

## Intimates as Agents of Social Support: Sources of Consolation or Despair?

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We proposed that people's intimates may insulate them against self-discrepant feedback. Individuals who possessed low or high self-esteem (*targets*) reported to the laboratory accompanied by persons with whom they were involved in intimate relationships (*intimates*). Some intimates perceived targets in a manner that was *congruent* with targets' self-conceptions; others perceived targets in a manner that was *incongruent* with targets' self-conceptions. Targets received bogus feedback that was discrepant with their self-esteem and interacted with either their intimate or a stranger. Targets then completed a measure of self-esteem. As expected, targets changed their self-ratings in the direction of the discrepant feedback when they interacted with either an incongruent intimate or a stranger but not when they interacted with a congruent intimate. Moreover, congruent intimates were just as effective in insulating low self-esteem targets against positive feedback as they were in insulating high self-esteem individuals against negative feedback. Finally, the more targets discussed the feedback, the less self-rating change they experienced. Implications for social support processes and attempts to cope with traumatic events are discussed.

"Whatever his position in society, the person . . . makes an 'adjustment' by convincing himself, with the tactful support of his intimate circle, that he is what he wants to be" (Goffman, 1959, p. 230).

People's identities are in a very real sense at the mercy of their intimates, friends, and acquaintances. When people receive feedback that disconfirms their self-conceptions, for example, they may retreat to their *intimate circles* in search of support. If they succeed in finding such support, their self-conceptions may well survive the threat posed by the discrepant

feedback. If they fail to obtain such support, the threatened self-conceptions may perish.

This report is concerned with the processes whereby members of people's intimate circles offer them support for their self-conceptions when these conceptions are under attack. In a sense, our research is closely related to recent investigations of social support processes (for reviews, see Cobb, 1976; Cohen & McKay, 1984; Cohen & Syme, 1985; House, 1981; Suls, 1983; Thoits, 1983). The central claim of this research is that intimates help their partners deal with stress by offering various forms of aid. Our concerns bear on social support processes in that self-discrepant feedback is a threatening stimuli or stressor with which people may cope by turning to their friends and intimates for support (cf. Cohen & McKay, 1984; Lazarus, 1966).

Nevertheless, there is at least one respect in which self-discrepant feedback is unlike most stressors studied by social support researchers. Whereas most social support researchers have focused on the effects of negative stressors (for exceptions, see Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Nuckolls, Cassel, & Kaplan, 1972), self-discrepant feedback can be either positive or negative. Moreover, positive and negative self-discrepant feedback may be equally stressful. This is be-

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cause all forms of self-discrepant feedback challenge the validity of people's self-conceptions, conceptions that ordinarily allow them to predict and control their social environments (e.g., Epstein, 1973; Swann, 1983). Hence, just as unfavorable feedback diminishes the ability of high self-esteem individuals to predict their social environments, so too does favorable feedback undermine the ability of low self-esteem individuals to predict their social environments. Reducing the stress imposed by either type of self-discrepant feedback should be a matter of reinforcing the initial self-concept. This means providing positive feedback to the high self-esteem individual and negative feedback to the low self-esteem individual.

At first blush, the notion that negative feedback can be "supportive" may seem to violate the common assumption that social support is, by definition, beneficial to recipients.<sup>1</sup> On closer examination, however, it is clear that low self-esteem individuals may sometimes benefit from negative feedback. For example, consider the dull-witted man who, after receiving feedback indicating that he is a genius, contemplates a career in nuclear physics. This man may avoid a great deal of wasted effort and embarrassment if he is lucky enough to have a spouse who disabuses him of his delusion. In such instances, a strong case could be made that negative feedback is more supportive than positive feedback. It may therefore be inappropriate to equate the supportiveness of feedback with its positivity. Rather, the supportiveness of feedback may reside in its ability to promote the goals of the target (cf. Cohen & Wills, in press; Kaplan, Cassel, & Gove, 1977).

With this conceptualization of social support in hand, we sought to identify the psychological consequences of the processes through which intimates validate their partners' self-conceptions. We began by attempting to identify some intimates who would support their partners' self-views in the face of attack and some who would fail to support their partners' self-views. We reasoned that an especially important factor in this regard might be the degree of *congruence* between intimates' appraisals of their partners and their partners' self-views. Intimates who have congruent perceptions of their partners should offer them implicit or explicit support for their self-views.

Such support should nullify discrepant feedback and minimize self-rating change.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, intimates who have incongruent perceptions of their partners should fail to support their self-views. Such lack of support should encourage their partners to change their self-ratings in the direction of discrepant feedback.

To address these issues, we recruited couples who were involved in heterosexual intimate relationships for a laboratory experiment. One member of each couple, designated the *target*, had completed a measure of self-esteem earlier in the semester. This measure allowed us to discriminate targets who had low self-esteem from those who had high self-esteem. As each couple arrived for the experiment, the target was separated from his or her partner, whom we designated the *intimate*. Intimates completed a measure that tapped their appraisal of targets. This measure, in conjunction with the measure of target self-esteem, allowed us to compute a measure of congruency between each target's self-esteem and the intimate's appraisal of that target. If the discrepancy between these two measures was small, the intimate's perception was considered congruent. If the discrepancy between these two measures was large, the intimate's perception was considered incongruent. Thus, the congruency variable was a measured rather than a manipulated variable.

While intimates rated targets, we set the stage for the feedback manipulation by having targets complete a bogus personality test. Shortly thereafter, targets received self-discrepant feedback and then had an opportunity to interact with either their intimate (whom we classified as either congruent or incongruent) or a complete stranger. After this interaction opportunity, targets completed the final measure of self-esteem. The major de-

<sup>1</sup> This assumption is itself debatable because there are some clear and documented instances in which the recipients of social support have suffered negative consequences (see Suls, 1983, for a thoughtful review).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, we use the term *self-rating change* to refer to relatively transitory shifts in people's self-images. This should not be confused with true self-concept change, which requires considerably more restructuring of the targets' psychological state and social environment than could ever be accomplished in the context of a laboratory study (for further discussions, see Swann, 1983; Swann & Hill, 1982).

pendent variable was the extent to which targets changed their self-ratings in the direction of the discrepant feedback. We expected that targets would display less change in the congruent intimate condition than in the incongruent intimate condition and stranger condition.

## Method

### *Participants and the Measure of Self-Esteem*

Seventeen male and 18 female introductory psychology students served as targets. These targets were drawn from a large sample of students who completed Helmreich, Spence, and Stapp's (1974) Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI) during a pretest session at the beginning of the semester. This scale emphasizes social self-esteem (e.g., "I have no doubts about my social competence"; "I am not likely to speak to people until they speak to me"). Scores on the TSBI could range from 16 to 80. Individuals who scored below the 30th percentile (53) were designated low self-esteem individuals; those who scored above the 70th percentile (62) were designated high self-esteem individuals; those who fell between the 30th and 70th percentiles were excluded from the sample. According to this classification scheme, 17 of the targets who participated in our investigation possessed low self-esteem and 18 possessed high self-esteem.

An intimate accompanied each target to the laboratory phase of this investigation. All intimates were involved with targets in an exclusive, heterosexual relationship for at least 2 months, with an average of 18 months. Two couples were scheduled for each session of the experiment. Whereas targets received course credit for participating, intimates received \$5.

### *Procedure*

*Cover story and measure of congruency.* A female experimenter introduced targets and their intimates to the experiment by explaining that the experiment was designed to determine what sorts of people enter into intimate relationships with one another. Toward this end, she continued, both the target and the intimate would be completing a series of questionnaires as well as responding verbally to cues presented by the experimenter. The experimenter then noted that some of these verbal responses might be tape-recorded.

After this brief introduction, the experimenter escorted both intimates (recall that two couples were scheduled for each session) to a nearby experimental room. Here, intimates completed a series of questions concerning their perceptions of the target, including a questionnaire that was to provide the basis for the measure of congruency. This questionnaire was a modified version of the TSBI, altered so that intimates rated targets rather than themselves. Later, after all the sessions of the experiment were completed, we calculated the difference between intimates' ratings of targets and targets' initial self-ratings. We then computed the median of these difference scores. The intimate's perception of the target was considered congruent if the difference score fell below the median ( $n = 19$ ); the

intimate's perception was considered incongruent if the difference score fell above the median ( $n = 16$ ).

While the two intimates were completing the measure of congruency, a female confederate led the two targets to separate rooms. The confederate—who introduced herself as a graduate student in clinical psychology—first asked targets to answer some questions concerning their relationship with their intimate. These questions, which included items assessing the length of time they had been involved and their perceptions of their intimate, were intended to bolster the credibility of the cover story. The confederate then presented targets with a bogus Thematic Apperception Test (TAT; Murray, 1943) stimulus that displayed a man exiting a room, leaving a woman lying in bed behind him. Targets learned that they would have 15 min to write a short story about the picture. After 15 min had elapsed, the confederate returned to collect each target's "TAT stimulus" and short story. She then indicated that she would take the story to a nearby room for analysis.

*Manipulations of discrepant feedback and interaction partner.* At this point the experimenter set the stage for the interaction partner manipulation by escorting each intimate to one of two experimental rooms. In the intimate condition, intimates were taken to the room of the target with whom they were involved in a relationship. In the stranger condition, intimates were taken to the room of a complete stranger, specifically, the target with whom the other intimate was involved in a relationship. The experimenter noted that there would be a brief delay while additional questionnaires were prepared for the next phase of the experiment, and departed.

Shortly after the experimenter's departure, the confederate entered to deliver the feedback manipulation. She began by explaining that she had completed her analysis of the target's TAT story and that university guidelines required that targets be allowed to read such analyses if they wished to do so. The confederate then invited the target to examine her written analysis. All targets accepted her invitation.

In reality, the "clinician's analysis" had been prepared in advance to communicate relatively positive or negative feedback to the target. The feedback was always contrary to the target's self-concept, as measured earlier in the semester. Thus, targets who possessed low self-esteem received the following feedback: "This individual displays little social anxiety. He or she feels comfortable around people he or she does not know very well and handles social interactions in a graceful and competent manner." In contrast, targets who possessed high self-esteem received the following feedback: "This individual displays a significant amount of social anxiety. He or she is occasionally uncomfortable around people he or she doesn't know very well and sometimes does not handle social interactions in a competent manner."

After providing targets with the feedback, the confederate left the room and tape-recorded the ensuing conversation. To minimize possible self-consciousness of targets and intimates during these conversations, we carefully concealed the microphone that had been planted in the room. The relatively revealing remarks made during some of the conversations, as well as the comments of targets during the debriefing, suggested that no one detected the microphone.

After 5 min, the conversations were terminated and targets were taken to private quarters where they completed the TSBI. This served as a final measure of their self-esteem.

Once targets completed this questionnaire, targets and intimates were carefully and thoroughly debriefed. In addition to explaining the nature and purpose of the experiment, the experimenter emphasized that the feedback targets received was purely fictitious. She also explained that the "graduate student in clinical psychology" was actually an undergraduate who had absolutely no experience or training in evaluating personality measures. When it became clear that everyone was convinced of the ruse and was in no way adversely affected by the feedback manipulation, intimates were paid for their participation and everyone was thanked and dismissed.

*Assessing the behaviors of the conversation partners.* We collected three sets of ratings in an effort to identify behaviors that may have influenced the extent to which targets changed their self-conceptions. The first set were temporal ratings, which consisted of simply having a judge listen to each conversation and record the amount of time each person spent discussing the feedback. After this, the same judge recorded the latency between the beginning of the session and the point at which either of the conversation partners referred to the feedback.

The second set of ratings were unstructured. A judge listened to the conversations and recorded statements that pertained directly to the feedback. The intent of this judge was to identify statements that may have influenced the amount of self-rating change displayed by targets. Toward this end, we made the judge aware of the amount of self-rating change displayed by each target. He did remain blind to condition, however.

The third set of ratings were structured. Six judges first learned that they would be listening to a series of conversations between "targets" and "partners" and that targets had just received feedback indicating that they possessed a large or a minimal amount of social anxiety. After listening to each conversation, judges rated each conversation on 11 dimensions. Specifically, on 7-point scales ranging from *disagree strongly* to *agree strongly*, judges rated the extent to which the (a) target initiated discussion about the feedback, (b) target disagreed with the feedback, (c) target struggled to make sense of the feedback, (d) target wanted the partner to help him or her make sense of the feedback, (e) partner initiated discussion about the feedback, (f) partner disagreed with the feedback, (g) partner tried to make the target feel better about him or herself, (h) partner struggled to make sense of the feedback, (i) partner was a good listener, (j) partner saw the target as the target saw him or herself, and (k) target and the partner were involved in an intimate relationship. These judges remained blind to condition and to the amount of self-rating change displayed by targets.

The interrater reliability of the six judges, as assessed by intraclass correlation coefficients, exceeded .70 for all items except c and j, with an average of .81. Given the low reliabilities for Items c and j (.46 and .33, respectively), we dropped them from further analyses.

## Results and Discussion

Did interacting with either a congruent intimate, an incongruent intimate, or a stranger influence the extent to which targets changed their self-ratings? If so, were there systematic differences in the behaviors of targets and their

interaction partners that contributed to such self-rating change? We addressed each of these issues in turn.

### *Self-Rating Change of Participants*

We expected that interacting with a congruent intimate would bolster the ability of targets to resist discrepant feedback, but that interacting with an incongruent intimate or stranger would not. Accordingly, we predicted that targets in the congruent intimate condition would be less inclined to change their self-ratings in the direction of the feedback than would targets in the noncongruent intimate condition or stranger condition. Furthermore, we anticipated that congruent intimates would be just as effective in insulating low self-esteem individuals against positive feedback as they would be in insulating high self-esteem individuals against negative feedback.

To test these predictions, we performed a hierarchical multiple regression with target self-esteem and interaction partner condition (congruent intimate, incongruent intimate, stranger) as predictors and self-rating change toward the feedback as the criterion.<sup>3</sup> The results confirmed our predictions. Most important, there was a reliable effect of interaction partner,  $F(2, 31) = 6.85, p < .014$ , such that targets in the congruent intimate groups displayed less self-rating change in the direction of the discrepant feedback ( $M = 3.21$ ) than did targets in the incongruent intimate group ( $M = 6.55$ ) and the stranger group ( $M = 7.70$ ).<sup>4</sup> Planned comparisons indicated that (a) targets in the incongruent intimate condition and the stranger condition displayed equally large amounts of self-rating change,  $F < 1$ , and (b) targets in the congruent intimate condition displayed less change than those in the incon-

<sup>3</sup> Prior to performing this analysis, we determined that the self-conceptions of individuals in the three interaction partner conditions did not differ ( $F < 1$ ) and that the within-cell regression coefficients were homogeneous. We report difference-score analyses instead of the more sensitive analysis of covariance (ANCOVA; Huck & McLean, 1975) because they are more readily interpretable. In any event, the results of the ANCOVA (available from the authors) are consistent with the results presented here.

<sup>4</sup> In interpreting these change scores, note that due to regression to the mean, the absence of self-rating change would result in some unknown positive value rather than zero. Participants in the congruent intimate group, then, may have experienced no change.

gruent intimate and stranger conditions,  $F(1, 31) = 5.41, p < .03$ .

Perhaps our most interesting and provocative finding was that there was no interaction between the interaction partner and self-esteem variables,  $F(2, 31) = 1.16, ns$ , nor was there a main effect of self-esteem,  $F < 1$ . Inspection of the means revealed that congruent intimates were just as effective in insulating the self-concepts of low self-esteem individuals against positive feedback as they were in insulating the self-concepts of high self-esteem individuals against negative feedback,  $M_s = 2.0, 4.13$ , respectively;  $t = 1.49, ns$ . Thus, just as congruent intimates seemed to tell low self-esteem individuals "I told you so, you're a nurd!", congruent intimates seemed to tell high self-esteem individuals "I told you so, you're wonderful!" Such messages prompted targets to dismiss the discrepant feedback and display minimal self-rating change.

Examination of the means also revealed that just as incongruent intimates failed to insulate the self-concepts of low self-esteem individuals against positive feedback, they also failed to insulate the self-concepts of high self-esteem individuals against negative feedback,  $M_s = 5.6, 7.33$ , respectively;  $t = 1.18, ns$ . It is probably too extreme to say that incongruent intimates promoted self-rating change in an absolute sense, however, inasmuch as interacting with an incongruent intimate produced no more self-rating change than interacting with a stranger.

Further analyses tested the possibility that the differences in self-rating change between the congruent and incongruent intimate groups were due to differences in the type of people in the two groups. One might argue, for example, that targets in congruent relationships displayed less change because they happened to have greater ego strength than targets in noncongruent relationships, rather than because of congruency per se. This possibility was undermined by the fact that among participants in the stranger condition, there were no differences between those involved in congruent versus incongruent relationships,  $t < 1$ .

Finally, two supplementary analyses revealed that neither sex of target (all  $F_s < 1.7, ns$ ) nor length of time that targets reported being involved with their intimate ( $F_s < 1$ ) influenced self-rating change.

### *Conversations and Self-Rating Change*

All but two of the couples discussed the feedback. In fact, most of the couples were fairly quick to discuss the feedback, the median latency being 12 s (the conversations lasted 300 s).<sup>5</sup> Usually, but not always, the target rather than the partner initiated discussion of the feedback ( $M_s = 4.7$  vs. 3.6, respectively), with targets expressing bewilderment regarding the feedback. Once having done so, targets listened to what their interaction partner had to say about the feedback, and then moved on to other topics. In fact, on the average, targets spent only 20 s discussing the feedback and their partners discussed it for only 18 s.

In what ways did interactions between congruent intimates and targets differ from those between incongruent intimates and targets? The unstructured ratings revealed that targets in incongruent relationships seemed more alarmed by the feedback than those in congruent relationships. For example, whereas 46% of targets in incongruent relationships expressed their concern by reading the feedback and asking their partner, "Is this supposed to be about me?" or "Did you write this about me?", no targets in congruent relationships asked either question. Intimates who were asked such questions were uniformly unsuccessful in nullifying the feedback. If the intimate endorsed the feedback, as one did, the target accepted the endorsement at face value and displayed considerable change. If, on the other hand, the intimate adamantly contradicted the feedback, as one did, the target accurately deduced that the intimate was joking. Hence, behaviors that were superficially dissimilar were interpreted in the same manner when they occurred in the context of relationships characterized by incongruency.

It is noteworthy that there was only one instance in which an intimate explicitly endorsed the discrepant feedback. In all other cases, incongruent and congruent intimates alike

<sup>5</sup> These data are based on only 24 of the total of 35 cases. The remaining 11 cases were recorded on a tape that was stolen from the laboratory before the judges' rating sessions. We encountered no evidence that the stolen cases differed in any way from the others, however. For example, the mean levels of self-rating change for the 24 cases were similar to those for the entire sample: Congruent = 3.44; incongruent = 6.38; stranger = 7.57.

quickly dismissed the discrepant feedback in roughly the same manner (e.g., by laughing loudly or by offering some verbal assessment such as, "That's bullshit"). Incongruent intimates, however, seemed less comfortable in this role than did congruent intimates, presumably because they tended to agree with the feedback, but knew that their intimate did not. Their discomfort was justified, inasmuch as their intimates tended to conclude that they agreed with the feedback no matter what they said or did. In some instances, they attempted to counter the skepticism of targets but experienced little success. For example, one incongruent intimate kept refuting the feedback long after it became evident that his intimate wanted to talk about something else. His repeated refutations eventually became a clear case of protesting too much. It was not surprising that his intimate displayed considerable self-rating change.

In sum, the unstructured ratings revealed that although both congruent and incongruent intimates dismissed the feedback, only congruent intimates were able to do so effectively. Targets of incongruent intimates apparently used their knowledge of the history of the relationship to infer that their intimate believed the feedback, thereby undermining the credibility of the intimate's efforts to refute it.

The structured ratings offered no further insight into why targets in the congruent intimate conditions displayed less self-rating change than did targets in the other two conditions. Nevertheless, these ratings did reveal that the two intimate groups differed from the stranger group on several dimensions. For example, judges were more likely to guess that conversation partners were involved in an intimate relationship if they were in the congruent intimate condition ( $M = 5.1$ ) or the incongruent intimate condition ( $M = 5.1$ ) rather than in the stranger condition ( $M = 2.1$ ),  $F(1, 20) = 23.96$ ,  $p < .001$ . Judges also indicated that intimates were more responsive to the plight of targets than were strangers. Specifically, partners disagreed with the feedback more in both the congruent intimate ( $M = 4.3$ ) and incongruent intimate condition ( $M = 4.1$ ) than in the stranger condition ( $M = 3.3$ ),  $F(1, 20) = 4.32$ ,  $p < .05$ . Similarly, partners struggled to make sense of the feedback more in both the congruent intimate ( $M = 4.2$ ) and incongruent intimate conditions ( $M = 4.1$ )

than in the stranger condition ( $M = 3.3$ ),  $F(1, 20) = 7.24$ ,  $p < .02$ . The only other finding that emerged from the structured ratings was that judges indicated that strangers ( $M = 5.4$ ) were better listeners than were congruent intimates ( $M = 4.5$ ), with the incongruent intimates falling in between ( $M = 5.1$ ),  $F(1, 20) = 6.51$ ,  $p < .02$ . None of the analyses revealed main or interactive effects of self-esteem.

Correlations between self-rating change and the structural and temporal ratings revealed that the single best predictors of self-rating change were the extent to which targets initiated discussion of the feedback,  $r(22) = -.479$ ,  $p = .009$ , and the extent to which they actually discussed the feedback,  $r(22) = -.476$ ,  $p = .009$ . That is, the more that targets discussed the feedback, the less change they displayed. In addition, the more targets disagreed with the feedback, the less change they experienced,  $r(22) = -.39$ ,  $p < .03$ . Within-cell correlations indicated that this pattern of correlations characterized all three conditions, except that the extent to which targets disagreed with the feedback was unrelated to self-rating change in the congruent intimate condition.

None of the other structured or temporal ratings were reliably associated with self-rating change. So, for example, self-rating change was unaffected by the extent to which partners denied the feedback or tried to make sense of it (both *r*s, *n*s).

In summary, the ratings of the conversations suggested that self-rating change was diminished by two independent factors. The first involved characteristics of the social support context in which targets sought to cope with the discrepant feedback; specifically, less self-rating change occurred if targets interacted with a congruent intimate rather than a incongruent intimate or a stranger. The second factor was the tendency of targets to try to cope with the feedback by discussing it with their conversation partners. In the General Discussion, we consider how each of these processes may reduce self-rating change.

### General Discussion

Our findings indicate that people's relationships may exert a powerful stabilizing influence on their self-conceptions. The first step in the chain of events that precipitate such stabilizing activity occurs when people form rela-

tionships. In general, people tend to form relationships with individuals who see them as they see themselves (for a discussion, see Secord & Backman, 1965; Swann, 1983). In our sample, for instance, covariation between targets' self-conceptions and their intimates' perceptions of them was fairly substantial,  $r(29) = .41$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Yet even if most relationships are characterized by congruency, there are some noteworthy exceptions. At least some of the incongruent intimates in our sample, for instance, possessed views of targets that were incongruent in an absolute as well as relative sense. That is, on the average, incongruent intimates rated high self-esteem targets *less* favorably than low self-esteem targets,  $M_s = 3.48$  and 4.0, respectively. Such incongruency is surely aversive to most individuals. To wit, Laing, Phillipson, and Lee (1966) reported that incongruent relationships are associated with unhappiness (see also Harvey, Wells, & Alvarez, 1978; Knudson, Summers, & Golding, 1980; Orvis, Kelley, & Butler, 1976; Sillars, 1981). Furthermore, in our sample, there was evidence suggesting that people might flee from incongruent relationships. Whereas couples in congruent relationships had been involved for an average of nearly 23 months, those in incongruent relationships had been involved for only 14 months.

Lest we be accused of painting an overly negative picture of incongruency, let us hasten to add that there are instances in which incongruency is desirable. A good example is the low self-esteem individual who seeks therapy in hopes of improving his or her self-view. Our data clearly suggest that incongruent intimates would promote improvement in the self-conceptions of such individuals. In contrast, our data indicate that congruent intimates would tend to stabilize the negative self-views of such low self-esteem individuals.

In support of the notion that the actions of congruent intimates may sometimes have undesirable consequences, there are documented instances in which intimates have provided their mate support for an unhealthy self-concept. Fry (1962), for example, reported that married couples who enter therapy often have mutual arrangements whereby the husband is afforded a self-concept that he is the healthier, more competent partner, and the wife is viewed as the sick, dependent partner. Once such con-

tracts have been established, both parties work to honor them, even if it requires that the wife bear the responsibility for a debilitating pathology that is as much her husband's as her own:

The spouses reveal, upon careful study, a history of symptoms closely resembling, if not identical to, the symptoms of the patient. . . . In one case the wife was labeled the patient because she was afraid of enclosed places and could not ride in elevators. Therefore, the couple could not visit a cocktail lounge on the top of a tall building. However, it was later revealed that the husband had a fear of high places which he never needed to face because of the marital agreement that they never went to the tops of buildings because of the wife's fear of elevators. (Fry, 1962, p. 248)

The point here is that social support can be helpful or harmful depending on characteristics of the recipient, the recipient's goals, and the extent to which the type of support under consideration allows them to achieve these goals (cf. Swann, 1984). For this reason it is probably best to avoid making blanket statements concerning the utility of social support and simply note that people's friends and intimates are an important aspect of the *opportunity structures* that constrain the identities that they are able to maintain (e.g., McCall & Simmons, 1966; Swann, 1983).

Our findings also have some more general implications regarding social support processes. On the empirical level, our research demonstrates the feasibility of studying social support processes experimentally (see also Kiecolt-Glaser & Greenberg, 1984). Such research is important because it offers an especially effective means of establishing the *causal* impact of social support processes on people's psychological and physical well-being. Our investigation, for example, demonstrated that interacting with a congruent intimate rather than with an incongruent intimate or a stranger improved people's ability to dismiss self-discrepant feedback.

On a conceptual level, our findings support Thoits's (1984) contention that social support researchers should begin integrating their work with investigations of *coping* processes—the opposite side of the social support coin. That is, our data suggest that the manner in which people strive to cope with stressors may be as important as the quality of social support they receive from intimates.

Our results also indicate that the mechanisms through which social support and coping

processes nullify stressors may be somewhat different. Being exposed to a congruent intimate, for example, probably diminished change because such intimates had a long track record of supporting the target's self-view and could therefore dismiss the feedback more effectively than could an incongruent intimate or stranger.

Attempting to cope with the feedback by discussing it probably diminished self-rating change for very different reasons. One possibility is that only those targets who regarded the feedback as preposterous were willing to openly discuss the feedback and deny it. From this perspective, it was not discussing the feedback per se that reduced self-rating change, it was simply that the only ones who were inclined to discuss the feedback also happened to be the ones who never took the feedback seriously, even in the beginning.

One weakness of this explanation is that it cannot account for evidence indicating that discussing discrepant feedback plays a causal role in diminishing self-rating change. In research by Swann and Hill (1982), participants first received self-discrepant feedback from a confederate. Some were then given opportunity to interact with the confederate; others received no such opportunity. Those who had an opportunity to interact with the confederate made active efforts to undermine the feedback through their behavior. They subsequently displayed relatively little self-rating change, even though they believed that they had failed to modify the confederate's appraisal of them. Because participants were randomly assigned to condition, these data support the notion that discussing feedback plays a causal role in reducing self-rating change.

Perhaps a better explanation for the relationship between discussing feedback and self-rating change in the present research is that, prior to talking about discrepant feedback, targets had to first organize and structure it (e.g., Abelson, 1959; Horowitz, 1976; Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983; Zajonc, 1960). In thinking about the feedback and how it fit with their previous experiences, targets realized just how aberrant and implausible it was. They consequently dismissed it.

In support of this hypothesis, Pennebaker and his colleagues (Pennebaker, 1985; Pennebaker & O'Heeron, 1984) provided independent evidence that the best way to nullify the effects of stressors

is to engage in behavior that forces one to structure and organize it. In a series of laboratory and field investigations, these investigators report converging evidence that the opportunity to discuss or write about a traumatic event reduces physiological stress (as indexed by autonomic activity) and risk of developing disease. Apparently, translating one's concerns about some stressful event into behavior encourages the individual to make sense of that event. The result is that a frightening or incomprehensible event becomes more understandable and therefore less stressful.

Our findings are similar to Pennebaker's, then, in that in our study discussing the feedback facilitated coping. Our findings are different, however, in that we also discovered that the setting in which such discussion occurred was also very important. Thus, our data suggest that just as certain coping strategies are ideally suited for offsetting the effects of stress, so too are certain interaction partners ideally suited for providing a context in which coping efforts will succeed.

### Conclusions

Over the years, psychologists have generally assumed that people's self-conceptions remain stable due to forces *inside* the person. Specifically, theorists have speculated that self-concept stability reflects continuities in the manner in which people's thought processes are organized (e.g., Allport, 1937; Freud, 1921).

Our data offer an alternative to this conceptualization. That is, our findings suggest that self-concept stability emanates from forces *outside* the person, from continuity in the manner in which people's *social relationships* are organized. Pivotal in such organizational schemes are people's friends and intimates. If chosen carefully, these individuals will serve as accomplices who reinforce their partners' self-conceptions, thereby rendering these conceptions impervious to attack.

To be sure, our findings show that not all accomplices are equally effective in stabilizing people's self-views; those who possess congruent views of their partners exert a greater stabilizing influence than do those who have incongruent views of their partners. Also, accomplices differ in the nature of the feedback they offer; just as some accomplices verify favorable self-concepts by offering positive feedback, others verify unfavorable self-concepts



by offering negative feedback. Despite these differences, all such accomplices have one thing in common: For better or worse, their activities may often be the single most potent determinant of the survival of their partners' self-conceptions.

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