

## Research Report

## EMBRACING THE BITTER "TRUTH": Negative Self-Concepts and Marital Commitment

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**Abstract**—We propose that because self-concepts allow people to predict (and thus control) the responses of others, people want to find support for their self-concepts. They accordingly gravitate toward relationship partners who see them as they see themselves. For people with negative self-views, this means embracing relationship partners who derogate them. Our findings confirmed this reasoning. Just as persons with positive self-concepts were more committed to spouses who thought well of them than to spouses who thought poorly of them, persons with negative self-concepts were more committed to spouses who thought poorly of them than to spouses who thought well of them.

I flee who chases me, and chase who flees me. (Ovid, ca. 8/1925, line 36)

Ovid's remarks raise eyebrows because they seem to defy a basic truth of social conduct. That is, over the years, everyone from poets and philosophers to grandmothers has noted that people love to be loved. In the last few decades, social scientists have documented this proposition so many times that it is now a bedrock assumption of most theories of social behavior (e.g., Berscheid, 1985). This is what makes Ovid's commentary so puzzling: surely, all other things being equal, rational people do not flee from loving partners in favor of indifferent ones.

Or do they? Recent theorizing has suggested that people want more than adoration from their relationship partners; they also want verification and confirmation of their self-concepts. This research suggests that there may be a grain of truth to Ovid's commentary.

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That is, if people with negative self-concepts truly look to their relationships for self-verification, they may shun partners who appraise them favorably and embrace those who appraise them unfavorably.

### SELF-VERIFICATION PROCESSES AND THE SEARCH FOR FEEDBACK THAT FITS

Self-verification theory (Swann, 1990) begins with the assumption that the key to successful social relations is the capacity for people to recognize how others perceive them (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1981). To this end, people note the reactions of others and use these reactions as a basis for inferring their own self-concepts. From this vantage point, self-concepts are cognitive distillations of past relationships.

Because self-concepts are abstracted from the reactions of others, they should allow people to predict how others will respond to them in the future. Recognizing this, people come to rely on stable self-concepts and view substantial self-concept change as a threat to intrapsychic and interpersonal functioning (for related accounts, see Aronson, 1968; Festinger, 1957; Lecky, 1945). Consider, for example, how a woman who perceives herself as socially inept might feel upon overhearing her husband characterize her as socially skilled. If she takes his comment seriously, she will probably find it thoroughly unsettling, as it challenges a long-standing belief about who she is and implies that she may not know herself after all. And if she does not know herself, what does she know?

Even if she lacked such existential concerns, she might still want her husband to recognize her social ineptitude for purely pragmatic or interpersonal reasons (e.g., Goffman, 1959). That is, as long as he recognizes her limitations, he will form modest expectations of her and their interactions will proceed smoothly. In contrast, should he form an inappropriately favorable impression, he might develop unrealistic expectations that she could not meet.

Both intrapsychic and interpersonal considerations may therefore motivate people to prefer self-verifying appraisals over self-discrepant ones. This reasoning leads to an unusual prediction: Although people with negative self-views may find that unfavorable evaluations frustrate their desire for praise, they may nevertheless seek such evaluations because they find them to be reassuring—particularly when they contemplate the intrapsychic and interpersonal anarchy that inappropriately favorable appraisals may bring. People with negative self-views may accordingly prefer relatively negative evaluations and relationship partners who provide such evaluations.

Although laboratory studies have shown that people with firmly held negative self-views prefer interaction partners who evaluate them unfavorably (e.g., Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, in press; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, in press), no one knows whether or how this tendency influences people's choice of relationship partners outside the laboratory.<sup>1</sup> This issue is not trivial, as some theorists have argued that these findings are a product of idiosyncratic features of laboratory settings and would not generalize to naturally occurring situations (e.g., Raynor & McFarlin, 1986). To address this issue, we moved outside the laboratory to examine people's reactions to appraisals from persons with whom they were involved in ongoing relationships. In particular, we focused on the extent to which married persons with negative, moderate, or positive self-

1. Although two investigations seem superficially relevant (Backman & Secord, 1962; Doherty & Secord, 1971), they are not because the investigators did not analyze the responses of people with positive and negative self-views separately.

concepts seemed committed to spouses who appraised them relatively favorably or unfavorably.

### SELF-VERIFICATION AT THE HORSE RANCH AND MALL

We recruited 95 married couples from a sample of patrons of a horse ranch (41 couples) and shopping mall (54 couples) in the central Texas area by offering them \$5 apiece. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 78, with a mean of 32.1 years. Most participants were Caucasians (87.8%) and had at least some college education (91%). Spouses had known one another for an average of 9 years and had been married for an average of 6 years. Members of 3 couples misunderstood the instructions, and members of 6 other couples gave conflicting responses (e.g., reported having a different number of children); we accordingly deleted their data.<sup>2</sup>

The experimenter seated the members of each couple at opposite ends of a long table so they could not discern one another's responses. After obtaining informed consent and assuring participants that their partners would never see their responses, the experimenter presented each participant with an identical questionnaire as part of an investigation of "the relation between personality and close relationships." In addition to the items described below, the questionnaire included items pertaining to the structure of self-knowledge, interpersonal accuracy, and related issues.

The measure of self-concepts was the short form of the Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ; Pelham & Swann, 1989). The SAQ is a measure of a confederacy of five specific self-views central to self-worth: intellectual capability, physical attractiveness, athletic ability, social skills, and aptitude for arts and music. For each attribute, participants rated themselves relative to other people their

2. Before combining these samples, we ensured that the participants in the ranch and mall samples responded similarly (i.e., our findings replicated across samples). Also, concurrent with this study, we collected data from dating couples as part of an independent investigation of the effect of relationship type on self-verification (Swann, Hixon, & De La Ronde, 1991).

**Table 1.** Average level of marital commitment by self-concept and spouse's appraisal

Spouse's appraisal	Self-concept		
	Negative	Moderate	Positive
Unfavorable	52.4	52.8	52.0
Moderate	52.7	53.2	53.1
Favorable	43.8	53.8	58.7
Difference (favorable - unfavorable)	-8.6	+1.0	+6.7

Note. Higher values indicate more commitment.

own age and gender on graduated-interval scales ranging from 0 (bottom 5%) to 9 (top 5%). Previous work has shown that the SAQ is stable over a period of 4 months (test-retest  $r(50) = .77$ ). The scale is also internally consistent (coefficient  $\alpha = .64$ ), which permitted us to sum the five items and use the sum scores to distinguish participants with negative self-concepts (lower third,  $\leq 27$ ), moderate self-concepts (middle third, 28-32), and positive self-concepts (upper third,  $\geq 33$ ).

After completing the self-ratings, participants filled out the principle index of partner appraisal: the sum of their ratings of their partners on the five SAQ attributes. As expected, spouses rated participants with negative self-views less favorably ( $M = 29$ ) than participants with moderate ( $M = 32$ ) or positive ( $M = 34$ ) self-views,  $F(2, 159) = 10.39, p < .001$ .

The measure of commitment focused on participants' intentions, feelings, and actions regarding their relationships. On 9-point scales, participants responded to seven items tapping desire to remain in the relationship, plans to remain in the relationship, relationship satisfaction, time spent together, amount of talking, discussion of problems and worries, and disclosure of personal matters. Responses to these items were closely associated ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and were summed.

The means plotted in Table 1 suggest that people were committed to spouses who verified their self-concepts. A simultaneous multiple regression with commitment as the criterion revealed the anticipated interaction between self-

concept and spouse appraisal,  $F(1, 157) = 15.15, p < .001$ . Just as participants with positive self-concepts were more committed to their relationships insofar as their spouses thought well of them,  $F(1, 51) = 9.40, p < .004, r = .39$ , participants with negative self-concepts were more committed to the extent that their spouses thought poorly of them,  $F(1, 52) = 9.31, p < .004, r = -.39$ . Those with moderate self-concepts were not influenced by the nature of their spouses' appraisals,  $F < 1$ . The difference scores in row 4 of Table 1 highlight this interaction.

### WHY PEOPLE WITH NEGATIVE SELF-VIEWS EMBRACED SPOUSES WHO DEROGATED THEM

Our most provocative finding was that people with negative self-views were most committed to spouses who appraised them unfavorably. To better understand this finding, we examined our participants' responses to several questions that they completed after the major measures.<sup>3</sup> We found the following:

1. The more participants believed that their spouses' appraisals "made them feel that they really knew themselves" rather than "confused them" (summed over the five SAQ attrib-

3. In the interests of brevity, some of these items were included in the ranch or mall sample only.

## Embracing the Bitter Truth

- ities), the more committed they were to the relationship,  $r(106) = .35, p < .001$ , for all participants;  $r(35) = .37, p < .01$ , for those with negative self-views only.
- There was no evidence that people were committed to partners who appraised them unfavorably because they thought such partners would help them improve themselves. In fact, participants with negative self-views were less confident that feedback from their spouses would help them improve themselves ( $M = 6.56$ ) than were participants with moderate ( $M = 7.28$ ) and positive ( $M = 7.49$ ) self-views,  $F(2, 161) = 3.69, p < .04$ .
  - People with negative self-views were not especially committed to spouses who rated them negatively because they hoped to win their spouses over. Indeed, participants with negative self-views showed a marginally reliable tendency to be more committed to spouses to the extent that they expected their spouses' appraisals on the five SAQ attributes would worsen,  $r(35) = -.25, p < .06$ .
  - People with negative self-views did not commit themselves to spouses who rated them unfavorably because they took expressions of negativity as signs of perceptiveness; that is, commitment was unrelated to ratings of spouse perceptiveness,  $r(36) = .08, ns$ .
  - Self-verification was not the exclusive province of women or men. Specifically, gender had no main or interactive effects (all  $F_s < 1.15$ ) when added to the regression equation that related commitment to participants' self-concepts and their spouses' ratings of them.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, when we performed separate regressions on the commitment of women and men, reliable interactions between self-concept and spouse's ap-

praisal emerged for both genders,  $F_s > 5.30, ps < .03$ . By showing that our effects obtained even when only one member of each dyad was examined, these findings also suggest that the  $p$  values associated with our primary findings were not spuriously inflated by interdependency between the responses of members of dyads (Kenny & Judd, 1986).

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

In our investigation, married people with negative self-views responded in a remarkable fashion. Whereas participants with positive self-concepts displayed more commitment to spouses who evaluated them favorably than to spouses who evaluated them unfavorably, participants with negative self-views displayed more commitment to spouses who evaluated them unfavorably than to spouses who evaluated them favorably. Our findings therefore suggest that people embrace spouses who appraise them in a self-verifying manner, even if this means committing themselves to persons who think poorly of them. This tendency may have undesirable consequences, especially for people who want to improve their self-esteem. Such people may discover, for example, that they are unable to benefit from therapy because their spouses reinforce their negative self-concepts (for a related experiment, see Swann & Predmore, 1985).

Skeptics could, of course, note that our design was correlational and that it is thus hazardous to assume that the spouses' appraisals caused the level of commitment. Although we agree that caution is in order, we are reassured by the evidence we report that casts doubt on several alternative explanations of our effects and by the fact that recent laboratory research has yielded findings that parallel our own (see Swann, 1990, for a review). To us, a more troubling issue is the discrepancy between our findings and the voluminous literature indicating that people prefer favorable evaluations. One reason for this discrepancy may be that past researchers have typically examined participants' reactions to evaluations from complete strangers in laboratory settings. Clearly, it is one thing to express attraction for a

stranger who offers an inappropriately favorable evaluation. It is quite another to pursue a relationship with such a person (e.g., Huston & Levinger, 1978), because doing so may invite the undesired intrapsychic and interpersonal consequences associated with discrepant feedback. Thus, for example, the same flattering remarks that seem harmless and pleasant when delivered by a stranger may seem disturbing and unsettling when delivered by someone who should know the person well.

Of course, some laboratory studies, including those we have conducted, have shown evidence of self-verification strivings. Why? Perhaps because we have focused on our participants' choice of feedback and interaction partners rather than on immediate, affective reactions to evaluations, as most past researchers have done. Recent research and theorizing (e.g., Swann, 1990; Swann et al., 1990) have suggested that when people with negative self-views first receive favorable evaluations, they are quite enamored with them; only after they have had time to compare such evaluations with their self-concepts has a preference for self-verifying evaluations emerged. Similarly, immediately after receiving unfavorable feedback, people with negative self-views report being distressed by it, yet shortly thereafter they go on to seek additional unfavorable feedback (e.g., Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, in press!).

This research, then, suggests that people with negative self-views are enveloped in a psychological cross fire between a desire for positive feedback and a desire for self-verifying feedback. For such persons, it seems that the warmth produced by favorable feedback is chilled by incredulity, and that the reassurance produced by negative feedback is tempered by sadness that the "truth" could not be more kind. Given this dilemma, it seems likely that people with negative self-concepts may seek unfavorable (self-verifying) evaluations in some contexts and positive appraisals in others (e.g., Swann, Hixon, & De La Ronda, 1991). When they do court unfavorable evaluations, however, it is not out of masochism, as it seems that they engage in such activities in spite of rather than because of the unhappiness that such appraisals foster.

4. The modest correlation ( $r = .24$ ) between the residual scores of women and men indicated that the error terms for testing the interactions between gender and the other predictors in our design were minimally biased (D.A. Kenny, personal communication, April 1991). This reassured us that our gender interactions were truly nonsignificant.

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