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Motivated Expectations of Positive Feedback in Social Interactions

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ABSTRACT. People self-enhance in a variety of ways. For example, they generally expect to perform better than others, to be in control of events, and to have a brighter future. Might they also self-enhance by expecting to receive positive feedback in social interactions? Across five studies, we found that they did. People’s desire for feedback correlated with how positive they expected it to be (Study 1), and their feedback expectations were more positive for themselves than for others (Study 2). People’s positive feedback expectations also covaried with trait tendencies to self-enhance (i.e., self-esteem and narcissism; Study 3) and with a direct situational manipulation of self-enhancement motivation (Study 4). Finally, people expected to receive positive feedback but did not consistently expect to receive self-verifying feedback (Study 5). These findings are consistent with social expectations being driven in part by the self-enhancement motive.

Keywords: feedback, self-enhancement, self-motives, social interaction

“Man is a rational animal—so at least I have been told. [. . .] I have looked diligently for evidence in favor of this statement, but so far I have not had the good fortune to come across it [. . .]”

– Bertrand Russell, *An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish* (1943, p. 73)

IN HIS VAIN SEARCH FOR EVIDENCE of human rationality, Russell would hardly have been aided by contemporary research in social psychology. Such

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research has documented the diverse ways in which people make unsound judgments, often by virtue of succumbing to the effects of visceral motives (Dunning, 2004; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003; Tesser, 2003). Far from being dispassionate information processors, human beings are instead passionate information manipulators, with vested interests in arriving at particular conclusions (Brunot & Sanitioso, 2004; Kunda, 1990; Sanitioso & Niedenthal, 2006). Even at a basic cognitive level, people interpret ambiguous visual stimuli as signaling the outcomes they prefer (Balcetis & Dunning, 2006, 2010). A slew of reason-distorting motives has been identified and studied (Dawson, Gilovich, & Regan, 2002; Haugtvedt & Petty, 1992; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Steele, 1988; Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003). Arguably, the most potent and pervasive is the motive to self-enhance (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Baumeister, 1998; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008).

Self-enhancement manifests itself in many ways (Hepper, Gramzow, & Sedikides, 2010). People regard themselves as superior to their peers (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995), claim credit for success, but disclaim responsibility for failure (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999) and forget negative feedback more than positive feedback (Sedikides & Green, 2009). Moreover, the biasing power of self-enhancement extends beyond the intrapsychic realm: It shapes social judgments, behaviors, and expectations. With respect to social judgments, people regard their own talents as special but those of others as mundane (Dunning & Cohen, 1992). They also activate positive or negative stereotypes of ambiguous targets depending on whether those targets provide positive or negative feedback (Sinclair & Kunda, 1999). With respect to behaviors, people self-handicap to lessen their responsibility for anticipated poor performance (Jones & Berglas, 1978). They also reside in towns, cities, and states whose names feature letters from their own names (Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002). Finally, with respect to expectations, people overestimate how much control they possess over upcoming events (Langer, 1975). They also predict a rosier future for themselves than present circumstances objectively warrant (Weinstein, 1980).

Taken together, such findings suggest that, far from merely passively reflecting social reality, the self actively imposes itself upon it. They bear out Shrauger and Schoeneman's (1979) classic conclusion that people's opinions of themselves do not so much mirror what others *actually* think of them as much as they mirror what people *think* others think of them. Contemporary research underlines the same point. For example, Diener, Wolsic, and Fujita (1995) reported that people's *own* ratings of their attractiveness correlate substantially with their self-reported self-esteem, whereas *others'* ratings of their attractiveness do not. This strongly implies that subjective internal factors, not objective external ones, are responsible for key self-beliefs, even in situations where the latter, not the former, intuitively seem likely to dominate. Moreover, many self-enhancement patterns generalize cross-culturally (Gaertner, Sedikides, & Chang,

2008; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005; Yamaguchi et al., 2007), attesting to their pervasiveness (though see Heine, Kitayama, & Hamamura, 2007, for an alternative viewpoint).

In sum, two overall conclusions seem warranted. First, self-motives, and particularly the desire to self-enhance, play a central role in social cognition. Second, social perceptions, behaviors, and expectations are often driven by intrapsychic preoccupations as well as by social reality.

Nonetheless, there is a curious gap in the empirical literature. Very little research has directly addressed whether and to what extent self-motives bias expectations about *interpersonal interactions*, the basic building blocks of social life. Here, we sought to remedy the deficit. In particular, we sought to examine the nature of the feedback that people expected to receive from others in typical social situations. If the motive to self-enhance makes people desire positive feedback, and if that desire is powerful enough to bias social cognition, then people should generally expect to receive positive feedback. However, if it turns out that people do not generally expect to receive positive feedback, then the sovereignty of the self-enhancement motive would be called into question.

In five studies, therefore, we set out to examine whether and to what extent people expected to receive positive rather than negative feedback in social interactions. Assuming that they did, we also explored whether and to what extent the motive to self-enhance (as opposed to social reality) was responsible. We accomplished this using three basic approaches. First, we examined whether the expected positivity of feedback correlated with reported desire for it. Second, we examined whether feedback expectations were more positive for self than for others. Third, we examined whether feedback expectations were more positive when one's motivation to self-enhance was chronically high versus low (i.e., among individuals with high self-esteem and narcissism) or temporarily raised versus lowered (i.e., experimentally manipulated). If so, such expectations could not simply be grounded in past positive experiences. Finally, we explored whether the motive to self-enhance was a stronger determinant of feedback expectations than another important motive, self-verification (Swann et al., 2003).

We began by focusing on expectations about interactions with acquaintances and strangers rather than with friends and family. The reasons for this were twofold. First, feedback from acquaintances and strangers is likely to vary more in valence than feedback from friends and family, who are normatively more likely to provide consistently positive or supportive feedback (Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990; Sedikides, Campbell, et al. 2002). Hence, interactions with acquaintances and strangers, being less predictable and less uniformly valenced, are more likely to provide a suitable screen for the projection of self-enhancing expectations. Second, prior research has shown that self-enhancement is often maximized in interactions with unfamiliar others (Alicke et al., 1995; Sedikides, Campbell, et al. 1998; Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell,

1995). Given that the present research represented the first foray into new empirical territory, it made sense for us to begin, in Studies 1–3, with settings in which the largest effects were liable to emerge. In Studies 4 and 5, we extended our focus to include feedback from close others (e.g., friends and family) as well as from acquaintances and strangers.

Study 1

In our first study, we had two objectives. First, we sought to show that people generally expect to receive positive feedback in typical social interactions. Second, we sought to show that, consistent with the claim that the motive to self-enhance can shape social cognition, the strength of desire for feedback would correlate with the positivity of expectations for that feedback.

Method

Participants

Forty-nine University of Southampton psychology undergraduates (80% female; $M_{AGE} = 20.5$) participated in exchange for course credit.

Materials

A set of prototypical social interactions was derived from previous research (Pemberton & Sedikides, 2001), in which 120 undergraduate students recorded many different types of daily social interactions. A further 30 undergraduates subsequently rated how common and how typical each interaction was for the average undergraduate student. The present research used the six most common and typical interactions with non-close others (e.g., classmates, professors, new acquaintances; Table 1).

Procedure

The experimenter distributed a booklet featuring two sections (in counterbalanced order across participants). In one section, participants were asked to think about what kind of feedback they *expected* to receive in each of the six typical social interactions, and to indicate this on a 6-point scale (*very negative* to *very positive*). In the other section, participants were asked to indicate how much they would *desire* the feedback they would expect to get in each of the social interactions (1 = *not at all*, 6 = *very much*). Upon completion, participants were thanked and debriefed.

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics for Desire and Expectations of Feedback in Study 1

Interaction	Mean (<i>SD</i>) expectation	Mean (<i>SD</i>) desire	Correlation
Eating lunch with a new friend	4.69 (0.68)	4.31 (1.19)	.37**
Getting feedback from a professor about a paper	3.69 (0.98)	4.90 (1.23)	.23 [†]
Discussing an exam with classmates	3.43 (1.02)	3.96 (1.40)	.28 [†]
Group evaluation of a class paper	3.53 (0.96)	4.16 (1.42)	.43**
Getting a haircut	4.22 (0.96)	4.31 (1.52)	.27 [†]
Talking to someone about feelings you have for them	4.29 (0.94)	5.14 (0.89)	.45**

Note. $N = 49$. Expectation and desire were assessed on scales from 1 (*very negative*) to 6 (*very positive*). The same typical interactions were also used in Studies 3 and 5.

[†] $p < .11$. ** $p < .01$.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants generally expected to receive positive feedback in typical social interactions. Averaging across all participants and all interactions, expectations were significantly more positive than the scale midpoint, $t(48) = 8.00, p < .0005$. In addition, mean expectations for 5 of the 6 social interactions were numerically above the midpoint of 3.5 (Table 1). Also as predicted, a link was evident between desire for feedback and positivity of expectation. Averaging across interactions, desire and expectation were significantly correlated, $r(48) = .32, p < .05$. In addition, the desire-expectation correlations for specific interactions were significant in 3 out of 6 cases, and marginal in the other 3 cases (Table 1). Finally, after performing a Fisher's z transformation to normalize the distribution, the mean of these interaction-specific correlations ($M = .36$) differed significantly from zero, $t(5) = 8.36, p < .0005$. These results indicate that, generally speaking, expectations of receiving positive feedback, and strength of desire for feedback, go hand in hand.

In summary, Study 1 yielded two findings. First, people generally expect to receive positive feedback in typical non-close social interactions. Second, the positivity of expectations collectively covaries with the strength of desire for feedback. Both findings are consistent with the thesis that self-enhancement is operating. However, it could still be that feedback expectations are positive largely because everyday social interactions are also positive. We attempted to minimize this confound by focusing on interactions with acquaintances and strangers, who may be less likely to provide positive feedback than friends and family. Nonetheless, the results still do not rule out the possibility that positive feedback

expectations reflect objective reality rather than motivated perception. We began to address this issue in the next study.

Study 2

Study 2 assessed, not only what type of feedback people expected to receive *themselves* in social interactions, but also what type of feedback they expected *other people* to receive. If people personally expected to receive more positive feedback than they expected others to receive, then that would more directly implicate the self-enhancement motive.

Method

Participants

One hundred and three University of Southampton psychology undergraduates (83% female; $M_{AGE} = 21.96$) participated voluntarily in a single testing session.

Materials and Procedure

A between-subjects design was employed. Each participant received one of two versions of a booklet, distributed at random. One booklet referred to everyday social interactions involving the *self*, the second to interactions involving *others*. Both versions began by introducing the idea that people may, in the course of social interactions, receive positive or negative feedback. Five categories of interaction were listed (Table 2). To ensure that previous findings were not stimulus-specific, these categories differed from those employed in Study 1.

TABLE 2. Mean Feedback Expectations for Self and Other People in Study 2

Interaction	Self	Other	$t(\text{diff})$	Effect size (d)
All interactions (mean)	1.31 (0.92)	0.83 (0.98)	2.59*	0.50
University staff	1.14 (1.21)	1.13 (0.96)	0.05	0.01
Shop assistants	1.37 (1.32)	0.69 (1.27)	2.67**	0.52
Employers/supervisors	1.45 (1.00)	1.22 (1.08)	1.10	0.22
Authority figures	1.57 (1.17)	0.75 (1.45)	3.11***	0.61
Public transport workers	1.06 (1.12)	0.44 (1.45)	2.39*	0.47

Note. Self $n = 49$, Other $n = 54$. Standard deviations are reported in parentheses. Expectations were reported on scale of -3 (*negative*) to $+3$ (*positive*). Effect sizes are bias-corrected.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Rather than depicting interaction scenarios (e.g., discussing an exam), the new categories depicted people with whom one might interact (e.g., shop assistants). These people were again drawn from the ranks of strangers and acquaintances.

In the *self* condition, participants were asked to report the feedback that they personally expected to receive in each type of interaction, on a 7-point scale from -3 (*negative*) to $+3$ (*positive*). In the *others* condition, participants were asked to report, on the same scale, the feedback that they expected other people to receive in each interaction. Participants were verbally debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Mean expectations, broken down by condition and interaction, are displayed in Table 2. First, mean expectations for all interaction types were significantly more positive than the scale midpoint (self: $t(48) > 6.63$, $ps < .0005$, others: $t(53) > 2.25$, $ps < .05$). This implies, replicating Study 1, that people expect to receive positive feedback, but expect other people to receive it too. Moreover, the former finding suggests that the results of Study 1 generalize across different stimulus materials.

Next, we compared the positivity of the feedback participants expected to get personally to the positivity of the feedback they expected other people to get (Table 2). Averaging across all five interactions, expectations in the *self* condition significantly exceeded those in the *others* condition. Moreover, for all five interactions, the mean in the *self* condition numerically exceeded that in the *others* condition, and also independently reached significance in three cases. The strongest effect was obtained for interactions with authority figures, despite the greater likelihood of negative interactions with them, a result individually suggestive of self-protection. Thus, these results provide stronger evidence that the self-enhancement motive operates in social interactions: people expect themselves to receive more positive feedback than they expect others to receive.

In summary, Study 2, in combination with Study 1, showed that people (a) expect to receive positive feedback in interactions with non-close others, (b) do so in proportion to their reported desire for that feedback, and (c) expect the feedback they receive to be more positive than that received by other people. Taken together, these findings suggest indirectly that the motive to self-enhance augments the expected positivity of the feedback people receive from others. In our next two studies, we first more directly assessed, and then manipulated, the motive to self-enhance.

Study 3

In Study 3, we sought to examine whether individual differences in expectations for positive feedback vary as a function of personality traits that

are known to relate to self-enhancement. Specifically, we focused on self-esteem and narcissism. People with higher self-esteem are more likely to self-enhance in a variety of ways and contexts (Hepper et al., 2010; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003; Story, 1998). Moreover, people who score highly on subclinical narcissism are especially liable to self-enhance: They possess grandiose views of the self and pursue every opportunity to augment those views (Campbell & Foster, 2007; John & Robins, 1994; Rhodewalt & Morf, 2005). Some authors have even argued that narcissists possess an urgent need for, or addiction to, self-enhancement (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001; Sedikides & Gregg, 2001). Importantly, however, people with higher self-esteem or narcissism may not actually experience more positive social interactions. For example, levels of self-esteem and social liking are unrelated under control conditions and even negatively related under conditions of ego-threat (Heatherton & Vohs, 2000). Moreover, narcissists are evaluated less positively than non-narcissists over the course of repeated group interactions (Paulhus, 1998). Thus, if expectations of positive feedback in social interactions reflect the motive to self-enhance, then they should correlate positively with self-esteem and narcissism.

Method

Participants

Participants were 256 University of Southampton psychology undergraduates (85.9% female; $M_{AGE} = 19.38$) who took part in return for course credit.

Materials and Procedure

Participants completed a series of questionnaire measures, presented in random order, via the internet. One measure assessed expectations of feedback in social interactions. We included both the six typical interactions used in Study 1 ($\alpha = .81$) and the five categories of interaction used in Study 2, with eight additional categories of non-close interaction partner (e.g., bar staff, doctors) to maximize the reliability of our results ($\alpha = .85$). Participants again rated the feedback they would expect to receive in the course of each interaction on a scale from 1 (*very negative*) to 6 (*very positive*). Although the two expectation indices correlated positively, $r(254) = .70, p < .001$, we analyzed them separately to facilitate comparison with previous studies.

Participants also completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), a widely used 10-item measure of trait global self-esteem ($\alpha = .88$). Finally, participants completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988), a 40-item forced-choice measure of sub-clinical narcissism ($\alpha = .83$). For each item, participants were given two options (one narcissistic,

one non-narcissistic) and asked to select the statement that best reflected their own beliefs.

Results and Discussion

Consistent with prior research (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Horton & Sedikides, 2009; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004), self-esteem and narcissism were modestly correlated, $r(254) = .28$, $p < .001$. More importantly, expectations of feedback in typical social interactions (cf. Study 1) correlated positively with self-esteem, $r(254) = .58$, $p < .001$, and narcissism, $r(254) = .29$, $p < .001$. Moreover, when regressed on both variables simultaneously, positive expectations were significantly predicted by both self-esteem, $\beta = .55$, $t = 10.36$, $p < .001$, and narcissism, $\beta = .13$, $t = 2.54$, $p = .01$.

Expectations of feedback in interactions with categories of people (cf. Study 2) also correlated positively with self-esteem, $r(254) = .55$, $p < .001$, and narcissism, $r(254) = .20$, $p < .01$. When regressed on both simultaneously, positive expectations were significantly predicted by self-esteem, $\beta = .53$, $t = 9.75$, $p < .001$, but not by narcissism, $\beta = .05$, $t = 0.85$, $p = .40$.

In summary, people who are more dispositionally prone to self-enhancing (i.e., those higher in self-esteem and narcissism) expected to receive more positive feedback in social interactions, even though research suggests that they may not actually receive it (Heatherton & Vohs, 2000; Paulhus, 1998). Narcissism may be a purer index of self-enhancement than self-esteem, especially given that the latter is susceptible to social desirability concerns (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991; Upshaw & Yates, 1968). Thus, the link between feedback expectations and narcissism more directly implicates self-enhancement. Although narcissism uniquely predicted feedback expectations in typical interaction *situations*, it did not do so in interactions with typical *people*. This may be because narcissists self-enhance more in agentic than in communal domains (Campbell et al., 2002). Nevertheless, these findings, considered as a whole, further implicate the self-enhancement motive as a source of social feedback expectations.

Study 4

Study 3 demonstrated that people who differ on *trait* self-enhancement are differentially likely to inflate their expectations of feedback in social interactions. In Study 4, we manipulated people's *state* motivation to self-enhance. We did so by informing participants, via a bogus news article, that either self-enhancement or modesty augured well for future outcomes. Then, in an ostensibly unrelated survey, we asked about their feedback expectations. This experimental design allowed us to draw firmer causal conclusions.

We also broadened our focus by assessing feedback expectations in interactions, not only with acquaintances and strangers, but also with friends and family. We did this to test the generalizability of our findings to interactions with close others, despite such interactions being normatively more positive. Finally, we also included, alongside feedback expectations, a classic index of self-enhancement: the better-than-average effect (i.e., people's views of themselves compared to their peers). If participants' feedback expectations and comparative self-views were more positive when participants were under the impression that self-enhancement is desirable, we would have shown that self-enhancement drives short-term (as well as dispositional) feedback expectations.

Method

Participants

Eighty-three students (54.2% female; $M_{AGE} = 21.85$) from the University of Southampton and other British universities were recruited through convenience sampling. They freely volunteered or participated for confectionary.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were first given a brief (~220 words) bogus article to read, apparently drawn from a university news Web site. The article reported a "ground-breaking" longitudinal study showing that college students' current personalities powerfully shaped their happiness, popularity, and health in later life. Two versions of the article were randomly distributed. One version claimed that people who overestimate and overplay their knowledge and skills (i.e., "self-enhancers") do better in future. The other version claimed that people who underestimate and play down their knowledge and skills (i.e., "modest people") do. Importantly, neither article made mention of social interactions or feedback, meaning that participants were *not* primed or told that positive feedback was healthy or unhealthy. After reading the article, participants were asked to provide four reasons why such people would be healthier and more popular. This served to bolster the cover story about requiring lay opinions, and to reinforce the message.

Finally, we asked participants to complete a separate "rating survey," which comprised two measures of self-enhancement (feedback expectations and comparative self-views) in counterbalanced order. The measure of expectations comprised the five categories of non-close people used in Study 2 ($\alpha = .87$), as well as three categories of close others: *friends*, *family*, and *peer group* ($\alpha = .65$). Participants rated the feedback they expected to receive from these targets from -3 (*very negative*) to $+3$ (*very positive*). To assess comparative self-views, we asked participants to indicate, on a percentage scale, where they stood relative to other students at their university on four somewhat ambiguous traits: *intuitive*,

reasonable, fair, and mature. This format was very similar to that used by Taylor and Gollwitzer (1995). We combined these four trait-ratings into an index of self-views ($\alpha = .86$).

Results and Discussion

Table 3 displays the mean feedback expectations in each condition for close and non-close interactions, as well as *t*-tests comparing the two conditions. On average, feedback expectations were significantly more positive in the Enhancement condition than in the Modesty condition. In addition, individual expectations for all eight categories were significantly higher in the Enhancement condition, with *ts*(81) ranging from 2.07, $p < .05$, to 4.25, $p < .001$. Finally, comparative self-views were also significantly more positive in the Enhancement condition (Table 3). Taken together, these results strongly indicate that expectations of feedback in social interactions covary with state levels of self-enhancement.

Importantly, the pattern was evident across interactions with acquaintances/strangers (cf. Studies 1-3) and also interactions with close others. A mixed 2 (condition: enhancement vs. modesty) \times 2 (interaction type: close vs. non-close) ANOVA revealed, unsurprisingly, that feedback expectations were more positive for interactions with close others ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 0.71$) than non-close others ($M = 1.44$, $SD = 1.00$), $F(1, 81) = 74.43$, $p < .001$. Mirroring Table 3, expectations were more positive in the Enhancement than the Modesty condition, $F(1, 81) = 19.30$, $p < .001$. However, there was no interaction between condition and interaction type, $F(1, 81) = 0.05$, $p = .83$. Thus, these results equally implicate the self-enhancement motive as a source of feedback expectations in both close and distant interactions.

TABLE 3. Mean Feedback Expectations and Comparative Self-Views By Condition in Study 4

Dependent measure	Enhance	Modesty	<i>t</i> (diff)	Effect size (<i>d</i>)
All interactions (mean)	2.14 (0.72)	1.47 (0.73)	4.11***	0.91
Close others	2.66 (0.55)	2.02 (0.70)	4.51***	0.99
Non-close others	1.83 (1.04)	1.15 (0.88)	3.22**	0.71
Comparative self-views	65.46 (13.40)	51.84 (15.20)	4.26***	0.93

Note. Enhancement $n = 36$, Modesty $n = 47$. Standard deviations are reported in parentheses. Expectations were reported on scale of -3 (negative) to $+3$ (positive). Self-views were reported on a percentage scale from 0 (worse than all others) to 100 (better than all others). Effect sizes are bias-corrected.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Study 5

Study 5 broadened the scope of our empirical enquiry. In particular, we sought to investigate whether people's expectations of social feedback testify, not only to the impact of the self-enhancement motive, but also to the impact of the *self-verification* motive (Swann et al., 2003). Self-verification denotes the desire to confirm pre-existing self-beliefs, regardless of whether those self-beliefs are positive or negative. The idea is that by self-verifying, people can maintain a coherent view of themselves and others, which preserves intrapsychic equilibrium and facilitates smooth social interactions. On this view, *identity*—knowing *what* one is—matters above and beyond *positivity*—knowing that one is *good*.

In Study 5, therefore, we also tested whether people expected to receive verifying rather than non-verifying feedback in a range of social interactions, alongside positive rather than negative feedback. Given that some studies find self-enhancement to predominate over self-verification (e.g., Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Strube, 1997), and others find the opposite (e.g., Giesler, Josephs, & Swann, 1996; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992), the issue is of considerable theoretical and empirical interest. Studies 1–3 did not allow us to tease apart the two motives. Because most people have relatively positive self-views, positively biased expectations could reflect the operation of either self-enhancement or self-verification. The experimental design employed in Study 4 partly addressed this by specifically manipulating the motive to self-enhance. Nevertheless, we now wished to examine the roles of the two motives explicitly. As in Study 4, we examined interactions both with acquaintances/strangers and with close others.

If the self-enhancement motive is operating, then people should generally expect to receive positive rather than negative feedback, consistent with the results of Studies 1–4. Additionally, if the self-verification motive is operating, then people should generally expect to receive feedback that confirms rather than does not confirm their existing self-views. We tested both predictions in Study 5. Of course, both motives might operate simultaneously. We therefore used an orthogonal design that would allow us to detect the operation of one motive, both, or neither.

Method

Participants

Fifty-seven University of Southampton psychology undergraduates (44 female, 13 male; $M_{AGE} = 21.5$) participated in a single testing session in exchange for course credit or confectionary.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were told that they would read a series of hypothetical social interactions and classify the type of feedback they expected to receive in each one. The feedback could relate to any self-aspect (e.g., appearance, personality, behavior). The experimenter distributed a booklet that described (in counterbalanced order) four categories of feedback: *simple positive*, *simple negative*, *self-verifying positive*, and *self-verifying negative*. Simple positive and simple negative feedback were described respectively as entailing flattery or criticism, regardless of whether they confirmed or disconfirmed prior self-beliefs. Self-verifying positive and self-verifying negative feedback were described as entailing confirmation of prior self-beliefs, and could be flattering or critical respectively. The booklet included two sample social interactions (getting a haircut, giving a class presentation) to illustrate feedback that would fall into each of the four categories. For example, after “getting a haircut,” an instance of simple positive feedback would be “a friend tells you that they *really like* what you have done with your hair;” an instance of simple negative feedback would be “a friend tells you that they think your haircut is *awful*.” Self-verifying positive and self-verifying negative feedback would be identical to the above, except that the haircut would be one that *you personally* “really like” or “do not like at all.” In the first two cases, the emphasis is solely on the valence of the feedback given, in the latter two cases, it is also on confirming the self-view held. Thus, only the latter two cases provide an opportunity for self-verification.¹

The last page of the booklet contained a list of 15 social interactions. These included the six used in Studies 1 and 3, as well as nine further typical interactions with friends, family, and romantic partners (e.g., road trip with friends, talking with parents about future plans; Pemberton & Sedikides, 2001). Participants were asked to imagine themselves in each interaction and to classify the feedback that they expected to receive in each. Participants checked either “yes” (selected) or “no” (non-selected) alongside each of the four feedback categories (presented in counterbalanced order). They were told that they could select as many or as few categories as they wished for each interaction. Next, for each interaction, participants assigned a rank (1 to 4) to all the categories they had selected, to indicate the relative prominence of each type of feedback they expected to receive. Debriefing followed.

Dependent Measures

Our primary dependent measure was *percentage expectancy*, reflecting the frequency with which each feedback category was selected. (Note that participants were free to select any feedback category *independently* of any other, meaning that for the first time positive and negative expectations were assessed

independently.) To derive this measure, we divided the number of times a participant selected a given feedback category (e.g., 1 to 15) by the total number of times they could do so (i.e., 15, the number of interactions), and multiplied by 100. Higher scores indicated stronger feedback expectations.

To permit a more fine-grained examination of our data, we also derived four secondary dependent measures: *ordinal expectancies*. Each of these measures reflected the frequency with which participants assigned a particular rank order, 1 to 4, to each of the feedback categories. Ranks closer to 1 (and further away from 4) indicated greater expected prominence for each type of feedback. Given the non-independent nature of these ranked data, we use them principally for descriptive purposes.

Results and Discussion

Our experimental design, by orthogonalizing the valence (positive vs. negative) and focus (simple vs. self-verifying) of feedback, afforded the possibility of obtaining results consistent with the operation of the self-enhancement motive alone, of the self-verification motive alone, of both motives, or of neither motive. If the *self-enhancement* motive was operating, participants should have expected more positive than negative feedback overall. That is, they should have selected positive feedback more often than negative feedback (whether in the simple or self-verifying category). If the *self-verification* motive was operating, participants should have expected more self-verifying than simple feedback overall. That is, they should have selected self-verifying more often than simple feedback (whether in the positive or negative category).

Percentage expectancies for each feedback type are displayed in Table 4. Collapsing across simple/self-verifying conditions, participants selected positive feedback significantly more often than negative feedback, $F(1, 56) = 27.27$, $p < .0001$, $d = 0.70$. In addition, they selected simple positive feedback

TABLE 4. Overall Feedback Percentage Expectancies in Study 5

Feedback type		Percentage
Valence	Focus	Expectancy
Positive	Simple	68.71
	Self-verifying	68.42
Negative	Simple	48.25
	Self-verifying	53.80

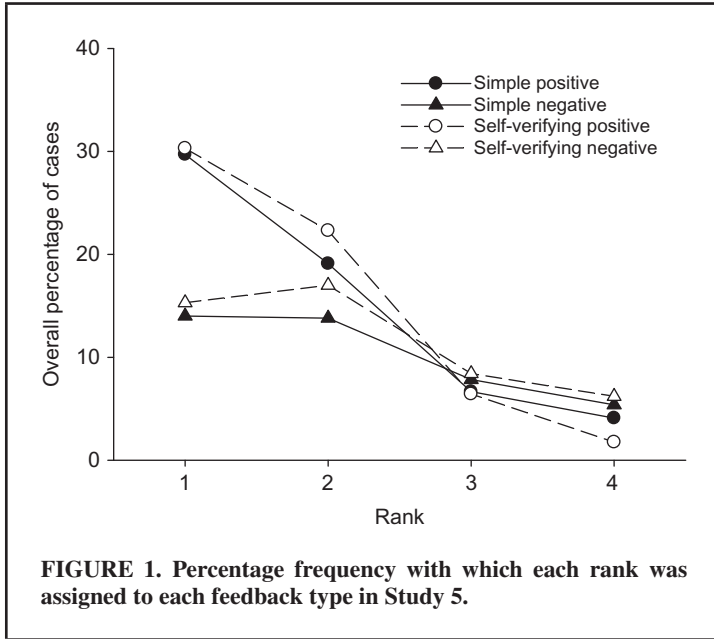
significantly more often than simple negative feedback, $t(56) = 4.76, p < .0005, d = 0.64$, and self-verifying positive feedback significantly more often than self-verifying negative feedback, $t(56) = 4.54, p < .005, d = 0.61$. These findings are consistent with Studies 1–4 and with expectations for social feedback being shaped by the self-enhancement motive.

Collapsing across positive/negative conditions, participants selected self-verifying feedback only marginally more often than simple feedback, $F(1, 56) = 3.60, p = .06, d = 0.25$. They did not select self-verifying positive feedback more often than simple positive feedback, $t(56) = 1.18, p = .25, d = 0.16$, but did select self-verifying negative feedback marginally more often than simple negative feedback, $t(56) = 1.90, p = .06, d = 0.25$. These findings are only weakly consistent with expectations for social feedback being shaped by the self-verification motive and implicate only negative feedback.

In a supplementary analysis, we also included the effect of interaction type (close vs. non-close) as an additional factor in the ANOVA. As expected, the effects of feedback valence and focus were not moderated by interaction type, $F_s(1, 56) < 1.46, p_s > .23$. Thus, participants expected to receive positive feedback significantly more often than negative, and expected to receive self-verifying feedback marginally more often than non-verifying, regardless of whether the interaction was with a close or non-close person.

A more textured impression of the data can be gained from considering participants' ordinal expectancies descriptively (across all types of interaction). If the *self-enhancement* motive was operating, participants should have expected positive feedback to prevail over negative feedback. That is, positive (vs. negative) feedback should have been more often assigned primary ranks (1, 2) and less often assigned lower ranks (3, 4). If the *self-verification* motive was operating, participants should have expected self-verifying feedback to prevail over simple feedback. That is, self-verifying (vs. simple) feedback should have been more often assigned primary ranks and less often assigned lower ranks. Figure 1 depicts the frequency with which each feedback type was assigned each rank.² As illustrated, when more than one type of feedback was expected, the two primary ranks were more often assigned to positive feedback, whereas the last rank was more often assigned to negative feedback, suggesting that participants' expectations prioritized positive feedback over negative. In contrast, no clear pattern was visible regarding feedback focus: When more than one type of feedback was expected, participants showed little tendency to prioritize self-verifying feedback.

In summary, Study 5 achieved two objectives. First, it again replicated the finding that, in typical social interactions, people generally expect to receive positive feedback. That is, participants selected positive feedback much more often and considered it likely to predominate over negative feedback. This occurred despite the fact that positive and negative feedback expectations were assessed



separately, meaning that participants could have expected both positive and negative feedback in equal measure. Second, Study 5 found little evidence that, in typical social interactions, people generally expect to receive feedback that explicitly confirms their existing self-views. In particular, participants did not select self-verifying feedback significantly more often than simple feedback, nor did they expect it to predominate over other types of feedback. These patterns held across interactions with both close and non-close others. In sum, the findings of Study 5 are again consistent with expectations being guided by the self-enhancement motive, but do not provide support for expectations being guided by the self-verification motive.

General Discussion

The program of studies presented in this article was designed to test the thesis that social expectations are driven, at least in part, by the self-enhancement motive. First and foremost, we found that people expect to receive positive feedback in social interactions: This result emerged strongly in every study. Especially when considered in the light of the evidence for motivated social cognition generally (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003, 2008), this suggests that feedback expectations are biased by the motive to self-enhance. However, in

isolation, this finding hardly makes a watertight case. In particular, positive expectations may reflect objective reality as well as motivated cognition. Hence, further evidence for the operation of self-enhancement was required. Such evidence was provided by key additional findings.

Study 1 found that the positivity of feedback expectations covaried with the strength of desire for feedback. Study 2 found that people expected the feedback they personally receive to be more positive than the feedback other people receive. These findings together suggest that feedback expectations are not uniformly positive but vary in tandem with people's motivation to self-enhance. Nonetheless, these findings implicated self-enhancement only indirectly. Thus, in our next two studies, we measured people's dispositions to self-enhance (Study 3) and then situationally manipulated their motive to self-enhance (Study 4). Study 3 found that positivity of people's feedback expectations covaried with their levels of self-esteem and narcissism. This occurred even though people higher in self-esteem or narcissism do not necessarily receive more positive social feedback than people lower in these traits (Heatherington & Vohs, 2000; Paulhus, 1998). Study 4 found that feedback expectations became more positive when self-enhancement was experimentally portrayed as more beneficial. This occurred even though reading a news article could have no objective impact on the quality of one's social interactions, and even though the article did not mention social interactions or feedback—meaning that the findings could not have reflected demand characteristics or priming. Study 4's findings most strongly support a causal link between self-enhancement motivation and feedback expectations. Taken together, these findings firmly implicate the self-enhancement motive as one determinant of the positivity of people's feedback expectations in everyday social interactions.

Study 5 found that people expect to receive positive feedback to a greater extent than negative feedback in social interactions, even when given the opportunity to expect negative feedback to an equal degree. In contrast, hardly any evidence emerged of people expecting to receive self-verifying feedback in social interactions. This suggests that the self-verification motive is less powerful than the self-enhancement motive (Baumeister, 1998; Gregg, 2009; Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Green, 2004).

Studies 1, 2, and 3 documented a link between self-enhancement motivation and feedback expectations for interactions with distant others (i.e., strangers and acquaintances). Studies 4 and 5 also documented the same link for interactions with close others (i.e., friends and family). Moreover, interaction type did not statistically moderate our results. Thus, self-enhancement seemingly shapes perceptions of social interactions generally, whether they may be relatively varied or negative (e.g., involving distant others) or more uniformly positive (e.g., involving close others). Moreover, our findings held across different sets of stimuli (e.g., semantic-level categories of person and episodic-level descriptions of typical situations), ruling out methodological artifacts.

It has long been documented that people self-enhance by expecting to influence events outside their control (Langer, 1975), to perform better than their peers (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), and to have a relatively rosy future (Weinstein, 1980). Yet we could identify no existing research documenting that people also expect to receive positive feedback in everyday social interactions. This is a surprising lacuna, given that interpersonal feedback is precisely what makes social interactions self-relevant and consequential. Such feedback can delight or dismay, uplift or undermine, with important behavioral consequences (Tesser, 2003). Here, we showed that feedback expectations in social interactions (a) are generally positive, (b) correlate with the desire for feedback, (c) are more positive for self than for others, (d) are more positive for people with higher self-esteem or narcissism, (e) are more positive when people are motivated to self-enhance, and (f) may not be a function of the motive to self-verify. This collection of coherent findings strongly suggests that such feedback expectations are not merely reflective of social reality, but are inflated by trait-level, manipulated, or situational motivation to self-enhance.

We claim, of course, only to have uttered the first word on the matter, not the final one. For example, all of our studies focused on hypothetical social interactions. Future research would benefit from examining real interactions (e.g., in a daily diary study) or systematically controlled interactions (e.g., in the laboratory). Another key question concerns the mechanism underlying motivated expectations. For example, two of our studies ruled out the explanation that expectations merely reflect social reality (i.e., because people higher in self-esteem or narcissism are not better liked, and because randomly assigning a participant to an experimental condition does not alter their past experiences). It is nonetheless possible that because self-enhancers are more likely to engage in motivated memory processes (Sedikides & Green, 2004, 2009; Story, 1998), this inflates their *perceptions* of reality and in turn drives positive expectations. Of course, such a mechanism would still reflect the operation of the self-enhancement motive. Finally, our findings suggest that the self-verification motive does not have the same impact on feedback expectations. Future studies might aim to manipulate the self-verification motive and to recruit specifically people with negative self-views, because among these people the two motives oppose one another and can be teased apart most effectively (Swann et al., 2003). It may be that the relative impact of each motive varies according to the individual or the context (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Nonetheless, the findings from our five studies tell a consistent initial story and will serve as a springboard for more nuanced research into how self-enhancement shapes perceptions of the social world.

NOTES

1. In past research on seeking self-verifying feedback, participants are often asked to choose between feedback that confirms or actively disconfirms current self-views (Swann et al., 2003). Such

a distinction differs from that used in Study 5, in which participants reported their expectations for feedback that confirms or fails to confirm a current self-view. Nevertheless, self-verification theory predicts that people are more motivated to obtain feedback that actively confirms a current self-view over either alternative (i.e., feedback that either disconfirms or neglects to confirm a current self-view). In line with this, several studies have shown that individuals choose to self-verify when, as here, they are given an alternative that neither confirms nor disconfirms self-views (e.g., taking part in a different experiment; Swann, Wenzlaff, & Tafarodi, 1992; making identity-irrelevant physical appearance choices; Swann et al., 2003). It would be valuable in future research to assess expectations for feedback that actively disconfirms a self-view (e.g., a friend provides positive feedback on a haircut that you personally do not like). Such a distinction would also allow for an equitable comparison of the relative strengths of the self-enhancement and self-verification motives in guiding feedback expectations.

2. The use of parametric statistics is not recommended when analyzing this type of ranked data, given that (a) the different ranks were not independent (e.g., having ranked one type of feedback as 1, participants had to rank all others differently), and (b) respondents were not obliged to assign a rank to all four types of feedback. To supplement the illustration provided by Figure 1, however, we conducted an ANOVA to examine the effects of feedback valence and focus at each rank level. A significant main effect of valence, indicating that positive feedback was more often assigned than negative, was found at rank 1, $F(1, 56) = 33.59, p < .0005$, and at rank 2, $F(1, 56) = 8.01, p < .01$, but not at rank 3, $F(1, 56) = 2.65, p = .11$. In addition, a significant main effect of valence, indicating that negative feedback was more often assigned than positive, was found at rank 4, $F(1, 56) = 8.77, p < .01$. In contrast, only at rank 2 did the main effect of focus approach marginal significance, $F(1, 56) = 2.84, p = .10$. These results, though they should be interpreted with caution, bear out the interpretation suggested by inspecting Figure 1. It is worth noting that the log-linear sampling distribution for the formally correct statistic is very difficult to estimate accurately, and that statistical simulations find log-linear analysis to provide only a modest increase in accuracy that rarely leads to altered statistical decisions (DeCarlo, Lacznick, Azevedo, & Ramaswami, 2000). Even if readers prefer not to view this analysis as demonstrative, they may still wish to regard it as illustrative.

AUTHOR NOTES

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