Acquiring Self-Knowledge: The Search for Feedback That Fits

William B. Swann, Jr., and Stephen J. Read
University of Texas at Austin

This report is concerned with the influence of people's self-conceptions on the feedback they solicit during their social interactions. In the first of three empirical investigations, participants were given an opportunity to seek feedback from interaction partners that would either confirm or disconfirm their self-conceptions. In this investigation, participants displayed a clear preference for feedback that would confirm their self-perceived emotionality and self-perceived assertiveness. Participants in Investigation 2 spent more money for the purchase of self-confirmatory social feedback than self-disconfirmatory feedback. The third investigation asked what might motivate this tendency to preferentially solicit self-confirmatory feedback. It was found that participants regard self-confirmatory feedback as especially informative. This suggests that the feedback preferences found in Investigations 1 and 2 may reflect a cognitively based tendency for people to regard confirmatory instances of phenomena to be more diagnostic and compelling than disconfirmatory instances of phenomena. The discussion considers how people's efforts to solicit self-confirmatory feedback from others may stabilize their social environment, their self-conceptions, and their behavior.

Some characteristics of people are more easily modified than others. A few judiciously applied cosmetics make the homely beautiful; an appropriate diet can help the obese become slender; a bottle of bleach will transform the brunette into a blonde. However, when it comes to people's core notions of who they are, changeability is the exception, stability the rule.

Testimonials to the continuity and temporal stability of self-conceptions date back to the writings of James (1890). Over the years, references to the robustness of self-conceptions have appeared again and again

in the psychological literature. For example, clinicians have often experienced considerable difficulty in changing their clients' self-conceptions, even after months and months of intensive therapy (e.g., Wylie, 1979). Similarly, longitudinal studies show that people's self-ratings remain stable over periods as long as 35 years (e.g., Block, 1981; Costa & McCrae, 1980). And although some have concluded from the results of laboratory investigations that self-conceptions are quite malleable (e.g., Gergen, 1977; Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976), others have criticized these studies on methodological grounds and shown that self-conceptions are highly resistant to change in naturally occurring situations (Shrauger & Shoeneman, 1979; Wylie, 1979). Even practitioners of "brainwashing" techniques in prisoner-of-war camps have typically failed to change the self-concepts of their captives, despite their ability to exert nearly complete control over prisoners' physical and psychological environments (e.g., Schein, 1956).

Why are self-conceptions so stable? Such stability may partially reflect the systematic strategies people use in processing social feedback, strategies that cause them to over-

estimate the actual amount of feedback that supports their self-conceptions (e.g., Lecky, 1945; Secord & Backman, 1961). For example, people are more likely to attend to and remember social feedback that will confirm rather than disconfirm their self-conceptions (e.g., Swann & Read, 1981, Investigations 1 and 3). Also, when people receive feedback that disconfirms their self-conceptions, they tend to interpret it in ways that minimizes its impact (e.g., Crary, 1966; Markus, 1977; Shrauger & Lund, 1975). Through such processes, people may see the social feedback they receive as being more compatible with their self-conceptions that it really is.

But there are other, perhaps even more influential, processes that may serve to stabilize people's self-conceptions. During their social encounters, individuals may actively bring their interaction partners' evaluations into harmony with their self-conceptions. To wit, the man who conceives himself to be intimidating may sustain this conception by behaving in ways that induce others to cower and grovel in his presence; the woman who views herself as unlovable may validate this conception by acting in ways that foster rejection by her would-be lovers. Just such a process has recently been demonstrated by Swann & Read (1981, Investigation 2). In this investigation, individuals who perceived themselves to be relatively likable elicited more favorable reactions from their interaction partners than those who perceived themselves to be relatively dislikable. Further, participants were especially inclined to elicit self-confirmatory reactions when their self-concepts had been called into question. Thus, those who perceived themselves as likable elicited especially favorable reactions when they suspected that their partners disliked them; those who perceived themselves as dislikable elicited especially unfavorable reactions when they suspected that their partners liked them.

Why might people strive to bring their interaction partners' appraisals into agreement with their self-conceptions? One possibility centers around the significance they attach to different types of appraisals. For example, consider the man who, after flying into a rage over some trivial mishap, has

come to doubt his self-conception that he is an unemotional person. To quell his feelings of uncertainty, he decides that he will assess whether or not a female friend of his perceives him to be unemotional. He may employ any of three information search strategies. He might solicit feedback that would tend to *confirm* his belief that he is unemotional. Thus, he may encourage his friend to recall instances from the past that made her think he was cool and restrained even in stressful situations. Alternately, he might solicit feedback that would tend to *disconfirm* his belief that he is an unemotional person. Thus, he may encourage his friend to recount times when she saw him become terribly upset in response to some personal misfortune. Finally, he might solicit some feedback that would tend to confirm his self-conception and some feedback that would tend to disconfirm his self-conception. In this case, he would be equally diligent in probing for evidence that his friend perceives him to be emotional.

Although one could argue that, from a strictly logical standpoint, people should solicit self-disconfirmatory feedback (e.g., Popper, 1963), there is reason to believe that people may preferentially solicit feedback that will confirm their self-conceptions. Recent findings in cognitive and social psychology suggest that people may regard self-confirmatory feedback to be especially informative and compelling. Investigations of concept formation and concept utilization indicate that people are more likely to use positive instances of phenomena than negative ones (e.g., Hovland & Weiss, 1953). Similarly, confirming instances typically have more impact on inductive conclusions than do disconfirming instances (e.g., Gollob, Rossman & Abelson, 1973). In estimating the similarity of two entities, people search for features that are common to both entities rather than features that characterize only one entity (Tversky, 1977). Moreover, whether in testing the validity of propositions about people (e.g., Mary is an extravert) or physical objects (e.g., All chairs have four legs), people preferentially search for evidence that will confirm rather than disconfirm the propositions they are testing (e.g., Snyder & Swann, 1978b; Wason &

Johnson-Laird, 1972). Finally, people are more likely to recall information that confirms rather than disconfirms their beliefs about others (e.g., Snyder & Cantor, 1979).

In this article, we present a series of three empirical investigations. The first and second investigations test the hypothesis that people actively seek to acquire self-confirmatory rather than self-disconfirmatory feedback from their interaction partners. The third investigation tests the hypothesis that people regard social feedback that will confirm their self-conceptions to be relatively more informative and diagnostic than feedback that disconfirms their self-conceptions.

Investigation 1

The initial investigation tested the prediction that individuals would preferentially solicit feedback that would confirm their self-perceived assertiveness and self-perceived emotionality. We chose these two dimensions because they are important and salient aspects of the self-concept that are independent of one another (for our participants, $r = .09$). Moreover, since the poles of the emotional–restrained dimension were equally positive in affective connotation and the poles of the assertive-unassertive dimension were not (assertive having a more positive valence than unassertive, see Goldberg, Note 1), using both of these dimensions allowed us to determine if our findings would generalize across dimensions that differed in affective loading.

In this investigation, participants first completed a measure of self-perceived assertiveness and self-perceived emotionality. They then learned that they would be interacting with another person who had access to some information about them and who was at that moment evaluating them by answering a series of questions. Furthermore, they learned that prior to the interaction, they could examine some of their future interaction partner's answers to the questions. Participants then chose those questions whose answers they most wanted to examine from among a series of questions that were related to assertiveness and emotionality. We assessed the effects of participants' self-con-

ceptions on the questions whose answers they asked to examine. We anticipated that participants would preferentially solicit feedback that would confirm their self-perceived assertiveness and emotionality.

Method

Participants

Seventy female and 9 male undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin participated in this experiment for credit in their introductory psychology course.

Procedure

The measure of self-conceptions. Upon arrival, each participant completed several questionnaires. Embedded in the booklet of questionnaires was a series of 12 6-point bipolar trait scales that included two critical items, assertive–unassertive and emotional–restrained. We computed the median for each of these two scales. Those who scored below the median on the assertive–unassertive scale were designated *self-assertives;* those who scored above the median were designated *self-unassertives.* Similarly, those who scored below the median on the emotionality scale were designated *self-emotionals;* those who scored above the median were designated *self-unemotionals.*

Setting the stage for the measure of information seeking. At this time, participants also completed a second questionnaire that was designed to help set the stage for the measure of information seeking. This questionnaire included items from the Allport-Vernon-Lindzey Survey of Values (1961) and the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (Helmreich & Stapp, 1974) that dealt with issues that were quite personally revealing, such as religious values. By including such items, we hoped to convince participants that virtually any set of responses they might make would provide someone reading their responses with a basis for forming an impression of them, thereby bolstering the credibility of the soon-to-be-presented measure of information seeking.

After participants completed their questionnaires, the experimenter informed them that the study was concerned with the getting acquainted process. To initiate this process, the experimenter continued, she would like to show the responses that the participant had just made on the personality questionnaires to the participant's future conversation partner, an introductory psychology student of the opposite sex.[1] When the participant granted his or her permission (as everyone did), the experimenter indicated that she would leave to show the participant's questionnaire responses to the conversation partner.

The measure of information seeking. After approximately 2 minutes, the experimenter returned and began by asking all participants to imagine that they had just

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[1] The conversation partner was described as a member of the opposite sex to maximize our participants' involvement in the experiment.

met someone at a party and were trying to discover what this person thought of them. In such situations, she continued, they might often have some idea of their interaction partner's evaluation of them. The experimenter then explained that to simulate this possibility, she was having the participant's future interaction partner read over the participant's responses to the personality questionnaires and evaluate the participant by answering a series of questions. When the interaction partner was finished answering these questions, participants would have an opportunity to see all of the questions that their partners had answered and select those questions whose answers they were most interested in scrutinizing.

The experimenter then provided participants with two separate lists of questions, with eight questions on each list. The questions on one list were related to assertiveness; the questions on the other list were related to emotionality. Nine naive judges had previously classified each of the eight questions on the list of assertiveness related questions into two categories.

1. *Assertive questions.* These four questions were ones that a majority of the judges agreed focused on assertive characteristics, for example, "What makes you think that this is the type of person who will complain in a restaurant if the service is bad?" or "What is it about this person that makes him or her likely to go to court if the landlord refuses to return the deposit?"

2. *Unassertive questions.* The majority of the judges also agreed that these four questions focused on unassertive characteristics, for example, "Why would this person not be likely to complain if someone cuts into line in front of them at a movie?" or "What leads this person not to complain when the neighbors are too loud?"

The same nine judges also classified each of eight questions on the list of emotionality related questions into two categories.

1. *Emotional questions.* A majority of the judges thought that these questions focused on emotional characteristics, for example, "Why does this person have trouble staying in control of his or her emotions?" or "What about this person makes you think that he or she would go to pieces if a friend died?"

2. *Unemotional questions.* A majority of the judges also agreed that these four questions focused on unemotional characteristics, for example, "What about this person makes it difficult to tell if he or she was feeling happy or sad?" or "Why do you think that this person doesn't get angry, even when provoked?"

Approximately half of the participants chose from the list of assertiveness related questions first, the others chose from the other list first. After choosing five questions from each list, participants were debriefed, thanked for their participation, and excused.

Results and Discussion

Did participants seek social feedback that would confirm their self-conceptions? Our first prediction was that self-assertives would preferentially solicit assertive feedback and self-unassertives would preferentially solicit

Table 1

Investigation 1: Choice of Feedback as a Function of Self-Conceptions

Self- conception	Type of feedback	
	Assertive	Unassertive
Assertive (n = 43)		
M	2.74[a]	2.26
SD	.93	.93
Unassertive (n = 36)		
M	2.28	2.72
SD	.85	.85
	Emotional	Unemotional
Emotional (n = 43)		
M	2.77	2.23
SD	.72	.72
Unemotional (n = 36)		
M	2.42	2.58
SD	.77	.77

[a] Higher means indicate greater amounts of feedback selected.

unassertive feedback. The results confirmed this prediction. A 2 (self-assertive, self-unassertive) $\times$ 2 (assertiveness related questions presented first or second) least squares analysis of variance of the type of feedback participants chose to examine revealed that self-conception had a reliable impact on feedback preferences, $F(1, 75) = 5.46$, $p = .022$.[2] As can be seen in Table 1, this effect was nearly perfectly symmetrical: Just as self-assertives asked to examine more assertive feedback than unassertive feedback, self-unassertives asked to examine more unassertive feedback than assertive feedback. The overall analysis also showed that whether participants chose the assertive questions first or second had no impact on feedback preferences, $Fs < 1$, ns.

Our second major prediction was that self-emotionals would preferentially solicit emotional feedback and self-unemotionals would

[2] The number of assertive questions chosen served as the dependent variable in this analysis. Since these values were perfectly correlated with the number of unassertive questions selected ($r = -1.00$), a separate analysis of the unassertive questions was not conducted. Also, sex of participant was not included as a factor in the analysis because the total number of males was so low that some cells in the design would have been empty. Sex effects are assessed in Investigation 2, however.

preferentially solicit unemotional feedback. This prediction was also confirmed. A least squares analysis of variance revealed that self-conception had a reliable impact on feedback preferences, $F(1, 75) = 4.05$, $p = .048$. The means, displayed in the lower half of Table 1, indicate that just as self-emotionals preferred emotional feedback, self-unemotionals preferred unemotional feedback. The overall analysis also showed that there were no effects associated with the order in which the questions were chosen, Fs < 1, ns.

The results of this investigation clearly support the hypothesis that people are motivated to acquire social feedback that confirms their self-conceptions. Also, it is clear that this effect occurs for at least two distinct dimensions of the self-concept. To learn more about the generality of this desire to acquire self-confirmatory feedback, we conducted a second study.

Investigation 2

Acquiring information concerning other people's appraisals of oneself can often be costly in terms of time, effort, or embarrassment. In the second investigation, we attempted to simulate this possibility by assessing the extent to which participants were willing to purchase feedback that would confirm their self-conceptions. In addition, to assess whether or not our findings would generalize to both sexes, we included a roughly equivalent number of males and females in this study.

Method

Participants

Fifty-nine female and 64 male undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin participated in this experiment for extra credit in their introductory psychology course.

Procedure

All aspects of the procedure were identical to that used in Investigation 1, with the following modifications. Since Investigation 1 showed similar effects for self-perceived assertiveness and emotionality, we arbitrarily chose to focus on the assertiveness dimension in Investigation 2. In addition, after informing participants that

they would have access to some feedback concerning their interaction partners' reactions to them, the experimenter noted that in real-life situations, learning how others perceive oneself can often cost people something in terms of effort or embarrassment. To simulate this real-life possibility, the experimenter continued, participants would be required to pay 10¢ for every piece of feedback they wished to examine. To insure that all participants would have equal amounts of purchasing power, the experimenter explained that she had been instructed to give each of them $1 to purchase as much feedback as they desired and that they could keep any money they did not spend.

The experimenter then presented the participant with the same list of assertiveness related questions that had been used in Investigation 1. After allowing participants several minutes to decide what to do with their funds, the experimenter returned to the experimental chamber, debriefed them, and awarded them $1, regardless of the amount of information that they had agreed to purchase.

Results and Discussion

Were participants motivated to spend more of their private funds on feedback that would confirm rather than disconfirm their self-conceptions? And, if so, was this true for both males and females? To address these issues, we performed a 2 (self-assertives, self-unassertives) × 2 (assertive, unassertive feedback) × 2 (male, female) least squares analysis of variance of the amount of money participants spent on the feedback. There were no main or interactive effects of sex of participant, so this variable was deleted from all subsequent analyses, all Fs < 1.37. More importantly, the analysis did reveal the predicted interaction between self-conception and feedback type, $F(1, 121) = 4.85$, $p = .030$. The means, displayed in Table 2, show that this interaction was due equally to each self-conception group: Just as self-assertives purchased more assertive feedback than unassertive feedback, self-unassertives purchased more unassertive than assertive feedback. Neither self-conception nor feedback type alone had reliable effects in the overall analysis, Fs < 1.

At the very least, these findings indicate that both males and females prefer self-confirmatory feedback. Moreover, although the absolute amount of money participants spent was not large, the pattern of spending reveals a clear preference for self-confirmatory feedback. Thus, it may well be that even in naturalistic situations, in which acquiring social

Table 2

Investigation 2: Amount of Money Spent on Assertive and Unassertive Feedback as a Function of Self-Perceived Assertiveness

Self-perceived assertiveness	Type of feedback	
	Assertive	Unassertive
Assertive (*n* = 67)		
M	1.9[a]	1.6
SD	3.54	3.63
Unassertive (*n* = 56)		
M	1.7	2.0
SD	3.57	3.10

[a] Higher means indicate more dimes spent on feedback.

feedback may be costly in terms of effort or embarrassment, people may still solicit self-confirmatory feedback. In the following investigation, we took a closer look at why people might desire such feedback.

Investigation 3

The first two investigations clearly suggest that people are motivated to acquire social feedback that will confirm their self-conceptions. One reason that people may be so motivated is suggested by recent research in deductive reasoning and hypothesis testing (e.g., Snyder & Swann, 1978b; Wason & Johnson-Laird, 1972). That is, people may preferentially solicit self-confirmatory feedback because they regard information that confirms their beliefs and hypotheses to be relatively more compelling and informative than information that disconfirms their beliefs and hypotheses. We tested this notion in Investigation 3.

Method

Participants

Forty-one undergraduate and 33 graduate student volunteers of both sexes at the University of Texas at Austin participated in this experiment. Participants were run in three group sessions with approximately 25 people in each group.

Procedure

Upon arrival, each participant completed a series of six bipolar-trait scales that included the critical item,

emotional–restrained. Those who scored below the median on this scale were classified as self-emotionals; those who scored above the median were classified as self-unemotionals. After filling out the measure of self-perceived emotionality, participants completed an unrelated personality questionnaire to prevent them from associating the measure of self-conceptions with the soon-to-be-presented measure of perceived informativeness. After participants completed this questionnaire, the experimenter introduced the measure of perceived informativeness by first instructing them to imagine that another person had answered a series of questions about them. He then presented the eight emotionality related questions that had been used in Investigation 1. After reading each question, participants responded to the query, "How much would you learn about yourself by reading the answer to this question?" by completing a scale ranging from 1 (extremely uninformative) to 6 (extremely informative). After completing the scale for all eight statements, participants were debriefed, thanked, and excused.

Results and Discussion

Did participants perceive feedback that confirmed their self-conceptions to be relatively more diagnostic than feedback that disconfirmed their self-conceptions? We expected that self-emotionals would regard the emotional feedback to be more informative than the unemotional feedback and self-unemotionals would regard the unemotional feedback to be more informative than the emotional feedback. This was the case. A 2 (self-emotionals, self-unemotionals) × 2 (emotional, unemotional feedback, a within-subjects factor) least squares analysis of variance of the average informativeness rating participants assigned to the emotional and unemotional feedback revealed a reliable interaction between self-conception and feedback type, $F(1, 72) = 15.31$, $p = .001$. The means, displayed in Table 3, show that just as self-emotionals regarded the emotional feedback to be more informative than the unemotional feedback, self-unemotionals asserted that the unemotional feedback was more informative than the emotional feedback.

In summary, these data indicate that there is in fact a tendency for people to believe that social feedback that confirms their self-conceptions is relatively more informative than feedback that disconfirms their self-conceptions. In the following section, we will consider how this tendency might play an

Table 3
*Investigation 3: Perceived Informativeness of
Emotional and Unemotional Feedback as a
Function of Self-Perceived Emotionality*

Self-perceived emotionality	Type of feedback	
	Emotional	Unemotional
Emotional (n = 40)		
M	3.856[a]	3.55
SD	1.918	2.184
Unemotional (n = 34)		
M	3.426	4.015
SD	1.786	1.749

[a] Higher means indicate greater perceived informativeness.

important role in stabilizing people's social relationships.

General Discussion

Our findings suggest that in the course of their social relationships, there is a systematic tendency for people to solicit feedback that verifies and confirms their self-conceptions. In Investigation 1, participants preferentially sought feedback that would confirm two distinct aspects of their self-concept, self-perceived assertiveness and self-perceived emotionality. Investigation 2 showed that participants were more willing to relinquish their private funds to acquire self-confirmatory feedback than self-disconfirmatory feedback. Moreover, males and females were equally likely to manifest this desire to acquire self-confirmatory feedback. Finally, the third investigation suggested that one reason that people may preferentially solicit self-confirmatory feedback is because they believe that such feedback is especially informative and diagnostic with respect to the type of persons they are.

This evidence that people believe that self-confirmatory feedback is highly informative converges with other research that shows that people find confirmatory instances of phenomena to be especially diagnostic and compelling. Even when performing relatively uninvolving deductive reasoning and problem solving tasks, people are more compelled by information that confirms rather than disconfirms their beliefs and hypotheses (e.g.,

Gollob, Rossman, & Abelson, 1973; Hovland & Weiss, 1953; Wason & Johnson-Laird, 1972). Therefore, it may well be that people desire and value self-confirmatory feedback because their thought processes are structured in ways that cause them to regard confirmatory instances of phenomena to be more compelling and diagnostic than disconfirmatory ones.

This is not to say that people do not appreciate the implications of disconfirmatory evidence when they encounter it (e.g., Mynatt, Doherty, & Tweney, 1977). Nor do we wish to suggest that all people are equally likely to display a preference for confirmatory feedback. Individuals whose self-concepts are diffuse or poorly integrated are probably less inclined to display this preference than those whose self-concepts are well articulated (e.g., Mead, 1934). For example, the adolescent male who has hopes of becoming a Don Juan but has not yet been kissed may be just as likely to look for signs of disinterest in the women he encounters as he is to look for signs of interest. For such individuals, the large discrepancy between their goals and their accomplishments makes it difficult to specify their self-concept. Consequently, it is unclear what feedback they would regard as confirmatory and disconfirmatory.

Nevertheless, instances in which people have truly diffuse self-concepts are probably rare. Rather, by observing the regularities in their own behavior and the reactions of others that may arise from temperamental or environmental factors, most people probably form clear ideas of who they are. Once they do this, our data suggest that they will begin seeking self-confirmatory feedback. They may, for example, ask their friends and acquaintances leading questions (e.g., "Oh Ashley, you *do* love me, don't you?"). In a recent paper (Swann & Read, 1981), we have shown several other ways in which people may seek self-confirmatory feedback. In one study, we found that people spent longer scrutinizing an interaction partner's evaluation if they thought it would confirm rather than disconfirm their self-conception. A second study showed that while engaging in conversation, individuals adopted strategies of self-presentation that elicited self-confir-

matory reactions from their interaction partners. Finally, a third study demonstrated that after listening to another person evaluate them, people tended to recall only those statements that confirmed their self-conceptions. Together, these data suggest that people's preference for self-confirmatory feedback may generate an entire family of processes through which they verify and sustain their images of themselves.

It is important to note that such verification processes may foster stability not only in people's images of themselves, but in their interpersonal environments as well. For example, take Percy, who perceives himself to be highly tractable. Characteristically, Percy tries to get everyone to give him orders and make his decisions for him. When he encounters Cynthia, he is alarmed to discover that she does not believe he is the milquetoast that he thinks he is. Percy does not take such feedback lightly; he launches a campaign to show Cynthia just how wimpy and indecisive he really is. On such occasions, tractable Percy will become even more tractable (for empirical demonstrations, see Swann & Read, 1981, Investigation 2; Swann & Hill, Note 2). If Percy succeeds in his efforts to convince Cynthia that he is indeed tractable, Cynthia will probably use her impression of him to guide her behavior (e.g., Snyder & Swann, 1978a, 1978b; Swann & Snyder, 1980). Thus, Percy can rest assured that Cynthia will treat him in a manner that befits his self-image.

Moreover, Percy can expect that Cynthia's perception and corresponding treatment of him will not change substantially over time. Researchers have repeatedly shown that once people form social perceptions, these impressions are incredibly robust and resistant to change (e.g., Rosenhan, 1973; Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975; Walster, Berscheid, Abrahams, & Aronson, 1967). Consider also that Cynthia may communicate her impression of Percy to others; soon, everyone in Percy's circle of friends may be trying their hand at leading "tractable Percy" around. The impressions that Percy's circle of friends form of him may be especially significant for him since he, like most people, may spend the vast majority of his time interacting with this group or other

groups that have similar impressions of him. Ultimately, Percy may succeed in bringing nearly everyone in his interpersonal environment to see him in a manner that confirms his self-conception. When he does so, tractable Percy's image of himself will have become an *inter*personal as well as an *intra*personal phenomenon; Percy will not only have *internalized* tractability into his self-conception, he will also have *externalized* this conception into the belief systems of his interaction partners.

The argument that we are advancing here will surely evoke a sense of déjà vu from those familiar with any of several interpersonal approaches to personality (e.g., Berne, 1964; Carson, 1969; Endler & Magnusson, 1976; Snyder, 1980; Sullivan, 1953; Wachtel, 1973, 1977). These theorists suggest that individuals who possess various personality dispositions may behave in ways that elicit certain characteristic and stable reactions from others. Our approach goes one step beyond these formulations by asserting that once people translate the stability they perceive in the reactions of others into self-conceptions, these conceptions will make independent contributions to the stability of their social relationships above and beyond any stability generated by traits. For instance, in the preceding example, Percy will launch a campaign to bring Cynthia to see him as tractable only if he *believes* that he is tractable and desires others to see him that way; simply possessing the trait would not be enough to motivate such intensive efforts to acquire self-confirmatory feedback.

The notion that people may actively create self-confirmatory environments around themselves may provide a fresh perspective on the recent traits versus situations controversy (e.g., Bem & Allen, 1974; Hogan, DeSoto, & Solano, 1977; Mischel, 1968). Mischel (1968) initiated the controversy by challenging the conventional assumption of trait theorists that behavior is stable across situations and over time. His argument was based on the dual premises that situational pressures are influential determinants of behavior and that the nature of the situational pressures people encounter vary considerably as they move from one social setting to the next. From these premises, he concluded

that people's behavior will vary markedly across situations and over time.

Although we are in general agreement with the assumption that situations influence behavior, our findings reported here and elsewhere (Swann & Read, 1981; Swann & Hill, Note 2) suggest that the situational pressures that any given individual encounters may be much more stable than Mischel (1968) supposed. In the service of verifying their self-conceptions, individuals may create idiosyncratically skewed social environments that are indeed stable. The stability inherent in these environments will, in turn, stabilize behavior.

This suggests that it may be quite inaccurate to characterize people as passive creatures who watch in wonderment as their self-conceptions are tossed about willy-nilly by the pressures that swirl about them (e.g., Gergen, 1977). Rather, it may be more accurate to view people as active agents who, after fashioning images of themselves, behave in ways that tend to bring their social environments into harmony with these images. From this perspective, self-conceptions are interpersonal as well as intrapersonal phenomena that are manifested not only in the thoughts, feelings and actions of individuals, but also in the thoughts, feelings and actions of their interaction partners.

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