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Self-Verification: Bringing Social Reality into Harmony with the Self

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One sure way to stir people up is to tell them that they are not what they think they are. Imagine, for example, the surprise and consternation of the self-conceived Don Juan who hears a former lover describe him as “all elbows,” or the painfully shy individual whose guidance counselor advises her to pursue a career in acting, or the macho man who overhears someone refer to him as “that milquetoast.” Although people’s reactions to such feedback will surely differ in specifics, there will usually be some striking commonalities. After they recover from their surprise, people will often rush to find ways to discredit or dismiss the feedback. Furthermore, they will probably take steps to insure that they never encounter such appraisals again. In these and other ways people may strive to sustain their beliefs about themselves.

The major purpose of this chapter is to examine the processes whereby people work to ensure the stability of their self-conceptions. Some of these processes are designed to bring people’s friends, colleagues, and intimates to see them as they see themselves. Others are designed to make the social environment seem more compatible with their self-conceptions than it really is. Together, these *self-verification* processes enable people to create—both in their actual social environments and in their own minds—a social reality that verifies and confirms their self-conceptions (cf. Lecky, 1945; Secord & Backman, 1961, 1965).

In the first section of this chapter I consider why people are motivated to formulate and sustain their self-conceptions. Next I examine how people create around themselves environments that confirm their self-conceptions. In the third section I outline a number of cognitive strategies through which people come to overestimate the extent to which their social environments are compatible with their self-conceptions. Then I examine how these strategies are woven into

people's lives. In the fifth section I consider the events that precipitate and accompany changes in self-concepts. Finally, I offer some speculations concerning the implications of these processes for therapy, the traits-situations controversy, and a theoretical conceptualization of the self-perception process.

ON THE NATURE OF KNOWING ONE'S SELF

In the tradition of the symbolic interactionists (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), I assume here that as soon as children begin to engage in social interaction they become concerned with anticipating how others will respond to them. Toward this end they try to adopt the perspective of others, to see themselves as others see them. Through such activities children develop thoughts and feelings about themselves, that is, self-conceptions.

As they mature, children will become increasingly accustomed to the notion that the appraisals of others should agree with their self-conceptions. In addition, they will become more and more motivated to see to it that neither their self-conceptions nor the appraisals of others change in any radical way. The reasons for this second development are several, but they all boil down to the same general principle: People seem to possess an inborn preference for things that are predictable, familiar, stable, and uncertainty reducing. That is, people like to feel that their social world is knowable and controllable, that their hunches concerning the nature of the world are accurate and reliable. Without trustworthy beliefs they are like scientists without theories; they do not know what to look for or expect (cf. Epstein, 1973; Greenwald, 1980).

The research literature supports the notion that people prefer phenomena that are predictable and consistent with their expectations. Research on the effects of "mere exposure" (e.g., Harrison, 1977; Zajonc, 1968), for example, has offered convincing evidence that humans and animals alike grow to love that which is familiar to them. A similar preference for the expected has emerged in studies of judgmental and inference processes. According to this research, people find positive or confirmatory instances of phenomena to be especially impressive, trustworthy, and diagnostic—despite the fact that such instances are inferior to negative or disconfirmatory instances from a strictly logical standpoint (e.g., Popper, 1963). Thus, investigations of concept formation, concept utilization, and causal reasoning indicate that people are more likely to rely on positive or confirmatory instances of phenomena than negative or disconfirmatory ones (e.g., Hovland & Weiss, 1953; Koriati, Lichtenstein, & Fischhoff, 1980). Whether testing the validity of propositions about people (e.g., Mary is an extrovert) or physical objects (e.g., all chairs have four legs), people preferentially search for evidence that will confirm rather than disconfirm the propositions they are testing (e.g., Snyder & Swann, 1978b; Wason & Johnson-Laird, 1972). The pervasiveness of these findings in adults and the fact that analogous findings occur in animals and very young children (Sophian & Fabricius, 1981)

suggest that the appeal of confirmatory instances may reflect some very basic characteristics of human thought processes (cf. Bruner, Goodrow, & Austin, 1956).

Of greatest interest here are data suggesting that this preference for confirmatory instances channels people's reactions to self-relevant feedback. Swann and Read (1981a, Investigation 1) first had each of their participants complete a series of questionnaires, including a personality inventory and measures of self-perceived assertiveness and emotionality. The experimenter then secured the participant's consent to show the responses on the personality inventory to another individual. She then left the room with the personality inventory in hand. Several minutes later the experimenter returned and told the participant that the other individual had read over his or her responses to the personality tests and answered some questions about the participant. She then displayed two lists of questions that the other person had ostensibly answered. Each list had a total of eight questions. On one list some questions probed for evidence of assertiveness, for example: "What makes you think that this is the type of person who will complain in a restaurant if the service is bad?" Other questions probed for evidence of unassertiveness, for example: "Why would this person not be likely to complain if someone cuts into line in front of them at a movie?" On the second list some questions probed for instances of emotional behavior, for example: "What about this person makes you think that he or she would go to pieces if a friend died?" Other questions probed for evidence of unemotional behavior, for example: "Why do you think this person doesn't get angry, even when provoked?" The experimenter told the participant to read the questions and select those whose answers he or she was most interested in scrutinizing. The sole limitation was that only five questions from each of the two lists could be chosen.

The authors expected that participants would seek social feedback that would confirm their self-conceptions. This was the case. There was a reliable interaction between self-conception and type of feedback. As can be seen in Table 2.1 the effect was almost perfectly symmetrical: Just as those who saw themselves as assertive asked to examine more assertive feedback than unassertive feedback, those who saw themselves as unassertive asked to examine more unassertive feedback than assertive feedback. A similar pattern characterized the emotionality data; whereas those who perceived themselves as emotional preferred emotional feedback, those who saw themselves as unemotional preferred unemotional feedback.

Swann and Read (1981a) conducted two follow-up investigations to assess the generality of this preference for self-confirmatory feedback. Investigation 2 showed that participants were even willing to relinquish their private funds to acquire self-confirmatory feedback and that males and females were equally likely to manifest this desire to acquire self-confirmatory feedback. Investigation 3 indicated that participants regarded self-confirmatory feedback as especially informative and diagnostic with respect to the type of persons they were.

TABLE 2.1
Choice of Feedback as a Function
of Self-Conceptions

<i>Self-Conceptions</i>	<i>Type of Feedback</i>	
	<i>Assertive Feedback</i>	<i>Unassertive Feedback</i>
Assertive	2.74	2.26
Unassertive	2.28	2.72
	<i>Emotional Feedback</i>	<i>Unemotional Feedback</i>
	Emotional	2.77
Unemotional	2.42	2.58

Note: Higher numbers indicate greater amounts of feedback selected. $n = 79$.

The message emerging from this research is simple and clear-cut: People prefer self-confirmatory feedback, and they will translate this preference into active efforts to acquire such feedback. In the next two sections of this chapter I characterize some of the strategies people employ in their quest for self-confirmatory feedback. But before describing these strategies let me introduce the concept of an opportunity structure.

Opportunity Structures for the Self

Biologists, ethologists, and sociobiologists have often noted that all living organisms tend to inhabit "ecological niches," that is, environments that routinely satisfy their needs (e.g., Clarke, 1954; Odum, 1963; Wilson, 1974). In their classic monograph McCall and Simmons (1966) point to evidence that people also live within certain niches or opportunity structures (e.g., Duncan, 1964; Hawley, 1950) and go on to consider various factors that might influence the nature of these structures. One of their most intriguing arguments is that people gravitate toward opportunity structures that offer support for their self-conceptions.

DEVELOPING AN OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE

People may employ at least three general strategies in acquiring an opportunity structure that verifies their self-conceptions. Consider, for example, how a woman might insure that the men she encounters at a party see her as she sees

herself—seductive. Before she even arrives at the party, she takes steps to insure that when she makes her entrance most will be quick to recognize her as a seductive woman. In particular, she acquires several signs and symbols of her seductiveness: a dress that exposes more cleavage than it covers; a perfume that is guaranteed to tantalize even the most insensitive nose; and cosmetics that give her the “let me entertain you” look.

Upon making her appearance at the party, she will be sure to seek out and mingle with the “right” people. To the unattached, more virile men she is drawn like a magnet, for in the past they have shown that they fully appreciate her charms. At the same time she avoids the attached or sexually retired men. But even if these strategies fail, she may elicit the reactions she desires through her actions. She may hold herself in her seductive pose, smile her “come-hither” smile, and inject her conversations with numerous sexual innuendos and suggestive metaphors. Such interpersonal prompts will almost certainly insure that her interaction partners will quickly recognize her for the seductive woman she believes herself to be.

This hypothetical example illustrates three distinct strategies that people may use to establish an opportunity structure that will sustain their self-conceptions. By acquiring signs and symbols of who they are, by choosing appropriate interaction partners, and by adopting certain interaction strategies, people may insure that the appraisals of their interaction partners will validate their self-conceptions.

Displaying Signs and Symbols of Who We Are

If people are to succeed in laying claim to a particular identity, it is critical that they look the part. By wearing long hair and a scraggly beard, acquiring a grandiose title, or accumulating a curriculum vitae that is too fat to fit into a normal-sized briefcase, people may leave their interaction partners few doubts concerning who they are and how they expect to be treated.

To be effective, signs and symbols must possess at least three characteristics. They must be noticed by others, they must characteristically evoke certain specifiable reactions from others, and they must be under control of the individual. Clothing and cosmetics meet all three of these criteria quite well. The clothes one wears, for example, can be used to tell others whether one is liberal or conservative, wealthy or destitute, easygoing or meticulous, flashy or sedate, prudish or promiscuous. Similarly, through cosmetics, wigs, or hair style, people can project dramatically different identities to onlookers.

Individuals can even alter their body structure in an effort to self-verify. Those with positive body images may diet or lift weights to keep their bodies in stride with their self-views. Those who do not wish to adapt their body images to their aging bodies may try even more drastic measures. With a little surgery an aging face can shed its wrinkles, sagging breasts can regain their former stature, and a balding pate can go under cover again.

Whatever appearance people decide to take on, it will almost certainly influence how they are perceived and treated. This point has been demonstrated repeatedly by researchers in physical attractiveness (e.g., Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971; Dion, 1973, 1974; Langlois & Stephan, 1977; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). For example, Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid (1977) have shown that college men will behave much more flirtatiously with women whom they believe to be physically attractive. In light of these data the billions of dollars spent on clothing, cosmetics, and body improvement schemes each year may be well spent. Apparently, people's appearances can be an important means of insuring that they are treated in a manner that befits their self-conceptions.

The signs and symbols that people acquire and display are not limited to aspects of their physical appearance. The cars they drive, the neighborhoods they live in, and the artwork they display on their living room walls may all be used to tell others who they are. In addition, people may enter certain occupations in an attempt to communicate their self-views to others. In an article entitled "Pediatric Lions and Gynecological Lambs," Stern and Scanlon (1958) present evidence that physicians choose areas of specialization that match their self-concepts. Similarly, Englander (1960) found that students who had decided to be elementary school teachers possessed self-concepts that were much more similar to the characteristics of "exemplary" elementary school teachers than students who had committed themselves to other occupations. Although these data cannot be taken as conclusive evidence that self-concepts actually *cause* occupational choices, they are certainly compatible with the notion that when people choose professions they simply translate their self-concepts into occupational terminology (e.g., Super, 1966).

Whether it be the way they dress, the cars they buy, or the titles they tack onto their names, it is clear that there are a number of props people may use in setting the stage for their social interactions. If they are successful in their use of these props, people will find their interaction partners ready to treat them in a self-confirmatory manner.

Selective Affiliation

People may also self-verify by interacting with the "right" people in the "right" situations. Perhaps the most straightforward way to accomplish this is to seek out certain people and avoid others. Thus, the stereotypically feminine woman may look for men who "treat her like a lady"; her male counterpart may gravitate toward women who make him feel like "a real man."

There is some suggestive evidence that people seek out interaction partners whose appraisals confirm their self-conceptions. Backman and Secord (1962), for example, found that sorority women interacted most frequently with those whom they thought perceived them in a congruent manner. Similarly, Broxton (1963) found that college women who requested roommate changes believed that

the new roommate had a more congruent view of them than did the old roommate.

Another means of acquiring self-confirmatory reactions through selective affiliation capitalizes on the fact that observers often base their inferences about people on the company they keep. For example, whereas the reputations of people who associate with highly competent or attractive individuals benefit, the reputations of those who affiliate with incompetent or unattractive people suffer (e.g., Sigall & Landy, 1973). Research has shown that people will sometimes use this "basking in reflected glory" effect for purposes of eliciting certain reactions from others (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). Just as people may self-verify by affiliating with certain people, they may also do so by entering certain roles. Backman and Secord (1968) studied women's preferences for one of three marital roles: wife and mother, companion, or partner. They discovered that women were much more likely to choose roles that were consistent with their self-conceptions.

There is also evidence that people may gravitate toward and stay in environments that are compatible with their self-conceptions. Pervin and his colleagues (Pervin, 1967a, 1967b; Pervin & Rubin, 1967) have shown that students are happiest if their college has qualities that are compatible with their view of self. Further, these researchers report that students enrolled in colleges that are discrepant with their self-conceptions are especially prone to consider dropping out.

Although none of the foregoing data are conclusive, they support the notion that people tend to seek out people and situations that will offer support for their self-conceptions. An important characteristic of this selective affiliation strategy of self-verification is that once people enter a particular social group, institution, or occupation, forces such as legal contracts and inertia will tend to keep them there. Hence, when they make decisions such as whom to marry, what profession to pursue, or which university to attend, people lock themselves into a system that will thereafter more or less automatically provide them with certain types of feedback. For this reason, this strategy will probably be self-sustaining as well as self-verifying.

Interpersonal Prompts

Even if people fail to acquire self-confirmatory reactions by displaying signs and symbols or by selective affiliation, they may still do so by adopting appropriate interaction strategies. Thus, the male who sees himself as dominant may bring others to bow to him by presenting himself in an authoritative and commanding manner; his more docile counterpart may create just the opposite reaction by presenting himself in a highly tentative, uncertain fashion.

There are now two independent studies that have examined the conditions under which people are most inclined to present themselves in ways that elicit

self-confirmatory reactions. Swann and Hill (1982) first collected a measure of participants' self-perceived dominance during a pretesting session at the beginning of the semester. The actual experimental session began with participants playing a game with a confederate in which each player alternately assumed the dominant "leader" role or the submissive "assistant" role. There was a break between games, and the experimenter asked the two players to decide who would like to be the leader for the next set of games. This was the cue for the confederate to deliver the feedback manipulation. Within some conditions she indicated that the participant seemed dominant: "You really seem to be the forceful, dominant type. . . ." Within the other conditions she asserted that the participant seemed rather nondominant: "You really don't seem to be the forceful, dominant type. . . ."

How did participants react to this feedback? The key was whether the feedback confirmed or disconfirmed their self-conceptions. If the feedback confirmed their self-conceptions, they did not do much of anything—they more or less passively accepted the confederate's appraisal. In contrast, if the feedback disconfirmed their self-conceptions, they reacted quite vehemently, resisting the feedback and bending over backwards to demonstrate that they were not the persons the confederate made them out to be. The means in Table 2.2 show that in the eyes of objective observers self-conceived dominants who were labeled submissive became all the more dominant. At the same time, self-conceived submissives who were labeled dominant became especially submissive.

Swann and Read (1981b, Investigation 2) obtained quite similar results using a different dimension of the self-concept and a different procedural paradigm. Participants who perceived themselves as either likable or dislikable engaged in getting-acquainted conversations. Some participants were led to suspect that their interaction partner might like them; others were led to suspect that their interaction partner might dislike them; still others learned nothing of their interaction partner's evaluation of them. As predicted, there was an overall tendency for participants who perceived themselves as likable to elicit more positive

TABLE 2.2
Behavioral Reactions to Social Feedback

<i>Self-Perceived Dominance</i>	<i>Consistent Feedback</i>	<i>Discrepant Feedback</i>
Dominant	36.00	46.29
Submissive	37.20	30.00

Note: Higher numbers indicate that participants were rated as more dominant by objective judges.

reactions than participants who perceived themselves as dislikable. Moreover, this tendency was especially pronounced when participants suspected that their interaction partner's appraisal might disconfirm their self-conceptions. Whereas the most positive appraisals were elicited by participants who thought of themselves as likable and suspected that their partner disliked them, the most negative reactions were provoked by those who saw themselves as dislikable and suspected that their partner liked them. Therefore, as in the Swann and Hill study, when participants confronted the prospect that their interaction partner's appraisal might disconfirm their self-conceptions, they tried especially hard to present themselves in ways that would elicit self-confirmatory feedback.

In the Swann and Hill (1982) and Swann and Read (1981b, Investigation 2) studies, the interaction strategies people adopted differed markedly as a function of the specific self-concept that they were verifying. Thus, for example, those verifying their submissiveness grew mild-mannered and docile, and those verifying their likableness heaped on praise and compliments. Undoubtedly, still other interaction strategies will be adopted when people are trying to verify other self-conceptions. For example, people who wish others to see them as powerful or ruthless might try to intimidate the people they encounter, whereas those who wish to be seen as competent might take pains to display their knowledge and expertise. Similarly, individuals who wish to be seen as honest might strive to exude morality and integrity in their interactions (for a detailed discussion of these and other strategies of self-presentation and when they are used, see Jones & Pittman, 1982).

Clearly, there exists a wide variety of interaction strategies that people may use in the service of self-verification. Nevertheless, as powerful as they may be, these self-verification attempts may sometimes run aground. When this happens, people may first try to shift the focus of the interaction onto another aspect of their identity. So, for example, a woman whose boyfriend refuses to acknowledge her athletic prowess might implicitly or explicitly say to him, "Well, if you will not say that I am a good athlete, will you at least grant that I am a competent musician?" If successful, she will at least have the satisfaction of verifying *some* aspect of her self-concept, even if it is not the one that she set out to verify.

However, this refocusing strategy will not always meet the needs of self-verifiers, particularly when the self-conception in question is extremely important to them. For instance, if the woman's athletic prowess is a central feature of her self-concept, it will be especially difficult for her to cope with her boyfriend's refusal to recognize her athletic ability. As a result she may utilize one of three self-verification strategies that are still available to her. She may simply ignore her boyfriend's appraisal. She may attend to his evaluation but fail to encode and/or retrieve it. Or she may nullify his appraisal by systematically distorting the feedback she receives from him. Each of these three strategies is discussed in the next section.

"SEEING" MORE SELF-CONFIRMATORY EVIDENCE THAN ACTUALLY EXISTS

It would be truly remarkable if people were able to manage their lives so well that they received nothing but self-confirmatory feedback. But, realistically speaking, it is inevitable that some discrepant feedback must fall into everyone's interpersonal environment. Still, when people do encounter self-disconfirmatory feedback, it is not necessarily the end of the line for the self-conception in question. Researchers have shown that self-conceptions can exert a powerful channeling influence on information processing (for a review, see Greenwald, 1982). This introduces the possibility that self-conceptions may guide the processing of social feedback in ways that promote their own survival. Consider first the earliest phase of information processing, attention.

Attention

People attend to information more if they are highly motivated to digest it. Consequently, to the extent that people are motivated to acquire self-confirmatory feedback, they should be especially attentive to it. A study by Swann and Read (1981b, Investigation 1) supports this hypothesis. Participants who perceived themselves as likable or dislikable learned that another individual had evaluated them. Some of the participants were led to suspect that the other person had formed a favorable impression of them; others were led to suspect that an unfavorable impression had been formed. All participants were then given an opportunity to examine a series of positive, negative, and neutral statements that the other person had ostensibly made about them. In reality, the statements had been prepared prior to the experiment, and all of them were so vague and general that they could apply to almost anyone.

The results indicated that participants spent more time scrutinizing the evaluative statements when they anticipated that the statements would confirm their self-conceptions. The means in Table 2.3 show that those who saw themselves as likable spent more time scrutinizing the statements if they suspected that the other person liked them; those who saw themselves as dislikable scrutinized longer if they suspected that the other person disliked them. Hence, it appears that if people know in advance that they will be receiving feedback that will confirm their self-conceptions, they will become especially attentive to it. In contrast, if people believe that self-discrepant feedback is coming, they will tend to look the other way.

Encoding and Retrieval

An interesting aspect of the preceding Swann and Read study (1981b, Investigation 1) was that when participants believed that the statements they were about to

TABLE 2.3
 Attention to Feedback as a Function of Self-Conception,
 Feedback Type, and Hypothesis Concerning Other's Appraisal

<i>Self-Perceived Likableness</i>	<i>Type of Statement</i>	<i>Hypothesis Concerning Other's Appraisal</i>	
		<i>Favorable</i>	<i>Unfavorable</i>
Self-dislikables	Positive + Negative	12.00	16.27
	Positive	5.38	7.31
	Negative	6.62	8.96
Self-likables	Positive + Negative	16.73	12.93
	Positive	7.05	5.56
	Negative	9.68	7.37

Note: The higher the number, the longer the reading time. $n = 64$.

receive would confirm their self-conceptions they devoted similar amounts of time to all of them, regardless of how positive or negative each statement actually was. This implies that the expectancy that confirmatory feedback is forthcoming may activate a generalized vigilance that applies to all incoming information. An analogous phenomenon may occur when people think back to their interactions. Two investigators (Crary, 1966; Silverman, 1964) have reported that people tend to recall more incidental information about experimental tasks in which they receive self-confirmatory rather than self-discrepant feedback.

Not only do self-conceptions channel the *amount* of feedback people recall, they also appear to channel the *types* of feedback people recall. Swann and Read (1981b, Investigation 3) had participants who perceived themselves as likable or dislikable listen to another individual make a series of positive and negative statements about them. Some participants expected that the statements would be generally positive; others expected that the statements would be generally negative. After a brief delay period participants were asked to recall as many of the statements as they could.

The findings indicated that, overall, those who saw themselves as likable remembered more positive statements; those who saw themselves as dislikable remembered more negative statements. Furthermore, this tendency to remember only self-confirmatory statements was greatest when individuals anticipated that their interaction partner's statements would confirm their self-conceptions.

One interpretation of this tendency to preferentially recall self-confirmatory feedback is that people were motivated to encode and retrieve such feedback and hence worked harder to do so. Alternatively, it is possible that it was simply easier for people to recall self-confirmatory feedback due to the manner in which the feedback was encoded and stored in memory. In support of this latter interpretation Snyder and Cantor (1979) report that in recalling information about a

job candidate participants tended to remember only information that was compatible with a hypothesis they had been asked to test about her. Similarly, Bower (1981) has provided evidence that people are better able to recall information that is consistent with their affective states. As there were no obvious reasons for people to work harder to recall confirmatory information in these studies, it was probably simply easier for them to do so.

In fact, there are some more direct data to support the notion that self-confirmatory feedback is easier to recall than self-discrepant feedback. Suinn, Osborne, and Page (1962) asked students to rate themselves on a number of trait dimensions and then presented them with a series of evaluations that had ostensibly been made by other members of their class. When later asked to recall their classmates' ratings, participants were considerably less accurate in recalling the highly discrepant ratings relative to the congruent ones. These data suggest that people find it easier to remember self-confirmatory feedback. Insofar as they also appear to be highly motivated to remember such feedback (e.g., Crary, 1966; Silverman, 1964; Swann & Read, 1981b, Investigation 3), it should not be surprising to find that people seldom remember self-discrepant feedback when they happen to encounter it.

Interpretation

When people receive feedback there are a number of questions they might ask themselves: Is the feedback valid? Is the source of feedback reliable and trustworthy? What implications does the feedback have in light of what I know about myself? The research literature suggests that people typically answer these questions in ways that promote the survival of their conceptions of themselves.

Indeed, researchers have shown that people will engage in a wide array of mental gymnastics to dismiss discrepant feedback. At least three separate investigators have demonstrated that participants will endorse the validity of tests only if the scores they receive fit with their self-conceptions (Crary, 1966; Korman, 1968; Markus, 1977). Similarly, Shrauger and Lund (1975) have reported that individuals expressed relatively more confidence in the perceptiveness of someone posing as a clinician when his diagnosis confirmed their self-conceptions.

Even if people do not dismiss the feedback itself, they may still twist the facts in ways that allow them to remain confident in their self-conceptions. Feather and Simon have illustrated this nicely in their research. These researchers were interested in how people would interpret feedback concerning their performance on anagram tasks (Feather, 1969; Feather & Simon, 1971) and psychology examinations (Feather & Simon, 1972; Simon & Feather, 1973). When people's outcomes confirmed their expectations, they attributed them to ability. In contrast, when people's outcomes disconfirmed their expectations, they attributed them to external factors such as good or bad luck.

Still another way that people may soften the impact of discrepant feedback is to attach little significance to it. Because self-conceptions typically represent the synthesis of a lifetime of social feedback, people will probably not weigh one instance of discrepant feedback too heavily in the long run. Such a policy is actually quite reasonable. After all, what is the self-conceived Don Juan to make of one rejection if it follows several hundred successful love affairs? However reasonable it may be, the important point is that this strategy, in concert with the interpretational strategies already discussed, will securely anchor people's self-conceptions right where they are. It is perhaps little wonder that people will sometimes cling to erroneous self-conceptions even in the face of mountains of contrary evidence.

Together, the attention, encoding, retrieval, and interpretational processes described in this section may prove formidable adversaries for even the most potent discrepant feedback. In light of these processes it is easy to understand why researchers have found that people's self-conceptions are sometimes at odds with the actual appraisals of others (e.g., Felson, 1981a, 1981b) and, more specifically, that people overestimate the extent to which the appraisals of their friends and acquaintances confirm their self-conceptions (Miyamoto & Dornbusch, 1956; Orpen & Bush, 1974; Sherwood, 1967; Walhood & Klopfer, 1971).

Still, it is important to realize that these processes are only stopgap measures that are designed to take up the slack when there is a failure of the more primary self-verification processes through which people create opportunity structures. Thus, as displayed in Fig. 2.1, the strategies through which people create opportunity structures are positioned so that they ordinarily account for the lion's share of the variance in the self-verification scheme. It should also be noted that although their cognitive processes may make it difficult for people to identify and correct inaccurate self-conceptions, they do not ordinarily make it impossible to do so. In fact, it is critical that these strategies do not work *too* well. If they do, large discrepancies may develop between the person's conceptions of self and the appraisals of others. In such instances the person may be labeled maladjusted or, in extreme cases, mentally ill.

HOW THE SELF GETS INTO ACTION

Having read up to this point, one might conclude that the self-concept is no slouch. If not choosing a career, it is deciding with whom to interact, how to elicit a certain response from someone, or how to distort a piece of discrepant feedback; the list goes on and on. Surely, one might protest, our self-conceptions are not always so active.

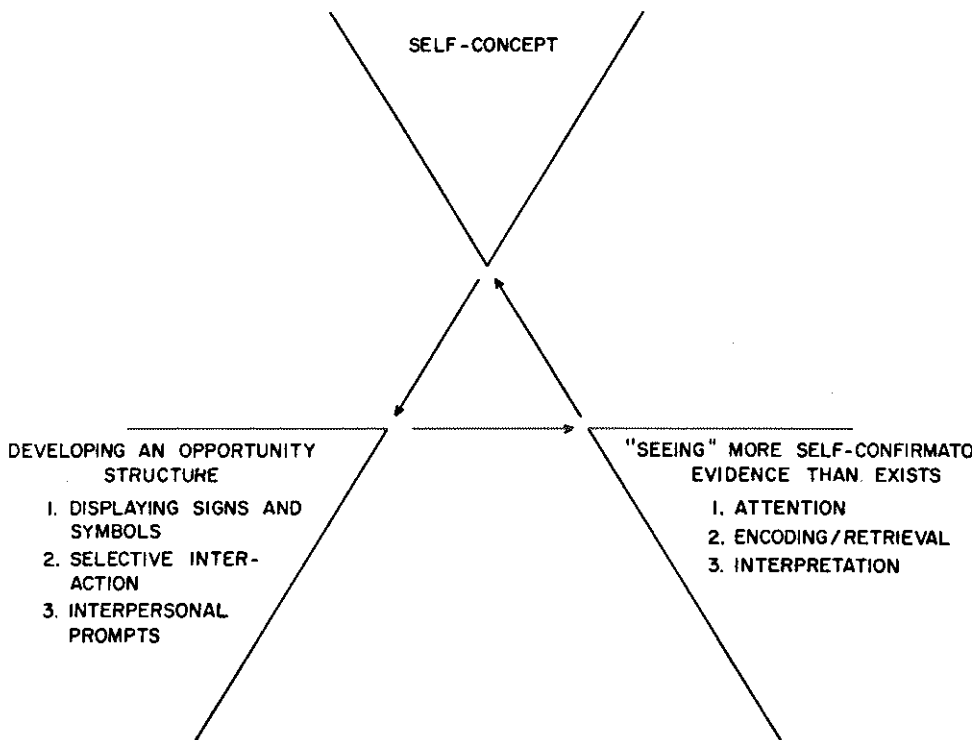


FIG. 2.1. Self-verification processes

Quite so. Most of the time people elicit self-confirmatory reactions without any direct intervention on the part of the self. Thus, the bulk of self-verification is done routinely, as part of the normal flow of the individual's life. At times, however, some event precipitates a break in this flow. In such crisis situations the self will be activated, and the individual will make special efforts to self-verify.

Routine Self-Verification

All of us spend a great deal of time with individuals that we know. In most instances we have established with these individuals implicit agreements concerning how we are to treat one another (e.g., Boissevain, 1974; Boissevain & Mitchell, 1973; Goffman, 1959). This fact of social life has one very important consequence: It tends to limit the people that we interact with to those who know how we expect to be treated.

Take, for example, a week in the life of a female cashier at the neighborhood food store. On most working days she wakes up, eats breakfast, and chats briefly

with her neighbor before rushing off to work. At work most of her time is spent with her boss and co-workers. During the evenings she typically has dinner alone. Occasionally, she may dine with one of her friends or her fiancé, or more infrequently she may attend a movie with one of these individuals. Most of her weekends are spent visiting her family, or during the winter months she and her friends may leave the city for some skiing.

What is striking about the cashier's activities is that all of them are structured around a rather small number of people, people who are more than likely ready and willing to recognize and legitimize her self-conceptions. This means that the bulk of the reactions she receives every day will, in a sense, be preprogrammed. Consequently, she will rarely need to demonstrate that she is knowledgeable, conscientious, and hates being patronized simply because most of her interaction partners are well aware of this. All she need do is remain in her opportunity structure, and she will find a ready-made "me" awaiting her in each of her interactions.

Because many of the cashier's actions do not require direct intervention of the self, it is tempting to divorce them from the self and self-verification. For example, consider the fact that in all of her interactions she tries to speak clearly and firmly, always making eye contact with her interaction partners. At this point in her life she behaves this way automatically, out of habit (e.g., Abelson, 1976; Langer, 1978). Even so, she may have initially developed this interaction strategy during adolescence for the explicit purpose of verifying her belief that she was intelligent and competent. Although these behaviors are now overlearned, they may still be expressions of her self-concept and may still be essential to the verification of that self-concept. From this vantage point it is perfectly appropriate to consider such routine self-verification activities to be manifestations of the self and desire to self-verify.

The relatively automatic character of routine self-verification activities makes them a real bargain for the self-verifier. When operating in this mode individuals may employ each of the six self-verification strategies displayed in Fig. 2.1 with minimal effort. In this way they will insure that the relatively drastic measures associated with crisis self-verification are rarely necessary.

Crisis Self-Verification

Whenever people have reason to stop and ask themselves, "Who am I?," they may experience at least a minor crisis of selfhood (cf. Shibusani, 1961). Subsequently, they may strive to reaffirm their self-conceptions by bending over backwards to self-verify. Such intensified self-verification activities differ from the rather automatic, nonreflective activities that characterize routine self-verification insofar as people are apt to focus attention on themselves and actively attempt to confirm their self-conceptions.

One tact people may take is to set out consciously and deliberately to learn how to present themselves in ways that more accurately reflect their true selves. Traditional housewives who want to perfect their behavioral repertoire may read popular books like *The Total Woman*; college students who want others to know that they are rich snobs can learn how to do so in *The Preppy Handbook*; executives can discover how to cultivate an appropriate image in *Dress for Success* or *Power and How to Use It*. Interestingly, each of these books argues that the best way for people to "find themselves" is to take on appearances and interaction strategies that will elicit self-confirmatory reactions from others. Hence, people know themselves by bringing others to know them; that is, by verifying their self-conceptions.

One occasion when people often ask themselves the "Who am I?" question that initiates crisis self-verification is the *choice point*. A choice point occurs whenever people must make a decision that will have far-reaching implications for how others will perceive them in the future. Good examples of choice points are times when people must choose a career or a marriage partner. Other possible examples include activities such as purchasing a house or a car and deciding what image to try to cultivate in the minds of friends and colleagues. On occasions such as these, people may carefully contemplate the extent to which each of their alternatives will be likely to reap self-confirmatory reactions in the future.

People may also question who they are when they receive self-discrepant feedback. Such feedback may threaten people's confidence in their self-conceptions. They may respond to such a threat by doing two things. First, they may focus attention on the self-conception that has been threatened. Second, they may increase their efforts to acquire highly diagnostic information (cf. Swann, Stephenson, & Pittman, 1981). Because people regard self-confirmatory feedback as highly diagnostic (Swann & Read, 1981a, Investigation 3), such intensified efforts to acquire diagnostic feedback will translate into intensified efforts to acquire self-confirmatory feedback, that is, to self-verify. In what follows I present research that shows each of these processes at work.

The propensity for self-discrepant feedback to focus attention onto self-conceptions that have been threatened has received support from Swann and Hill (1981a). Participants who perceived themselves as emotional or unemotional were given "diagnoses" that were ostensibly written by a team of student clinicians. Some participants received diagnoses indicating that they were emotional, others received diagnoses indicating that they were unemotional; still others received no diagnoses. Participants were then ushered to a "second experiment" in a different room on a different floor of the building. Here the experimenter asked them to decide whether or not a series of emotionality-related or neutral adjectives described them. As they made each judgment the experimenter surreptitiously recorded their response latency.

As expected, the results revealed that individuals who received self-discrepant feedback were faster in making self-descriptive judgments than those who received either no feedback or self-confirmatory feedback. Furthermore, this pat-

tern of results occurred only for the emotionality-related adjectives; the feedback manipulation had no impact on reaction times for the neutral adjectives. Apparently, receiving self-discrepant feedback caused people to retrieve information relevant to that self-conception from memory, thereby making that information more cognitively available (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1973).

Such heightened availability of self-relevant information may increase the probability that the self-conception will be used to guide behavior (cf. Carver, 1975; Gibbons, 1978; Snyder & Swann, 1976; Wegner & Giuliano, 1982). This may explain why in the Swann and Hill (1982) and Swann and Read (1981b, Investigation 2) studies discussed earlier participants were most inclined to behave in a self-confirmatory manner when they were presented with self-discrepant feedback. Apparently, the self-discrepant feedback made their self-conceptions more cognitively available, which in turn increased the probability that they would act on these conceptions.

Of course, a single instance of self-discrepant feedback will not always be enough to initiate a process of self-questioning followed by crisis self-verification. One important factor will be the certainty of the self-conception. That is, because it is the predictive function of self-conceptions that motivates self-verification, certainty of the self-view must be high enough that the person is able to use it to make reasonably confident predictions about the world. At the same time, self-certainty must not be so high that the person is able to categorically dismiss even the most potent self-discrepant feedback. Therefore, crisis self-verification will be found most often in people who are moderately certain of the relevant self-conception and will be rare in those who are either extremely low or high in certainty. Such self-certainty will, in turn, be influenced by several factors. Most importantly, certainty will increase whenever people acquire credible evidence that supports the conception and other beliefs that are compatible with the conception.

Another factor that will determine whether or not discrepant feedback initiates crisis self-verification is the potency of the feedback. Research concerned with issues other than self-verification has suggested that discrepant feedback will be potent to the extent that it is:

1. Delivered by a source who is competent and has a firm basis from which to make a judgment (e.g., Webster & Sobieszek, 1974).
2. Sufficiently at odds with the individual's self-conception, that it is perceived as self-discrepant, yet not so farfetched that it is dismissed as ridiculous or absurd (e.g., Eagly, 1967).
3. Relevant to an important, well-articulated dimension of the self-concept (e.g., Markus, 1977).
4. Directly related to the self-conception (Maehr, Mensing, & Nafzger, 1962; Videbeck, 1960).
5. Delivered by a large rather than small number of people (e.g., Backman, Secord, & Pierce, 1963).

One familiar example in which people encounter highly potent self-discrepant feedback is evident in some instances of midlife crisis. Such crises are often triggered when people realize that their now frazzled and frowzy appearances no longer evoke the admiring glances they have come to expect from others (e.g., Conway, 1978). They may react to this realization by trying to regain their lost youth. For starters, they might seek tips from books like Heidi's (1976) *Winning the Age Game*. Here, they will learn that their first order of business should be to modify their outward appearance. With such advice in hand the 45-year-old man may undertake a crash diet, begin lifting weights, buy a sports car, purchase flashy clothes, and initiate a liaison with a woman half his age—all in a frenzied attempt to recapture a youthful self that is slowly fading into the sunset.

Such midlife crises illustrate how people sometimes stubbornly resist the changes to their self-concept that are indicated by discrepant feedback. Still, it is clear that people sometimes undergo transformations that *demand* corresponding changes in their self-concept. The next section explores the processes whereby such changes occur.

WHEN SELF-VERIFICATION FAILS

This section focuses on the events that precipitate changes in self-conceptions. Before considering the antecedents of these changes, however, it is important to specify precisely what is meant by self-concept change.

The Nature of Changes in Self-Conceptions

In recent years, a number of theorists (e.g., Gergen, 1977; Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976) have challenged the long-standing belief that self-conceptions are relatively stable and enduring (e.g., James, 1890). These authors assume, as I do, that people construct self-conceptions by observing themselves and the reactions of others and making appropriate inferences about themselves. These authors diverge from my own viewpoint, however, by assuming that people place heavy emphasis on very recent events in formulating their self-views. From this vantage point the self is highly malleable, changing with every twitch of the social environment.

As reasonable as this malleable-self formulation may be, it is undermined by numerous findings from the research literature. For example, several investigators (e.g., Block, 1981; Costa & McCrae, 1980) have discovered remarkably high levels of stability in people's psychological structures over periods as long as 35 years. Moreover, those who have sought to alter people's self-conceptions have often failed, even after months and months of intensive therapy (e.g., Wylie, 1979). Similarly, practitioners of "brainwashing" techniques in prisoner of war camps have typically failed to change the self-concepts of their captives,

despite their ability to exert nearly complete control over prisoners' physical and psychological environments (e.g., Schein, 1956).

In contrast, there is relatively little unequivocal evidence that favors the malleable-self formulation. The strongest evidence comes from laboratory investigations in which people have been shown to change their self-ratings in response to social feedback. However, recent reviews by Shrauger and Shoeneman (1979) and Wylie (1979) indicate that the findings of these laboratory investigators are extremely difficult to replicate in naturalistic settings.

Swann and Hill (1981b, 1982) have conducted two studies that help explain why self-conceptions are so stable and resistant to change in nonlaboratory situations. A portion of the Swann and Hill (1982) study has already been described: Individuals who perceived themselves as dominant or submissive received either self-confirmatory or self-discrepant feedback from a confederate. Then some of the participants had an opportunity to interact with the confederate; others received no such opportunity but instead engaged in a filler task. Finally, all participants indicated the extent to which they saw themselves as dominant.

As was indicated in Table 2.2, participants in the interaction-opportunity conditions who received self-discrepant feedback actively sought to undermine the feedback by behaving in a self-confirmatory manner. Furthermore, this opportunity to refute the feedback had important cognitive consequences. The means displayed in Table 2.4 show that among those who received self-disconfirmatory feedback, individuals who had opportunity to interact with the source of the feedback displayed very little change in their self-descriptions; those who were deprived of this opportunity displayed considerable change. Therefore, if participants in this study had occasion to do so, they behaved so as to undermine self-discrepant feedback and were consequently unlikely to modify their subsequent self-ratings.

The results of this study suggest that people will change their self-ratings only when they receive self-discrepant feedback in highly structured situations in which they have little opportunity to influence or resist the treatment they receive. Swann and Hill (1981b) conducted a follow-up investigation that asked how long laboratory-produced self-rating changes would last. Participants an-

TABLE 2.4
Change in Self-Ratings

<i>Interaction Opportunity</i>	<i>Consistent Feedback</i>	<i>Discrepant Feedback</i>
Present	1.18*	2.85
Absent	-.50	5.17

Note: Higher numbers indicate more self-rating change in the direction of the feedback. $n = 46$.

swered either ten questions that probed for evidence of extroversion or ten questions that probed for evidence of introversion. In line with previous research, participants readily provided the evidence that was requested of them, even if in doing so they misrepresented their actual personalities (for a discussion of why this occurs, see Swann, Giuliano, & Wegner, 1982). Then, ostensibly as part of a second experiment, participants completed a series of questionnaires in which items relevant to their extroversion were embedded. After a 1 to 4 week delay participants returned to the laboratory and completed these same questionnaires a second time. Analyses of the ratings collected during the first session indicated that those who answered the introvert questions described themselves as relatively introverted, whereas those who answered the extrovert questions described themselves as relatively extroverted. However, this effect was not lasting. By the time participants returned to the laboratory several days later, the effect of answering the leading questions had disappeared.

Together, these two studies by Swann and Hill (1981b, 1982) suggest that it may be misleading to regard laboratory-produced changes in people's self-ratings as true changes in self-conceptions. Rather, it may be more appropriate to label such short-lived changes as shifts in people's *self-images*, the views people have of themselves at any given moment in time, analogous to a single frame in a motion picture film (cf. Turner, 1968). Within this framework it is quite another matter to speak of changes in *self-concepts*, that is, people's generalized or average views of themselves, analogous to a composite of all the frames in a motion picture film.

For enduring self-concept changes to occur there must be a relatively permanent shift in the way individuals are treated by the people who inhabit their opportunity structures. There are basically two ways in which such shifts may come about. One chain of events is for the community to recognize a change in the individual and adjust the way it treats him or her. For example, when adolescents begin to show the bodily manifestations of puberty, their parents and peers may modify the way they respond to them. Males may find that behavior and attire that was once wholly acceptable is suddenly too boyish. Females may find that their days of unladylike behavior are over; young women do not do such things. Equally dramatic changes in people's opportunity structures may occur later in life. Just as a 25-year-old man may find that his numerous affairs with women win admiration from those around him, his 45-year-old counterpart may discover that such activities make him the target of scorn, a "dirty old man."

Alternatively, people may themselves bring about change in their opportunity structures when they notice that a discrepancy has developed between their self-view and their existing opportunity structure. Just such a process is beautifully illustrated in Elia Kazan's (1967) novel *The Arrangement*. The novel takes off when Eddie Anderson receives feedback from an intimate that causes him to realize that he despises the identity that he had "choked down" all of his adult life. Having come to this agonizing realization he decides to rid himself of his old

identity and totally restructure his life around a new identity that is more in keeping with his true self. The remainder of the novel describes his efforts to do just this. First, he destroys his old opportunity structure by divorcing his wife, resigning from his job, and alienating his friends and acquaintances. Then, he spends several months in a mental hospital where he reassesses and reintegrates his self-view. Finally, he builds a completely new social environment that includes a new wife, career, friends, and acquaintances.

What is instructive about this story is that the most dramatic aspect of the change in Eddie did not go on in his head; it occurred in his interpersonal environment. Eddie did not become a new Eddie until he had essentially "switched worlds." Only after he and his new self-concept were safely embedded in a new opportunity structure was the process of self-concept change complete.

Religious Conversion and Self-Concept Change

One way to appreciate the principles that underlie self-concept change is to consider other instances in which individuals experience upheavals in some aspect of their belief system. Religious conversion is a good example. Berger and Luckman (1966) note that: "a conversion is nothing much. The real thing is to be able to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility. *This* is where the religious community comes in [p. 145]." According to Berger and Luckman the members of the religious community confirm and legitimize the convert's new religious beliefs. They serve as guides into what is for the convert a novel version of reality. They do this by befriending new converts and helping them to accept their newly formed religious convictions completely. Thus, the convert's new community of friends serves the same belief-sustaining function that the members of most people's opportunity structures serve. The only major difference is in the nature of the belief system that they sustain.

Successful religious proselytizers have always been sensitive to the importance of reinforcing conversion experiences by creating a social infrastructure around new converts. Snow and Machalek (in press), for example, consider a number of historical figures who did or did not emphasize the creation of such infrastructures. They show that religious leaders who tried to buttress their conversions by building an appropriate social support structure tended to be much more successful than those who failed to do so.

Many contemporary religious groups seem to be well aware of this principle. A common strategy employed by the Unification Church is to remove recent converts from their normal social environments and take them to an isolated place, such as a farm. Here, converts meet only devoted apostles of the Reverend Moon while they are inundated with religious doctrine. Only after the leaders are certain that the conversion has "taken" is the convert permitted to return to the outside world (e.g., Bromley & Shupe, 1979; DeMaria, 1978).

Another important strategy that groups may use to help insure that the conversion is lasting is to arm their new converts with appropriate signs and symbols of their new identities. This will insure that they are treated appropriately by members of the outside world. In recent years, for example, there have been a number of instances in which names have been changed to fit new self-images. When star athletes Cassius Clay and Lew Alcindor underwent religious conversions they became Muhammed Ali and Kareem Abdul Jabaar. Similarly, the 1960s and 1970s saw a number of groups take on new labels to reflect new group identities. As a result, Negroes today are blacks, Mexican Americans are Chicanos, and females over about 16 years of age are women rather than girls. Further, such name changes are apt to have important interpersonal consequences. Research has shown that the names people go by are influential determinants of how they are perceived (e.g., McDavid & Harari, 1966).

Clearly, because new self-views are based on minimal evidence, they live a very precarious existence. In the overview of self-verification processes presented in Fig. 2.2, for example, it can be seen that a dose of potent discrepant feedback may be sufficient to completely wipe out a new self-view. Of course, new converts are not the only people who possess relatively tentative, untested self-views. All of us have gone through at least one period during which our self-images were in a state of flux: childhood.

Developmental Changes in the Self, Self-Enhancement, and Self-Verification

In formulating views of themselves, children possess at least two distinct sources of information. One source is their caretakers' reactions to them. Because most caretakers are apt to be generous in praising and complimenting them (e.g., Fagot, 1978; Langlois & Downs, 1980), this source of self-knowledge will usually encourage children to develop rather idealized images of themselves. Children may also learn about themselves by observing their own behaviors and the contexts in which they occur (Bem, 1972; Shoeneman, 1981; Shoeneman, Tabor, & Nash, 1981). But such self-perception processes will be slow to produce complete and highly certain self-views because it will be some time before children are able to observe themselves often in a wide range of settings. And so, although most children probably view themselves positively in a general sense, they may have considerable doubt concerning their abilities within specific areas of competence. A little boy may believe that he is a good boy but have little idea as to his ability to play baseball, solve arithmetic problems, or get along with his playmates. As he has no firm evidence to substantiate a particular self-definition, he lacks the motivational basis for self-verification. Consequently, he may simply test the validity of alternative self-views rather than verify any specific view.

In their efforts to establish and consolidate their self-conceptions, children may use their ideal selves to guide their expectancies and slowly "edit" this

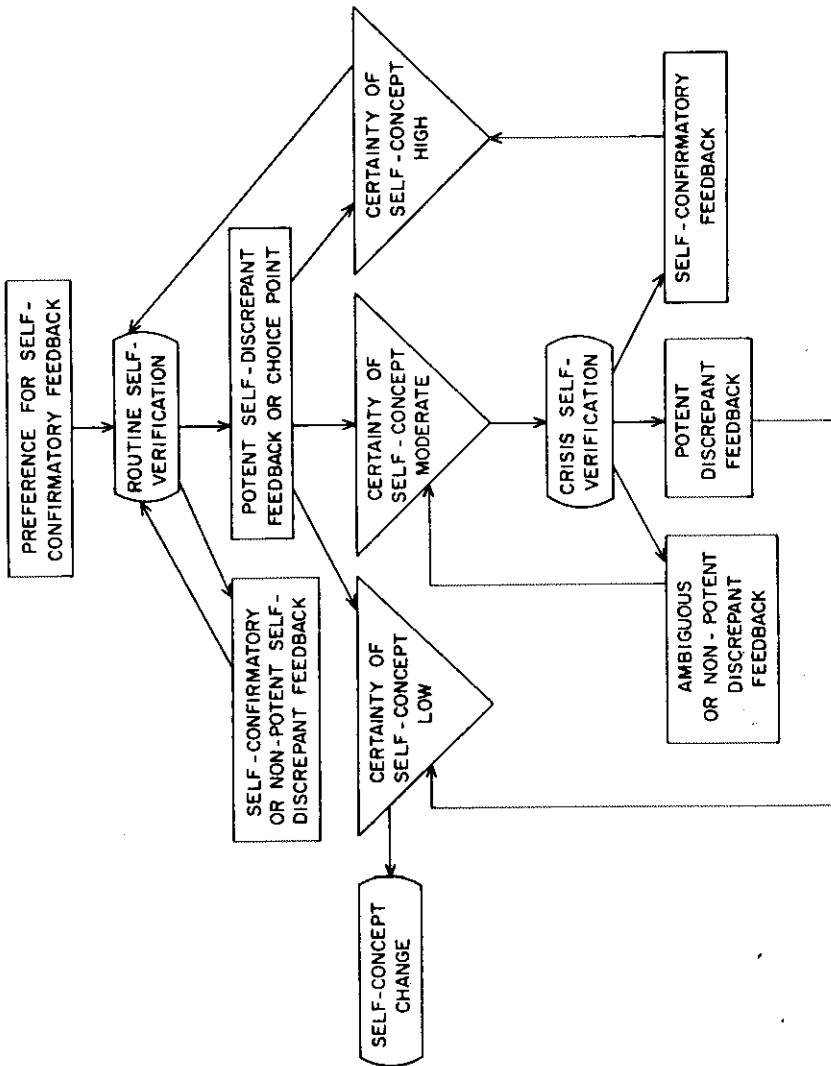


FIG. 2.2. Routine self-verification, crisis self-verification and self-concept change

ideal self as they gain more evidence (Turner, 1968). This self-editing process is nicely illustrated by a child that a colleague of mine recently brought to my attention. The case involved a rather frail 4-year-old boy whom I refer to as Harold. Like many of his classmates in nursery school Harold had come to identify himself with certain ideal models. As a result he was periodically obsessed with visions of becoming powerful and tough like his television idol, the Incredible Hulk. However, as the year wore on physical encounters with his age-mates told Harold that there was nothing the least bit Hulk-like about him; in fact, his record to date suggested that he was an incredible whimp. The consequence of this blend of aspirations and accomplishments was that by the end of the year Harold's feedback-seeking activities were decidedly erratic. At times, he ran about growling and howling at those he encountered (Harold the Hulk), whereas at other times he groveled around in a very submissive manner (Harold the Whimp). Often, his behavior could be traced to some recent bit of feedback he had received. Indeed, in many instances Harold appeared to be straining to confirm the expectancies that his parents, peers, and teachers had communicated to him (e.g., Rosenthal & Rubin, 1978). At this point in his development Harold was not ready to self-verify because he had not yet consolidated his self-concept.

Although Harold will certainly never become the human bulldozer he once hoped to become, his maturational processes alone will probably insure that he develops at least some physical prowess. By adulthood (and probably sooner) Harold's self-concept will probably coalesce into a compromise between the hulk he once aspired to become and the whimp he once was. And so might be the fate of many self-conceptions; through a lifelong process of realizing some aspired-to characteristics and eliminating other ones, people narrow the gap between the individuals they hope to become and the individuals they in fact are. In the end most people will develop conceptions of self that are well substantiated and coherent (cf. Turner, 1968). This coherence will, in turn, be accompanied by a decrease in the extent to which they are guided by the expectancies of others and a corresponding increase in the extent to which they are guided by their self-conceptions.

Of course, even adults will occasionally enter situations in which they have no well-formulated self-view, as when they change careers. Theirs may be an even more perplexing situation than Harold's because there exist social norms that make it especially difficult for adults to learn how they are viewed. Blumberg (1972) and Tesser and Rosen (1975), for example, have shown that adults are reluctant to give one another explicit feedback, especially when it is negative. Individuals in such situations will probably behave just as Harold did: They will use any available information to form a tentative self-image and then edit this image. The general point here is that, whether child or adult, people who are early in their experiential careers will lack sufficient evidence to be motivated to verify a particular self-view. During this time they may rely heavily on their goals, aspirations, and ideals to guide their information-seeking activities. Self-verification will occur only after people accumulate enough converging evidence

so that they can be certain of their self-conceptions and invested in their continued existence. Simply put, people must first become reasonably certain of their self-conceptions before they can begin verifying them.

The interplay between self-certainty and self-verification is nicely illustrated in a study by Marecek and Mettee (1972). These investigators recruited a group of individuals who thought poorly of themselves and were either certain or uncertain of these beliefs. The experimenter provided both of these groups with success feedback and led them to attribute it to either luck or skill. The experimenter then monitored their subsequent performance.

There was no evidence of self-verification among highly uncertain individuals; in both the luck and skill conditions they sought to elicit highly positive evaluations. Similarly, self-certain individuals who attributed their success to luck made no efforts to verify their negative self-conceptions. Presumably, because they could attribute their performance to luck, the self-discrepant feedback did little to threaten their belief in their own incompetence. However, self-certain individuals who attributed their success to skill displayed substantial self-verification attempts. These individuals apparently regarded their success as a threat to their self-concept. They responded by going out of their way to perform poorly, thereby bolstering their belief that they were highly incompetent.

This research, together with evidence that it is relatively rare to find college students who have negative self-views and still rarer to find students whose self-views are both negative and certain (e.g., Swann, Griffin, & Ely, 1981; Vallacher, 1975, Investigation 1), may help explain why researchers have experienced difficulty in demonstrating self-verification in college students with negative self-concepts (for reviews, see Jones, 1973; Shrauger, 1975). Apparently, few college students will verify their negative self-views because most of them are uncertain of these views. As suggested earlier, if people are uncertain of their self-conceptions, they will use their aspirations and goals to guide their information-seeking activities, a tendency that some researchers have dubbed a "self-enhancement" or "self-esteem maintenance" effect (e.g., Tesser & Campbell, this volume).

IMPLICATIONS

Self-verification processes have a number of important implications, both practical and theoretical. Their practical implications can be seen most readily in the context of therapy.

Self-Verification and Therapy

Many theorists, including Adler, Jung, Horney, Rogers, and Sullivan, argue that the changing of self-concepts is a central goal of the therapeutic process. Yet, despite the importance that many therapists attribute to self-concept change, the

research literature suggests that therapy often has little lasting impact on people's self-conceptions (for a recent review, see Wylie, 1979).

The fact that self-concepts are so resistant to change can be readily understood from the present perspective. The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that people live within idiosyncratically skewed interpersonal environments that provide them with a great deal of support for their self-views. As a result, though a client may come to believe during the therapy session that she is competent and likable, her husband, boss, and co-workers may later undermine this perception by treating her with contempt and condescension.

The interpersonal character of emotional disturbance is made clear in Coyne's (1976b) penetrating analysis of depression. Coyne argues that the critical problem of depressives is that they behave so as to engender hostility and resentment in the people around them. In support of this contention he cites evidence indicating that the relationships of depressed persons are fraught with strain and interpersonal conflict (Weissman & Paykel, 1974), a state of affairs that is apparently caused by their use of interaction strategies that arouse anger and rejection in the people they encounter (Coyne, 1976a). Indeed, Swann and Read (1981b, Investigation 2) have shown that even when individuals with negative self-concepts suspect that someone else likes them, they behave in ways that generate precisely the opposite appraisals.

The self-verification formulation argues that one promising approach to bringing depressive or low self-esteem individuals to accept more positive self-concepts might be to modify their opportunity structures. For example, the clinician might help the client develop more endearing interaction styles. Alternatively, using a version of family therapy, the clinician might actively and directly bring the client's interaction partners to see the client in a more positive light. Not only may this insure that such clients are exposed to positive feedback, but a study by Coopersmith (1967) suggests that it may also make them more receptive to such feedback. Coopersmith identified two groups of low self-esteem boys. In one group, the parents and peers viewed the boys favorably. In a second group, the boys' parents and peers were just as negative toward the boys as the boys were toward themselves. When Coopersmith compared the achievement-related behavior of the two groups of boys, he found that it was only the boys whose parents and peers shared in the negative appraisal that behaved so as to elicit negative evaluations. Those whose opportunity structures supported a positive self-concept sought to elicit highly positive reactions by striving to achieve.

Another strategy for improving the self-images of individuals is suggested by Marecek and Mettee (1972). Remember that in this study even highly certain, low self-esteem individuals were receptive to positive feedback if they believed that it was due to luck. In light of these data it would appear that one way to get around the tendency of low self-esteem individuals to resist positive feedback would be to induce them to attribute it to chance. Although such random successes should in principle be regarded as irrelevant to one's self-evaluation, it is

quite conceivable that over time experiencing a "lucky" success will slowly bring such individuals to view themselves more positively (cf. Marecek & Mettee, 1972, p. 105).

The Self and the Traits-Situations Controversy

One of the central themes presented here is that self-verification processes may foster stability not only in people's images of themselves but in their interpersonal environments as well. For example, take the individuals in the Swann and Hill (1982) study. Recall that when these individuals received feedback that challenged their self-conceptions they bent over backwards to bring their interaction partners to see them in a self-confirmatory manner. Thus, as self-perceived dominants became all the more overbearing, self-perceived submissives grew all the more yielding.

Through efforts such as these, people may succeed in convincing those around them that they are the individuals they believe themselves to be. When this happens their interaction partners will probably use their appraisals to guide their behavior (e.g., Rosenthal & Rubin, 1978; Snyder & Swann, 1978a, 1978b; Swann & Snyder, 1980; Zanna & Pack, 1975). If so, then they will be able to rest assured that their interaction partners will treat them in a manner that befits their self-conceptions.

Moreover, people can expect that their interaction partners' impressions and corresponding treatment of them will not change substantially over time. Researchers have shown repeatedly that, once formed, social perceptions are incredibly robust and resistant to change (e.g., Rosenhan, 1973; Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975; Walster, Berscheid, Abrahams, & Aronson, 1967). Consider also that when they bring one person to see them in a self-confirmatory manner, this person may communicate his or her impression to others; soon, all of their friends and acquaintances may see them as they see themselves. Ultimately, their images of themselves will have become an *interpersonal* as well as an *intrapersonal* phenomenon; they will not only have *internalized* dominance or submissiveness into their self-conceptions, they will also have *externalized* this conception into the belief systems of their interaction partners.

The argument that I am advancing here will surely evoke a sense of déjà vu from those familiar with any of several interpersonal approaches to personality (e.g., Berne, 1964; Carson, 1969; Endler & Magnusson, 1976; Snyder, 1981; Sullivan, 1953; Wachtel, 1973, 1977). These theorists suggest that individuals who possess various personality dispositions may behave in ways that elicit certain characteristic and stable reactions from others (for an elegant integration and overview, see Snyder & Ickes, in press). The present approach goes one step beyond these formulations by asserting that once people translate the stability they perceive in the reactions of others into self-conceptions, these conceptions will make independent contributions to the stability of their social relation-

ships—above and beyond stability generated by traits. For instance, in the Swann and Hill (1982) study, for participants to have launched a campaign to bring their interaction partners to see them in a self-confirmatory manner, it was critical that they noticed a discrepancy between their self-views and their interaction partner's appraisal. Simply *being* dominant or submissive (i.e., possessing the behavioral predisposition) would not be enough to motivate such intensive self-verification attempts.

The notion that people may actively create self-confirmatory environments around themselves may provide a fresh perspective on the recent "traits versus situations" controversy (e.g., Bem & Allen, 1974; Hogan, DeSoto, & Solano, 1977; Mischel, 1968). Mischel (1968) initiated the controversy by challenging the conventional assumption of trait theorists that behavior is stable across situations and over time. His argument was based on the dual premises that situational pressures are influential determinants of behavior and that the nature of the situational pressures people encounter vary considerably as they move from one social setting to the next. From these premises he concluded that people's behavior will vary markedly across situations and over time.

Although it is certainly true that situations influence behavior, self-verification processes and other sources of behavioral stability (e.g., temperaments) may insure that the situational pressures that any given individual encounters may be much more stable than Mischel (1968) supposed. That is, people may create idiosyncratically skewed social environments that are highly stable. The stability inherent in these environments will, in turn, stabilize behavior.

The Cyclical Nature of the Self-Perception Process

Most classical (e.g., Cooley, 1902; James, 1890; Mead, 1934) and contemporary (e.g., Bem, 1972; Gergen, 1977) treatments of the self have stressed the ways in which self-conceptions are shaped by social experiences. Although this conceptual orientation has contributed substantially to our theoretical understanding of the self, it presents an incomplete and truncated picture of the actual relationship between the self and social reality. The self-verification formulation suggests that it is grossly misleading to characterize people as passive creatures who watch in wonderment as their self-conceptions are tossed about willy-nilly by the situational pressures that swirl about them. Rather, it is more accurate to characterize people as active agents who, after forming images of themselves, strive to bring social reality into harmony with these images. From this perspective, self-conceptions are determinants as well as products of social reality. Furthermore, self-perception is a cyclical process that is distinguished by the dynamic interplay of self-conceptions and the social feedback that sustains them.

This characterization of the self-perception process is analogous to Neisser's (1976) model of visual and auditory perception. Neisser argues that perception is a dynamic and recursive process that is distinguished by continuous interplay

between our mental representations of stimuli and our active efforts to validate and elaborate these representations. Thus, Neisser's arguments and my own suggest that both object and self-perception may be cyclical in nature.

Still, there is at least one critical difference between the cycles that characterize object and social perception. For example, consider a woman who, in conversation with a close friend, tries to estimate the length of his eyelashes. No matter what she does in estimating the length of his eyelashes, she will not change their length. Now consider what might happen if she tries to discover if her friend finds her attractive. In this instance everything she says or does will probably influence how he responds to her. Thus, when Scarlet O'Hara tested the feelings of Ashley by asking him, "Oh, Ashley, you *do* love me, don't you?" Ashley could not help but be influenced by her testing procedure. In these and similar instances it is nearly impossible for individuals to construct unbiased tests of their beliefs and hypotheses. No matter what testing procedure they devise, the procedure may of itself elicit that evidence for which it was designed to test.

This suggests that even if people wanted to elicit accurate and unbiased feedback rather than self-confirmatory feedback, it would be exceedingly difficult to obtain and interpret such information. And so, here we have yet another reason why people's self-conceptions may be so resistant to change. But perhaps this is as it should be. To the extent that people can rely on the continued existence of stable self-conceptions, they may be in a much better position to cope effectively with challenges in the world around them.

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