

Self-Verification Processes: How We Sustain Our Self-Conceptions

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It is proposed here that individuals use their social interactions as opportunities to verify and confirm their self-conceptions. In a series of empirical investigations, three unique strategies of self-verification are examined. In Investigation I, participants were more likely to seek social feedback when they believed that it would confirm their self-conceptions. In Investigation II, participants elicited reactions from their interaction partners that confirmed their self-conceptions, especially when they suspected that their interaction partners' appraisals might disconfirm their self-conceptions. In Investigation III, participants preferentially recalled social feedback that confirmed their self-conceptions. Thus, within each of three distinct phases of the social interaction, people sought to verify their self-conceptions. The interplay of different strategies of self-verification and the conditions under which they will occur are discussed.

One of psychology's oldest assumptions is that people have a relatively stable and enduring sense of who they are (James, 1890). However old and venerable this assumption may be, it has recently been called into question by a host of laboratory experiments which show that people readily modify their conceptions of themselves in response to social feedback (for a review, see Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). These demonstrations have led some to conclude that self-conceptions not only lack stability but that they are mere transitory reflections of social experience (e.g., Gergen, 1977).

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Such assertions, however, are undermined by evidence that self-conceptions are far more resistant to change in naturally occurring situations than they are in laboratory settings (cf. Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). This discrepancy between the results of laboratory and naturalistic studies may at least partially reflect differences in the extent to which people are able to control the nature of the feedback they receive in such settings. In the laboratory, any efforts participants might make to influence the nature of the feedback they receive are typically blocked by the fact that they are randomly assigned to feedback conditions. By contrast, in naturalistic situations, people may play an active and influential role in selecting and transforming the nature of the feedback they encounter. Most importantly, they may actively seek, elicit, and recall social feedback that confirms their self-conceptions, thereby promoting the stability of these conceptions.

Consider, for example, how a person's conception that she is a dominant individual might channel her activities at various stages of a cocktail party. Upon arriving at the party, she may survey the room and identify those guests whom she knows perceive her to be dominant. She may then seek the company of those people and listen attentively to them, meanwhile avoiding or ignoring the other guests at the party. When it is time for her to contribute to the conversation, she may present her views in an authoritative and confident manner that is specifically tailored to elicit the signs of deference and respect that she has come to expect in her social encounters. Later, after she has left the party, she may recall with some satisfaction the minute details of the conversations she dominated and remember only vaguely the conversations in which her influence was minimal.

This hypothetical example illustrates a potentially powerful set of processes through which people may stabilize their self-conceptions. By seeking, eliciting, and preferentially recalling social feedback that confirms their self-conceptions, people may create an idiosyncratically skewed version of social reality that verifies, validates, and sustains their self-conceptions. It is with these self-verification processes that we are concerned here.

SELF-VERIFICATION PROCESSES IN SOCIAL INTERACTION

In the tradition of the early symbolic interactionists (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), we define self-conceptions as thoughts and feelings about the self that are derived from past experience, especially the reactions of others. Once established, these conceptions play an important role in enabling people to predict and control their social environment (e.g., Mead, 1934). Hence, people should be well motivated to insure that their self-conceptions are accurate and reliable. One way they may do this

is to strive to acquire social feedback that they believe is highly informative concerning the type of persons they are.

If people are motivated to gain accurate images of themselves, then it becomes important to know what type of information they will regard as informative. There is now a considerable body of evidence that suggests that people regard confirmatory or positive instances of phenomena to be more informative than disconfirmatory or negative instances. Investigations of concept formation and concept utilization indicate that people are more likely to use positive instances of phenomena rather than negative ones (e.g., Hovland & Weiss, 1959). In estimating the similarity of two entities, people search for common rather than distinctive features (Tversky, 1977). Moreover, whether in testing the validity of propositions about people (e.g., Mary is an extrovert) or physical objects (e.g., all chairs have four legs), people preferentially search for evidence that will confirm rather than disconfirm the propositions they are testing (e.g., Snyder & Swann, 1978; Wason & Johnson-Laird, 1972). Finally, recent research has provided direct evidence that people regard social feedback that confirms their self-conceptions to be relatively more informative and compelling than feedback that disconfirms their self-conceptions (Swann & Read, Note 1, Investigation III). Therefore, these data indicate that people may attach greater value to feedback that confirms their self-conceptions. This is one reason why they may strive to acquire such feedback through self-verification processes.

There are doubtlessly other reasons why people might be motivated to verify their self-conceptions. Our primary concern here, however, is not with *why* people are motivated to verify their self-conceptions, but with the tactics and strategies by which they do so. At least one such strategy has already been documented. When people receive social feedback, they tend to interpret and react to it in ways that promote the survival of their self-images. For example, whereas people attribute high trustworthiness and credibility to self-confirmatory feedback and the individuals who deliver it, they tend to dismiss self-disconfirmatory feedback as inaccurate (e.g., Crary, 1966; Markus, 1977; Shrauger & Lund, 1975). As a result, people may "see" their social worlds as being more compatible with their self-conceptions than they actually are.

But these and similar information processing strategies may represent only a small portion of the activities by which people verify their self-conceptions. Indeed, such processing strategies may often be obviated by complementary strategies that occur earlier in the interaction sequence. That is, by seeking out and eliciting self-confirmatory reactions from others, people may actively bring their social environments into harmony with their self-conceptions. As a result, they may characteristically receive feedback that confirms their self-conceptions.

The particular self-verification strategy that people employ may partially hinge on whether the person is initiating, in the midst of, or thinking back to a given interaction. During the early phases of interaction, people may be especially likely to use an information-seeking strategy of self-verification. For example, people may be more likely to attend to others whose appraisals they suspect will confirm rather than disconfirm their self-conceptions. Thus, people who perceive themselves as likable may be especially attentive to interaction partners who they think view them favorably whereas people who perceive themselves as dislikable may be more attentive to interaction partners who they think view them unfavorably.

As their interactions unfold, individuals may employ a second self-verification strategy. By choosing the appropriate words and deeds, people may elicit reactions that confirm their self-conceptions. People who perceive themselves as likable, for example, may evoke relatively more positive reactions from others than those who perceive themselves as dislikable.

Furthermore, there may be times when people intensify their efforts to behaviorally elicit self-confirmatory reactions. One such occasion may be when people have an hypothesis that their interaction partner's appraisal conflicts with their self-conceptions. Such an hypothesis may threaten their belief that the social world is predictable and controllable. When people's perceptions of control are threatened, they tend to increase their efforts to acquire highly diagnostic information (e.g., Swann, Stephenson, & Pittman, in press). Given that people regard self-confirmatory feedback to be highly diagnostic, such a threat to control should increase their efforts to acquire such feedback. Accordingly, we expect that people who perceive themselves as likable should be especially likely to elicit positive reactions when they suspect that their interaction partners view them unfavorably. People who perceive themselves as dislikable should be particularly inclined to elicit negative reactions when they suspect that their interaction partner views them favorably.

After they leave their interactions, people may employ yet a third self-verification strategy. Given that people are motivated to acquire self-confirmatory social feedback, they should work harder to encode and retrieve self-confirmatory feedback. Therefore, in remembering events that occurred during their interactions, people may preferentially recall self-confirmatory feedback. For example, people who perceive themselves as likable may preferentially recall positive statements and those who perceive themselves as dislikable may preferentially recall negative statements. In addition, people may recall *more* feedback (both positive and negative) from interactions in which they expected that their inter-

action partners' appraisal would confirm their self-conceptions, since they will presumably have been more motivated to attend to and encode such feedback. Thus, people who perceive themselves as likable may recall relatively more feedback when they had the hypothesis that the partner viewed them favorably. People who perceive themselves as dislikable may recall more feedback when they suspected that the partner viewed them unfavorably.

In the empirical investigations that follow, we have sought evidence for the three distinct strategies of self-verification described above. The first investigation tests the prediction that people are most likely to seek social feedback from interaction partners when they suspect that the partners' appraisal will confirm rather than disconfirm their self-conceptions. The second investigation asks if people will behaviorally elicit reactions from their interaction partners that confirm their self-conceptions, and when they will be most inclined to do so. Finally, the third investigation examines whether or not people will preferentially recall social feedback that confirms their self-conceptions.

INVESTIGATION I: SELF-VERIFICATION AND INFORMATION SEEKING

The initial investigation examined whether or not individuals would be more likely to scrutinize social feedback that they suspected would confirm rather than disconfirm their self-conceptions. Participants first completed a measure of self-conceptions that allowed us to partition them into a group who saw themselves as relatively likable (designated "self-likables") and a group who saw themselves as relatively dislikable (designated "self-dislikables"). All participants then learned that they would be interacting with another person, and that prior to this interaction they would have an opportunity to examine a series of statements that summarize this person's appraisal of them. Before reading these statements, some participants were led to form the hypothesis that their interaction partner viewed them favorably; others were led to form the hypothesis that their interaction partner viewed them unfavorably. We assessed the effects of these self-conception and hypothesis variables on the length of time participants spent reading a series of positive and negative statements that were ostensibly taken from their interaction partner. Our major prediction was that participants would attend to the firm their self-conceptions. Therefore, we anticipated that self-likables with the favorable hypothesis and self-dislikables with the unfavorable hypothesis would spend longer examining the statements than self-likables with the unfavorable hypothesis and self-dislikables with the favorable hypothesis.

Method

Participants

Sixty-four female undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin participated in this experiment for credit in their introductory psychology course.

Procedure

The measure of self-conceptions. Upon arrival, each participant rated herself on a series of 10, six-point, bipolar trait scales: likable–disagreeable, quiet–talkative, unfriendly–friendly, unsociable–sociable, distant–intimate, awkward–poised, shy–outgoing, guarded–open, cold–warm, unconfident–confident. Responses to these 10 scales were summed and the median of this sum score was computed. Those who scored below the median (44) were designated self-dislikables; those who scored above the median were designated self-likables.¹

Setting the stage for the hypothesis manipulation. At this time, each participant also completed a second questionnaire that was designed to help set the stage for the soon-to-be-enacted hypothesis manipulation. This questionnaire included items from the Allport–Vernon–Lindsey Survey of Values (1960) and the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (Helmreich & Stapp, 1974). We selected items that dealt with issues that were highly volatile and controversial, such as religious values. In this way, we hoped to convince participants that virtually any set of responses they might make could potentially evoke a highly favorable or unfavorable reaction from their future interaction partner, thereby bolstering the credibility of the hypothesis manipulation.

After each participant completed the Self-Perceived Likability scale and the other questionnaire, the experimenter introduced the experiment as a study of the getting acquainted process. The experimenter explained that to initiate the getting acquainted process, she would like to show the responses that the participant had just made on the personality questionnaires to the participant's conversation partner, a male introductory psychology student.² When the participant granted her permission (as everyone did), the experimenter indicated that she would leave to show the participant's questionnaire to the conversation partner.

The hypothesis manipulation. After 10 min, the experimenter returned and delivered the following account of the study.

In this experiment, we are studying how people figure out how they are seen by others. That is, one of the key aspects of getting acquainted is getting a sense of what the person you are meeting thinks of you. Imagine, for example, that you have just been introduced to someone at a party. How do you act toward him? Well, probably a big factor will be what you believe he thinks of you. But how

¹ Scores on this scale ranged from 31 to 58. The mean was 44.32, the standard deviation was 6.28, and the coefficient α was .82. On the basis of the scores of a separate sample of 50 undergraduates, the scale was highly correlated with (a) the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (Helmreich & Stapp, 1975), $r = .70, p < .001$, a measure of social self-esteem, self-confidence, and social competence, and (b) the introversion–extroversion scale of the Eysenck Personality Inventory (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1968), $r = .53, p < .001$. The scale was not reliably related to the Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964), $r = .24, n.s.$, and Snyder's (1974) Self-Monitoring Scale, $r = .29, n.s.$ In all of the investigations reported in this paper, the experimenter was blind to participants' self-conceptions.

² The conversation partner was described as a *male* introductory psychology student to maximize our female participants' involvement in the experiment.

do you find this out? How do you find out how he feels about you? That's what we want you to be doing here: We want you to find out what the person you are going to be talking to thinks of you. Now imagine you are back at the party again confronting the person you have just met. Often, you'll have some idea of how he might feel toward you, say, because someone may have told you something about him that leads you to suspect that he may like you or dislike you. To parallel this kind of prior information you might have about how your conversation partner *might* feel toward you, we took the rating form he evaluated you on and put it in a pile with four others from previous sessions of this experiment. You may now draw one of the five forms from this pile. Thus, there is a chance that the form you draw will be the one your partner rated you on, but this is by no means certain. It is entirely possible that it will not be the form your partner rated you on. Do you understand?"

When she was assured that the participant understood the procedure, the experimenter asked the participant to withdraw *one* of the five rating forms from the pile. These forms had been prepared in advance to reflect one of two sentiments. Within the favorable hypothesis condition, all the forms indicated that the participants' partner thought that she was "moderately likable" and he "moderately would" like to get to know her better. In contrast, within the unfavorable hypothesis condition, all the forms indicated that her partner thought that she was "moderately disagreeable" and he "moderately would not" like to get to know her better.

After the participant withdrew one of the rating forms, the experimenter told her that her task during the experiment would be to find out if the evaluation on the rating form reflected her partner's appraisal of her. To test this hypothesis, the experimenter continued, the participant could examine a series of statements that her partner had ostensibly selected from a large pool of statements to summarize his feelings toward her. The experimenter then left the room and returned after 2 min with a tray of 18 slides.

The measure of information seeking. As she mounted the slides in the projector, the experimenter explained that the statements had been placed on slides so that participants could view them. When the slide tray was mounted, the experimenter then demonstrated how the participant could advance the projector from one slide to the next by pushing a button located on the table in front of her. After advising the participant to spend as long as she wished reading each slide, the experimenter retired to an adjacent room. Three warm-up slides (all evaluatively neutral) were presented first, followed by the 15 critical slides. The experimenter surreptitiously recorded the amount of time each participant spent reading each slide by means of a signaling device and a Lafayette millisecond clock/counter located in an adjacent room.

The slides were rated by 32 introductory psychology students prior to the experiment. Raters read each statement and then responded to the question, "If someone made this statement about me, I would infer that he or she," by choosing a scale response ranging

³ Since we were interested in participants' cognitive reactions to feedback only, we manipulated participants' expectancies by informing them that their partner *might* like or dislike them. We hoped that this procedure would minimize the affective reactions that may have occurred had we told them that their partner *definitely* liked or disliked them. To ensure that this hypothesis manipulation did influence participants' expectancies, we ran a separate sample of 55 undergraduates through the hypothesis manipulation. Participants then responded to the question, "How does your partner feel toward you," by completing a scale ranging from 1 ("likes me extremely") to 7 ("dislikes me extremely"). As expected, those within the favorable hypothesis condition felt that their partners liked them more than those within the unfavorable hypothesis condition, $F(1, 51) = 4.79, p = .033$.

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from 1 ("Strongly disliked me") to 7 ("Strongly liked me"). Six of the statements were rated as relatively positive ($M = 5.89$); six were rated as relatively negative ($M = 2.86$); and three were rated as neutral ($M = 4.14$). All of the statements were sufficiently vague and general that they could apply to almost anyone. The positive, negative, and neutral statements were presented in random order.

When participants finished reading all of the slides, the experimenter returned to the room, carefully and thoroughly debriefed them, and thanked them for their participation. No participants reported being suspicious of the experimental procedures in this investigation or either of the following investigations.

Results and Discussion

Did participants spend longer scrutinizing their partners' statements about them when they suspected that these statements would confirm their self-conceptions? We anticipated that self-likables would spend more time reading their partner's statements when they thought that he had a favorable rather than unfavorable appraisal. In contrast, we anticipated that self-dislikables would spend relatively more time reading their partner's statements when they thought that he had an unfavorable rather than a favorable appraisal. This was the case. A 2(Self-Likable–Self-Dislikable) \times 2(Favorable–Unfavorable Hypothesis) \times 2(Positive–Negative Statements, a within-subjects factor) unweighted means analysis of variance of the length of time participants spent reading their partners' statements revealed a reliable interaction between Self-Conception and Hypothesis, $F(1, 60) = 4.94, p = .030$.⁴ As can be seen in Table 1, this interaction was nearly symmetrical. Just as self-likables spent longer reading the statements within the favorable hypothesis condition ($M = 16.73$) than in the unfavorable hypothesis condition ($M = 12.93$), self-dislikables spent longer reading the statements within the unfavorable hypothesis condition ($M = 16.27$) than in the favorable hypothesis condition ($M = 12.00$). Simple-effects analysis, however, did suggest that the differences among self-dislikables were greater than those among self-likables, F 's(1, 60) = 3.92, 1.30, p 's = .052, n.s., respectively. Neither Hypothesis nor Self-Conception had a reliable main effect in the overall analysis, F 's < 1.

These data suggest that it was the expectations participants formed concerning the confirmatory or disconfirmatory nature of the statements that determined the extent to which they scrutinized their partners' state-

⁴ Since the distribution of reading times was highly skewed, we performed a log transformation on these scores before entering them into the ANOVA. Because they are more readily interpretable, the raw scores are presented in Table 1. Also, we deleted the neutral statements from this analysis and all subsequent analyses in this report because (1) they were less pertinent to our major hypotheses than the positive and negative statements, and (2) since there were only three filler statements versus six positive and six negative ones, they would be overweighted in the repeated measures analysis. Nevertheless, if the neutral statements are added into the analysis, the Self-Conception \times Hypothesis interaction is still statistically reliable, $p = .048$.

TABLE I
 INVESTIGATION I: READING TIME OF STATEMENTS AS A FUNCTION OF SELF-CONCEPTION AND
 HYPOTHESIS

Self-perceived likability	Hypothesis	
	Favorable <i>M</i>	Unfavorable <i>M</i>
Self-dislikables		
Positives + negatives	12.00	16.27
Positives	5.38	7.31
Negatives	6.62	8.96
	(<i>n</i> = 15)	(<i>n</i> = 15)
Self-likables		
Positives + negatives	16.73	12.93
Positives	7.05	5.56
Negatives	9.68	7.37
	(<i>n</i> = 18)	(<i>n</i> = 16)

Note. The higher the number, the longer the reading time.

ments about them. Thus, participants spent longer viewing their interaction partners' statements whenever they expected that these statements would confirm their self-conceptions. If this interpretation is correct, then we would expect that participants should not have attended differentially to the *individual* positive and negative statements as a function of their self-conceptions and hypotheses, since they had formed no expectancy concerning the nature of each statement prior to reading it. This was the case. An analysis of variance of the reading times that included statement type as a repeated measures factor revealed that Statement Type did not interact with either Self-Conception or Hypothesis, F 's < 2.03, n.s. Although there was a main effect of statement type, $F(1, 60) = 43.94$, $p = .001$, this was due to the fact that the negative statements were more complex than the others. When we controlled for statement complexity (i.e., number of syllables and propositions), this statement type effect disappeared, $F = 2.49$, n.s.⁵

In summary, the results of this investigation suggest that people may be especially likely to attend to the evaluations of others when they

⁵ It is true that if participants had reread the statements, we would have expected them to spend longer reading the confirmatory ones, since they presumably would have differentiated confirmatory and disconfirmatory statements. However, the low average reading times ($\bar{x} = 7.24$ sec) indicate that participants only rarely reread the statements. This probably reflects the fact that the experimenter did not encourage participants to take their time reading the slides. Also, because the statements were rather brief and used simple constructions, participants may have felt foolish had they spent a great deal of time gazing at any particular slide.

expect that these evaluations will confirm rather than disconfirm their self-conceptions. Such information-seeking activities may go a long way toward ensuring that the social feedback people process will verify their self-conceptions. Surely, however, there will be times when people are unable to attend to social feedback that will confirm their self-conceptions and ignore feedback that will disconfirm their self-conceptions. On such occasions, people might employ another self-verification strategy; they may actively bring their interaction partners' appraisals into harmony with their self-conceptions. We explored this possibility in Investigation II.

INVESTIGATION II: SELF-VERIFICATION AND BEHAVIORAL ELICITATION

This investigation asked whether individuals might, in the course of their social interactions, behaviorally elicit reactions from others that confirm their self-conceptions. Furthermore, this investigation sought to specify some of the conditions that influence the intensity of such behavioral elicitation processes. To examine these issues, we had pairs of individuals participate in getting-acquainted conversations. Upon their arrival, we assessed the self-perceived likability of one individual (designated the "Self"). Prior to the conversation, some Selves were led to form the hypothesis that their interaction partner (designated the "Partner") had a favorable impression of them; some Selves were led to form the hypothesis that the Partner had an unfavorable impression of them; some Selves learned nothing about the Partner's appraisal of them. We anticipated that, out of a desire to acquire self-confirmatory feedback, Selves would elicit appraisals from Partners that would confirm their self-conceptions. Moreover, we predicted that Selves would be most likely to elicit confirming appraisals when they were testing an hypothesis that was inconsistent with their self-conceptions, since under these conditions their desire for self-confirmatory feedback would be intensified by the threat to control posed by the inconsistent feedback. That is, we expected that self-likables testing the unfavorable hypothesis would elicit the most positive evaluations and the self-dislikables testing the favorable hypothesis would elicit the most negative reactions.

Method

Participants

Ninety-seven male and ninety-seven female undergraduates at the University of Minnesota participated in this experiment for credit in their introductory psychology course. Pairs of males and females attended each session of the experiment. To ensure that they did not meet prior to the experiment, participants were instructed to report to separate experimental rooms located in separate corridors.

Procedure

Males were always assigned to the role of Self and females were always assigned to the role of Partner. Within all conditions of this experiment, Selves received the same measure of self-perceived likability, general rationale for the study and hypothesis manipulation that participants in Investigation I had received. There were two critical differences between the two experiments. First, this study included a control group in which the experimenter simply described the experiment as a study of the getting-acquainted process and did not ask Selves to test an hypothesis concerning the Partners' appraisal. Second, in this study Selves actually participated in getting-acquainted conversations with Partners. Prior to the conversation, the experimenter provided Selves in all conditions with a list of six topic areas (e.g., spare-time activities, major field) and 4 min to consider what they might like to say about these topics during the conversation. During this 4-min preparation period, the partner received the same set of instructions as did Selves with the control conditions and the same list of discussion topics as well.

The getting-acquainted conversation. The experimenter initiated the conversation by asking the Self and Partner to introduce themselves to each other using only their first names. Each conversation lasted approximately 9 min and was recorded by a Sony TC-570 stereophonic tape recorder.

After the conversation, Partners recorded their impressions of Selves on the same 10 bipolar trait dimensions used for the self-conception measure. Also, Selves estimated the probability that the Partner thought that they were a disagreeable person on 100-point scales.

Assessing the Behavioral Strategies of Selves

To assess the behavioral strategies Selves used during the getting-acquainted conversations, eight judges listened to tape recordings of the voices of both interaction partners. Two male and two female judges listened to approximately half of the 97 conversations ($n = 46$) and two male and two female judges listened to the remaining tapes ($n = 51$). To insure that they would hear a representative sample of the conversations, judges listened to the first 3 and the last 2 min of each conversation. Before listening to the actual conversations, judges listened to several practice conversations during which they learned how to use the Coding Sheet. Specifically, judges learned that they should place a check mark in the appropriate space on their Coding Sheet whenever they heard the male speaker praise or compliment his partner. At all times, judges remained unaware of the nature and purpose of the experiment.

Results and Discussion

To determine the behavioral, interpersonal, and cognitive consequences of the Selves' self-conceptions and hypotheses about Partners' appraisals, we examined: (a) the Partners' impressions of Selves after the conversation; (b) the behavioral strategies Selves used to create these impressions; and (c) the Selves' estimates of the Partners' impressions of them.

The Partners' Impressions of Selves after the Conversation

Did Selves elicit reactions from Partners that confirmed their self-conceptions? Were they most likely to do so when they suspected that their Partners' impressions might be inconsistent with their self-concep-

tions? To address these issues, we first computed the sum of the Partners' ratings of Selves on the 10 trait scales (internal consistency of .88, as assessed by Cronbach's coefficient α). We then tested the prediction that self-likables would elicit more favorable reactions than self-dislikables by entering these sum scores into a 2(Self-Likables, Self-Dislikables) \times 3(Favorable Hypothesis, Unfavorable Hypothesis, Control) least-squares analysis of variance. As predicted, self-likables did elicit more favorable reactions than self-dislikables, $F(1, 91) = 9.95, p = .002$. Planned comparisons revealed that Selves were especially prone to elicit confirmatory reactions when they suspected that their Partner's impressions might disconfirm their self-conceptions. As is evident in Table 2, self-likables within the unfavorable hypothesis condition elicited more favorable reactions than self-likables within the favorable hypothesis and control condition, $F(1, 91) = 6.84, p < .01$. Similarly, self-dislikables within the favorable hypothesis condition showed a marginally reliable tendency to elicit more negative reactions than self-dislikables within the unfavorable hypothesis and control conditions, $F(1, 91) = 3.41, p < .07$. Therefore, not only were Selves inclined to elicit self-confirmatory reactions but they were especially likely to do so when they had reason

TABLE 2
INVESTIGATION II: PARTNERS' IMPRESSIONS OF SELVES, SELVES' BEHAVIORS, AND SELVES'
ESTIMATES OF PARTNERS' IMPRESSIONS AS A FUNCTION OF SELF-CONCEPTION AND
HYPOTHESIS

Self-perceived likability	Hypothesis		
	Favorable <i>M</i>	Unfavorable <i>M</i>	Control <i>M</i>
Self-dislikables			
Partners' Impressions ^a	39.90	42.40	43.00
Selves' praise/ compliments ^b	.23	0.00	.06
Selves' estimates of Partners' impressions ^c	75.12	59.07	69.78
	(<i>n</i> = 17)	(<i>n</i> = 14)	(<i>n</i> = 18)
Self-likables			
Partners' impressions	43.90	49.40	44.48
Selves' praise/ compliments	.60	.88	.31
Selves estimate of Partners' impressions	80.73	68.12	75.63
	(<i>n</i> = 15)	(<i>n</i> = 17)	(<i>n</i> = 16)

^a The higher the numbers, the more favorable the impressions (range = 10-60).

^b The higher the numbers, the more Selves praised and complimented Partners.

^c The higher the numbers, the more positive the estimates of Partners' appraisals (these data were transformed by subtracting the original numbers from 100).

to believe that their partner's appraisals might disconfirm their self-conceptions.

Interestingly, these intensified efforts to elicit self-confirmatory reactions were more pronounced among self-likables as compared to self-dislikables. This probably reflects the fact that most of the participants in our sample viewed themselves rather favorably. That is, the theoretical range of the self-conception measure was 10-60, the median 35; the actual range was 27-59, the actual median, 44. Hence, it is probably the case that only the more negative of the self-dislikables viewed the favorable hypothesis as highly incongruent whereas almost all of the self-likables viewed the unfavorable hypothesis as incongruent. Hence, a greater proportion of self-likables were motivated to actively solicit self-confirmatory feedback.

The Behavioral Elicitation Tactics Used by Selves

What tactics did Selves within the hypothesis conditions employ to elicit reactions from Partners that confirmed their self-conceptions? We hypothesized that one strategy which Selves might employ would be to compliment and praise Partners, a well-documented ingratiation strategy (Jones, 1964; Jones & Pittman, in press). To test this prediction, we examined the listener judges' ratings of the frequency with which Selves complimented and praised Partners during the conversation.⁶ The means, which are presented in Table 2, are similar to the pattern of means for the Partners' impressions of Selves. In particular, the overall analysis of variance revealed a main effect of self-conception, $F(1, 91) = 7.56$, $p < .007$, such that self-likables complimented and praised Partners more than self-dislikables. Planned comparisons revealed that self-likables tended to compliment and praise Partners more (although not reliably so) within the unfavorable hypothesis condition than within the favorable hypothesis or control conditions, $F(1, 91) = 2.48$, $p = .119$. Self-dislikables within the favorable hypothesis conditions did not differ from self-dislikables within the unfavorable hypothesis or control conditions, $F < 1$. Therefore, the overall differences between self-likables and self-dislikables and the between condition differences among self-likables suggest that this strategy of complimenting and praising partners may have been one behavioral elicitation strategy Selves used during their interactions. At the same time, the use of this strategy was quite modestly correlated with Partner's impression of Selves (all within cell r 's $< .25$, n.s.), which was probably at least partially due to the fact that Judges detected this behavior so infrequently. Therefore, there were probably other aspects of the Selves interpersonal demeanor that interacted with their praise and compliments in generating the evaluations they received.

⁶ The reliability of our raters, as assessed by the intraclass correlation coefficient (Ebel, 1951), averaged .43.

The Selves' Estimates of the Partners' Impressions of Them

Were Selves able to assess accurately how their interaction partners perceived them? Or, did their self-conceptions and hypotheses they were testing channel and guide their processing of behavioral feedback from Partners so as to bias their estimates of the Partner's appraisals?

To address these issues, we examined Selves' estimates of the probability that Partners thought they were disagreeable persons. An analysis of variance revealed a reliable effect of self-conception, $F(1, 91) = 4.50$, $p = .04$, such that self-dislikables estimated that they were seen as more disagreeable than self-likables. There was also a reliable effect of the hypothesis variable, $F(2, 91) = 6.57$, $p = .002$, such that Selves within the unfavorable hypothesis conditions estimated that they were seen as more disagreeable than Selves within the favorable hypothesis conditions. As can be seen in Table 2, the means for the control conditions fell in between the favorable and unfavorable hypothesis conditions.

These data suggest that self-likables left their interactions convinced that they had impressed their partners more favorably than self-dislikables. Moreover, participants who tested the favorable hypothesis believed that they had made a more positive impression on their partner than those who tested the unfavorable hypothesis. Since these estimates were at odds with the Partners' actual impressions of Selves (e.g., self-likables asserted that they were perceived more favorably in the favorable than unfavorable hypothesis condition when the opposite was true), it appears that Selves were not accurately reading the partners' reactions to them.⁷

Perhaps their self-conceptions and hypotheses channeled the manner in which they processed the feedback they received. There is evidence, for example, that beliefs about the self play a powerful role in organizing and processing social information (e.g., Kuiper & Rogers, 1979; Markus, 1977; Rogers, Kuiper & Kirker, 1977). Furthermore, there is also evidence that hypotheses about others can guide information processing. In testing an hypothesis about the attributes of another individual (e.g., that the person is "extroverted"), people preferentially recall information that confirms the hypothesis (Snyder & Cantor, 1979). Of course, we have no *direct* evidence that participants in this investigation preferentially recalled feedback that confirmed their self-conceptions and hypotheses. It was for purposes of gathering such evidence that we conducted Investigation III.

⁷ This should not be taken to mean that Selves were completely insensitive to the feedback they received from Partners, since there were some (albeit modest) correlations between Partners' impressions of Selves and Selves' estimates of these impressions (all within cell r 's $< .27$, n.s. Our point is simply that their self-conceptions and hypotheses did have considerable impact on Selves' estimates of Partners' appraisals.

INVESTIGATION III: SELF-VERIFICATION AND MEMORY FOR SOCIAL FEEDBACK

Even after they leave their social interactions, people may verify their self-conceptions by recalling only those aspects of their interactions that confirm their self-conceptions. For example, in Investigation II, self-likables estimated that they were viewed quite positively whereas self-dislikables were not as optimistic concerning the evaluations they received. Moreover, these estimates were often at odds with the actual impressions that these individuals elicited. These data may partially reflect a tendency for participants to preferentially encode or recall aspects of their interactions that confirm their self-conceptions. One purpose of Investigation III was to test this possibility.

Another interesting finding in Investigation II was that participants felt that their hypotheses concerning the appraisal of their interaction partner were confirmed, even when there seemed to be little evidence to support such a belief (e.g., self-likables within the unfavorable hypothesis condition). This suggests that hypotheses, like self-conceptions, may guide the encoding and/or retrieval of social feedback.

The results of Investigation I may also be relevant here. The major finding was that people were more likely to scrutinize social feedback when they *expected* that the feedback would confirm their self-conceptions. These data suggest that people attach more importance to feedback that they believe will confirm their self-conceptions. If so, they should work harder to encode that feedback and consequently be better able to recall it later.

In this investigation, self-likable and self-dislikable participants were led to form the hypothesis that a future interaction partner had either a favorable or unfavorable appraisal of them. They then listened to a series of positive and negative statements that the partner had ostensibly made about them. Later, participants attempted to recall as many of these statements as possible. We made the following predictions:

(1) We expected that participants would preferentially recall statements that would confirm their self-conceptions and hypotheses because they would find confirmatory statements easier to process and more compelling. Specifically, we anticipated that self-likables would tend to recall positive statements and self-dislikables would tend to recall negative statements. Moreover, we predicted that participants testing the favorable hypotheses would tend to recall positive statements and those testing the unfavorable hypothesis would tend to recall negative statements.

(2) We expected that insofar as participants were motivated to acquire self-confirmatory feedback, they would work harder to encode and retrieve feedback (both positive and negative) when they suspected that it would confirm their self-conceptions. That is, we anticipated that self-

likables with the favorable hypothesis and self-dislikables with the unfavorable hypothesis would recall more statements than self-likables with the unfavorable hypothesis and self-dislikables with the favorable hypothesis.

Method

Participants

Fifty-eight female undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin participated in this experiment for extra credit in their introductory psychology course.

Procedure

The procedure was identical to the procedure used in Investigation I, with the following modifications. After delivering the hypothesis manipulation to the participant, the experimenter informed her that she would have an opportunity to test the hypothesis by listening to a tape recording of her conversation partner's evaluation of her. The experimenter then played a tape recording of a male voice reading the same 15 statements used in Investigation I. The statements were presented in the same order as in the first investigation. After playing the tape recording, the experimenter asked the participant to perform a 5-min, unrelated task (rating the masculinity-femininity of various descriptions of hypothetical individuals) to eliminate any short-term memory effects. The experimenter then asked the participant to write down on a blank sheet of paper as many of her partner's evaluative statements as she could remember. These protocols were later scored by two judges (average $r = .92$) who were blind to both self-conception and hypothesis conditions.

Results

Did participants' self-conceptions and hypotheses guide their recall of statements that another individual had ostensibly made about them? To address this question, we performed a 2(Self-Likable-Self-Dislikable) \times 2(Favorable-Unfavorable Hypothesis) \times 2(Positive-Negative Statement Type, a within-subjects factor) unweighted-means analysis of variance. As predicted, there was a reliable interaction between Self-Conception and Statement Type, $F(1, 53) = 4.48, p = .039$. Simple-effects analyses indicated that this interaction was primarily due to the fact that self-likables recalled more positive statements than negative statements, $F(1, 53) = 8.69, p = .005$. Although there was a tendency for self-dislikables to recall more negative statements than positive statements, this trend was not statistically reliable, $F(1, 53) = 1.70, n.s.$

The analysis also revealed the predicted interaction between Hypothesis and Statement Type, $F(1, 53) = 4.48, p = .039$. This interaction was primarily due to the fact that participants who were asked to test the favorable hypothesis recalled more positive statements than negative statements, $F(1, 53) = 8.69, p = .005$. There was a tendency for participants who were asked to test the unfavorable hypothesis to recall more negative statements than positive statements, although this trend was not statistically reliable, $F(1, 53) = 1.70, n.s.$

The overall analysis also revealed a marginally reliable interaction between Self-Conception and Hypothesis, $F(1, 53) = 2.83, p = .098$, such that participants recalled more statements (positive + negative) when their hypotheses were consistent with their self-conceptions. As can be seen in Table 3, this interaction was primarily due to the fact that self-dislikables recalled more feedback within the unfavorable hypothesis conditions than self-likables, $F(1, 53) = 4.23, p < .05$. There was also a tendency for self-likables to recall more feedback than self-dislikables within the favorable hypothesis conditions, although this tendency was not statistically reliable, $F < 1$. Therefore, these data do support the notion that participants recalled more feedback when testing an hypothesis that was consistent rather than inconsistent with their self-conceptions.

It is interesting to note that the increments in recall displayed by participants when their hypotheses were consistent with their self-conceptions occurred primarily for statements that were consistent with their self-conceptions. That is, the tendency of self-likables to recall more statements within the favorable as compared to unfavorable hypothesis conditions held much better for the positive statements, $F(1, 53) = 7.42, p < .009$, than for the negative statements, $F < 1$. Similarly, the tendency of self-dislikables to recall more statements within the unfavorable as compared to favorable hypothesis conditions occurred more for the negative, $F(1, 53) = 4.73, p < .04$ than for the positive statements, $F < 1$.

TABLE 3
INVESTIGATION III: RECALL OF STATEMENTS AS A FUNCTION OF SELF-CONCEPTION AND HYPOTHESIS

Self-perceived likability	Hypothesis	
	Favorable <i>M</i>	Unfavorable <i>M</i>
Self-dislikables		
Positives + negatives	4.04	4.63
Positives	2.08	2.03
Negatives	1.96	2.60
	(<i>n</i> = 13)	(<i>n</i> = 15)
Self-likables		
Positives + negatives	4.22	3.41
Positives	2.56	1.77
Negatives	1.66	1.64
	(<i>n</i> = 16)	(<i>n</i> = 13)

Note. The higher the numbers, the more sentences were recalled.

In summary, the results of this investigation offered support for our prediction that participants would preferentially recall social feedback that would confirm their self-conceptions and hypotheses concerning the interaction partners' appraisal of them. Moreover, this was especially true when they had anticipated in advance that the feedback they received would confirm their self-conceptions.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We propose here that as their social interactions unfold, people may engage in a variety of strategies designed to verify and confirm their self-conceptions. Early in their interactions, people may implement an information seeking strategy of self-verification. In Investigation I, for example, participants spent longer scrutinizing the statements of another person if they suspected that the person's appraisal was consistent rather than inconsistent with their self-conceptions.

During their interactions, people may verify their self-conceptions by behaviorally eliciting reactions that confirm their self-conceptions. Such behavioral elicitation processes may vary in intensity. At times, people may not make any special efforts to elicit reactions that confirm their self-conceptions, but may nevertheless do so simply because their characteristic behaviors happen to elicit such reactions. At other times, people may actively strive to elicit reactions that confirm their self-conceptions. Investigations II provided evidence of both of these "routine" and "crisis" forms of behavioral elicitation. Evidence for the routine form of behavioral elicitation was provided by the fact that participants tended to elicit confirming reactions regardless of how they suspected that their interaction partner felt toward them. The crisis form of behavioral elicitation was evident in the actions of those who suspected that their interaction partners' appraisals were inconsistent with their self-conceptions. It may be that the prospect that their interaction partner's appraisal might disconfirm their self-conceptions threatened participants sense of control. They responded to the threat by attempting to elicit what they perceived to be highly diagnostic feedback, that is, self-confirmatory feedback. Therefore, it appears that just as people may chronically engage in some behavioral elicitation, they may intensify their behavioral elicitation activities when they experience threats to the validity of their self-conceptions. Together, the two forms of behavioral elicitation may go a long way toward ensuring that even if they are confronted with interaction partners who do not initially view them in ways that are compatible with their self-conceptions, they may soon bring these partners' appraisals into harmony with their self-images.

After their interactions, people may verify their self-conceptions by recalling more feedback from interactions in which they had anticipated self-confirmatory rather than disconfirmatory feedback. In support of

this notion, participants in Investigation III recalled a greater number of their interaction partners' statements if they had formed the expectancy that their partners' appraisal was consistent with their self-conceptions. This finding parallels the results of Investigation I, in which participants scrutinized their interaction partners' statements longer when they anticipated that the statements would confirm their self-conceptions. Presumably, as in Investigation I, participants were especially motivated to acquire feedback that they anticipated would confirm their self-conceptions. Hence, they worked harder to encode and/or retrieve this feedback.

The results of Investigation III also suggested that self-conceptions may channel the quality as well as the quantity of information that people recall from their interactions. That is, participants preferentially recalled statements that would confirm their self-conceptions. Thus, the confirmatory or disconfirmatory nature of the individual statements, which had little impact on attention in Investigation I, did influence recall in the third investigation. This probably reflects the fact that when participants in Investigation I viewed the individual statements, they had no way of knowing in advance whether they were confirmatory or disconfirmatory. In contrast, when participants in Investigation III recalled the statements, they had already encoded and stored them. Presumably, by this time they had identified the confirmatory and disconfirmatory statements, and therefore had a basis for preferentially retrieving the self-confirmatory statements.⁸

One additional finding in the third investigation was that participants preferentially recalled statements that confirmed their hypotheses concerning their partners' appraisals. This finding is especially significant because people may often rely on their self-conceptions to generate hypotheses about the appraisals of others. Hence, their hypotheses and self-conceptions may often drive information processing in the same direction. And so, peoples' hypotheses about their interaction partners' appraisals and their self-conceptions may both operate to ensure that on those occasions when people do receive feedback that disconfirms their self-conceptions, they will seldom remember that feedback.

Despite the wide variety of self-verification strategies that people may employ as they move through various phases of their social interactions, there is still the possibility that these self-verification strategies may fail. On such occasions, people will be left with at least three options. One option might be to intensify their current self-verification attempts. An-

⁸ Although we believe that these data reflect processes occurring at the retrieval stage of information processing, it could be that participants devoted greater amounts of attention and processing time to confirmatory statements, so that this feedback was more easily recalled later on. This seems unlikely as there was no evidence that participants in Investigation I devoted more time to confirmatory statements.

other option may be to introduce new self-verification strategies, such as distorting, discrediting, or ignoring the feedback they are receiving (e.g., see Shrauger, 1975), or leaving the relationship in search of interaction partners whose appraisals of them are more compatible with their self-conceptions. Finally, people may change their self-conceptions. In most instances, and particularly if the self-conception is a central and important one, changing the self-conception will be the least-desirable option, since such a change may necessitate extensive restructuring, reorganization, and reinterpretation of various beliefs and values (for an insightful discussion of these issues and related ones, see Secord & Backman, 1961).

Self-Verification and Self-Enhancement

Our findings are relevant to the recent debate concerning the generality of self-enhancement strivings in social interactions (e.g., Shrauger, 1975). Advocates of self-enhancement theories argue that people have a need to increase their feelings of personal worth and value. This need is believed to be particularly strong among people with negative self-conceptions, since for such individuals the need to encounter positive feedback is frequently frustrated.

The research literature suggests that self-enhancement notions do characterize peoples' affective reactions to evaluative feedback. Thus, people like individuals who like them and dislike individuals who dislike them, and this is particularly true of people who think poorly of themselves. However, when investigators have focused on cognitive and behavioral reactions to social feedback, as we have done in our research, they have found that people display a clear preference for self-confirmatory feedback (for a thorough review of this literature, see Shrauger, 1975). Therefore, it appears that although self-enhancement effects do occur, they do so only within limited circumstances.

There is also reason to believe that self-verification processes may occur in some situations in which self-enhancement theory is simply inapplicable. For example, consider the many characteristics that people possess that they regard as neither good nor bad. In such instances, self-enhancement theory is mute. However, our self-verification formulation predicts that people should strive to verify these aspects of their self-conceptions. Indeed, we (Swann & Read, Note 1) have recently found that people seek to verify other self-conceptions such as their self-perceived emotionality and assertiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

In this report, we have presented evidence that people may use their social interactions as opportunities to gather social feedback that will verify their self-conceptions. In a series of investigations, we have shown how people may adopt unique strategies of self-verification during each

of three distinct phases of social interaction. Whether they were seeking social feedback, interacting with others, or recalling aspects of their interaction partners' reactions to them, people sought to verify and confirm their self-conceptions. Through such processes, people may create—both in their own minds and in the actual social environment—a social reality that verifies, validates, and sustains the very conceptions that initiate and guide these processes.

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