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Definition

Self-enhancement is a term encompassing a range of psychological phenomena whose common denominator is the possession or pursuit of a **tendentiously positive view of self** – in terms of what the self can do, currently is, or will be in future (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Description

For the purposes of exposition, the phenomena comprising self-enhancement can be divided into one of three classes: ostensible signs, dynamic processes, and personality traits (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008).

Ostensible signs provide prima facie evidence of self-enhancement. A well-known ostensible sign is the better-than-average effect, whereby most people rate themselves above most of their peers in terms of desirable abilities or characteristics (Alicke & Govorun, 2005). Other examples include people's tendency to make self-serving attributions (i.e., claim credit for success but disavow blame for failure; Sedikides & Alicke, 2012), succumb to self-serving memory distortions (i.e., selectively forget negative feedback; Sedikides & Green, 2009), and show special fondness for what is theirs (i.e., prefer letters in their own name; Hodson & Olson, 2005).

Ostensible signs may or may not reflect an underlying motive to self-enhance, and a lively debate persists over the relative importance of motivational and cognitive factors as explanations (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Guenther & Alicke, 2010). For example, people may rate themselves as above average because they want to be superior to others. However, they may also rate themselves as above average simply because they focus more on themselves when answering the question or because their ratings reflect the general tendency to prefer individual things over collections of things. The evidence typically implicates a combination of explanations but also points to motivational factors (i.e., self-enhancement) as sufficient for the production of ostensible signs (Sedikides & Alicke, 2012).

Self-Endorsement of One's Action

- ▶ Choice

Self-Enhancement

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Synonyms

Positive illusions; Self-deception; Self-serving bias

Dynamic processes provide more direct evidence of self-enhancement strivings. For example, people evaluate uncongenial information more critically than they do congenial information (e.g., spend more time and energy scrutinizing and refuting information implying that their health is at risk; Ditto & Lopez, 1992). Yet, if people first bolster their egos via self-affirmation (e.g., by reminding themselves of value that are important to them), they no longer engage in such biased processing (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000). Even more tellingly, people sometimes engage in behavioral self-handicapping, where they act to preemptively sabotage their performance in order to forestall the shame of performing poorly (e.g., binge drinking the night before an examination to excuse flunking it; Rhodewalt & Tragakis, 2002). Such reversible ego-defensive tendencies, and overt behavioral self-deceptions, are difficult to account for in terms of cognition alone.

Personality trait entails the final form of self-enhancement. It refers to possessing a chronically positive ► *self-concept* and is equivalent to having high levels of trait ► *self-esteem* (or ► *self-worth*). This is a component both of lower *depression* and of higher ► *self-efficacy*. In such cases, people show themselves to be not only willing but also able to self-enhance.

Thus, a range of phenomena testify to the prevalence self-enhancement and collectively point to a potent motive underlying them. That said, the inferred motive to self-enhance, albeit powerful, is perpetually held in check by the antagonistic motive to self-assess, for which ample evidence also exists (Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011). For example, people will often select test feedback more on the basis of its diagnosticity (i.e., how informative it is) than on the basis of its positivity (i.e., how flattering it is) (Trope, 1986). In addition, making people accountable for judgments of their own work (thereby increasing their incentive to self-assess accurately) prompts less egotistically inflated judgments (Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002). To paraphrase Hume, the passion of self-enhancement is partly a slave to reason.

Culture has also been alleged to moderate self-enhancement, with East Asians and Westerners

differing on underlying ► *cultural values*. Specifically, East Asians show less evidence of some (Hamamura & Heine, 2007), though not all (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003), of the ostensible signs of self-enhancement, prompting some researchers to infer that the underlying motive affects them less urgently. However, it could be that East Asians simply engage more in tactical than in candid self-enhancement (Sedikides & Strube, 1997), focusing relatively more on their failings so that they can remedy them. East Asians, then, may prioritize self-enhancing their future, as opposed to present, qualities.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is to explain why any propensity to self-enhance exists in the first place. Why would dodging reality by self-enhancing ever be more advantageous than deferring to it by self-assessing, given that dodging reality is liable to prompt less wise decisions? A voluminous research literature addresses the question empirically, mostly with respect to ► *wellness*, in terms of *psychological health* and ► *quality of life*. Although findings are complex and methodological complications abound, the following summary is defensible: self-enhancement predicts the relevant positive outcomes better than an advocate of impartial realism would expect (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Gregg et al., 2011). One explanation may be that, although self-enhancement has the potential to lead people objectively astray, it also provides them with the subjective energy and certainty they require to pursue various goals, thereby enabling them to take advantage of benefits and opportunities they would otherwise miss (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). For example, a self-enhancer, by optimizing her *self-presentation*, may unwisely discount the perils of suntanning, and so raise her risk of skin *cancer* via greater solar exposure (Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994); yet her tanned appearance, and positive life orientation, may also increase her chances of attracting a high-status mate, thus offsetting her cancer risk via greater material wealth. It may also be that only a touch of self-enhancement is adaptive; too much and it spills over into maladaptive *narcissism* (Morf, Horvath, & Torchetti, 2011).

Ultimately, self-enhancement may be interpreted as an adaptive product of evolution (Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000), one that underlies and regulates a variety of adaptive behaviors (Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001).

Cross-References

- ▶ Cultural Values
- ▶ Physical Quality of Life
- ▶ Self-Acceptance
- ▶ Self-Concept
- ▶ Self-Esteem
- ▶ Self-Worth
- ▶ Wellness

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