

## Self-verification 360°: Illuminating the Light and Dark Sides

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*Self-verification theory assumes that people actively work to preserve their self-views, even if these self-views are negative. This article considers the benefits and drawbacks of receiving self-verification. Direct benefits of self-verification include psychological coherence, reduced anxiety, and improved health. Indirect benefits include greater intimacy and trust in relationships and more harmonious social interactions. Drawbacks of self-verification strivings are limited to people with negative self-views, who may find that self-verifying evaluations help perpetuate low self-esteem and depression and stabilize unhealthy relationships. Elucidating the processes underlying self-verification may bring more light to its dark side; specifically, it may reveal insights about raising self-esteem and building happiness.*

**Keywords:** Self-verification; Self-views; Self-esteem; Self-acceptance; Happiness.

Self-verification theory asserts that people are motivated to seek confirmation of their negative as well as positive self-views (Swann, 1983). The light side of self-verification is represented by various benefits, including both direct (affecting the individual, him- or herself) and indirect benefits (affecting the individual by influencing his or her relationships or environment). Self-verification, however, also has a dark side for people whose self-views are negative. In this article, we will discuss the light and dark sides of self-verification. Ultimately, we suggest that a thorough understanding of the self-verification process can provide a basis for knowing how to benefit from its positive consequences and avert its negative effects.

### What is Self-verification?

Self-verification theory starts with the assumption that once formed, self-views give people a powerful sense of coherence and a related ability to predict and control their worlds (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Because self-views serve these vitally important functions, people become invested in maintaining them. They may, for example, choose to interact with others who see them as they see themselves

(Swann, 1983). People presumably enact such self-verification strivings regardless of how negative the self-views may be. Specifically, just as individuals with positive self-views prefer to interact with people who see them positively, individuals with negative self-views prefer to interact with people who appraise them negatively (e.g., Hixon & Swann, 1993; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992; Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989).

There is more to self-verification strivings, however, than a tendency to choose self-verifying interaction partners. In fact, past research suggests that people use a host of strategies to verify their self-views (see Swann, 1990, for a review). Not only do people gravitate toward interaction partners who are apt to confirm their self-views, they elicit self-confirmatory feedback (e.g., Coyne, 1976; Coyne, Kahn, & Gotlib, 1987; Curtis & Miller, 1986; Pelham, 1991; Swann et al., 1989; Swann & Read, 1981a, 1981b); they pay more attention to self-confirmatory feedback (Swann & Read, 1981a), and they recall it better (e.g., Cray, 1966; Silverman, 1964; Suinn, Osborne, & Page, 1962; Swann & Read, 1981a).

Self-verification theory's prediction that people who have positive self-views prefer to be around others who see them in a positive light is not surprising, as it squares well with self-enhancement theory's assumption that people want positive, self-enhancing evaluations (Jones, 1973). The symmetric proposition—that people with negative self-views prefer partners who view them negatively—clashes sharply with most psychological theorizing (e.g., Jones, 1973). Nevertheless, as we shall show, the notion that people with negative self-views prefer and seek negative evaluations is easier to understand when one recognizes how such individuals perceive the evaluations that they receive. Specifically, whereas negative evaluations seem highly reassuring and credible, positive evaluations can be profoundly disquieting and can provoke anxiety. Receiving self-verification thus provides psychological coherence, a feeling that one's self and the world are as expected.

In addition to psychological coherence, receiving confirmation of one's self-view, is associated with a host of direct and indirect benefits. For people with negative self-views, however, self-verification also carries with it painful consequences, including the perpetuation of low self-esteem and depression. We will first discuss the benefits, or light side, of self-verification and then turn to its negative consequences, or dark side.

## **The Light Side: Direct and Indirect Benefits of Self-verification**

Self-verification can benefit people directly, by affecting individuals themselves. It can also benefit people indirectly, by influencing people's relationships. In principle, *all* people should enjoy these benefits, regardless of the positivity of their self-views.

### *Direct Benefits of Self-verification*

*Psychological coherence.* Psychological coherence grows out of the perception that things are as they are expected to be. Self-verification strivings foster psychological coherence because they facilitate the validation of self-views. Comments of self-verifiers from a study by Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler (1992a) provided evidence that psychological coherence is linked to the self-verification process and is desirable to people. When self-verifiers with negative self-views were asked to discuss why they decided to interact with a confederate who

evaluated them negatively, one participant said, “Yeah, I think that’s pretty close to the way I am. [The negative evaluator] better reflects my own view of myself, from experience.” The desire for psychological coherence is so strong that it can actually trump people’s desire for positive appraisals from others. Witness one participant with a negative self-view: “I like the [favorable] evaluation but I am not sure that it is, ah, correct maybe. It *sounds* good, but [the negative evaluator] . . . seems to know more about me. So, I’ll choose [the negative evaluator].” From this vantage point, psychological coherence is appealing because it is an important source of emotional comfort (Swann, Chang-Schneider, & Angulo, 2007a).

*Reduced anxiety.* Self-verification not only provides feelings of psychological coherence, it also lowers anxiety. Support for this proposition comes from several studies (see Swann et al., 2007a, for a review). Wood, Heimpel, Newby-Clark, and Ross (2005) analyzed the reactions to success experiences of high vs. low self-esteem participants. High self-esteem participants reacted favorably to success, but low self-esteem participants became anxious, apparently because the feedback was not consistent with their self-views (cf. Lundgren, & Schwab, 1977). Similarly, Ralph and Mineka (1998) observed students’ reactions to receiving grades on a mid-term examination. These investigators found that students with low self-esteem experienced the greatest increase in overall distress, including anxious and depressive symptoms, after they received grades that were considered successful to them. At the same time, low self-esteem participants displayed relatively little anxiety and depression in response to grades that they considered failures.

The link between self-verification and lower anxiety has also emerged when non-conscious measures of anxiety have been used. Ayduk, Mendes, Akinola, and Gyurak (2008) provided participants with self-verifying or non-verifying evaluations and then observed their cardiovascular responses. When individuals with negative self-views received positive feedback, they were physiologically “threatened” (avoidant and distressed). In contrast, when they received negative feedback, they were physiologically “galvanized” or “challenged” (i.e., cardiovascularly aroused in a manner associated with approach motivation). Individuals with positive self-views displayed precisely the opposite pattern.

Related research suggests that self-verifying feedback will reduce anxiety only when recipients have had an opportunity to think about it and compare it with their self-views. Contrary to the findings reviewed above, Swann, Griffin, Predmore, and Gaines (1987) found that when people with negative self-views received negative feedback and then immediately completed a measure of anxiety, they were more anxious than those who received positive feedback. Nevertheless, the affective benefits of non-verifying (positive) feedback were significantly weaker if participants were first asked to indicate how accurate the feedback was. Similarly, other research that has focused on choice of interaction partner has shown that self-verification strivings will manifest themselves only insofar as recipients of evaluations have the time and mental resources to compare an evaluation to a relevant self-view (e.g., Hixon & Swann, 1993; Swann et al., 1990). Apparently, when people contemplate a negative evaluation, even people with negative self-views display a “positive tropism” wherein they embrace and favor positive evaluations over negative ones. Only after people with negative self-views have had time to recognize the disjunction between positive evaluations and their self-views do they eschew such evaluations (see Chang-Schneider & Swann, in press, for a discussion).

*Improved health.* Insofar as positive but non-verifying events trigger anxiety and stress for people with negative self-views, repeated exposure to such events should eventually impair physical health. Initial support for this self-verification hypothesis came from a pair of prospective studies by Brown and McGill (1989). They assessed the impact of positive life events on health outcomes for high and low self-esteem people. For participants with high self-esteem, positive life events (e.g., getting very good grades, improvement in living conditions) predicted increases in self-reported health. For participants with low self-esteem, positive life events predicted *decreases* in health.

Shimizu and Pelham (2004) replicated and extended these results by controlling for the possibility that self-reported health might reflect negative affectivity. They found that positive life events predicted increased self-reported illness for low self-esteem individuals even when controlling for negative affectivity. This, together with the fact that low-esteem participants only reported diminished health insofar as they experienced positive life events, undermines the notion that negative affect may have influenced both self-reported self-esteem and reports of physical symptoms. Instead, for individuals with negative self-views, the disjunction between their negative self-views and positive life events appears to be so disquieting that it undercuts physical health (cf. Iyer, Jetten, & Tsivrikos, 2008).

### *Indirect Benefits*

*Harmony of social interactions.* Through self-verification, the behaviors of both self-verifiers and their interaction partners become more predictable, thereby allowing social interactions to flow more smoothly. That is, self-verifiers act in predictable, consistent ways to communicate a stable self-view to others, causing their partners to consistently confirm the self-views under question. The result is mutual predictability which simplifies and facilitates social relations.

The benefits of mutual predictability can be understood from several perspectives. From an evolutionary perspective, mutual predictability among small hunter-gatherer groups would have facilitated a more effective division of labor and promoted survival (Goffman, 1959; Swann et al., 2007a). In close relationships, a lack of predictability from a significant other could have thwarted coordination of meeting goals connected to survival and reproduction. For example, if a mate ventured out to hunt for meat and decided instead to take a nap, disappointment, disharmony or worse could result. If repeated, such unpredictable behavior could undermine sustenance and survival (Buss, 2003). Additionally, in hunter-gatherer societies, people presumably formed cooperative coalitions, which were alliances of two or more individuals formed for the purpose of achieving a specific goal, such as large game hunting, building shelters, and defending against attacks. One of the two biggest threats to the success of these coalitions was defection (the other was free riding), an extreme example of unpredictability (Buss, 2004). In short, in our evolutionary past, predictability was presumably at a premium and contributed enormously to successful group dynamics, whereas unpredictability wreaked havoc on group dynamics and inhibited progress toward meeting crucial goals.

Predictability in a person's behavior continues to be a highly-valued characteristic in relationship partners even today (Athay & Darley, 1981; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). Indeed, in an international study of mate selection criteria, "emotional stability" and "dependable character" were the second and third most valued qualities (love was the first; Buss, 2003).

*Relationship quality.* Perhaps due to its tendency to foster predictability, self-verification may improve the quality of people's relationships. Swann and Pelham (2002), for example, found that college students with negative self-views who had roommates who appraised them positively made plans to find a new roommate. In a similar way, married people with negative self-views became less intimate with partners who saw them in a more positive way than they saw themselves (e.g., Burke & Stets, 1999; De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Ritts & Stein, 1995; Schafer, Wickrama, & Keith, 1996; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). In fact, in one study people sought divorce or separation when their spouse perceived them in an overly positive, non-verifying manner (e.g., Cast & Burke, 2002).

In a related argument, Cassidy (2001) posited that intimacy: "... is making one's innermost known, sharing one's core, one's truth, one's heart, with another..." (p. 122); this is central to self-verification—seeking out relationship partners who see you as you believe you truly are. Cassidy explains further that the ability to experience intimacy is related to secure attachment in childhood, and secure attachment: "... is thought to be associated with validating the truth of the child's experiences" (p. 143). This connection between intimacy and the validation of inner experience is representative of the link between intimacy and the self-verification process, as the validation of inner experience is an integral part of the self-verification process.

Feeling understood, a key part of intimacy (Cassidy, 2001; Reiss & Shaver, 1988) may be responsible for the link between self-verification and intimacy. Comments from self-verifiers offer evidence that feeling understood drives self-verification. In a study by Swann et al. (1992a), self-verifiers with negative self-views explained why they chose to interact with a confederate who evaluated them negatively. One participant stated, "Well, I mean, after examining all of this I think [the negative evaluator] pretty much has me pegged." Another participant said, "Since [the negative evaluator] seems to know my position and how I feel sometimes, maybe I'll be able to get along with him." Swann et al. (1994) found that married people were more intimate with spouses insofar as their spouses' appraisals "made them feel that they really knew themselves." The satisfaction of feeling understood, a vital aspect of intimacy, attracts people to relationship partners who confirm their self-views.

Relationship partners who offer self-verification may also be valued because they are perceived as honest and honesty in relationships fosters intimacy (Lerner, 1993). Lerner argued that "closeness requires honesty" and that "truth-telling" is "the foundation of... intimacy..." (p. 15). Choosing to be around others who see us as we feel we actually are can create deep intimacy and be rewarding and validating at the deepest level.

*Trust.* The elevated level of predictability promoted by the self-verification process not only fosters harmonious social interactions and may enhance intimacy in relationships but may also enhance trust. Rempel et al. (1985) included predictability of a relationship partner's behavior as one of the three components of their model of trust, along with dependability and faith. Others have also noted that predictability is a key component of trust (Tyler, 2001). The necessity of predictability in establishing trust is especially apparent in the context of romantic relationships. Imagine a husband who routinely asked his wife how her day was when she came home from work. If on some days she responded by scolding him for being nosy and

on other days by heaping praise on him for being thoughtful, this unpredictability would erode trust. The self-verification process leads to greater predictability in people's behavior, decreasing the chances for this type of scenario, and, thereby, enhancing trust.

In sum, self-verification is beneficial to people in that it provides psychological coherence, reduces anxiety, and is associated with better physical health. In addition, it benefits people's relationships because it facilitates predictability and smooth interactions, encourages individuals to prefer and seek relationship partners who seem honest, and bolsters relationship quality. Nevertheless, although the self-verification process is adaptive for most people most of the time, like any process, it may have a dark side.

### **The Dark Side: Direct and Indirect Drawbacks of Self-verification**

The tendency for self-verification processes to stabilize self-views can be problematic for people whose self-views are inappropriately negative. Such inappropriately negative self-views are common among people who suffer from low self-esteem (comprising approximately one third of the population; Diener & Diener, 1995) and depression; for who "deserves" to believe that they are worthless? When people seek verification for such self-views, the negative consequences can be both direct and indirect.

#### *Direct Drawbacks*

*Lower self-esteem.* Through the self-verification process, people with negative self-views surround themselves with others who see them in a negative light; this cycle perpetuates their negative self-views. Although some have challenged the notion that higher self-esteem is better (Kernis, 2003) and asserted that higher self-esteem is not always related to greater well-being (Ryan & Brown, 2003), there is considerable evidence linking low self-esteem to depression (Murrell, Meeks, & Walker, 1991; Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008; Reinherz, Giaconia, Pakiz, & Silverman, 1993; Roberts, Gotlib, & Kassel, 1996; Robinson, Garber, & Hilsman, 1995; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992b; Trzesniewski et al., 2006) and high self-esteem to happiness (Diener & Diener, 1995; Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Shackelford, 2001). On the balance, it appears that there is good reason to see the perpetuation of low self-esteem via self-verification as potentially maladaptive (see also Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McClarty, 2007b).

*Depression.* Just as the self-verification process perpetuates low self-esteem, it also perpetuates depression. One reason for this is that low self-esteem is a common feature of depression, so the perpetuation of either low self-esteem or depression may imply the perpetuation of the other. Past research shows that depression and self-esteem are highly correlated, with the correlation between measures of the two constructs sometimes approaching .80 in some samples (Swann et al., 1992b). More broadly, depression can be maintained via the self-verification process because receiving unfavorable feedback makes people feel badly. For example, Swann and his colleagues (Swann et al., 1987, 1992b) showed that people with negative self-views who received unfavorable feedback reported more negative affect than those with negative self-views who received favorable feedback.

In addition to its tendency to stabilize low self-esteem, the self-verification process may also perpetuate depression in ways that are unrelated to self-esteem. Joiner (1995) found that participants who were high in negative-feedback-seeking behavior and had roommates who evaluated them negatively experienced significant increases in depressed symptoms over time; this relationship, however, was not accounted for by the level of self-esteem of the participant. Interestingly, neither high negative feedback seeking nor roommate rejection alone predicted increases in depressed symptoms. Only in combination did these factors lead to future symptoms of depression. In a similar way, Joiner and Metalsky (1995) found that greater negative-feedback-seeking behavior was significantly correlated ( $r = .15$ ) to depressed symptoms (on the Beck Depression Inventory). Specifically, participants with depressed symptoms reported greater negative-feedback-seeking behavior than non-depressed participants. The unfavorable feedback that depressed people seek out confirms their negative self-views, thereby perpetuating current depressed symptoms. Additionally, surrounding themselves with people who supply them with unfavorable feedback may ensure that people's negative self-views remain negative (e.g., Swann & Predmore, 1985).

If self-verification strivings contribute to the maintenance of depression, a natural question to ask is: why do depressed people seek out negative feedback and surround themselves with people who see them in a negative light? One answer is that depressed people are caught in a "cognitive-affective crossfire" (Swann et al., 1987), in which there exists a tension between what people want at a cognitive level (i.e., psychological coherence) versus an affective level (i.e., the feelings of elation that accompany positive feedback). For people with negative self-views, negative feedback offers feelings of psychological coherence, a feeling that things are the way one thinks they are, even though it does not feel good in the short run. Swann et al. (1987) found that when participants with negative self-views received negative feedback from an evaluator, they viewed it as particularly accurate and viewed the evaluator as relatively competent, even though they felt badly immediately after receiving it. Thus, negative feedback provided coherence and comfort on a cognitive level, even though it caused pain on an affective level. Ultimately, the desire for psychological coherence is so powerful that it often trumps the desire for self-enhancing feedback, such that people with negative self-views seek negative feedback and surround themselves with people who view them negatively. As a result, their depression endures. People with positive views are not caught in this crossfire. Swann et al. (1987), for example, found that such individuals not only felt better when they received positive feedback, but they also regarded positive feedback as more accurate and rated the evaluator as more competent when he or she gave positive feedback.

We should emphasize here that in decrying the tendency for people with negative self-views to seek verification of their negative self-views, we are referring only to *inappropriately* negative self-views. Clearly, all people possess flaws and limitations that are difficult, if not impossible, to change. For example, some people are less artistic, physically strong, or musical than others. Overly positive, inaccurate assessments of their capacities would be a liability for such individuals, as they might inhibit personal growth and flourishing. Nevertheless, possessing shortcomings does not justify the feelings of worthlessness that are the hallmark of low self-esteem and depression. Furthermore, low self-esteem and depressed persons typically exaggerate their negative qualities or the negative implication of those qualities. Coupled with self-verification strivings, such individuals may surround themselves with partners

who have similar, inappropriately negative assessments of them. In this way, people with negative self-views may perpetuate their negative, false self-views of themselves and this may, in turn, prevent them from realizing their true capabilities and attaining happiness. Such activities go far beyond having a healthy understanding of one's limitations.

### *Indirect Effects*

Self-verification strivings not only have direct repercussions for individuals with negative self-views, but they may also have indirect consequences. In particular, self-verification strivings may affect people's relationships and the environments they choose for themselves.

*Relationships.* Self-verification strivings may lead to painful relationships for people with negative self-views. That is, such individuals may choose to be around others who see them in a negative light and seek out negative feedback, even though receiving unfavorable feedback from others is painful (Swann et al., 1992b). Specifically, Swann et al. (1992b) found that depressives were more inclined to show a preference for friends and dating partners who reported negative appraisals of them than their non-depressed counterparts. In addition, depressed persons preferentially solicited unfavorable feedback, even though receiving unfavorable feedback made them unhappy immediately after receiving the feedback. In a similar way, Swann et al. found that participants with symptoms of depression wanted a good friend to see them less positively in a global way than did non-depressed persons.

The more people seek negative feedback, the more likely they are to suffer rejection in their relationships. In a study of undergraduate roommates, Swann et al. (1992b) found that the more a participant sought unfavorable feedback during the middle of the semester, the more likely his or her roommate was to desire to terminate the relationship,  $r(21) = .38, p = .030$ , and to plan to get a new roommate,  $r(21) = .39, p = .032$ . Furthermore, Joiner and Metalsky (1995) found that males high in negative feedback seeking, reassurance seeking, and depression at one time point were more likely to experience greater rejection (defined by dislike and intent to avoid) from roommates subsequently. Furthermore, as mentioned above, people tend to withdraw from relationships in which the relationship partner fails to provide self-verification. For example, Swann and Pelham (2002) found that college students with firmly held negative self-views who had roommates who appraised them positively made plans to find a new roommate. Therefore, self-verification strivings may not only lead people with negative self-views to provoke rejection, it may also cause them to flee from people who fail to reject them. As a result, people with negative self-views may find that their relationship partners frequently make them feel badly or reject them outright.

These results are particularly significant because they suggest self-verification strivings are expressed outside the confines of laboratory settings. That is, people with negative self-views not only choose interaction partners who view them negatively in a laboratory, but they also choose others who view them negatively as the central figures in their lives—their dating partners, their good friends, and their roommates. Corroborating this point, research has shown that self-verification strivings are even more pronounced in relatively enduring relationships as compared to fleeting ones (Campbell, Lackenbauer, & Muise, 2006; Swann et al., 1994).



*Work environment.* The tendency for people with negative self-views to seek self-verification is not limited to personal relationships but extends even to their relationships in the workplace. In a series of studies of the reactions of employees in various working environments in the USA and elsewhere, Wiesenfeld, Swann, Brockner, and Bartel (2007) discovered that self-esteem moderates people's reactions to "procedural justice" (whether the organizations' procedures for dealing with employees are fair). For people with high self-esteem, being treated fairly by their work organization increased commitment to the organization, but people with low self-esteem failed to display this preference for fair treatment. Furthermore, in one study Wiesenfeld et al. (2007) reported that low-esteem persons were particularly oblivious to maltreatment when the work relationship was thought to be enduring as compared to fleeting. That is, people with low self-esteem felt more commitment to organizations that treated them fairly when they had been at an organization for a short time but displayed no such preference toward organizations they had been associated with for a long while. This finding reinforces the notion that self-verification strivings are more salient in relatively enduring relationships. This phenomenon could be pernicious in that it appears that people with low self-esteem are most willing to tolerate unfair treatment when they are choosing situations that matter the most—long-term work environments and people who are likely to be central figures in their lives.

The relative insensitivity of people with low self-esteem to unfair treatment is potentially deleterious because it suggests that such persons may be unaware of injustice and remain in jobs in which they are being exploited. Indeed, in the final study in the Wiesenfeld et al. (2007) paper, students with low self-esteem indicated that they felt most self-verified (i.e., known and understood) when their university treated them unfairly, and perceptions of self-verification mediated the relationship between self-esteem and commitment to the university.

From this vantage point, the self-verification strivings of people with low self-esteem may create an insidious cycle in which they remain in settings that may place them at risk for psychological harm. This state of affairs also creates a challenging predicament for employers interested in trying to foster employee commitment to their organization. That is, if treating employees with low self-esteem more fairly will not enhance their commitment (as it does for high self-esteem employees), employers must identify another way of enhancing commitment. They may, for instance, verify specific attributes that are independent of their global perceptions of self-worth.

It appears, then, that self-verification can be maladaptive for people with negative self-views because it facilitates the perpetuation of low self-esteem and depression, and this may, in turn, contribute to emotionally painful relationships and work environments. If so, it is important to develop ways of improving such negative self-views. We address this and related issues in the next section.

## **Using Self-verification to Illuminate the Dark Side**

Because self-verification processes tend to stabilize self-esteem, any effort to raise self-esteem must be informed by a thorough understanding of these processes. We propose here that, paradoxically, providing people with self-verification may actually facilitate the process of raising self-esteem by reassuring the person, thereby reducing anxiety and emboldening the person to contemplate change. From this vantage point, the process of self-verification can be seen as a necessary (but not sufficient) step for raising self-esteem. Furthermore, because feelings of self-verification are

associated with acceptance of oneself, self-verification processes may also be essential to happiness. We explore both of these possibilities in what follows.

### *Self-verification and Raising Self-esteem*

Attempting to raise others' self-esteem by simply telling individuals with negative self-views that they are wrong about themselves is unlikely to bear fruit. That is, when people encounter challenges to their self-views, research on self-verification processes indicates that they actively resist such challenges both behaviorally (e.g., by attempting to correct the "mistake" or withdrawing from the relationship) and cognitively (e.g., by "seeing" the feedback as more consistent with their self-views than it actually is). Presumably, such resistance reflects the fact that people's self-views are a deeply-rooted source of psychological coherence. For this reason, people need to feel verified before they are able to change. This validation of the person's self-view fosters coherence and a sense of feeling accepted and understood, thereby providing fertile soil for change.

We are not the first to suggest that feelings associated with self-verification can foster receptiveness to change. Deci and Ryan (1995), for example, have argued that fostering self-esteem in another entails "... valuing the other for who he or she is and taking that other's frame of reference...it means beginning by accepting and relating to the self of the other. It is precisely the acceptance of *self*—first by others and then by oneself—that supports the development and maintenance of true self-esteem" (p. 46). This type of acceptance is similar to Carl Rogers' (1961) notion of "unconditional positive regard," the concept that therapists could facilitate growth and successful change in clients by providing an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance. Rogers elaborated on this concept in his book, *On Becoming a Person*; he wrote: "So I find that when I can accept another person, which means specifically accepting the feeling and attitudes and beliefs that he has as a real and vital part of him, then I am assisting him to become a person..." (p. 21). He underscored the importance of the somewhat counter-intuitive relationship between acceptance and change when he wrote, "... the curious paradox is that when I accept myself as I am, then I change" (Rogers, 1961). Accepting what another person is actually feeling, as opposed to what one thinks the individual should feel or could feel, is a necessary first step to change. This is even more important for family members, friends, and co-workers closest to an individual with low self-esteem since past research has shown that self-verification strivings are particularly salient when a relationship is relatively enduring (Campbell et al., 2006; Swann et al., 1994). Acceptance from such persons will go further to pave the way to change, and non-verifying feedback from this group will create larger obstacles on the road to change. The self-verification process constitutes a necessary first step in the process of raising self-esteem by fostering acceptance in one's social support network, but it is not sufficient.

Positive feedback, challenging negative self-views, must follow verification but must be given in manageable doses. A study by Finn and Tonsager (1992) demonstrated that integrating verification and positivity does, in fact, raise self-esteem. College students who received subjectively accurate feedback about a problem-focused personality test in a supportive environment enjoyed higher self-esteem, even though the accurate feedback was often negative. Finn and Tonsager posited that the results were due to the combination of "creating a positive emotional tone, while verbally offering self-confirmatory (and often negative) feedback" (p. 285). In essence, they found that accepting another's shortcomings and

encouraging them to do the same makes such individuals more open to positive evaluations that will raise self-esteem.

In a similar way, combining self-acceptance with positive change is evident in various types of therapies. In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, clients are taught not to try to control thoughts or feelings but rather to observe them non-judgmentally and to accept them, while changing behaviors in positive ways to better their lives (Hayes, 1994). In Dialectical Behavior Therapy, the dialectic between acceptance and change is also central (Baer, 2003). Clients are taught to accept themselves completely, while working to change their behaviors and environments to improve their lives (Baer, 2003). In the area of couples therapy, Jacobson, Christensen, Prince, Cordova, and Eldridge (2000) found that Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (IBCT), which focuses on accepting challenging aspects of one's partner with some emphasis on change, showed better results for distressed couples than Traditional Behavioral Couple Therapy (TBCT), which focuses solely on change. Specifically, both the husbands and wives participating in IBCT showed greater increases in marital satisfaction than couples participating in TBCT, and in IBCT, a larger percentage of couples either improved or recovered than in TBCT. Jacobson et al. underscored the importance of this dialectic between acceptance and change in discussing their study: "Paradoxically, acceptance interventions are also predicted to produce change in addition to acceptance, often more efficiently than the direct change inducing strategies that constitute TBCT, because at times the pressure to change may be the very factor that prevents it from occurring." The theme running throughout these therapies is that the provision of verifying evaluations fosters self-acceptance, and self-acceptance lays the psychological groundwork for receptiveness to positive change.

### *Self-verification and Happiness?*

Just as understanding the self-verification process may offer insight into how to raise self-esteem, it may also provide hints about how to increase happiness, a correlate of self-esteem. We contend that encouraging people to accept themselves, in effect offering themselves self-verification, is a key component of happiness.

Our argument is based on the assumption that accepting oneself, including vulnerabilities, imperfections, and the full range of one's emotions, is empowering and is essential to happiness. This viewpoint differs from most contemporary conceptualizations of happiness, which define happiness as the frequency of positive emotions and infrequency of negative emotions (see Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005, for a review). In contrast, we suggest that happiness is better described as a compassionate embracing or acceptance of a fuller range of emotions, rather than one's overall amount of positive emotions or net value of positive minus negative emotions.

Our contention that a wider range of feelings and emotions should be included in conceptualizations of happiness has been presaged by Matthieu Ricard (2003) in his *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill*. He writes that although "... we so often confuse genuine happiness with merely seeking enjoyable emotions," happiness is about learning how to "... reduce the gap between appearances and reality" (pp. 26 and 23). That is to say, it is about acceptance. He added: "There exists a way of being that underlies and suffuses all emotional states, that embraces all joys and sorrows that come to us.... The Sanskrit word for this state of being is *sukha*" (p. 25). Here again, he underscores the significance of

acceptance, specifically accepting all emotions—in essence, accepting ourselves. He elaborates on this concept of *sukha* when he writes: “*Sukha* is the state of lasting well-being that manifests itself when we have freed ourselves of mental blindness and afflictive emotions. It is also the wisdom that allows us to see the world as it is, without veils or distortions. It is, finally, the joy of moving toward inner freedom and the loving-kindness that radiates toward others” (p. 25). Again, Ricard echoes the notion that happiness is associated with the warm welcoming of “the world as it is,” rather than “merely seeking enjoyable emotions” or attempting to re-frame all emotions as positive.

No less important than self-acceptance is acceptance by others. For example, research on the effects of social support in the face of traumatic events has shown that significant others often respond to a loved one who is a victim of trauma by forcing cheerfulness and displaying an optimistic facade (Wortman & Dunkel-Schetter, 1979, 1987). Forced cheerfulness actually minimizes the victim’s situation, which may make the victim feel abandoned or rejected (Dakof & Taylor, 1990). Similarly, Dakof and Taylor (1990) found that minimization of trauma by social support providers (i.e., family, physicians, and nurses) was one of the most frequent complaints of cancer victims. Furthermore, Ingram, Betz, Mindes, Schmitt, and Smith (2001) found that forcing optimism or downplaying the individual’s concerns (e.g., saying the victim “should look on the bright side”), is such a prevalent and unsupportive response that it was one of the four main factors upon which these authors loaded all negative, unsupportive responses to difficult life events. This type of response was not only characterized by victims as being unsupportive, it was also related to depressive symptoms and predicted incremental variance in depression, overall psychological distress, and physical symptoms of depression.

Ironically, the implicit belief that happiness can be achieved by shoehorning all experiences into positive ones may lead to behaviors that have precisely the opposite of the effect intended. To the contrary, when a person does not feel that their negative feelings are validated or accepted by others in the social support network, their physical and mental health suffers. In short, acceptance at both an intrapsychic and interpersonal level is integral to enduring happiness, but it is often overlooked in both the definition and measurement of happiness. Our theoretical perspective suggests that a more expansive definition of happiness, as well as appropriate measures, is needed to achieve a richer understanding of the nature and origins of this construct.

## Conclusion

Self-verification theory assumes that people work to preserve their negative as well as positive self-views by seeking confirmation for these self-views. This process has a light side in that it is a fundamentally adaptive process. Some direct positive consequences of self-verification are feelings of psychological coherence, reduced anxiety, and improved physical health. Some indirect positive consequences grow out of the impact of these processes on people’s relationships, including the role self-verification plays in detecting relationship partners perceived to be honest, fostering intimacy and trust in relationships, and ensuring predictability in one’s behavior, which enables harmonious social interactions and further promotes trust.

Although fundamentally adaptive, self-verification strivings also have a dark side. Some direct negative consequences are a tendency to perpetuate inaccurate self-views, low self-esteem, and depression. Indirectly, self-verification processes can

degrade the quality of people's relationships and environments. These consequences are significant and can cause tremendous anguish in people's lives. Nevertheless, in such instances, it is the overly negative self-view, rather than the process of self-verification, that is the root of the problem.

Understanding the critical importance of self-verification processes offers insight into how to bring more light to the dark side of self-verification. Specifically, it teaches us about how to raise self-esteem. We suggest that to help raise the self-esteem of another individual with a negative self-view, one should first convey acceptance of what the other individual is actually feeling and only then provide positive feedback that challenges the negative self-views. This ordered combination of acceptance plus positivity will theoretically foster positive self-views. Once such positive self-views are established, the process of self-verification can resume anew, but this time it will be in the service of promoting personal and social realities that are both truthful and relatively adaptive. As a result, people will think about themselves in a new, more meaningful, more complete, and more sustaining way.

Not only does understanding self-verification offer insight into how to minimize negative phenomena, such as the perpetuation of low self-esteem, but it also provides guidance about enhancing positive phenomena, such as building happiness. Self-verification highlights the importance of acceptance, both intrapsychic and interpersonal, to happiness. It calls us to acknowledge and to incorporate in a personal way the powerful, life-giving force of acceptance.

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