The self and identity negotiation

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Identity negotiation refers to the processes through which perceivers and targets come to agreements regarding the identities that targets are to assume in the interaction. Whereas past work has focused on the contribution of perceivers to the identity negotiation process, I emphasize the contribution of targets to this process. Specifically, I examine the tendency for targets to work to bring perceivers to verify their self-views. For example, people prefer and seek self-verifying evaluations from others, including their spouses and employers — even when this means attaining evaluations that validate negative self-views. Moreover, receiving self-verification has adaptive consequences, even improving the performance of workers in diverse groups. Some boundary conditions of self-verification strivings as well as implications for making of minds are discussed.

Keywords: self-verification, self-concept, self-esteem, close relationships

As a graduate student I became interested in the self-fulfilling effects of people's expectations about one another. With Mark Snyder, I studied a phenomenon we referred to as "behavioral confirmation." In a series of studies, we showed that perceivers' expectations about targets channeled their interactions so as to make those expectations come true (for reviews, see Snyder, 1984; Snyder & Klein, this volume). We concluded that perceivers might systematically shape the minds of targets.

Yet as robust as these findings seemed to be, I noticed that sometimes targets actively resisted the label with which they had been tagged and attempted to alter the impressions of perceivers. This suggested that the process of "making minds" was not a one-way street; not only did perceivers shape the minds of targets, but targets shaped the minds of perceivers. Apparently, the "making of minds" was an interactive and dynamic process in which both perceivers and targets actively influenced one another. Through this process of *identity*

negotiation perceivers and targets interactively forge agreements regarding the identities of targets.

In this essay I focus on the target's contribution to the identity negotiation process. In the tradition of the early symbolic interactionists (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), I assume that people form self-views as a means of making sense of the world, predicting the responses of others, and guiding behavior. From this vantage point, self-views represent the "lens" through which people perceive their worlds and organize their behavior. As such, it is critical that these "lenses" remain stable. This explains why people are motivated to stabilize their self-views (e.g., Secord & Backman, 1965; Lecky, 1945) through a series of active behavioral and cognitive activities I dubbed *self-verification processes.*[1]

In what follows, I first identify several distinct forms of self-verification processes. I then examine the consequences of these processes. Finally, I conclude with some remarks about the implications of these processes for the making of minds.

Forms of self-verification

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 engage in several distinct activities. First, people seek self-verifying interaction partners. Even if they fail to find such partners, people may elicit self-verifying reactions by enacting behaviors that tend to bring others to see them as they see themselves. And what if the first two strategies fail and people find themselves with partners or in contexts in which they fail to receive verification? Under such circumstances, they may withdraw either psychologically or in actuality. I consider each of these strategies of self-verification in turn.

Seeking self-verifying partners

An especially important form of self-verification occurs when people choose partners who see them as they see themselves, thereby creating social environments that are likely to support their self-views. In one study, for example, we asked people with positive and negative self-views whether they would prefer

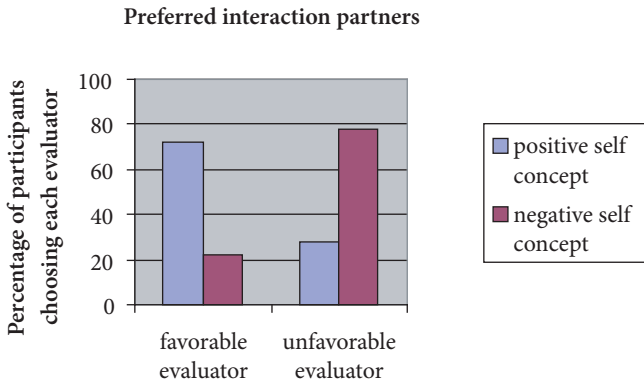**Preferred interaction partners**

Figure 1. Preference for self-verifying interaction partner

to interact with evaluators who had favorable or unfavorable impressions of them. As can be seen in Figure 1, participants with positive self-views preferred favorable partners and people with negative self-views preferred unfavorable partners (e.g., Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992).

Over a dozen replications in different laboratories using diverse methodologies have left little doubt that people with negative self-views seek negative feedback as well as negative interaction partners (e.g., Hixon & Swann, 1993; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992; Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989; Swann, Wenzlaff, & Tafarodi, 1992).

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 (Swann et al., 1992). For example, in choosing a negative evaluator, one person with low esteem noted that the positive evaluator "sounded good" but that the negative evaluator "seems to know more about me."

Direct evidence that the self-views of participants (rather than a covariate of self-views) drive their choice of interaction partner was offered by Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, and Gilbert (1990). They had participants choose an interaction partner while unable to access their self-views because the experimenter rushed their decision or had them decide while rehearsing a phone number. Those with positive and negative self-views alike displayed a preference for a positive partner. Only when people had available the mental resources to compare the fit between their self-views and the partners' evaluation did people with negative self-views display a preference for the negative evaluator.

And should people's efforts to find partners who verify their self-views fail and they wind up in relationships or in contexts in which their desire for self-verification is frustrated, a second strategy of self-verification may still ensure that they receive self-verifying reactions. Specifically, people may behave in ways that brings the other person's appraisal into line with their self-views.

Bringing others to see us as we see ourselves

Insofar as people use their self-views to guide their behavior, they may evoke self-verifying reactions. Also, insofar as 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) tested this proposition. The experimenter began by informing targets who perceived themselves as either likeable or dislikeable that they would be interacting with perceivers who had already formed impressions of them. Some targets learned that the perceiver had positive regard for them; some learned that the perceiver had negative regard for them; and still others learned nothing of the perceivers' evaluation of them. There was an overall tendency for targets to elicit reactions that confirmed their self-views (see also Curtis & Miller, 1986). In addition, this tendency was especially pronounced when targets suspected that perceivers' appraisals might disconfirm their self-conceptions. Targets who thought of themselves as likeable elicited particularly favorable reactions when they thought perceivers disliked them, and targets who thought of themselves as dislikeable elicited particularly unfavorable reactions when they suspected that perceivers liked them. In short, targets were especially inclined to elicit self-confirmatory feedback from perceivers when they suspected that perceivers' appraisals were incompatible with their self-views.

Swann and Hill (1982) obtained a similar pattern of results, using a different procedural paradigm and dimension of the self-concept (dominance). Targets 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 deliver feedback to the participant. In some conditions, the confederate said that the participant seemed dominant; in other conditions, the confederate asserted that the participant seemed submissive. If the feedback confirmed targets' self-conceptions, they seemed to passively accept the confederate's appraisal. If the feedback *dis*confirmed their self-conceptions, however, targets vehemently re-

sisted the feedback and sought to demonstrate that they were not the persons the confederate made them out to be.

Of course, in both of the foregoing studies, some people behaviorally resisted the discrepant feedback more than others. Swann and Ely (1984) speculated that increments in self-concept certainty would be associated with heightened investment in verifying such views, which would in turn lead to greater resistance in the face of disconfirmation. To test this hypothesis, they first led perceivers to develop an expectancy about targets that was either high or low in certainty. In all cases, the expectancy was discrepant with the self-conceived extraversion of targets. Perceivers then interviewed targets who happened to be either certain or uncertain of their self-conceived extraversion. This situation created a potential "battle of wills," with perceivers' experimentally manipulated beliefs vying against targets' chronic self-views.

Consistent with earlier research (Snyder, 1984), perceivers acted on their expectancies by soliciting responses that would confirm their own expectancies but *dis*confirm targets' self-conceptions. For example, perceivers who believed that the target was an extravert often asked questions such as "Do you like to go to lively parties?" Targets who were low in self-certainty generally answered in ways that confirmed perceivers' expectancies (but disconfirmed their own self-conceptions) when perceivers were highly certain of their expectancies. In contrast, targets who were high in self-certainty actively resisted the questions (regardless of the perceivers' level of certainty), thereby bringing perceivers' expectancies into harmony with their self-views. Thus, as long as targets were high in self-certainty, self-verification "won" over behavioral confirmation in the battle of wills.

Other research suggests that the tendency for self-verification to triumph over behavioral confirmation generalizes to naturally occurring settings. For example, McNulty and Swann (1994) followed a group of college students over a semester. They discovered that, over the course of the semester, students tended to bring their roommates to see them as they saw themselves. In addition, this self-verification pattern was stronger than the corresponding tendency for students to bring their self-views into agreement with their roommates' initial impressions of them. Similarly, in a semester long 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 prevailed over the countervailing tendency for the group members to shape the self-views of individuals in the group.

And what happens if people somehow wind up in relationships in which their partners refuse to bring their appraisals into line with the self-views of targets? In the next section, I suggest that targets will attempt to rectify the situation by withdrawing from the relationship, either psychologically or by terminating the relationship.

Fleeing contexts in which self-verification is not forthcoming

Several investigators have now examined how people react when they wind up in marriages in which their spouses perceive them more (or less) favorably than they perceive themselves. They have found repeatedly that people are less intimate and satisfied in relationships in which they are perceived incongruently (Burke & Stets, 1999; De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Katz, Beach, & Anderson, 1996; Ritts & Stein, 1995; Schafer, Wickrama, & Keith, 1996; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). Moreover, one study found that spouses in non-verifying relationships were especially inclined to opt for separation or divorce (Cast & Burke, 2002). Similarly, when college students with firmly held self-views find that their current roommate perceives them more or less favorably than they perceive themselves, they make plans to find a new roommate (Swann & Pelham, 2002).

As impressive as this evidence of self-verification strivings may be, a recent study by Schroeder, Josephs, and Swann (2004) is especially compelling. The question they asked was this: would people with low (but not high) self-esteem remain in jobs in which their wage trend was flat or declining, and quit jobs in which their wage trend increased. In light of evidence that people are more inclined to seek confirmatory evaluations insofar as the evaluator is highly credible (Hixon & Swann, 1993), they predicted that the longer people were employed, the stronger their preference for self-confirmatory feedback would be. That is, people with low self-esteem might initially tolerate positive performance feedback (increasing pay), but become increasingly less tolerant of such positivity as their employer acquired more evidence on which to base an evaluation of them.

To test these ideas, they measured the self-esteem of 7758 male and female college students using Tafarodi and Swann's (1995) self-esteem measure. Ten questions tap social worth (feeling valued and respected by others), and ten questions tap agency (feeling strong and capable due to one's knowledge of what one can do). Conceivably, both forms of self-esteem (social worth and agency) might be related to turnover. That is, perceived social worth might

predict persistence in a job because salary might be understood as reflecting how much people are valued by their supervisors and co-workers, and perceived agency might be influential insofar as people use self-perceived competence as a yardstick for assessing their "market value."

We obtained employment information for participants between 1994 and 1999. This allowed us to determine how much each participant earned from any given employer in any given calendar quarter. The criterion variable was the employment longevity of participants with their original employer, adjusted for the time-on-the-job of those still with their employer at the end of the study.

The predictors of the employment lifetime variable were self-esteem (summed over social worth and agency), wage trend, and the interaction of these two. The results showed that self-esteem and wage trend began to interactively predict turnover after 24 months of employment. Most strikingly, those with low self-esteem preferred remaining in jobs in which they received no raises and preferred *leaving* jobs with increasing wage. In contrast, those with high self-esteem were more apt to remain with the original employer if their wages increased. Apparently, when faced with a choice between their negative self-views or high salaries, people with low social worth chose to retain their negative self-views.

A potential alternative interpretation of our findings is that people with low self-esteem were genuinely incompetent and they were either fired or resigned because they were embarrassed or felt overwhelmed. Contrary to this rival hypothesis, when we controlled for self-perceived ability (which has been shown to be related to measures of actual ability) the self-verification pattern remained.

Interestingly, the preference for self-verifying wages emerged only after a substantial period of time (two years) elapsed. The latter finding presumably reflects a tendency for perceived over- or under-payment to produce discomfort only when the employer is well acquainted with one's performance. Apparently, after two years, participants felt that their employer should have known them better than to pay them amounts that their self-views told them were too high. This finding is reminiscent of Swann et al.'s (1994) evidence of self-verification strivings among married but not dating persons. Whereas dating couples were intimate with positive but not negative partners, married couples were most intimate with partners who evaluated them in self-verifying manner, even if their self-views were negative. As in the present data, self-discrepant evaluations were troubling only when they came from credible evaluators.

Our findings challenge recent contentions that self-esteem is a mere product of social interaction that has no impact on significant social phenomena (e.g., Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Dawes, 1994; London, 1997). That is, it appears that people's self-views encourage them to systematically gravitate toward contexts that will reinforce their conceptions of themselves, even if these conceptions happen to be negative. Having said this, I should emphasize here that however paradoxical or self-defeating our participants' behaviors may appear to the outside observer, they may be adaptive within the frame of reference of the participants themselves. That is, by avoiding employment opportunities that are financially beneficial, participants with low self-esteem are avoiding situations that are likely to be discordant with their deep seated beliefs about themselves and therefore psychologically stressful. The responses of low self-esteem participants may thus be members of a larger class of responses that are designed to ensure that their worlds seem safe, predictable and congruent with previous experiences rather than dangerous, unpredictable, and incongruent with previous experiences.

Consequences of self-verification processes

The tendency for people to gravitate toward self-verifying relationship partners and employment settings has several distinct consequences. For example, by engaging in such activities, people may enlist accomplices who will assist them in their efforts to create self-verifying worlds that stabilize their self-views. Evidence for this possibility comes from research by Swann and Predmore (1985). These researchers brought couples into the laboratory, separated them, and asked spouses to rate their partner on several personality attributes. This enabled the researchers to differentiate partners who saw targets as they saw themselves ("congruent partners") from those that did not ("incongruent partners"). Targets were then joined by either their partner or a stranger. Shortly thereafter, the experimenter returned with a bogus evaluation of the "target" that an independent source had ostensibly generated. The evaluation was designed to be inconsistent with the target's self-views. After examining the evaluation, targets rated themselves. When targets examined the self-discrepant evaluation in the presence of a congruent partner, they displayed less self-concept change than when they examined it in the presence of an incongruent partner or stranger. Such evidence suggests that when people establish relationships with partners who see them congruently, they will enjoy stable self-views.

Self-verification processes may also influence group processes. Recall Swann et al.'s (2000) study of MBA students. At the middle of the semester, they assessed the extent to which participants brought the other members of their study groups to see them as they saw themselves. Then, toward the end of the semester, they assessed participants' feelings of connection to the group (i.e., group identification, social integration, and emotional conflict) as well as performance on creative tasks (e.g., tasks that benefit from divergent perspectives, such as devising a marketing plan for a new product or determining how to increase the productivity of a failing corporation). They discovered that self-verification effects fostered both feelings of connection and creative task performance, and this pattern emerged for negative as well as positive self-views. Moreover, in addition to the direct link between verification and performance on creative tasks, there was also evidence that feelings of connection to the group partially mediated the relation between verification and performance on creative tasks. Apparently, when group members had their unique attributes and perspectives verified they felt recognized and understood. Such feelings emboldened them to offer creative ideas and insights that they might otherwise have been inhibited to share. In addition, feeling known and understood by the group may have increased motivation to cooperate with one another by making members feel more identified with the group.

Polzer et al. (2002) extended these ideas even further by examining the implications of the self-verification process for the "value in diversity" hypothesis (e.g., Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999) — the notion that contact between workers from diverse backgrounds will lead to the development of novel solutions to the tasks at hand. Although intuitively appealing, the value in diversity hypothesis has received mixed support. In fact, in some research, diversity actually seems to foster dissension within groups (for a review, see Williams & O'Reilly, 1998).

Why might diversity sow dissension within groups? Some researchers (Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992) have proposed that identifying individual group members with distinct groups (i.e., "out-groups") may disrupt group dynamics. Consistent with this, research on self-categorization theory has shown that out-group members evoke more disliking, distrust, and competition than in-group members (e.g., Brewer, 1979; Hogg, Cooper-Shaw, & Holzworth, 1993; Hogg & Hardie, 1991, 1992). Such processes may conspire to make diverse groups a fertile breeding ground for misunderstanding and discord.

To address these issues, Polzer et al. (2002) began by defining diversity as the amount of inter-individual variability across several demographic and functional categories (e.g., sex, race, previous job function, area of concentration in the MBA program). They reasoned that the identity negotiation processes through which group members come to see one another as they see themselves might offset the tendency for categorical differences between group members to disrupt group processes. In particular, they predicted that verification of self-views might encourage diverse group members to apply their differences in knowledge, experiences, and perspectives to the tasks at hand (e.g., Ely and Thomas, 2001) and that this would help them translate their diverse qualities into exceptional performance on creative tasks. Consistent with this, they found that self-verification achieved within the first ten minutes of interaction moderated the impact of demographic diversity on performance. Specifically, among groups that achieved high levels of self-verification, diversity facilitated performance. In contrast, among groups that failed to achieve substantial self-verification, diversity undermined performance. Thus, group members who quickly recognized the unique qualities of their fellow group members were optimally positioned to capitalize on the diversity in their group. In short, Polzer et al.'s evidence of links between self-verification, diversity, and performance suggest that the failure of previous researchers to consider self-verification processes may explain why they obtained mixed support for the value in diversity hypothesis.

Self-verification, identity negotiation, and making minds

The research considered here builds on past evidence that the expectations of perceivers shape the activities of targets (Snyder & Klein, this volume) by showing that targets do not merely passively assimilate the expectations of others. Instead, research on self-verification processes shows that people gravitate toward self-confirming relationship partners and jobs, even when doing so ensures that they will receive support for their negative self-views. Moreover, people's success in bringing others to validate their self-views is highly consequential. Witness that people are drawn to relationship partners and group members who offer them validation. Moreover, these feelings may, in turn, influence the extent to which they feel connected to the group as well as their actual performance. This research therefore suggests that the "making of minds" is properly understood as an interactive process in which both

perceivers and targets shape the minds of one another through a process of identity negotiation.

In the spirit of my contention that identity negotiation is a two-way street, it is important to acknowledge that targets are not always successful in shaping the perceptions of perceivers. Indeed, several of the studies discussed here point to conditions under which the expectations of perceivers are apt to shape the self-views of targets. At least two key principles govern the outcome of the identity negotiation process (cf. Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003).

The investment principle suggests that as investment in expectancies increases, those expectancies (whether they are entertained by perceivers or targets) are more apt to prevail in the identity negotiation process. For example, Swann and Ely (1984) demonstrated that targets tend to behaviorally confirm the expectancies of perceivers when perceiver's expectancies are high in certainly and target's self-views are low in certainty. Similarly, Swann & Pelham (2002) reported that targets were more committed to self-verifying roommates when their self-views were high in certainty and importance. In the language of making minds, the extent to which people feel that they know their own minds will determine the extent to which they work to bring the minds of others into harmony with their own views.

The accessibility principle states that for people to strive to verify an expectancy, they must possess the mental resources and motivation required to access that expectancy. Swann et al. (1990), for example, showed that people who were prevented from accessing their self-views (by depriving them of cognitive resources) failed to choose self-verifying interaction partners. Motivational factors, such as the nature of the relationship, may also influence how likely people are to access their self-views and translate them into behavior. For example, Swann et al. (1994) discovered that dating partners were most intimate with partners who viewed them favorably but married people were most intimate with spouses who saw them as they saw themselves. Presumably, the nature of the relationship determined whether or not people accessed their self-views and used these views to guide their responses to their partners.

Such research on the boundary conditions of self-verification and rival processes is important because it helps illuminate the nature of these processes. More generally, this work offers important insight into the making of minds. Indeed, understanding the interplay between people's self-views and their expectancies about one another seems to represent a key step in developing a comprehensive theory of the making of minds.

Acknowledgement

Note

1. Self-verification theory is related to, but distinct from, Freud's (1920) concept of repetition compulsion as well as later cognitive consistency and balance theories (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1946). Whereas all such formulations argue that people strive for the familiar and avoid psychological inconsistency, they fail to specify the functional significance of inconsistency. Self-verification theory argues that people work to maintain their self-views because such self-views are a critically important source of psychological and interpersonal integrity and stability.

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