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Reasserting the Self: Blocking Self-verifying Behavior Triggers Compensatory Self-verification

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Previous research has demonstrated that when people receive self-discrepant feedback from their interaction partners, they respond by engaging in compensatory self-verification. We sought to extend this work by determining if merely preventing people from behaving in a self-verifying manner would trigger compensatory self-verification. Consistent with this possibility, when deprived of the opportunity to demonstrate their assertiveness, participants who perceived themselves as assertive subsequently compensated by displaying increased assertiveness in a subsequent interaction. In addition, self-perceived unassertive participants reported negative affect when forced to act in an assertive manner. Evidence that these effects were predicted by a measure of identity but not a measure of behavioral propensity diminished the plausibility of rival accounts such as ego depletion. We conclude that compensatory self-verification emerges even when people's self-views are indirectly challenged by depriving them of the opportunity to self-verify.

Keywords: Assertiveness; Compensation; Ego-depletion; Identity; Self; Self-verification.

Like all psychological structures, enduring self-views require a steady supply of nourishment from the social environment. To meet this need for support for their self-views, people routinely work to elicit such support by behaving in a self-verifying manner. When their efforts to behave in a self-verifying manner are blocked, they may subsequently redouble their efforts to bring others to see them as they see themselves. In this paper, we test this prediction. We begin by describing the formulation from which it was derived, self-verification theory (Swann, 1983).

Self-verification Theory

The self-verification formulation (e.g., Swann, 1983) assumes that people want others to see them as they see themselves (for a recent overview, see Swann, in press). The theory was drawn from symbolic interactionism (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Mead,

1934), which holds that people form their identities by observing how others behave toward them and inferring that they deserve the treatment they receive. Once formed, identities serve as scripts for social interaction, telling people what to expect, how to behave and how to interpret events they encounter. Because stable self-views serve these important epistemic and pragmatic functions, people come to relish the feelings of coherence and predictability that they provide. They accordingly work to maintain their self-views. At the same time, they studiously avoid incongruent appraisals, which they regard as unsettling, anxiety provoking, and generally aversive (Lundgren & Schwab, 1977; Wood, Heimpel, Newby-Clark, & Ross, 2005).

In light of people's powerful motivation to maintain their self-views, it is not surprising that they devise several distinct interpersonal strategies for accomplishing this goal. When, for example, people have a choice of interacting with someone who sees them congruently or incongruently, they choose the congruent evaluator. This pattern emerges even if it means choosing a negative but verifying evaluator over a positive but non-verifying one (e.g., Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). Similarly, when people find themselves in marriages with spouses who disconfirm their self-views, they withdraw from them either psychologically or by actually divorcing them (e.g., Cast & Burke, 2002; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). And when people think back to their interactions, they selectively recall and interpret the reactions they received (e.g., Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987; Swann & Read, 1981).

Of greatest interest here, people constantly monitor the reactions they receive from others; if they suspect that others may perceive them in a non-verifying manner, they compensate by intensifying their efforts to obtain self-verifying feedback. In one study, Swann and Read (1981) led people with positive or negative self-views to suspect that an interaction partner evaluated them in a manner that either supported or challenged their self-views. Overall, participants behaved so as to elicit feedback that supported their self-views, with people with positive as compared to negative self-views being particularly likely to praise and compliment their partners. Such efforts to evoke congruent reactions were exaggerated, however, when people believed that their partner saw them in a manner that challenged their chronic self-views. Similarly, Swann and Hill (1982) presented people who viewed themselves as either dominant or submissive with feedback that either confirmed or disconfirmed their self-views. Once again, when people received feedback that challenged their self-views, they compensated by behaving in an exceptionally dominant or submissive manner, thereby bringing their partners to see them as they saw themselves.

To date, research on compensatory self-verification has focused on people's response to direct feedback about an interaction partner's appraisal. While informative, this approach simulates only one type of scenario that can trigger compensatory self-verification. At times, for example, people may not receive direct discrepant feedback, but may simply be deprived of the opportunity to behave in a self-verifying manner. Although more subtle than receiving self-discrepant feedback, because such deprivation experiences temporally cut off the supply of self-verifying feedback, they should amplify their desire for self-verification. Agitation and compensatory behaviors designed to elicit self-confirmatory information should result.

We tested our compensatory self-verification hypothesis by depriving some participants of the opportunity to verify their self-perceived assertiveness. Based on evidence that people who see themselves as assertive recognize assertiveness as both highly important (Bruch, Kaflowitz, & Berger, 1988) and readily recognizable by the

people around them (Woolfolk & Dever, 1979), depriving people of the ability to behave in an assertive manner should be sufficient to produce negative affect and to motivate compensatory self-verification strivings. Specifically, we expected that placing a self-perceived assertive person in a listener role or a self-perceived unassertive person in a talker role would be perceived as non-verifying, leading to negative affect and triggering compensatory efforts to bring others to see them as they see themselves (cf. Swanson, 2007).

We also sought to test the viability of a rival, "self-control," explanation of our expected results. Conceivably, being assigned to the listener role might cause participants with assertive self-views to subsequently display more talking behavior because suppressing their "natural" desire to talk depletes their psychological resources (e.g., Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). To test this rival hypothesis, we included a measure of the behavioral propensity to talk, the BLIRT (Brief loquaciousness and interpersonal rapidity test; Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). The BLIRT scale captures people's reports of their verbal behavior (i.e., "If I have something to say, I always say it"). If a self-control explanation of our findings is viable, scores on the BLIRT should strongly predict compensatory talking following deprivation. In contrast, a self-verification account of our findings would *not* predict that BLIRT scores should predict compensatory talking, because the BLIRT measures verbal behavior, which may or may not be related to people's identity. Insofar as compensatory behavior is motivated by a desire to restore one's identity, only measures of identity (which specifically ask people what they think of themselves, as did our measure of self-perceived assertiveness) should predict compensatory behavior.

To test these hypotheses, we had participants engage in a series of conversations in which they were first assigned to the role of either talker or listener. Given that rate of verbalization is associated with levels of self-perceived assertiveness (e.g., Swanson & McIntyre, 1998), being assigned to the talker role should be verifying for self-perceived assertives (but not self-perceived unassertives) and being assigned to the listener role should be verifying for self-perceived unassertives (but not self-perceived assertives). After the manipulation, we measured participant's affect and observed their behavior in a subsequent interaction. We hypothesized that when participants were assigned to the listener role, they would experience more negative affect and engage in more compensatory talking behavior insofar as they perceived themselves as assertive. In contrast, we expected that when participants were assigned to the talker role, they would experience more negative affect and engage in less compensatory talking behavior insofar as they perceived themselves as unassertive.

Method

Participants

Ninety-two undergraduates (34 males, 58 females) from the University of Texas participated for credit in their introductory psychology class. The participants arrived for the experiment in groups of two and were run together in dyads.

Procedure

The experimenter informed participants they would be participating in an investigation of personality and social interaction. Participants first completed

a questionnaire assessing their self-perceived assertiveness and Big Five personality traits (Revised NEO Personality Inventory, assertiveness subscale; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Big Five Inventory; John & Srivastava, 1999), and a measure of blirtatiousness—how quickly and effusively people talk (BLIRT; Swann & Rentfrow, 2001).

Upon completion of the questionnaires, participants engaged in the first of a series of three interactions. This initial interaction was a 5 minute getting acquainted conversation that was used to establish a word count baseline. This initial interaction, as well as the next two interactions, was videotaped.

After the initial interaction, the experimenter introduced the talker vs. listener manipulation. The manipulation was delivered during a second 5 minute interaction on the relatively engaging topic of abortion. One participant was assigned to the role of talker; the other was assigned to the role of listener. Talkers were instructed to freely discuss their opinions on abortion, while listeners were instructed to sit and listen in silence. Immediately following the interaction, participants completed a measure of positive and negative affect (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988).

To determine if the talker–listener manipulation influenced participants' subsequent talking behavior, we then had them engage in a third and final conversation. The final conversation was an unstructured 5 minute conversation on another engaging topic, same-sex marriage. Both participants were free to talk as much as they wanted during this interaction and their responses were recorded. Afterwards, each participant indicated their impressions of their partner's assertiveness on a modified version of the SAQ (Self-Attributes Questionnaire; Pelham & Swann, 1989).

After completion of the laboratory phase of the experiment, the first two minutes of the getting acquainted and same-sex marriage conversations were transcribed. Word counts during both conversations were computed. Preliminary analysis revealed that our measures were indeed associated with talking behavior. For example, as expected, self-perceived assertiveness was positively correlated with word count during the getting acquainted conversation, $r(92) = .24$, $p < .05$, as well as the same-sex marriage conversation, $r(92) = .33$, $p < .05$. In addition, word count in the final interaction was associated with participant's ratings of how assertive they considered their partner, $r(92) = .29$, $p < .05$. This latter finding indicates that talking is a means of communicating assertiveness to others.

Results

Compensatory Self-verification

Did participants who were deprived of the opportunity to self-verify engage in compensatory activity to reaffirm their self-views? To test this prediction, we performed a multiple regression analysis in which the predictors were self-perceived assertiveness, word count during the initial getting acquainted conversation (to control for time 1 word count), talker/listener condition (dummy coded), and the interaction between self-perceived assertiveness and talker/listener condition. The criterion was the word count during the final conversation. As can be seen in Figure 1, a significant interaction emerged between self-perceived assertiveness and condition, $B = -1.03$, $t(92) = -2.06$, $p < .05$. Among those in the listener condition who were deprived of the opportunity to talk, self-perceived assertives spoke more in the final conversation than self-perceived unassertives, $r(46) = .31$ $p < .01$. Among
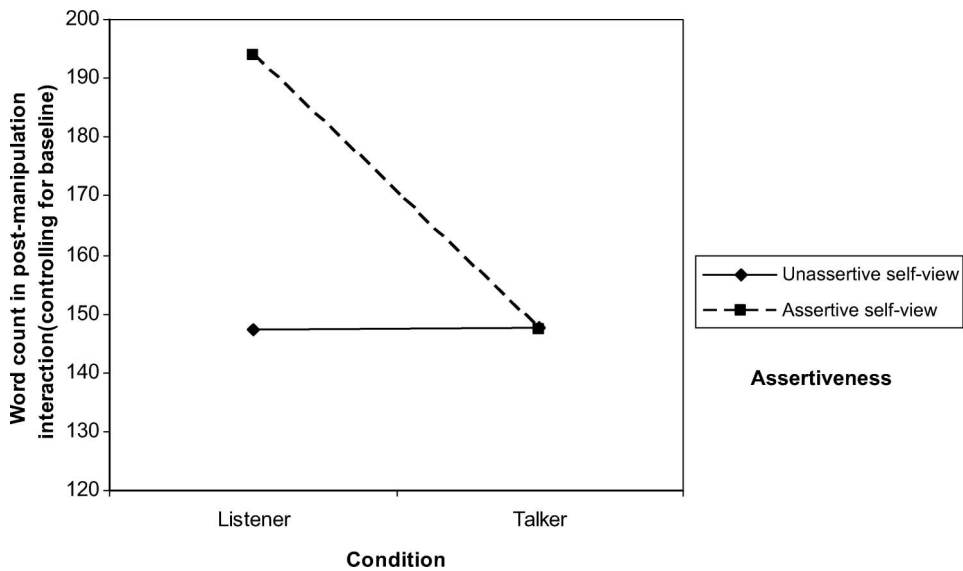
FIGURE 1 Interaction of assertiveness and condition on word count at time 2.

those in the talker condition who were given ample opportunity to talk, self-perceived assertives spoke no more in the final conversation than self-perceived unassertives, $r(46) = .06$, $p > .60$.
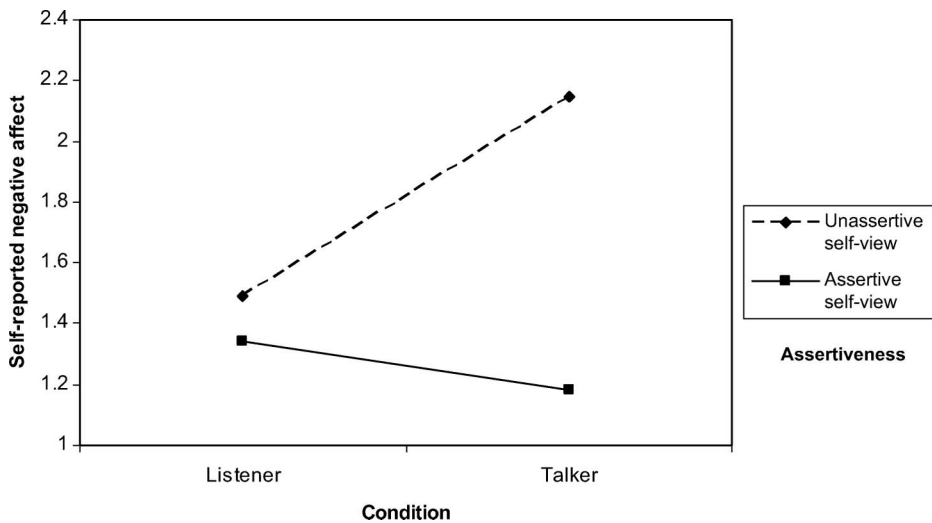
Negative Affect

Analysis of negative affect scores revealed a significant interaction between self-perceived assertiveness and talker/listener condition, $B = -1.95$, $t(91) = -3.60$, $p < .01$. As shown in Figure 2, and consistent with prediction, among participants in the talker condition, self-perceived assertiveness was negatively correlated with negative affect, $r(46) = -.61$, $p < .01$, such that those with an unassertive self-view showed higher levels of negative affect than those with an assertive self-view. Among those in the listener condition, however, the relationship between self-perceived assertiveness and negative affect was not significant, $r(45) = -.18$, $p > .20$.

Positive Affect

Consistent with prior research (Herringer, 1998), self-perceived assertiveness was associated with positive affect, $r(91) = .27$, $p < .05$. Listeners and talkers did not differ in their levels of positive affect, nor did assertiveness interact with the talker/listener manipulation.

Could a ''Self-control'' Hypothesis Explain Our findings?

A ''self-control'' explanation would explain the foregoing findings by contending that being assigned to the listener role depleted the psychological resources of participants with assertive self-views and thus amplified their natural tendency to talk. If so, then a similar pattern should emerge if we substituted a measure of participants' natural tendency to talk for the measure of assertiveness. Both the

FIGURE 2 Interaction of assertiveness and condition on post-manipulation negative affect.

BLIRT scale and the assertiveness scale correlated with participants' time 1 word count, $r(91) = .221$, $p < .05$; $r(91) = .239$, $p < .05$, respectively, and scores on both scales served as significant predictors of time 1 word count when placed in a regression model, $B = .221$, $t(91) = 2.151$, $p < .05$; $B = .239$, $t(91) = 2.335$, $p < .05$, respectively. Since only the assertiveness score is related to self-concept, the failure of the BLIRT to predict time 3 word count would support an identity-based explanation of the findings. To test this rival hypothesis, we substituted participants' scores on the BLIRT scale for their scores on the assertiveness scale and repeated the analyses (i.e., the predictors were condition, time 1 word count, blirt score, and blirt × condition interaction; the criterion was word count during the final conversation). The results revealed no evidence of an interaction between blirt and condition, $B = -.62$, $t(92) = -1.51$, *ns*.

Discussion

We proposed here that simply depriving people of the opportunity to self-verify will trigger compensatory self-verification strivings. Our findings offered support for this expectation. In particular, when the self-verification strivings of those who perceived themselves as assertive were blocked by placing them in the role of listeners, they subsequently compensated by being particularly effusive, significantly more effusive than those who perceived themselves as unassertive who had been placed in the same role. Also consistent with prediction, when the verification strivings of self-perceived unassertives were blocked by placing them in the talker condition, they subsequently reported relatively high levels of negative affectivity.

Although our findings indicate that both self-perceived assertives and unassertives responded to the manipulation, they had quite distinct reactions to being cast in a non-verifying role. That is, whereas self-perceived assertives responded to being listeners by engaging in compensatory talking behavior (but did not report negative affect), self-perceived unassertives responded to being talkers by reporting negative

affect (but did not engage in compensatory talking behavior). In hindsight, it may be that these findings reflect the idiosyncratic features of our procedural paradigm and the relationship of these features to the everyday experiences of our participants. Consider the fact that self-perceived unassertives did not compensate by talking less after being placed in the talker role. We suspect that this was due the fact that there is an implicit demand on people to hold up their half of the conversation in dyadic interactions, and this demand may have been intensified by the fact that the conversation was being recorded. Next consider that self-perceived assertives did not display negative affect when deprived of the opportunity to self-verify in the listener condition. Conceivably, because our participants were students who must remain silent while in the classroom much of the day, they are very accustomed to being deprived of the opportunity to talk, and were therefore not upset by the deprivation experience. In contrast, unassertives did report negative affect when forced to talk because they are routinely able to avoid situations in which they must talk.

Whatever the ultimate explanation of these asymmetries in our data may be, our evidence of compensatory activity is generally consistent with previous evidence in which the provision of explicit feedback triggered compensatory self-verification strivings (e.g., Swann & Hill, 1982; Swann & Read, 1981). For example, by increasing his or her talking rate, the self-perceived assertives who were assigned to the listener role later attempted to bring their interaction partners to see them in a verifying manner. Apparently, compensatory self-verification strivings can be triggered without explicitly challenging people's self-views. To the extent that people do not receive direct feedback in most social situations (Blumberg, 1972), the relatively subtle manipulation used in the present research may capture a set of processes that are fairly representative of the factors that normally trigger compensatory self-verification in everyday life. One challenge for future researchers will be to gather direct evidence for the meditational role of self-verification in these settings.

Finally, we should comment on a possible "self-control" account of our findings, wherein blocking the self-verification strivings of participants deprived them of regulatory resources, which triggered a later rebound in talking behavior. To test this possibility, we substituted a measure of behavioral propensity to talk for our measure of assertiveness identity and repeated our analyses of compensatory activity. Although the self-control explanation would predict a parallel pattern of findings, no such pattern emerged. It therefore appears that the phenomena we have captured here offer an interesting parallel to evidence that exerting mental control over psychological processes can impair people's ability to exert control over subsequent activities (e.g., Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Whereas such "ego depletion" processes presumably operate below the radar of consciousness, the compensatory self-verification process that we focus on here theoretically operates on conscious representations of the self rather than non-conscious behavioral predispositions. Future researchers might follow up our investigation by learning more about the interplay of the conscious and non-conscious systems of behavioral regulation.

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