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THE SABOTEUR WITHIN

Self-verification strivings can make praise toxic

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Praise was a poison to me; I choked on it. I wanted the professor to shout at me, wanted it so deeply I felt dizzy from the deprivation. The ugliness of me had to be given expression.

(Westover, 2018, p. 277)

Unexpected praise was terrifying to Tara Westover, author of the award-winning memoir, *Educated*. Although few people develop such an extreme aversion to praise, most feel wary when they receive praise that challenges their firmly held self-views. In this chapter, we use self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 2012) to illuminate this phenomenon. The theory proposes that people want to be seen as they see themselves, even if their self-views are negative. As a result, people with negative self-views recoil at evaluations that seem overly positive and embrace evaluations that seem appropriately negative. We begin by considering why this pattern emerges.

The function of self-knowledge and self-verification strivings

Humans are born with an instinctual preference for social approval. As early as 4.5 months, infants prefer voices that have the melodic contours of acceptance rather than rejection (Fernald, 1989). Similarly, 5-month-olds prefer gazing at smiling faces over non-smiling ones (Shapiro, Eppler, Haith, & Reis, 1987). Later during development, children endorse positive views of themselves before embracing negative self-views (e.g., Benenson & Dweck, 1986). Among adults, there is widespread consensus that people prefer praise, at least in Western societies. Support for this belief comes from evidence that people report liking positive feedback more than negative feedback, even when the feedback seems overly positive (Kwang & Swann, 2010).

But if people are fundamentally motivated to acquire positive evaluations, why do individuals like Tara eschew such evaluations? The answer emerges from a consideration of how children form their self-views. From a very early age, children learn that others evaluate them on the basis of their personal characteristics, abilities, and so on. Children carefully note these evaluations and use them to form self-views (Mead, 1934). Once formed, these self-views serve as proxies for how people fit into the social hierarchy (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Individuals who suffer from maltreatment as children often conclude that they are at the bottom of this hierarchy. In extreme cases like Tara's, they may even decide that they are worthless.

Yet if it is clear why people might form negative self-views, it is less obvious why they should wish to preserve these self-views. After all, working to preserve negative self-views will clearly frustrate people's desire for praise. If the self-enhancement motive is as fundamental as some theorists claim it is (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009), why did Tara report feeling "dizzy from the deprivation" when the professor praised her?

To understand Tara's desire for self-verification, consider the important role that self-views play in mental life. Prominent self-theorist Howard Murphy once noted that self-knowledge "serves as the chart by which the individual navigates. If it is lost, he can make only impulsive runs in fair weather. The ship drifts helplessly whenever storms arise" (1947, p. 715). A case study reported by the neurologist Oliver Sacks (1985) shows how losing a stable sense of self can cause an individual to feel adrift. Due to chronic alcohol abuse, patient William Thompson suffered from memory loss so profound that he forgot who he was. Lacking stable self-views, Thompson did not know how to act toward people and was unable to maintain meaningful relationships with them. His case study illustrates why mechanisms designed to stabilize identities would have been selected for during human evolutionary history: stable identities are required for harmonious relationships, which in turn facilitate effective division of labor and accomplishment of objectives.

Stable self-views may not only serve the pragmatic function of helping people regulate their social relationships but also serve the epistemic function of enabling people to make predictions about their worlds. This will reassure people that things are as they should be, fostering a sense of coherence and place. In fact, firmly held self-views will serve as the centerpiece of knowledge systems and thus determine the viability of that system. It is thus unsurprising that by mid-childhood, a preference for evaluations that confirm and stabilize self-views emerges (e.g., Cassidy, Ziv, Mehta, & Feeney, 2003). This preference will have a profound impact on people's reactions to praise.

The fleeting gleam of praise

The preference for praise that all humans seem to be born with is intrinsically simple. That is, as soon as people recognize that an evaluation is positive, they

develop an affinity for it. Self-verification strivings, however, are more complex. For self-verification to occur, in addition to recognizing an evaluation as positive or negative, people must also compare it to their self-view to determine whether the evaluation is self-verifying or non-verifying. This comparison process leads to a subsequent preference for self-verifying evaluations that may override the initial preference for a positive evaluation. The foregoing logic suggests that if people with low self-esteem are prevented from fully processing praise, they may embrace it because they have not yet realized that it is not self-verifying. That is, people with negative self-views may find praise appealing immediately after receiving it, but this appeal may be short-lived and fragile. The results of three studies support this reasoning.

One study employed a “think aloud” methodology (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). People with positive and negative self-views thought out loud into a tape recorder as they chose to interact with either an evaluator who provided positive evaluations or one who provided negative evaluations. Analyses of the tape recordings revealed that even people with negative self-views were initially smitten by the favorable evaluation before becoming wary of it:

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.

Consistent with self-verification theory, people with negative self-views tended to ultimately choose the negative evaluator. Comments by people with negative self-views revealed that they were drawn by the match between the partner’s evaluation and their own self-view:

I think that’s pretty close to the way I am. [The negative evaluator] better reflects my own view of myself, from experience.

Follow-up studies experimentally tested the idea that positivity strivings occur before verification strivings. When forced to choose between two evaluators quickly, participants selected the positive evaluator regardless of their self-view. Only when given time to ponder their decision did participants with negative self-views choose negative, self-verifying partners. Similarly, depriving people of cognitive resources by having them rehearse a phone number while they chose an interaction partner had a similar effect of short-circuiting self-verification strivings. As a result, even persons with negative self-views chose positive partners while resource-deprived (Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990).

In naturally occurring relationships, wherein people have plenty of time to process the evaluations they receive from others, self-verification strivings should cause people with negative self-views to eschew praise. One set of researchers (Kille, Eibach, Wood, & Holmes, 2017) examined the role of self-verification in

response to compliments from romantic relationship partners. Consistent with self-verification theory, individuals with negative self-views devalued their partners' compliments, citing discrepancies between the positive information conveyed in the compliment and their own self-views. Similarly, when people received overly positive feedback regarding their group identities, they responded to this non-verifying feedback by derogating those who delivered the feedback (Vázquez, Gomez, & Swann, 2018).

Self-verification strivings may cause people with low self-esteem to not only express ambivalence about praise but also withdraw from persons who praised them. In two independent investigations (De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Swann, De La Ronde & Hixon, 1994), married persons rated themselves and their partner on a series of qualities (e.g., intelligence) and then rated the quality of their relationships. Consistent with the idea that the gleam of praise is fleeting for people with negative self-views, such individuals were less committed to spouses who appraised them positively. Later studies revealed that individuals whose negative self-views were not verified by their partner were especially likely to divorce their partners (e.g., Burke & Harrod, 2005). Apparently, people preferred self-verifying evaluations to non-verifying evaluations even when the self-verifying evaluations were negative.

One reason underlying the counterintuitive finding that people with negative self-views prefer self-verifying, negative evaluations could be that self-verifying negative evaluations are reassuring, while non-verifying evaluations provoke anxiety. For example, researchers (Wood, Heimpel, Newby-Clark, & Ross, 2005) contrasted the reactions of high and low self-esteem participants to success. Whereas high self-esteem persons reacted quite favorably to success, low self-esteem participants reported being anxious and concerned, apparently because they found success to be surprising and unsettling. Similarly, others (Ayduk, Gyurak, Akinola, & Mendes, 2013) observed participants' cardiovascular responses to positive and negative evaluations. When people with negative self-views received positive feedback, their cardiovascular reactions (i.e., blood pressure reactivity as well as negative facial expressions and body posture) indicated that they felt "threatened." In contrast, when participants with negative self-views received negative feedback, their cardiovascular reactions indicated that they were "galvanized" (i.e., aroused in a manner associated with approach motivation). The opposite pattern emerged for people with positive self-views.

How can we get individuals with negative self-views to embrace praise?

Even though people with negative self-views prefer self-verifying negative evaluations, it may not always be adaptive for them to eschew praise. For example, self-verification strivings may thwart positive change and cause people with negative self-views to tolerate poor treatment from others ranging from disparaging marriage partners (Swann & Predmore, 1985) to exploitative

employers (Wiesenfeld, Swann, Brockner, & Bartel, 2007). The story of Tara Westover with which we opened this chapter represents a case in point. Decades of abuse by family members convinced her that she was worthless, and it took years of support from key people in her life, psychotherapy, and success in her career to reverse the effects of her early experiences. Yet, in many respects, she was very fortunate, as her many talents and guidance from those who loved her enabled her to extricate herself from a horrific life situation. In Tara's case and similar ones, a key challenge is bringing people with negative self-views to accept praise.

Given that persons with low self-esteem perceive praise as toxic because it feels self-discrepant, reducing perceptions of being misunderstood should help them benefit from praise. A potential solution may be to simultaneously verify a person's perception of themselves (e.g., "I agree that you may have some negative qualities that don't matter to me") but also encourage them to recognize positive aspects of themselves. Some studies have in fact shown that successes and compliments can be reframed in ways that make them less threatening. For example, Zunick and colleagues (Zunick, Fazio, & Vasey, 2015) identified a way to enable people with low self-esteem benefit from positive evaluations based on their past successes. Their studies introduced a "directed abstraction" writing task, wherein participants considered a past success (e.g., in public speaking) and then wrote about "why" they were successful. By presupposing that people were responsible for their success, the manipulation was able to direct those with negative self-views to generalize from that success, report higher ability levels, and even persist in the face of subsequent failure. Marigold, Holmes, and Ross (2007) focused on compliments in romantic relationships. They discovered that reframing a partner's past compliments in an abstract manner (e.g., by writing about "why" their partner "admired" them) led persons with low self-esteem to report increased happiness, state self-esteem, and evaluations of their relationship. In fact, these effects were still evident two weeks after the intervention. Follow-up studies discovered that the reframing manipulation also decreased negative behavioral responses to relationship threats among low self-esteem individuals (Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2010). Apparently, reflecting on the meaning and significance of a compliment persuaded these participants to perceive their partner's positive evaluation as enduring (e.g., "She appreciates that I am thoughtful") rather than as a one-time incident (e.g., "She said I was thoughtful"). Importantly, these researchers warn that such abstract reframing interventions will be effective only insofar as they "direct those with negative self-views towards positive generalizations" (Zunick et al., 2015, p. 16). This means that some types of abstract reframing can backfire. For example, abstract reframing of the content of the compliment itself (i.e., conceptualizing it at an abstract manner that focuses on meaning) can be harmful because it may trigger a conflict between the compliment and the individual's self-views. In contrast, concrete construal of the compliment (i.e., conceptualizing it at a concrete, behavioral level) allows for processing the compliment in isolation and avoiding integration

with the individual's self-theories (Kille et al., 2017). As a result, persons with low self-esteem who processed a compliment in a concrete (vs. abstract) way were just as gratified by the praise as persons with high self-esteem.

In short, it is possible to detoxify praise for persons with negative self-views by framing it in ways that minimize the threat to their self-theories. Carefully framed praise may allow those with negative self-views to benefit from praise, but such interventions have so far been shown to have only short-term effects. Given that the toxicity of praise experienced by some is produced by their negative self-views, perhaps the ultimate solution would be to actually change their self-theories. One possibility begins by leveraging naturally occurring contexts in which people with negative self-views tolerate praise. Consider dating relationships. Although married people display a clear preference for self-verifying partners, people who are dating display a preference for positive partners, even when they have negative self-views (Swann et al., 1994). Apparently, while dating, people are most concerned with keeping the relationship alive, but this unalloyed desire for positive evaluations is replaced by a desire for self-verification as they grow more confident that the partner is "hooked" (Campbell, Lackenbauer, & Muise, 2006; Swann et al., 1994). Conceivably, people with negative self-views could be convinced to continue to suspend their desire for self-verification until they actually come to internalize relatively positive self-views through a self-perception process (Bem, 1972).

Conclusion

As we have highlighted here, praise can have counterintuitive effects when it contradicts one's firmly held self-views. Non-verifying praise is particularly harmful to people who suffer from low self-esteem and depression because it threatens their firmly held negative self-views. For these individuals, praise is not just ineffective, but it can be toxic. They may therefore habitually avoid praise and instead select contexts and relationship partners that raise the chances that they will receive verification for their unfounded negative self-views. As a result, they may get trapped in a perpetual cycle of life experiences that feel safe and predictable despite being objectively problematic. Fortunately, recent work suggests that it *is* possible to detoxify praise for persons with low self-esteem, at least in the short term, by framing it in ways that minimize threat. Yet, for those with low self-esteem, the ultimate end to harmful self-verifying cycles may require improving their self-esteem. It is sobering that decades after self-verification theory was first introduced, we still know precious little about how to achieve lasting improvements in self-esteem, which perhaps reflects the difficulty of this endeavor. Yet, as stories like Tara's demonstrate, it is clearly possible for people who harbor negative conceptions of self to enjoy dramatic improvements in their conceptions of self. A key challenge for future researchers will be to engineer interventions that make Tara's extraordinary odyssey commonplace.

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