

Partner Verification: Restoring Shattered Images of Our Intimates

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When spouses received feedback that disconfirmed their impressions of their partners, they attempted to undermine that feedback during subsequent interactions with these partners. Such partner verification activities occurred whether partners construed the feedback as overly favorable or overly unfavorable. Furthermore, because spouses tended to see their partners as their partners saw themselves, their efforts to restore their impressions of partners often worked hand-in-hand with partners' efforts to verify their own views. Finally, support for self-verification theory emerged in that participants were more intimate with spouses who verified their self-views, whether their self-views happened to be positive or negative.

Although people enjoy surprises now and then, some surprises are decidedly unwelcome. Imagine, for example, the consternation of the newlywed who learns that her husband is in love with someone else, the man who witnesses his health-nut girlfriend smoking a cigarette, or the woman who finds a National Rifle Association dues statement addressed to her leftist husband. When people encounter such unexpected information about their close relationship partners, they may become agitated and concerned. In addition, they may translate such feelings into active attempts to repair the belief that has been challenged.

One class of reasons why people may work to restore their beliefs about their partners is epistemic. Because people rely on their firmly held beliefs to predict and control their worlds (e.g., Kelly, 1955), challenges to these beliefs will frustrate their prediction and control motive. Therefore, people's efforts to shore up their beliefs about their partners may sometimes reflect their desire to restore their perceptions of prediction and control.

People may also work to reaffirm their beliefs about their partners for pragmatic reasons. That is, people have many goals in their relationships and achieving these goals often depends

on the stability of their partners' identities. For example, the power-hungry narcissist who fears that his wife has become too self-confident may belittle her in an effort to "keep her in her place." And the woman who is worried that her husband has become overconfident in his rock-climbing ability may discredit his accomplishments because she fears that he might hurt himself. These and other pragmatic considerations may motivate people to work to maintain their beliefs about their partners.

Shared reality theory also predicts that people will work to maintain and stabilize their beliefs about their partners. Hardin and Higgins (1996) argued that people maintain relationships to the degree that partners achieve consensus or "shared reality" about beliefs relevant to the relationship, including beliefs about one another. Shared reality theory thus suggests that information that challenges people's beliefs about their partners is alarming not only because it questions the beliefs themselves but also because it challenges the relationships on which those beliefs are based.

As intuitively appealing as the notion that people want to stabilize their impressions of their partners may be, we know of no evidence that they actually strive to do so. Of greatest relevance is evidence that people use their impressions of others to guide their behaviors (e.g., Rosenthal & Rubin, 1978; Snyder, 1984). Researchers working within this tradition, however, have refrained from asking if people work to verify their beliefs about their partners when these beliefs come under attack. One goal of this research was to address this issue.

If people do indeed strive to verify their impressions of their partners, a further question is whether such activities occur when their impressions are negative as well as positive. On the one hand, powerful social norms against delivering negative feedback (Blumberg, 1972; Tesser & Rosen, 1975) might discourage people from verifying negative impressions of their partners. Nevertheless, to the extent that people are concerned with maintaining perceptions of predictability, control, and shared realities, they should be motivated to sustain negative as well as

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positive impressions of their partners. A second goal of this research was to test this possibility.

A final goal was to gather evidence of the *self-verification* process, the theoretical sister of the proposed partner-verification process. Past research has suggested that people are motivated to verify their self-views (e.g., Aronson, 1968; Secord & Backman, 1965; Swann, 1990; 1996). To this end, people actively refute feedback that contradicts their self-views (e.g., Swann & Hill, 1982; Swann & Read, 1981) and are especially intimate with spouses whose appraisals are congruent with their self-views, whether these self-views are positive or negative (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). Although such self-verification activities seem to be fairly robust (for replications, see Katz, Beach, & Anderson, 1996; Ritts & Stein, 1995; and Schafer, Wickrama, & Keith, 1996), Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996) recently reported that Swann et al.'s (1994) effect replicated only among married people with positive self-views. An additional test of the self-verification hypothesis among married people would help resolve this controversy.

To address these concerns, we invited married couples to our laboratory. Shortly after their arrival, we separated the couples and gave one member of the couple either favorable or unfavorable feedback about his or her spouse. We then reunited members of couples and videotaped their subsequent interactions. Independent judges subsequently coded these interactions. Our major prediction was that spouses would refute feedback that contradicted their impressions of their partners but embrace feedback that confirmed their impressions of their partners. In addition, we expected that partners would attempt to refute feedback that challenged their self-views. Finally, we expected that participants would be more intimate with spouses who viewed them as they viewed themselves, even if their self-views were negative.

Method

Participants

Ninety-three heterosexual married couples participated. We excluded data from 12 couples from the analyses: 2 couples because there were large within-couple discrepancies in the amount of time they reported being married; 7 couples because they were not fluent in English, and 3 couples because they misunderstood the instructions. This left 81 couples for the analyses. Only 61 of these couples were included in the analyses involving the judges' ratings because the first 20 sessions were not rated as several measures were not collected during these sessions.¹

To attract a diverse group of participants, we used several different recruitment strategies. We offered most couples \$10 per couple for participating. Of those who received payment, 69 couples responded to flyers that we distributed around the city of Austin, Texas, 5 responded to an advertisement that appeared in the University of Texas at Austin campus newspaper, and 8 had participated in an earlier project. In addition, 11 couples received credit in their introductory psychology class.

The participants ranged in age from 18 to 67, with a mean age of 29.1 years. Most were either Caucasian (81%) or Hispanic (11%). Participants were fairly well educated: 17% had an advanced professional degree (e.g., MA, PhD, MD), 12% had some graduate training or postcollege certification, 27% had earned a college degree, 41% had some college or vocational training, and only 3% had a high school diploma as their highest level of education.

Many of the participants were undergraduate or graduate students

(31%) or were employed in professional positions (22%). Another 13% held general labor positions (e.g., waitperson, blue-collar worker), 8% were office workers (e.g., bank teller, secretary), and 8% were self-employed. Others were homemakers (4%), educators (3%), artists or musicians (2%), community service workers (2%), or military personnel (1%).

Couples had known one another from 2 months to 31 years ($M = 6.7$ years) and had dated 1 month to 10 years ($M = 2.2$ years) prior to getting married. They had been married for a minimum of 1 month to a maximum of 30 years ($M = 3.4$ years). Although the majority of the couples (68%) had no children, 16% had one child, 13% had 2 children, and 3% had 3 or more children.

Procedure

A female experimenter introduced the study as an investigation of the relation between personality and close relationships. She explained that the specific goal of the research was to compare participants' responses to psychological questionnaires with standardized personality assessments. For the first portion of the study, she continued, each member of the couple would be completing different questionnaires in separate rooms. The experimenter assured participants that their responses would be completely confidential and that even their partners would not see their responses (note that this did not rule out the possibility that participants would see material *based on* their partners' responses). After escorting one member of the couple to a different room, the experimenter presented participants with a series of questionnaires.

Participants first provided some general background and demographic information, including their age, gender, race, education level, and occupation. They also indicated how long they had known their partner, how long they dated prior to getting married, how long they had been married, and how many children they had.

To assess the replicability of Swann et al. (1994), we asked participants to complete a measure of specific self-conceptions, the Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ; Pelham & Swann, 1989). This scale focuses on five attributes that most college students regard as important to their sense of self-worth: intelligence, social skills, artistic and/or musical ability, athletic ability, and physical attractiveness. Participants first rated themselves relative to other people of their own gender and age on graduated interval scales ranging from 1 (*bottom 5%*) to 10 (*top 5%*). The scores of these five items were summed to create a composite self-concept score (coefficient $\alpha = .69$). Scores ranged from a low of 18 to a high of 45, with a mean of 34.3. The composite scores provided a basis for classifying participants in the lower fifth of the distribution (<29) as having negative self-concepts, the middle of the distribution (30–38) as having moderate self-concepts, and the upper fifth (>39) as having positive self-concepts.²

Participants also rated how certain they were of their standing on each of the five SAQ attributes on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all certain*) to 9 (*extremely certain*). Finally, they rated how personally important each attribute was to them on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all important to me*) to 9 (*extremely important to me*).

¹ These additional measures were included in the dissertation on which this article was based but are not discussed in this article.

² We used upper and lower 20th percentile cuts instead of the tertile splits used by Swann et al. (1994) because our participants had somewhat more positive self-views than those in Swann et al., which meant that a tertile split placed several participants who had moderate self-views in Swann et al.'s study (i.e., scores of 31) in the negative self-concept group. Note that upper and lower 20th percentile cuts have been used in many previous self-verification studies (see Hixon & Swann, 1993; Swann, Griffin, Predmore & Gaines, 1987; Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992).

After completing the self-ratings, participants rated their spouse on each of the five SAQ attributes on the same 10-point scales on which they rated themselves. The sum of these ratings ranged from 24 to 48 ($M = 36.7$). This served as the primary index of spouse appraisal for the attempted replication of Swann et al. (1994).

Participants next completed a measure of self-views, the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI; Helmreich, Spence, & Stapp, 1974), which was compatible with the soon-to-be administered feedback manipulation. The TSBI is a measure of social self-esteem (e.g., "I have [My partner has] no doubts about my [his/her] social competence," "I am [My partner is] not likely to speak to people until they speak to me [him/her]"). The member of the couple who was randomly assigned to the role of "target" rated him- or herself on this measure ($\alpha = .83$). We summed scores on the TSBI to create an overall composite score with a theoretical range of 16–80 and an actual range of 39–72 ($M = 57.3$). We performed a tertile split on these self-ratings, resulting in a group of targets with negative self-views (lower third, <53), moderate self-views (middle third, 53–61), and positive self-views (upper third, >61).

The other member of the couple, whom we had randomly assigned to the role of "spouse," rated the target on a reworded version of the same scale ($\alpha = .82$). We summed scores on the target appraisal measure to create an overall composite score with an actual range of 36–75 ($M = 58.8$).

After completing some filler items, participants filled out Swann et al.'s (1994) measure of intimacy. It consisted of five items on 9-point scales that focused on both the affective component of intimacy (i.e., relationship satisfaction) and the behavioral components of intimacy (i.e., time spent doing things together, time spent talking to each other, discussion of problems or worries, exclusive sharing of personal matters). As expected, responses to the five items were closely associated with one another ($\alpha = .82$) and were therefore summed. The scores on the intimacy measure ranged from 13 to 45, with a mean of 37.3.

Manipulation of Feedback

After waiting several minutes, the experimenter set the stage for the feedback manipulation by telling the spouse that a computer was analyzing the target's responses to the questionnaires and was generating a psychological assessment. The experimenter explained that she would begin by showing the spouse a condensed version of this assessment because "we are interested in your reactions to this general, overall assessment."

The psychological assessment that the spouse received focused on the target's social skills and social competence. We chose this attribute because social competence is seen as quite important among college students (Pelham & Swann, 1989), and past research has shown that college students are readily convinced that a computer can evaluate social skills on the basis of someone's questionnaire responses.

In the favorable feedback condition, the feedback indicated that the target was socially skilled:

He/she is very socially aware and skilled, especially with regard to understanding people and the appropriate things to say and do in different social situations. He/she feels comfortable and at ease around other people he/she doesn't know very well, and others tend to feel comfortable around him/her as well. All in all, he/she is a very socially competent person.

In the unfavorable feedback condition, the favorable feedback was negated:

He/she is not very socially aware and skilled, especially with regard to understanding people and the appropriate things to say and do in different social situations. He/she feels uncomfortable and anxious

around other people he/she doesn't know very well, and others tend to feel uncomfortable around him/her as well. All in all, he/she is not a very socially competent person.

After reading the feedback, spouses rated, on 9-point scales, the feedback's accuracy, how much a stranger could learn about the target from reading it, and the extent to which they agreed with it. Analyses of these responses indicated that our manipulations had the intended effect.³ After spouses completed this questionnaire, the experimenter explained that a more elaborate assessment of the target was being prepared. Spouses were then reunited with targets.

Videotaped Interaction

Upon their reunion, the target and spouse were surreptitiously videotaped for a 5-min unstructured interaction period. At the end of the 5 min, the experimenter returned and interrupted by telling the spouse, "I'm sorry, but I seem to have mixed up the assessment I showed you earlier with several others from previous sessions. Could you tell me what it said?" Although this interruption proved unnecessary, its purpose was to initiate discussion of the assessment if the couple failed to discuss it during the unstructured interaction period. After the spouse answered, the experimenter thanked him or her, left the room, and then recorded the subsequent interaction for an additional 2 min.

After 2 min had passed, the experimenter returned and informed the couple that the session was over and that they would not be getting the assessment described earlier. The experimenter then thoroughly debriefed participants.

Judge's Ratings of the Videotaped Interaction

Three judges watched the videotapes and rated the interactions on several dimensions. One set of ratings consisted of temporal ratings in

³ We conducted simultaneous multiple regressions in which appraisal of target on the TSBI, feedback (negative or positive), and the interaction term served as predictors, and each of these ratings of the feedback served as the criterion. The analysis of perceived accuracy of the feedback revealed the expected interaction between the feedback and appraisal of target, $F(1, 77) = 27.13, p < .001$, such that participants who received a negative description of their partner believed it was more accurate to the extent that they evaluated their partner unfavorably, $F(1, 36) = 12.67, p < .001$, and participants who received a positive description of their partner rated it as more accurate to the extent that they evaluated their partner favorably, $F(1, 41) = 14.49, p < .001$. Similarly, the analysis of estimates of how much a stranger could learn about the target from the feedback also revealed a significant interaction between feedback and appraisal of target, $F(1, 77) = 16.27, p < .001$, with participants who received a negative description of their partner believing that it was more diagnostic to the extent that they evaluated their partner unfavorably, $F(1, 36) = 4.80, p < .04$, and participants who received a positive description of their partner thinking it was more diagnostic to the extent that they evaluated their partner favorably, $F(1, 41) = 11.77, p < .001$. Finally, the analysis of agreement with the feedback showed a significant interaction between feedback and appraisal of target obtained, $F(1, 77) = 29.41, p < .001$, such that participants who received a negative description of their partner were more likely to agree with it to the extent that they evaluated their partner unfavorably, $F(1, 36) = 15.87, p < .001$, and participants who received a positive description of their partner were more likely to agree with it to the extent that they evaluated their partner favorably, $F(1, 41) = 14.15, p < .001$. In this note, we have refrained from reporting main effects that were qualified by significant interactions; in no instance do the results of the main effects qualify our conclusions.

which one of the judges listened to the conversations and recorded the total amount of time each person spent discussing the feedback. Judges also rated, on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*), the extent to which both the spouses and targets (a) disagreed with the feedback and (b) struggled to make sense of the feedback. In addition, on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*), judges rated the extent to which the spouse's appraisal of the target was congruent with the target's self-views (i.e., the extent to which the spouse saw the target as the target saw him- or herself).

To assess interrater reliability, we computed intraclass correlation coefficients for each item. The correlation coefficients exceeded .80 for all of the items, thus allowing us to sum the judges' ratings.

Results

Partner Verification: Behaviors of Spouses During the Interactions

All spouses mentioned the feedback, and they were the first to do so in 85% of the cases. In addition, spouses spent considerably more time discussing the feedback ($M = 48$ s) than did targets ($M = 22$ s). This is consistent with our assumption that spouses would be interested in discussing the feedback with the targets.

Although spouses were clearly eager to discuss the feedback, the critical question was what they said about it. To address this issue, for each of the criterion variables related to partner verification, we conducted simultaneous multiple regressions in which appraisal of target on the TSBI, feedback (negative or positive), and the interaction term served as predictors. (Because the feedback manipulation focused on social competence, we used the TSBI measures of spouse appraisal and self-views in the analyses of spouse and target behavior during the interactions.) When judges' ratings of spousal disagreement with the feedback was the criterion variable, the regression revealed main effects of feedback type and appraisal of targets, $F_s(1, 57) = 44.4$ and 4.55 , respectively ($p_s < .04$), that were qualified by a significant interaction between the feedback and appraisal of target, $F(1, 57) = 12.87$, $p < .001$.⁴ The regression lines in Figure 1 indicate that just as spouses who received unfavorable

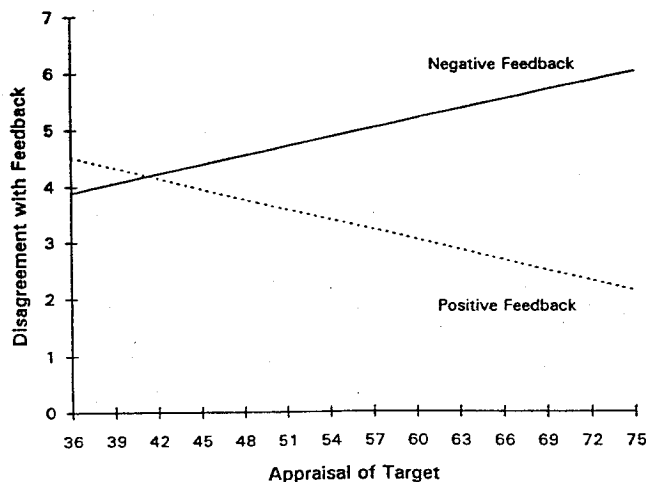


Figure 1. Disagreement with feedback by spouse as a function of appraisal of target and feedback.

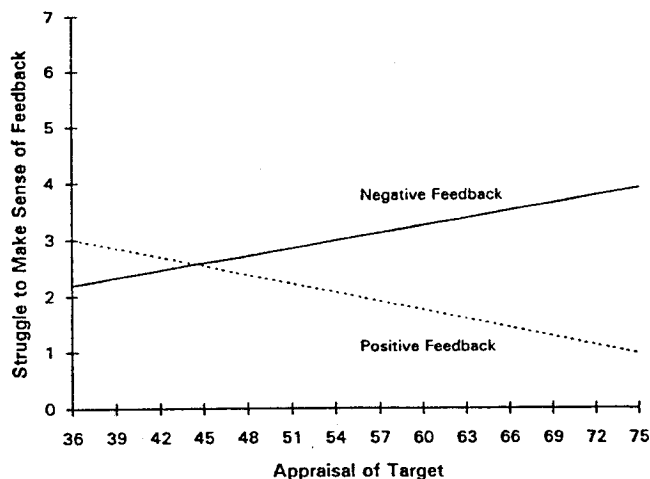


Figure 2. Struggle by spouse to make sense of feedback as a function of appraisal of target and feedback.

feedback about the target disagreed with it insofar as they appraised the target favorably, $F(1, 27) = 4.78$, $p < .04$, spouses who received favorable feedback about the target disagreed with it insofar as they appraised the target unfavorably, $F(1, 30) = 9.26$, $p < .005$. (As noted above, in this analysis and subsequent ones, we treated scores on the measures of self-views—both the SAQ and TSBI—as continuous variables for the purposes of basic hypothesis tests; when significant interactions emerged, we used the categorical version of the self-view variable to probe these interactions and to create plots.)

Analyses of the extent to which spouses struggled to make sense of the feedback revealed no main effect of appraisal of target, $F(1, 57) = 1.87$, $p < .18$, but a main effect of feedback, $F(1, 57) = 13.32$, $p < .001$, that was qualified by a significant interaction between feedback and appraisal of target, $F(1, 57) = 5.73$, $p < .02$. As can be seen in Figure 2, there was a significant tendency for spouses who received favorable feedback about the target to struggle to make sense of it to the extent that they appraised the target unfavorably, $F(1, 30) = 5.92$, $p < .02$; the tendency for spouses who received unfavorable feedback about the target to struggle to make sense of it to the extent that they appraised the target favorably was not significant, $F(1, 27) = 1.50$, $p < .23$.

The most striking and consistent finding here was that spouses embraced the feedback when it matched their view of targets but rejected the feedback when it disconfirmed their view of targets. Independent of this, spouses also disagreed with unfavorable feedback more than favorable feedback, especially if their appraisals of targets were favorable. The latter tendency may reflect powerful social norms against delivering negative feedback (Blumberg, 1972; Tesser & Rosen, 1975).

Self-Verification: Behaviors of Targets During the Interactions

We expected that targets would disagree with and struggle to make sense of the feedback insofar as it disconfirmed their self-

⁴ All analyses were conducted with centered variables (see Aiken & West, 1991).

views. To test these hypotheses, we conducted a simultaneous multiple regression for each of the judges' ratings of the target, using feedback, target's self-view on the TSBI, and the interaction term as predictors.

Analysis of the extent to which targets disagreed with the feedback revealed main effects of self-view and feedback, $F_s(1, 57) = 6.69$ and 17.09 , $p_s < .02$, that were qualified by a significant interaction between feedback and self-view, $F(1, 57) = 11.45$, $p < .001$. As can be seen in Figure 3, just as targets in the unfavorable feedback condition disagreed with it to the extent that their self-views were positive, $F(1, 27) = 6.07$, $p < .02$, those in the favorable feedback condition disagreed with it to the extent that their self-views were negative, $F(1, 30) = 5.25$, $p < .03$.

A similar pattern emerged when we inspected target's efforts to make sense of the feedback. Main effects of feedback and self-view, $F_s(1, 57) = 3.19$ and 10.78 , $p_s < .08$, were qualified by a significant interaction between feedback and self-view, $F(1, 57) = 12.52$, $p < .001$. The results shown in Figure 4 indicate that whereas targets in the unfavorable feedback condition struggled to make sense of the negative feedback to the extent that their self-views were positive, $F(1, 27) = 9.88$, $p < .004$, targets in the favorable feedback condition struggled to make sense of the positive feedback (although not significantly so) to the extent that their self-views were negative, $F(1, 30) = 2.62$, $p < .12$.

In short, targets who received challenges to their self-views worked to refute and make sense of the information. These data therefore support earlier evidence that people who receive self-discrepant feedback will take steps to dismiss it (e.g., Swann & Hill, 1982; Swann & Read, 1981). Targets' efforts to dismiss the feedback also seemed more intense when the feedback was unfavorable and their self-views were positive. This asymmetry could reflect positivity strivings (Jones, 1973). Alternatively, the asymmetry may reflect a tendency for the feedback to be more negative, on the average, than were targets' self-views.

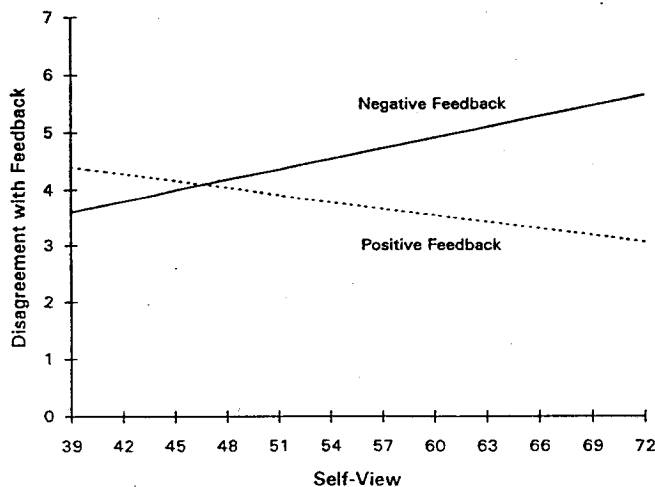


Figure 3. Disagreement with feedback by target as a function of self-view and feedback.

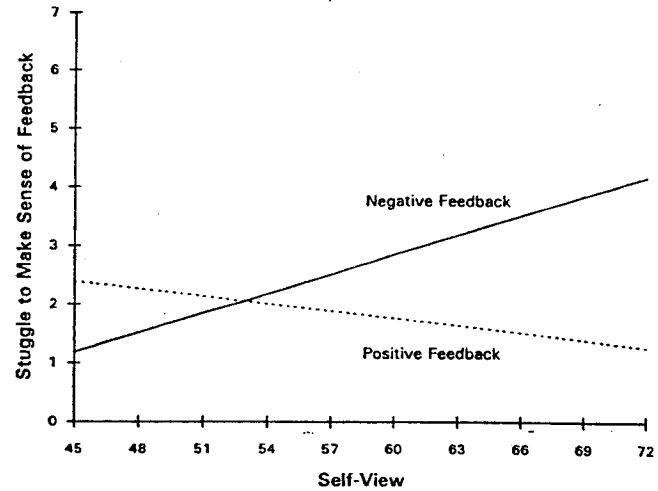


Figure 4. Struggle by target to make sense of feedback as a function of self-view and feedback.

Self-Verification: Replication of Swann et al. (1994)

Swann et al. (1994) and others reported that married people were more intimate with spouses who saw them as they saw themselves. To determine if we replicated this finding, we conducted a simultaneous multiple regression with three predictors (self-concept on the SAQ, spouse appraisal on the SAQ, and the interaction term) and the measure of intimacy as the criterion. As in the earlier research, a significant interaction between self-concept and spouse appraisal emerged, $F(1, 157) = 9.55$, $p < .003$ (both main effects were nonsignificant, $p_s > .16$). We decomposed this interaction by examining people with positive and negative self-views separately. The regression lines plotted in Figure 5 indicate that participants with positive self-views were more intimate to the extent that their spouses appraised them favorably, $F(1, 27) = 4.28$, $p < .05$, whereas participants with negative self-concepts were more intimate to the extent

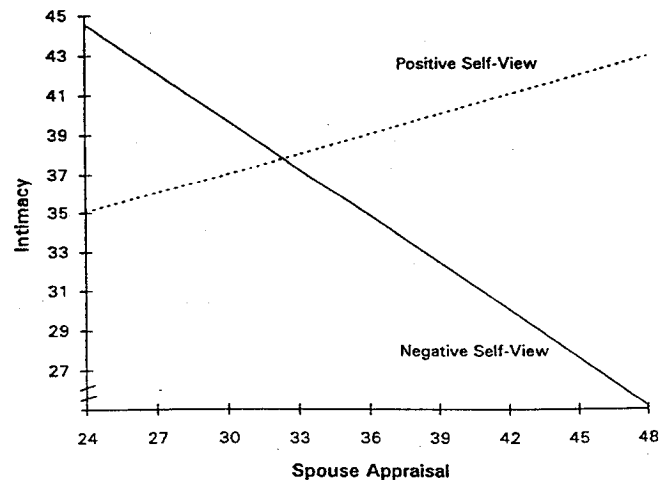


Figure 5. Intimacy as a function of self-view and spouse appraisal.

that their partners appraised them unfavorably, $F(1, 24) = 6.19$, $p < .02$.⁵ People with moderate self-views displayed no significant pattern, $F < 1$.

As a further test of the replication of Swann et al. (1994) we assessed whether participants were especially intimate with partners whose appraisals were congruent with their self-views. This analysis was designed to determine whether self-enhancement motives, self-verification motives, or both affected the responses of our participants. Self-enhancement theory predicts that as the discrepancy between spouse appraisals and self-views become more positive, intimacy will increase; that is, there should be a linear effect. Self-verification theory predicts that as the discrepancy widens in either direction from zero, intimacy should decrease; that is, there should be an inverted U-shaped function (a quadratic function). We examined the evidence for each of these motives by conducting a polynomial regression with intimacy as the criterion and both a linear term (the discrepancy, operationalized as spouse appraisal minus self-view) and a quadratic term (the squared discrepancy) as predictors. As can be seen in Figure 6, the results supported self-verification theory, as the quadratic term (with a negative coefficient) was significant, $F(1, 158) = 4.14$, $p < .04$, but the linear term was not, $F(1, 158) = 1.27$, $p < .26$. The overall regression approached significance, $F(2, 158) = 2.07$, $p < .13$.

The results of these analyses therefore indicate that to the extent that participants saw their partners as their partners saw themselves, intimacy levels were higher. Moreover, negative as well as positive discrepancies diminished intimacy.

The foregoing analyses were based on entering scores from both members of each dyad into the analyses. Because responses such as intimacy tend to be correlated, this introduces the potential that the p values could be spuriously inflated (Kenny & Judd, 1986), although in dyads with moderate degrees of dependence such as those in our sample, ignoring this dependence results in only a small distortion in alpha levels (e.g., Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1997). Nevertheless, to be conservative we conducted analyses of each gender separately. The results of simultaneous multiple regressions with self-concept and partner

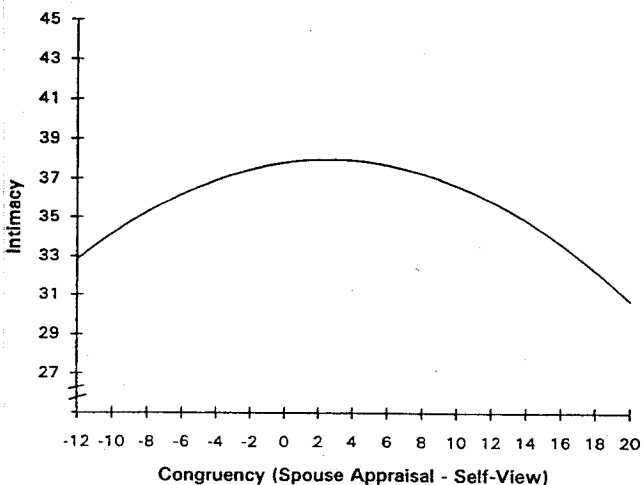


Figure 6. Intimacy as a function of congruency.

appraisal as predictors and intimacy as the criterion revealed the predicted two-way interactions for both the men, $F(1, 76) = 5.35$, $p < .02$, and for the women, $F(1, 76) = 6.24$, $p < .01$. Furthermore, the effect most crucial for self-verification theory (a tendency for the intimacy of people with negative self-views to increase insofar as their partners appraised them unfavorably) was significant for men, $F(1, 14) = 4.51$, $p < .05$, and approached significance for women, $F(1, 13) = 3.30$, $p < .10$. The tendency for intimacy among people with positive self-views to increase insofar as their partners appraised them favorably approached significance for men, $F(1, 11) = 2.11$, $p < .17$, but not for women, $F(1, 15) = 1.04$, $p < .33$.

To test for the predicted curvilinear relationship between intimacy and the discrepancy between self-views and partner appraisal for each gender, we conducted separate polynomial regressions. The results for the men indicated that the predicted curvilinear effect approached significance, $F(1, 77) = 2.69$, $p < .10$, but neither the linear term, $F(1, 77) < 1$, nor the overall regression, $F(2, 77) = 1.43$, $p < .25$, was significant. Among women there was a significant curvilinear effect, $F(1, 77) = 4.82$, $p < .03$, but the linear term was not significant, $F(1, 77) < 1$, and the overall regression approached significance, $F(2, 77) = 2.61$, $p < .08$. Overall, then, both men and women displayed evidence of the self-verification strivings reported in Swann et al. (1994), and evidence of these strivings did not appear to be an artifact of interdependence of the responses of participants within couples.

Congruence of Spouses: The Fruits of Self-Verification Strivings?

If people prefer self-verifying spouses over nonverifying ones, they should wind up in relationships in which their spouses see them as they see themselves. This was the case, as indicated by a substantial correlation between target's self-views on the SAQ and spouse's appraisals of them on the SAQ, $r = .39$, $p < .01$.

In addition, the congruence of the relationships of targets was not merely "all in their heads." When we submitted judges' ratings of the congruence of spouses' and targets' views of the target to a multiple regression in which target's self-view on the SAQ, spouse's appraisal of the target on the SAQ, and the two-way interaction served as predictors, a significant interaction emerged between target's self-view and spouse's appraisal of the target, $F(1, 57) = 21.60$, $p < .001$ ($ps > .21$ for both main effects). As can be seen in Figure 7, this interaction emerged because judges perceived more congruency to the extent that spouses appraised targets with negative self-views unfavorably, $F(1, 16) = 31.24$, $p < .001$, and spouses appraised targets with positive self-views favorably, $F(1, 22) = 31.66$, $p < .001$.

At the very least, these data support the notion that there is a tendency for people to be in relationships with partners who see them as they see themselves. In addition, these data suggest that when past researchers measured congruency by assessing

⁵ As noted above, we categorized people into positive and negative self-views on the basis of the upper and lower 20th percentiles.

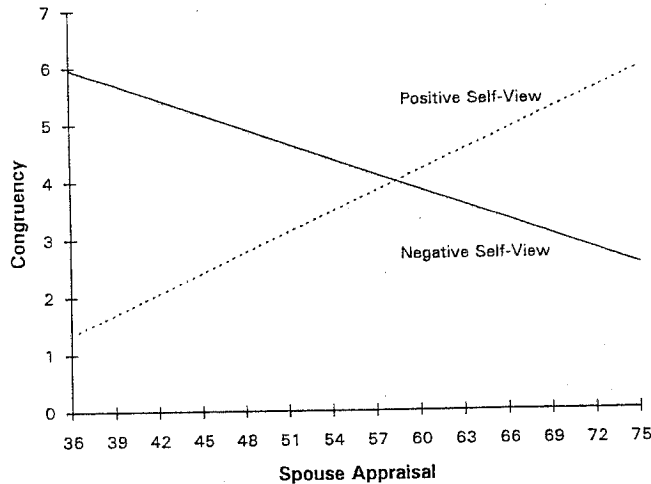


Figure 7. Congruency of couples as a function of self-view and spouse appraisal.

the degree of fit between target self-views and spouse appraisal (e.g., Swann et al., 1994), they were indeed measuring this construct rather than a construct that covaried with it. This evidence thus strengthens the claim that people find congruence to be inherently appealing.

Discussion

We assumed here that people's stable impressions of their partners play an integral role in allowing them to predict and control their worlds (Kelly, 1955) and in maintaining shared realities (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). For this reason, people are motivated to reinforce feedback that supports their impressions of their partners and repudiate information that challenges their impressions.

The results of our research confirmed our predictions. For example, comments made during some of the interactions revealed that among congruent couples in which the target's self-view was positive and the spouse's appraisal of the target was similarly positive, spouses enthusiastically supported the favorable feedback:

Spouse: "It said basically that he's socially competent and that when he is with a crowd of people he doesn't know well that he blends and mixes well and also at the same time, makes them feel just as comfortable. That's basically what it said."

The spouse then turned to the target and said, "That's what it said. It was really accurate. I was quite impressed."

Congruent couples in which the target's self-view and the spouse's impression of the target were negative had a very different reaction to favorable feedback:

Spouse: "It said something like, she's very sociable, confident around others she does not know. I wouldn't hardly rate you as very sociable. Then the question was, how much do you agree with this feedback of her, and I said, oh, not very much. Maybe I got the wrong sheet. Maybe she handed me one with the wrong sheet."

Similarly, spouses who disagreed with the unfavorable feedback also made their opinions clear.

Spouse: "It said that you lack the social skills, it was like you would feel uncomfortable around them, and they would feel uncomfortable around you. I'm like, get out of here! I'm thinking not."

Such commentaries reinforce past evidence of the integral role that people's impressions of their partners play in their knowledge system (e.g., Andersen & Baum, 1994; Andersen & Cole, 1990; Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). For example, Aron et al. (1991) found that associating to-be-remembered information with a partner is sometimes every bit as effective in facilitating memory as associating that information with oneself (for related evidence, see Bower & Gilligan, 1979; Keenan & Baillet, 1980; Klein & Loftus, 1990). Our work goes beyond past research on this topic by illustrating that people develop allegiances to their impressions of their partners, allegiances that have important motivational and behavioral consequences. Specifically, once spouses become wedded to particular impressions of their partners, they actively protect those impressions against challenges from outsiders.

Our evidence of partner-verification activities raises many questions about the nature of these processes. For example, to what extent are such processes fueled by epistemic concerns (i.e., the need for worlds that are coherent and expectable) versus pragmatic concerns (i.e., a desire to keep partners out of difficulty or have them maintain the identities that they have negotiated)? Are partners more inclined to verify particular traits? For instance, are people more apt to verify qualities that are important to the relationship, such as warmth and honesty, than qualities that often have little bearing on the relationship, such as athletic or musical ability? Is the concreteness of the attribute important? On the one hand, people may be more inclined to verify qualities that have clear objective referents (e.g., intelligence) because they want their partners to be prepared for the feedback that they are likely to receive. On the other hand, people may be more inclined to verify attributes that have relatively fuzzy objective referents (e.g., kindness) because they recognize that the attribute is highly subjective and thus feel that their own opinion should count more than the opinions of strangers.

Another important question for future researchers will be how partner-verification activities change as people move from one stage of their relationship to another. Recent research has suggested that people in dating relationships are primarily concerned with obtaining positive feedback from their partners, but people in marital relationships are more concerned with receiving self-verifying feedback from their partners (Swann et al., 1994). These findings suggest that married people may verify their partners' negative as well as positive qualities but that people in dating relationships verify their partners' positive qualities only.

Whatever the precise nature of partner-verification processes may be, our findings suggest that spouses typically enjoy the assistance of at least one other person in their attempts to maintain their impressions of their partners—the partner him- or herself. Consistent with self-verification theory, there was a tendency for targets and spouses to concur in their perceptions of targets. Moreover, when targets learned that their spouses had

received discrepant feedback about them, they actively disagreed with it—even when the feedback was more favorable than their self-views. Indeed, in some cases, targets with negative self-views seemed to be more accepting of unfavorable feedback than were their spouses:

Spouse: "It said that she didn't feel comfortable in social gatherings. Maybe you don't, but you do very well."

Target: "But, maybe I don't feel comfortable. There's a big difference. That's a possibility. Well, maybe I did score that way. I think I do have a lot of self-doubt in certain areas. My self-doubt, my insecurities, my unwillingness to believe, would reflect itself on the paper. You may think that I look great, and I show myself like I don't care, but deep down I hate my body."

The self-verification strivings of targets also manifested themselves in their responses to the measure of intimacy. Just as targets with positive self-views were most intimate with spouses who thought highly of them, targets with negative self-views were most intimate with spouses who thought poorly of them. This evidence that participants were most intimate with spouses whose appraisals verified their self-views replicates earlier work by Katz et al. (1996), Ritts and Stein (1995), Schafer et al. (1996), and Swann et al. (1994). The reason why Murray et al. (1996) did not replicate this finding is unclear. We suspect that their use of somewhat different measures may have been crucial. Another possibility is that the self-views of participants whom Murray et al. classified as being negative may not have been negative enough for such participants to display a preference for unfavorable partners.

In any event, in addition to replicating Swann et al.'s (1994) findings, our results address one ambiguity inherent in them. Specifically, when judges estimated the extent to which spouses saw targets as targets saw themselves, judges' perceptions of congruence was greatest when rating couples whose self-reports led us to classify them as being high in congruence. Moreover, this was equally true of targets with negative as well as positive self-views. By showing that members of congruent couples actually are perceived this way by objective observers, our data reinforce the assumption that couples classified as congruent actually are congruent. They also support the idea that people find congruency desirable in that they are more intimate with congruent partners.

The Interplay of Partner Verification and Self-Verification

Past research on self-verification has suggested that when people encounter information that challenges their firmly held self-views, they take active steps to refute that information. If they fail in their efforts to create a social environment that is more hospitable to their self-views, they may withdraw from that environment (for reviews, see Swann, 1990, 1996). Our findings confirm this earlier research and reinforce it in an important way. Specifically, our data suggest that by entering into relationships with partners who see them as they see themselves, people may enlist accomplices who are every bit as motivated to preserve their self-views as they themselves are. In this sense, people will have externalized their self-views; they will have

created idiosyncratic social worlds that support and nurture their self-views.

The existence of partner-verification processes has disturbing implications for people who suffer from low self-esteem and depression. For example, if such persons seek therapy in the hope of improving their self-views, the positive effects of the therapy may be undone when they return home to a spouse who holds them in low regard and is motivated to maintain this impression (e.g., Swann & Predmore, 1985). Furthermore, being in a relationship with a disparaging spouse may lower people's self-esteem, and such diminished self-esteem may, in turn, cause people to feel verified by a partner who devalues or mistreats them (Buckner & Swann, 1995).

On a more positive note, spouses who verify their impressions of their partners may enjoy stable impressions that engender perceptions of predictability and control and confirm the realities that they share with their partner. In addition, if a spouse perceives or values some quality in the target person that the target does not value in him- or herself, that spouse may form favorable impressions of a target with negative self-views. Such spouses may accordingly work to stabilize such favorable impressions and encourage targets to develop more positive self-views. If those with negative self-views are able, with the help of their spouses, to accept the spouse's point of view and develop more positive self-views, feedback that was initially perceived as self-discrepant will eventually come to represent a source of self-verification. When this happens, favorable feedback will no longer foster anxiety among targets (e.g., Pines & Swann, 1997), and targets may grow to accept or even seek favorable feedback from their spouses and others.

Here, then, is a further similarity of the process of partner verification and self-verification: Both processes can lead to desirable or undesirable outcomes. For this reason, rather than attempting to characterize either process as inherently good or bad, it may be best to think of them simply as integral components of people's attempts to understand their worlds.

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