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**Self-verification in relationships as an adaptive process**

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### **Self-verification in relationships as an adaptive process**

Once people form their self-views, they work to verify and preserve them. This is the core contention of self-verification theory (Swann, 1983). The theory has wide ranging implications for understanding close relationships. That is, it not only predicts the partners people select, but also how happy they are with those partners and whether they remain with them or divorce them. What makes the theory interesting is that it challenges the widely accepted notion that relationship quality is optimized when partners entertain and communicate exalted evaluations of one another. Rather, the theory predicts that people prefer partners who validate their *negative* as well as positive self-views. Moreover, because self-views have the same functional properties regardless of their degree of specificity, the theory applies whether self-views pertain to global qualities (e.g., personal value) or highly specific ones (e.g., athleticism). Furthermore, the theory holds that self-verification is an adaptive process that, paradoxically, promotes health and well being.

Let us begin by describing a study that provides a glimpse of the phenomenon we have in mind. The goal of this study, which we will call the “Mr. Nice-Mr. Nasty study,” was to assess how much people with positive self-views and negative self-views wanted to interact with partners who held positive or negative evaluations of them (Swann, Stein-Seroussi & Giesler, 1992). To this end, we invited college students to a laboratory experiment. Shortly after participants arrived, they learned that two evaluators had formed an impression of them based on their responses to a personality test that they had completed earlier. The experimenter then showed participants some comments that each of “the evaluators” (who were actually fictitious) had ostensibly written about them. One evaluator (whom we will call “Mr. Nice”) was favorably impressed with the participant, noting that he or she seemed self-confident, well-adjusted, and

happy. The other evaluator ("Mr. Nasty") was distinctly unimpressed, commenting that the participant was unhappy, unconfident, and anxious around people. The results revealed a clear preference for self-verifying partners. As shown in Figure 1, participants with positive self-views tended to choose Mr. Nice but those with negative self-views tended to choose Mr. Nasty.

These findings inspired considerable incredulity among advocates of positivity strivings. Many simply questioned the reliability of the phenomenon, asserting that "It won't happen again!" Researchers at Texas and elsewhere responded by attempting to replicate the effect using diverse methodologies. Seventeen replications later it was clear that the tendency for people to prefer self-verifying evaluations and interaction partners was robust, even if their self-views happened to be negative (e.g., Hixon & Swann, 1993; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992; Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull & Pelham, 1992; Swann, Wenzlaff & Tafarodi, 1992). Further, people with negative self-views seem to be truly drawn to self-verifying interaction partners rather than simply avoiding non-verifying ones—when given the option of being in a different experiment, people with negative self-views chose to interact with the negative evaluator over participating in another experiment and they chose being in a different experiment over interacting with a positive evaluator (Swann, Wenzlaff, & Tafarodi, 1992).

Both men and women displayed this propensity, whether or not the self-views were easily changed and whether the self-views were associated with qualities that were specific (intelligence, sociability, dominance) or global (self-esteem, depression). People were particularly likely to seek self-verifying evaluations if their self-views were confidently held (e.g., Pelham & Swann, 1994; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann, Pelham, & Chidester, 1988) and important (Swann & Pelham, 2002), or extreme (Giesler, Josephs, & Swann, 1996). Finally, in

recent years researchers have shown that people also strive to verify negative (and positive) self-views associated with group membership. Such strivings emerge for both collective self-views (personal self-views people associate with group membership, as “sensitivity” is for many women; Chen, Chen, & Shaw, 2004) or group identities (convictions about the characteristics of the groups of which they are members, as “chronically late” is for most Spaniards; Gomez et al., 2006; LeMay & Ashmore, 2004).

But is it appropriate to suggest that the behavior of people with negative self-views is “paradoxical?” If the frame of reference is contemporary social psychology, we think so. After all, the notion that people possess a fundamental, pervasive desire for positive evaluations may be *the* bedrock assumption of the social psychological discipline. And well it should be, as there are sound reasons to believe that the desire for self-enhancement is truly fundamental. First, there is the apparent ubiquity of this desire. Whether one examines people’s social judgments, attributions, or overt behaviors, there appears to be a widespread tendency for them to favor themselves over others (for reviews, see Jones, 1973; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Indeed, some (Greenwald & Ronis, 1978) have argued that self-enhancement was a hidden assumption underlying many variations of consistency theories, including dissonance theory (Brehm & Cohen, 1963).

Second, traces of a preference for positivity emerge extremely early in life. Within mere weeks of developing the ability to discriminate facial characteristics, for example, 5-month-olds attend more to smiling faces than to non-smiling ones (Shapiro, Eppler, Haith, & Reis, 1987). Similarly, as early as 4 1/2 months of age, children orient preferentially to voices that have the melodic contours of acceptance as compared to non-acceptance (Fernald, 1993). Third, when people react to evaluations, a preference for positive evaluations emerges before other

preferences (Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990). Thus, for example, when participants who viewed themselves negatively chose between an evaluator who appraised them either negatively or positively, those forced to choose quickly preferred the positive evaluator; only those who had some time to reflect chose the negative (self-verifying) partner (more on the mechanism underlying this phenomenon later).

Yet as potent as the desire for positivity may be, the results of the Mr. Nice-Mr. Nasty study suggest that it may sometimes be trumped by a desire for self-verification. Most strikingly, among people with negative self-views, the desire for self-stability leads people to embrace negative rather than positive partners.

But, one might protest, what relevance do a bevy of laboratory investigations have for readers of a volume on close relationships? Quite a bit, if one takes seriously the implications of a parallel line of research on people involved in ongoing relationships. The first study in this series, dubbed the “marital bliss study” was designed to compare how people with positive self-views and negative self-views reacted to positive versus negative marital partners (Swann, Hixon & De La Rhonde, 1992). The investigators recruited married couples who were either shopping at a local mall or enjoying an afternoon's horseback riding at a ranch in central Texas. The researchers approached couples and invited them to complete a series of questionnaires. They began with the Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ; Pelham & Swann, 1989), a measure that focused on 5 attributes that most Americans regard as important: intelligence, social skills, physical attractiveness, athletic ability, and artistic ability. Upon completion, participants completed it again; this time rating their spouse. Finally, participants filled out a measure of their commitment to the relationship. While each person completed these questionnaires, his or her spouse completed the same ones. The researchers thus had indices of what everyone thought

of themselves, what their spouses thought of them, and how committed they were to the relationship.

How did people react to positive or negative evaluations from their spouses? As shown in Figure 2, people with positive self-views responded in the intuitively-obvious way—the more favorable their spouses were, the more committed they were. By contrast, people with negative self-views displayed the opposite reaction; the more favorable their spouses were, the *less* committed they were. Those with moderate self-views were most committed to spouses who appraised them moderately.

Subsequent researchers attempted to replicate this effect (e.g., Cast & Burke, 2002; De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Ritts & Stein, 1995; Schafer, Wickrama, & Keith, 1996; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). Although the strength of the effect varied, each study reported that some evidence of a preference for self-verifying partners emerged among married participants (for a discussion of an error in the Murray et al. report, see the last section of this chapter). Furthermore, both men and women displayed this preference whether they had positive or negative self-views and whether they resided in any of several cities across the United States. Similarly, it did not matter whether the research participants were volunteers from the community or university students; again and again, a preference for self-verifying marital partners emerged.

The major goal of this chapter is to explain why people display self-verification strivings, with special emphasis on how these strivings are adaptive for people striving to maintain enduring relationships. We begin by discussing the nature and boundary conditions of self-verification processes, with special attention to the relationship of self-verification strivings to positivity strivings.

### *Self-verification theory*

Prescott Lecky (1945) was the first to propose the notion that people are motivated to maintain their self-views. The core ideas surfaced again in various self-consistency theories (e.g., Aronson, 1968; Festinger, 1957; Secord & Backman, 1965). Self-verification theory (Swann, 1983; Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003) elaborated these approaches by shifting away from the notion that people desired psychological *consistency* to an emphasis on the desire for psychological *coherence*. Self-verification theory is thus less interested in the mental gymnastics through which people create consistency between their behaviors and their transient self-images. Although such gymnastics could contribute to coherence, the concept of coherence is broader and deeper because it refers to the unity, integrity and continuity of the entire knowledge system. This knowledge system transcends the here and now and embraces all of individuals' experiences. Because self-views summarize and organize these experiences, they are a vital source of coherence.

Ultimately, self-verification theory can be traced to the assumption that children initially form their self-views by observing how others treat them (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). As children mature, the more their self-views are confirmed, and the more certain they become in the accuracy of these self-views. Such certainty, in turn, encourages people to rely on their self-views more in making predictions about their worlds, guiding behavior, and maintaining a sense of coherence, place, and continuity. As a result, by mid-childhood there emerges a preference for evaluations that confirm self-views (e.g., Cassidy, Ziv, Mehta, & Feeney, 2003).

The theory's most provocative prediction is that a preference for self-verifying evaluations should emerge even if the self-view happens to be negative. In some cases, it is obvious how the desire to maintain negative self-views can be adaptive. After all, all people

possess flaws and weaknesses, and it makes sense for them to cultivate and maintain appropriately negative self-views to reflect these flaws and weaknesses. For example, to avoid confusion and disappointment, just as those who are musical should want others to see them as musical, so too will tone-deaf people benefit from having others see them as tone-deaf.

Nevertheless, the adaptiveness of self-verifying strivings is more difficult to see when people develop globally negative self-views (e.g., “I am worthless”) that have no compelling objective basis. Active efforts to maintain such negative self-views by, for example, gravitating toward harsh or abusive partners, seem maladaptive.

Which raises a question: What’s so important about stable self-views that people will endure hardship to maintain them? The psychological significance of the stable self-views can be better appreciated by considering what happens to individuals whose self-views have been stripped away. Consider a case study of a man whose chronic alcohol abuse led him to develop memory loss so profound that he could no longer remember who he was (Sacks, 1985). Able to remember only scattered fragments from his past, Thompson lapsed into a state of incoherence and psychological anarchy. Desperately striving to recover the self that eluded his grasp, he frantically developed hypotheses about who he was and then tested these hypotheses on whomever happened to be present (“You must be Hymie, the Kosher butcher next door . . . But why are there no bloodstains on your coat? . . .”). Tragically, Thompson could never remember the results of the latest test for more than a few seconds and so he was doomed to repeat his experiments once again. Thompson’s case not only shows that stable self-views are essential to the feelings of coherence that give meaning to our worlds, it also shows how critically important self-views are to guiding action. Thompson did not know how to act toward people because his

sense of self kept disappearing like a Cheshire cat. No wonder, then, that people will fight like tigers to preserve their self-views.

*How self-verification strivings shape actual and perceived social reality*

People may use three distinct processes to create—either in actuality or in their own minds--self-verifying social worlds. First, people may construct self-verifying “opportunity structures” [i.e., social environments that satisfy people’s needs (McCall & Simmons, 1966)] by seeking and entering into relationships in which they are apt to enjoy confirmation of their self-views. We believe that this is a particularly important and influential process, which is why we introduced it above. Thus, whereas the Mr. Nice-Mr. Nasty study suggests that people seek self-verifying interaction partners, the marital bliss study suggests that if they fail to find a self-verifying spouse, they will leave the relationship.

A second self-verification strategy includes the processes through which people systematically communicate their self-views to others. One way they may do this is by judiciously displaying identity cues—highly visible signs and symbols of who they are. Physical appearances represent a particularly salient class of identity cues. The clothes one wears, for instance, can advertise numerous social self-views, including one’s political leanings, income level, religious convictions, and so on. Pratt and Rafaeli (1997) found that dress, style, and fabric revealed a great deal about individuals' jobs, roles, and self concepts. Even body posture and demeanor communicate identities to others.

People may also communicate their identities to others by the way they interact with others. Evidence suggests, for example, that mildly depressed college students were more likely to solicit unfavorable feedback from their roommates than were non-depressed students (Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992). Such efforts to acquire unfavorable feedback apparently bore

fruit; the more unfavorable feedback they solicited in the middle of the semester, the more their roommates derogated them and planned to find another roommate at the semester's end.

Furthermore, if people recognize that they have failed to evoke self-verifying reactions, they will redouble their efforts. For example, in one study participants who perceived themselves as either likeable or dislikeable learned that they would be interacting with someone who probably found them likeable or dislikeable. Participants displayed increased efforts to elicit self-verifying evaluations when they suspected that evaluators' appraisals challenged their self-views (e.g., Swann & Read, 1981a, Study 2).

And what if people's efforts to acquire self-verifying evaluations run aground? Even then, people may still cling to their self-views through the third strategy of self-verification: "seeing" evidence that does not objectively exist. That is, there is considerable evidence that expectancies (including self-conceptions) channel information processing (e.g., Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Shrauger, 1975). Self-views may guide at least three distinct aspects of information processing. For example, an investigation of selective attention revealed that participants with positive self-views spent longer scrutinizing evaluations when they anticipated that the evaluations would be positive and people with negative self-views spent longer scrutinizing evaluations when they anticipated that the evaluations would be negative (Swann & Read, 1981a, Study 1). Participants in a follow-up study displayed signs of selective recall. In particular, participants who perceived themselves positively remembered more positive than negative statements, and those who perceived themselves negatively remembered more negative than positive statements. Finally, numerous investigators have shown that people tend to interpret information in ways that reinforce their self-views. For example, Murray et. al. (2000) have reported that people with low self-esteem systematically distort their impressions of their

partners' feelings as being more negative than they actually are. Together, such attentional, encoding, retrieval, and interpretational processes may stabilize people's self-views by allowing them to "see" self-confirming evaluations where they do not exist (for a more detailed discussion of various strategies of self-verification, see Swann, Rentfrow & Guinn, 2003).

One distinctive feature of the above findings was the nearly symmetrical preferences of participants with positive and negative self-views. That is, just as participants with positive self-views displayed a preference for positive evaluations, participants with negative self-views displayed a preference for negative evaluations, regardless of the particular strategy of self-verification the researchers examined. To those mired in the assumption that self-enhancement is the most basic of human motives, such activities seem bizarre and pointless. In the next section, we point to evidence that neither of these characterizations apply to self-verification strivings.

#### *Why people self-verify*

If examples such as William Thompson leave little doubt that stable self-views are essential to survival, they do not fully explain *why* this should be so. One can pose the "why" question at several different levels of analysis. At the most distal level, consider an evolutionary perspective. Most evolutionary biologists assume that humans spent most of their evolutionary history in small hunter-gatherer groups. Stable self-views would be advantageous in such groups, as they would stabilize behavior, which in turn would make the individual more predictable to other group members (e.g., Goffman, 1959). Mutual predictability would, in turn, facilitate division of labor, making the group more effective in accomplishing its objectives and promoting the survival of its members.

In a similar vein, Leary's "sociometer theory" (Leary & Baumeister, 2000) suggests that self-knowledge helps regulate group relationships. In particular, self-esteem presumably acts as

an “interpersonal monitor” (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995), informing people about their degree of inclusion or exclusion in the social group. Support for this idea comes from evidence that state self-esteem ratings are associated with how included people feel in their relationships (Leary et al., 1995). Whereas sociometer theory emphasizes how low self-esteem may warn people that they are at risk for being excluded from the group, low self-esteem might also serve the adaptive function of bringing people’s expectations about their status in the group into line with the actual appraisals of other group members. From this vantage point, a key function of self-views is to ensure that people do not develop expectations that are disjunctive with their actual qualities, as to do so might promote behaviors that result in being excluded from the group. By enabling people to avoid such disjunctions, self-views and the quest for self-verifying evaluations they guide may help ward off situations that would threaten their ability to enjoy the benefits of group membership (cf. Fletcher, Simpson & Boyes, in press; Kirkpatrick and Ellis, 2004). From this perspective, self-views serve the pragmatic function of fostering harmonious group relations.

At a psychological level, stable self-views and the self-verifying evaluations that sustain them are desirable because, as noted above, they bolster feelings of psychological coherence. Self-verifying evaluations may foster feelings of coherence for purely epistemic reasons—because self-verifying evaluations affirm people’s sense that things are as they should be. In addition, self-verifying evaluations may foster feelings of coherence for pragmatic reasons--by reassuring people that their interaction partners understand them and that their interactions are thus likely to proceed smoothly. For both epistemic and pragmatic reasons, then, people may find self-verifying evaluations reassuring and emotionally comforting, even if such evaluations

happen to be negative. In contrast, non-verifying evaluations may precipitate psychological anarchy.

Finally, people may even be attuned to self-verifying evaluations at the neurological level. Theoretically, predictable, familiar stimuli should be more perceptually fluent and more easily processed than unfamiliar stimuli. Because self-verifying evaluations are more predictable than non-verifying evaluations, they should also be similarly fluent and easily processed. The heightened fluency of self-verifying evaluations could explain why people see them as more diagnostic than non-verifying evaluations (Swann & Read, 1981b, Study 3). Elevated perceptions of diagnosticity might, in turn, help explain why people come to prefer and seek self-verifying evaluations. For these and related reasons, people should develop a preference for evaluations that validate and confirm their self-views.

*Are self-verification strivings something other than what they appear to be?*

Advocates of positivity strivings have questioned the foregoing explanations of the mechanisms underlying self-verification strivings. They have protested that even if the desire for negative self-verifying evaluations is robust, it is limited to a very small segment of the population who suffer from a personality flaw such as masochism or self-destructive tendencies. From this vantage point, it was the personality flaw, rather than the negative self-view, that caused people with negative self-views to embrace negative evaluations and evaluators.

One counter to such claims is offered by an interesting twist in the results of the marital bliss study described above. That is, it was not just persons with negative self-views who eschewed overly positive evaluations; even people with positive self-views displayed less commitment to spouses whose evaluations were *extremely* favorable (Swann, De La Ronde & Hixon, 1994). Thus, the self-verification effect was not restricted to people with negative self-

views; anyone who sensed that a spouse appraised them in an unduly favorable manner tended to withdraw from the relationship.

Although these data support a self-verification explanation, they do not explicitly show that it was the self-views of people who thought poorly of themselves that caused them to choose negative evaluators. In search of such evidence, Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert (1990) proposed that there were likely differences in the cognitive operations that gave rise to positivity strivings versus self-verification strivings. Positivity strivings seemed to require only one step: upon classifying the evaluation, embrace positive evaluations and avoid negative evaluations. In contrast, self-verification strivings logically required at least two steps. Not only did the evaluation need to be classified, it also needed to be compared to the self-view; only then could the person decide to embrace verifying evaluations and avoid non-verifying ones. This reasoning led them to hypothesize that if they were to deprive people of cognitive resources while they were choosing an interaction partner, it would interfere with their ability to access their self-concept. The result would be that people who might ordinarily self-verify would self-enhance instead.

To test these ideas, while choosing an evaluator to interact with, some participants were deprived of cognitive resources by having them rehearse a phone number. While they were struggling to keep the phone number in memory, they were asked to choose between a positive or negative evaluation. So deprived, people with negative self-views suddenly behaved like their positive self-view compatriots—they chose positive evaluations over negative ones. Nevertheless, when these same participants were later given several moments to access their self-views, they chose the negative, self-verifying evaluation. Later studies replicated this effect using other manipulations of resource deprivation, such as having participants choose partners

hurriedly (Hixon & Swann, 1993). The resource deprivation studies thus suggested that it was the accessibility of negative self-views that caused some people to choose negative evaluators and thus diminished the plausibility of the “flawed personalities” hypothesis.

Another way of testing this flawed personalities hypothesis was to seek insight into what people were thinking as they chose an interaction partner. To this end, Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler (1992) conducted a “think aloud” study. The procedure paralleled the one used in the Mr. Nice-Mr. Nasty study, except that participants thought out loud into a tape recorder as they chose an evaluator to interact with. As in the Mr. Nice-Mr. Nasty study, people with positive self-views tended to choose the positive evaluator and people with negative self-views tended to choose the negative evaluator. Of greatest relevance here, subsequent analyses of the tape recordings revealed no evidence that masochism or self-destructive tendencies drove the self-verifying choices of participants.<sup>1</sup> If anything, people with negative self-views seemed torn and ambivalent as they chose negative partners. One person with negative self-views, for example, noted that:

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. So, I'll choose [the negative evaluator].

Examination of the protocols from the think-aloud study also provided evidence that offered direct support for self-verification theory. There was evidence, for example, that self-verifiers--both those with negative self-views who chose negative partners and those with positive self-views who chose favorable partners--preferred partners who made them feel that they knew themselves. That is, consistent with self-verification theory, the overriding concern seemed to be

the degree of coherence between the partner's evaluation and what they knew to be true of themselves:

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

"That's just a very good way to talk about me. Well, I mean, after examining all of this I think [the negative evaluator] pretty much has me pegged."

Consistent with the notion that pragmatic considerations contribute to self-verification strivings, self-verifiers voiced a concern with getting along with the evaluators during the forthcoming interaction. Participants wanted their interactions to unfold in a predictable, orderly manner:

"Since [the negative evaluator] seems to know my position and how I feel sometimes, maybe I'll be able to get along with him."

"Seeing as he knows what he's dealing with we might get along better...so I think I'll have an easier time getting along with [the negative evaluator]."

The foregoing results support the assumptions underlying self-verification theory. That is, people choose self-verifying partners with an eye to how well their evaluations fit with their self-views as well as how well they will get along with the evaluator in the forthcoming interaction. The results of the think-aloud study were also useful in addressing several "ironic" explanations of self-verification strivings. These explanations were based on the assumption that evidence that people seek negative evaluations actually reflects a desire for praise and adulation that, ironically, goes awry. At the most general level, this ironic perspective assumes that many seemingly counter-productive behaviors are actually positivity strivings run amuck (for other examples, see Berglas & Jones, 1978; Wachtel & Wachtel, 1986). To determine if such ironic

processes could explain why people prefer self-verifying relationship partners, we revisited the think aloud and marital bliss studies and tested the viability of several ironic reasons why people with negative self-views might choose negative partners.

*Perceptiveness of the evaluator.* There is a subtle but important distinction between desiring an evaluator who seems perceptive versus one who bolsters one's feelings of coherence, parallel to the difference between choosing a wife because she makes a good salary versus choosing her because she makes you feel good. In the think-aloud study, people who mentioned a concern with perceptiveness focused on qualities of the evaluator, such as being "on the ball" or "insightful." In contrast, people who emphasized coherence stressed a concern with feeling that evaluator made them feel that they knew themselves. Those who mentioned being concerned with the perceptiveness of the evaluator were not the same ones who expressed coherence-related concerns, indicating that the two sets of concerns were independent. In addition, evidence from the marital bliss study indicated that it was the extent to which the spouse was self-confirming rather than perceptive that determined relationship quality. In particular, commitment to relationships was related to people's conviction that their spouses' appraisals would make them "feel that they really knew themselves" rather than "confused them" but was independent of estimates of the perceptiveness of spouses.

*Self-improvement.* People with negative self-views might choose interaction partners who think poorly of them because they believe that such partners will give them critical feedback that will help them improve themselves. There was no evidence from the think-aloud study that this was the goal of self-verifiers. The results of the marital bliss study also argued against self-improvement: When asked if they thought their spouse would provide them with information that would enable them to improve themselves, people with negative self-views were decidedly

pessimistic, thus suggesting that it was not the hope of improving themselves that led them to remain in self-verifying relationships.

*Perceived similarity.* The research literature indicates that people prefer those who have similar values and beliefs as themselves over those who have dissimilar values and beliefs. For example, people typically prefer their friends and associates who share their political beliefs, tastes in music, and the like (Byrne, 1971). If people believe that those who judge them in ways that confirm their self-views also have similar attitudes, then they may find self-verifying partners appealing because they suspect that such partners will agree with them on topics and issues that are unrelated to who they are. There was no evidence of this, however; participants in the think aloud study scarcely mentioned the partners' likely attitudes. The results of the marital bliss study also provided no evidence that people's affinity for self-verifying partners could be understood as an effort to align themselves with spouses with similar attitudes.

*Winning converts.* Were people with negative self-views interested in negative evaluators because they hoped to "win over" exceptionally harsh critics? After all, converting an enemy into a friend is no mean feat, so pulling off such a stunt ought to be especially gratifying. Several participants in the think aloud study did indeed allude to a desire to win over a partner ("I kind of think that [the negative evaluator] is...the kind of guy or girl I'd like to meet and I would like to show them that I'm really not that uncomfortable [around people]"). Nevertheless, it was only people with *positive* self-views who mentioned this concern; people with negative self-views never brought it up. This makes sense, as people with negative self-views have little confidence that they can turn an enemy into a friend so it might not occur to them as readily.

The marital bliss study provided even more compelling evidence against the "winning converts" hypothesis. If people with negative self-views wished to "convert" a spouse who was

initially critical, it follows that they would be most interested in partners whose evaluations of them seemed likely to grow more favorable over the course of the relationship. In reality, people with negative self-views displayed a slight tendency to commit themselves more to spouses whose evaluations they expected to grow increasingly negative over time. The evidence suggests, then, that people with positive self-views choose rejecting interaction partners for very different reasons than people with low self-views do.

*Self-verification or accuracy.* There is one final ironic explanation of self-verification strivings: Perhaps people with negative self-views seek negative evaluations because such people actually are deficient in some way. That is, perhaps they seal their own fate because an objective assessment of them indicates that they *deserve* to be viewed in a negative manner and they are better off seeking such evaluations than having others discover for themselves.

Let us begin by acknowledging that many people with negative self-views surely possess negative qualities. Nevertheless, we suggest that it is people's *conviction* that they are flawed rather than the actual flaws themselves that underlie self-verification strivings. From this vantage point, at times people with negative self-views may seek negative evaluations even though they do not "deserve" such evaluations. Support for this idea comes from research in which the researchers compared the feedback seeking activities of people who were depressed or non-depressed (Giesler, Josephs, & Swann, 1996). They discovered that depressed people regarded negative evaluations to be especially accurate and were more apt to seek them. This finding is telling because there is no evidence that depressed people actually possess chronic deficiencies that might justify their negative feedback seeking (similarly, it is difficult to imagine an "objective" justification for the conviction of low self-esteem persons that they are worthless and undeserving of love). Moreover, if depressed persons truly were as deficient as their

negative self-views would suggest, one would expect that their negative self-view would remain negative on a more-or-less permanent basis. In fact, once the depression clears, their self-views bounce back to normal.

In short, the research literature offers little support for various ironic explanations of self-verification strivings. Instead, it appears that a desire for self-stability and associated feelings of coherence motivates people to strive for self-verification. If so, then it should be possible to provide direct evidence that receiving self-verifying evaluations is adaptive.

*Are self-verification strivings functional?*

Earlier we noted that during human evolutionary history, self-verification strivings may have increased inclusive fitness by making successful self-verifiers more predictable to other group members. Self-verification strivings may be similarly adaptive for modern humans. For example, insofar as people gravitate toward self-verifying partners, their relationships will be more predictable and thus manageable. Such predictability and manageability may not only improve the likelihood that people can achieve their relationship goals (e.g., raising children for married people), it may also be psychologically comforting. Such psychological comfort may, in turn, reap physiological dividends in the form of reduced anxiety. From this vantage point, self-verification processes serve to regulate affect.

Several studies support the notion that receiving non-verifying evaluations may be more stressful than verifying evaluations. For instance, Wood, Heimpel, Newby-Clark, and Ross (2005) compared how high and low self-esteem participants reacted to success experiences. Whereas high self-esteem persons reacted quite favorably to success, low self-esteem participants reported being anxious and concerned, apparently because success was surprising and unsettling for low self-esteem participants (cf. Lundgren, & Schwab, 1977). Similarly,

Mendes and Akinola (2006) observed participants' cardiovascular responses to positive and negative evaluations that either did or did not verify their self-views. When they received positive feedback, those with negative self-views were physiologically "threatened" (distressed and avoidant). In contrast, when they received negative feedback, participants with negative self-views were physiologically "challenged" or "galvanized" (i.e., cardiovascularly aroused but in a positive manner associated with approach motivation). People with positive self-views displayed the opposite pattern.

This evidence that people with negative self-views are stressed by positive information raises an intriguing possibility: If positive but non-verifying experiences are stressful for people with negative self-views, then over an extended period such experiences might prove to be physically debilitating. Several independent investigations support this proposition. An initial pair of prospective studies (Brown & McGill, 1989) examined the impact of positive life events on the health outcomes of people with low and high self-esteem. Among high self-esteem participants, positive life events (e.g., improvement in living conditions, getting a very good grade or grades) predicted increases in health; among people low in self-esteem, positive life events predicted *decreases* in health. A recent study (Shimizu & Pelham, 2004) replicated and extended these results, including the most intriguing finding that positive life events predicted increased illness among people low in self-esteem. Furthermore, this finding emerged even while controlling for negative affectivity, thereby undercutting the rival hypothesis that negative affect influenced both self-reported health and reports of symptoms. Here again, for people with negative self-views, the disjunction between positive life events and their chronic beliefs about themselves appears to have been so psychologically threatening that it undermined physical health.

The results of the foregoing studies clearly suggest that it may be psychologically and physiologically adaptive for people with negative self-views to seek and embrace negative feedback. Having said this, we add two caveats. First, although we are suggesting that self-verification strivings are adaptive, this does not necessarily apply to negative self-views themselves. Instead, negative self-views are adaptive only when they accurately reflect an intransigent personal limitation (e.g., thinking that you are tone deaf when you truly are); *inappropriately* negative self-views—that is, negative self-views that exaggerate or misrepresent the persons' limitations—are *maladaptive* (e.g., thinking you are too fat when in reality you are anorexically thin). Second, although striving for negative but self-verifying evaluations can be functional in some respects (e.g., they may foster a sense of coherence), it may be dysfunctional in other respects (e.g., it may imperil their relationships). For this reason, when they enjoy the luxury of seeking feedback about their strengths or weaknesses, people with low global self-esteem try to evade the anguished antinomy between positivity and truth by seeking verification for their positive self-views (Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1979).

### **Seeking partners who will provide self-verification for the long haul:**

#### **The adaptive context of self-verification for people with negative self-views**

When it comes to choosing relationship partners, people with negative self-views are in an unenviable position. On the one hand, if they choose a non-verifying partner who sees them in an overly positive manner, their desire for coherence will be frustrated and anxiety will result. On the other hand, if they choose a negative, self-verifying partner, the partner's negativity may prove problematic. In the marital bliss study (Swann, Hixon & De La Ronde, 1992), for example, the more negatively their partners evaluated each other on the specific self-views measured by the SAQ (Pelham & Swann, 1989), the more apt their partners were to label them “bad persons.”

By embracing partners who view them as “bad persons,” then, people with negative self-views may be putting themselves at risk for being treated poorly or being abandoned altogether.

To be sure, the fact that the self-verification strivings of people with negative self-views may place them at risk for rejection should not be misunderstood to mean that rejection is the *goal* of the self-verification process. For example, Murray, et. al. (2005) have credited self-verification theory with assuming that “low self-esteem people want to feel unloved” (p. 327). Such mischaracterizations of self-verification theory appear to presume that if people with negative self-views gravitate toward unloving or rejecting partners, they must be uninterested in love. There are three problems with this claim. First, the fact that self-verifying partners are sometimes unloving does not mean that unlovingness was the specific quality that self-verifiers sought in their partner. More likely, self-verifiers with negative self-views gravitated toward self-verifying partners whose halo biases encouraged them to generalize from negative specific appraisals (e.g., “unsociable”) to globally negative (e.g., “unworthy”) appraisals. Second, self-verifiers want to secure a *steady* supply of self-confirming feedback, a goal that requires finding partners who feel sufficiently accepting about them to remain in the relationship. Because unloving partners may be tempted to cut off their supply of self-verification by terminating the relationship, the logic of self-verification encourages people to avoid such partners.

Moreover, direct tests of the hypothesis that people with negative self-views desire rejection have not supported it. For example, Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996) have reported that when spousal evaluations involved likability of their partners (e.g., perceptions of the partners’ virtues, faults, and social commodities; fondness), people preferred positive over self-verifying evaluations. Similarly, Rudich and Vallacher (1999) have provided evidence suggesting that people with low self-esteem may actually be more concerned with being

accepted than people with positive self-views. Research by Davila and Bradbury (2001) suggest that this may be particularly true of avoidantly attached people; when such individuals encounter conflict, they leave the relationship to avoid intimacy.

Therefore, when people with negative self-views are in the early, formative stages of their relationships, they withdraw from partners who harbor negative perceptions of them because negative perceptions at this stage in the relationship may signal an impending loss of the relationship, and as we noted earlier, one can only self-verify if one has a relationship in which to self-verify.<sup>2</sup> As this is particularly true in highly evaluative relationships such as dating relationships, it is only after people with negative self-views are in committed relationships that they feel safe to indulge their desire for self-verification because at this point the perpetuation of the relationship is more certain. Indeed, in marriage relationships, the dominant pragmatic concern is to negotiate identities that can be sustained over the long haul (i.e., realistic identities). Self-verification strivings will also gain force from epistemic concerns, as the partners' evaluations will be more credible as intimacy increases. The result is a phenomenon that Swann et. al. (1994) dubbed the "marital shift," a tendency for self-verification strivings to replace positivity strivings as the dominant force in the relationship once the relationship transitions from dating to married status.

Davila and Bradbury's (2001) research on the effects of adult attachment classification may add further insight into the marital shift phenomenon. These authors reported that spouses with negative self-views who remained in unhappy marriages had exceptionally high levels of anxiety of abandonment, a quality that is the hallmark of a preoccupied (or ambivalent) attachment pattern. In contrast, those who fled unhappy marriages tended to be have attachment classifications that were high in avoidance of intimacy (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Such evidence

suggests that different people may comprise the samples of dating and married people in the marital shift study (Swann et al., 1994). That is, if avoidantly attached people flee from relationships in which they are evaluated negatively (as is typically the case in unhappy relationships), then they would be under-represented in married couples in self-verification studies (e.g. Swann et al., 1994, De La Ronde & Swann, 1998). Instead, the only people with negative self-views left in the married couple sample and thus seeking self-verification would be ambivalently attached, who remain in unhappy relationships due to their fear of abandonment. In shorter term dating relationships, however, people with avoidant attachments styles would be well represented, but they would display a preference for self-enhancing partners over self-verifying ones, as the former would be more compatible with their desire to avoid intimacy. In short, among people with negative self-views, avoidants may be primarily responsible for the positivity strivings of dating couples and ambivalents may be primarily responsible for the self-verification strivings of married couples. This hypothesis is readily testable.

Whatever the links between attachment classification and self-verification strivings ultimately wind up being, these adjacent literatures raise a more general issue regarding how people reconcile their desire for self-verification with their other motivational states. One recent hypothesis along these lines is that people with negative self-views simultaneously seek global acceptance together with verification of specific characteristics.

*The specific verification, global acceptance hypothesis.*

Neff and Karney (2003; 2005) have provided some evidence that people with negative self-views may desire partners who recognize their specific shortcomings but are still globally accepting of them. Such partners would be appealing because they would not only be self-verifying (at a specific level) but they would also be likely to be a *continued* source of self-

verification because their global acceptance would shore up their commitment to the relationship.

Although we agree with Neff and Karney's (2003) contention that people are motivated to satisfy both enhancement and verification motives simultaneously, we have reservations about the specific verification, global acceptance hypothesis. Conceptually, because global self-views presumably serve all the same functions as specific self-views (e.g., coherence, prediction and control), the *desire* for self-verification should be just as strong at the global level as it is at the specific level. As such, it seems unlikely that people would suspend their desire for global verification, as doing so would presumably impose psychological costs in the form of diminished sense of coherence. Empirically, several findings are inconsistent with the specific verification, global acceptance hypothesis. For example, several studies indicate that depressed and low self-esteem people prefer evaluations and interaction partners that are globally negative (Giesler et al., 1996; Little et. al., 2005; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992; Swann, Wenzlaff, & Tafarodi, 1992), even when the evaluator is a good friend (Swann et. al., 1992). Moreover, because ratings of specific qualities tend to spill over onto global perceptions (Neff & Karney, 2003; Swann, De La Ronde & Hixon, 1994), partners who verify specific negative qualities also tend to harbor negative global evaluations. This means that even if people wanted specific verification/global acceptance, they would have trouble finding it due to the inability of their partners to separate their specific and global evaluations.

But if people really prefer global as well as specific verification, how should one interpret Neff and Karney's evidence that global acceptance contributes to relationship quality in the presence of specific verification? We believe that this finding reflects a tendency for ratings of global acceptance to covary with something that people really do want, which is their partners'

interest in remaining in the relationship (Boyes & Fletcher, 2006). That is, the global evaluations Neff and Karney studied (e.g., personal warmth, estimated worth as a human being) are closely related to their willingness to remain with the partner. Given that relationships must survive if they are to provide self-verification, global positive evaluations represent a practical necessity. This phenomenon has been discussed under the rubric of relationship relevance.

*The relationship-relevance hypothesis.*

People appear to be highly motivated to bring their relationship partners to see them positively on qualities that are important to the survival of the relationship. Consider the uniquely important dimension of physical attractiveness. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is evidence that people take steps to ensure that their close relationship partners see them as physically attractive. Swann, Bosson, & Pelham (2000), for example, found that participants not only wanted their dating partners to see them as much more attractive than they saw themselves, they actually took steps to ensure their partners viewed them this way. Moreover, such steps were effective: Their partners actually came to see them in ways that verified their more-attractive-than-usual selves. Apparently, people with negative self-views recognize that for their relationships to “work,” they must be perceived in a relatively positive manner on relationship-relevant dimensions. They accordingly arrange it so that their partners actually develop such positive evaluations.

The Swann et al. (2000) findings provide an empirical foundation for understanding how people with negative self-views navigate the treacherous interpersonal waters created by their self-views. On the one hand, they prefer and seek negative evaluations regarding characteristics that are low in relationship-relevance, presumably because evaluations are self-verifying and will not threaten the survival of the relationship. At the same time, on dimensions that are critical to the survival of the relationship, they strive to acquire evaluations that are more positive than those that

they typically receive but which *do* verify the self that they have presented to their partners. In this way, participants may enjoy the relationship stability that is presumably cultivated by receiving favorable evaluations on relationship-relevant dimensions yet still feel that the evaluations were supported by the identity they had negotiated with their partner. In this instance, people appeared to be seeking verification of circumscribed, highly positive selves rather than of their “typical” selves—a phenomenon that Swann and Schroeder (1995) dubbed “strategic self-verification.” Such strategic self-verification is a clear cousin to Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist and Whitton’s (1999) “Michelangelo Phenomenon,” in which a partner views the target in a manner that is congruent with the target’s ideal self, and to Murray, Holmes, and Griffin’s (2003) notion that mutual idealization contributes to the quality of relationships. It is also related to recent evidence that relationship partners not only trade exceptionally positive mutual evaluations, but that they are aware of this process and such awareness is actually beneficial to the relationship (Boyes & Fletcher, 2006).

At first blush, the Swann et al. (2000) findings may seem to support Murray and her colleagues’ (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a; 1996b) assertion that people want to create positive illusions in their relationships. Although our argument is similar in some respects, we believe that it inappropriate to refer to use the word “illusions” here. That is, although our participants received verification for circumscribed selves that outstripped their chronic selves, these circumscribed selves were *not* illusory. Rather, they were relationship-specific selves that they actively negotiated with their partner. Therefore, our participants did not create illusions, they created idiosyncratically skewed social realities that were validated by their partners.

If evidence for the relationship-relevance hypothesis is consistent with self-verification theory’s notion that people strive for convergence between their self-views and the social realities that maintain them, it is inconsistent with the original theory’s assumption that people strive to

negotiate identities that match their *characteristic* self-views (Swann, 1983). Apparently, people will seek verification of their negative self-views only if doing so does not risk being abandoned, which would completely cut off the supply of potential verification. This evidence of strategic self-verification shows that self-verification strivings do not exist in a social psychological vacuum but are instead woven into the fabric of everyday life. Note, however, that when self-verifiers pragmatically enacted positive relationship specific selves, they created micro-social environments that supported the relationship specific self. Thus, while this relationship-specific selves argument departs from the assumptions of classical trait and self theory, it is quite consistent with Mischel and Shoda's (1999) notion that people strive for intra-individual consistency and to Swann's (1984) suggestion that people strive for circumscribed accuracy (e.g., Gill & Swann, 2004).

#### **Coda: Does self-verification in relationships matter?**

In recent years several authors have questioned the importance and social significance of self-verification research. One argument has been that self-verification strivings are rare relative to self-enhancement strivings (Baumeister, 1998; Murray et al., 2000; Sedikides, Skowronski & Gaertner, 2004). Careful examination, however, of the evidentiary basis of such assertions reveals serious shortcomings. For example, although there are scores of studies whose results are relevant to the relative strength of the two motives, Baumeister (1998) arbitrarily focused his review on the results of six laboratory investigations by Sedikides (1993). This is an astonishing choice because five of the six studies Sedikides (1993) reported are irrelevant to the debate because he failed to measure chronic self-views, a necessary condition for testing self-verification theory. Furthermore, the only study that provided a fair test of the two theories showed equally strong verification and enhancement effects. Despite the inconclusive nature of

Sedikides (1993) studies, Baumeister (1998) followed Sedikides' lead in concluding that they provided definitive evidence that self-enhancement regularly prevails over self-verification.

More recent efforts by Sedikides to champion self-enhancement strivings are similarly problematic. For example, Sedikides and Green (2004, p. 23) dismiss the significance of evidence that verification strivings trump self-enhancement strivings in studies of memory (Swann & Read, 1981) by arguing that self-verification research generally focuses on peripheral traits, such as extraversion. This assertion is factually incorrect because the two studies of self-verification and memory of which we are aware—Story (1998) and Swann and Read (1981)—showed that people with negative self-views preferentially recalled information indicating that they were low in self-esteem or dislikable—neither of which are peripheral traits.

Even more relevant to this volume on close relationships, Murray and her colleagues have reported considerable evidence of self-enhancement strivings in their work and no evidence of self-verification. Some of this discrepancy can be attributed to the fact that most of this work has focused on dating couples, perceived rather than actual appraisals, and their use of a measure of self-views (Interpersonal Qualities Scale [IQS; Murray et al. 1996a]) that is quite high in relationship relevance. All of these features tend to diminish or eliminate self-verification effects. In one study, however, Murray et al. (2000) report (in footnote 15) that they found evidence of self-enhancement but not self-verification in a sample of married participants using the SAQ. Nevertheless, this alleged failure to replicate is misleading because Murray (2005) subsequently acknowledged that a substantial number of the “married” participants were actually co-habiting. This is important because when cohabitating couples were eliminated from Murray et al.'s sample, a marginally reliable self-verification effect emerged among male participants (Murray, 2005).

In short, at present there is no persuasive evidence that self-enhancement strivings are more common than self-verification strivings. There is, however, growing evidence that self-verification strivings are predictive of a host of important social outcomes, such as marital satisfaction and divorce (Cast & Burke, 2002; for a review, see Swann et. al., 2006), desire to remain with college roommates (Swann & Pelham, 2002), identification with and performance in small groups (Swann, Milton, & Polzer, 2000), reactions to diversity in the workplace (Polzer, Milton & Swann, 2002; Swann, Polzer, Seyle & Ko, 2004), reactions to procedural fairness in the workplace (Wiesenfeld, Brockner & Swann, 2006) and worker job retention (Schroeder, Josephs, & Swann, 2006).

It thus appears that self-verification strivings influence a wide array of important social behaviors. The ubiquity of such strivings offers further testimony to their adaptiveness---after all, were they completely dysfunctional, people would presumably stop enacting them. From this vantage point, when it comes to information about the self, people will often seek the truth, even when there is a sense in which the truth hurts.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Also, although we recognize that think-aloud techniques have something of a checkered reputation in psychology, the most cogent critiques have been directed at *retrospective* think aloud methodologies (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). More recently, researchers have shown that when people think aloud *as they are making their decisions*, as Swann et al. (1992) did, think aloud procedures yield useful insights into psychological processes (e.g., Ericsson & Simon, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> The pseudo relationships formed with strangers in the laboratory offer an interesting exception to this rule, as the decontextualized nature of such relationships strip them of the evaluative concerns that are often present outside the laboratory while sparing epistemic considerations.

Figure 1. Preferred interaction partners.  
Adapted from Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler (1992)

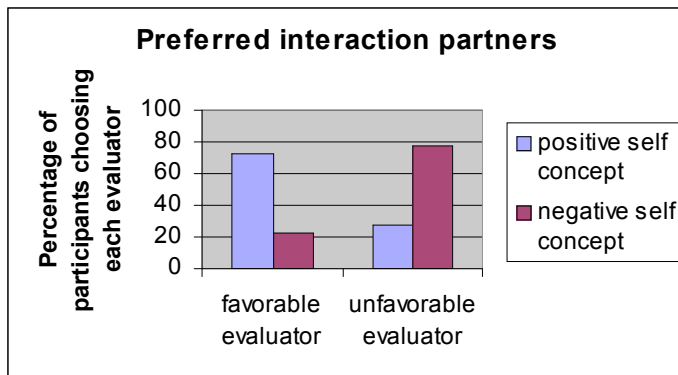


Figure 2. Commitment in marital relationships  
Adapted from Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon (1992)

