

Depression and the Search for Negative Evaluations: More Evidence of the Role of Self-Verification Strivings

William B. Swann, Jr.
University of Texas at Austin

Richard M. Wenzlaff
University of Texas at San Antonio

Romin W. Tafariodi
University of Texas at Austin

Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, and Pelham (1992) suggested that depressed and dysphoric persons verify their self-conceptions by seeking rather negative appraisals. Hooley and Richters (1992) and Alloy and Lipman (1992) have worried that (a) idiosyncratic features of Swann et al.'s participants and design may have produced their effects and (b) Swann et al. presented no evidence that self-verification strivings are motivated. We address these issues empirically. Study 1 showed that 20 dysphoric participants preferred interacting with a person who appraised them unfavorably over participating in another study, in comparison with 30 nondysphorics. Study 2 revealed that 26 dysphoric persons responded to feedback that challenged their negative self-view by working to reaffirm their low self-esteem, in comparison with 47 nondysphorics. These findings support the notion that at some level depressed and dysphoric persons want rather negative appraisals.

Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, and Pelham (1992) suggested that a desire for self-verification may cause depressed and dysphoric people to prefer rather unfavorable evaluations and relationship partners who offer such evaluations. Hooley and Richters (1992) and Alloy and Lipman (1992) have voiced two major concerns about this work. First, they have suggested that the characteristics of Swann et al.'s participants and the procedural paradigm may have produced the findings artifactually. Second, they have noted that Swann et al. presented no evidence that self-verification strivings are motivated. We address the commentators' thoughtful critiques by reporting the results of two new studies. Study 1 shows that dysphoric persons choose interaction partners who appraise them unfavorably even when a different subject selection procedure and experimental design are used. Study 2 provides evidence of the motivational underpinnings of self-verification strivings by showing that people who encounter threats to their global self-evaluations work to reaffirm such evaluations by seeking self-verifying feedback.

Study 1: Do Dysphorics Prefer Evaluators Who Appraise Them Unfavorably?

In a pretest session, students completed the long form of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, 1967). We recruited 20 dysphorics

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to William B. Swann, Jr., Department of Psychology, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, 78712.

(BDI score of less than 12; $M = 18.0$) and 30 nondysphorics (BDI score of less than 5; $M = 2.5$) from this group. As in Study 1 of Swann et al. (1992), the participants reported to a study of the getting-acquainted process and learned that they had been evaluated. In this study, however, they learned of only one evaluator. Some participants learned that the evaluator appraised them favorably (i.e., as well-adjusted, self-confident, happy, and untroubled); others learned that the evaluator appraised them unfavorably (i.e., as chronically unhappy, unconfident, and uncomfortable around others). After receiving either the favorable or unfavorable evaluation, participants chose whether to interact with the evaluator or to participate in another experiment on a different topic. They then completed several items to illuminate the mechanisms underlying their responses and were debriefed.

As can be seen in Table 1, most nondysphoric participants preferred an interaction when the evaluator appraised them favorably but preferred a different experiment when the evaluator appraised them unfavorably. In contrast, most dysphorics preferred an interaction when the evaluator appraised them unfavorably but chose the other experiment when the evaluator appraised them favorably. A Dysphoria \times Evaluator analysis of variance (ANOVA) of these data revealed the predicted interaction, $F(1, 46) = 12.88, p < .001$. Participants' desire to interact with each partner, also displayed in Table 1, revealed a similar interaction, $F(1, 46) = 19.34, p < .001$.

Other data supported the idea that a desire for self-verification propelled our participant's choices. For example, the participants were more interested in interacting with the evaluator to the extent that they believed that the evaluation described them accurately, $r(48) = .61$. Also, the estimates of perceived descriptiveness in Table 1 indicate that participants' estimates mimicked the data for their desire to interact and contributed to a reliable Dysphoria \times Evaluator interaction, $F(1, 46) = 77.71, p < .001$. Finally, analyses of participants' desire to change the evaluator's appraisal and improve themselves suggested that neither of these considerations mediated participants' desire to interact with the evaluators.

Study 2: Does the Desire for Self-Verifying Feedback Have Motivational Properties?

Although the results of Study 1 bolster the notion that dysphoric persons prefer partners who appraise them unfavorably, they do not

Table 1
Desire for Self-Verifying Interaction Partners

Measure	Subject group	
	Nondysphoric	Dysphoric
Favorable evaluator		
% that chose evaluator	80 _b	20 _a
Desire to interact	7.2 _b	4.1 _a
Perceived descriptiveness	5.6 _b	3.0 _a
Likelihood of change	4.3	3.0
Self-improvement	3.5	3.5
Unfavorable evaluator		
% that chose evaluator	27 _a	60 _b
Desire to interact	4.9 _a	5.9 _b
Perceived descriptiveness	3.3 _a	5.3 _b
Likelihood of change	4.7	3.4
Self-improvement	3.9	3.2

Note. For the nondysphoric group, $n = 15$, and for the dysphoric group, $n = 10$. The range for the desire to interact scale was 1–9; scores for all other scales ranged from 1–7. Numbers with different subscripts differ according to two-tailed t tests ($p < .05$).

demonstrate that such preferences are motivated. We explored the motivational character of self-verification by asking if participants who received a threat to their global self-regard (i.e., self-discrepant evaluations) would work to restore their perceptions of predictability and control by trying to shore up their global self-concept with feedback that confirms their global self-regard. To this end, we gave participants self-congruent or self-discrepant evaluations in regard to one set of abilities and then allowed them to seek additional feedback about an unrelated set of attributes. We predicted that confronting nondysphoric participants with self-discrepant (unfavorable) evaluations would encourage them to seek feedback about their strengths but that confronting dysphoric participants with self-discrepant (favorable) evaluations would encourage them to seek feedback about their limitations.

We recruited 73 undergraduates who had completed the long form of the BDI. After Kendall, Hollon, Beck, Hammen, and Ingram (1987), we classified those who scored above 9 as dysphoric ($n = 26$; $M = 17.04$) and those who scored below 9 as nondysphoric ($n = 47$; $M = 3.74$). The experimenter introduced participants to a study of personality assessment. He explained that he would interview the participant while three clinicians listened from an adjacent room and evaluated the participant. He then proceeded to interview the participant, after which he excused himself to collect the clinicians' evaluations. He soon returned with bogus evaluations that were ostensibly generated by two of the clinicians. Sometimes both evaluations were favorable (i.e., insightful and socially skilled) and sometimes they were both unfavorable (i.e., un insightful and socially unskilled). In the congruent-evaluation conditions, nondysphoric participants received favorable evaluations, and dysphorics received unfavorable evaluations; in the self-discrepant-evaluation conditions, nondysphorics received unfavorable evaluations, and dysphorics received favorable evaluations.

After participants examined the evaluations, the experimenter explained that the third clinician had used their verbal style as a basis for predicting their athletic and artistic abilities but that, unfortunately, there might not be enough time for them to examine the entire evaluation. For this reason, the experimenter explained, the participant should rank how much he or she wanted to examine each of four categories of feedback that the third clinician had ostensibly generated. The

categories consisted of (a) athletic strengths, (b) athletic limitations, (c) artistic strengths, and (d) artistic limitations. (To ensure that at least some of the categories referred to true strengths and true limitations, we recruited only persons who rated themselves as artistic but not athletic or vice versa.) Participants rank ordered the four categories of feedback by degree of interest and were debriefed.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the analysis of the rankings that participants assigned to their limitations (rank assigned to athletic limitations between dysphoria and initial evaluations, $F(1, 69) = 13.27, p < .001$). Whereas receiving self-discrepant (i.e., unfavorable) evaluations discouraged nondysphoric participants from seeking feedback about their limitations, $F(1, 69) = 3.45, p < .07$, receiving self-discrepant (i.e., favorable) evaluations encouraged dysphoric participants to seek feedback about their limitations, $F(1, 69) = 9.98, p < .002$. Thus, when we threatened the subjective validity of participants' self-concepts by disconfirming their global self-regard, they tended to seek feedback that was reaffirming.

Conclusions and Implications

Self-verification theory assumes that people work to confirm their self-views, even negative ones. We and Swann et al. (1992) have together reported a series of six laboratory and field studies that support this proposition. Specifically, relative to people with positive self-views, those with negative self-views (e.g., dysphoric and depressed persons) were more inclined to choose unfavorable evaluations and interaction partners who appraise them unfavorably (Studies 1, 3, and 4 of Swann et al. and Study 1 of this article). Moreover, people with negative self-views preferred to be evaluated less favorably than people with positive self-views (Study 2 of Swann et al.). Finally, people who had recently encountered threats to their global self-regard were particularly inclined to display a preference for feedback that was self-verifying (Study 2 of this article).

Our new data address several key issues raised by the commentators. First, as for the "Pollyanna problem" in Study 1, nondysphorics scored from 0–4 on the long form of the BDI, and in Study 2, they scored 0–9. Second, the commentators were concerned about the small number of depressed and nondepressed participants. Forty-six dysphoric and depressed persons participated in the new studies; 152 such persons participated in Swann et al.'s (1992) samples. In regard to the limitations inherent in having persons choose between a positive and negative evaluator or feedback, in Study 1, the participants chose between interacting with an evaluator or being in another experiment. The commentators were also concerned about what they perceived to be a lack of evidence that the responses of participants are motivated by self-verification strivings. In Study 1, the participants chose partners to the extent that they believed the partners' appraisals were self-descriptive; in Study 2, the participants compensated for threats to their global self-concepts by displaying a relative preference for feedback that verified their global self-esteem. Finally, Study 1 included data that argued against both the possibility that dysphorics had hoped to acquire favorable feedback through self-improvement and the possibility that dysphorics hoped to bring the unfavorable evaluator to appraise them more favorably. In sum, we believe that our new data allay most of the specific concerns raised by the commentators.

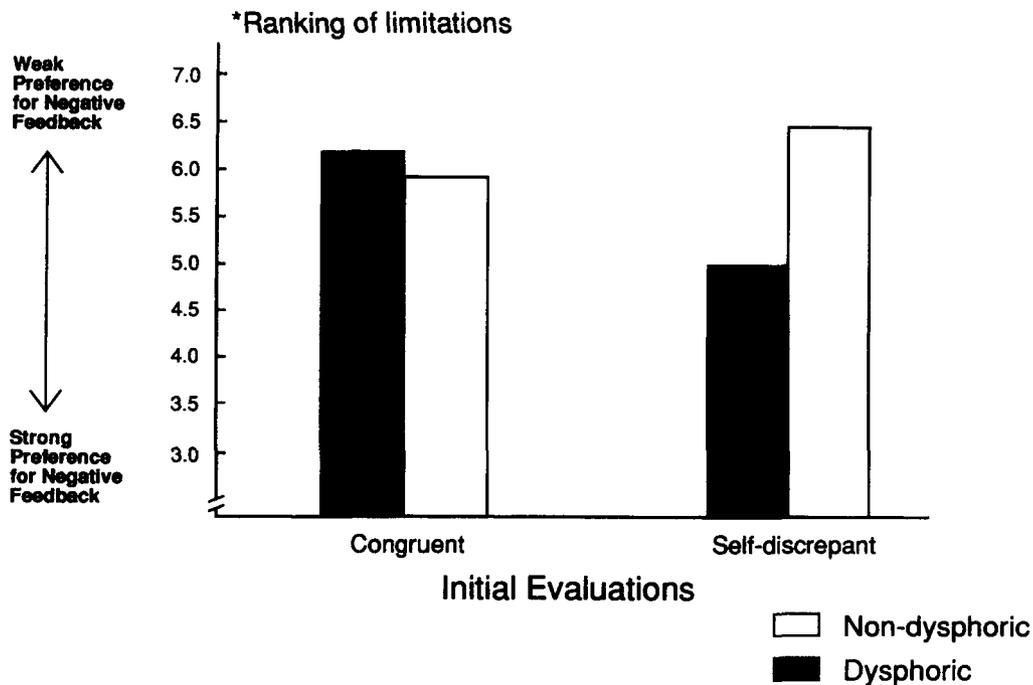


Figure 1. Analysis of rankings.

Can a motive to sample favorable and unfavorable feedback in an evenhanded manner explain the responses of dysphorics? We think not. For example, the evenhandedness idea cannot explain why most dysphorics preferred interacting with a negative evaluator over being in another experiment (Study 1 of this article), nor can this construct tell us why threatening participants' global self-concepts inspired them to reaffirm their self-concepts by seeking self-verifying feedback (Study 2 of this article). In fact, we are puzzled by the commentators' suggestion that the evenhandedness construct can explain Swann et al.'s (1992) findings. That is, even if one were willing to overlook serious conceptual (e.g., Coyne & Gotlib, 1983) and empirical (e.g., Dunning & Story, 1991; see Swann et al., 1992, p. 302) difficulties with the evenhandedness construct, an adequate test requires that the investigator present participants with a choice of feedback or interaction partners that is representative of the entire spectrum of feedback or partners ordinarily available to them. As Swann et al. made no effort to devise such a representative sample, it is possible that characteristics of their stimulus materials encouraged depressives to be more (or less) evenhanded than they would have been otherwise. We are confident, for example, that depressives would have abandoned all signs of evenhandedness if the unfavorable evaluator (evaluation) was more negative. Similarly, we suspect that nondepressives would have been more evenhanded if the unfavorable evaluator (evaluation) was more positive. This means that one can only draw sound inferences about the responses of depressed persons in relation to those of nondepressed ones and that Swann et al.'s data are mute with respect to a desire for evenhandedness or realism.

Although we were unable to address a few of the commentators' concerns in our new studies, most of these concerns are

dealt with elsewhere. Swann (1990) reviewed, for example, other articles that offer data that bear on the comorbidity issue and provide direct evidence that people choose self-verifying partners for the epistemic and pragmatic reasons specified by self-verification theory. One issue that we have not addressed, however, is how clinically depressed persons express their desire for self-verification. Swann et al.'s (1992) evidence that higher depression scores were associated with more negative feedback seeking suggests that acutely depressed persons have a particularly strong preference for unfavorable feedback. Of course, the passivity of acutely depressed persons may sometimes preclude active feedback seeking. Such persons may, however, find that they receive self-verification without even engaging in negative feedback-seeking activities because their passivity evokes the unfavorable appraisals that they desire.

From this perspective, although we agree that active feedback seeking is a particularly compelling and dramatic expression of self-verification strivings, the real import of our research is in the demonstration that (at some level) depressed persons want negative appraisals. Thus, even if clinically depressed persons elicit negative reactions through subtle or indirect means or even if they merely refrain from taking steps to evoke more positive reactions, the crucial point is that such persons are disposed to embrace negative appraisals that nondepressed persons would eschew.

This raises what is for us the most perplexing and intriguing issue: How do depressed people reconcile their yearning for positive appraisals with their desire for self-verifying (negative) appraisals? The results of Study 4 of Swann et al. (1992), for example, indicated that people with negative self-views were just as saddened by unfavorable feedback as were people with positive self-views. Despite this, moments later, they sought ad-

ditional unfavorable feedback! These data complement evidence that people with negative self-views do indeed desire praise but that their self-verification strivings override this desire when they recognize that praise disconfirms their self-concept (e.g., Swann, 1990; Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990). Be this as it may, we suspect that positivity strivings are never completely overridden and that people with negative self-views are consequently ambivalent about the interaction partners whom they choose. From this vantage point, the plight of depressed persons is surely an unenviable one, as they are trapped between a desire for praise and a conviction that they do not deserve it.

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