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Self-Verification:
The Search for Coherence

WILLIAM B. SWANN, JR.
PETER J. RENTFROW
JENNIFER S. GUINN

Old patterns, no matter how negative and painful they may be, have
an incredible magnetic power—because they do feel like home.
—Steinem (1992, p. 38)

Why do some people find that hurtful, humiliating relationships have an "incredible magnetic power"? And why do these same people sometimes wander from one miserable relationship to the next? We suggest that the answer to these and related questions can be found in the construct of psychological coherence. Furthermore, we suggest that understanding the allure of coherence will lay bare a host of phenomena that have heretofore remained rather baffling and mysterious, including the tendency for people to enter into and maintain relationships that seem punitive or even abusive.

Our argument rests on three key assumptions. First, once patterns of living have been established and maintained for some time, they come to provide people with a powerful sense of coherence. Second, because these patterns are summarized by people's self-views, stable self-views become intimately tied to feelings of coherence. Third,

these feelings of coherence are so alluring that people will fight to maintain them even if it means enduring pain and discomfort. For example, when people's life experiences lead them to develop negative self-views, these negative self-views will provide them with a sense of coherence that they will work to maintain by seeking and creating confirming (i.e., negative) feedback. This points to an important qualifier to the widely held belief that people have a strong preference for positive evaluations (Jones, 1973).

The first section of this chapter focuses on the nature and origin of coherence strivings, with a distinction made between coherence and its cousin construct, self-consistency. The second section reviews research on how people translate their coherence strivings into efforts to verify their self-views. The third and final section examines the interplay between people's desire for self-verification

and other important social psychological phenomena, including the desire for objectively accurate information, self-enhancement, and strategic self-presentation.

Coherence Strivings and Why Leon Overlooked Prescott

Philosophers tell us that the desire for coherence is so essential for survival that even children possess it, albeit in rudimentary form (e.g., Guidano & Liotti, 1983). As soon as children begin to form generalizations about the world, they start looking for information that confirms those generalizations. Popper (1963) discussed this process in terms of a search for regularities: "Every organism has inborn reactions or responses. . . . The newborn baby "expects" . . . to be fed (and, one could even argue, to be protected and loved). . . . One of the most important of these expectations is the expectation of finding a regularity" (p. 47).

As people mature, they acquire vast amounts of information about the world, and they organize this information into an elaborate set of theories. At the heart of this theoretical system reside people's views of themselves. People's self-views represent the lens through which they perceive reality, lending meaning to all experience. Should people's self-views flounder, they will no longer have a secure basis for understanding and responding to the world because they will have been stripped of their fundamental means of knowing the world. Murphy (1947) likened self-views to a map or chart: "Indeed, the self-picture has all the strength of other perceptual stereotypes, and in addition serves as the chart by which the individual navigates. If it is lost, he can make only impulsive runs in fair weather; the ship drifts helplessly whenever storms arise" (p. 715).

Evidence for the critical role of the self in providing people with a source of coherence comes from a case study of a man who drowned his self-views in a sea of alcohol. Chronic alcohol abuse led William Thompson to develop Korsakoff syndrome, a brain disease marked by profound memory loss. According to his physician, Oliver Sacks (1985), the memory loss was so severe that Thompson had essentially "erased himself."

Able to remember only scattered fragments from his past, he constantly confused fantasy and reality. The case was particularly poignant because he desperately wanted to recover the self that constantly eluded his grasp. When Thompson encountered other people, he launched into a whirlwind of activity designed to determine his own identity. Frantically, he would develop hypotheses about who he was and then test these hypotheses on whoever happened to be present ("I am a grocer and you are my customer, right? Well now, what'll it be—Nova or Virginia? But wait; why are you wearing that white coat? You must be Hymie, the Kosher butcher next door. Yes, that's it. But why are there no bloodstains on your coat?"). Sadly, he could never remember the results of the latest test for more than a few seconds. Sacks (1985) concludes that Thompson was "continually creating a world and self, to replace what was continually being forgotten and lost . . . such a patient must literally make himself (and his world) up every moment. . . . The world keeps disappearing, losing meaning, vanishing—and he must seek meaning [by] throwing bridges of meaning over abysses of meaninglessness" (pp. 110–111).

Desperately seeking an elusive self that kept disappearing like the Cheshire cat, Thompson was cast adrift in a world that was devoid of meaning. Thompson's case not only shows that a stable sense of self is essential to feelings of coherence but also provides some hints about how people try to find coherence as they move from one situation to the next. Thompson repeatedly generated hypotheses about who he was and then proceeded to test them by seeking supportive evidence. It turns out that this is essentially what most people do. That is, people perceive evidence that confirms their hypotheses and beliefs to be especially trustworthy, diagnostic, and easy to process (e.g., Bruner, Goodnow & Austin, 1956; Klayman & Ha, 1987). And when people test the validity of their propositions and beliefs, they are especially likely to seek hypothesis-confirmatory evidence (e.g., Snyder & Swann, 1978; Wason & Johnson-Laird, 1972).

This preference for coherent information appears functional in that people seem to be better off when their worlds seem coherent to them. For example, Rentfrow, Swann,

and Keough (2002) had participants write about either positive or negative life experiences several times over a period of 4 weeks. At the end of each week participants indicated the extent to which their essays told a coherent story. Overall, the more coherence participants perceived in their essays, the less likely they were to report symptoms of physical illness or to visit the student health center. Thus those who "saw" a great deal of coherence in their lives were more apt to enjoy psychological and even physical health later on. Furthermore, perceptions of coherence were unrelated to self-esteem measured at the beginning of the semester, indicating that it was not simply that people who felt worthless experienced a lack of coherence and fell ill.

In addition to demonstrating the health implications of coherence, Rentfrow et al.'s (2002) findings point to an important difference between psychological coherence and a related construct, psychological consistency. Perceptions of coherence grow out of the ability of participants to integrate their experiences into their evolving theory of self. Although theories of self could, in principle, contribute to people's feelings of cognitive consistency, most consistency theories have excluded the self (for exceptions, see Aronson, 1969; Lecky, 1945; Secord & Backman, 1965). For example, in the most influential exposition of consistency theory, Festinger (1957) suggested that a man would experience dissonance if, after discovering that he had a flat tire but no jack, he proceeded to remove the lug nuts from his wheel. Theoretically, dissonance would grow out of the pointlessness of removing the wheel because, without a jack, he could not replace the wheel. The source of the dissonance, then, was the inconsistency between the man's knowledge of what needed to be done and what he did—his enduring sense of self was largely irrelevant.

No wonder, then, that in his 1957 classic on dissonance, Festinger failed to cite Prescott Lecky's 1945 book, *Self-Consistency: A Theory of Personality*. Whereas Festinger studiously avoided implicating the self in his dissonance processes, Lecky placed people's enduring sense of self at center stage.[1] Despite the title of his book, then, Lecky's theory actually said more about the allure of psychological coherence than

about consistency. He thus laid the groundwork for self-verification theory.

Self-Verification Theory

Self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 1987, 1990, 1999) assumes that stable self-views provide people with a crucial source of coherence, an invaluable means of defining their existence, organizing experience, predicting future events, and guiding social interaction (cf. Cooley, 1902; Lecky, 1945; Mead, 1934; Secord & Backman, 1965). Moreover, by stabilizing behavior, stable self-views make people more predictable to *others* (Goffman, 1959). This added predictability will, in turn, stabilize the way others respond to people. In this way, stable self-views foster a coherent social environment, which, in turn, further stabilizes their self-views.

This reasoning suggests that people may seek self-verification for one or both of two reasons: to bolster their feelings of psychological coherence ("epistemic" concerns) or to ensure that their interactions proceed smoothly ("pragmatic" concerns). For this reason, just as being perceived in a self-congruent manner may bolster feelings of existential security and calm the waters of social interaction, being perceived in an incongruent manner may produce the epistemic and pragmatic equivalents of a tidal wave. People strive to avoid such disasters by entering into and creating social worlds that confirm their self-views.

Which statement brings us back to the topic with which we began this chapter: close relationships. Because we infer who we are by observing how others react to us (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), our close relationships play a prominent role in nurturing and sustaining a coherent sense of self. Specifically, we can maintain stable self-views only insofar as we receive—or at least think that we have received—a steady supply of self-verifying feedback from others. In this section, we discuss some of the ways that people pursue this objective.

How Self-Verification Maintains Coherence

People may enlist two classes of self-verification activities in their search for self-veri-

Self-concept

Creating social environments
1. Selective interaction
2. Displaying identity cues
3. Creating allies or interpersonal prompts

Biased information processing
1. Selective attention
2. Selective encoding and retrieval
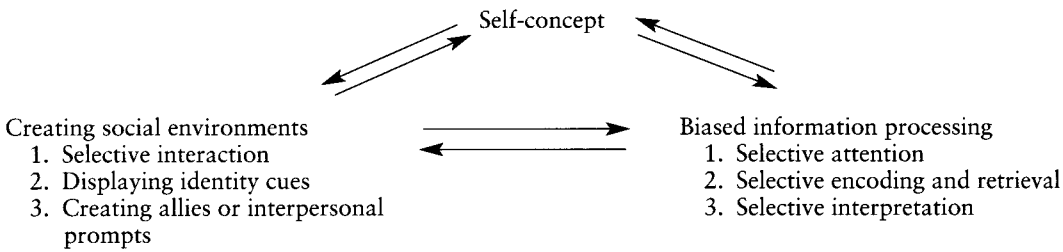3. Selective interpretation

FIGURE 18.1. Self-verification processes.

fying evaluations. As shown in Figure 18.1, the first such class of activities involves their overt behaviors. Specifically, people work to create social environments that reinforce their self-views (e.g., McCall & Simmons, 1966). The second class of self-verification activities is cognitive. Through biased information processing, people develop perceptions of reality that are more compatible with their self-views than is warranted by the objective evidence.

Developing a Self-Confirmatory Social Environment

All living organisms inhabit "niches" that routinely satisfy their basic needs (e.g., Clark, 1954). Human beings satisfy their need for self-verification by attempting (consciously or not) to construct self-confirmatory social environments (McCall & Simmons, 1966). To this end, they employ three distinct activities: They strategically choose interaction partners and social settings; they display identity cues; and they adopt interaction strategies that evoke self-confirmatory responses. We consider each of these strategies in turn.

Selective Interaction

The notion that people seek social contexts that provide them with self-confirmatory feedback has been around for several decades (e.g., Secord & Backman, 1965; Wachtel, 1977). Until recently, the evidence for this hypothesis was anecdotal or based on field studies. For instance, Pervin and Rubin (1967) reported that students tended to drop out of school if they found themselves in colleges that were incompatible with their self-views (see also Backman &

Secord, 1962; Broxton, 1963; Newcomb, 1956).

Recent laboratory investigations have complemented earlier evidence by showing that people prefer interaction partners who see them as they see themselves. Swann, Pelham, and Krull (1989), for example, told participants that two evaluators had evaluated them on performance dimensions that participants had previously identified as their "best" or "worst" attribute (e.g., athletic ability, physical appearance, etc.). One evaluator offered an unfavorable evaluation; the other offered a favorable evaluation. Targets chose to interact with the congruent evaluator. Most surprisingly, as displayed in Figure 18.2, targets with negative self-views preferred the unfavorable self-verifying evaluator to the favorable nonverifying one.

In a similar vein, Swann, Stein-Seroussi and Giesler (1992) asked participants with positive and negative self-views whether they would prefer to interact with evaluators who had favorable or unfavorable impressions of them. Just as those with positive self-views preferred favorable partners, those with negative self-views preferred unfavorable partners. More than a dozen replications of this effect using diverse methodologies have confirmed that people prefer self-verifying evaluations and interaction partners, even if their self-views happen to be negative (e.g., Hixon & Swann, 1993; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992; Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990; Swann et al., 1989; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992). Both men and women display this propensity, whether the self-views are or are not easily changed and whether the self-views are associated with specific qualities (intelligence, sociability,
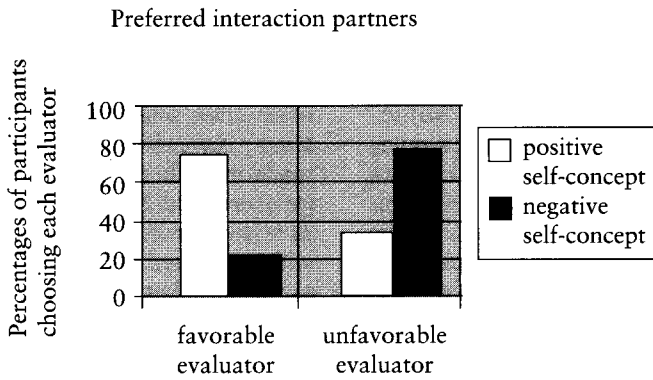
Preferred interaction partners

FIGURE 18.2. Preferred interaction partners.

dominance) or with global self-worth (self-esteem, depression). Similarly, people prefer to interact with self-verifying partners even if given the alternative of taking part in a different experiment (Swann, Wenzlaff, & Tafarodi, 1992).[2] Finally, people are particularly likely to seek self-verifying evaluations if their self-views are confidently held (e.g., Pelham & Swann, 1994; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann, Pelham, & Chidester, 1988), important (Swann & Pelham, 2000), or extreme (Giesler, Josephs, & Swann, 1996).

There is also evidence that the self-verification strivings of people with low self-esteem and depression are not masochistic, for rather than savoring unfavorable evaluations, they feel torn and ambivalent about them. In choosing a negative evaluator, one person with low self-esteem noted: "I like the [favorable] evaluation but I am not sure that it is, ah, correct, maybe. It *sounds* good, but [the unfavorable evaluator] ... seems to know more about me. So, I'll choose [the unfavorable evaluator]" (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Gielser, 1992).

Field studies reveal a parallel phenomenon. For example, if people wind up in marriages in which their spouses perceive them more (or less) favorably than they perceive themselves, they become less intimate with those spouses (Burke & Stets, 1999; De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Katz, Beach, & Anderson, 1996; Ritts & Stein, 1995; Schafer, Wickram, & Keith, 1996; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). A prospective study of MBA students revealed a similar phenomenon. Swann, Milton, and Polzer

(2000) found that members of groups felt more connected to their group insofar as the other members brought their appraisals into line with the members' own self-views. In addition, they discovered that the groups in which the most self-verification occurred were also the groups with the highest grades at the end of the semester. Presumably the increased feelings of connectedness that grow out of self-verification would encourage members of self-verifying groups to work together more often, thereby ensuring that people are associated with self-verifying partners not only in their intimate relationships but also in the classroom and workplace.

Considered together, these data offer clear evidence that people gravitate toward relationships that provide them with self-confirmatory feedback. An important characteristic of such selective interaction strategies is that once people enter particular social relationships, legal contracts and social pressures encourage them to remain there. The power of such contractual arrangements is obvious in the case of marriage, but friendships, collaborations, and dating relationships are also characterized by a good deal of inertia. Thus people who choose self-verifying interaction partners may discover that their choices are self-sustaining, as well as self-verifying.

Displaying Identity Cues

People can also ensure that they receive self-verifying reactions by "looking the part." Ideally, identity cues will be readily con-

trolled and will predictably evoke desired responses from others. Physical appearances represent a particularly salient class of identity cues. The clothes one wears, for instance, can advertise one's political leanings, income level, sexual preference, and so on. Even body posture and demeanor communicate identities to others. Take, for example, the teenager who radiates anomie, the "punk" who projects danger, or the neophyte who exudes naiveté.

People may even alter their bodies to convey various identities to others. Whereas self-perceived athletes may diet and lift weights to keep their muscles bulging, self-proclaimed rock stars may cover themselves in tattoos and piercings to convey an image of rebelliousness. Those who are squeamish about surgery may rely on titles or material possessions to convey their identities to others. The cars people drive, the homes they live in, and the bumper stickers they display may all be used to tell others who they are and how they expect to be treated (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980).

It is noteworthy that people display identity cues to communicate negative, as well as positive, identities. Some highly visible examples include skinheads and members of the Ku Klux Klan. Furthermore, Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli and Morris (2002) have shown that people structure their personal environments (e.g., bedrooms, offices) to communicate negative, as well as positive, identities to others. For example, observers were as adept in recognizing people who saw themselves as "closed" and "messy" as they were in recognizing those who saw themselves as "open" and "tidy."

Interpersonal Prompts

Even if people fail to gain self-verifying evaluations by selective interaction and displaying identity cues, they still may acquire such feedback. Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, and Pelham (1990), for example, found that mildly depressed college students were more likely to solicit unfavorable feedback from their roommates than were nondepressed students. Moreover, students' efforts to acquire unfavorable feedback apparently bore fruit: The more unfavorable feedback they solicited in the middle of the semester, the more their roommates derogated them and

planned to find another roommate at the semester's end.

If people are motivated to bring others to verify their self-conceptions, they should *intensify* their efforts to elicit self-confirmatory reactions when they suspect that they are misconstrued. Swann and Read (1981, Study 2) tested this idea by informing participants who perceived themselves as either likeable or dislikeable that they would be interacting with evaluators who had evaluated them. Some learned that the evaluators probably found them likeable; others learned that the evaluators probably found them dislikeable; still others learned nothing of the evaluators' appraisals. Participants tended to elicit reactions that confirmed their self-views. More important, this tendency was especially pronounced when participants suspected that evaluators' appraisals might *disconfirm* their self-conceptions. Participants who thought of themselves as likeable elicited particularly favorable reactions when they thought their evaluators disliked them, and participants who thought of themselves as dislikeable elicited particularly unfavorable reactions when they suspected that their evaluators liked them. Participants therefore displayed increased interest in self-verification when they suspected that evaluators' appraisals challenged their self-views.

Swann and Hill (1982) obtained similar findings using a different procedure and a different dimension of the self-concept (dominance). Participants began by playing a game (with a confederate) in which each player alternately assumed the dominant "leader" role or the submissive "assistant" role. During a break in the game, the experimenter asked the players to decide who should be the leader for the next set of games. This was the confederate's cue to give participants self-relevant feedback. In some conditions, the confederate said the participant seemed dominant; in others, the confederate said the participant seemed submissive. If the feedback confirmed participants' self-conceptions, they passively accepted the confederate's appraisal. If the feedback *disconfirmed* their self-conceptions, however, participants vehemently resisted the feedback and sought to demonstrate that they were not the persons the confederate made them out to be. Furthermore, having the opportunity to resist the

discrepant feedback insulated participants against changes in their self-views.

Not surprisingly, in these studies of responses to discrepant feedback, some people resisted the discrepant feedback more than others. Swann and Ely (1984) theorized that high self-concept certainty was associated with heightened interest in self-verification and thus heightened resistance in the face of disconfirmation. To test this hypothesis, Swann and Ely had evaluators interview participants who were either certain or uncertain of their self-conceived extraversion. When evaluators were highly certain of their expectancies, participants who were low in self-certainty generally answered in ways that confirmed evaluators' expectancies, thus disconfirming their own self-conceptions but providing behavioral confirmation for the expectancies of evaluators. In contrast, participants who were high in self-certainty actively resisted the questions—regardless of the evaluators' level of certainty. Thus, as long as participants were high in self-certainty, self-verification overrode behavioral confirmation.

The tendency for self-verification to triumph over behavioral confirmation seems to generalize to naturally occurring situations. For example, McNulty and Swann (1994) studied college students over a semester. They discovered that students were more likely to bring their roommates to see them as they saw themselves than to conform their self-views to their roommates' initial impressions of them. Similarly, in an investigation of MBA students in study groups, Swann, Milton, and Polzer (2000) found that the tendency of individual members of each group to bring the appraisals of other group members into agreement with their self-views was stronger than the countervailing tendency for the group members to shape the self-views of individuals in the group.

In summary, the research literature suggests that people enlist several distinct strategies for bringing their evaluators to see them as they see themselves. In so doing, they may, in effect, enlist accomplices who will assist them in their efforts to create coherent, self-verifying worlds. Evidence for this possibility comes from research by De La Ronde and Swann (1998). These researchers brought married couples into the laboratory, asked both to rate themselves

and their partners on a number of personality attributes, and presented one of the partners with a bogus evaluation of his or her spouse. The evaluation was designed to be inconsistent with the ratings participants had made of their spouses earlier in the session. Participants responded to the inconsistent evaluations by rushing to refute them—even if this meant undermining a positive evaluation of their spouses.

Furthermore, other research suggests that merely *seeing* a self-verifying partner after receiving discrepant feedback may exert a similar stabilizing effect on people's self-views (Swann & Predmore, 1985). Such evidence of "partner verification" suggests that when people find partners who see them congruently, they will position themselves to receive a steady supply of self-verifying feedback in the future.

As effective as such behavioral self-verification strivings may be, people sometimes fail to create fully self-confirmatory relationships. When this happens, several cognitive biases may step in to rescue the self-view in question. In particular, people may misperceive and misremember social experiences in ways that are more compatible with their existing self-views than those experiences actually are, thereby preserving coherent views of themselves.

Seeing More Self-Confirmatory Evidence than Actually Exists

Researchers have shown that expectancies (including self-conceptions) exert a powerful channeling influence on information processing (e.g., Higgins & Bargh, 1987). As such, self-conceptions may guide the processing of social feedback so as to promote their own survival (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979; Story, 1998).

Selective Attention

To the extent that people are motivated to acquire self-confirmatory feedback, they should be especially attentive to it. Swann and Read (1981, Study 1) tested this proposition. Participants who perceived themselves as either likeable or dislikeable were led to suspect that an evaluator had either a favorable or an unfavorable impression of them. All participants were then given an

opportunity to examine some remarks that the evaluator had ostensibly made about them. These remarks were sufficiently vague as to apply to anyone.

The results showed that participants spent longer scrutinizing evaluations when they anticipated that the evaluations would confirm their self-conceptions. That is, just as self-perceived likeables spent the most time reading when they expected the remarks would be favorable, self-perceived dislikeables spent the most time reading when they expected the remarks would be unfavorable. In short, people are more attentive to social feedback when they suspect that it will confirm their chronic self-views.

Selective Encoding and Retrieval

Just as people may selectively attend to self-confirmatory feedback, they also may selectively remember it. Crary (1966) and Silverman (1964), for example, reported that people recalled more incidental information about experimental tasks in which they received self-confirmatory rather than self-discrepant feedback. Moreover, other research suggests that self-conceptions channel the *type*, as well as the *amount*, of feedback people recall. In particular, Swann and Read (1981, Study 3) had participants who saw themselves as likeable or dislikeable listen to an evaluator make a series of positive and negative statements about them. Some participants expected that the statements would be generally positive; others expected that the statements would be generally negative. After a brief delay, participants attempted to recall as many of the statements as possible. Participants who perceived themselves as likeable remembered more positive than negative statements, and those who perceived themselves as dislikeable remembered more negative than positive statements. In addition, this tendency to recall self-confirmatory statements was greatest when participants had anticipated that the evaluators' statements would confirm their self-conceptions.

Selective Interpretation

On being evaluated, people may ask, "How trustworthy is the source of feedback? What does the feedback tell me about myself?" They may answer these questions in ways that promote the survival of their self-views.

Researchers have reported clear evidence that people endorse the validity of feedback only if it fits with their self-conceptions (Markus, 1977). Similarly, Shrauger and Lund (1975) reported that people expressed greater confidence in the perceptiveness of an evaluator when his impression confirmed their self-conceptions. Swann, Griffin, Predmore, and Gaines (1987) replicated Shrauger and Lund's effect and also found that people tended to attribute self-confirmatory feedback to characteristics of themselves and self-disconfirmatory feedback to the source of the feedback. Finally, Story (1998) reported that people with high self-esteem remembered feedback as being more favorable than it actually was, whereas people with low self-esteem remembered it as being more negative than it actually was.

Together, the attentional, encoding, retrieval, and interpretational processes described in this section may prove formidable adversaries for self-discrepant feedback. This may be one reason why people's self-conceptions sometimes conflict with the actual appraisals of others and, more specifically, why people overestimate the extent to which the appraisals of their friends and acquaintances confirm their self-conceptions (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). Yet there is another reason that people's self-views sometimes conflict with the appraisals of others: People do not always self-verify. In the next section, we identify some of the boundary conditions of self-verification.

Self-Verification and Self-Assessment

Sedikides and Strube (1997) have suggested that people are motivated to obtain objectively accurate or "diagnostic" information and that this motive reflects a self-assessment motive (e.g., Trope, 1975) that is distinct from self-verification. We certainly agree that people value information that seems accurate; in fact, we believe that this is what motivates self-verification strivings. From our vantage point, the two motives often represent complementary means through which people search for truth. Insofar as a given self-view is firmly held, people will usually feel no need to assess its "objec-

tive" accuracy but will instead accept it as a proxy for truth (e.g., Kruglanski, 1990). After all, firmly held self-views will generally be based on considerable evidence (Pelham, 1991) and should thus offer a reasonably accurate rendering of reality. On the other hand, when the self-view is weakly held or when people have good reason to question its accuracy (e.g., when they are making an important decision or when they have received contradictory information that is difficult to refute), they will seek diagnostic information pertaining to its objective accuracy (i.e., engage in self-assessment).

Two studies have attempted to distinguish the desire for self-verification from the desire for objective accuracy. Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler (1992) had students think aloud as they chose interaction partners. When objective raters coded these think-aloud protocols, they discovered that there were three major reasons why people self-verified. The most prominent reason was epistemic. For example, a person with negative self-views said, "I think the unfavorable evaluator is a better choice because . . . he sums up basically how I feel." A person with positive self-views said, "the positive evaluator better reflects my own view of myself, from experience." The second reason was pragmatic. A person with negative self-views said, "the unfavorable evaluator seems like a person I could sort of really get along with . . . if I choose the unfavorable evaluator it seems to me that he'll be more prepared for my anxiety about being around people I don't know. Seeing as he knows what he's dealing with we might get along better." This evidence of epistemic and pragmatic concerns, then, supported the idea that participants were interested in obtaining self-verification. Independent of these self-verification strivings, however, participants also mentioned a desire for objective accuracy. Specifically, some students voiced a concern with their partners' perceptiveness. Participants with positive self-views said things such as "I'd like to meet with the favorable evaluator because obviously they're more intelligent . . . are more able to see the truth"; "Well, actually the favorable evaluator . . . hits me right on the point . . . someone who could see that just by the answers is pretty astute" (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992, p. 401).

Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler's (1992) findings, then, suggest that when people choose relationship partners who see them as they see themselves, they may do so because they are interested in obtaining self-verification or because they suspect that a self-verifying partner is highly perceptive (and thus likely to give them information that is objectively accurate). Although we suspect that the two concerns frequently overlap, the results of a later study by Swann and colleagues (1994) seem to be driven by self-verification strivings alone. As noted previously, participants displayed more intimacy toward spouses who saw them as they saw themselves. Consistent with self-verification theory, married persons expressed more intimacy insofar as they believed that their spouses' appraisals made them feel that they really knew themselves. Contrary to the idea that self-assessment strivings might influence intimacy, the extent to which participants believed that their partners were highly perceptive was unrelated to intimacy.

In general, then, it appears that although self-assessment strivings cannot explain the evidence that researchers have amassed for self-verification processes, people are in fact sensitive to the truth-likeness of the evaluations they receive. We suspect that this sensitivity extends to the truth-likeness of self-views themselves and that it could perpetuate some of the compensatory reactions observed in narcissists (e.g., Colvin, Block & Funder, 1995; John & Robbins, 1994). Presumably, at some level narcissists are aware of the disjunction between their self-views on the one hand and their objective accomplishments and reputation on the other. Their awareness of this disjunction may be associated with their tendency to seek exalted evaluations from others and to overreact to criticism (Brown, Bosson, & Swann, 2000).

Self-Verification and Self-Enhancement

Of the explanatory tools in the social psychological literature, none has been used as extensively as the desire for self-enhancement (Jones, 1973). Self-enhancement strivings, which we prefer to call positivity strivings,[3] are theoretically manifested in

people's efforts to obtain positive evaluations. The appeal of positivity strivings is their apparent versatility; in his widely cited treatise, Baumeister (1998) enlisted self-enhancement's help in explaining virtually every phenomenon that self researchers have studied over the past five decades. In the wake of such imperialism, our assertion that people will strive to confirm their self-views "even if these self-views happen to be negative" is provocative, because it not only implies that there exists a self-related motive other than the desire for positivity, but it also suggests that this motive will sometimes override positivity strivings. In what follows, we first explain why it is appropriate to maintain a distinction between positivity versus self-verification strivings. We then focus on the conditions under which each desire will prevail.

Why Positivity Strivings Cannot Subsume Self-Verification Strivings

In the interests of parsimony, it would be useful to bring self-verification strivings into the positivity-strivings family. One strategy for accomplishing this goal is to suggest that the feeling of coherence produced by stable beliefs is nothing more than a sense of competence and that people's efforts to shore up their feelings of coherence are thus merely a manifestation of the more general desire to feel good about themselves. Unfortunately, this approach overlooks the fact that the feelings of coherence produced by self-verification are unlike any other form of competence. Whereas most competences are localized to particular tasks or domains (social, athletic, etc.), the sense of coherence emanating from self-verification is associated with people's core sense of who they are—indeed, their fundamental ability to understand reality and themselves. As a result, when people's desire for self-verification is frustrated, they will not merely feel incompetent; they will suffer the severe disorientation and psychological anarchy that occurs when people recognize that their very existence is threatened.

Alternatively, one might argue that, in some ultimate sense, people strive for self-verification for precisely the same reason that they strive for positivity—because it is reinforcing in the long run. Although self-verification surely is reinforcing in some ultimate sense, this does not mean that the desire for self-verification can be subsumed by the desire for positivity. That is, in the here and now, positivity theory assumes that people strive for favorable feedback, and self-verification theory assumes that people strive for self-confirmatory feedback. In the case of people with negative self-views, the two approaches thus make competing predictions.

And what if one expands positivity theory to include instances in which people seek negative evaluations in the service of obtaining positive evaluations later on (e.g., Sedikides & Strube, 1997)? For this position to be viable, one must determine whether people do indeed self-verify in an effort to obtain favorable evaluations down the road (otherwise, the position is not falsifiable). Unfortunately for this temporally expanded version of positivity theory, the research literature has offered it little support. For example, in two independent studies of people who thought out loud as they chose interaction partners (Swann, Bosson, & Pelham, in press; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Geisler, 1992), self-verifying participants with negative self-views specifically mentioned a desire for self-confirming reactions but said nothing about choosing a partner who would help them obtain positive evaluations later on.

Related research tested the idea that people with negative self-views chose the negative evaluator over the positive one because they feared that the positive evaluator might soon "find them out" and reject them with righteous indignation. If so, their choice of a negative evaluator was designed to avoid the wrath of an initially positive evaluator who later became disappointed (i.e., they were engaging in positivity strivings). To test this idea, Swann, Wenzlaff, & Tafarodi (1992) had people choose between interacting with an evaluator or being in a different experiment. People with positive self-views chose to interact with the favorable evaluator over participating in another experiment, and they chose being in a different experiment over interacting with an unfavorable evaluator. In contrast, people with negative self-views chose to interact with the unfavorable evaluator over participating in another experiment, and they chose being in a different experiment over

interacting with a favorable evaluator. Therefore, people with negative self-views not only preferred to interact with someone who thought poorly of them, they actually preferred being in a different experiment over interacting with someone who thought well of them. People with negative self-views thus seem to be truly drawn to self-verifying interaction partners rather than simply avoiding nonverifying ones.

Numerous demonstrations also indicate that people with negative self-views seek negative feedback in settings in which it is clear that there will be no opportunity to obtain positive evaluations later on. First, people with negative self-views seek negative feedback when they have no prospect of receiving additional feedback in the future (e.g., Bosson & Swann, 1999; Giesler, Josephs, & Swann, 1996; Hixon & Swann, 1993; Pelham & Swann, 1994; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992; Swann et al., 1989, 1990; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992). Finally, among Swann and colleagues' (1994) self-verifying married couples, there was no evidence that people with negative self-views were more intimate with spouses who thought poorly of them because they wanted to improve themselves, or as a means of obtaining negative specific appraisals coupled with global acceptance, or because they believed that negative spouses were more perceptive than positive spouses.

In short, there is now considerable evidence that self-verification strivings are distinct from positivity strivings both conceptually and empirically. It thus becomes important to identify the boundary conditions of the two motives.

The Conditions under which Self-Verification and Positivity Strivings Will Prevail

We believe that the interplay between self-verification and positivity strivings can be best understood in terms of three principles: accessibility, investment, and idiosyncratic worlds.

The Accessibility Principle

Logically, for people to strive to verify a self-view, they must possess the mental resources needed to access that self-view. To test this idea, Swann and colleagues (1990)

deprived some participants of cognitive resources by having them rush their choice of an interaction partner. Participants who were rushed chose the positive evaluator even if they had negative self-views. In contrast, participants with negative self-views who were not rushed chose the negative evaluator, presumably because they had time to realize that the negative evaluator knew them and was thus preferable.

Just as depriving people of cognitive resources can lower the accessibility of self-views, asking participants questions that encourage them to consider their self-views can raise it. For example, when experimenters provide participants with an evaluation and ask them to indicate how self-descriptive it is, participants will typically compare the evaluation with relevant self-views and respond accordingly. In light of this, it is not surprising that researchers have repeatedly found evidence of self-verification when they have studied "cognitive responses" such as rating the accuracy of feedback (e.g., Moreland & Sweeney, 1984; Swann et al., 1987). In contrast, when experimenters give participants feedback and then ask them how they feel, participants have no reason to consider their self-views, and they thus say that they are in a better mood when the feedback is positive, even when it clashes with their negative self-views. An exception to this result may arise when discrepant feedback comes from a highly credible evaluator, for a credible evaluator should have accurate knowledge of who they are. In support of this reasoning, Pinel and Swann (1999) found that when positive feedback came from a highly credible evaluator, participants with negative self-views grew anxious on receiving it (on the other hand, when feedback was low in credibility, participants' self-views had no impact on their reactions to it: The more positive the feedback, the better they felt).

The nature of the relationship may also influence how likely people are to access their self-views and translate them into behavior. For example, Tice, Butler, Muraven, and Stillwell (1995) found that people exaggerated their positive qualities when presenting themselves to a stranger but presented themselves in a relatively accurate manner to a friend. Presumably, within a friendship relationship, it is important to be

known and understood, and this makes exaggeration of one's positive qualities a liability. In contrast, with strangers people have much to gain and little to lose by presenting themselves in a highly favorable light (e.g., Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

In a similar vein, Swann and colleagues (1994) discovered that married people were most intimate with spouses who saw them as they saw themselves, even if they had negative self-views. In contrast, dating partners felt most intimate with their partners to the extent that their partners viewed them favorably. Swann and colleagues explained this finding by suggesting that, having made the decision to stay together for the long haul, married people switch their attentions to the goal of carrying out the day-to-day activities of married life as smoothly as possible. Because this goal is best facilitated if both partners are in agreement about one another's relative strengths and weaknesses, people access their self-views and consider them in reacting to their spouses' evaluations. In contrast, a central goal of dating relationships is to ensure that the partner is fond of oneself, and one's self-view has little bearing on this issue.

The Investment Principle

We suggest that as the investment involved in a set of behaviors increases (e.g., getting to know a potential spouse), people will be more apt to self-verify. One way to increase investment in a behavior is to increase the investment in self-views associated with the behavior. Thus, for example, to the extent that self-views are firmly held, people will be more inclined to rely on them in organizing their perceptions of the world and their social relationships. As a result, people should be more inclined to access highly certain, important self-views when deciding how to behave. Support for this proposition comes from evidence that people are most inclined to act on self-views that are high in certainty (e.g., Pelham, 1991; Pelham & Swann, 1994; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann et al., 1988).[4] Similarly, people are more inclined to remain in relationships with roommates who support their important rather than unimportant self-views (e.g., Swann & Pelham, in press). Furthermore, certainty and importance have the effect of intensify-

ing self-verification even if the relevant self-views are negative.

People will also be more inclined to behave in line with their self-views if the behavior itself is highly consequential. Hixon and Swann (1993) gave participants with negative self-views a choice of interacting with a relatively positive or negative evaluator under low or high consequences. In the low-consequences condition, the experimenter indicated that the evaluator was not particularly credible (thus minimizing the epistemic consequences of the evaluation) and that the interaction would be quite brief (thus minimizing the pragmatic consequences of the evaluation). In the high-consequences condition, the experimenter indicated that the evaluator was credible and that the interaction would be lengthy (2 hours long).[5] When participants had adequate time to reflect, those in the low-consequences condition preferred the positive evaluator and those in the high-consequences condition preferred the negative evaluator. Apparently, then, when the epistemic and pragmatic stakes are high, people are more inclined to access their self-views and seek self-verification.

The Idiosyncratic-Worlds Principle

The idiosyncratic-worlds principle suggests that people can structure their personal and interpersonal worlds so that they can satisfy their positivity and self-verification strivings simultaneously. Dunning, Meyerowitz, and Holzberg (1989), for example, showed that people assign more importance to their own positive than negative qualities. Thus, for example, just as a gymnast might define athleticism in terms of balance and flexibility, a long-distance runner might emphasize stamina. Because both definitions are entirely legitimate, the ability to use these idiosyncratic self-definitions allows people to satisfy their desires for positivity and subjective accuracy simultaneously. Campbell (1986) showed that people in general, and people with high self-esteem in particular, exploit this principle by perceiving the abilities of others in ways that preserve their positive self-views.

There is also an interpersonal version of this process: People may create idiosyncratic worlds that selectively reinforce their posi-

tive self-views. Swann, Bosson, and Pelham (in press), for example, found not only that participants wanted their dating partners to see them as much more attractive than they saw themselves but also that they actually were seen this way by their partners. Apparently, people with negative self-views recognize that for their relationships to "work," they must be perceived in a fairly positive manner on relationship-relevant dimensions. They accordingly structure their interactions so that their partners actually develop such positive evaluations.

Swann and colleagues' (in press) findings are important because they provide an empirical foundation for a reconciliation of self-presentation and self-verification theories. As self-presentation approaches (e.g., Schlenker, 1980, 1984) would suggest, on dimensions that were critical to the survival of the relationship, participants desired evaluations that were considerably more positive than their self-views. Consistent with self-verification theory, on dimensions that were critical to the survival of the relationship, dating participants apparently succeeded in either locating relationship partners who viewed them quite positively or brought their partners to see them this way. Moreover, participants felt that being seen highly positively on these high-relationship-relevant dimensions was verifying even though these evaluations far exceeded their self-views. Presumably, they felt the evaluations were verifying because they had behaved in ways that made them feel deserving of such evaluations. In this instance, people appeared to be seeking verification of their highly circumscribed ideal selves rather than of their "typical" selves—a phenomenon that Swann and Schroeder (1995) dubbed "strategic self-verification." In contrast, on dimensions that were personally important to participants but not of paramount importance to the survival of the relationship, dating participants preferred and elicited evaluations that were much more congruent with their self-views.

At first blush, Swann and colleagues' (in press) findings may seem to support an assertion of Murray and her colleagues (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996) that people want to create positive illusions in their relationships. Our position is distinct, however. Although our participants anticipated

that their performances in their romantic lives would outstrip their chronic self-views, they actually elicited highly positive reactions. Therefore, rather than illusions, our participants created idiosyncratically skewed realities that validated their highly positive desired selves.

Our suggestion that people work to verify idealized self-views may seem incompatible with Swann and colleagues' (1994) claim that married people strive to attain verification for their *characteristic* self-views such that people with negative self-views are less committed to marriages in which they are perceived positively (e.g., De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Ritts & Stein, 1995; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994; Swann & Pelham, 2000). Note, however, that these researchers examined how people with negative self-views react to positive reactions *on several dimensions*, only some of which were high in relationship relevance. This is critical because the results of Swann and colleagues' (in press) research suggest that people did *not* present themselves in an exceptionally positive manner on traits low in relationship relevance. If so, favorable evaluations on these dimensions would have felt underserved, incoherent, and unpleasant.

This reasoning may also explain why Murray and her colleagues (1996) found that people with negative self-views embraced positive evaluations. An examination of the items in the self-concept scale (Interpersonal Qualities Scale) used by Murray and colleagues reveals a strong focus on qualities related to the success of the relationship (e.g., "emotional," "moody," "patient," "tolerant," "complaining," "open"). In contrast, with one exception (physical attractiveness), the Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ) items used in the Swann, Bosson, and Pelham (in press) study refer to competences (intellectual, artistic, sociable, athletic) that are largely independent of the person's activities within the relationship. Conceivably, people prefer highly positive evaluations on relationship-relevant dimensions because they can (and do) behave in ways that they believe merit such evaluations. In contrast, because four of the five SAQ attributes refer to relatively "objective" qualities that are expressed in multiple contexts, people may be reluctant to seek highly positive evaluations on these dimen-

sions. Consistent with this reasoning, when judges rated the IQS and SAQ items, they indicated that the IQS qualities were less specific, more difficult to judge, required more behavioral referents to make a judgment (i.e., more vague), and were more desirable (Swann & Rentfrow, 2000). From this perspective, people may strive to keep their relationships alive by cultivating highly positive perceptions of themselves in dimensions that are high in relationship relevance and low in specificity while seeking self-verification of their chronic self-views on dimensions that are low in relationship relevance and high in specificity.

But if the notion of idiosyncratic worlds is compatible with previous research generated by self-verification theory, it is inconsistent with the theory's assumption that people strive to negotiate identities that match their characteristic self-views (Swann, 1983). Apparently, people's relationship goals cause them to enact idealized, relationship-specific selves, and they thus come to prefer having these idealized selves verified. This revised version of self-verification theory goes beyond the original idea that people want verification for the selves that they negotiate by positing that, because people care most about the behavior of relationship partners in their own presence, people may be primarily concerned with verifying situation-specific selves. This new emphasis, then, departs from the assumptions of classical trait and self theory. Instead, it draws on Swann's (1984) suggestion that people strive for circumscribed accuracy and on Shoda and Mischel's (1996) notion that people strive for intraindividual consistency.

Conclusions

Recently, reviewers of the literature on the self (Baumeister, 1998; Sedikides & Strube, 1997) have made it their business to compare the power of the three major motives (self-assessment, positivity, self-verification) and to declare positivity the "victor." We believe that this is unfortunate, because the vast majority of the studies that have been presented as evidence for the pervasiveness of positivity strivings do not even include measures of self-views. For example, the centerpiece of Baumeister's (1998) discussion of the major motives was a study by Sedikides (1993). Because Sedikides failed to measure self-views, his findings say nothing about the pervasiveness of positivity versus self-verification strivings. That is, although the fact that his participants regarded positive traits as more self-descriptive than negative traits could have reflected positivity strivings, it could just as easily be understood to reflect the self-verification strivings of people with positive self-views, who are overrepresented in most samples (Swann, 1987). In addition, of those studies that do include measures of self-views, many are quite low on the dimensions of self-view accessibility and investment. For example, because role-playing studies (Morling & Epstein, 1997) are quite low on the accessibility and investment dimensions, participants may have little reason to self-verify. Due to these and related limitations in the relevant research literature, much work remains to be done before anyone is positioned to declare which of the three motives is most important.

However this debate is ultimately resolved, recent work on idiosyncratic worlds suggests that the conflict may exist more in the minds of researchers than in the hearts of their participants. Perhaps it is time to move away from attempting to identify the "winner" of the three-motives sweepstakes and concentrate instead on more nuanced questions, such as, How do people engineer social worlds that simultaneously satisfy their desires for accuracy, positivity and self-verification?

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Although we suspect that Festinger's failure to cite Lecky reflected this conceptual distinction, we will probably never know the real reason. When we asked Elliot Aronson, one of Festinger's most distinguished former students, he chalked it up to Lecky's low visibili-

ty: "I'm not 100% certain as to why not. My best guess is that, at that time, Lecky was hardly a household name. I think that Lecky's book on self-consistency was his only publication and, as you know, it was originally published by 'The Shoestring Press' in the 1940s. I don't think many people (aside from a few of his students) ever read it in the '40s and '50s. I had certainly never heard of him in grad school" (E. Aronson, personal communication, April 15, 2002)

2. The nature of the different experiment was not specified. Nevertheless, the overall pattern of data suggested that it was quite unlikely that participants assumed that it was apt to be a dreadful experience. That is, people with positive self-views chose the different experiment when the alternative was a negative partner, and people with negative self-views chose the different experiment when the alternative was a positive partner.

3. Our reservation about the term "self-enhancement" is that inconsistent usage has rendered it ambiguous. For example, sometimes it has been used to refer to processes that improve one's self-evaluation, at other times to refer to processes that maintain one's self-evaluation, and at still other times to processes that have little to do with the self.

4. In principle, a person who is *extremely* high in self-certainty may simply dismiss discrepant feedback out of hand. Thus far, however, we have not encountered participants who are sufficiently certain of their self-views to do this.

5. The conceptual focus of the Hixon and Swann (1983) study (i.e., the effectiveness of introspection) led them to emphasize the results of the low-epistemic–low-pragmatic-consequences condition and merely allude to the results of the high-epistemic–high-pragmatic-consequences condition in a footnote.

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