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Outcasts in a White-Lie Society: The Enigmatic Worlds of People With Negative Self-Conceptions

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Although people with negative self-views want to be liked at some level, they repeatedly enact behaviors that alienate their relationship partners. Why? One possibility is that such persons reside in social environments that offer them little insight into what they are doing wrong. Although persons who had negative self-views elicited unfavorable reactions, they did not appreciate this fact because their interaction partners concealed their aversion behind a facade of kind words. To be sure, the interaction partners of people with negative self-views tended to leak their disdain nonverbally. These negative nonverbal messages proved to be uninformative, however, because people with negative self-views overlooked them. These data imply that people with negative self-views may live in social worlds in which they are deprived of corrective feedback that could allow them to improve themselves.

> It takes your enemy and your friend, working together, to hurt you to the heart; the enemy to slander you and the friend to get the news to you" (Twain, 1911, *Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar*).

Why should enemies be reluctant to communicate hurtful news directly to their victims? After all, it would seem that enemies would savor the opportunity to deliver an insult and watch their crestfallen victims wallow in despair. Not so, according to Twain, and the research literature bears him out. That is, in our society people abide by social norms that enjoin them against communicating unfavorable evaluations to one another (e.g., Blumberg, 1972; Tesser & Rosen, 1975). So constrained, when people dislike others they mask their true feelings and feign liking instead.

Such rules of social interaction are clearly useful. For example, the suppression of unfavorable sentiments allows interaction partners to gloss over potential disagreements, minimize disputes, and focus on the important tasks that bring them together (see also La Russo, 1978). Nevertheless, this seemingly benign mandate of social intercourse may have unfortunate consequences for people with negative self-views. Consider, for example, the fate of people with negative self-views. Despite the fact that such persons want to be liked at some level, they tend to elicit negative appraisals (e.g., Swann, 1990; Swann, Wenzlaff, Pelham, & Krull, in press). Because the interaction partners of persons with negative self-views obey social norms that require the suppression of disliking, however, such persons rarely encounter direct negative feedback. Deprived of such feedback, they are handicapped in their efforts to pinpoint problematic behaviors.

To be sure, the interaction partners of people with negative self-views may fail to conceal their unfavorable appraisals completely. For example, in their seminal paper, Ekman and Friesen (1969) proposed that although people are adept at concealing their emotions in the words they speak, their true feelings sometimes leak through nonverbal channels of communication. This proposal has since gathered considerable empirical support (e.g., Bugenthal, Henker, & Whalen, 1976; Ekman, 1981; Rosenthal & Depaulo, 1979b; Vincent, Friedman, Nugent, & Messerly, 1979; Weitz, 1972; Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974; Zuckerman, Larrance, Spiegel, & Klorman, 1981; for a recent review, see DePaulo, 1990). This suggests, then, that people with negative self-views may confront favorable verbal reactions but unfavorable nonverbal reactions.

Yet if persons with negative self-views encounter mixed messages, they may fail to recognize them as such. For one thing, if people are to hold up their end of conversations, they must attend to information in the verbal channel. In addition, even if persons with negative self-views feel compelled to attend to nonverbal cues, research suggests that such persons may be particularly inept in encoding and interpreting such cues (e.g., Rosenthal, Hall, DiMatteo, Rodgers, & Archer, 1979). Such encoding difficulties may be further exacerbated if nonverbal cues travel in a relatively subtle channel such as tone of voice. Together, these factors may ensure that recipients of mixed messages will be forced to infer the appraisals of their interaction partners from cues delivered in the verbal channel—cues

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that may be deceptively favorable. As a result, they may leave their interactions convinced that their partners like them when this is not so.

What if people with negative self-views do attend to the nonverbal as well as to the verbal messages they receive? Unfortunately, this may simply produce confusion. Bateson, Jackson, Haley, and Weakland (1956), for example, contended that the mixed messages that some parents present to their offspring place them in "double binds" that lead to schizophrenia. Although this version of the double-bind hypothesis has received precious little empirical support (e.g., Gottman, 1979; Hall & Levin, 1980), the research literature does corroborate the notion that a mixture of positive verbal feedback and negative nonverbal feedback is very difficult to decipher (Zuckerman, DePaulo, & Rosenthal, 1981). Moreover, Bugenthal, Love, Kaswan, and April (1971) discovered that children who had received discrepant communications from their mothers tended to display exceptionally high levels of aggression (see also Coyne's, 1976a, 1976b, analysis of the maintenance of depression).

In short, people with negative self-views may reside in deceptive social worlds in which they receive favorable reactions in the verbal channel coupled with unfavorable reactions in the nonverbal channel. If they take the verbal reactions they receive at face value, they may feel good. Nevertheless, this may ultimately cripple them by preventing them from identifying and modifying those behaviors that sour their interaction partners. This may, in turn, undermine potential improvement in their social behaviors and self-esteem.

To test these hypotheses, we had people who scored high or low on a measure of self-perceived sociability (targets) interact with persons who were moderate on this dimension (perceivers).[1] After the interactions, judges rated the vocalizations of perceivers to determine the nature of their verbal and nonverbal reactions to targets. In addition, other judges rated the vocalizations of targets to identify what they did to alienate (or win over) perceivers. We assumed that targets with negative self-views would repel perceivers. Our major prediction was that perceivers would conceal their unfavorable sentiments toward targets with negative self-views by refraining from saying anything disagreeable to them but that their aversion would leak through the nonverbal (tone of voice) channel.

Method

Participants

Same-sex pairs of men and women participated in this investigation for credit in their introductory psychology course.[2] All participants had completed the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI; Helmreich & Stapp, 1974) during a pretest at the beginning of the semester. The TSBI is a measure of self-perceived sociability and social competence (e.g., "I have no doubts about my social competence," "I am not likely to speak to people until they speak to me," "Other people look up to me").

We designated people who scored below the 33rd percentile on the TSBI as targets with negative self-views, those who scored above the 66th percentile as targets with positive self-views, and those who scored between the 33rd and 66th percentile as perceivers. Each experimental session involved an interaction between one target and one perceiver. The original sample included 121 pairs of participants. A tape player malfunction caused us to delete 7 pairs of participants, leaving a total of 114 targets and 114 perceivers in the final sample.

Procedure

Members of pairs of previously unacquainted persons reported to separate waiting rooms in different parts of the psychology building to ensure that they never saw one another. The experimenter, who was blind to the sociability score of the target, escorted each participant to a cubicle that contained a microphone and headphones. He explained that he was studying how people get acquainted. To that end, he noted, he was having each participant engage in a short conversation with another student. He then instructed the participant to slip on a pair of headphones and speak into the microphone on the table. After noting that the conversation would last for 10 min, the experimenter left.

The conversation was completely unstructured. After 7 min, the experimenter halted the conversation and asked each participant to fill out a series of 7-point Likert scales. The questionnaire consisted of the following items: (a) "How much did you like your interaction partner?" (b) "How much would you like to interact with your partner in the future?" and (c) "How favorable was your partner towards you?" After each item, participants indicated how certain they were of their previous response. After participants completed this questionnaire the experimenter debriefed them.

Judges' Ratings of the Conversations

All judges were blind to participants' self-concepts and the hypotheses. Before averaging the responses of any given team of judges, we ensured that no judges's ratings reduced the interrater reliability of the team. This procedure called for the deletion of a single judge from the original pool of 24 judges. We used a similar procedure to ensure that our scales were internally consistent. They were, so we included all items in each scale.

Rating the Reactions of Perceivers

We assumed that perceivers would take several minutes to formulate impressions of targets (recall that perceivers could not see targets). We also noted that in a few instances, the conversation partners ran out of things to say before the 10 min were up. For these reasons, we had judges rate the middle (4–6 min) portion of each perceiver's vocalizations. Judges made independent ratings of the verbal and nonverbal content of perceiver's vocalizations.

Perceivers' verbal reactions. A secretary transcribed the conversations so that judges could rate perceivers' verbal reactions to targets. She transcribed only the perceivers' vocalizations. Judges read each transcript and rated perceivers on a measure of sociability. This measure consisted of six 6-point, bipolar trait items: likable, sociable, talkative, intimate, open, and confident. One team of judges rated the

[1] We chose targets with extreme scores in the hopes of identifying persons whose behavior would typify the activities of either people with positive self-views or people with negative self-views. We chose perceivers with moderate scores because we wished to determine the typical response to targets with positive or negative self-views and assumed that perceivers with moderate scores would be most likely to display such responses.

[2] Gender did not qualify any of our conclusions and will not be discussed further.

first 80 transcripts; a second team rated the remainder. The interrater reliability, collapsed across items, was .78 for the first team of five judges and .87 for the second team of five judges. The coefficient alpha of the sociability scale, collapsed across judges, was .90.

Perceivers' nonverbal reactions. We passed perceivers' vocalizations through a Rockland Model 442 Dual Pass Filter, set at 48 Db per octave roll-off and 200 Hz. This removed the high frequencies from the conversation, making it impossible to tell what was said, but keeping the timing, rhythm, and intonation of the vocalizations intact. Judges listened to the content-filtered tape and rated perceivers' nonverbal reactions to targets on the same six-item sociability scale used to rate verbal content. One team of judges rated the first 80 tapes and a second team rated the remainder. The interrater reliabilities (collapsed across items) were .81 for the first team of five judges and .70 for the second team of three judges. The coefficient alpha for the sociability scale, collapsed across judges, was .70.

Rating the Reactions of Targets

Preliminary scrutiny of the conversations suggested that positivity of self-conception was clearest during the initial, highly demanding moments of conversation (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Schneider, Hastorf, & Ellsworth, 1979). We accordingly had judges rate targets during the first 2 min of their conversations. We made no effort to distinguish the verbal and nonverbal reactions of targets (as we had with perceivers) because we did not anticipate differences across the two channels.

We chose dimensions that our intuitions and the research literature suggested might be relevant: sociability, animation, positivity, femininity (masculinity), self-disclosure, and support seeking. We included more items in those scales that we believed would be most likely to discriminate the self-perceived sociability of targets. The Sociability scale included the same six items used to rate the reactions of perceivers. The Animation scale included three items: happy, animated, and monotonous. The Positivity scale included three items: positive content, positive toward partner, and positive toward self. Finally, one item represented each of the following constructs: "feminine," "discusses personal matters," and "seeks emotional support."

A team of judges rated a subset of 40 conversations.[3] The interrater reliabilities of each scale, collapsed across items, was .90 for the measure of sociability, .89 for the measure of animation, .79 for the measure of positivity, .82 for the measure of femininity, and .56 for the measure of disclosure. The reliability for the emotional support item was so low (.34) that we will not discuss it further. The coefficient alpha of each scale, collapsed across judges, was .95 for the Sociability scale, .95 for the Animation scale, and .86 for the Positivity scale.

Results

Did perceivers form relatively unfavorable impressions of targets with negative self-views? If so, did they express these impressions through the nonverbal channel but not the verbal channel? Were targets able to see through the ambiguous responses of perceivers and detect their true appraisals? And what did targets with negative self-views do to alienate their partners?

Perceivers' Appraisals of Targets

Did perceivers like targets with positive self-views more than targets with negative self-views? To address this question, we examined the extent to which perceivers expressed liking for targets and were interested in interacting with them. Because liking was closely associated with eagerness to interact ($r = .68$), we combined the two dependent measures into a single perceiver-appraisal index. The means plotted in the first row of data in Table 1 indicate that perceivers appraised targets with positive self-views more favorably than targets with negative self-views. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) corroborated this conclusion in that there was a reliable main effect of self-concept, $F(1, 112) = 20.80$, $p < .001$.

Table 1
Relation of Perceiver and Target Behaviors to Social Competence of Target

Reaction	Self-concept of target: Positive ($n = 56$)	Self-concept of target: Negative ($n = 58$)
Perceivers' appraisals of targets		
M	6.13	5.51
SE	.07	.11
Perceivers' verbal reactions		
M	4.45	4.34
SE	.06	.07
Perceivers' nonverbal reactions		
M	4.10	3.81
SE	.07	.08
Targets' estimates of perceiver appraisals		
M	6.07	5.90
SE	.12	.11

Note. Higher means indicate greater positivity.

Perceivers' Verbal and Nonverbal Reactions to Targets

We expected that perceivers would have relatively negative reactions to targets with negative self-views but that these reactions would manifest themselves in the nonverbal channels only. Because the interaction term of an omnibus ANOVA does not test for this pattern of means, we performed an a priori planned comparison that was designed to do so (e.g., Hays, 1973, p. 582; Keppel, 1973, p. 90; Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985; Winer, 1971, p. 384). This contrast required that the following weights be assigned to each cell: verbal reactions to targets with positive self-views (1); verbal reactions to targets with negative self-views (1); nonverbal reactions to targets with positive self-views (1); and nonverbal reactions to targets with negative self-views (−3). This contrast was highly reliable, $F(1, 112) = 30.87$,

[3] We chose to have judges rate only a subset of the conversations to minimize labor in addressing a question that was not central to our concerns. Before collecting these ratings, we conducted analyses to ensure that the subset of conversations we selected was not different in any way from the other conversations. These analyses revealed no differences.

$p < .001$, $r = .46$.[4] As the means in data rows 3 and 5 of Table 1 show, perceivers offered favorable verbal reactions to targets with negative as well as positive self-views, favorable nonverbal reactions to targets with positive self-views, but unfavorable nonverbal reactions to targets with negative self-views. Furthermore, pairwise comparisons indicated that the reactions of perceivers in the nonverbal negative self-view cell were more negative than the reactions of perceivers in any other cell, all $Fs(1, 112) > 6.27$, $ps < .01$, and that the verbal reactions of perceivers to targets did not differ as a function of target self-view, $F = 1.28$, *ns*.

Further testimony to the notion that perceivers' verbal reactions to targets were minimally related to their nonverbal reactions was provided by the fact that the two types of reactions were uncorrelated. For example, the correlation between verbal and nonverbal responses averaged over all the conditions was .03.

These data therefore confirm the notion that perceivers dislike targets with negative self-views but reveal their feelings through the nonverbal channel only. In light of this, it becomes important that such targets attend to the relatively diagnostic contents of the nonverbal channel. The analyses presented next were designed to test this possibility.

Targets' Estimates of Perceivers' Appraisals

Targets with negative self-views failed to realize that perceivers' appraisals were relatively unfavorable. The means in data row 7 of Table 1 show that targets with negative self-views estimated that they were liked as much as ones with positive self-views $F = 1.17$, *ns*.[5]

Why did targets leave their interactions with so little insight into perceivers' appraisals of them? Or, more precisely, why did targets with negative self-views fail to recognize that their interaction partners were relatively cool toward them? Apparently, such targets were tuned to the wrong (i.e., nondiagnostic) channel of communication. For example, the estimates of perceiver favorability made by targets with negative self-views were associated with perceivers' verbal responses ($r = .25$) but not perceivers' nonverbal responses ($r = -.13$, $z = 2.02$, $p < .02$). Targets with positive self-views, in contrast, based their estimates on neither the verbal nor the nonverbal responses of perceivers, $rs = .06$ and $-.14$, respectively, *ns*. Presumably, their history of successful social interaction led targets with positive self-views to simply assume that they were liked and to refrain from careful scrutiny of the reactions of their partners. Although not strong, this evidence suggests that targets with negative self-views failed to realize that they were disliked because they based their estimates of how much they were liked on perceivers' highly nondiagnostic verbal responses.

In summary, our data support the notion that perceivers dislike people with negative self-views but hide their feelings behind a veneer of kind words. Moreover, despite the fact that perceivers' true feelings toward these targets seep out through nonverbal channels of communication, targets overlook these unfavorable messages because they focus on the verbal rather than the nonverbal channel of communication. As a result, targets with negative self-views leave their interactions blissfully unaware of information that could potentially assist them in developing more endearing interaction strategies.

Behaviors of Targets With Positive and Negative Self-Views

How did targets with negative self-views alienate their partners? Our analyses revealed that judges regarded targets with positive self-views to be more sociable, more animated, and more positive than targets with negative self-views $Fs(1, 36) = 3.96$, 4.4, and 6.35, all $ps < .055$. At the same time, they perceived no differences in the femininity or self-disclosure of targets in the two groups, *ns*.

Correlational analyses suggested that the behaviors of targets were linked to the reactions of perceivers. For example, the more sociable, animated, and positive targets were, the more favorably perceivers appraised them, $rs(38) = .48$, .41, and .45, respectively, $ps < .005$, one tailed. Similar, albeit somewhat weaker, relationships emerged between the positivity of target behaviors and the favorability of perceivers' verbal and nonverbal reactions, $rs(38) = .26$ and .26, $ps < .06$, one-tailed. Inspection of the within-cell correlations revealed only that the sociability, animation, and positivity of targets with negative self-views covaried with perceivers' appraisals, $rs(20) = .59$, .46, and .54, respectively, $ps < .05$.

In short, the extent to which targets behaved in a sociable, animated, and positive manner seemed to channel the reactions of perceivers. Evidence for this link emerged most clearly when we examined perceivers' appraisals of targets with negative self-views.

Discussion

Why do people with negative self-views consistently enact behaviors that alienate the people around them? Our findings suggest that the social environments that such persons characteristically inhabit may help foster such paradoxical behavior. In particular, we found that although the interaction partners of people with negative self-views became disenchanted with them, they masked their disdain with words of approval. Furthermore, although the partners' tone of voice revealed their actual feelings, the targets of their disdain failed to attend to this channel. The upshot was that people with negative self-views left their interactions with little insight into how badly they were appraised.

Our findings complement recent analyses of self-presentation and nonverbal behavior in several ways. The fact that per-

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[4] Although the appropriate error term is actually a weighted average of the within-subjects and between-subjects error term rather than the between-subjects term only, we followed Rosenthal and Rosnow's (1985, pp. 71–73) suggestion of computing both terms and using the error term based on the more conservative (between-subjects) error term. Finally, the overall tendency for judges to rate verbal reactions more favorably than nonverbal ones should be interpreted cautiously, as judges commented that the task of rating nonverbal reactions was rather unengaging and this may have soured their ratings.

[5] Similarly, self-conceptions of targets had no impact on their desire to interact with, or their liking for, perceivers, *ns*.

ceivers successfully masked their unfavorable appraisals of targets with negative self-views for example, confirms the notion that people can control the verbal cues they display so as to prevent others from detecting their "true" feelings (e.g., DePaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985). Our data also show, however, that deceivers are not completely successful in disguising their negative reactions. To wit, perceivers failed to control their verbal and nonverbal behaviors simultaneously, but leaked their true feelings through the nonverbal channel (e.g., DePaulo et al., 1985). These findings support Rosenthal and DePaulo's (1979a, 1979b; DePaulo, 1990) notion of a leakage hierarchy. In particular, when people are motivated to conceal their emotions, they can deceive people through the words they speak but nevertheless reveal their true feelings through the accompanying tone of voice.

One aspect of our research, however, seems at least superficially incompatible with the claim of earlier researchers that people regard nonverbal expressions to be particularly trustworthy indicators of their true feelings (e.g., DePaulo, 1990). If so, then why did the targets in our research ignore such cues in estimating perceivers' appraisals? There are at least three possibilities. First, because our participants were actively engaged in social interactions, they were forced to attend to verbal cues as a means of maintaining the conversation; they lacked a correspondingly compelling reason to attend to nonverbal cues (e.g., O'Sullivan, Ekman, Friesen, & Scherer, 1985). Second, the particular nonverbal cue that we studied in our research—tone of voice—tends to be relatively subtle. Conceivably, people are more apt to take notice of relatively conspicuous nonverbal cues such as the tendency for perceivers to grimace, look away, or gaze at them with fire in their eyes. Finally, people may have attended to nonverbal cues but simply failed to interpret them correctly; in fact, the research literature suggests that persons with low self-esteem may have particular difficulty interpreting nonverbal cues (e.g., DePaulo et al., 1985; Rosenthal & DePaulo, 1979b).

In any event, our findings highlight drawbacks associated with living in a white-lie society (e.g., Blumberg, 1972; Tesser & Rosen, 1975). For example, the fact that perceivers masked their negative sentiments with words of praise means that it may be hazardous to take favorable feedback at face value (see Jones & Pittman's [1982] discussion of the ingratiator's dilemma). In addition, the reluctance of perceivers to deliver direct negative feedback to targets suggests that people with negative self-views may frequently be deprived of the corrective feedback that they need to improve their interaction strategies. So deprived, they may continue to evoke negative reactions from others, and these reactions may reaffirm their self-doubts and make their negative self-concepts stubbornly resistant to change (e.g., Wylie, 1979).

The white lies encountered by persons with negative self-views may also sow the seeds of a host of neurotic behaviors. Consider, for example, that although people with negative self-views may enjoy pleasant interactions, they may later discover that the same silver tongue that charmed them during the interaction ridiculed them as soon as they turned their back. Such experiences may erode their sense of self-confidence and convince them that they should doubt signs of acceptance and these doubts may, in turn, stimulate them to seek reassurance repeatedly (e.g., Coyne, 1976b; Gasparikova-Crasnec & Post, 1984; Hokanson, Loewenstein, Hedeen, & Howes, 1986) or engage in excessive social comparison activity (e.g., Frey & Ruble, 1985). Ultimately, these activities may sour the appraisals of the few who happen to perceive them favorably.

A tendency for people with negative self-views to be particularly likely to experience unforeseen rejection may explain why they maintain negative self-views even though they do not always recognize that their partners dislike them (as in our research). That is, unforeseen rejection may convey a dual, doubly troubling message by suggesting that the person is not only dislikable but is also incapable of recognizing his or her enemies. Of course, it is entirely possible that some adults maintain negative self-views without ever encountering rejection. That is, in at least some instances, negative self-views may be legacies of earlier experiences. Research on attachment, for example, suggests that infants who have insecure relationships with their caretakers suffer from low self-esteem years later (e.g., Cassidy, 1988).

We should also note that people do not rely exclusively on social feedback to form conceptions of themselves. Other important sources of self-knowledge include the self-observation of one's own behavior (e.g., Bem, 1972; Jones, Rhodewalt, Berglas, & Skelton, 1981; Rhodewalt & Agustdottir, 1986) and the fruits of comparisons between one's own performances and those of others (e.g., Suls & Mullen, 1982; Taylor & Loebel, 1989; Tesser, 1986; Wills, 1981).

Conclusion

Behavioral scientists have long wondered why negative self-concepts and related psychological structures are so stubbornly resistant to change. Many past theorists and researchers have named dysfunctional thought processes as the primary culprit. For example, Beck (1967) has suggested that negative or cynical beliefs lead some people to develop overly gloomy conceptions of themselves.

As troublesome as dysfunctional thought processes may be, the problem with people with negative self-views (e.g., low self-esteem or depressed people) may not be all in their heads. In particular, our findings and related ones (e.g., Andrews, 1991; Krause, Steimer, Sänger-Alt, & Wagner, 1989; Swann, 1987; Wachtel, 1977) suggest that people create around themselves social environments that feed into their belief that they are the persons that they believe themselves to be.

To be sure, the notion that people construct self-confirmatory environments around themselves is not new (e.g., Lecky, 1945; Secord & Backman, 1965). The findings reported here, however, go beyond recent evidence that people's desire for self-verification causes them to seek negative feedback. That is, people with negative self-views may not only get rejected, they may also fail to learn why because a concern with social decorum causes their interaction partners to refrain from offering corrective feedback. As a result, even when people with negative self-views find that their desire for positive evaluations overrides their desire for self-verification and they court favorable appraisals (e.g., Swann, 1990), they may lack the requisite

skills to do so effectively. From this perspective, people with negative self-views may have difficulty improving themselves not merely because they alienate others but also because others refrain from letting them know what they did wrong.

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