

## Introduction

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# **Self-Enhancement and Self-Protection**

### *Historical Overview and Conceptual Framework*

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**P** psychological science is a boon to the philosophy of science. The empirical study of people—their thoughts, feelings, anxieties, values, aspirations, and behavior—has stimulated epic debates and countless academic articles about how to deal with these capacities or whether to deal with them at all. Recommendations have ranged from treating inner life as though it were the only thing that mattered to treating people like nonpeople and dispensing with subjective constructs altogether. As if the task of explaining the human condition were not difficult enough, disagreements about how it should be studied in the first place occupied a great deal of experimental psychology's attention during its first century.

Today, we do not worry much about these issues. Scientific psychology is more eclectic than at any time in its brief history. Hypothetical constructs, intervening variables, and processes that are indirectly observable are not only tolerated but are also the basis of some of psychology's most active research areas, such as cognitive and social neuroscience. Provided that valid and reliable measurements are demonstrated, new constructs are evaluated on their promise for theoretical advancement and on investigators' perceptions that the constructs are indispensable to the phenomenon under study rather than on preexisting dogma about what constructs are acceptable.

All of which makes the time ripe for a volume dedicated to what has sometimes been a controversial topic in psychology, namely, the motivation to enhance or protect one's

self-image—which, following convention, we label as self-enhancement and self-protection, respectively. Whereas self-enhancement refers to a tendency to claim greater standing on a characteristic, or more credit, than is objectively warranted, self-protection refers to tactics that are adopted to avoid falling below a desired standard (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). Despite being subject to periodic critiques, self-enhancement and self-protection motivations have been among the most actively researched topics by social and personality psychologists, perhaps more actively researched at present than at any previous time.

So why have these constructs, which psychologists deem so vital and which are mainstays of literary and artistic conceptions of human life, been intermittently suspect in scientific psychology? One possibility is their historical association with Freudian theory. The defense mechanisms posited by Sigmund Freud (1915/1961a, 1923/1961b, 1926/1961c) and Anna Freud (1936/1946) provided the first important discussion of such issues in psychology. Whereas few would deny the operation of psychological tendencies such as repression, projection, displacement, and rationalization (Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998; Cramer, 2000; Schimel, Greenberg, & Martens, 2003), the Freudian conception contains dubious and difficult to validate assumptions about their unconscious and sexual nature that diminishes their scientific utility.

Moreover, given that they belong to the family of motivational constructs, self-enhancement and self-protection were subject to the same onslaught as were all motivational constructs during the heyday of radical behaviorism. Skinner (1953) thought of self-enhancement and self-protection as Freudian-type constructs that occurred in a mythical unconscious mind—which is to say that he did not think much of them at all. Skinner lost his battle, as it became increasingly clear that reliable and valid measurement, along with theoretical efficacy, were the main touchstones for the scientific usefulness of a construct. All sciences make extensive use of unobservables (e.g., “force” in physics), and many formerly unobservable constructs in psychology have become observable with advances in technology. Perhaps the single most damning criticism of the radical behaviorist enterprise was the recognition that behavior itself is a construct to be explained. So, although a person who is “swinging an axe” appears to be enacting a behavior that can be taken at face value, whereas a person who is “acting defensively” is seen as doing something that requires further interpretation, the matter is not quite so simple. A person swinging an axe might be described as building a canoe, getting exercise, working out his frustrations, destroying his neighbor’s property, doing his neighbor a favor, or committing a crime. Simply stating that he is swinging an axe is uninformative at best and may be misleading or inaccurate. In short, whether the event to be explained is swinging an axe, feeling insulted, exaggerating one’s abilities, or taking undeserved credit for an assignment, the motives underlying these events are relevant to an accurate characterization.

Although Skinner (1953) eschewed most “internal” events, he began his career doing physiological research and could never quite bring himself around to deny the importance of genetics on behavior. It was his perception that internal events were resistant to empirical study that troubled him more than their existence, and it was the motivation construct above all that aroused his ire. To be fair, there was good reason for his dyspepsia. During the 1950s, exquisitely complex motivational mechanisms dominated behavior theories so that even the simplest actions were explained by convoluted processes with scant empirical support. Radical behaviorism waned as the study of cognition and language waxed, but, during its ascendance, it was a useful corrective for motivational theories run amok.

A final reason that self-enhancement and self-protection explanations have been met with resistance is that they seem to violate William of Ockham's (c. 1287–1347) dictum to favor explanations with fewer theoretical mechanisms (Spade, 2006). Ockham's "razor" was actually intended to eliminate theological assumptions from nascent scientific explanations, but its greatest legacy is the proposition that the simpler of otherwise identical theoretical explanations should be preferred (Thorburn, 1918). There are, however, no inherent complexities in self-enhancement and self-protection mechanisms to discourage their use in scientific explanations.

Despite their central role in human behavior and social relations, no single volume has been dedicated to self-enhancement and self-protection as they are represented in psychological theory and research. Our goal in this handbook is to provide a comprehensive survey of research areas in which self-enhancement and self-protection explanations play an important role. To put the study of self-enhancement and self-protection in context, we begin by examining briefly the emergence of the motivation concept, then trace its introduction into psychological theories, and finally describe its deployment in self-enhancement and self-protection theories.

### The Motivation Construct Emerges

Although self-enhancement and self-protection are complex motives, they have at their roots the assumption that people want to feel good, or avoid feeling bad, about themselves. In this regard, the self-enhancement and self-protection motives are consistent with the earliest conjectures about what drives human action, namely, that hedonism was at the helm. The hedonism construct entered Western thought with the writings of the Cyrenaic and Epicurean philosophers. The founders of these schools of thought, Aristippus and Epicurus, respectively, emphasized the pursuit of pleasure over anything else (including traditional conceptions of virtue) and painted a picture of humans as pleasure seeking and pain avoidant (De Witt, 1973; Tatarkiewicz, 1976).

The dominant role of hedonism as the master motive in human affairs receded for a time while rationalist philosophies were in ascendance. Rationalism depicted an objective reality that all people with correct understanding (literally, "orthodoxy") could discern (Kenny, 1986; Loeb, 1981). According to the continental rationalists (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz), for example, irresponsible, malicious, selfish, or foolish actions stemmed from faulty knowledge—a view that echoed Plato's ideas (*The Republic*, trans. 1991). If there were a master motive for the rationalists, therefore, it would be to obtain correct knowledge, and the failure to behave morally, or in a way that ultimately advanced personal and societal goals, was due to inadequate understanding.

Hedonism reemerged as the dominant perspective with the rise of British empiricism in England in the late 16th century. For Hobbes, behavior was driven by the unbridled pursuit of pleasure rather than by a failure to grasp a priori truths. Experience, which could confer a range of salutary or destructive motives, became the key to understanding behavior. In short, empiricists (e.g., John Locke, David Hartley, James Mill) substituted learned associations for innate knowledge, and Hobbes (and later the utilitarians, particularly Bentham) supplanted rationality with desire. With desire reestablished at the forefront and the role of experience or learning recognized as the key to understanding behavior, the early foundation for motivation research was laid (Cofer & Appley, 1964; Macfarlane, 1978).

## Motivation in Psychology

With the notable exception of the aforementioned radical behaviorists, most psychologists have readily embraced motivational constructs and theories. Motivation has been used in three essential ways in psychology. First, motivation accounts for fluctuations in how much energy is exerted toward a goal. Skinner (1953) proposed that learning, deprivation, and genetic endowment could account for these differences, but even most behaviorists invoked energization or drive constructs to account for variations in behavior strength (Atkinson, 1960; Dollard & Miller, 1950; Hull, 1943). In fact, these early learning theories contributed some of the most comprehensive motivational perspectives that have emerged in psychology.

The second conceptualization of motivation is as directive or purposive. Whereas energization refers to variations in how hard the organism is working, the directive component explains what the organism is trying to accomplish. This aspect of motivation is represented in ordinary concepts, such as desires, preferences, goals, wishes, values, wants, and needs (Higgins & Sorrentino, 1996; Schwartz, 1992; Shah, Kruglanski, & Friedman, 2002). The directive or purposive component accounts for the fact that identical stimulus conditions can produce dramatically different responses. A pair of identical twins, for example, imbued with the same genetic constitution and deprived of food for the same period, might respond very differently to the sight of triple-chocolate ice cream. Although a staunch behaviorist would argue that preferences are written in people's reinforcement histories, practical limitations make it virtually impossible to identify all the past and present contingencies that govern behavior. Thus alluding to the reasons for which people acted or to the desires that impelled them substitutes for complete knowledge of their reinforcement histories.

The third prominent use of the motivation construct is to describe individual differences in behavior and desire. This meaning of motivation harkens back to the instinct concepts that were popular through the 1920s (and that are currently reemerging in evolutionary psychology; Taylor, 2002). For example, Murray's (1938) list of needs (e.g., achievement, aggression, autonomy, nurturance) differs primarily in length from McDougall's (1923) voluminous list of instincts. However, motives as personality characteristics share many of the same problems that bedevil instincts: They are difficult to disconfirm, they have trouble accounting for situational variations, and there are potentially as many of them as imaginative investigators can conjure. A more profitable avenue for investigating motives is to treat them as moderators of other important behavioral phenomena. Social and personality psychologists have used motives such as the needs for achievement (McClelland & Koestner, 1992), closure (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996), cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982), competence (White, 1959), control (Burger, 1992), uncertainty reduction (Trope, 1979), or uniqueness (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980) for this purpose.

Within this framework, self-enhancement and self-protection can be viewed as particular types of motives, namely, motives whose directive function is either to elevate self-regard toward a more desired level or to avoid reducing it. The energizing aspect of these motives refers to how much effort people are willing to expend and how much distortion they will tolerate to achieve these goals. Self-enhancement and self-protection efforts are applied most vigorously to central characteristics—those that are especially vital to one's self-concept and global self-esteem. On the other hand, for less important or peripheral characteristics, self-enhancement and protection strategies may be engaged only weakly and readily abandoned

if contradicted by objective data. Self-enhancement and self-protection motives apply not only to oneself but also extend to others in whom one is invested, such as children and relationship partners.

Regarding the third function of the motivation construct, several individual-difference measures are relevant to the dispositional tendencies to engage in self-enhancement or self-protection. For example, persons high on narcissism, self-concept certainty or clarity, and self-handicapping engage in more self-enhancement than their counterparts, whereas persons high on repression, shyness, and depression engage in more self-protection than their counterparts (for reviews see Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Morf, Horvath, & Torchetti, Chapter 19, this volume).

The self-protection motive has been more prominent than self-enhancement in psychology's history due to its origins in the Freudian defense mechanisms. In social and personality psychology, self-protection motives are presumably aroused in the numerous studies that threaten an individual's self-concept or create anxiety by providing feedback about failure (Sedikides & Strube, 1997) or social rejection (MacDonald & Leary, 2005) or by inducing concerns about mortality (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). In addition, specific defensive strategies have been studied in their own right, such as self-handicapping (Berglas & Jones, 1978), defensive pessimism (Norem & Cantor, 1986), and repression (Baumeister & Cairns, 1992).

Self-enhancement, however, is a more recent addition to the theoretical arsenal. The self-enhancement motive can be traced to humanistic psychologists' concern with what Rogers (1959) called "organismic" needs, or, more generally, growth strivings. The humanistic movement was a reaction against the ego-defense orientation of Freud and the drive-reduction emphasis of the behaviorists. Whereas psychodynamic and behavioral approaches stressed the need to reduce or eliminate undesirable states (anxiety for Freud, physiological tension for the behaviorists), humanistic psychologists argued that people had higher, self-actualizing needs (Maslow, 1970), such as love (Rank, 1932/1989), meaningfulness (Frankl, 1959/1976) and aesthetic beauty (Arnheim, 1971), that could not be conceptualized as drive reduction.

The construct of "self" emerged in the late 1940s (Lecky, 1945) and became central to Rogers's (1961) theorizing. The roots of self-enhancement can be traced to Rogers's discussion of the need for positive self-regard. Self-regard in Rogers's system entailed a form of self-appreciation that could overcome "conditions of worth," that is, conditions that require people to adjust their preferences and values to satisfy others' expectations. An important component of Rogerian therapy, therefore, involves establishing or recouping the individual's true needs and goals divorced from the desire to satisfy others. Although this is a lofty goal, the fact remains that social approval is one of the most basic of all human motives (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and it would be neither feasible nor desirable completely to shun others' expectations. In the same vein, although countless self-help books have echoed Rogers's encouragement to grant oneself unconditional positive regard (Branden, 1995; McKay & Fanning, 2000; Webber, 2002), life, unfortunately, provides a smorgasbord of negative self-evaluation opportunities, and most people are aware of their weaknesses as well as their strengths. Thus people must navigate their way through self-enhancement opportunities without exaggerating their capacities beyond believability and in a way that satisfies their need to be accepted by others. Self-serving attributions, the better-than-average effect, over-optimism, the illusion of control, and the misconstrual and misremembrance of events all

have limits that are determined by what people believe is feasible to themselves and to others (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Higgins, 2005; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003, 2008).

## Motivation in Social Psychology

### *Cognitive Consistency Theories*

Motivational constructs were present at the earliest stages of social psychological research. Examples are Triplett's (1897) studies demonstrating the motivational advantages of racing bicycles in direct competition with others versus in solitary time trials and Floyd Allport's (1924) social facilitation research. However, the use of motivation-type explanatory variables gained prominence with the advent of cognitive consistency theories, especially balance and cognitive dissonance perspectives. Although it would be relatively straightforward to cast the need for consistency among cognitive elements in nonmotivational terms (Abelson & Rosenberg, 1958; Insko, 1984), both Heider (1958) and, to an even greater extent, Festinger (1957) cast their theories in motivational language. For Festinger, of course, inconsistency among cognitive elements created a central tension state that was analogous to peripheral deprivation states such as thirst and hunger. The precise relation between cognitive "dissonance" and peripheral drive states still requires clarification, but years of research supports Festinger's contention that inconsistencies between avowed values and overt behaviors produce drive-like states that can be reduced through cognitive or behavioral mechanisms (Cooper, 2007; Stone & Focella, Chapter 9, this volume).

Until the late 1960s, motivational theories were so ingrained in social psychology as to arouse little controversy. The first antimotivational rumblings arrived in the form of Bem's (1967) behaviorist reinterpretation of cognitive dissonance theory, which eventually morphed into self-perception theory. Bem interpreted cognitive dissonance as a self-construal problem. He began with the assumption that people are generally aware of the reinforcement contingencies that guide their behavior. Behaviors that are enacted with the expectation of a substantial payoff are behaviors that most others would do in the same situation and are, therefore, relatively uninformative of one's attitudes, values, or characteristics. On the other hand, behaviors that are enacted for little or no reward, or that accrue costs, are quite informative of one's preferences and traits. A research participant in a cognitive dissonance experiment, therefore, who is paid a large sum of money to express an attitude that she does not really hold simply infers that the reward explains her behavior, whereas a participant who receives a much smaller reward infers instead that she holds the attitude she expressed. Whether attitude change occurs under these circumstances depends on judgments of whether external conditions can sufficiently explain one's behavior and drive-reduction assumptions are eschewed.

Although cognitive dissonance theory has received extensive empirical support (Aronson, 1992; Cooper, 2007; Elliot & Devine, 1994), self-perception assumptions also have wide applicability (Alicke, 1987). One of the main virtues of Bem's alternative construction was that it not only challenged the tenets of cognitive dissonance theory but it could also be adapted to explain many phenomena that cognitive dissonance was not designed to address (Alicke, 1987). In other words, Bem's challenge provided a heuristic theoretical alternative, one that disclosed new research vistas, even if it did not explain away the phenomenon it originally addressed.

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### ***Attributional Egotism***

Bem's self-perception theory dovetailed perfectly with the emerging attributional theories that spawned scores of studies in the 1960s and 1970s. Ironically, the enduring value of the "intuitive scientist" metaphor that guided attributional perspectives may be that it provides a normative baseline against which to assess the various ways in which people diverge from rational expectations. Attributional biases were studied most frequently in the context of Weiner's (1972) attributional model of achievement motivation, which originally partitioned attributions into internal (i.e., ability and effort) and external (i.e., luck and task difficulty) factors. Many studies showed that people ascribed successful events and outcomes to their ability and effort and explained away unsuccessful ones as due to bad luck or insurmountable task obstacles. This research topic, which came to be known as the "self-serving bias," became increasingly complex both conceptually and in terms of the consistency of the findings (Zuckerman, 1979), but, throughout the 1970s, self-serving bias research pushed the self-enhancement and self-protection issues to the forefront of social psychology. In fact, the voluminous studies conducted on this topic represent one of the single largest literatures devoted to self-enhancement and self-protection in social and personality psychology.

Miller and Ross's (1975) classic critique of the self-serving bias literature was a model for later critical analyses of theories that included self-enhancement or self-protection mechanisms. Miller and Ross proposed a number of alternatives for these purportedly self-serving attributional tendencies, the most important being that people expect success and may, therefore, simply be making attributions to expected outcomes. Subsequent research (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004; Weary, 1979) demonstrated self-serving attributions in conditions that could not be explained by the alternatives that Miller and Ross proposed (1975) and also showed that they were not simply self-presentational postures (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1982; Roese & Olson, 2007; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 2002). Nevertheless, Miller and Ross raised a number of issues that could not be ignored by later researchers who wished to advance self-enhancement or self-protection positions. For example, when researchers manipulate positive or negative social or task feedback, they must consider how this will jibe with participants' existing beliefs about their abilities and characteristics. For this reason, tasks are usually chosen that measure purportedly novel abilities or characteristics.

### ***The State of the Art***

For a time, the difficulty of distinguishing between motivational and nonmotivational explanations led some to wonder whether the distinction was even viable (Tetlock & Levi, 1982). Around this same time, the burgeoning social cognition movement shifted research interests toward exploring how attentional capacities and knowledge structures influenced social perception and judgment. Given the historical importance social psychologists had always placed on motivational processes, motivation found its way back into the mainstream in the form of the distinction between so-called "cold" motivational processes, referring to goal formulation and pursuits, and "hot" ones, corresponding to self-enhancement and self-protection. Integrative work by Kruglanski (1989), Kunda (1990), and Pyszczynski and Greenberg (1983) showed how more complete explanations of social phenomena could be

given by integrating cognitive process mechanisms with self-enhancement and self-protection assumptions where relevant.

### The Present Volume

The 22 chapters in this handbook attest to the vibrancy of theories that incorporate self-enhancement and self-protection mechanisms in social and personality psychology. If one had tried to project 25 years ago what the psychology of the self would look like circa 2010, it would have seemed that it would be dominated by the study of autobiographical memory, self-schemas, and self-categorization processes, with little room for self-enhancement and self-protection mechanisms. Although excellent self-theories of each of these sort exist (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; McConnell & Strain, 2007; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), a more accurate assessment of the present state of the art is that self-enhancement and self-protection mechanisms are interwoven into most of the major theories of how the self is constructed, evaluated, and defined and how it influences social perception and judgment.

#### **Part I**

The first section includes chapters by Harmon-Jones and by Beer and Hughes that explore the neurocognitive underpinnings of self-enhancement and self-protection. Although social neuroscience is at the initial stages of exploring the brain correlates of motivated self-processes, it holds the promise of helping to uncover what might be called the holy grail for self researchers: the ability to distinguish between memory and judgment phenomena that entail only information-processing mechanisms and those that are motivated by concerns with advancing positive self-images or avoiding negative ones. The problem, of course, is that all so-called motivated biases have nonmotivational components and can occur for reasons that have nothing to do with self-enhancement (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). Identifying different brain states and events that are activated when self-enhancement and self-protection are believed to occur would be one way of isolating motivated processes. Harmon-Jones, in Chapter 1, discusses the relation between neurological representations of approach and avoidance motives, the distinct brain regions that are associated with positive versus negative evaluative responses, brain control of self-regulatory behaviors, altering emotional responses with neurofeedback, and identifying temporary and chronic affective states such as anger. Beer and Hughes (Chapter 2) report the findings of neuroimaging studies that begin to distinguish processes that are uniquely self-related (e.g., self-insight, exaggerated positivity) from those that are common to any social judgment task. They also discuss studies showing the specific brain regions that are involved in well-known phenomena such as overconfidence, accepting personal responsibility for failure, unrealistically favorable self-evaluations, and the influence of self-enhancement motivations on social comparison choices.

#### **Part II**

The second section comprises four chapters related to what we call motivated self-construal. Critcher, Helzer, and Dunning (Chapter 3) address a central issue in self-enhancement and self-protection research concerning the ways in which people enact motivated strategies while

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maintaining believability to themselves and others. Such strategies have sometimes been caricatured as deep, dark secrets that are accessible only through extraordinary efforts (such as 5 years on an analyst's couch). Social psychologists recognized relatively early, however, that self-enhancement and self-protection did not necessarily require large doses of self-deception. In his article on the "totalitarian ego," Greenwald (1980) used the analogy for self-deception of refusing to open unwanted mail: You have a pretty good idea of what's in it, but you avoid opening it to dampen the impact. By recognizing these more ordinary self-protection strategies, social and personality psychologists have broadened the scope of phenomena to which self-enhancement and self-protection theories apply.

Critcher et al.'s chapter is a current incarnation of this perspective. They begin by noting an important disjunction between the ways people behave and the construals they place on those actions. The needs to maintain favorable self-images and to avoid derogatory ones are aided splendidly by the subjectivity that characterizes social events. Whereas test scores, performance outcomes, and even some social actions may have unambiguous interpretations at one level, they are open to favorable construals at higher categorization levels. So, although I have no choice but to confess to poor grades, low SAT scores, and abysmal performance on standardized IQ tests, when asked to rate my "intelligence," I still see myself as better than most, as I rely on idiosyncratic conceptions of intelligence (such as whatever I do well). In the older, attributional literature, these self-serving explanations involved ascribing unflattering outcomes to forces beyond one's control. But Critcher et al. make the crucial point that subjective construal is more the norm than a special attribution to external forces. If my relationship partner tells me that forgetting to send her a Valentine's Day card is a sure sign of my feeble devotion, there is always wiggle room for interpretation: I can argue that the depth of my love exceeds anything that the hacks at Hallmark could possibly express. So self-enhancement and protection do not require herculean reality distortions for the simple reason that social constructs are conveniently malleable, and Critcher and colleagues explore the various ways in which construal opportunities influence self-enhancement and self-protection efforts.

Avowing higher standards than one's behavior actually delivers is another way to advance a belief in one's superiority—in this instance, in one's moral superiority. In Chapter 4, Batson and Collins review research on moral hypocrisy. Identifying the contours of hypocrisy has kept philosophers busy (Szabados & Soifer, 2004), particularly in debating whether hypocrisy requires self-deception, which, of course, veers off into debates about the nature of self-deception. Thankfully, these questions need not be answered definitively before psychologists can make progress in assessing when and how something like hypocritical behavior occurs. The first question Batson and Collins pose is whether the disjunction between moral standards and moral action is primarily a failure of understanding or of willpower. They quickly conclude that poor judgment—a favorite excuse of moral transgressors—is a far less compelling explanation than the sheer desire for material gain and sensual pleasures. The next question, then, concerns the causes of these moral failings. In addition to social learning and situational pressures, each of which clearly play a role, Batson and Collins point to the desire to promote one's own interests. Given that others are likely to thwart one's self-interested pursuits when they become patently obvious, moral hypocrisy is a means by which self-interest can be advanced while bamboozling others with one's alleged adherence to exacting moral standards. Batson and Collins review a series of studies that demonstrate hypocrisy in the way research participants allocate reward to themselves and others, namely, by avowing

egalitarian standards and then behaving selfishly. They also review findings showing that, despite having acted in ways that are egregiously hypocritical by virtually all logical conceptions of the term, participants rate their actions as relatively moral. This is another instance in which construals save the day.

An additional type of construal that can serve self-enhancement and self-protection needs involves the perception of time. As Wilson and Ross note in Chapter 5, personal identity is composed of experiences that span a person's life, and people possess considerable latitude in deciding which elements to include as part of their self-concepts and how heavily those elements should be weighted. In their research, Wilson and Ross have found that people exaggerate the recency of positive events and the distance of negative ones, thereby according experiences that reflect favorably upon oneself a privileged position in the self-concept. The same types of effects are obtained at the group level: People see historical injustices attributed to their group as "old news," presumably to deflect their importance to the group's identity.

Sherman and Hartson (Chapter 6) raise the theme of reconciling self-enhancement and self-protection with the needs to function adaptively and to make accurate judgments and decisions. A large and growing literature on self-affirmation demonstrates that buffering oneself against threatening information, such as by affirming one's core values, permits people the luxury to be less self-serving in defining themselves and their outcomes and to be more open to potentially threatening information. Given the opportunity to assert their global self-integrity, people can be more realistic about their abilities and characteristics. Sherman and Hartson view self-affirmation as an integral part of the larger psychological immune system that protects the self and maintains psychological health and well-being. Self-affirmation is believed by the authors to confer these benefits by marshalling self-resources, such as reducing stress or increasing energy.

### Part III

The third section consists of four chapters devoted to the perceptual, judgmental, and memory aspects of self-enhancement and self-protection. Cole and Balciotis (Chapter 7) start things off with a "newer" new look in perception. Research in the 1940s and 1950s (Bruner & Goodman, 1947; Bruner & Tagiuri, 1954) suggested that personal needs, values, and expectancies could influence basic perceptual processes, but, despite a research program that produced many intriguing findings, the idea that unconscious motivations could influence perception spooked psychologists who wished to disavow any connection to the Freudian past. With improved methodologies and a half century of social cognition research showing the widespread operation of automatic mental processes (Hassin, Uleman, & Bargh, 2005), the waters are safe for revisiting this question, and Balciotis and her colleagues have produced an impressive body of findings in this promising area, which is reviewed in this chapter.

They begin by noting that self-enhancement is, in essence, a form of wishful thinking and then ask whether wishful thinking can be extended to the perceptual realm. Specifically, can motivational processes direct the way we actually see things? Cole and Balciotis describe the findings of a number of studies that leave little doubt that they do. Motivational states influence which objects and events capture our limited attentional resources, they affect the "lens" or filter that colors what is seen, they raise or lower thresholds for recognizing objects, and they affect the amount of processing that occurs. These findings greatly expand the scope of phenomena to which self-enhancement and self-protection are potentially relevant. For

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example, Balcetis and Dunning (2007) showed in one study that people in whom dissonance is aroused by their choosing to put themselves in embarrassing situations estimate the physical distance required to remove themselves from the embarrassment to be shorter (thereby reducing dissonance) than do participants who were assigned to the embarrassing situation. Other findings, such as that desirable objects are perceived to be physically closer—sort of like seeing a mirage in the desert—have an interesting analogue in Wilson and Ross's findings that positive events are perceived to be closer in time. Apparently, both physical and temporal distance are influenced by motivational concerns.

Although most self-enhancement and self-protection theories assess the influence of these motives on how people interpret their actions and outcomes, define their characteristics, and explain their predicaments, self-enhancement and self-protection motives also have pivotal implications for social judgment. In Chapter 8, Alicke and Guenther discuss various ways in which self-related motives influence judgments of other people. Perhaps the most important consequence of self-involvement in social judgment is the use of one's own values and preferences as a barometer for judging the quality and moral worth of others' actions. Research has shown, for example, that people who endorse less ethical choices (e.g., those who say that they would lie rather than tell the truth if it were to their advantage) evaluate other moral slackers less harshly. Condoning others' dubious ethical choices may be a subtle way of excusing one's similar choices, thereby protecting the self from the derogatory implications of moral compromise. In performance domains, research has shown that, when the self is threatened, people tend to contrast the scores of lower performers to their own, thereby improving their self-standing by implication. Conversely, research on the "genius effect" shows that when people are unambiguously outperformed on an intellectual task, they respond by exaggerating the ability of the individual who outperformed them (Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst, & Zhang, 1997). By assigning extraordinary ability to the person who is better than they, people maintain relatively favorable views of their own abilities.

We mentioned earlier that cognitive dissonance theory represented the first major installment of a self-protection model in social psychology. As Stone and Focella (Chapter 9) note, rationalizing the difficult choices that one makes serves self-enhancement by helping people to maintain consistent and coherent self-concepts. However, the dissonance literature is replete with complex and difficult-to-reconcile findings, not all of which support self-enhancement or self-protection accounts of dissonance processes. Stone and Cooper's (2001) self-standards model (SSM) was developed to integrate these diverse findings. The SSM assumes that people generally evaluate their behavioral decisions with reference to prevailing cultural norms and justify their actions when they are perceived to be discrepant with these norms. Alternately, however, people may evaluate their actions by invoking their personal, idiosyncratic standards. Thus people who have low expectations for their moral behavior or task prowess may experience no dissonance at all as a result of ostensibly poor moral or intellectual performance because these actions or outcomes are not terribly inconsistent with their self-concepts. The essential question in making dissonance-related predictions, therefore, is whether people are relying on cultural or personal norms to evaluate their actions. Stone and Focella report a series of studies that support this revised dissonance model and explore when cultural and personal standards are likely to be invoked.

In Chapter 10, Skowronski takes up the topic of positivity biases in autobiographical memory. A straightforward self-enhancement prediction would be that people would

recall predominantly favorable life experiences at the expense of life's pitfalls and downturns. Indeed, there is evidence that, for example, students recall having received better grades in courses than they actually did and that people recall more favorable health information than they actually received. As Skowronski notes, effects such as these could represent an augmentation of positive material in memory, a diminution of negative information, or a bias toward consistent information. Further research is needed to assess when each of these tendencies might prevail.

#### **Part IV**

The fourth section is dedicated to self-enhancement and self-protection in interpersonal, relational, and group contexts. Hoorens provides the first general attempt to examine the interpersonal consequences of self-enhancement and self-protection in Chapter 11. People who are prone to self-enhancement may feel that their superior efforts will not be appreciated and therefore "loaf" on group tasks, advance their own goals at the expense of others, respond with aggression when they receive negative feedback, and feel as though they are entitled to greater rewards than others. Interestingly, some evidence suggests that self-enhancers are viewed more positively than self-deprecators, although the generality of this finding depends on the nature of the enhancement or deprecation and the context in which it occurs. As Hoorens notes, the research that is available on the consequences of motivated biases focuses predominantly on self-enhancement rather than self-protection, suggesting that future research needs to be directed at this neglected topic.

In Chapter 12, Wood and Forest look more generally at the operation of self-enhancement and self-protection motives in interpersonal relationships. The rewards that people receive and the costs they incur in interpersonal relationships are arguably the prepotent determinants of self-esteem. This makes relationships both the best and worst incubators for self-enhancement: the best when relationships are rewarding and nurturing, and the worst when they are debilitating and cause people to question their fundamental worth. Wood and Forest discuss research that shows that individuals with high self-esteem (HSE) possess the confidence to take risks in initiating and maintaining relationships, whereas individuals with low self-esteem (LSE) are far more cautious and protective. Compared with their counterparts with HSE, individuals with LSE interpret ambiguous or even positive feedback from a potential group member more negatively. These different styles have relationship consequences: Individuals with LSE, who are less secure about their partners' acceptance and commitment, may respond to personally threatening information by devaluing their partners and evaluating them negatively, whereas individuals with HSE pursue the opposite strategy of increasing their partners' value under threat.

Shaver and Mikulincer (Chapter 13) review their interesting studies on the attachment motive in adults. Feelings of secure attachment in adults help to deflect psychological threats and diminish the need to engage self-protective mechanisms. Simply priming thoughts of a supportive attachment figure has positive effects on mood and behavior. Attachment security is associated with self-insight, healthy self-enhancement, and positive self-views. Anxiously attached individuals, on the other hand, are less likely to achieve self-insight due to an unwillingness to consider potentially threatening information, and they tend to rely on self-defeating mechanisms such as thought suppression and unrealistic self-inflation to compensate for their insecurity.

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In Chapter 14, DeHart, Longua, and Smith (like Wood and Forest) tackle the most frequently studied topic in research on the self, namely, self-esteem. Self-esteem is also one of the thorniest and most complex topics in the psychology of the self. Historically, self-esteem has been assessed using explicit measures whose downside is that they are easily subject to socially desirable responding. DeHart and colleagues concentrate on findings derived from implicit measures such as the name-letter technique and the Implicit Association Test and examine the relation between implicit and explicit measures. The fact that implicit and explicit self-esteem are typically weakly related suggests that they are separate constructs, or that people respond differently to the different measures. As the authors show, research in this area includes some consistent patterns admixed with an array of conflicting findings. As a general rule, research indicates that individuals with low self-esteem respond more defensively to threats or stress, whereas individuals with high self-esteem may even display self-enhancement in the face of threat. One of the promising avenues of recent research in this area is assessing how variations in self-esteem might influence, and be influenced by, self-regulation. For example, implicit self-esteem is raised in response to self-threats to alleviate anxiety, and students with low implicit self-esteem drink more alcohol on days when they have negative interpersonal interactions.

The self-enhancing and self-protecting functions of prejudice and discrimination have been recognized in social psychology at least since the findings of Hovland and Sears (1940), who documented an increase in lynchings in the South corresponding to reductions in the price of cotton. This is one form of scapegoating, or blaming others for one's own problems. Major and Eliezer (Chapter 15) review research that shifts the perspective to the person who is the target of discrimination rather than the agent. In particular, they discuss the conditions under which attributing others' actions to discrimination may serve a self-protective function for the person who claims discrimination. Beginning with the somewhat surprising finding that stigmatized groups do not typically have lower self-esteem than nonstigmatized ones, researchers came to recognize that beliefs about the nature of the discrimination were critical. Research has shown that attributions to discrimination prevent the self-esteem decrements that would otherwise occur. These effects occur primarily when the nature of discriminatory comments is unambiguous. On the other hand, when sufficient ambiguity is introduced—such as when a target is unsure whether a potentially sexist comment reflects sexism or a valid criticism—these advantages diminish.

### Part V

The fifth section places self-enhancement and self-protection in developmental, clinical, health, personality, and cultural contexts. As Trzesniewski, Kinal, and Donnellan note in Chapter 16, developmental psychologists have not used the terms *self-enhancement* and *self-protection* as prominently as social and personality psychologists have. Nevertheless, these processes are implied in many developmental investigations. Children are unrealistically optimistic in predicting their performance outcomes but fairly accurate in estimating the outcomes of other children. Self-serving biases (making internal, stable, and global attributions for positive rather than negative events) are present in children as well as adults and are particularly strong in children in the 8–11 age range. Children have high self-esteem that decreases somewhat in adolescence. Ascribing these tendencies to motivations to promote a favorable self-image is difficult, however, because specific features of children's cognitive

abilities probably contribute to their self-enhancement. Children are egocentric and focus predominantly on their own experiences and outcomes; they engage in wishful thinking and have difficulty distinguishing between desires and realistic expectations; and they tend to confuse ability and effort, often equating effort with high ability. The authors discuss the adaptive functions that self-serving tendencies in children might serve and consider why these tendencies decline in adolescence.

Alloy, Wagner, Black, Gerstein, and Abramson (Chapter 17) discuss their findings that depressed people (in both college-student and clinical samples) are frequently more accurate in their self-assessments than are nondepressed people. Compared with nondepressed people, depressed people are better at calibrating their control over outcomes and less susceptible to the illusion of control. When depressives miscalibrate, it is typically in the direction of taking responsibility for negative outcomes that they did not control. These findings, and more recent ones that the authors review, highlight the potential disadvantages of relinquishing self-protective mechanisms—what Alloy et al. have called the “sadder but wiser” effect, which has been replicated many times.

In Chapter 18, Arndt and Goldenberg review the ways in which terror management theory has been applied to health decisions. Their health-decision model is based on the extensive literature that has tested predictions derived from terror management theory. This research has demonstrated that, when thoughts about mortality are made cognitively accessible, people strive to maintain self-esteem and to promote cultural worldviews. Mortality thoughts in relation to health concerns are elicited not only by actual illnesses or risky health behaviors but also by hearing about diseases and seeing others cope with illness. The mortality thoughts that these concerns evoke can be dealt with effectively by adopting health-promoting behaviors such as exercise, but they are often dealt with defensively by, for example, denying the threat or even increasing risky behaviors, especially when mortality thoughts are primed below awareness.

Self-enhancement is, for the most part, an adaptive strategy that improves mood, instills confidence, and helps people maintain their goal pursuits in the face of obstacles. At the extreme, however, lies the personality trait of narcissism, which, in addition to representing self-enhancement run amok, has other deleterious features, such as lack of empathy for others. Morf, Horvath, and Torchetti (Chapter 19) discuss narcissistic self-enhancement and the strategies that narcissists pursue to achieve their goals. They emphasize the self-regulatory aspect of narcissism, in particular the strategies that narcissists use to be noticed and admired. They depict narcissists as people with high trait self-esteem but with fragile state self-esteem that requires constant vigilance against threat. Narcissists show high activation of negative words after being primed with failure, increase the positivity of their self-presentations toward expert evaluators, blame others for poor group performance, exaggerate their virtues after rejection, and invest less in relationships—perhaps as a way of countering possible rejection.

In Chapter 20, Chiu, Wan, Cheng, Kim, and Yang suggest that need for positive self-evaluation is universal. Members of both Eastern and Western cultures negotiate the dynamics between the self-concept and the social environment in terms that enhance and protect either the individual self or the cultural self. Chiu and colleagues then go ahead to discuss the intricate role of cultural constraints in this process. For example, Westerners enhance their personal qualities (i.e., individual selves) more than Easterners. However, Easterners enhance their individual selves by associating them with cultural authorities. Easterners, then, use

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## Part V

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### **Part VI**

The sixth and final section is devoted to boundary conditions and methodological issues in self-enhancement and self-protection. Gramzow (Chapter 21) stakes out the apparent boundaries of self-enhancement and self-protection strivings. Overly positive self-evaluations are less prevalent for attributes that are unambiguous and concrete. People are more accurate in their self-appraisals when they are aware of their true standing and when they are accountable. Ambiguity, abstractness, awareness, and accountability help to identify the constraints on self-enhancement. As self theorists contend, "people cannot self-enhance willy-nilly" (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008, p. 108). Nevertheless, the motive to self-enhance and self-protect is powerful, and people pull at the constraints and push the boundaries. This resistance is especially evident when examining the tendency to exaggerate academic performance. Students exaggerate unambiguous and concrete information about themselves: their grades in specific courses and their overall grade point averages (GPAs). Academic exaggeration occurs despite the fact that students are aware of their actual GPAs and know that their responses could be verified. As with other forms of self-enhancement and self-protection, however, the strength of the motive to exaggerate academic performance varies across individuals and situations. Students high in achievement motivation and dispositional self-enhancement are particularly prone to exaggerate their grades. And, although the self-enhancement motive is powerful, its influence can be curtailed, and it can be satiated. Students are less likely to exaggerate when their actual academic performance (rather than their performance goals) is made salient to them. Likewise, students who typically exaggerate their GPAs do so less if they have an alternative opportunity to affirm an important aspect of themselves. However, the self-enhancement motive can also be energized and its influence increased. Unconscious priming of achievement increases the degree to which students exaggerate their academic performance. The tendency to resist these constraints attests to the important role that self-enhancement and self-protection play in the regulation not only of self-evaluation but also of behavior. Academic exaggeration is related to high performance goals and predicts better actual performance in the future. Students who push the boundaries also move forward.

Krueger and Wright (Chapter 22) close the volume with a consideration of methodological issues in assessing self-enhancement and self-protection. This, of course, is a critical topic in that most of the controversy surrounding explanations based on these motives involves the methods by which they are investigated and, in particular, whether alternative explanations are available. As Krueger and Wright note, most of the arguments in the literature for self-enhancement, such as research on the better-than-average effect, are based on aggregate data and preclude assessing the accuracy of individual participants. The strongest evidence for self-enhancement is obtained when individual judgments can be compared with an objective standard, which raises the question of the validity of different standards. A common technique is to compare actors' responses to those of observers and, for the sake of reliability, to average across a number of observers, and Krueger and Wright discuss the advantages and potential shortcomings of this approach. They note that, in the end, the strength of a psychometric approach to self-enhancement is inextricably tied to the precise theoretical question that is being posed.

### Concluding Remarks

Our intention in this handbook is to provide a broad overview of self-enhancement and self-protection theories and findings, and we trust that the reader will find that the landscape has been well represented, even if it is impossible to include all aspects of this voluminous literature. Clearly, self-enhancement and self-protection, which have varied in their prominence over the years in social and personality psychology, are playing a more important role than at any time in the field's history. We hope that this volume will attest to the relevance self-enhancement and self-protection for psychological phenomena and to the ingenuity of researchers who have contributed their theories and findings.

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