

## Agreeable Fancy or Disagreeable Truth? Reconciling Self-Enhancement and Self-Verification

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Three studies asked why people sometimes seek positive feedback (*self-enhance*) and sometimes seek subjectively accurate feedback (*self-verify*). Consistent with self-enhancement theory, people with low self-esteem as well as those with high self-esteem indicated that they preferred feedback pertaining to their positive rather than negative self-views. Consistent with self-verification theory, the very people who sought favorable feedback pertaining to their positive self-conceptions sought unfavorable feedback pertaining to their negative self-views, regardless of their level of global self-esteem. Apparently, although all people prefer to seek feedback regarding their positive self-views, when they seek feedback regarding their negative self-views, they seek unfavorable feedback. Whether people self-enhance or self-verify thus seems to be determined by the positivity of the relevant self-conceptions rather than their level of self-esteem or the type of person they are.

You will find that the truth is often unpopular and the contest between agreeable fancy and disagreeable fact is unequal. For, in the vernacular, we Americans are all suckers for good news. (Stevenson, 1958, p. 17)

Man's passion for truth is such that he will welcome the bitterest of all postulates so long as it strikes him as true. (Machado, 1963, p. 2)

People like good news, especially when it is about them. This point has not been lost on behavioral scientists, who have proposed that there is a fundamental human tendency for people to seek positive or *self-enhancing* feedback. Yet it also seems clear that people possess a "passion for truth." Recognition of this sentiment has led theorists to propose that people are motivated to seek subjectively accurate or *self-verifying* feedback. A major purpose of this article is to consider how these sometimes conflicting motives interact to control behavior. We begin with a brief discussion of each.

### Self-Enhancement and Self-Verification

One of psychology's most venerable ideas is that people like to hear good things about themselves. For example, McDougall (1933) referred to the principle of self-regard as the "master motive," Koffka (1935) gave special status to the "force which

propels the ego upward," and Allport (1937) suggested that self-enhancement is a central goal of human existence. Two distinct versions of self-enhancement theory have emerged (Shrauger, 1975). *Simple self-enhancement* refers to a process whereby all people strive systematically to promote the perception that others think well of them. *Compensatory or defensive self-enhancement* refers to a motive that has the hydraulic quality associated with most drives (Hull, 1943). Thus, because people with negative self-concepts rarely receive positive feedback, they make compensatory efforts to win the favor of others. The two versions differ, then, in that simple self-enhancement assumes that all people are equally motivated to self-enhance whereas compensatory self-enhancement assumes that people with negative self-views are more motivated to self-enhance than are people with positive self-views.

A great deal of empirical evidence supports the simple version of self-enhancement theory. For example, the motive to self-enhance has been used to interpret self-presentational strategies (Baumeister, 1982; E. E. Jones, 1964; E. E. Jones & Pittman, 1982; Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976), self-attributions (Bradley, 1978; Greenwald, 1980; Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Zuckerman, 1979), predictions of future success (Alloy & Abramson, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Weinstein, 1980), the targets to whom people compare themselves (Taylor & Loebel, 1989; Tesser, 1986, 1988; Wills, 1981), and even belief change (Steele, 1988).

Contrary to compensatory self-enhancement theory, however, there is little evidence that people with negative self-conceptions are more inclined to self-enhance than people with positive self-conceptions. Thus, the research literature supports the simple but not the compensatory version of self-enhancement theory (e.g., Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988; Campbell, 1986; Shrauger, 1975; Swann, in press; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 1987, in press) grew out of a long tradition of self-consistency and balance theories (e.g., Aronson, 1969; Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; Lecky, 1945; Secord & Backman, 1965). Its core assumption is that

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people are invested in preserving their firmly held self-conceptions and that they do so by soliciting self-verifying feedback. Although such self-verification strivings are multiply determined, people's desire for worlds that are predictable and controllable is central. This desire can be appreciated from both epistemic and pragmatic perspectives (e.g., Swann, in press).

From an epistemic perspective, stable self-conceptions act like the rudder of a ship, bolstering people's confidence in their ability to navigate through the sometimes murky seas of everyday social life (cf. Epstein, 1973; Kelly, 1955; Lecky, 1945; Mead, 1934; Secord & Backman, 1965). For this reason, events that confirm people's self-conceptions fortify their feelings of confidence and events that disconfirm their self-conceptions engender fear that they may not know themselves after all.

From a pragmatic perspective, people recognize that social interaction is predicated on an implicit agreement that people will honor the identities to which they have laid claim (e.g., Athay & Darley, 1981; Goffman, 1959; Swann, 1984). Therefore, they should work to ensure that others do not form appraisals that are overly negative (which could cause others to patronize them) or overly positive (which could cause others to expect too much of them or to place extravagant demands on them).

In short, just as being perceived in a self-congruent manner may promote perceptions of control and may grease the wheels of social interaction, being perceived in an incongruent manner may usher in psychological and interpersonal anarchy. For these and other reasons, people should be motivated to ensure that others see them as they see themselves—even if it means bringing others to recognize their flaws and limitations (cf. Baumeister, Hamilton, & Tice, 1985; Baumgardner & Brownlee, 1987).

There is evidence that the desire to self-verify can influence behavior within each successive stage of the interaction sequence. For example, people choose interaction partners who are apt to support their self-views (e.g., Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1989; Swann & Pelham, 1989; Wenzlaff, 1988), and they solicit feedback that confirms their self-views (e.g., Coyne, 1976; Coyne et al., 1987; Curtis & Miller, 1986; Swann, Krull, & Pelham, 1989; Swann & Read, 1981a, 1981b). People pay more attention to confirming feedback (Swann & Read, 1981b); they recall it better (e.g., Crary, 1966; Silverman, 1964; Suinn, Osborne, & Page, 1962; Swann & Read, 1981b); they regard it as more accurate, credible, and diagnostic (e.g., Crary, 1966; Korman, 1968; Markus, 1977; Shrauger & Lund, 1975; Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987); they attribute it to their own dispositions (e.g., Swann et al., 1987); and they even spend personal funds to get it (Swann & Read, 1981a).

In short, there are sound reasons to believe that people attempt to verify their self-views (for a review, see Swann, in press). Furthermore, this evidence is not readily interpretable under several rival hypotheses. For example, the notion that people engage in self-verification simply as a means of self-improvement or reducing uncertainty (Trope, 1979, 1986) is undermined by evidence that people are more inclined to verify self-views of which they are certain (e.g., Maracek & Mettee, 1972; Pelham, 1989; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann, Pelham, & Chidester, 1988). Similarly, the idea that people self-verify simply to avoid interaction partners who seem imperceptive is weakened by evidence that people seek self-verifying feedback

as well as self-verifying interaction partners (Swann, Krull, & Pelham, 1989; Swann & Read, 1981a).

### *Reconciling Self-Enhancement and Self-Verification*

How can one reconcile the evidence of self-enhancement with the evidence of self-verification? One strategy is to suppose that some people have a better developed self-enhancement motive than others. For example, just as some theorists (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988) have argued that certain people (e.g., people with low self-esteem) self-verify because they have a poorly developed self-enhancement motive, others have argued that certain people self-enhance because they are narcissistic (e.g., Freud, 1914/1976). Although this explanatory strategy has a certain conceptual elegance, it does not explain why the same people sometimes seem to be motivated to both self-enhance and self-verify. For example, although people with negative self-views seek unfavorable feedback, when they receive such feedback they feel just as bad as people with positive self-views (e.g., Swann et al., 1987; Swann, Krull, & Pelham, 1989). If people with negative self-views lacked a self-enhancement motive, why would they suffer when they received unfavorable feedback?

We suggest that all people are simultaneously motivated to self-enhance and self-verify and that they will work to satisfy both motives when possible. Thus, for example, even people with low global self-esteem should strive for self-enhancement by working to verify their positive self-views.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, when soliciting feedback pertaining to negative self-views, even people with high self-esteem should self-verify by displaying a preference for unfavorable feedback over favorable feedback. This tendency for people to seek verification of their negative self-views should be stronger among people whose self-views are clearly negative because self-verification strivings are most pronounced among people with firmly held self-views (e.g., Maracek & Mettee, 1972; Pelham, 1989; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann & Pelham, 1989; Swann et al., 1988).

### *Testing Our Assumptions*

Two important assumptions underlie our expectation that, regardless of their self-esteem level, people will seek favorable feedback about their positive self-views and unfavorable feedback about their negative self-views. First, people's self-views must be sufficiently differentiated for those with low self-esteem to believe that they have at least one relatively positive attribute and those with high self-esteem to believe that they have at least one relatively negative attribute (e.g., Higgins, 1987; James, 1890; Linville, 1987). Second, people's self-views must be sufficiently compartmentalized for them to seek verification for atypically positive or negative self-views without being encumbered by their low or high global self-esteem. We conducted a preliminary investigation to test these two assumptions.

<sup>1</sup> Although people's specific self-views are one important component of their global self-esteem (e.g., Marsh, 1986), Pelham and Swann (1989) have shown that there are other factors that contribute as well (e.g., weighting of self-views, undifferentiated affect, etc.). Self-verification processes are presumably driven by specific self-views rather than global self-esteem.

### *Do We All See Good and Bad in Ourselves?*

Participants (486 undergraduates, male and female) first completed Pelham and Swann's (1989) Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ), a temporally stable (test-retest reliability over 4 months = .77,  $p = .01$ ) measure of self-perceived intellectual capability, skill at sports, physical attractiveness, competency in art and music, and social skills. Participants rated themselves relative to other college students their own age on these 5 dimensions using graduated-interval scales ranging from 1 (bottom 5%) to 10 (top 5%). In addition to the SAQ, participants completed some filler items (see Pelham & Swann, 1989, for a report of other findings from this study) and the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, a widely used measure of global self-esteem.

The analyses suggested three things about the relation between people's specific self-views and their global self-esteem. First, people with high self-esteem possessed far more positive than negative attributes relative to those with low self-esteem. For example, those who scored in the lower third of the sample on the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale admitted having roughly three times as many negative (i.e., below average) attributes as people who scored in the upper third of the sample. Second, there was a positivity bias, in that even people with very low self-esteem (less than or equal to the 10th percentile) gave themselves above average ratings on most of the SAQ attributes (for a discussion of this positivity bias, see Swann, 1987, or Taylor & Brown, 1988). Of particular relevance here, most people could identify positive as well as negative attributes in themselves. That is, just as 80% of those with very low self-esteem were able to identify at least one positive attribute, 65% of people with very high self-esteem (scores at or above the 90th percentile) were able to identify at least one negative attribute. In short, although there was a tendency for people with high self-esteem to perceive themselves as especially talented, participants with low as well as high global self-esteem possessed both positive and negative self-views.

### *Psychological Compartmentalization*

The fact that people possess one or two specific self-views that belie their global self-esteem does not necessarily mean that they will strive to verify such views. That is, to the extent that people think of themselves as unified entities, they may assimilate atypically positive or negative self-views into their global self-esteem and refrain from verifying them. Our predictions are viable, then, only insofar as people's self-concepts are sufficiently compartmentalized for them to ignore their global self-evaluations when soliciting feedback. The preliminary study revealed substantial psychological differentiation in people's self-views: The five SAQ attributes were only modestly correlated with one another for both people with low self-esteem (average  $r = .20$ ) and those with high self-esteem (average  $r = .22$ ). This evidence of compartmentalization led us to suspect that our participants would have little difficulty distinguishing—and working to verify—both their positive and negative self-views.

### *Summary*

By showing that most people have positive as well as negative self-views and that these self-views are at least somewhat inde-

pendent of their level of global self-esteem, the preliminary investigation set the stage for testing our major hypotheses. We conducted three investigations. In Study 1, we examined the relation between the self-views and feedback-seeking activities of participants in a laboratory setting. Two measures of feedback seeking were used: (a) a between-attributes measure that assessed preferences for feedback pertaining to positive versus negative attributes, and (b) a within-attribute measure that assessed the type of feedback (positive vs. negative) that subjects wanted to sample pertaining to each of their specific attributes. In Study 2, we used similar indexes of feedback seeking in a longitudinal investigation of the feedback-seeking activities of college roommates. Finally, in Study 3, we examined a more ecologically valid form of feedback seeking: choice of interaction partners.

Consistent with self-enhancement theory, we expected that, when free to solicit feedback pertaining to any of their attributes, even people with low self-esteem would prefer to verify their positive rather than negative self-views. In particular, we expected people to solicit feedback regarding their positive rather than negative attributes on the between-attribute measure included in Studies 1 and 2 and to prefer to interact with an evaluator who had rated one of their positive rather than negative attributes in Study 3. Consistent with self-verification theory, we expected that when soliciting feedback regarding an attribute that was clearly negative, even people with high self-esteem would prefer unfavorable feedback to favorable feedback. We anticipated that this preference would influence people's responses to the within-attribute measure of feedback seeking (Studies 1 and 2) and would also cause them to choose an evaluator who offered them unfavorable rather than favorable feedback regarding a negative attribute (Study 3).

## Study 1

### *Method*

#### *Overview*

Participants reported individually to an experiment that was billed as a test of a computer program that had been developed to analyze personalities. After answering a series of questions, participants learned that they could solicit feedback about themselves from the computer. They then completed two measures of feedback seeking. The between-attribute measure asked them to indicate their relative preferences for obtaining feedback pertaining to each of the five domains represented in the SAQ; the within-attribute measure required that they solicit feedback from within each of the five domains.

In designing this study and those that followed, we assumed that participants would work to verify negative self-views only insofar as their self-verification strivings overrode their self-enhancement strivings. Accordingly, we took steps to ensure that our participants' self-views would be relatively extreme. For example, in Study 1, we recruited only people whose pretest scores indicated that they were in the upper and lower third of the sample on Helmreich, Spence, and Stapp's (1974) Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI; a measure of social self-esteem). In addition, we conducted two waves of analyses, one on the entire sample and one on participants whom we expected to be especially motivated to self-verify—those who gave themselves a score of 6 or above on their best SAQ attribute and a score of 4 or below on their worst attribute (on a scale of 1 to 10).

## Participants

We recruited 43 female undergraduates enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin by offering them credit in their introductory psychology course. We included women only in this research because of their greater availability in the subject pool. One person was dropped from the analysis because she misunderstood the instructions.

## Procedure

The experimenter introduced each participant to the study and had her complete a series of questionnaires. The first was a version of the SAQ in which each participant rated herself on the five attributes and then indicated how certain she was of each of her ratings and how important each attribute was to her. The participant then completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale and some filler items.<sup>2</sup>

The experimenter took the participant's responses and entered them into a nearby microcomputer. The computer promptly began making noises that the experimenter explained were an indication that it was evaluating the participant's responses. After 17 s, the computer paused and prompted an adjacent printer to produce a series of questions (e.g., "Is there any particular thing that you tend to dream about frequently?" "Do you consider yourself to be more or less dominant than most people?"). The experimenter explained that the computer needed answers to these questions before it could complete its analysis of the participant's personality. In reality, the questions had been prepared in advance to bolster the credibility of the experimental procedure. The experimenter asked these questions of the participant and then fed her responses into the computer. The computer then audibly "processed" this information for 17 s.

*The measures of feedback seeking.* As the computer seemingly continued to process the information, the experimenter explained that as a side benefit of participating in the experiment, participants would have the opportunity to examine some of the computer's analysis. He explained further that because there would not be enough time for participants to review the computer's analysis in its entirety, they would be asked to specify those portions that they most wanted to examine. The experimenter then presented, in counterbalanced order, the two measures of feedback seeking (order did not qualify our conclusions).

*The between-attributes measure of feedback seeking.* This measure allowed us to assess whether participants preferred to sample feedback pertaining to their positive or negative attributes. The experimenter simply suggested that each participant rank the five SAQ attributes on the basis of how much she wanted to receive feedback regarding each one.

*The within-attribute measure of feedback seeking.* This measure consisted of five sets of questions, each corresponding to one of the five SAQ attributes. Six leading questions made up each set; three probed for favorable feedback and three probed for unfavorable feedback. For example, three questions probed for favorable feedback regarding sports (e.g., "What is this person's greatest asset at sports and games?") and three others probed for unfavorable feedback pertaining to sports (e.g., "In the area of sports, what is this person's largest problem?"). Similarly, three questions probed for favorable feedback pertaining to intelligence (e.g., "What is this person's greatest intellectual strength?") and three questions probed for unfavorable feedback pertaining to intelligence (e.g., "What about this person makes you think she would have problems in academia?").

Participants were instructed to choose from each set of six questions the two questions to which they most wished to receive answers. This measure, then, allowed us to determine whether people would solicit self-confirmatory or self-disconfirmatory feedback pertaining to each of the five SAQ attributes.

Table 1  
*Study 1: Between-Attribute and Within-Attribute Feedback Seeking*

Measure	Attribute	
	Best	Worst
Between-attribute feedback seeking		
Average rank <sup>a</sup>	4.05	1.95
% of participants ranking this attribute first	50.0	5.0
% of participants ranking this attribute last	5.0	55.0
Within-attribute feedback seeking		
Type of feedback sought <sup>b</sup>		
Favorable	1.30	.75
Unfavorable	.70	1.25

<sup>a</sup> Ranks have been recoded so that higher means indicate greater desire to examine feedback. Range = 1–5.

<sup>b</sup> Higher means indicate more feedback solicited. Range = 0–2.

## Results and Discussion

### *Between-Attributes Feedback Seeking*

When given an opportunity to sample feedback regarding any of their attributes, did participants prefer feedback pertaining to their best characteristic? Yes. The means displayed in row 1 of the upper portion of Table 1 reveal that participants were much more interested in receiving feedback regarding their best attribute than their worst attribute. A within-subjects (best vs. worst SAQ attribute) analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the average ranks assigned corroborated this conclusion,  $F(1, 19) = 37.17, p < .001$ .<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the percentages displayed in Rows 2 and 3 of the upper portion of Table 1 show that most participants preferred to examine feedback pertaining to their best attribute.

To determine whether these results might be qualified by global self-esteem, we added self-esteem to the aforementioned ANOVA. The TSBI had no impact on feedback seeking. There

<sup>2</sup> The effects of importance and certainty are reported in Pelham (1989). To increase the sensitivity of the Rosenberg (1965) scale, we expanded it from a 4- to a 7-point scale in Study 1 and to a 5-point scale in Studies 2 and 3. The Rosenberg (1965) scores we report have also been recoded with negative items reversed so that higher numbers indicate greater esteem. Finally, in all three studies, those participants who were deleted from the major analyses had slightly (but not significantly) higher Rosenberg (1965) scores than those who were included, all  $ps > .24$ . The average Rosenberg (1965) score of participants included in the primary analysis of the three studies was 55.9 in Study 1 (theoretical range was 10 to 70), and 40.7 and 40.2 in Studies 2 and 3, respectively (range was 10 to 50).

<sup>3</sup> Although it is not generally known that dichotomous data can be analyzed by means of the ANOVA, it has been shown that this procedure is very useful (e.g., Cochran, 1947; Hsu & Feldt, 1969; Lunney, 1970; Pearson, 1931; Snedecor & Cochran, 1967, 1980; Winer, 1971). In any event, alternative approaches to the analysis of these data (e.g., chi-square) corroborate the results of the ANOVA.

was, however, a marginally reliable interaction between attribute and scores on the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale,  $F(1, 18) = 3.92, p = .063$ , in that participants with high self-esteem were more likely than were those with low self-esteem to rank their best attribute higher than their worst attribute. The important point, though, is that even people with low self-esteem were more interested in hearing about their best as compared to their worst attribute,  $F(1, 8) = 6.25, p = .037$ .

### *Within-Attribute Feedback Seeking*

What kind of feedback did participants solicit pertaining to their strengths and weaknesses? We first considered only those people who clearly believed that they possessed one very good attribute (rated 6 or above) and one very bad attribute (rated 4 or below). Just as participants sought predominantly favorable feedback pertaining to their positive attributes, they sought predominantly unfavorable feedback pertaining to their negative attributes. A 2 (best vs. worst SAQ attribute)  $\times$  2 (unfavorable vs. favorable feedback seeking) within-subjects ANOVA revealed a reliable interaction between attribute and type of feedback solicited,  $F(1, 19) = 6.78, p = .017$ . Simple-effects tests revealed that participants sought more favorable than unfavorable feedback about their best attributes,  $F(1, 19) = 4.17, p = .055$ , and more unfavorable than favorable feedback about their worst attributes,  $F(1, 19) = 4.13, p = .056$ .

Not surprisingly, when we included all participants in the sample (29% of whom indicated that their "worst" attribute was actually positive), the effect was weaker. Specifically, although the overall interaction was still reliable,  $F(1, 41) = 8.78, p = .005$ , and participants still wanted more favorable than unfavorable feedback about their best attribute ( $M_s = 1.4$  vs.  $.6$ , respectively), they were equally inclined to sample favorable and unfavorable feedback about their worst attribute (both  $M_s = 1.0$ ).

We also conducted several analyses to determine whether people's social self-esteem (as measured by the TSBI) or global self-esteem (as measured by Rosenberg's, 1965, Self-Esteem Scale) moderated the influence of specific self-views on feedback seeking. No effects of self-esteem emerged ( $p_s > .25$ ). Apparently, people's self-views are sufficiently compartmentalized that their global conceptions of who they are to have relatively little impact on the types of feedback they seek about their best and worst attributes.

In summary, the results of Study 1 support self-enhancement theory in that people with low self-esteem preferred to verify their positive rather than their negative self-views, as did people with high self-esteem. In addition, the results support self-verification theory in that people with high self-esteem sought unfavorable feedback pertaining to their negative attributes, as did people with low self-esteem.

## Study 2

One possible limitation of the results of Study 1 is that participants sought feedback from a computer. A very different pattern of feedback seeking might have emerged had people sought feedback from an actual relationship partner. For example, people might completely refrain from seeking unfavorable feedback from their partners for fear of alienating them.

To examine this possibility, we conducted a follow-up investigation of 48 pairs of first-year introductory psychology students who were roommates in dormitories at the University of Texas at Austin. Participants completed measures of their self-views (the SAQ and Rosenberg's, 1965, Self-Esteem Scale) at the beginning of the semester and measures of feedback seeking half-way through the semester. The measures of feedback seeking were similar to those used in Study 1 except that participants were told that their roommates (rather than a computer) would provide them with the feedback they solicited (at the end of the semester). When participants returned at the end of the semester, they indicated their desires and plans to remain roommates and completed a measure of their perceptions of their roommate's personal worth, as assessed by 10 items adapted from the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (e.g., "I feel that my roommate is a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others").

The results offered a clear replication of Study 1. That is, on the between-attribute measure, participants indicated that they most wanted feedback about their best attribute ( $p = .017$ ). On the within-attribute measure, a reliable interaction emerged ( $p = .024$ ), in which participants sought favorable feedback about their positive attributes and unfavorable feedback about their negative attributes. Self-esteem had no impact on feedback seeking. The results also indicated that the more participants sought favorable feedback on the within-attribute measure, the more favorably disposed their roommates were toward them ( $p = .058$ ) and the more their roommates wanted to remain in the relationship ( $p < .006$ ). Apparently, people who sought unfavorable feedback tended to alienate their roommates. This may mean that negative feedback-seeking activities were in and of themselves alienating. At the very least, these data suggest that our measure of feedback seeking was sensitive to processes that had an important bearing on the nature and outcome of participants' relationships.<sup>4</sup>

## Study 3

The first two investigations showed that, in the best of all worlds, even people with low self-esteem prefer verification of their positive rather than their negative attributes. Nevertheless, when people seek feedback regarding their negative attributes, even those with high self-esteem seek unfavorable feedback. The advantage of the measure of feedback seeking used in the first two studies was that it offered a fairly unambiguous index of the participants' desire to obtain various types of feedback. Nevertheless, a more typical means of soliciting feedback is choice of interaction partners. For example, people may strive to self-enhance by gravitating toward people who will verify their best attributes. At the same time, if forced to choose between two people who have evaluated them on a negative attribute, they may prefer people who evaluated them negatively rather than positively. We assessed these possibilities in Study 3.

<sup>4</sup> A complete report of the method and results of Study 2 is available from the authors.

## Method

### Overview

We first had participants interact with three other people for a brief getting-acquainted period and informed them that they would later be interacting more extensively with one of these persons. We then (a) had each participant evaluate the other participants on various dimensions of the SAQ, (b) provided participants with bogus feedback regarding the appraisals of each of the three other persons, and (c) asked participants how much they wanted to interact with each of the three potential interaction partners relative to the others. One of the potential partners was both enhancing and verifying (i.e., made a favorable appraisal of the participant's best attribute), one was enhancing but not verifying (i.e., made a favorable appraisal of the participant's worst attribute), and one was nonenhancing but verifying (i.e., made an unfavorable appraisal of the participant's worst attribute).

We asked participants to make the three paired comparisons most relevant to self-enhancement and self-verification theory. The first comparison tested the hypothesis (derived from self-enhancement theory) that people would prefer a partner who was both enhancing and verifying to one who was nonenhancing but verifying. The second comparison tested the idea (derived from the self-verification formulation) that people would prefer a partner who was both enhancing and verifying to one who was enhancing but nonverifying. The third comparison pitted self-enhancement and self-verification directly against one another by asking people to choose a nonenhancing but verifying partner or an enhancing but nonverifying one.

### Participants

We recruited an initial sample of 44 University of Texas introductory psychology students by offering them course credit. To ensure that participants had self-attributes that were negative as well as those that were positive, we included only those whose scores on a pretest administered earlier in the semester indicated that their best SAQ attribute was clearly positive ( $\geq 6$ ) and their worst attribute was clearly negative ( $\leq 4$ ). In addition, we eliminated 2 participants from the study because they were not native speakers of English, 1 participant because the experimenter erred in constructing the feedback, and 1 participant because she spontaneously noted that a recent turn of events had invalidated her original SAQ scores. This left a total of 13 men and 13 women in the sample.

### Procedure

An experimenter introduced groups of 4 previously unacquainted participants (of the same sex) to a three-part investigation of "social interaction and the acquaintance process." He explained that, during the first part of the investigation, participants would complete a series of questionnaires (several background items; the Rosenberg, 1965, Self-Esteem Scale; a measure of self-perceived assertiveness; and a bogus questionnaire focusing on participants' personalities) and introduce themselves to 3 other students by telling the group their name, hometown, major, year in school, and reason for attending the University of Texas.

During the second phase, the experimenter had participants rate each of the other participants on one of the SAQ attributes (the attribute differed depending on the participant). He also had participants express their confidence in each rating to bolster the plausibility of including confidence ratings as part of the feedback manipulation described later. One of the SAQ attributes—attractiveness—was excluded from this study because pilot testing suggested that college men were wary of rating the physical attractiveness of other men.

After all participants rated each other, the experimenter left to "organize the evaluations." Shortly thereafter he returned and provided par-

Table 2  
Study 3: Choice of Interaction Partners

Comparison	Percentage choosing rater
Nonenhancing- verifying vs. enhancing- verifying	15.4 84.6
Enhancing- nonverifying vs. enhancing- verifying	15.4 84.6
Enhancing- nonverifying vs. nonenhancing- verifying	38.5 61.5

ticipants with one evaluation from each of the other participants and invited them to indicate how much they wanted to interact with each potential partner. He then provided participants with a single bogus evaluation from each of the other participants but did not identify the source of each evaluation. These evaluations were prearranged so that one rater gave them favorable feedback on their best attribute (enhancing and verifying), another gave them unfavorable feedback on their worst attribute (nonenhancing but verifying), and a third gave them favorable feedback on their worst attribute (enhancing but nonverifying). Feedback classified as verifying always matched the participant's pretest self-ratings exactly. The enhancing but nonverifying feedback was precisely as positive as the participant's own self-rating on his or her best attribute. In all cases, the "evaluators" indicated that they were highly confident (8 or 9 on a 9-point scale) of their ratings.

Participants rated the extent to which they preferred to interact with (a) the enhancing and verifying partner versus the nonenhancing but verifying one, (b) the enhancing and verifying partner versus the enhancing and nonverifying one, and (c) the nonenhancing but verifying partner versus the enhancing but nonverifying one. They made these ratings on 6-point scales ranging from 1 (*very much prefer to interact with Rater A [B, C]*) to 6 (*very much prefer to interact with Rater B [C, A]*). We prevented participants from seeing anything that the other participants had written by equipping their desks with opaque screens. We also balanced the order of presentation of each of the three choices participants made by randomly varying the label (A, B, or C) associated with each rater (order had no effect on participants' preferences).

### Results

We expected that participants would prefer (a) the enhancing and verifying partner over the nonenhancing but verifying partner, (b) the enhancing and verifying partner over the enhancing but nonverifying partner, and (c) the nonenhancing but verifying partner over the enhancing but nonverifying one. The means presented in Table 2 supported all three of these predictions. Specifically, when we tested participants' average ratings against the theoretical mean of the scale (3.5), we found a preference for the enhancing and verifying evaluator over both the nonenhancing but verifying evaluator ( $M = 4.69$ ,  $F(1, 25) = 19.44$ ,  $p = .001$ , and the enhancing but nonverifying evaluator ( $M = 4.69$ ,  $F(1, 25) = 31.28$ ,  $p = .001$ ).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, participants also preferred the nonenhancing but verifying evaluator

<sup>5</sup> This  $F$  differs from the preceding one because of variance associated with the respective comparisons rather than the size of the differences.

over the enhancing but nonverifying one ( $M = 4.08$ ),  $F(1, 25) = 3.62$ ,  $p = .069$ . The percentages displayed in Table 2 lend further support to these conclusions.

Further analyses revealed that self-esteem was not associated with the choices involving the enhancing and verifying evaluator. There was some evidence, however, that people with low self-esteem were more likely to choose the nonenhancing but verifying evaluator over the enhancing but nonverifying evaluator,  $r(24) = -.34$ ,  $p = .089$ .

Finally, we were concerned that the pattern of feedback seeking in Study 3 as well as in the previous studies might be an artifact of the particular attributes designated as best or worst by the participants. Our concerns were allayed by the fact that there was substantial variability regarding the particular attributes people identified as their best versus worst. The modal best attribute was sociability in Study 1 (12 of 20 participants) and intelligence in Study 2 (7 of 10 participants). In Study 3, there was essentially a three-way tie in which 25 of 26 classifications were accounted for by sociability (9), intelligence (8), and sports (8). In all three studies, most people (77% to 100%) identified either arts or sports as their worst attribute.

Because participants in Study 3 displayed considerable variability in the particular attributes that they identified as their best and their worst, it offered a relatively clear test of the possibility that the particular attribute participants considered their best and worst might account for our results. We accordingly examined the relation between the attributes that participants identified as their best or worst and each of the three choices participants made. These analyses revealed no reliable effects of the content of particular attributes on the interaction partners that participants chose.

### General Discussion

Our findings suggest that people possess at least two fundamental social motives: self-enhancement and self-verification. Support for the existence of a self-enhancement motive was offered by the fact that people with low self-esteem as well as those with high self-esteem preferred feedback about their positive attributes (Studies 1 and 2) and preferred interaction partners who had offered them feedback about their positive attributes (Study 3). True to the self-verification formulation, when soliciting feedback pertaining to their negative attributes, people with high self-esteem as well as those with low self-esteem preferred unfavorable over favorable feedback (Studies 1 and 2) and preferred interaction partners who offered unfavorable rather than favorable feedback (Study 3).

The fact that the very people who sought favorable feedback about positive attributes also sought unfavorable feedback about negative attributes challenges suggestions that self-enhancement and self-verification are produced by personality traits or character defects. That is, just as our evidence of self-enhancement cannot be attributed to narcissism (e.g., Freud, 1914/1976) or an insensitivity to reality (e.g., Alloy & Abramson, 1988), our evidence of self-verification cannot be attributed to a poorly developed self-enhancement motive (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). Rather, our findings suggest that our participants' self-views concerning the specific attribute in question drove their feedback-seeking activities.

The greater impact of specific as compared to global self-views on feedback seeking fits well with self-verification theory (Swann, in press) as well as with evidence that measures of specific self-views are better predictors of behavior than are measures of global self-esteem (cf. Brockner & Hulton, 1978; Shrauger, 1972; Shrauger & Osberg, 1980; Shrauger & Sorman, 1977; Swann, in press). Moreover, this finding parallels data suggesting that measures of specific attitudes outperform measures of global attitudes in predicting specific behaviors (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Apparently, when the objective is to predict relatively specific behaviors, a little specificity can go a long way toward promoting predictability. Of course, this holds only if the goal is to predict specific behaviors; if the objective is to predict global behaviors, global measures are presumably more useful.

Perhaps the most obvious implication of our findings is that neither self-enhancement nor self-verification theory alone can adequately explain people's feedback-seeking activities. For example, the tendency for participants to solicit unfavorable feedback regarding their negative attributes clearly flies in the face of both forms of self-enhancement theory. Furthermore, although our participants' preference for enhancing *and* verifying feedback (evaluators) over nonenhancing but verifying ones clearly supported the simple form of self-enhancement theory, no support for the compensatory form of the theory emerged (for further evidence along these lines, see Curtis & Miller, 1986; Swann et al., 1987; Swann et al., 1989; Swann & Read, 1981b; and Wenzlaff, 1988).

The self-verification position was also limited. For example, self-verification theory was mute with respect to the fact that participants in Study 3 preferred the enhancing and verifying feedback (evaluator) over the nonenhancing but verifying feedback (evaluator). Furthermore, consistent with previous research (Swann, Krull, & Pelham, 1989; Wenzlaff, 1988), only people with quite negative self-views displayed a preference for unfavorable feedback; those with slightly negative self-views did not.

The fact that only people who possessed quite negative self-views preferred unfavorable feedback over favorable feedback makes sound theoretical sense. That is, people should seek unfavorable feedback only insofar as there are aversive epistemic and pragmatic consequences associated with failing to self-verify. This should be particularly true of people whose self-views are extremely negative because (a) the content of their self-views is quite negative, and (b) extremity is positively associated with certainty, and people are more inclined to work to verify self-views of which they are certain (e.g., Maracek & Mettee, 1972; Pelham, 1989; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann & Pelham, 1989; Swann et al., 1988). In short, it appears that the self-verification strivings of people with tentatively held negative self-views are attenuated by self-enhancement strivings. Perhaps if previous researchers had been aware of this, they would have been better able to replicate some of the intriguing but illusive self-consistency findings reported during the early 1960s (e.g., Aronson & Carlsmith, 1962; for a further discussion, see Swann, in press).

Our findings might seem to take people with low self-esteem off the "self-verification hook." Consider, for example, that people with low self-esteem indicated that they preferred to satisfy their self-enhancement and self-verification strivings simulta-

neously, by seeking verification for their positive attributes. Does this mean that such people might organize their lives so that they receive verification for their positive attributes only?

Probably not. For one thing, it is likely that people with low self-esteem sometimes strive to improve themselves by seeking feedback pertaining to their negative attributes. Moreover, some attributes, such as dominance, likability, or sociability, are so integral to social relationships that people find that their interaction partners almost always form relevant appraisals of them. And research suggests that when people sense that their interaction partners' appraisals are wrongheaded, they work to correct them even if such appraisals are positive. For example, when people who regard themselves as submissive or dislikable suspect that their interaction partners see them differently, they intensify their self-verification activities and bring their partners to see them as they see themselves (e.g., Swann & Hill, 1982; Swann & Read, 1981b).

Furthermore, once a relationship partner recognizes a target person's negative attributes, *halo biases* (e.g., Chapman & Chapman, 1967; Hamilton, 1981; Hamilton & Gifford, 1976) may prevent that relationship partner from entertaining and verifying positive perceptions of the target. Swann and Pelham (1989), for example, found that friends who had unfavorable appraisals of targets on one or more specific dimensions also had unfavorable global appraisals of targets. The upshot is that people who possess a host of negative self-views may typically be forced to choose between relationship partners who see them in a globally negative or globally positive manner. And when they make such choices, research suggests that they select the negative partners (Swann & Pelham, 1989).

Therefore, although our laboratory studies suggest that people with low self-esteem like positive feedback as much as their counterparts with high self-esteem, a host of psychological and social-psychological factors surely mitigate against their routinely seeking such feedback in naturally occurring situations. We suspect that, as a result, people with low self-esteem are at least sometimes caught in a crossfire between their desire for self-enhancement and their desire for self-verification (Swann et al., 1987), a conflict they at least sometimes resolve in favor of self-verification (for a discussion of crucial variables, see Swann, in press). From this perspective, although our findings suggest that people with low self-esteem might look on their positive attributes as offering a ray of hope, the realities of everyday life may prevent such attributes from offering much more than that.

### Conclusion

Initiated by Deutsch and Solomon's (1959) seminal study and punctuated by the provocative findings of Aronson and Carlsmith (1962), the debate between self-enhancement and self-consistency theorists will soon enter its 4th decade (cf. Epstein, in press; S. C. Jones, 1973; Schlenker, 1985; Shrauger, 1975). In retrospect, it is possible to identify at least two distinct phases in this debate. The first, "mine is bigger" phase, was noteworthy for the efforts of both parties to drown the opposition in a sea of statistically reliable findings. This phase has only recently been supplanted by a second, "both of ours are big" phase, in which researchers have acknowledged the existence of

both motives, but have failed to go beyond broad assertions, such as "self-consistency and self-enhancement are both important determinants of human social behavior" or "self-consistency tendencies characterize cognitive responses and self-enhancement tendencies characterize affective responses" or "some people tend to self-enhance while others tend to self-verify." Our hope is that the research reported in this article signals the beginning of a third phase of the debate, which asks, "How do self-verification and self-enhancement interact to guide behavior?" This phase promises to yield a much richer understanding of the self and its interpersonal consequences.

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