
The Search for Beauty and Truth: A Framework for Understanding Reactions to Evaluations

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It is proposed that independent desires for positivity and verisimilitude shape the sequence of cognitive operations people perform on self-relevant evaluations. In phase 1, the mere identification of evaluative information triggers a minimally cognitive tendency to embrace favorable evaluations and eschew unfavorable ones, a positive tropism. If sufficient motivation and cognitive resources are available, people proceed to phase 2, wherein they evaluate the verisimilitude of the evaluation by comparing it with a series of representations of self, beginning with their actual selves. To the extent that actual selves are uncertain and cognitive resources and motivation to continue processing are ample, people make additional comparisons with various possible selves (e.g., who they ought to be, who they ideally might be, and who they are according to "objectively accurate" indexes). If sufficient cognitive resources and motivation are still available, people will engage in a third phase, consisting of a cost-benefit analysis.

Truthful words are not always beautiful; beautiful words are not always truthful.

—Chinese proverb

At a purely descriptive level, the foregoing proverb is so straightforward that it smacks of the mundane. After all, who could argue with the suggestion that beauty and truth are distinct? Yet the proverb is beguiling because it alludes to a fundamental human conflict: Although beauty and truth are sometimes different, people want both of them just the same. As a result, they are sometimes torn between two desirable yet mutually incompatible courses of action. People with negative self-views are a case in point.¹ For such persons, choosing between the "beauty" in favorable evaluations and the "truth" in unfavorable evaluations is much like choosing between eating and drinking—they cannot deny either motive. In

such instances, they must cope with a problem that has no completely satisfactory solution.

Prescott Lecky (1945) was among the first to discuss the difficulties of people with negative self-views. Some years later, a legion of social scientists joined in debating whether people with negative self-views would opt for favorable or unfavorable evaluations. The "consistency-enhancement" debate that resulted has now raged for several decades, with self-enhancement theorists vociferously claiming that people prefer and seek favorable evaluations (e.g., Allport, 1939; Baumeister, 1982; Brown, 1986; E. E. Jones, 1964; E. E. Jones & Pittman, 1982; S. C. Jones, 1973; Schlenker, 1980, 1985; Steele, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976; Tesser, 1986, 1988; Wills, 1981) and self-consistency theorists just as adamantly contending that people seek evaluations that are consistent with their self-views, even if their self-views happen to be negative (e.g., Aronson, 1969; Lecky, 1945; Secord & Backman, 1965; Swann, 1983).

Enticed by the promise of a good fight, during the 1960s and 1970s proponents on both sides of the consistency-enhancement debate took up the challenge to bury the opposition under a mountain of findings favoring the home team. This approach generated a great deal of useful research that initially seemed to

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signal that self-enhancement theory had "won" (S. C. Jones, 1973). When Shrauger (1975) took a closer look, however, he found enough support for both sides to conclude that neither could claim a decisive victory.

In declaring a draw, Shrauger (1975) suggested that just as people favored positive evaluations when it came to affective responses (e.g., mood), they favored self-confirmatory evaluations when it came to cognitive responses (e.g., memory for evaluations). Unfortunately, neither Shrauger nor his followers (e.g., McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981; Moreland & Sweeney, 1984; Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987) offered a compelling explanation of *why* the two types of responses might behave so differently. This theoretical vacuum was particularly problematic because there was (and still is) considerable debate about how to define the terms *affective* and *cognitive*. As a result, there was no means of classifying many important behaviors (e.g., feedback seeking, choice of relationship partners) into one or the other category.

The latest round of attempts to reconcile the two theories has turned on expanding the definition of either self-enhancement or self-consistency so as to accommodate evidence that would otherwise be disconfirming. Representing the self-consistency team, Aronson (1992) sought to subsume self-enhancement theory by suggesting that people want to preserve the belief that they are competent and morally good as well as self-consistent. Representing the self-enhancement team, Steele, Spencer, and Lynch (1993) attempted to subsume self-consistency theory by suggesting that when people try to be consistent, their ultimate goal is to feel morally and adaptively adequate. With similar intent, Baumeister (1993) argued that people seek consistent evaluations as a means of protecting themselves against the unfavorable evaluations that they might encounter were they to seek overly favorable evaluations.

The appeal of these expanded theories is indisputable, for there is little they cannot explain, whether it be a preference for favorable evaluations, a preference for unfavorable evaluations, or no preference whatsoever. Such explanatory power comes at a considerable cost, however. By overemphasizing the ways in which self-consistency and self-enhancement strivings can work together, the expanded theories obscure the unique properties of these two motivational forces, much as overemphasizing the functional similarities of the motives to drink and eat might obscure their unique properties. More generally, by clouding the original meanings of self-enhancement and self-consistency theory, the expansionist's approaches render the terms ambiguous and quite possibly misleading (for similar critiques directed specifically at dissonance theory, see Abelson, 1983; Greenwald & Ronnis, 1978).

For this and related reasons, in this article we have shifted to terms whose meanings are more in keeping with the original theoretical statements. Specifically, we have replaced *self-enhancement strivings* with *positivity strivings*, the latter term referring exclusively to a tendency to prefer or seek favorable evaluations. Similarly, we have replaced *self-consistency strivings* with *self-verification strivings*, the latter term referring to a tendency to prefer and seek evaluations that confirm self-views that are firmly held.²

One of our goals here will be to examine the interplay between positivity strivings and self-verification strivings. A second goal will be to examine how these two motives fit into a somewhat broader scheme of motivational forces. We propose that two fundamental motives organize people's reactions to evaluations: a desire for positive evaluations and a desire for verisimilitude (i.e., truthlikeness). Whereas positive evaluations are valued because they usually signal warmth and acceptance, truthful evaluations are prized because they ordinarily provide information about how one fits into the social order (this assumes that subjective "truth" is associated with objective "Truth," wherein the lower-case *t* refers to truth in a subjective sense and the upper-case *T* refers to Truth in an objective sense). We assume that both these desires represent distinct motives, each being adaptive in its own way. We assume further that the two motives are independent and that neither can be subsumed or explained by the other motive. In what follows, we consider the cognitive operations that determine how the desire for positivity and verisimilitude gain expression.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE COGNITIVE OPERATIONS UNDERLYING REACTIONS TO EVALUATIONS

Let us provide a caveat before beginning. Our intent in this brief article is merely to introduce our framework and to present some preliminary evidence that supports its plausibility. We are *not* attempting to provide an exhaustive review of the literature.

One of our major assumptions here is that information-processing capacity and motivation will constrain the expression of positivity and verisimilitude strivings by determining how deeply people analyze information before responding. When people receive an evaluation, they begin by categorizing it as favorable or unfavorable. As can be seen in Figure 1, this will produce a positive tropism, a reflexlike, minimally cognitive tendency to seek and embrace favorable evaluations. If processing capacity and motivation allow, people then gauge the verisimilitude of the evaluation by comparing it against one or more self-representations, each of which presumably captures a unique "truth." For reasons discussed below, people will usually begin by comparing the evalu-

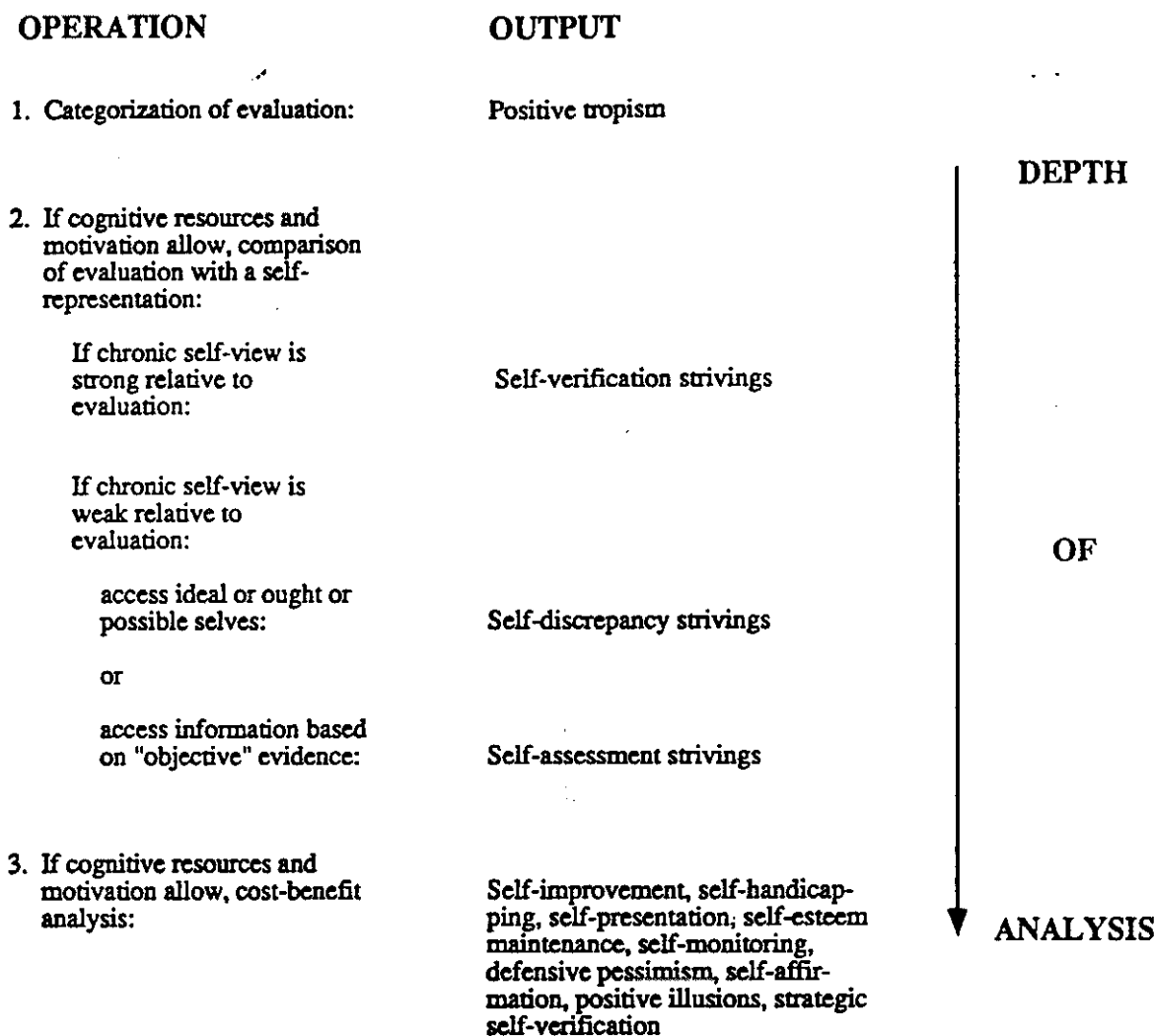


Figure 1 Cognitive operations underlying several self-related motives.

ation against their beliefs about who they actually are (i.e., their *actual selves*). When they rely on their actual selves to guide behavior, self-verification strivings (Swann, 1990) will result.

If their actual self-views are uncertain or if their motivation to continue processing is high,³ people may go on to refer to various *possible selves* in choosing how to behave (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As suggested by self-discrepancy theory (e.g., Higgins, 1987), they may attempt to reduce the discrepancy between their actual selves and the persons they think they ought to be (*ought selves*) or the persons they think they can be under optimal circumstances (*ideal selves*). Alternatively, they may rely on a representation of who they are according to a source that seems objectively accurate, producing self-assessment processes (e.g., Trope, 1986).

If processing resources and motivation are still plentiful, people will proceed to a third phase that consists of a cost-benefit analysis of the outputs of the earlier phases. For example, in deciding whether to interact with a favorable or unfavorable evaluator, a person with negative self-views may reason as follows:

Hmmm. . . . Well, the favorable evaluator obviously thinks well of me, and that's nice. But she thinks I am socially skilled, and in reality I am pretty klutzy in a lot of social situations. So I might feel uneasy knowing that she thinks I am something different from what I really am. However, I am only going to interact with her for 3 minutes—hardly enough time for her to figure out what I am really like. And that snarly evaluator might be kind of a jerk. So maybe I should go with the more favorable evaluator . . .

Of course, because this cost-benefit analysis is guided by people's idiosyncratic goals, there is no guarantee that it will succeed in maximizing their objective outcomes (or even their subjective outcomes). Our point is simply that if the decision is important enough, people will presumably make an effort to consider all the angles and choose the response they believe will maximize their outcomes.

In short, we distinguish three distinct phases in people's reactions to evaluations from others. In the first phase, people respond to the sheer positivity of evaluations. In the second, they attempt to assess the verisimilitude of the evaluation by comparing it with any of several representations of themselves. Finally, in the third phase, people consider their perceptions of the evaluation, themselves, and the social situation in a cost-benefit analysis that is designed to maximize their outcomes.

Before examining each of these three phases in detail, we will briefly characterize our approach. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of our framework is its focus on the *cognitive* operations that determine how positivity and verisimilitude strivings manifest themselves. One advantage of this approach is that it may help unify current work on the self, a subarea that is terribly fragmented. One prominent source (and symptom) of such fragmentation has been the schism between the "why psychologists," who have sought to identify the motives underlying people's responses, and the "how psychologists," who have examined the cognitive mechanisms that shape people's responses. Our framework wedges these two approaches by analyzing the cognitive operations that determine how the desires for positivity and verisimilitude gain expression.

By identifying the cognitive processes whereby these two basic motives shape responses, our approach should also illuminate the deep-structure similarities between behaviors or strategies that previous workers have regarded as unrelated. We suggest, for example, that positivity strivings underlie a host of phenomena that have been discussed under such diverse topics as positive illusions (e.g., Taylor, 1989), learned optimism (Seligman, 1991), and strategic self-presentation (Baumeister, 1982; E. E. Jones & Pittman, 1982). Similarly, we suggest that verisimilitude strivings may channel behaviors as diverse as self-verification (Swann, 1990), self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987), and self-assessment (Trope, 1986). Once the commonalities among these processes are recognized, researchers will be in a better position to predict how and when they will control behavior.

THE POSITIVE TROPISM

We suspect that the most elementary form of positivity strivings is the positive tropism mentioned above—a propensity to approach superficially accepting organ-

isms and avoid threatening ones. In principle, this tropism is quite simple, requiring only the identification of evaluations as favorable or unfavorable to trigger it. It follows that even very young children should display it. They seem to do so. For example, shortly after developing the ability to discriminate facial characteristics, 5-month-olds begin attending more to smiling faces than nonsmiling ones (Shapiro, Eppler, Haith, & Reis, 1987). At about the same time, children also begin orienting to voices that have the melodic contours of acceptance (Fernald, 1989). Later, when children become verbal and thus capable of rating themselves, they endorse positive descriptions of themselves before endorsing negative ones (e.g., Benenson & Dweck, 1986; Eshel & Klein, 1981; Nicholls, 1978, 1979; Stipek, 1981; Stipek & Daniels, 1988; Stipek & Tannatt, 1984). These findings offer converging evidence that a rudimentary preference for positivity emerges at a tender age. It presumably continues to shape behavior throughout life, even after somewhat more sophisticated motives emerge. One such relatively sophisticated motive is the desire for truth.

THE QUEST FOR TRUTH

One difficulty with searching for truth is recognizing it when one encounters it. Philosophers have suggested that people resolve this difficulty by translating regularities and recurrent patterns in the information they encounter into beliefs. They then treat these beliefs as proxies for Truth and use them as the standard against which to compare incoming information (e.g., Kuhn, 1970; Lakatos, 1974; Polanyi, 1968). In effect, then, people strive for verisimilitude by forming beliefs and seeking confirmation for these beliefs (e.g., Kruglanski, 1990). Karl Popper believed that this mechanism (or something akin to it) is so fundamental to mental life that its rudiments are present at birth:

One of the most important of [the] expectations [that children are born with] is the expectation of finding a regularity. It is connected with an inborn propensity to look for regularities, or with a *need* to *find* regularities. . . . This "instinctive" expectation of finding regularities . . . is logically a priori to all observational experience, for it is prior to any recognition of similarities . . . and all observation involves the recognition of similarities (or dissimilarities). (Popper, 1963, pp. 47-48)

By adulthood, the preference for information that confirms expectation is well established. Studies of concept formation and concept use, for example, suggest that people are more compelled by positive instances of concepts than negative ones (e.g., Hovland & Weiss, 1953). Similarly, people perceive evidence that confirms their hypotheses and beliefs to be more trustworthy, diagnostic, and easy to process than disconfirmatory

evidence (e.g., Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1956; Klayman & Ha, 1987). And when people test the validity of their propositions and beliefs, they are especially likely to seek hypothesis-confirmatory evidence (e.g., M. Snyder & Swann, 1978; Wason & Johnson-Laird, 1972).⁴

The research literature thus suggests that when people seek the truth about themselves, they will prefer evidence that confirms their representations of themselves. In what follows, we consider several such representations: actual selves, ideal selves, ought selves, and selves defined by objectively accurate criteria.

Using actual selves to guide behavior: Self-verification strivings. Even if there were no such thing as a general preference for expectancy-consistent information, there are several reasons that people might prefer and seek information that confirms their chronic self-views. Most important, people's self-views theoretically reside at the center of their psychological universe, providing the context for all other knowledge. For this reason, stable self-views provide people with a critically important source of coherence, an invaluable means of defining their existence, organizing experience, predicting future events, and guiding social interaction (cf. Cooley, 1902; Epstein, 1973; Lecky, 1945; Mead, 1934; Secord & Backman, 1965).

In addition, by stabilizing behavior, chronic self-views make people predictable to their interaction partners (Athay & Darley, 1981; Goffman, 1955). Through repeated exposure to this fact of social life, people come to associate evaluations that confirm their self-views with feelings of authenticity, psychological coherence, and control while linking nonverifying evaluations to feelings of wariness, bemusement, and lack of control. In this way, stable self-views foster a coherent social environment that, in turn, stabilizes the original self-views.⁵

The upshot is that adults may seek self-verifying evaluations either because such evaluations bolster their perception that the world is coherent and orderly (*epistemic* concerns) or because being evaluated in a self-verifying manner will ensure that their interactions will proceed smoothly (*pragmatic* concerns). Furthermore, because these preferences may be automatized, people need not compute the epistemic and pragmatic consequences of a given behavior every time they engage in it. Instead, they automatically know to behave in ways that increase the probability that they will be perceived congruently.

Under some conditions, these epistemic and pragmatic concerns should be sufficiently powerful to override the desire for positive evaluations. This makes sense. To the extent that stable self-views anchor people's knowledge system, dramatic self-concept change will rock the entire epistemic boat. When this happens, people lose confidence in their ability to discriminate truly favorable evaluations from favorable but deceptive ones.

This would, in turn, impair their willingness to seek ostensibly favorable evaluations. Simply put, if people cannot be confident that their perceptions of reality are correct, they cannot confidently employ any strategy based on these perceptions.

In fact, recent research has shown that people prefer self-confirming social feedback and interaction partners, even if it means seeking negative evaluations. For example, people with negative self-views are more inclined to seek and receive unfavorable evaluations than people with positive self-views (e.g., Hixon & Swann, 1993; McNulty & Swann, 1994; Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989; Swann & Read, 1981a; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992). Similarly, people with negative self-views prefer interaction partners who appraise them unfavorably, whether the alternative is interacting with those who appraise them favorably (e.g., Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992; Swann et al., 1989, 1990; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992) or participating in a different experiment (Swann, Wenzlaff, & Tafari, 1992). Moreover, people seek evaluations that verify their self-views whether these self-views happen to be global (e.g., depressive beliefs) or relatively specific (e.g., athletic, artistic). Finally, both epistemic and pragmatic reasons seem to underlie self-verification strivings (e.g., Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992).

Researchers have also identified some of the factors that determine when the desire for self-verification will override the positive tropism. This research was predicated on evidence that experimentally depleting people of cognitive resources tends to truncate the normal information-processing sequence (Ben Zur & Breznitz, 1981), forcing people to base their behavior on the output of early, relatively simple operations (see Gilbert, 1989; Norman & Bobrow, 1975). Depriving people of cognitive resources by encouraging them to rush their decisions, for example, should leave them time to identify the stimuli but should keep them from performing the additional operations required for self-verification. Their behavior should therefore reflect the positive tropism.

Swann et al. (1990) tested this hypothesis by depriving some people of cognitive resources while they chose between interaction partners who evaluated them in a relatively favorable or unfavorable manner. In one study, participants were resource deprived by having them rush their choice of interaction partner. Participants with negative self-views who were rushed displayed a strong preference for the favorable evaluator over the unfavorable evaluator, presumably because they lacked the cognitive resources (i.e., time) to perform the operations underlying self-verification. In contrast, participants who were unrushed self-verified, presumably because they

possessed the requisite cognitive resources. Hixon and Swann (1993, Experiment 1) and Paulhus and Levitt (1987) provided further support for this argument by showing that people with negative self-views were particularly inclined to endorse positive self-descriptors when they were deprived of cognitive resources.⁶

Recent research thus provides converging evidence that the positive tropism is a computationally simple tendency to approach and embrace friendly stimuli and avoid and reject menacing stimuli. Self-verification, in contrast, appears to be a more complex process that requires the identification of stimuli *plus* the added step of comparing the stimuli with a representation of an actual self.

Although people may often rely on representations of an actual self to approximate truth, they will not always do so. For example, they may sometimes be sufficiently uncertain of an actual self (e.g., because of lack of experience in some domain) that they decide that it is untrustworthy. At other times, people may be moderately certain of an actual self but ignore it because a possible self is more salient. They may, for instance, rely on an ought self or ideal self because something has happened that has made it very important to develop a certain quality. Alternatively, they may feel compelled to assess the objective accuracy of their characteristics because they are making an extremely significant decision (e.g., choosing a career). In each of the foregoing instances, people may guide their behavior by referring to one or more possible selves (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986). In the following section, we consider two such possible selves, ought and ideal selves. Next we turn to possible selves defined by information from objective sources.

Using ought and ideal selves to guide behavior: Self-discrepancy strivings. Higgins (1987, 1989) has distinguished two particularly important possible selves. One is the ideal self, which refers to attributes that people (or their significant others) wish they had ideally (e.g., James, 1890). People should be most likely to rely on an ideal self when they are inexperienced in a given domain: Witness Turner's (1968) suggestion that young children equate their actual selves with their ideal selves and then slowly "edit" their actual selves in light of their experiences. People may also strive to obtain confirmation for an ideal self when there is a great deal of social pressure to conform to a particular ideal. Note, for example, the propensity for contemporary Americans to aspire to the ideal body types featured by the advertising and entertainment industries.

Higgins has also discussed the ought self, the self to which one aspires to satisfy a sense of duty and obligation. Like ideal selves, ought selves are probably especially influential when people have little information

about who they actually are. In addition, ought selves are apt to be especially influential when the source of the sense of obligation (either a person or a social norm) is highly salient.

Using objective information to guide behavior: Self-assessment strivings. Another strategy for defining a possible self is to establish the upper or lower limits of what one *can* be according to some objectively accurate criterion. To this end, people may seek highly credible information that seems likely to be objectively accurate. Such self-assessment processes will, of course, be limited to those self-views for which objective referents are readily available (e.g., intelligence) and may not apply to self-views that lack such referents (e.g., emotionality, self-worth).

Trope (1986) has discussed the search for objectively accurate information in terms of a desire for diagnosticity. Although we are in general agreement with Trope's position, we disagree with his apparent belief that self-verification and diagnosticity strivings are antagonistic and mutually exclusive. Instead, we believe that the two motives represent complementary means of maximizing the verisimilitude of self-knowledge. To the extent that a relevant self-view is firmly held, people will usually feel no need to assess its objective accuracy but will instead accept its accuracy and work to verify it. However, when the self-view is weakly held or when people have good reason to question its accuracy (e.g., when making an important decision), they will seek information about its objective accuracy.

This analysis suggests that when people choose relationship partners who see them as they see themselves, they may do so because they are interested in obtaining self-verification or because they suspect that a self-verifying partner is highly perceptive (and thus likely to give them information that is objectively accurate). Two recent studies have shown that the desire for self-verification is indeed distinct from the desire for objective accuracy. Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler (1992) had students talk out loud as they chose interaction partners. When objective raters coded these think-aloud protocols, they discovered three major reasons that people self-verified. The most prominent reason was epistemic (e.g., "I think [the unfavorable evaluator] is a better choice because . . . he sums up basically how I feel"; "[The self-verifying evaluator] better reflects my own view of myself, from experience"). The second reason was pragmatic: "[The unfavorable evaluator] seems like a person I could sort of really get along with"; "If I choose [the unfavorable evaluator], it seems to me that he'll be more prepared for my anxiety about being around people I don't know. Seeing as he knows what he's dealing with, we might get along better." Evidence of both the epistemic and pragmatic reasons, then, indicated that participants were interested in obtaining self-verification. Independent

of these self-verification strivings, however, participants also mentioned a desire for objective accuracy. Specifically, some students voiced a concern with their partners' perceptiveness: "I'd like to meet with [the favorable evaluator] because obviously they're more intelligent . . . more able to see the truth"; "Well, actually [the unfavorable evaluator] . . . hits me right on the point . . . someone who could see that just by the answers is pretty astute" (p. 401).

A recent study of married couples provides additional evidence that the desire for self-verification is distinct from the desire for objective accuracy. In this research, participants self-verified by committing themselves more to spouses who appraised them in a manner that confirmed their self-views (Swann, Hixon, & De La Ronde, 1992). People with negative self-views, for example, were more inclined to commit themselves to spouses who evaluated them unfavorably. Consistent with self-verification theory, people expressed more commitment to the extent that they believed that their spouses' appraisals "made them feel that they really knew themselves." Contrary to the idea that a desire for objective accuracy might influence commitment, people were *not* more committed to spouses whom they perceived as perceptive.

These findings suggest that people are sensitive to the verisimilitude of the evaluations they receive and that they may gauge the verisimilitude of those evaluations by computing the discrepancy between the evaluation and any of several representations of themselves (e.g., actual self, objectively accurate self). If, after estimating the verisimilitude of the evaluations, people still have ample motivation and cognitive resources available (e.g., when the behavior is highly consequential), they will move on to a third, strategic phase.

STRATEGIC ANALYSES

The goal of the strategic phase will be to maximize outcomes through a cost-benefit analysis. To this end, people will consider outputs from earlier operations as well as information about the evaluation, themselves, and social contextual factors in generating hypothetical "if-then" scenarios. The outcome of these scenarios will guide behavior.

These processes will allow people to pursue their quest for positivity and verisimilitude using a host of subtle and complex strategies. Moreover, the operations that give rise to these strategic processes may become automatized, thus diminishing the amount of cognitive resources they require. Such strategic analyses may thus lead to a wide array of self-serving activities, including those discussed by researchers interested in self-handicapping (E. E. Jones & Berglas, 1978), self-monitoring (M. Snyder, 1980), strategic self-presentation

(e.g., Baumeister, 1982; E. E. Jones, 1964; E. E. Jones & Pittman, 1982; Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976), defensive pessimism (Cantor & Norem, 1989), self-serving attributional activity (e.g., Bradley, 1978; Greenwald, 1980; C. R. Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Zuckerman, 1979), biased prediction (e.g., Alloy & Abramson, 1988; Kunda, 1987; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Weinstein, 1980), self-esteem maintenance (e.g., Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Tesser, 1986, 1988; Wills, 1981), and self-affirmation (e.g., Steele, 1988). The inherent complexity of these strategic analyses means that the resulting behaviors often cannot be taken at face value. For example, people with negative self-views may seek unfavorable evaluations because they assume such evaluations will ultimately foster self-improvement.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE EXISTENCE OF ALL THREE PHASES

Hixon and Swann (1993, Study 4) attempted to capture each of the three phases (positive tropism, verisimilitude strivings, and strategic analysis) in a single experiment. Participants, all of whom had negative self-views, learned that two other students had evaluated them. Their task was to choose to interact with either the relatively favorable or the relatively unfavorable evaluator. In the low epistemic/pragmatic consequences condition, the experimenter described the interaction in a way that fostered the perception of low epistemic consequences (the interaction partner was not particularly credible) as well as low pragmatic consequences (the interaction would be quite brief). In the high epistemic/pragmatic consequences condition, the experimenter described the interaction so as to foster the perception of high epistemic consequences (the interaction partner was a graduate student in clinical psychology) and high pragmatic consequences (the interaction would be 2 hr long).⁷ The experimenter also manipulated the amount of time participants had to make their decision. Some participants received 15 s (low reflection), others received 45 s (moderate reflection), and still others received 3 min (high reflection).

Hixon and Swann (1993) expected the manipulation of epistemic/pragmatic consequences to influence responses only when participants had time to consider these consequences fully—in the high-reflection condition. Specifically, they predicted that among participants who had high reflection time, those in the low epistemic and pragmatic consequences condition would choose the positive evaluator (i.e., strategic positivity strivings) and participants in the high epistemic/pragmatic consequences condition would be particularly likely to choose the negative evaluator (i.e., strategic self-verification). In contrast, they expected that the consequences manipu-

lation would have no impact on participants in the low and moderate-reflection conditions. Thus, regardless of consequences, they expected participants in the low-reflection condition to choose the positive evaluator (i.e., the positive tropism) and participants in the moderate-reflection condition to choose the negative evaluator (i.e., self-verification).

Consistent with prediction, those in the low-reflection-time condition displayed the positive tropism: a strong preference for the favorable evaluator. This occurred whether consequences were high or low. When participants had moderate reflection time, they were more inclined to self-verify by choosing the unfavorable evaluator. Once again, the consequences manipulation had no impact on behavior. The consequences manipulation had substantial impact in the high-reflection-time conditions, however. That is, participants in the low-consequences condition preferred the favorable evaluator, and participants in the high-consequences condition preferred the unfavorable evaluator. Apparently, then, strategic analyses influence behavior only when people have the resources (e.g., time) available to perform the necessary cognitive operations. These findings thus highlight the three distinct phases of our model: positive tropism, verisimilitude strivings, and strategic activity.

PIVOTAL VARIABLES THAT CONSTRAIN THE OPERATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH THE THREE PHASES

At least three classes of variables will determine how people translate their positivity and verisimilitude strivings into behavior: characteristics of the self-view, the response, and the social psychological context.

Characteristics of the self-view. To the extent that self-views are firmly held, people will be more inclined to rely on them in organizing their perceptions of the world (i.e., epistemically) and their social relationships (i.e., pragmatically). As a result, strong, highly certain self-views should be evoked more quickly and will therefore be more likely to guide behavior (e.g., Sherman & Gorkin, 1980; M. Snyder & Swann, 1976; Swann & Read, 1981b). Support for this proposition comes from evidence that people are most inclined to act on self-views that are high in certainty (e.g., Pelham, 1991; Pelham & Swann, 1994; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann, Pelham, & Chidester, 1988).⁸

Theoretically, increments in the strength of any self-view—including the certainty of the actual self, coherence and clarity of ideal and ought selves, or diagnosticity of objectively accurate selves—should increase the likelihood of the self-view guiding behavior. If so, then it is useful to consider the determinants of self-view strength. Pelham (1991) has shown that people base the

certainty of actual selves on the perceived consistency and quantity of evidence supporting these self-views. Similarly, Higgins (1989) has suggested that children whose caregivers are consistently and clearly responsive to their actions are more likely to acquire strong ideal and ought selves. This effect should be accentuated insofar as caregivers are emotionally significant to the child. Some have also suggested that people who are chronically high in self-awareness should have more easily accessible ideal and ought selves. Such people should be more likely to notice discrepancies from these self-guides and thus regulate their behavior accordingly. Along these same lines, self-views that are based on objectively accurate information should have the most influence on behavioral decisions when the source of the objectively accurate information is perceived to be highly diagnostic for the evaluative dimension in question.

Characteristics of the response. Different types of responses require respondents to engage in different degrees of processing. At one end of this continuum are *affective* responses. Such responses require little more than an introspective glance at one's current mood state. As a result, when people encounter an evaluation and are then asked to report their moods, they will tend to respond on the basis of the superficial characteristics of the evaluation. They will, for example, feel no obligation to assess the verisimilitude of the evaluation but may instead respond on the basis of the sheer positivity of the evaluation (see Langer's, 1989, discussion of mindless behavior).

In contrast, *cognitive* responses (e.g., perceptions of the accuracy of feedback) logically require people to compare the stimulus (e.g., an evaluation) against some criterion. Not surprisingly, then, the research literature shows that such responses are influenced by the fit between the stimulus and a self-representation (e.g., McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981; Moreland & Sweeney, 1984; Swann et al., 1987), unless people lack the cognitive resources to engage in the required operations (Hixon & Swann, 1993, Study 1).

This suggests that an important difference exists between affective and cognitive responses (e.g., Shrauger, 1975; Swann et al., 1987), such that affective responses usually require less processing. If so, then encouraging people to process evaluative feedback deeply and then measuring affective reactions might cause these reactions to resemble cognitive reactions. Swann, Tafarodi, and Pinel (1995) found support for this proposition. They exposed people with low self-esteem to several doses of favorable feedback. Although participants were initially pleased with the praise (i.e., a positive tropism), they eventually became anxious and upset, presumably because the sheer magnitude of the favorable feedback

demanded their attention and forced them to recognize that it clashed with their self-views (for a related study, see Brickman, 1972).

Just as the foregoing research suggests that verisimilitude strivings will sometimes influence affective measures (e.g., mood), other research suggests that positivity strivings will sometimes shape cognitive measures (e.g., feedback seeking). For example, Swann et al. (1989) had participants complete two cognitive measures, a within-attribute and a between-attribute measure of feedback seeking. The within-attribute measure forced participants to choose between an unfavorable evaluation regarding a limitation (i.e., self-verifying) and a favorable evaluation regarding a limitation (i.e., nonverifying). As in similar work, people picked the self-verifying negative evaluation (see also Swann & Read, 1981b; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992). In contrast, the between-attribute measure allowed participants to have it both ways in that they could select a self-verifying evaluation pertaining to either a strength or a weakness. In this case, participants chose a self-verifying evaluation regarding a strength, thus satisfying their positivity and verisimilitude (in this case, self-verification) strivings simultaneously.

The within- and between-attribute distinction used by Swann et al. (1989) is probably representative of a larger dichotomy. Many responses are akin to the within-attribute measure in that they force people with negative self-views to choose between satisfying their positivity and their verisimilitude strivings. Such responses include (a) rating the diagnosticity and accuracy of feedback, making attributions regarding feedback, and rating an evaluator's credibility; (b) choosing between a verifying and a nonverifying partner; and (c) deciding to behave in a verifying or a nonverifying manner (for a review, see Swann, 1990).

At the same time, many responses are, like the between-attribute measure, logically unrelated to verisimilitude strivings. Social comparison processes offer a good example. Ordinarily, the desire for verisimilitude should not compel people with negative self-views to make themselves feel worse by comparing themselves with their superiors. For this reason, people who feel that they lack talent may enjoy the fruits of downward comparison without suffering adverse epistemic or pragmatic consequences (e.g., Gorenflo & Crano, 1989; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Tesser, 1986; Tesser & Campbell, 1983; Wills, 1981). Other responses also tend to be immune to verisimilitude strivings. Brown, Collins, and Schmidt (1988), for example, have shown that persons with low self-esteem may promote their own group when they are *indirectly* but not *directly* responsible for the group's performance (cf. Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). Similarly, Baumgardner, Kaufman, and Levy (1989) have

shown that by publicly derogating others, victims of chronic negative feedback can make themselves feel good without claiming to be persons who they are not. In these and similar instances, people can satisfy their positivity strivings without jeopardizing firmly held self-views.

Characteristics of the social context. The social psychological context may also influence how people respond to evaluative information. For example, the type of relationship may determine whether people place a premium on the positivity or the verisimilitude of their partners' evaluation. Dating partners know that they must recruit the affections of their partner if the relationship is to survive: No positivity, no more dates. When courtship culminates in marriage, however, the dating game is over; the commitment is made. Convinced that they are in the relationship for the long haul and that it will be both epistemically and pragmatically advantageous to be understood by their spouses, marriage partners work to bring their spouses to recognize their actual selves.

This reasoning led Swann, De La Ronde, and Hixon (1994) to test the hypothesis that people in dating relationships would prefer positive feedback and people in marital relationships would prefer self-verifying feedback. Dating and married persons completed a measure of their actual self-views while their partner evaluated them on a complementary measure. A measure of intimacy (e.g., relationship satisfaction, time spent together, self-disclosure) served as the primary criterion variable. Whereas dating persons were more intimate when their partners viewed them favorably, married persons were more intimate when their partners saw them as they saw themselves, even when their self-views were negative.

Other aspects of the social context may influence the extent to which ideal or ought selves influence behavior. For example, people may be especially inclined to aspire to an ideal or ought self when their social group emphasizes a particular quality (e.g., athleticism among teenage boys). Likewise, situations that contain cues that heighten self-awareness, such as mirrors or cameras, should heighten the accessibility of ideal and ought selves.

In general, we believe that in many contexts, people will fail to obtain information pertaining to an objectively accurate self owing to problems of acquiring such information or even identifying the appropriate criterion. At times, however, a decision may be so important that people systematically work to acquire such objective information about themselves, as when they are choosing a career or marriage partner.

Interactive effects of the pivotal variables. Characteristics of self-views, the response, and the social context may

interact with one another in determining how people behave. For example, just as people may strive to verify moderately certain self-views in the context of a marriage relationship, they may restrict their self-verification efforts to highly certain self-views in the context of friendship relationships, in which the premium placed on self-verification is presumably smaller. Similar interactions may occur involving other self-representations, responses, and contextual factors.

Methodological notes. One implication of our model is that future researchers who hope to identify the boundary conditions of positivity and verisimilitude strivings must measure the self-views of their participants and direct their attention to the responses of people with negative self-views. Continued reliance on the responses of people whose self-views are unknown will be unproductive in this regard. For different reasons, the results of role-playing studies may reveal little about the interplay of positivity and verisimilitude strivings. Most important, role-playing instructions may encourage people to engage in strategic analyses that they might ordinarily fail to employ because they lack cognitive resources and motivation.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

During the last few years, there has been a virtual explosion of theories related to the self (Banaji & Prentice, 1994). Although this development has brought visibility and excitement to the area, the introduction of one formulation after another has produced a veritable jungle of partially overlapping theories that are, at best, loosely organized. The intellectual free-for-all that has resulted has been as disorienting as it has been stimulating.

We see this article as a preliminary attempt to remedy this state of affairs. Our general objective was to integrate the approach of the "why psychologists," who have asked what motives underlie responses to evaluative feedback, and the "how psychologists," who have examined the cognitive mechanisms that shape people's responses to evaluative feedback. Our framework attempts to relate these two approaches by articulating the cognitive operations that determine how the desires for positivity and verisimilitude influence people's reactions. By identifying these cognitive operations, our framework should help to illuminate the links between behaviors that have heretofore been understood in terms of ostensibly unrelated motives.

Although we present some preliminary evidence in support of our framework, much work remains to be done. For example, most of the research relevant to our framework has focused on the relation between positivity and self-verification strivings; relatively little research has asked how these strivings interact with other expressions

of the desire for verisimilitude (e.g., self-discrepancy and self-assessment strivings). Similarly, many of our speculations regarding the boundary conditions of these motivational processes remain unsubstantiated. Nevertheless, we hope that identification of the cognitive operations that underlie motivational processes may lead to a deeper understanding of the how and why of reactions to evaluations of the self.

NOTES

1. We use the term *self-view* as a generic label to refer to any feelings or beliefs about the self. This includes everything from global self-esteem (worthy vs. unworthy) to quite specific self-concepts (e.g., athletic, dominant, intelligent). Although there are important differences in the properties of these unique forms of self-knowledge, for purposes of this discussion these differences are unimportant.

2. In addition to the foregoing problems, we also have reservations about the meanings attributed to both self-enhancement and consistency. For example, although the term "self-enhancement" implies that the self-concept is implicated in the processes to which it refers, in reality the self-concept is *not* involved in many self-enhancement processes (e.g., strategic self-presentation, self-esteem maintenance, the positive tropism). The term *enhancement* is likewise inappropriate because it means "to make greater, heighten," and some prominent researchers (e.g., Tesser, 1988) have incorporated efforts to *maintain high self-esteem* into the self-enhancement family. We are troubled with the term *self-consistency* because the construct has been used to refer to a desire for self-consistency *per se*. We favor the term *self-verification* because it is more restrictive, referring to processes motivated by a desire to confirm firmly held, chronic self-views that are caused by dual concerns with intrapsychic and interpersonal coherence.

3. Motivation to continue processing will be high when the decision is important. This will, in turn, depend on numerous factors, such as need to avoid or seek specific or nonspecific closure in a given domain (e.g., Kruglanski, 1990). In addition, people will be inclined to discontinue processing if the evaluation can readily be assimilated to an existing self-structure (i.e., it is viewed as old news) or if it is so discrepant with existing knowledge that it seems absurd. In contrast, people may work to reconcile modest discrepancies between the evaluation and self-structures by engaging in further processing (see Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall's, 1961, discussion of latitudes of acceptance and rejection).

4. This is not to say that beliefs are completely impervious to disconfirmatory information; if people encounter *repeated* disconfirmations of their beliefs, they abandon them. Nevertheless, the research literature implies that as long as people are reasonably certain of their beliefs, they will search for information that confirms them.

5. In a sense, the feeling of coherence produced by stable beliefs is nothing more than a sense of competence. Yet it is a very special form of competence. Whereas most competences are localized in particular tasks or domains (social, athletic, etc.), the sense of coherence grows out of people's ability to understand reality and themselves. Depriving people of this special form of competence is thus tantamount to taking away their sense of self. As a result, they will not merely feel incompetent, they will suffer the severe disorientation and psychological anarchy that people feel when their very existence is threatened.

6. Paulhus and Levitt (1987) deprived people of cognitive resources by introducing affective arousal; affective arousal has many of the properties of cognitive load (e.g., Easterbrook, 1959).

7. The conceptual focus of Hixon and Swann's (1983) article (namely, the effectiveness of introspection) led them to emphasize the results of the low epistemic/pragmatic consequences condition and merely mention the results of the high epistemic/pragmatic consequences condition in a footnote.

8. In principle, a person who is *extremely* high in self-certainty may simply dismiss discrepant feedback out of hand. Thus far, however, we

have not encountered participants who are sufficiently certain of their self-views to do this.

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