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When Our Identities Are Mistaken: Reaffirming Self-Conceptions Through Social Interaction

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Although those who have labored to change self-concepts in naturally occurring situations have often experienced difficulty, laboratory investigators have reported considerable success in this endeavor. This research sought to reconcile these contradictory findings by examining how people respond behaviorally and psychologically when they receive feedback that disconfirms their self-conceptions. The results showed that self-discrepant feedback produced changes in self-ratings only when recipients had no opportunity to reject and refute it. If participants had opportunity to behaviorally discredit discrepant feedback, they did so and subsequently displayed minimal self-rating change. The discussion proposes some important differences between transitory fluctuations and enduring changes in self-ratings and suggests some conditions that must be met before lasting self-concept changes will occur.

Are peoples' conceptions of themselves stable and enduring or do they shift markedly over time? Depending on who one asks, one will obtain very different answers to this question. Just as some insist that self-conceptions are highly enduring and stable over time, others contend that self-conceptions are remarkably plastic and flexible. These competing viewpoints represent two distinct assumptions concerning the nature of self-knowledge: the assumption of stability and the assumption of plasticity.

The Assumption of Stability

Some suggest that trying to change people's conceptions of themselves is rather like fighting windmills. Clinicians, for example, have often found that even years of intensive therapy are not enough to produce substantial changes in the self-concepts of their clients (e.g., Wylie, 1979). Similarly, efforts to change the self-conceptions of participants in field studies have characteristically met with failure (e.g., Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). Even practitioners of brainwashing techniques in prisoner-of-war camps have typically failed to create lasting changes in the self-concepts of their captives, despite their ability to exert nearly complete control over prisoners' physical and psychological environments (e.g., Schein, 1956). In light of this evidence for the immutability of self-conceptions, it is not surprising that longitudinal investigations have revealed that self-conceptions and related psychological structures remain stable over periods as long as 35 years (e.g., Block, 1981; Costa & McCrae, 1980).

The Assumption of Plasticity

As compelling as the evidence for the stability of self-conceptions may be, it has not convinced everyone. In recent years, a number of theorists (e.g., Gergen, 1977; Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976) have challenged the notion that self-conceptions are stable and enduring. These authors assume that people

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infer who they are by observing their recent behaviors and the reactions of others and translating this information into appropriate self-conceptions. From this vantage point, the self is highly malleable, changing with every twitch of the social environment.

The strongest evidence for the this malleable-self formulation comes from laboratory investigations in which people have been shown to change their self-ratings after receiving various types of social feedback. Although these studies have been criticized on methodological grounds (e.g., Wylie, 1979), they still raise a host of questions. For example, why have laboratory investigators succeeded where clinicians and others have failed? More generally, what factors promote self-concept change and what factors curtail it?

Factors That Promote and Curtail Change

One important distinction between laboratory and nonlaboratory studies of self-concept change centers around differences in what participants can and cannot do after they receive self-discrepant feedback. Whereas participants in field studies may leave the feedback setting and actively reaffirm their self-concepts before change is assessed, individuals in laboratory investigations typically do not have this option. This distinction is especially critical in light of Swann's (in press) recent contention that when people receive self-discrepant feedback, they will actively strive to verify and confirm their self-conceptions.

Swann (in press) begins by assuming that people's self-concepts are an important means through which they predict and control their world. Hence, threatening people's self-conceptions should threaten their perceptions of control. When people's perceptions of control are threatened, they increase their efforts to acquire highly diagnostic information (e.g., Swann, Stephenson, & Pittman, 1981). Since people regard self-confirmatory feedback as more diagnostic than self-disconfirmatory feedback (Swann & Read, 1981a, Investigation 3), threatening their self-concepts should intensify their efforts to acquire self-confirmatory feedback. One way they may acquire such feedback is by working to bring their interaction partners to see them as they see themselves.

In support of this formulation, Swann and Read (1981b, Investigation 2) have reported that when their participants suspected that someone perceived them in a self-discrepant manner, they went out of their way to elicit self-confirmatory reactions. In this study, individuals who perceived themselves as likable or dislikable engaged in getting-acquainted conversations. Prior to the conversations, some participants were led to suspect that their partner's appraisal confirmed their self-conceptions; others were led to suspect that their partner's appraisal disconfirmed their self-conceptions; still others were given no information concerning their partner's appraisal. In their subsequent interactions, individuals who perceived themselves as likable elicited more favorable reactions from their interaction partners than those who perceived themselves as dislikable. More important, this tendency was especially pronounced when participants suspected that their partner's appraisals might disconfirm their self-conceptions.

These data suggest that if people receive self-discrepant feedback and are then permitted to interact with another individual, they will attempt to verify the threatened self-conception by actively refuting the feedback. Thus, for example, the self-conceived macho man who overhears himself referred to as "that wimp" may subsequently reaffirm his self-conception by showing just how tough and ferocious he can be. By engaging in such activity, he may convince himself (and perhaps others as well) that he is the man he thought he was; consequently, he should display little self-rating change. In contrast, if individuals receive self-discrepant feedback and are then given no opportunity to refute that feedback—as in the typical laboratory study of self-concept change—they will be at a relative disadvantage in generating highly salient evidence with which to dismiss the feedback. They may therefore tend to align their subsequent self-ratings to the feedback. In such instances, self-rating change should be substantial.

Our research was designed to test the notion that self-discrepant feedback prompts

people to modify their self-ratings only when they are deprived of an opportunity to refute the feedback they receive. To address this issue, we arranged for individuals who perceived themselves as either dominant or submissive to receive feedback from a confederate that either confirmed or disconfirmed their self-conceptions. Some of these individuals were subsequently given an opportunity to interact with the confederate; others were given no such opportunity. All participants then completed a measure of self-perceived dominance.

We anticipated that individuals who received self-consistent feedback would accept the feedback and would subsequently display little change in their self-ratings. We also expected that those who received self-discrepant feedback and were then given the opportunity to interact with the confederate would strive to undermine the feedback and consequently display relatively little change in their self-ratings. Finally, we predicted that those who were deprived of an opportunity to interact with the confederate after receiving self-discrepant feedback would display substantial change in their self-ratings.

Method

Participants

Forty-six female undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin participated in this experiment for credit in their introductory psychology course. Males were excluded from the sample as a matter of convenience; when this research was initiated, there were relatively more females available.

The initial measure of self-conception. Participants completed a measure of self-perceived dominance during a pretesting session at the beginning of the semester. Each participant rated the extent to which five dominance-related qualities (dominant, commanding, takes charge of things, domineering, forceful) characterized her on 5-point scales ranging from 1 ("not at all like me") to 5 ("very much like me"). The internal consistency of this scale was .86, as assessed by coefficient alpha. Individuals who scored in the upper third of the distribution were designated *self-dominants*; those who scored in the lower third were designated *self-submissives*. Those who scored in the middle of the scale were deleted from the sample, since they could not be unequivocally classified. Neither the experimenter nor the confederate ever learned how participants scored on the self-conception measure.

Setting the stage for the feedback manipulation. A female confederate posing as an introductory psychology student greeted participants briefly when they reported to the waiting area. Shortly thereafter, a female experimenter arrived and escorted both the participant and confederate into the experimental chamber. After seating the participant and confederate at a table, the experimenter explained that the study was designed to contrast how people solve problems alone versus with someone else. Today, she continued, the participant and confederate would work together on one task and separately on a second task.

The experimenter then explained how to perform each of the two tasks. The first task, a modified version of the popular game Mastermind, was designed to provide a pretext for the feedback manipulation. The experimenter began by selecting four colored pegs from a bowl that contained a number of different colored pegs. She then inserted the four pegs side by side on the concealed portion of a pegboard. The players' task was to guess the relative position and color of each of the four pegs. For the first trial, the players selected any four pegs and placed them in a row in the pegboard in front of them. They then described the peg placement to the experimenter who responded by informing them how many of the pegs were the correct color and, of those, how many were in the appropriate position. When they received these clues, the players recorded them and then tried a different ordering of the pegs. This sequence was repeated until the players either discovered the correct ordering of the pegs or reached the 10-trial limit.

During this period, the experimenter also explained how to perform the filler task that is described in a following section. Once she described both tasks, the experimenter answered any questions and then instructed the participant and confederate to play one set of practice trials of the Mastermind game. She stipulated that although both players were free to make suggestions on every trial, they should take turns in deciding how the pegs should be ordered. The experimenter then (ostensibly at random) told the participant that she should be the decision maker in the first trial; turned on the tape recorder, which was positioned on the table; and retired to an adjacent room equipped with an intercom system. The practice session continued until the participant and confederate reached the solution or finished 10 trials, whichever came first.

After the practice session, the experimenter announced over the intercom that during the next set of trials one person (the leader) would always decide how to order the pegs and one person (the assistant) would simply keep track of the clues and place the pegs in the order designated by the leader. She explained further that although the assistant was free to make suggestions to the leader, the final decision should always reside with the leader. The experimenter then informed the participants that she would give them a couple of minutes to decide who would be the leader and who would be the assistant.

The feedback manipulation. Immediately after the experimenter instructed the participant and the confederate to decide which role each of them would play, the confederate delivered either dominant or submissive feedback to the participant. In the dominant-feedback conditions, she asserted:

> Well, you really seem to be kind of a forceful, dominant person. Like a little bit ago when you were

Table 1
Behavioral Reactions to the Feedback

Self-perceived dominance	Feedback: Consistent (*M*)	Feedback: Discrepant (*M*)
Dominant		
Resistance to feedback[a]	4.67	8.43
Dominance[b]	36.00	46.29
n	6	8
Submissive		
Resistance to feedback	4.80	7.40
Dominance	37.20	30.00
n	5	5

[a] The higher the number, the more resistance to feedback.
[b] The higher the number, the more dominant the participants appeared.

making suggestions during the practice session. You're probably the type who would like to direct things and be in charge of making decisions. Don't you think?

In the submissive-feedback condition, the confederate said:

Well, you really don't seem to be the dominant type. Like a little bit ago when you seemed a little hesitant making decisions during the practice session. You're probably happiest when someone else takes charge of things. Don't you think?

For self-dominants, the dominant feedback was considered consistent and the submissive feedback was considered discrepant. For self-submissives, the dominant feedback was considered discrepant and the submissive feedback was considered consistent.

The manipulation of interaction opportunity. After the confederate delivered the feedback manipulation, participants in the interaction-opportunity condition had time to respond to the confederate's assessment of them. During this 2-minute period, the confederate reacted to the participant's protestations, statements, and/or queries as neutrally and nondirectively as possible. Due to the brevity of this interaction, there were no instances in which a decision was actually made concerning the role each person would play.

In the no-interaction-opportunity conditions, the experimenter interrupted immediately after the confederate delivered the feedback manipulation by announcing that there was an equipment malfunction. She instructed the players to work on the second task until the equipment could be repaired. All participants in the no-interaction-opportunity condition complied with these instructions by quietly working on the filler task for the next 2 minutes. The filler task required participants to match a large number of symbols and numbers with one another according to an arbitrary matching scheme. To insure that they concentrated on the task, participants were instructed to work as quickly as possible.

After 2 minutes, the experimenter returned to the experimental room in all conditions carrying a booklet of questionnaires in which two dominance scales were embedded. The first scale measured participants self-ratings on the same items included in the initial self-conception measure (coefficient alpha = .91). The second scale measured participants' estimate of how the confederate would rate them on these same dimensions (coefficient alpha = .98).[1] After completing these questionnaires, participants were probed for suspicion, debriefed, thanked for their participation, and excused.

Assessing Participants' Behavioral Reactions to the Feedback

Three judges listened to tape recordings of the interactions between participants and the confederate within the interaction-opportunity conditions. Before listening to the conversations, judges listened to several practice conversations to familiarize them with the use of the coding form. The coding form asked judges to rate the extent to which the participant resisted the feedback on 4-point scales ranging from 1 ("accepted it willingly") to 4 ("questioned or refuted it").

The coding form also asked judges to rate the participant on the five dimensions included in the measure of self-perceived dominance on 5-point scales ranging from 1 ("not at all like her") to 5 ("very much like her"). Judges' ratings on these five scales were summed to form a dominance index with a coefficient alpha of .95. The average overall interrater reliability of our judges, as assessed by an intraclass correlation coefficient, was .81.

Results and Discussion

Behavioral Reactions to the Feedback

To assess how participants within the interaction-opportunity conditions responded to the feedback they received, we examined the judges' estimates of the extent to which participants (a) resisted the feedback and (b) appeared dominant.

Participant's resistance to feedback. We entered the judges' ratings of the extent to which participants resisted the feedback into a 2 (self-conception: dominant, submissive) × 2 (feedback: consistent, discrepant) least squares analysis of variance (ANOVA). Our major prediction was that participants would be much more resistant to the discrepant feedback as compared to the consistent feedback. This was the case. As can be seen in Table 1, participants were much more resistant to the feedback in the discrepant-feedback than in the consistent-feedback conditions, $F(1, 20) = 5.71$, $p = .027$. There

[1] This questionnaire was added to the materials after 19 sessions had been completed.

were no main or interaction effects of self-conception, Fs < 1.

Participant's dominance. The fact that participants were especially prone to resist the feedback in the discrepant-feedback conditions suggests that they also may have been highly motivated to undermine the feedback in those conditions. To test this hypothesis, we examined the extent to which participants appeared dominant during their interactions. We anticipated that in the consistent-feedback conditions, self-dominants would appear only slightly more dominant than self-submissives, but in the discrepant-feedback conditions, self-dominants would seem much more dominant than self-submissives. The results confirmed this prediction. A 2 × 2 least squares ANOVA revealed a reliable interaction between self-conception and feedback, $F(1, 20) = 5.52, p = .029$. The means, displayed in Table 1, show that in the consistent-feedback conditions, self-dominants were not rated as more dominant than self-submissives, $F < 1$. In contrast, in the discrepant-feedback conditions, self-dominants were considerably more dominant than self-submissives, $F(1, 20) = 10.19, p = .001$.

Together, these data clearly indicate that when participants received discrepant rather than consistent feedback, they actively sought to reject and refute it. From these data it would seem that the best way to bring out the "true selves" in people is to challenge their self-conceptions, to tell them that they are not the persons they believe themselves to be.

Changes in Self-Ratings

What were the psychological consequences of the feedback that participants received? Were the effects of the feedback moderated by whether they subsequently had the opportunity to refute it? We expected that when participants had an opportunity to interact with the source of the feedback, discrepant feedback would produce no more self-rating change than consistent feedback. In contrast, we expected that when participants were deprived of an opportunity to interact with the source of the feedback, self-discrepant feedback would produce substantially more self-rating change than self-consistent feedback.

Table 2
Change in Self-Perceived Dominance

Interaction opportunity	Feedback: Consistent (M)	Feedback: Discrepant (M)
Present	1.18[a]	2.85
n	11	13
Absent	−.50	5.17
n	10	12

[a] Positive numbers indicate self-rating change in the direction of the feedback; negative numbers indicate change away from the feedback.

Just such a pattern of data emerged. A 2 × 2 least squares ANOVA revealed a reliable interaction between feedback and interaction opportunity, $F(1, 42) = 4.05$, $p < .05$.[2] The data presented in Table 2 show that in the interaction-opportunity conditions, the discrepant feedback led to no more self-rating change than the consistent feedback, $F(1, 42) = 1.41$, *ns*. However, within the no-interaction-opportunity conditions, the discrepant feedback produced substantial self-rating change, whereas the consistent feedback created minimal change, $F(1, 42) = 14.82, p < .001$.[3] Additional analyses

[2] Prior to performing this analysis, we determined that there were no between-condition differences on the initial measure of self-conceptions (Fs < 1) and that the within-cell regression coefficients were homogeneous. We report difference-score analyses instead of the more sensitive analysis of covariance (ANCOVA; e.g., Huck & McLean, 1975), because it allowed us to contrast the effects of consistent versus discrepant feedback directly and clearly. In any event, the ANCOVA (available from the authors) bolsters the conclusions derived from the difference-score analyses.

[3] When we designed this study, we worried that the lower amounts of self-conception change in the interaction-opportunity as compared to no-interaction-opportunity cells within the discrepant-feedback groups could be attributed to a tendency of participants to forget the feedback more in the former group than in the latter group. To rule out this possibility, we made the filler task highly absorbing. Apparently, this strategy was effective. After collecting the final self-ratings, we asked participants to indicate how well they could remember the feedback. Analyses of this measure discredited the alternative interpretation; participants in the interaction-opportunity condition reported that it was easier for them to remember the feedback than those in the no-interaction-opportunity condition, $F(1, 23) = 3.08, p = .093$.

indicated that this pattern of data held equally true for both self-dominants and self-submissives; there were no main or interactive effects of self-concept when this variable was entered into a 2 × 2× 2 ANOVA, Fs < 1.82, *ns*.

The correlations between initial and final self-ratings reinforce the conclusions emerging from the aggregate data. In the interaction-opportunity conditions, covariation between initial and final ratings was uniformly high, whether participants received consistent feedback ($r = .82$, $p < .01$) or discrepant feedback ($r = .68$, $p < .02$). In contrast, in the no-interaction-opportunity conditions, initial and final ratings were closely related in the consistent-feedback conditions ($r = .94$, $p < .01$) but were independent in the discrepant-feedback condition ($r = .05$, *ns*).

The results thus far make two important points. First, when people receive discrepant feedback and then have an opportunity to interact with the source of the feedback, they will make intensive efforts to nullify and undermine the feedback by acting in ways that exemplify their conceptions of self (cf. Swann & Read, 1981b, Investigation 2). Second, if people are given an opportunity to nullify discrepant feedback, this feedback will have relatively little impact on their subsequent self-ratings.

One further question concerns the mechanism underlying the impact of the interaction-opportunity manipulation. Specifically, why did participants who had an opportunity to refute the discrepant feedback display relatively little self-rating change? There are at least two possibilities. It may be that those in the interaction-opportunity condition simply observed themselves behaving in a self-consistent manner (e.g., Bem, 1972) and this information reaffirmed their self-concepts. Alternatively, it may be that these individuals came to believe that they had succeeded in convincing the confederate that her initial assessment of them was wrong.

It is possible to test the viability of the latter, "waffling confederate" possibility by examining participants' estimates of the confederate's view of them at the end of the experiment. If, during their interaction with the confederate, participants decided that she had revised her opinion of them, then there should be (a) an interaction between feedback and interaction opportunity in the overall analysis and (b) no difference between the dominant- and submissive-feedback groups for participants in the interaction-opportunity conditions. The relevant analyses disconfirmed both of these hypotheses. A 2 × 2 ANOVA of participants' estimates of the confederate's appraisal of them at the end of the experiment revealed a reliable effect of feedback, $F(1, 23) = 23.67$, $p < .001$, but no interaction between feedback and interaction opportunity, $F < 1$. Moreover, in the interaction-opportunity conditions there was a reliable difference between the dominant- and submissive-feedback conditions, $t(23) = 3.63$, $p < .01$.

Therefore, although participants in the interaction-opportunity conditions undoubtedly would have been pleased to learn that the confederate revised her appraisal of them, they apparently did not believe that she had done so. These data undermine the hypothesis that participants in the discrepant-feedback–interaction-opportunity condition displayed minimal self-rating change because they believed that the confederate had come to see them in a self-confirmatory manner. By default, it must have been that the critical feature of the interaction opportunity was that it gave participants occasion to observe themselves behave in a self-confirmatory manner. Apparently, this was enough to restore participants' confidence in the validity of their self-conceptions and nullify the effects of the discrepant feedback.

Of course, these data do not imply that behaving in a self-confirmatory manner is the *only* way that individuals might undermine self-discrepant feedback. It is possible, for example, that merely giving individuals an opportunity to sit and ponder self-discrepant feedback would diminish self-rating change by providing them with a chance to recall instances from the past when they behaved in a self-confirmatory manner. Greenwald (1968), for example, has suggested that when people receive a persuasive communication, they will sometimes retrieve information from memory that undermines the argument conveyed in the communication.

Still, there are at least two reasons why

such selective retrieval processes might be less effective in arresting self-concept change than actually engaging in self-confirmatory behavior. First, the behaviors generated by such retrieval processes might have less impact because they are less recent and presumably less salient and vivid than those emitted during an interaction opportunity. Second, there is no possibility that such selective retrieval processes could alter the nature of social reality as could actual self-confirmatory behavior. That is, engaging in self-confirmatory behavior might bring others to see one as one sees oneself, thereby increasing the probability that one will receive self-confirmatory feedback in the future. In contrast, simply thinking about past instances of self-confirmatory behavior will have no direct effect on the reactions one subsequently receives.

The important point here is that there are a variety of strategies people may use to undermine any self-discrepant feedback that they encounter. This means that individuals interested in changing self-conceptions will succeed only if targets can be stopped from resisting and undermining discrepant feedback. Because such conditions are often difficult to establish in naturalistic environments, it is little wonder that efforts to change self-conceptions in these settings have so often failed.

General Discussion

This research sought to unravel a paradoxical set of research findings. On the one hand, some evidence indicates that self-conceptions are highly stable over time—witness the great difficulty experienced by clinicians and others who have struggled to change peoples' self-concepts in naturally occurring situations. On the other hand, other research suggests that self-concepts are quite malleable. Laboratory investigators have asserted that it is a rare self-concept indeed that can withstand the impact of a well-designed feedback manipulation.

Our findings suggest that both types of evidence may have captured a portion of reality. The results of our empirical investigations indicate that producing changes in people's self-ratings is as easy as many laboratory investigators have claimed. Provide them with a little self-discrepant feedback and voilà: People will dramatically alter the way they describe themselves.

However, our results also make clear that such changes in self-ratings may have limited significance. When we gave some of our participants the opportunity to contest the self-discrepant feedback they received, they took full advantage of this opportunity by behaving so as to discredit self-discrepant feedback and were consequently unlikely to modify their subsequent self ratings. Further, other research has shown that even if people enter highly structured laboratory situations in which they have little opportunity to influence or resist the feedback they receive, they may later process such feedback in ways that make it appear more compatible with their self-conceptions than it really is (for a review, see Swann, in press). Together, these *self-verification processes* may insure that when people leave the laboratory, any changes in self-ratings produced there will fade quickly away. Indeed, a recent study by Swann and Hill (Note 1) suggests that laboratory-produced changes in self-ratings typically disappear in a matter of days.

These findings suggest that it may be misleading to regard laboratory-produced changes in people's self-ratings as true changes in self-conceptions. It may be more appropriate to label such short-lived changes as shifts in people's *self-images*, the views people have of themselves at any given moment in time, analogous to a single frame in a motion picture film (cf. Turner, 1968). Within this framework, it is quite another matter to speak of changes in *self-concepts*, that is, people's generalized or average views of themselves, analogous to a composite of all the frames in a motion picture film.

For self-concepts to change, our findings suggest that at least two events must take place, one *intra*personal, the other *inter*personal. At the intrapersonal level, people must reorganize their self-view: They must decide that they are not the persons that they once thought they were. This step in the process is critical, since if people harbor doubts about their "true selves" they may behave in ways that will verify and confirm their old self-concepts, thereby undermining the change process.

But even if the person has completely accepted a new self-view, this view will endure only if certain interpersonal conditions prevail. For example, although a person in therapy may come to believe that she is competent and likable, her husband, boss, and co-workers may later discredit this perception by treating her with contempt and condescension (cf. Coyne, 1976). For her self-concept change to be lasting, the individuals around her must validate and legitimize her new self-view. Thus, changes in self-views will be lasting only when there is a corresponding shift in the individual's social environment or, in McCall and Simmon's (1966) terms, in the individual's *opportunity structure.* Only after people are embedded in a social environment that gives them the opportunity to sustain the new self-conception will the process of self-concept change be complete (for a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Swann, in press).

Conclusions

The research reported here suggests that it may be erroneous to argue that the self is empty or epiphenomenal and that people are milquetoasts who knuckle under to any social feedback they happen to encounter. Instead, our findings suggest that it may be more accurate to regard people as active agents who carefully monitor the feedback they receive and take active behavioral steps to refute and undermine feedback that threatens their existing self-conceptions. Apparently, once they form their self-conceptions, people will go out of their way to sustain them—even if it means changing the very nature of social reality.

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