. I can be a bit cold-hearted towards myself when I'm experiencing suffering.

22. When I'm feeling down I try to approach my feelings with curiosity and openness.

23. I'm tolerant of my own flaws and inadequacies.

24. When something painful happens I tend to blow the incident out of proportion.

25. When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure.

26. I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.
Conclusion after fourth prepared question

There was a bit of resistance to the test from 6 out of 9 participants but we managed to talk our way through the resistance. 3 out of the 9 answered each question without questioning it. The conclusion after the fourth prepared question is a clear indication of low self-compassion in 5 out of 9 participants, 3 out of 9 participants were in the low end of moderate and 1 out of 9 participants was in the high end of moderate.

Hypothesis after the fourth prepared question

As self-compassion is one of the key elements in shame resilience (Brene Brown, 2012), it would be reasonable to suspect that the overall low self-compassion level will not help the participants increase their vulnerability so that it can support an authentic self-esteem. This means that the compensatory and defensive self-esteem will be more powerful in the participants and that could influence a further decrease in vulnerability.

Summary of the field research

My research of the 9 participants shows some similarities in their profiles and their way of presenting themselves in life. During the interviews it became evident that all have experienced what they saw as critical events and most of them identified their childhood as rough. As a result of that I find it reasonable to suggest that it would have influenced their self-image and self-concept and influenced a special need to be capable of taking care of one self. At a presentation Kim Oestergaard (2012), former head of education at the Danish Frogman corps (Danish special forces), said that 80% of all the participants who complete the training to join the corps has
low self-esteem as a primary driving force. This is of course a controversial statement but there may be something to it. If we look at the field research there is much that indicates that the participants could have had low self-esteem as a driving force. Hence, low self-esteem could be a driving force for recognition at a broader perspective than “just” close relatives. This could be explained with the fact that their upbringing had an affect on the all the participants’ attachment competences. The participants talk about this in their childhood stories, where they indicate that they have learned to be self-reliant as a result of significant other people, who have not created a secure attachment and safety in the participant’s childhood (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). As the participant uses his/hers driving force to become a better and better performer and others (e.g. agencies, casting directors, movie instructors, the press etc.) (der mangler noget her) the bigger the threat towards the self/self-esteem becomes, the more anxiety develops and coping strategies are needed and a closing down of vulnerability is an effective strategy. We see in the initial talk and in the interview that all participants fear not being able to get a new casting and a new role. The reasoning behind that being that a fear of defeat in a self-relevant domain is expected to reduce self-esteem (Tesser, 1988). As a consequence of defeat (e.g. not getting a casting, not passing the casting) we see this outcome as non-theoretical and subsequently we set out to conceptually replicate our Implicit Self-Esteem Compensation (ISEC) and examine its function and social consequences. My work with the participants also gave me a strong impression that the self-image is strongly influenced by others and the way
the participants are perceived by others (e.g. CF who believed that she could only do drama acting because in the media she was always referred to as the actress from this and that drama series. That made her believe that she was only a drama actress)

My final hypothesis

It is my hypothesis that there is a strong coherence between self-esteem, shame and vulnerability, and is has an effect on high performance. I also do believe that it is a threat towards sustainable high performance in changing environments. I also believe that if we work with high performers and their self-compassion and develop the courage and self-esteem, the vulnerability will support the individual in reaching the feeling of being good enough. I do not believe that this would reduce the level of High Performance; I believe that it would open up opportunities for the individual to perform at a high level in more settings and follow the area where the individual has special talent and develop with the area as it moves.

In alignment to my hypothesis I would like to share the statement of Mark Leary in our mail correspondence from 25th of June 2013 where he wrights:

- I don't have any data on this, but I suspect that the very most highly "successful" people are not very self-compassionate because the lifestyles that create worldly fame, wealth, and success tend not to be good for people
psychologically. That's not to say that self-compassionate people don't achieve—they do, but in a balanced and self-congruent fashion.

This means that he believes that the high performers don't have self-compassion, but it also means that self-compassionated people can be high performers.

To support the hypothesis, further reaches by (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen and Handcock, 2007) shows that compassionate people deal with negative life events with more perspective to the problem and are less likely to feel isolated by the problem. They also experience less anxiety and self-consciousness when thinking about the problem.

Kristine Neff supports the theory even further by adding that people with high self-compassion aim just as high as people with low self-compassion, but also recognize that they cannot always reach their goals. Self-compassion is also linked to greater personal initiatives, and the desire to reach ones full potential. Furthermore, self-compassionate people have been found to have less motivational anxiety and engage in fewer self-disabling activities such as procrastination than those who lack self-compassion. Research also shows that self-compassion is positively associated with mastering goals - the desire to enhance self-image (Dweck. 1989). Self-compassionate individuals expressed this relationship through less fear of failure and perceived self-efficiency. Thus, self-compassionate
people are motivated to achieve, but for intrinsic reasons, not because they want to garner social approval.

The final words

If my hypothesis is right then there is a lot of potential in the future focus on talent recruiting, performance development, high performance cultures, leadership models, team building, High Performance coaching etc.

As a final anecdote I can back up my theory with the fact that the 3 participants who requested a continued process where we trained self-compassion, vulnerability and self-esteem, all got new castings and larger roles, but the great story is that CF who did not believe that she could do comedy got a leading part in a comedy show and is performing well and getting good reviews in the press.

I hope that others will find my theory interesting and will follow up on it by doing further research and publications.
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