

How Does Accountability Reduce Self-Enhancement?: The Role of Self-Focus

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Abstract Past research (Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002) has shown that accountability (the expectation to explain, justify, and defend one's self-judgments to an audience) curtails self-enhancement due to identifiability and evaluation expectancy concerns. The authors report an experiment that established focus on one's weaknesses as the mechanism through which evaluation expectancy reduces self-enhancement in accountable and identifiable participants. The findings affirm both the potential of accountability for deterring self-enhancement and the role of self focus as a crucial mechanism in this process.

Résumé Des travaux antérieurs (Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002) ont montré que l'attente d'avoir à expliquer, justifier et défendre ses propres jugements devant un auditoire affaiblit l'auto-valorisation pour des raisons de visibilité et d'évaluation de soi. Les auteurs décrivent une expérience montrant que la focalisation sur ses propres faiblesses est le mécanisme responsable de cet affaiblissement. Les résultats attestent ~ la fois le potentiel de l'attente invoquée antérieurement (avoir à expliquer, justifier et défendre ses propres jugements) pour réduire l'auto-valorisation et le rôle crucial de l'auto-focalisation dans cette réduction.

Exalting the strengths and downplaying the shortcomings of the self is a prevalent and enduring human characteristic. Remarkably, the elevation, maintenance, and defense of a positive self-concept are carried out through the creative and dynamic implementation of a seemingly inexhaustible array of judgmental, memorial, and behavioral strategies (Baumeister, 1998; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Tesser, 2001).

The zestfulness and polymorphy of the self-enhancement bias is sustained, in part, by the functions that it serves: Self-enhancement is associated with positive affect, high self-esteem, effective coping with negative health outcomes, and perseverance in difficult tasks (Aspinwall & Brunhart, 1996; Bonanno, Field, Kovacevic, & Kaltman, 2002; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Interestingly, however, self-enhancement is also linked to certain dysfunctional outcomes, such as ineffective action plans (Oettingen, 1996) and imprudent risk-taking (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Burger & Burns, 1988). Moreover, immoderate self-enhancers are viewed as conceited, uninteresting, and hostile (Bonanno *et al.*, 2002; Paulhus, 1998), an impression that certainly does not endear them to their social circles and also renders them vulnerable to such social malaise as distancing and avoidance, gossiping, negative feedback, and (worse of all) social exclusion and ostracism (Schlenker & Leary 1982; Tennen & Affieck, 1993; Williams & Zadro, 2001). As if this was not enough, immoderate self-enhancers are prone to future bouts of low self-esteem, low subjective well-being, and professional disengagement (Robins & Beer, 2001; Robins & John, 1997).

Given the potentially disastrous personal and interpersonal consequences of excessive and chronic self-enhancement, it is worth considering social settings that constrain (at least momentarily) this bias. We have recently introduced such a setting, namely accountability (Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002). Operationally, we define accountability as the expectation that one will be called upon to explain, justify, and defend her or his self-judgments to an audience. More broadly, we conceptualize accountability pressures as a social structure that facilitates the enforcement of important societal norms (Semin & Manstead, 1983).

In our first experiment (Sedikides *et al.*, 2002, Experiment 1), undergraduate students wrote a short opinion essay and were subsequently informed that they would be asked to grade their

own essay. Before the actual grading occurred, however, we introduced the crucial manipulation. Half of the participants learned that they would be accountable for their essay grades to an audience (i.e., Chris Becker, a Ph.D. candidate), whereas the remaining half learned that they would be unaccountable (i.e., their anonymous essays and grades would be mailed to researchers at another academic institution). Accountable participants assigned their essays lower grades relative to unaccountable participants. Accountability curtailed self-enhancement.

We wondered whether this effect is subject to alternative explanations, and, more specifically, to audience concreteness and audience status. Accountable participants, in the above described experiment, were under the impression that their essays and grades would be seen by an eponymous audience (i.e., Chris Becker), whereas unaccountable participants believed that their essays and grades would be seen by a generalized audience (i.e., researchers at another university). Given that individuals tend to refrain from self-enhancement when they compare socially with a concrete as opposed to an abstract source (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995), the observed self-enhancement reduction among accountable participants may be due to audience concreteness rather than accountability *per se*. Furthermore, self-enhancement reduction may have been the result of audience status. The audience for accountable participants was described as a star graduate student pursuing joint Ph.D. degrees in Logic and English Composition. Hence, these participants may have tempered their essay evaluations because, in anticipation of interaction with a high-status person, they strove to be liked or at least avoid giving off the impression of a know-it-all braggart.

We tested these rival hypotheses in a second experiment (Sedikides *et al.*, 2002, Experiment 2). First, audience concreteness was standardized: both accountable and unaccountable participants were told that their essays and grades would become available to a specific person (i.e., Chris Becker). Also, a new independent variable was introduced: audience status. Half of the participants were told that Chris Becker was high in status (e.g., a Ph.D. candidate), and half were told that Chris Becker was low in status (e.g., a high-school student). This experiment ruled out audience concreteness as an explanation for self-enhance-

ment reduction: accountable participants self-enhanced less than unaccountable participants even when audience concreteness was held constant. Additionally, the experiment ruled out audience status as an explanation for self-enhancement reduction: accountable participants assigned their essays lower grades regardless of whether they expected to interact with a high-status or a low-status audience.

Is self-enhancement reduction due to identifiability? That is, do accountable participants express a more temperate opinion of their work because they realize that their essay grades will be linked to them personally? We set up an experiment (Sedikides et al., 2002, Experiment 3) to test whether identifiability is a mechanism through which accountability leads to a self-enhancement reduction. One third of the participants were accountable and identifiable to a concrete, high-status source (i.e., Chris Becker, the Ph.D. candidate). This condition was identical to the accountability conditions of the previous experiments. Another third of participants were unaccountable. This condition was identical to the unaccountability, high-status condition of Experiment 2. Still, another third of participants were accountable (to Chris Becker, the Ph.D. candidate) but unidentifiable. This was a novel condition. In replication of our prior research, accountable and identifiable participants self-enhanced less than their unaccountable counterparts. More importantly, accountable and identifiable participants self-enhanced less than accountable and unidentifiable participants. Equally importantly, accountable and unidentifiable participants did not differ in their self-evaluations from their unaccountable counterparts. Thus, this experiment established identifiability as a necessary condition for the reduction of self-enhancement in accountable participants.

Is the effect of identifiability due to evaluation expectancy? Do accountable and identifiable participants refrain from self-enhancement because they expect to be evaluated by an audience? As suggested by past literature, evaluation expectancy induces evaluation apprehension (Henchy & Glass, 1968), which leads to an inward focus of one's attention and an accompanying awareness of discrepancies between actual and expected performance standards (Sedikides, 1992a; Wicklund, 1975). As a result, performance-related inadequacies become accessible in memory (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991) and influence self-judgments.

In our final experiment (Sedikides et al., 2002, Experiment 4), we examined evaluation expectancy as an explanation for why accountable and identifiable (to a high-status audience) participants temper the positivity of their self-views (i.e., essay grades). We crossed accountability and evaluation expectancy. As in previous research, half of the participants were accountable and half unaccountable. In addition, half of the participants expected for their essays and grades to be seen by a highly judgmental evaluator, whereas the remaining half expected for their essays and grades to be seen by a non-judgmental evaluator. Following the manipulations, we assessed essay grades and self-focus on one's shortcomings as a writer. The results were revealing. Accountable participants expecting to be evaluated self-enhanced less than either unaccountable participants expecting to be evaluated or accountable participants expecting not to be evaluated. Furthermore, participants who expected evaluation shifted their attention to their inadequacies as a writer. In all, this experiment demonstrated that evaluation expectancy, accompanied by focus on one's weaknesses, qualifies as an explanation for self-enhancement reduction among accountable and identifiable participants.

Nevertheless, an important question is left unanswered: is focus on one's weaknesses (with identifiability and evaluation expectancies held constant) sufficient to explain the effects of accountability on self-enhancement? Stated somewhat differently, Experiment 4 of Sedikides et al. (2002) showed that a highly judgmental evaluator induces focus on one's weaknesses to a greater degree than a non-judgmental evaluator. However, this experiment does not and cannot permit the inference that, controlling for level of judgmental evaluation, focus on one's weaknesses is sufficient to explain self-enhancement reduction. Thus, another investigation is needed which will keep identifiability and evaluation expectancy constant, while varying the direction of attention (e.g., toward the self vs. the environment) among accountable participants. We conducted such an experiment and report it in the present article.

Specifically, we tested directly whether focus on one's weaknesses qualifies as a mechanism for self-enhancement reduction. All participants were under high evaluation expectancy and were also accountable and identifiable to a high-status audience. The critical (and only) manipulation was that of self-focus. This factor

had two levels. One level, control, was identical to the accountability and high evaluation expectancy condition of Experiment 4 of Sedikides *et al.* (2002). The second level, weakness focus, involved turning participants' attention to their own weaknesses as a writer before grading their essays. This level simulated real life situations such as a Ph.D. candidate being asked to summarize the shortcomings of her dissertation before the faculty committee begins to examine her. Another simulated scenario is that of a performer becoming aware of the rough edges of his act, just as he prepares to act out the premiere of the show in the presence of professional critics.

We reasoned that, if focus on one's weaknesses is an explanation for self-enhancement reduction (among accountable, high identifiable, and high evaluation expectancy participants), then participants in the weakness focus condition will assign lower essay grades than control participants.

Method

Participants and Design

We tested 52 participants (39 women and 13 men). Gender did not produce any statistically significant effects and was thus excluded from further analyses. Participants were introductory psychology students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill fulfilling a course option. We varied the gender of the audience (i.e., Chris Becker) in order to match each participant's gender.

We used a one-way, balanced, 2-level (weakness focus, control) design. Participants were assigned randomly to one of the two experimental conditions. All participants were accountable (as well as identifiable) and expecting to be evaluated by a highly judgmental audience.

Procedure and Measures

Participants were tested in small groups. The experimenter escorted each participant to a research laboratory and announced that the investigation was part of a larger, inter-university research program on alternative grading systems. Each participant was requested to write a one-page essay in response to the question

','Should the United States pursue exploration of the planet Saturn?'. Participants were told that, "there is no right or wrong answer - this is an opinion question." Upon completion of the essay, all participants received the following written instructions:

"Next, we will ask you to grade your essay on five dimensions.

You will then be given the opportunity to explain, justify, and

defend the grades you gave yourself to a 5th-year graduate student, located in an adjoining office, during a 10-minute conversation. The graduate student, Chris Becker, has a Master's degree in Logic and English Composition and is currently completing a doctorate degree in these two fields. Chris Becker is widely published, and has won numerous writing and teaching awards. You will be asked to fully *explain, justify, and defend* the grades you assigned yourself on each and every dimension."

Moreover, participants learned that Chris Becker was widely regarded as extremely evaluative and judgmental, and that Chris Becker would be evaluating "every single sentence of your essay, every single thought that you expressed, every single twist and turn." The participants were also instructed that Chris Becker would have a similarly evaluative orientation toward their explanations and justifications for their grade assignment. Furthermore, the participants were told that Chris Becker would record carefully his or her impression of their essays in a notebook. In an effort to reinforce perceptions of identifiability, participants were also instructed to "write ... your first name on each page of your booklet ... so that we can keep your responses together."

The subsequent wave of instructions varied according to experimental condition. Participants in the *weakness-focus* condition (1) listed their weaknesses as a writer on a page of a booklet, (2) explained in some detail their weaknesses on a separate page, and (3) described "how it feels to be a bad writer" on a third page. Participants in the *control* group (1) drew a map of the typical route from their home to the Psychology Department building, and (2) generated the capitals of the United States. Participants in the two conditions were allotted the same time to complete their tasks.

Next, participants graded their essay. In an attempt to maintain the plausibility of the pretext, all participants were instructed to "assign yourself letter grades, whereas other participants in the

study will use an experimental grading system." Participants graded their essays on five dimensions: *clarity of thinking, writing style, smoothness of sentence and paragraph transition, logic of arguments, and persuasiveness of argument*. For each dimension, participants used an 11-letter grade scale (A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D+, D, F). We converted, for data analytic purposes, the letter grade scales to a 1(F) to 11(A) response scale. Thus, higher numbers on the main dependent measure (i.e., essay grading) reflect higher levels of self-enhancement. Afterwards, participants filled out the *weakness-focus* manipulation check by indicating the extent to which they focused on their inadequacies as writers (1 am thinking about my weaknesses as a writer right now," 1 am thinking about my bad qualities as a writer right now," 1 am thinking about the deficiencies in my writing right now") on a response scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 7 (*extremely true*).

Then, participants completed two measures. Specifically, they stated the importance that they ascribed to being a good writer on three statements (It is important to me to be a good essay writer," "Being a good essay writer is important to my identity," It means a lot to me to be a good essay writer"), using a 7-point response scale (1 = *not at all true*, 7 = *extremely true*). Additionally, participants recorded their affective states by indicating whether they were nervous (1 am feeling nervous right now"), tense (1 am feeling tense right now"), and anxious (1 am feeling anxious right now") on 7-point response scales (1 = *not at all true*, 7 = *extremely true*).

Finally, participants completed a set of manipulation checks. The first was the *confidentiality* check: participants indicated whether they thought that their essay grading was confidential (1 = *completely confidential*, 7 = *can be traced to me personally*). The second was the *accountability* check: Participants stated whether they needed to explain, justify, and defend their essays. (A "yes" answer was coded a "1," whereas a "no" answer was coded as "2.") The third was the *evaluation expectancy* check: Participants responded to the statement, I will be evaluated on my grades and essay" either with a "yes" (coded as 1) or a "no" (coded as 2) answer. At the end of each session, participants were thoroughly debriefed and thanked.

Careful post-experimental questioning revealed that no participant was aware of the actual purpose of the experiment.

Manipulation Checks

Confidentiality. There was no significant difference in the confidentiality expectancies of weakness-focus ($M = 4.40$) and control ($M = 4.16$) participants, $F(1, 50) = .23, p < .635$.

Accountability. All participants (weakness-focus and controls) believed that they would need to explain, justify and defend their essay grades.

Evaluation expectancy. Weakness-focus and control participants did not differ significantly in their evaluation expectancies, $X^2(1) = 3.02, p < .083$.

Weakness-focus. The main effect pertaining to the weakness focus manipulation check ($\alpha = .95$) was not significant, $F(1, 50) = .90, p < .35$. Nevertheless, the means were descriptively in the anticipated direction: Participants in the weakness-focus condition ($M = 4.33$) tended to focus on their weakness to a somewhat greater extent than participants in the control condition ($M = 3.86$).

Essay Grading

Given that grades on the five dimensions were internally consistent ($\alpha = .87$), we computed a composite grade index and entered it in an Analysis of Variance (ANCOVA). The main effect was significant, $F(1, 50) = 4.25, P < .039$: Participants who focused on their inadequacies as writers ($M = 6.99$) allocated lower grades to their essays than control participants ($M = 7.82$). This result affirms the role of weakness-focus in the curtailment of self-enhancement among participants who are accountable, identifiable, and expect to be evaluated.

Attribute Importance

We computed and entered the attribute importance composite ($\alpha = .83$) into an ANOVA. Participants considered good essay writing an important attribute ($M = 4.75$), as a test against the scale midpoint (4) indicated, $t(51) = 4.10, p < .001$. Attribute importance

ratings **did** not vary significantly by experimental condition, $F(1, 50) = 2.81, p < .100$ ($M = 5.05$ for the weakness-focus group, and $M = 4.45$ for the control group).

Affective States

Overall, participants felt nervous, tense, and anxious, as a test of the grand mean ($M = 2.85$) against the scale midpoint ($M = 4$) revealed, $t(51) = -4.68, p < .001$. The main effect on the composite affective states score ($\alpha = .95$) was not significant, $F(1, 50) = .19, p < .661$. Participants' affective states did not differ as a function of experimental condition.

Discussion

As beneficial as self-enhancement is (Bonanno *et al.*, 2002; Taylor & Armor, 1996), it can also be associated with negative personal and interpersonal outcomes, such as harmful risk-taking and social rejection. Despite its persistence and endurance, self-enhancement is controllable (Krueger, 1998; Kruger, 1999; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 2002). Hence, the empirical pursuit of a social context that can keep self-enhancement tactics in check (at least in the short-run) is a worthwhile endeavor. We suggested and demonstrated that accountability qualifies as an enhancement-constraining context. Participants who expect to be accountable to an audience for their evaluations of their own work tone down these evaluations to a greater degree than unaccountable participants (Sedikides *et al.*, 2002, Experiment 1).

Having established the enhancement-reduction potential of accountability, we proceeded with an attempt to pinpoint this effect. We assumed that accountability is a multi-component construct (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999, p. 255) and that, as such, it can be broken down empirically (Cronbach, 1955; Kenny, 1994; Kenny & Albright, 1987). Our strategy was to locate a component of accountability that was responsible for the obtained effect, split it up conceptually into its likely constituents, and then test empirically the viability of these constituents as enhancement-reduction mechanisms. Stated somewhat differently, we attempted to remove surgically components of the (rather undifferentiated) accountability construct until we arrived at a component

that can account for the observed effect (i.e., self-enhancement reduction). What is the lowest or more specific psychological

mechanism that can account meaningfully for the curtailment of self-enhancement?

We began by ruling out one component of accountability, namely evaluator status. This self-enhancement curtailment effect is observed regardless of whether the evaluator is high-status or low status-status (Sedikides *et al.*, 2002, Experiment 2). Next, we zeroed in on the identifiability component of accountability. Indeed, we located identifiability as a mechanism for why accountable participants lower the positivity of their self-evaluations (Sedikides *et al.*, 2002, Experiment 3). Subsequently, we pinpointed the locus of the enhancement-reduction effect in the evaluation expectancy component of identifiability: accountable and identifiable participants temper their self-evaluations because they expect to face a judgmental evaluator (Sedikides *et al.*, 2002, Experiment 4).

What is it about a judgmental evaluator that leads to self-enhancement reduction? We conducted the present experiment to answer this question. We hypothesized that the lowest-level component of accountability (the lowest common denominator) is focus on one's incompetencies in the relevant performance domain (i.e., writing). All participants were accountable and identifiable to a high-status and judgmental evaluator. However, half of the participants were instructed to focus on their performance shortcomings, whereas the remaining half of the participants were instructed to focus on aspects of the social or geographic environment. In support of our hypothesis, participants who focused on their shortcomings as writers expressed a lower opinion of their essays compared to control participants. Self-focus on one's weaknesses is a potent mechanism of self-enhancement reduction - at least when participants are accountable and identifiable to a judgmental evaluator. In summary the experiment pinpointed focus on one's weaknesses as the source of the self-enhancement reduction effect. Weakness-focus constitutes a minimal psychological explanation for the effects of accountability on self-enhancement. The results of the weakness-focus manipulation check were weak. We do not wish to minimize this issue, and, indeed, we would prefer to have obtained stronger results. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that we did obtain a significant effect of the independent variable (orientation of attention) on the dependent variable of interest

(i.e., essay grades), and this effect is certainly an indicator of manipulation effectiveness. Indeed, Sigall and Mills (1998) have cast doubt on manipulation check results as the acid test of manipulation effectiveness. They argued that manipulation checks are unnecessary in the relative absence of plausible alternative explanations. We believe that, in our experiment, we made every effort to eliminate plausible alternative explanations.

Note that we operationalized self-enhancement as the difference in positivity of self-evaluations between accountable and unaccountable participants. Thus, it is more accurate to refer to our operationalization as relative self-enhancement rather than absolute self-enhancement. Our operationalization addresses directly the issue of controllability of the self-enhancement bias. Do individuals manage to keep self-enhancement in check in response to multiple intrapsychic demands (e.g., maintaining a positive self-concept) and interpersonal demands (e.g., maintaining credibility to an audience)? Although the index of relative self-enhancement provided an affirmative response to whether individuals can control the self-enhancement bias, it cannot admittedly distinguish between intrapsychic and interpersonal conflict. This is an issue left to future research.

There are other important questions that future research needs to address. Why does focus on one's shortcomings produce self-enhancement reduction? One explanation is that self-focus leads to the perception of increased personal responsibility for the outcome; that is, the participants realize that all they could do is produce a rather mediocre essay. Another explanation is that a weakness-focus makes the individual appreciate how long and difficult the path to improvement is (Duval & Silvia, 2002; Sedikides, 1999). In either case, the result will be negative affect (e.g., sadness, frustration, low self-esteem, shame), which in turn would lead to unfavorable self-evaluations (Sedikides, 1992b).

The present findings are consistent with the resurgence of interest in the construct of self-focused attention and its relevance for the motivational, affective, and cognitive bases of the self-system (Fejfar & Hoyle, 2000; Higgins, 1998; Nezlek, 2002; Sedikides & Green, 2000; Silvia & Duval, 2001; Silvia & Gendolla, 2001). Importantly, the findings also enrich research on accountability: this is the first time that self-focused attention is linked with the accountability literature.

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