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Portraits of the Self

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The *self* manages to be wholly familiar and frustratingly elusive at the same time. At first blush, it appears that, if I know anything at all, then I know that I am a self-aware being, an 'I' that not only thinks, as Descartes famously asserted, but that also senses, feels, desires, intends, and acts. Yet, establishing exactly what this 'I' is, and how it manages to do what it does, is an excellent way to pass an otherwise interminable journey on British Rail. Indeed, so slippery has the self seemed to some that they have concluded it is merely a grammatical fiction or a cultural artifact (Gergen, 1991; Wittgenstein, 1959). An insubstantial self of this sort could never be the object of scientific scrutiny: it could only be an empty construct for linguists to parse or for postmodernists to critique. Social psychologists who study the self reject such deflationary interpretations, however. They start from the full-blooded assumption that the self is *real* (Baumeister, 1998; Sedikides and Brewer, 2001; Tesser, 2001) and that, although it may contain an element of subjectivity liable to awe and mystify (Nagel, 1974; Tallis, 1999), it nonetheless lends itself to objective empirical investigation.

This being the case, we define the self as *the totality of interrelated yet distinct psychological phenomena that either underlie, causally interact with, or depend upon reflexive consciousness*. The merit of this inclusive, if somewhat wordy, definition is that it does not describe the self as some arcane unity about which nothing further can be said. Rather, it describes the self as a set of properties and processes, each of which can be conceptually defined and empirically indexed. This opens the door to scientific progress: social psychologists can seek greater insight into the nature of selfhood by studying particular manifestations of the self, as well as their correlates, causes, and consequences. They can come up with testable theories that link self-related phenomena to one another and to phenomena beyond the self.

Two brief refinements of this definition are nonetheless in order. First, the properties and processes that collectively compose the self are themselves fairly *complex*. Although more primitive aspects of mental functioning may distantly affect or be affected by reflexive consciousness, the psychology of the self is typically pitched at a molar rather than at a molecular level of analysis. Second, the self operates predominantly *within the social world*. This means that the psychological phenomena that fall under its umbrella typically arise in interaction with others, real or imagined. Consequently, the self, though rooted in an individual brain, is dynamically responsive to social context.

Having sketched out what we think the self is, that is, the psychological domains that it covers, we aim to provide a taste of what empirical research has revealed about it. Unfortunately, this can be only a taste, given the sheer breadth of the literature and the space limitations imposed by a volume of this sort. Hence, we will concentrate on two heavily researched topics: the *motivational* and *affective* aspects of the self – specifically, *self-motives* and *self-esteem*. As we describe the cardinal findings in the area, and the theories put forward to explain them, we hope to show compellingly that the scientific study of the self substantially illuminates our understanding of human beings.

SELF-MOTIVES

If humans entirely lacked emotion, like the perfectly rational android Data on *Star Trek*, selfhood would involve little more than the disinterested encoding, storage, and retrieval of self-related information, either as a means of acquiring accurate knowledge or of carrying out effective action. However, as anyone who has never been an android knows, selfhood is a far more colorful, visceral affair.

Motivation is a case in point: the self is immersed in a variety of motives. Indeed, several taxonomies of *self-motives* have been proposed by social psychologists (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Epstein and Morling, 1995; Sedikides and Strube, 1997). We start with the *self-enhancement motive,* as it is arguably the pre-eminent one (Sedikides, 1993). Next, we move on to discussing various other self-motives in light of it, either as notable instances where it has been subverted, or as tactical means of satisfying it. Finally, we consider the correlates and consequences of *self-esteem*, a psychological attribute that, in its abundance or shortage, can be understood as the habitual ability or inability to satisfy the key self-motive for *self-enhancement*.

Self-enhancement

Self-enhancement denotes the drive to *affirm* the self (Steele, 1988), that is, to convince ourselves, and any significant others in the vicinity, that we are intrinsically meritorious persons: worthwhile, attractive, competent, lovable, and moral. Although the term 'self-enhancement' suggests the pursuit of a more positive self-view (*self-promotion*), it is also understood technically as covering attempts to maintain or defend an already positive self-view (*self-protection*) (Sedikides and Strube, 1997).

Research amply bears out what astute observers have long suspected: that people self-enhance with enthusiasm and ingenuity (Brown and Dutton, 1995; Greenwald, 1980; Taylor and Brown, 1988). Indeed, the manifestations of self-enhancement are so manifold that the label 'zoo' has been drolly applied to them (Tesser et al., 1996). A brief inventory of the inmates of this 'zoo', some familiar, others exotic, is in order.

The self-enhancing triad: the above-average effect, illusions of control, and unrealistic optimism

By and large, people hold flattering views of their own attributes. Most university students, for example, regard themselves as well above the 50th percentile in the degree to which they exhibit such sought-after attributes as social grace, athletic prowess, and leadership ability (Alicke, 1985; College Board, 1976–77; Dunning et al., 1989). Even conspicuously low (12th percentile) achievers in such domains as grammar and logic consider themselves to be relatively high (62th percentile) achievers (Kruger and Dunning, 1999). No less immune to vanity, 94 percent of university professors regard their teaching ability as above average (Cross, 1977). Such self-ascriptions must, at least for a subset of respondents, be false, assuming that the sample tested is representative of the sample that respondents broadly envisage, and that 'average' is taken to imply either the mean of a symmetric distribution or the median of a nonsymmetric one (Brown, 1998). The robustness of the *above-average effect* is borne out by the fact that, even when the criteria on which people base judgments of self and others are made *identical*, they still rate themselves more favorably (Alicke et al., 2001). All the more ironic, then, that people should consider themselves less susceptible to motivational and cognitive biases than their peers, even when explicitly informed about them (Pronin et al., 2002). Finally, anything close to the self basks in the glow of this perceived superiority: people value their close relationships (Murray, 1999; Rusbult et al., 2000) and their personal possessions (Nesselroade et al., 1999) above those of others.

People also overestimate their degree of control over outcomes and contingencies. Such *illusions of control* (Langer, 1975) are apparent in people's conviction that they can influence the outcome of inherently random systems such as lotteries, card-drawings, and dice-throws, especially when such systems are accompanied by features conventionally associated with skill-based tasks (For example, *choosing* one's own lottery number, *practicing* guessing the outcome of a dice throw, or competing against a *nervous* opponent). Even when a degree of contingency does exist between actions and outcomes, people still overestimate the strength of that contingency (Jenkins and Ward, 1965).

Moreover, people think that fate will smile upon them. They believe, in particular, that a greater number of positive life experiences (such as having a gifted child or living to a ripe old age) and a lesser number of negative life experiences (such as being a victim of crime or falling ill) lie in store for them than for similar others (Helweg-Larsen and Sheppard, 2001; Weinstein, 1980; Weinstein and Klein, 1995). Such *unrealistic optimism* is extended, albeit to a lesser degree, to others closely linked to the self, such as friends (Regan et al., 1995). In addition, people both overestimate their ability to predict the future (Vallone et al., 1990) and underestimate how long it will take to complete a variety of tasks (Buelher et al., 1994). As if that were not enough, people also overestimate the accuracy of their social predictions (Dunning et al., 1990).

The self-serving bias in attribution

Self-enhancement infects not only comparative judgments but also causal explanations for social outcomes, in that people manifest a *self-serving bias* when they explain the origin of events in which they personally had a hand or a stake (Campbell and Sedikides, 1999; Zuckerman, 1979). Specifically, they attribute *positive* outcomes *internally* to themselves, but *negative* outcomes *externally* to others (or to circumstance), thus making it possible to claim credit for successes but to disclaim responsibility for failures. The self-serving bias is a robust phenomenon, occurring in private as well as public (Greenberg et al., 1982; Miller and Schlenker, 1977), and even when a premium is placed on honesty (Riess et al., 1981). People's explanations for moral transgressions follow a similar self-serving pattern (Baumeister et al., 1990; Gonzales et al., 1990). Perhaps even the *ultimate attribution error* (Pettigrew, 2001), the tendency to regard negative acts by the outgroup and positive acts by the ingroup as essential to their nature, may simply reflect the operation of the self-serving bias refracted through the prism of social identification (Cialdini et al., 1976; Gramzow et al., 2001).

Mnemic neglect, selective attention, and selective exposure

People sometimes self-enhance by expediently remembering their strengths better than their weaknesses. For example, Sedikides and Green (2000) found that, following false feedback in the form of behaviors of mixed valence allegedly predicted by a bogus personality test, participants recalled more positive behaviors than negative ones, but only when those behaviors exemplified central traits, not peripheral ones, and only when the feedback pertained to themselves, not to other people. We label this pattern of selective forgetting *mnemic neglect*. Broadly similar findings have emerged when the to-be-recalled information takes the form of personality traits (Mischel et al., 1976), relationship-promoting or relationship-undermining behaviors (vanlange et al., 1999), frequencies of social acts (Gosling et al., 1998), and autobiographical memories (Skowronski et al., 1991).

The processing mechanisms underlying mnemic neglect may involve bias at encoding, retrieval, or retention. First, at encoding, people conveniently avoid attending to unflattering information (Baumeister and Cairns, 1982; Sedikides and Green, 2000, Experiment 3), thereby impeding its registration. The pattern of *selective attention* exhibited often follows a mobilization-minimization trajectory: a brief initial orientation towards the threat followed by a more prolonged evasion of it (Taylor, 1991). In addition, such selective attention manifests itself in overt behavior. For example, people *selectively expose* themselves to information that justifies important prior decisions (Festinger, 1957), at least when this information is perceived to be valid, and the decision freely made and irreversible (Frey, 1986). Moreover, when people suspect that they might possess characteristics of which they disapprove, they strive to avoid those who exhibit them (Schimel et al., 2000).

Second, at retrieval, people bring to mind a biased sample of congenial memories. Such selective recall has been found for behaviors that exemplify desirable personality traits (Sanitioso et al., 1990), harmonious interpersonal relationships (Murray and Holmes, 1993), or health-enhancing habits (Ross et al., 1981). Finally, affect associated with unpleasant memories fades faster than affect associated with pleasant memories (Walker et al., in press), possibly due to the various behind-the-scenes activities of the psychological immune system (Gilbert et al., 1998).

Selective acceptance and refutation

Where the ego-threatening information cannot be easily ignored, or where it looks open to challenge, people will spend time and psychological resources trying to refute it. This is evident in the adoption of a more critical attitude towards blame and a more lenient one towards praise (Ditto and Boardman, 1995; Pyszczynski and Greenberg, 1987), and in the tendency to counterargue uncongenial information energetically but to accept congenial information at face value (Ditto and Lopez, 1992; Ditto et al., 1998). A familiar example is of the student who unthinkingly accepts as valid an examination on which he performed well (*selective acceptance*) but mindfully searches for reasons to reject as invalid an examination on which he performed poorly (*selective refutation*) (Arkin and Maruyama, 1979; Greenwald, 2002). Often, selective refutation involves generating serviceable theories that enable criticism to be credibly defused. For example, members of stigmatized groups can, by imputing prejudice to those who derogate either them or their group, maintain high levels of self-esteem (Crocker and Major, 1989).

Strategic social comparison

Self-evaluation is a comparative rather than absolute affair: it takes place not in a self-contained psyche but in the social world thronged with individuals of varying merit. Consequently, although many social comparisons may be objectively forced upon people by circumstance, their minds can nonetheless exploit whatever subjective leeway remains to satisfy the self-enhancement motive. Most notably, despite a well-documented tendency to compare themselves to roughly similar or slightly superior others (Gruder, 1971; Miller et al., 1988), people are

often disposed to *downwardly compare* themselves to relevantly inferior others, in order to capitalize upon an ego-defensive *contrast effect* (Biernat and Billings, 2001; Suls and Wills, 1991).

Notably, even *lateral comparisons* and *upward comparisons* can further self-enhancement goals. For example, lateral ingroup comparisons, especially among members of disadvantaged groups, can protect self-esteem (Crocker et al., 1991). Moreover, upward comparison to superior others with whom one feels affinity can prompt self-enhancement through *assimilation* (Collins, 1996), at least where the gap is not unduly or unexpectedly large (Wheeler, 1966), the target's skill or successes are seen as attainable (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997), and the target is not viewed as a competitor (Wood, 1989). Indeed, self-esteem moderates the beneficial evaluative consequences of comparisons to *both* inferior and superior others. This is possibly because people with higher self-esteem are more optimistic about both evading the failures and misfortunes of their inferiors, and about securing the success and good fortune of their superiors (Buunk et al., 1990).

Strategic construal

The concepts that people use to understand themselves and their social world are characteristically loose and fuzzy, lacking necessary and sufficient defining conditions (Cantor and Mischel, 1979). Consequently, people can, when making social comparisons or estimations, subtly shift their construal of the *meaning* of those concepts in order to self-enhance. For example, people's interpretation of what counts as virtue or talent is slanted in favor of attributes they possess, and of what counts as vice or deficiency, in favor of attributes they lack (Dunning et al., 1991). Such *strategic construal*, affirming the self by semantic adjustment, is exacerbated following negative feedback, thereby implicating the ego in its genesis (Dunning et al., 1995). Thematic variations of the phenomenon include playing up the importance of skills in domains of competence (Story and Dunning, 1998) while downplaying those in domains of incompetence (Tesser and Paulhus, 1983). Though psychically soothing (Simon et al., 1995), such strategies may sometimes prove materially counterproductive. For example, members of minority groups, who, due to an inhospitable cultural climate, perform poorly in academic settings, subsequently disengage psychologically from, and disidentify with, academic pursuits in general, thereby safeguarding their self-esteem but imperilling their socioeconomic prospects (Crocker, Major and Steele, 1998).

Strategic construal can operate in a more devious manner still: people make self-aggrandizing interpretations, not only of their own attributes, but also of *others*, in order to cast themselves in a comparatively favorable light. For example, couch potatoes construe everyone as fairly athletic, whereas gym gerbils see athleticism as a singular attribute (Dunning and Cohen, 1992). In addition, low achievers in a domain are liable to regard the accomplishments of high achievers as exceptional, thereby lessening the shame of their own ineptitude (Alicke et al., 1997). In experimental settings, too, after positive or negative feedback, people with high, but not low, self-esteem, conveniently adjust their perceptions of others, of varying ability and performance, in a self-enhancing direction (Dunning and Beauregard, 2000). Moreover, not only is the meaning of categories subject to strategic construal, but also the *degree* to which they are believed to characterize other people. Over and above the general tendency to assume that others share their characteristics (Ross et al., 1977), people overestimate the prevalence of their shortcomings (for example, show an enhanced *false consensus effect*) and underestimate the prevalence of their strengths (for example, show a contrary *false uniqueness effect*) (Mullen and Goethals, 1990).

In summary, people's representations of self and others are not determined merely by impartial computation. Instead, they are transformed, in idiosyncratic ways, to satisfy self-enhancing prerogatives.

Behavioral implications of self-enhancement

Self-enhancement is not just confined to the intrapsychic sphere: it also has ramifications for how people *behave*. We outline below how self-enhancement influences behavior in two important ways.

Self-evaluation maintenance

Self-evaluation maintenance theory specifies how self-enhancement waxes and wanes as a function of one's ability level in the context of interpersonal relationships, and how this, in turn, influences interpersonal attitudes and behavior (Tesser, 1988). The theory specifies three relevant factors: the *closeness* of a relationship, the personal *relevance* of a particular ability, and one's level of *performance* in that ability domain. First, comparisons of one's own performance with that of others are more likely to occur, and, when they occur, are more consequential in cases where others are close rather than distant. Second, the nature of that comparison will differ depending on whether others' performance is or is not in an ability domain relevant to oneself. When the ability domain is *not* personally relevant, *reflection* will occur: one will undergo self-enhancement (pride) if others perform well but self-derogation (shame) if others perform poorly. However, when the ability domain is personally relevant, *comparison* will occur: one will undergo self-derogation (humiliation)

if others perform poorly but self-enhancement (triumph) if others perform well.

As a consequence of interpersonal self-enhancement or self-derogation, and the affective correlates, people adopt a variety of coping strategies. They choose as associates, friends, and partners those who excel, but not in the same domains as they do (Beach and Tesser, 1993); they withhold information that is likely to improve the performance of close others on personally relevant domains (Pemberton and Sedikides, 2001); they alter the relevance of the performance domain by changing their self-concept, thereby moderating the impact of the reflection and comparison processes (Tesser and Paulhus, 1983); and they broaden or narrow the gap between themselves and others, even by deliberately altering the difficulty of domain-relevant tasks (Tesser and Smith, 1980).

Behavioral self-handicapping

Behavioral self-handicapping refers to the act of erecting obstacles to task success in order to deflect the evaluative implications of unhindered task performance (Jones and Berglas, 1978). Self-handicapping permits self-enhancement to occur in two ways (Feick and Rhodewalt, 1997). First, in the case of failure, one can protect one's self-esteem by attributing failure to the obstacle that one has erected (*discounting*); second, in the case of success, one can promote one's self-esteem by attributing that success to oneself *despite* the obstacle erected (*augmenting*). People low in self-esteem opt for the former self-protective route, to avoid being perceived as incompetent, whereas people high in self-esteem preferentially select the latter self-promoting route, to enhance perceptions of competence (Rhodewalt et al., 1991; Tice, 1991). The word 'perceptions' is important, as self-handicapping, though still present when task performance is private (Rhodewalt and Fairfield, 1991), is magnified by public scrutiny (Tice and Baumeister, 1990). Yet, from a self-presentational point of view, self-handicapping is also a risky strategy: if found out, those who use it face the censure of others (Rhodewalt et al., 1995).

What factors prompt self-handicapping? One is a sense of uncertainty over whether good performance can be attained, due to limited control over similar task outcomes, or an insecure sense of self generally (Arkin and Oleson, 1998). Another is the tendency to hold *fixed-entity* as opposed to *incremental* theories of domain competency (Dweck, 1999): believing that improvement is impossible prompts evasive self-enhancing maneuvers. Thirdly, self-handicapping occurs only when a task or evaluation is important (Shepperd and Arkin, 1991). Finally, negative feedback makes self-handicapping more likely, allowing the wounded ego the chance to protect or promote itself (Rhodewalt and Tragakis, in press). Regardless, whatever the antecedents of self-handicapping, the self-defeating end result is the same: outcome quality is compromised in order to make the meaning of that outcome more palatable. Indeed, students who report a proneness to use self-handicapping strategies also underperform relative to their aptitude, with poor examination preparation mediating the effect (Zuckerman et al., 1998).

Constraints on self-enhancement

Self-enhancement comes in many shapes and forms. However, it would be an exaggeration to say that self-enhancement is *always* the dominant self-motive, that mental life is ruled by nothing else. Indeed, there are identifiable conditions under which self-enhancement is contained or in which other motives assume priority. Competing motives involved in self-evaluation include *self-assessment* (the desire to know the truth about oneself), *self-verification* (the desire to confirm pre-existing views about oneself), and *self-improvement* (the desire to expand one's abilities and become a better person) (Sedikides and Strube, 1997). We will begin by discussing specific factors that constrain self-enhancement, and gradually move into a discussion of how these other motives are implicated in such constraints.

Plausibility constraints

Much self-enhancement thrives upon the *vagueness* or *ambiguity* of the evidence. For example, the above-average effect subsides when the trait being judged is clearly defined and easily verified (for example, 'punctual' as opposed to 'sensitive') (van Lange and Sedikides, 1998). In addition, the tendency to selectively recall instances of desirable traits is held in check by one's actual standing on those traits (Sanitioso et al., 1990). Finally, unpalatable evidence is reluctantly taken on board when there is no room for interpretative maneuver (Doosje et al., 1995).

Such deference to reality is advantageous. Unqualified self-aggrandizement would preclude any informed assessment of one's strengths and weakness, a deficit that would hamstring effective social functioning – as the interpersonal abrasiveness of narcissists attests (Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001). Unless one is minimally committed to the facts at hand, which occasionally imply ugly truths about the self, one cannot exploit self-enhancing biases. This is because such biases operate effectively only under the veneer of rationality: to own up to a bias is to undermine any grounds for believing in the comforting conclusions it implies (Gilbert et al., 1998). Self-presentation is characterized by similar favorability/plausibility tradeoffs:

people self-enhance to the degree that they believe they can get away with it (Sedikides et al., 2002; Tice et al., 1995).

Another relevant finding in this connection is that *ambicausal* introspection, namely, the deliberate attempt to generate possible reasons for why one might either possess or lack a personality trait, attenuates self-enhancement, especially when people commit those reasons to paper (Horton and Sedikides, 2002). Ambicausal introspection works by undermining the certainty that one possesses positive traits and lacks negative traits.

Of course, people are sometimes motivated to seek out accurate, diagnostic information about themselves (Trope, 1986). Such unbiased *self-assessment* has obvious advantages. Knowing one's objective strengths and limitations, one's likes and dislikes, allows one to set and pursue personal goals that are both realistically achievable and personally beneficial (Oettingen and Gollwitzer, 2001). Unsurprisingly, then, people sometimes choose tasks believed to provide diagnostic information about the self, even when these tasks are difficult (Trope, 1979) or the information they transmit unflattering (Trope, 1980). Indeed, people invest effort in tasks to the extent that they believe those tasks will yield diagnostic information. This tendency is furthermore exacerbated by prior manipulations that increase uncertainty about the self, showing that it is the thirst for self-knowledge that underlies it (Trope, 1982).

Mood

This brings us neatly to mood as a moderator of self-enhancement. The initial experience of success, or the induction of a positive mood, will make people even more receptive to negative diagnostic feedback. Indeed, people will review their past successes in expectation of receiving such feedback, presumably to shore up their mood (Trope and Neter, 1994). Such findings suggest that state self-esteem, or the mood that accompanies it, serves as a *resource* that can be deployed to cope with ego threat (Pyszczynski et al., 1997; Steele, 1988).

If positive mood curtails self-enhancement, then, ironically, so does *negative* mood. For example, although immodesty is usually evident in discrepancies between people's estimates of their own virtues and the estimates of neutral observers, a depressive disposition decreases the discrepancy (Campbell and Fehr, 1990; Lewinsohn et al., 1980). In addition, illusions of control are moderated by melancholy (Alloy and Abramson, 1988), and pollyannaish prognostications are diluted by dysphoria (Pyszczynski et al., 1987). Finally, depressives seem to be less resolute self-enhancers in response to negative feedback than do normals (Blaine and Crocker, 1993; Kuiper, 1978). The divergent effects of mood may be best explained by negative mood making one less *able* to deploy self-enhancing tactics, and positive mood making their deployment less *necessary*. This raises the interesting possibility that not all manifestations of self-enhancement will positively correlate with one another.

However, contrary to some early suggestions (Alloy and Abramson, 1979), sadder does not always mean wiser (Dunning and Story, 1991; Ruehlman et al., 1985). For example, although the self-ratings of depressives are more in line with those of neutral observers than the self-ratings of normals, the self-ratings of normals are nonetheless more in line with those of friends and family than the self-ratings of depressives (Campbell and Fehr, 1990). Hence, so-called *depressive realism* may merely be the inadvertent consequence of viewing life through blue-tinted spectacles rather than the reliable result of greater self-insight (Shrauger et al., 1998; Wood et al., 1998).

Social context

When people interact with close others, the self-enhancement motive appears to be enfeebled. For example, when friends, or previous strangers whose intimacy levels have been experimentally enhanced, cooperate on a joint task, they do not manifest the self-serving bias, unlike casual acquaintances or continued strangers who do (Sedikides et al., 2002). People's graciousness in the presence of close others appears to be mediated by mutual liking and expectations of reciprocity, reflecting a communal rather than an exchange orientation (Clark and Mills, 1979). Indeed, a betrayal of trust reinstates the self-serving bias, which tallies with the real-world finding that relationship satisfaction is inversely correlated with such betrayal (Fincham and Bradbury, 1989). In addition, although people are inclined to self-present boastfully in front of strangers, they curtail their conceit in front of friends (Tice et al., 1995). Finally, others close to the self tend to be more highly evaluated than distant others (Murray et al., 1996a), a state of affairs that can be interpreted as the concept of the other being subsumed under the self-concept (Aron et al., 1991).

Culture

It has become a virtual truism that psychological functioning is moderated by the influence of culture (Fiske et al., 1998; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Triandis and Suh, 2002). Principal among the claims made has been that Eastern and Western cultures fundamentally diverge, in that the former, being more collectivistic prioritizes *interdependence* (interpersonal harmony, group cohesion, and social duty), whereas the latter, being more individualistic prioritizes *independence* (separate identity, private fulfillment, and greater autonomy). It has further

been claimed that, due to the greater emphasis laid on internal attributes in the West, self-enhancement tends to overshadow self-criticism, whereas the opposite tends to happen, due to the greater emphasis laid on relational attributes, in the East (Kitayama et al., 1995a). In other words, self-enhancement, for all its manifold manifestations, is a phenomenon largely limited to the West, where social ties are looser. Indeed, this would be roughly consistent with experimental findings showing that relationship closeness constrains self-enhancement (Sedikides et al., 2002).

Taken at face value, there is much evidence to support this culture-specific view of self-enhancement. For example, when describing themselves, Easterners spontaneously use more negative terms than Westerners do (Kanagawa et al., 2001), and provide less inflated ratings of their own merits (Kitayama et al., 1997). In addition, Easterners indulge in self-deprecatory social comparisons (Takata, 1987), entertain less unrealistically optimistic visions of the future (Heine and Lehman, 1995), and show a self-serving attributional bias that is attenuated absent even a reversed (Kitayama et al., 1995b).

It also seems that East Asians manifest a greater desire for *self-improvement* through self-criticism than Westerners do (Heine et al., 1999). They are reluctant, rather than eager, to conclude that they have performed better than an average classmate (Heine et al., 2000), and readily acknowledge, rather than reflexively discount, negative feedback (Heine et al., 2001a). They also persist more after initial failure than success, rather than vice versa, and consider tasks on which they fail to be more diagnostic of merit, not less (Heine et al., 2001b). More generally, the self-improvement motive, as an aspiration towards a possible self (Markus and Nurius, 1986), may moderate a variety of psychological processes, in both independent and interdependent cultures (Sedikides, 1999).

Yet, there are signs that self-enhancement is not altogether absent from interdependent cultures. Easterners self-efface on only some personality dimensions, not others (Yik et al., 1998). For example, Chinese schoolchildren rate themselves highly on the dimension of competence (Falbo et al., 1997) and Taiwanese employees rate themselves more favorably than their employers do (Fahr et al., 1991). On a more profound level, it may be that cultural differences in self-enhancement phenomena stem not from variations in the *strength* of the underlying motive, but rather from differences in how *candidly* or *tactically* that motive is acted upon (Sedikides and Strube, 1997), and in terms of what characteristics are deemed *important* by individuals as they strive to fulfill the roles that their culture prescribes. There is evidence, for example, that Westerners self-enhance on individualistic attributes while Easterners self-enhance on collectivistic attributes (Kurman, 2001; Sedikides et al., in press), and that this difference is explained at least partly in terms of the relative importance that members of each culture place on these attributes (Sedikides et al., in press).

Self-verification

It has been argued that people desire not merely to know how great they are (self-enhancement), or what they are really like (self-assessment), but also to confirm that they are the type of people they already thought they were. In other words, people seek to *self-verify* (Swann, 1987, 1990). The idea is that self-verification serves to stabilize self-views, and that stable self-views, in turn, increase the predictability and controllability of future events in the social world. More specifically, self-verification may be pursued for one of two reasons: epistemic, to induce or preserve a sense of cognitive coherence; and pragmatic, to allow interpersonal interactions to proceed smoothly. So, if people's sense of identity is undermined, or society takes a view of them discordant with their own, their psychological functioning will be impaired. Hence, people will be motivated to seek information that confirms their pre-existing self-views, as well as the company of other people who will provide them with such self-confirmatory information. For self-views of neutral valence, there is some evidence that this is true, particularly when those self-views are confidently held (Pelham and Swann, 1994).

Note that, because people are already inclined to believe that they possess positive traits (Alicke, 1985), they could prefer to receive (or actively seek) positive feedback (or individuals likely to provide it) either to self-enhance or to self-verify. For example, if people already believed that they were extraverted, a normatively positive trait, the observation that they sought to confirm this fact, say, by correcting evaluators' misperceptions, would not by itself furnish evidence of self-verification (Swann and Ely, 1984; see McNulty and Swann, 1994, and Swann et al., 2000, for similarly ambiguous findings). The acid test for self-verification is whether people will prefer and seek negative feedback, or the people who provide it, when such feedback is consistent with a *negative* view of self.

Much research appears to pass this acid test. For example, people choose to interact with evaluators who give them confirmatory feedback about their 'worst' attribute (Swann et al., 1989), or about their negative self-views in general (Swann et al., 1992a), even when they have the twin alternatives of either interacting with an evaluator who will provide them with positive information, or opting out of the study altogether (Swann et al., 1992d). In addition, people are prepared to act in such a way as to confirm existing self-perceptions. Those who regard themselves as dislikable will strive to disabuse an evaluator who likes them of his flattering misconceptions (Swann

and Read, 1981). Married people, when provided with bogus evaluations supposedly from their spouses, reject those evaluations when they clash with others obtained from a previous session, even when the new evaluation is comparatively positive (that is, more favorable than the previous ratings implied) (De La Ronde and Swann, 1998). There is even a suggestion that spouses (but not dating partners) who confirm each other's self-views are more intimate with one another (Swann et al., 1994; though see Murray et al., 1996a). Finally, people with negative self-views seem to gravitate towards those who view them negatively (Swann et al., 1992c).

Although these results show that people may opt to receive information congruent with negative self-views, and opt to interact with those who provide it, they do not in themselves establish the *motivation* that underlies the choosing of that option. People self-verify, certainly. But do they *want* to self-verify? Some light is shed on the matter by the think-aloud protocols of participants deliberating over which interaction partner to choose. In one study (Swann et al., 1992a), participants mostly mentioned that having a partner who agreed with them was important, a response which the researchers classified as an epistemic reason for making a choice; next, they mentioned being concerned that the interaction would take place smoothly (classified as a pragmatic reason); finally, they noted that a perceptive partner would be most desirable (classified as a concern with accuracy). Unfortunately, the most often mentioned reason leaves moot the underlying motivation (participants' noted agreement was crucial, but why?), and the last reason could have more to do with wanting a competent interaction partner than obtaining additional accurate self-assessment. Moreover, self-reports of motivations are suspect, as they may reflect a lack of introspective access (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977), expectancy effects (Rosenthal and Rubin, 1978), and self-presentation or self-deception (Paulhus, 1991).

Furthermore, there are at least two credible explanations, apart from bolstering a pre-existing view of self, for why people might prefer interaction partners who concur with their negative view of self. First, people like, and are drawn to, others who are similar to them and who share their views (Byrne, 1997). Although one might explain the effects of similarity in terms of a desire for verification, it cannot be ruled out, a priori, that other factors, such as an inchoate sense of familiarity (Bornstein, 1989), or a generalization of response from related past examples of attitude similarity, could also be responsible. Second, people with negative self-views who are glowingly evaluated by imminent interaction partners are likely to chafe at the prospect of disappointing those partners' upbeat expectations. They may react in this way because they are risk-averse in general (Baumeister et al., 1989) and are most upset by patterns of feedback that start out positive but then turn negative (Brown et al., 2002).

This, of course, still does not explain why participants would seek out negative information in the absence of any future interaction (Giesler et al., 1996: Swann et al., 1990). However, even here, the evidence clearly points to the fact that people with negative self-views do not *want* negative feedback. Much has been made of the assertion that affective responses to feedback are governed by self-enhancement whereas cognitive responses to feedback are governed by self-verification (or self-consistency) (McFarlin and Blascovich, 1981; Shrauger, 1975; Swann et al., 1987). However, this boils down to claiming that when people think about it, they generally cannot find sufficient *reason* to dispute the accuracy of feedback consistent with their self-view, positive or negative, although they still would *prefer* to receive positive feedback. A further elegant confirmation of this is that when people's cognitive resources are taxed, and their rational thought disrupted, they choose interaction partners on the basis of congeniality alone (Swann et al., 1990). But if people regard information consistent with their self-view as more credible, is it any surprise that they choose it in preference to information inconsistent with their self-view that they consider less credible? Why would they opt for positive information, or choose interaction partners who provide it, if they are incapable of believing it? Self-verification effects may simply be due to ubiquitous plausibility constraints. It is therefore a challenge for future research to implicate directly a drive for cognitive coherence in self-verification effects, an enterprise that would be aided by the development of specific measures and manipulations of such coherence.

Relative self-motive strength

In our discussion so far, some reference has been made to how the self-evaluation motives – self-enhancement, self-assessment, self-verification, and self-improvement – vie with one another, although the evidence is sometimes open to different interpretations. In one study, however, a direct attempt was made to compare the relative strength of various motives (excluding self-improvement) in the neutral context of a self-reflection task (Sedikides, 1993). Participants chose the question that they would be most likely to ask themselves in order to determine whether or not they possessed a particular type of personality trait. Questions varied in terms of the valence (positive/negative), diagnosticity (high/low), and importance (central/peripheral) of the answers they elicited. Participants' yes/no

answers to the questions were also noted. It turned out that, on the whole, participants self-enhanced more than they self-assessed or self-verified. For example, they chose higher diagnosticity questions concerning central positive traits than central negative ones, and answered 'yes' more often to central positive questions than central negative questions. However, participants also self-verified more than they self-assessed, in that they chose more questions overall concerning (relatively certain) central traits than (relatively uncertain) peripheral traits.

Nonetheless, the strength of activation of particular motives, and hence their relative strength, is likely to be situation- or state-specific. It has already been mentioned how an acutely positive mood makes people more capable of taking on board negative information, thereby facilitating even-handed self-assessment (Trope and Neter, 1994). Another factor that matters is *timing*. Prior to having made a decision, people may impartially muse upon the merits of deciding either way, but once they have made up their minds, and start acting accordingly, they move from a *deliberative* to an *implementational* mindset (Gollwizer and Kinney, 1989), and are likely to prefer self-enhancing information that justifies their prior decision. The classical research literature is peppered with examples of post-choice rationalization (Aronson and Mills, 1959; Brehm, 1956; Staw, 1976). Of course, having made a decision, one no longer has *control* over whether or not to make it. To the extent that one retains control over outcome, one may be less inclined to self-enhance. This is illustrated with regard to people's theories with respect to whether a particular characteristic is malleable or fixed (Dauenheimer et al., in press). For example, if people believe that an important personality trait cannot be altered, they show a self-enhancing pattern, welcoming feedback on that trait after initial success, but not failure at displaying it. However, if people believe that this trait can be altered (that is, that it is partly under their control) they show a self-assessment pattern, welcoming feedback regardless of initial success or failure (Dunning, 1995). Similarly, the controllability of trait is one factor that attenuates the above-average effect (van Lange and Sedikides, 1998).

It should not be assumed, however, that the different self-motives are implacably opposed to one another. For example, it could be argued that self-assessment and self-improvement can be classified as different manifestations of a single learning motive (Sedikides and Skowronski, 2000). In addition, it has been proposed that self-enhancement is the master motive, and that all the others represent tactical as opposed to candid ways of satisfying it (Sedikides and Strube, 1997). On this view, all the motives are ultimately 'on the same team'.

SELF-ESTEEM

Some people are more successful at self-enhancing than others; the affective correlate (and potential cause or effect) is level of *self-esteem*. Self-esteem can be manifest either as an underlying dispositional tendency (*trait self-esteem*) or as a transient psychological condition (*state self-esteem*). As the former, it is typically measured by self-report scales (Fleming and Courtney, 1984; Rosenberg, 1965), whereas, as the latter, it is typically induced by administering favorable or unfavorable feedback (Brown, 1993; Tesser, 1988), although reliable measures of state self-esteem also exist (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991). Trait and state self-esteem correlate substantially with one another (Heatherton and Ambady, 1993), and the latter can be construed as a temporary positive or negative departure from the former.

Although self-esteem occupies a privileged position in popular psychological discourse, social psychologists have long debated, and continue to debate, its meaning, origin, and implications. Nonetheless, few theorists would dispute that self-esteem involves something akin to an *attitude towards oneself* (Banaji and Prentice, 1994). As an attitude, self-esteem is associated with numerous *self-beliefs* (Markus and Wurf, 1987) that pertain either to the self as a whole ('I am likable') or to its particular attributes ('I make people laugh'). Importantly, such self-beliefs are *evaluative* in nature (for example, being likable, or making people laugh, is *good*); that is, self-knowledge is experienced, not dispassionately, but as intrinsically positive or negative. Moreover, self-esteem is associated with *feelings* about oneself (Brown, 1998), again pertaining either globally to the self ('I am fabulous') or locally to certain attributes ('I like my elegant sense of dressing'). In the general population, feelings about the global self are positively biased and rarely blatantly negative (Baumeister et al., 1989; Brown, 1986), an unsurprising state of affairs given the strength of the self-enhancement motive. Although such feelings might appear to be entirely a function of evaluative self-beliefs, the effect is probably bidirectional, given that people believe what they desire to be true (McGuire, 1990), and exploit semantic ambiguity to do so (Dunning, 1999; Kunda, 1990).

Opinion is divided on the subject of whether global self-beliefs and feelings derive, *bottom-up*, from local ones (Marsh, 1990; Pelham and Swann, 1989), or whether local self-beliefs and feelings derive, *top-down*, from global ones (Baumeister et al., 2002; Brown et al., 2001). Conceivably, the causality involved could again be bidirectional. However, bottom-up models that weight self-attributes by their idiosyncratic importance oddly fail to predict global self-esteem any better than models

that do without such weighting (Marsh, 1995; Pelham, 1995). There are several possible explanations for this oddity, including the inaccuracy of self-reported importance ratings (Brown, 1998), but if a globally positive self-view promotes above-average perceptions across the board, then ratings of peripheral traits should mirror that self-view, and therefore correlate with global self-ratings. Also relevant to this connection is the fact that the higher their self-esteem, the more people regard themselves as possessing flattering attributes to an illusory degree (Baumeister et al., 2002). Given that 'illusory' is here defined in terms of disagreement with peers, there would seem to be no basis for self-ascribing such attributes apart from a subjective sense of overall merit (Brown, 1998). That said, people do differ measurably in terms of their preconditions for feeling good about themselves, and feedback affects them profoundly depending on whether it does or does not pertain to such preconditions (Crocker and Wolfe, 2001).

High self-esteem: correlates, benefits, and drawbacks

In modern Western culture, global self-esteem has been regarded as a psychological attribute of cardinal importance. In abundance, it is hailed as a panacea for psychosocial ills such as bullying, delinquency, and neurosis; in dearth, it is derided as a prescription for them (Branden, 1988; Mackay and Fanning, 2000; Mruk, 1999; National Association for Self-Esteem, 2002). Yet the argument has been made that this view may generalize neither culturally (Heine et al., 1999; but see Sedikides et al., in press) nor historically (Baumeister, 1987; Exline et al., 2002; Twenge and Campbell, 2001; but see Sedikides and Skowronski, 1997, 2002). Moreover, academic scepticism regarding the validity of self-esteem has increased as research findings have accumulated (Baumeister et al., 2002; Dawes, 1994).

Methodological issues

Drawing summary conclusions about the correlates and alleged benefits of self-esteem poses problems. Care is needed to distill reality from perception, because self-esteem distorts the outlook on life in general, and many studies rely on subjective perceptions and verbal reports. Thus, an artifactual relation between self-esteem and, say, toe-tapping ability, might emerge simply because people with high self-esteem, seeing themselves through rose-tinted spectacles, conclude that they are talented toe-tappers, whereas people with low self-esteem, seeing themselves through blue- or nontinted spectacles, conclude that their toe-tapping ability leaves a lot to be desired. When objective measures of predicted outcomes are used, correlations with self-esteem decline dramatically or vanish altogether (Gabriel et al., 1994; Miller and Downey, 1999). For example, although self-reported physical attractiveness correlates substantially ($r = .59$) with self-esteem, observer-rated physical attractiveness correlates with it hardly at all ($r_s = .00$ to .14, depending on the aspect of appearance in question) (Diener et al., 1995).

Moreover, even if a genuine correlation obtains between self-esteem and a variable of interest, in the absence of further experimentation, longitudinal prediction, or structural equation analysis, the direction of causation remains unclear. From an a priori standpoint, it is at least as plausible that possessing a characteristic of objective significance will boost self-esteem as that high self-esteem will promote the development of such a characteristic. Take extraversion, for instance: although it reliably accompanies self-esteem (Robins et al., 2002), it is not clear which (if either) is the antecedent of the other.

Furthermore, even it is established that self-esteem is the antecedent rather than the consequence of some variable of interest, another background factor might still account, either statistically or causally, for self-esteem's predictive capacity. For example, suppose that self-esteem predicted extraversion over time, but that the inverse prediction was not observed. Self-esteem might nonetheless fail to predict over time any extraversion that was not *also* predicted over time by, say, social inclusion. Considerations like these act as salutary checks on overzealous interpretations of correlations between measures of self-esteem and desirable outcome variables.

Achievement and performance

The cautionary preamble out of the way, we can now inquire what self-esteem relates to (causally or otherwise) and whether it lives up to its sterling reputation. For starters, the evidence that self-esteem improves performance in academic settings is weak. Correlations are typically variable and exceedingly modest on average (Davies and Brember, 1999; Robins and Beer, 2001; Ross and Broh, 2000). Moreover, self-esteem seems to be an effect rather than a cause, and explains little beyond what other background variables do (Bachman and O'Malley, 1986; Midgett et al., 2002; Pottebaum et al., 1986). Furthermore, interventions designed to raise self-esteem may either fail to influence academic performance (Scheirer and Kraut, 1979) or actually undermine it, by encouraging complacency (Forsyth and Kerr, 1999). The general picture is not different for performance in other domains (Judge and Bono, 2001; Wallace and Baumeister, 2002), although differences between people with high and

low self-esteem may become apparent only as time goes by (Di Paula and Campbell, 2001) or in the wake of ego threat (Brockner et al., 1983; Campbell and Fairey, 1989). High self-esteem people do spontaneously show greater persistence (McFarlin, 1985; McFarlin et al., 1984; Shrauger and Sorman, 1977) and, importantly, more *judicious* persistence (Di Paula and Campbell, 2001; Sandelands et al., 1998) in the face of adversity than people with low self-esteem. However, ego threat can also goad people with high (but not low) self-esteem into persisting overoptimistically and fruitlessly (Baumeister et al., 1993).

One might expect self-esteem to be an important predictor of leadership ability, given the initiative and confidence that leadership requires. Although significant correlations do emerge – for example, in studies of military recruits incorporating multiple and objective dependent measures (Chemers et al., 2000) – these correlations mostly dwindle into insignificance when placed in statistical competition with other predictors. Nevertheless, some evidence does suggest that high self-esteem is associated with willingness to speak out critically in a variety of occupational groups (LePine and Van Dyne, 1998), and that people with high (though not grandiose) self-esteem are valued as work-group contributors (Paulhus, 1998). It may also be the case that, being such a nonspecific variable, self-esteem predicts overall success in life better than success in any particular domain. We could find no pertinent data addressing this issue, however.

Physical health

If self-esteem does not seem to propel forcefully achievement or performance, might it nonetheless promote physical health? The existing evidence does support the hypothesis, both directly for overall health (Forthofer et al., 2001; Nirkko et al., 1982) and indirectly for biological predictors of health (Prussner et al., 1998; Seeman et al., 1995). Moreover, although positive life events improve the overall health (both self-reported and objectively measured) of people with high self-esteem, they paradoxically impair the health of people with low self-esteem, possibly by disrupting their fragile identity (Brown and McGill, 1989).

With regard to specific health behaviors, however, the picture is less clear. On the one hand, low self-esteem features as a prominent clinical correlate of anorexia (Bers and Quinlan, 1992), bulimia (Mintz and Betz, 1988), or eating disorders generally (French et al., 2001; Williams et al., 1993), and longitudinal data suggest that it may play a causal role (Button et al., 1996; van der Ham et al., 1998), although the bidirectional effects of disordered eating and self-esteem on each other may also be responsible for spiraling symptoms (Heatherton and Polivy, 1992). In addition, low-self esteem may exert its effects only in complex interaction with other risk factors, such as perfectionism and body dissatisfaction (Vohs et al., 1999, 2001).

However, several large studies, both cross-sectional and prospective in design, find neither a simple nor a complex relation between self-esteem and smoking (Glendinning and Inglis, 1999; Koval and Pederson, 1999; McGee and Williams, 2000), except perhaps for females (Abernathy et al., 1995; Lewis et al., 2001). Comparable studies examining the link between self-esteem and alcohol consumption find either no effect (Hill et al., 2000; McGee and Williams, 2000; Poikolainen et al., 2001) or only complex and equivocal effects (Jackson et al., 1997; Scheirer et al., 2000). The same goes for sexual behavior: self-esteem does not reliably predict pregnancy or early sexual activity (Berry et al., 2000; McGee and Williams, 2000; Paul et al., 2000) and its relation to safer-sex activities is far from proven (Hollar and Snizek, 1996; Langer and Tubman, 1997). High self-esteem may simply dispose one to *more* sex of whatever type (Herold and Way, 1993).

Part of the reason for the lack of clear findings for sex and drugs may be that self-esteem exerts contrary effects, on the one hand, affording people the self-confidence to resist social pressure (Brockner, 1984) or escapist temptations (Baumeister, 1991), but, on the other hand, affording them the initiative to try more risky or forbidden activities (Brockner and Elkind, 1985) under self-serving illusions of invulnerability (Gerrard et al., 2000). Indeed, people with high self-esteem who relapse into smoking after a period of abstention are more adept at rationalizing their relapse (Gibbons et al., 1997).

Psychological health

The clearest correlate of self-esteem is *subjective well-being*. Self-esteem strongly and consistently predicts self-reported life satisfaction and assorted measures of happiness (Diener and Diener, 1995; Furnham and Cheng, 2000; Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1995; Shackleford, 2001). Admittedly, such data remain to be supplemented by others based on more objective indices (such as peer ratings) and on designs capable of disambiguating causal links. Nonetheless, diverging patterns of correlation with other variables already indicate that happiness and self-esteem are not merely redundant constructs.

Self-esteem also strongly and consistently predicts, in a negative direction, various manifestations of psychological distress, such as anxiety (Greenberg et al., 1992; Leary and Kowalski, 1995), depression (Tennen and Affleck, 1993; Tennen and Herzberger, 1987), hopelessness (Crocker et al., 1994), and neuroticism (Horner, 2001), although variance shared with neuroticism may account, in

part, for self-esteem's predictive power (Judge and Bono, 2001; Neiss et al., 2002). In addition, levels of self-esteem are associated with greater positive affect, and less variable affect, in the course of everyday life, and in reaction to much the same external events (Campbell et al., 1991).

Longitudinal and experimental studies also suggest that self-esteem promotes coping. Some studies find a simple adaptive benefit (Murrell et al., 1991; Robinson et al., 1995), others that high self-esteem acts as a buffer in times of high stress (Bonanno et al., 2002; Corning, 2002), and still others that low self-esteem acts as a spoiler in times of low stress (Ralph and Mineka, 1998; Whisman and Kwon, 1993). Despite the complexity of these findings, they are unanimous that high self-esteem is adaptive.

One reason why coping may be difficult for people with low self-esteem is that they are more prone to demoralization as a result of inauspicious feedback. Whereas people, regardless of their level of self-esteem, feel elated by success and saddened by failure, only those with low self-esteem experience substantial fluctuations in their underlying sense of self-worth (Brown and Dutton, 1995). Such fluctuations may be due to a greater tendency to see a specific poor performance as a reflection of general underlying ability: people low in self-esteem show less pronounced self-serving attributional biases (Blaine and Crocker, 1993) and indeed regard positive and negative feedback as equally credible (Shrauger, 1975). For people low in self-esteem, failure in a specific domain has wide psychological implications (Epstein, 1992; Heyman et al., 1992). It prompts them to lower their estimates of ability in unrelated domains, whereas their high self-esteem counterparts are prompted to raise their estimates by way of compensation (Brown et al., 2001; Rhodewalt and Eddings, 2002).

The above divergent pattern emerges elsewhere. With regard to expectations of future performance, people with low self-esteem, following failure, expect to fail again, whereas people with high self-esteem become paradoxically more optimistic about success (McFarlin and Blascovich, 1981). Moreover, following the activation of *self*-doubt, people with low self-esteem perceive their relationship partners as less fond and forgiving, and report needing the relationship less, whereas people with high self-esteem perceive their partners as more fond and forgiving, and report needing the relationship more (Murray et al., 1998). It seems that, because such individuals strongly link personal faults and failings to rejection, they are unable to use intimate relationships as a self-affirmational resource (Murray et al., 2001a). One final consequence of their demoralization may be self-regulatory paralysis: people with low self-esteem seem relatively less likely to deploy mood-repair tactics, even when they know that they would be effective (Heimpel et al., 2002).

The greater affective vulnerability of people with low self-esteem is accompanied by, and possibly stems from, self-conceptions that are more tentative and less coherent (Baumeister, 1993; Baumgardner, 1990; Campbell, 1990; Campbell and Lavallee, 1993; Greenwald et al., 1988). Relative to those with low self-esteem, people with high self-esteem: (i) rate themselves faster and more extremely, (ii) give more definite ratings (that is, report narrower confidence intervals) and express more confidence in the accuracy of these ratings, (iii) provide ratings that are internally consistent (that is, respond identically to synonyms) and also consistent over time, (iv) behave more consistently with those ratings, and (v) furnish more detailed and extensive open-ended self-reports. All this suggests more certain, accurate, and thorough self-knowledge. Hence, it is not so much that people low in self-esteem despise themselves – in fact, they give intermediate and even sporadically favorable ratings of themselves (Baumeister et al., 1989; Pelham, 1993) – but rather that they lack the enduring, firmly held, and richly supported positive identities that people high in self-esteem have.

Given the greater affective vulnerability and cognitive irresolution of people with low self-esteem, it is unsurprising that they prefer to proceed with *caution*, conserving their precious reserves of self-worth and safeguarding their fragile identity, whereas people with high self-esteem, being psychologically robust, prefer to court *risk*, their ego being able to stomach some minor devaluation and their identity some light revision. Another way of putting this is to say that, whereas people with low self-esteem seek to affirm the self by using subtle, *self-protective* strategies, people with high self-esteem seek to affirm the self by using overt, *self-promoting* strategies (Baumeister et al., 1989; Tice, 1993; Wolfe et al., 1986), the difference being mediated by the availability of self-affirmatory resources (Spencer et al., 1993).

Examples of this principle abound. People with low self-esteem make decisions carefully in order to minimize the possibility of future regret and embarrassment, whereas those with high self-esteem are prepared to carelessly spin the wheel (Josephs et al., 1992). Additionally, people with high self-esteem have fewer qualms about openly declaring their positive qualities to an audience (Baumeister, 1982), whereas their low-esteem counterparts prefer to self-enhance more indirectly, through association rather than competition (Schuetz and Tice, 1997). Indeed, assertive self-presentation comes so naturally to people with high self-esteem, and modest self-presentation so naturally to those with low, that instructing either to go against their inclination impairs their memory for the relevant social interaction (Baumeister et al., 1989).

In addition, people behaviorally self-handicap only when the advantages of doing so match their preferred risk-orientation (Rhodewalt et al., 1991). For example, people with low self-esteem refrain from practicing for a test if that test is described as indexing only stupidity, whereas people with high self-esteem refrain from practicing for it if it is described as indexing only genius (Tice, 1991). Moreover, how people act after success or failure reflects their risk-orientation: people high in self-esteem persist after success and desist after failure (going for glory and hiding from shame) whereas those low in self-esteem desist after success and persist after failure (fearing to jeopardize success and striving to remedy deficiencies) (Baumeister and Tice, 1985). This finding also squares with another one: high self-esteem people are most upset by repeated failure and low self-esteem people by failure that follows initial success (Brown et al., 2002).

Interpersonal behavior

Clearly, self-esteem is beneficial for an individual in-sofar as it *feels* good to have it. But what are its social implications? Is the oft-repeated popular psychological shibboleth true, namely, that, in order to love other people (for example, live in harmony with them), one must first love oneself? The evidence suggests not.

People with high self-esteem consider themselves to be more popular (Battistich et al., 1993), to have superior friendships (Keefe and Berndt, 1996), to get along better with workmates (Frone, 2000) to enjoy more pleasant social interactions and to experience greater social support. But are such benefits merely in the eye of the beholder? Apparently so, given that both sociometric studies, in which all participants systematically rate both themselves and one another (Bishop and Inderbitzen, 1995; Dolcini and Adler, 1994), and independent criterion studies, in which ratings are provided by observers such as teachers and peers (Adams et al., 2000; Buhrmester et al., 1988), show no evidence of such benefits. The results of 'get-acquainted' studies in the laboratory only confirm that people high in self-esteem, despite their pretensions, are not better liked than people low in it (Brockner and Lloyd, 1986; Campbell and Fehr, 1990), and, after ego threat, are actually disliked more, because they compensate by assertively de-emphasizing their interdependence with others (Vohs and Heatherton, 2001).

There is little direct evidence that high self-esteem promotes the quality or durability of intimate relationships, and theoretically matters would work both ways. On the one hand, low self-esteem contaminates regard for one's partner and the partner's views of self (Murray et al., 2001b), thereby acting as a midwife for unmerited distrust, excessive reassurance-seeking, and relational conflict (Murray et al., 1996b), all of which are likely to lower relationship satisfaction and increase the likelihood of relationship dissolution (Hendrick et al., 1988). On the other hand, people with high self-esteem are more likely to opt for 'exit' responses to relationship problems, by deciding to leave, seek other partners, and otherwise eschew constructive attempts to solve relationship problems (Rusbult et al., 1987). Perhaps lacking initiative and confidence, low self-esteem persons are more willing to passively endure relationship problems.

Aggression and violence

Conventional wisdom, rooted in clinical impressions, had it that low self-esteem was a key cause of aggression and violence, though the underlying psychological mechanism was left unspecified. However, the weight of the evidence suggests that those who perpetrate aggression – delinquents, spouse-beaters, child-beaters, murderers, assaulters, rapists, torturers, psychopaths, and warriors – are in fact rather fond of themselves (Baumeister et al., 1996). Such a correlation makes sense, for two reasons. First, people with high self-esteem, in view of their habitually positive self-appraisals, are more likely to perceive a discrepancy when others appraise them negatively. Second, people with high self-esteem, given the choice between shamefully accepting or angrily rejecting those negative appraisals, will opt for the latter course of action, given their greater self-confidence and initiative. However, this *threatened egoism* model may apply only to people whose self-esteem, as well as being high, is at the same time *fragile* (Kernis, in press). That is, although aggressive and violent people have high rather than low self-esteem, people with high self-esteem are not necessarily aggressive and violent. This conclusion is supported by studies showing that self-esteem, on its own, does not predict aggression or defensiveness in response to insults or ego threat: narcissism (Bushman and Baumeister, 1998) or self-esteem instability (Kernis et al., 1989) must also be present. In fact, people with high self-esteem may show the *least* aggression and defensiveness when their self-esteem is *not* fragile.

This conclusion is further supported by non-experimental evidence from several domains. For example, there is no simple link between self-esteem and bullying (Olweus, 1991; Slee and Rigby, 1993). However, one large sociometric study, featuring measures of self-esteem, peer-rated self-esteem, and defensive self-esteem (a combination of high scores on the first two measures combined with high scores on a separate defensive egoism scale) found that bullies had high defensive self-esteem, those who thwarted their bullying had high nondefensive self-esteem, and the bullied themselves had low self-esteem (Salmivalli et al.,

1999). As for delinquency, the evidence is equally mixed. Some studies find no link (Joon and Thornberry, 1998), others find a link explained away by background variables (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1997), and still others find an independent link (Trzesniewski et al., 2002, Study 1). Complicating factors include the possibility that becoming delinquent may raise previously low levels of self-esteem (Rosenberg et al., 1989) and that delinquency is mostly measured by self-reports. However, one longitudinal study using objective measures does suggest that self-esteem offers causal protection against the development of delinquency (Trzesniewski et al., 2002, Study 2).

Summary

The correlates, benefits, and drawbacks of self-esteem can be succinctly summarized. First, self-esteem is only tangentially related to many of the objective benefits it has traditionally been held to cause. Second, self-esteem is, nonetheless, strongly correlated with subjective well-being. Third, high self-esteem, particularly when fragile or extreme, can be socially disruptive.

Given these findings, why has self-esteem been ballyhooed as an *unqualified* good for so many years, at least in Western societies? It may partly be historical accident, an offshoot of twentieth-century social and economic individualism (Baumeister, 1986). Alternatively, the fact that self-esteem feels so good and prompts the self-ascription of illusory virtues (Brown, 1991) may have contributed to an overestimation of its objective merit, even among the psychological community.

Beyond self-esteem

Research suggests, then, that high self-reported self-esteem does not quite merit its traditionally sterling reputation. Might it be possible to go beyond traditional measures of self-esteem to distinguish between individuals with fragile and secure self-esteem? We will focus here on three relevant lines of inquiry: *implicit* self-esteem, *contingent* self-esteem, and self-esteem *stability*.

Implicit self-esteem

Awareness has grown about the limitations and pitfalls of self-report instruments (Paulhus, 2002). In particular, self-report measures of self-esteem are biased by self-presentation (Schlenker, 1980), self-deception (Paulhus, 1984), and self-ignorance (Wilson et al., 2000).

Regarding self-presentation, people self-aggrandize in front of strangers but self-efface in front of friends (Tice et al., 1995). Regarding self-deception, people may be reluctant to admit to themselves that they harbor self-doubt, a reluctance they can express in *socially desirable* responses (Crowne and Marlowe, 1960). Indeed, people who are, on an anonymous questionnaire, loath to self-ascribe common vices but keen to self-ascribe uncommon virtues, are more likely, following subsequent failure feedback, to present themselves in glowing terms to an audience, presumably in an attempt to affirm publicly a shaky self-image (Schneider and Turkat, 1975). Regarding self-ignorance, a theoretical distinction can be drawn between *explicit* self-esteem, rooted in the *rational* mind (that is, conscious, controlled, intentional, effortful, verbal, rule-based, slow-processing, and fast-changing), and *implicit* self-esteem, rooted in the *experiential* mind (that is, unconscious, automatic, unintentional, effortless, nonverbal, associationist, fast-processing, and slow-changing) (Smith and DeCoster, 2000).

Explicit self-esteem has been all but equated with responses to traditional self-report measures, and implicit self-esteem with responses to one of several indirect, subtle, and unobtrusive measures. The latter include the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998), the Go No-Go Association Test (GNAT; Nosek and Banaji, 2001), the Extrinsic Affective Simon Task (EAST; De Houwer, 2002), the Name Letter Task (NLT; Koole et al., 2001), the Self-Apperception Test (SAT; Aidman, 1999), evaluative priming paradigms (Fazio, 2001), and word-fragment completion tasks (Hetts et al., 1999). Yet, for all their diversity, implicit measures of self-esteem operate on the premise that stimuli intimately associated with the self (for example, first and last names, reflexive pronouns) reflect the valence of the self (Beggan, 1992; Hoorens and Nuttin, 1993). Hence, by assessing the valence of self-related stimuli, the underlying valence of the self can be inferred, free from the distortions of self-presentation, self-deception, and self-ignorance.

What, then, do implicit measures reveal? The matter remains controversial. Certainly, implicit measures readily replicate, at a mean level, preferences for self shown on explicit measures. At the same time, implicit measures either show no, or only modest, correlations with explicit measures (Bosson et al., 2000; Jordan et al., 2001). This finding could indicate, significantly, that explicit and implicit measures of self-esteem tap into different underlying constructs, or, mundanely, that the reliability of the latter is poor (Cunningham et al., 2001; Lane et al., 2001).

Nonetheless, consistent with theoretical expectation, the correspondence between explicit and implicit measures is increased if cognitive resources are made scarce during explicit responding (Koole et al., 2001; Wilson et al., 2000). Unfortunately, simply presenting explicit measures first also has the same effect (Bosson et al., 2000),

calling into question the autonomy of implicit measures. Also problematic is the fact that implicit measures of self-esteem habitually fail to intercorrelate (Bosson et al., 2000; Jordan et al., 2001), again perhaps due to low reliability, but also perhaps to meaningful structural differences between tasks, the precise modus operandi of which remains under debate (De Houwer, 2000; Gregg, in press; Klinger et al., 2000). The generic label 'implicit' may hide substantial heterogeneity. Nevertheless, the IAT does appear to index automatic associations between self, valence, and social identity that bear out the predictions of classical balance theory (Heider, 1958) better than explicit measures of the same constructs, suggesting that implicit measures may yet prove to be useful windows on the soul (Greenwald et al., 2002).

As regards the predictive validity of implicit self-esteem, the findings are promising but mixed. On the one hand, implicit self-esteem has failed to predict reasonable validity criteria. These include independent ratings of self-esteem and interpretations of ambiguous statements (Bosson et al., 2000), as well as a wide array of self-related constructs, including well-being, psychiatric symptoms, loneliness, self-construal, and personality traits (Gregg and Sedikides, 2002). On the other hand, implicit self-esteem has predicted nonverbal anxiety in an interview situation where explicit self-esteem proved unsuccessful (Spalding and Hardin, 1999). In addition, an IAT measure of implicit self-esteem has independently predicted greater psychological robustness in the face of failure (Jordan et al., 2001), suggesting that the IAT is diagnostic of fragile self-esteem. Perhaps the most striking predictive findings to date pertain to the name letter effect (the preference for letters in one's name over letters not in it, controlling for normative letter liking; Nuttin, 1987). A person (for example, Scott) is disproportionately likely to reside in or move to a location (for example, Scotland) and to hold or pursue an occupation (for example, scoutmaster) whose name resembles his or her own (Pelham et al., 2002).

In summary, research on implicit self-esteem has yielded some promising findings consistent with its reflecting secure self-esteem. However, issues involving both the coherence and interpretation of these findings persist. Future research incorporating manipulations as well as measures of explicit and implicit self-esteem may help clarify such issues. It has already been found that explicit and implicit factors combine in interesting ways to predict defensiveness (Jones et al., 2002) and self-serving biases (Kernis et al., 2000).

Contingent self-esteem

A distinction can be drawn between whether self-esteem is high or low and the extent to which self-esteem depends on particular conditions being met. In other words, self-esteem can vary not only in level but also in how *contingent* it is. When people with dispositionally contingent self-esteem do not meet specific standards and expectations, their sense of self-worth suffers, and feelings of shame result. Such people, therefore, require continual validation, and spend a great deal of time defending their frail egos against looming threats. In contrast, people with noncontingent self-esteem, though they certainly savor successes and lament failures, do not undergo comparable fluctuations in their sense of self-worth. Their core attitude towards themselves remains stable and positive (Deci and Ryan, 1995).

It has been theorized that such stable positive self-regard derives from the satisfaction of people's fundamental needs for *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness* (Deci and Ryan, 2000). This happens when their actions spring from intrinsic desires rather than extrinsic demands, when their actions prove to be habitually efficacious, and where they manage to forge and maintain meaningful and harmonious relationships. Sure enough, studies find that intrinsic aspirations (personal growth, meaningful relationships, and community aspirations) predict several dimensions of well-being, whereas extrinsic motivations (money, fame, and wealth) predict several dimensions of ill-being (Kasser and Ryan, 1996).

Along with an effort to identify the bases of contingent self-esteem, relevant research has progressed along three directions. First, an attempt has been made to characterize, as an individual difference, the degree to which one's self-esteem is contingent or noncontingent (Paradise and Kernis, 1999). When we control for level of trait self-esteem, contingent self-esteem, as expected, predicts less anger and hostility in response to insulting feedback, as well as the choice of better anger-management strategies in hypothetical scenarios (Kernis, in press).

Second, an attempt has been made to locate the various dimensions on which self-esteem is contingent (Crocker and Wolfe, 2001). These dimensions include approval, acceptance, family, God, power, self-reliance, identity, morality, appearance and academic ability (Crocker et al., 1999). As predicted, state self-esteem fluctuates to a greater or less extent depending on whether an important or unimportant contingency of self-worth has been targeted by feedback (Crocker et al., 2000; Lun and Wolfe, 1999). Interestingly, however, basing one's self-esteem on dimensions such as God, family, and morality is associated with greater noncontingency of self-esteem overall (Jordan et al., 2001).

Finally, researchers have attempted to qualify the extent to which interpersonal acceptance and rejection (closely linked to self-esteem; Leary and Baumeister, 2000) are considered to be contingent upon success and failure (Baldwin and Sinclair,

1996). High trait self-esteem is associated with weaker 'if–then' contingencies of this sort, as assessed by priming paradigms. The strength of such contingencies can be acutely reinforced or weakened by cuing people with thoughts of relationships in which another person's esteem for the self is contingent, so-called *relationship schemas*, or by having them experience success and failure experiences directly (Baldwin and Meunier, 1999; Baldwin and Sinclair, 1996). Although research on 'if–then' contingencies has not been expressly conducted with a view to going beyond self-reported self-esteem, it could be used for that purpose. What complicates the picture somewhat is that, like self-esteem, contingencies of self-worth also fluctuate with external events.

Self-esteem stability

Self-esteem stability can be defined as the absence of variation in self-reported self-esteem over either the short term or the long term; alternatively, it can be defined as the absence of variation in departures of momentary state self-esteem from resting levels of trait self-esteem. Either way, self-esteem stability has been typically indexed by the standard deviation of scores across multiple modified measures of self-esteem over several days (Kernis et al., 1992). Self-esteem stability correlates moderately, but not redundantly, with self-esteem level.

Theoretically, one might expect self-esteem instability to be the result of contingent self-esteem: to the extent that one's sense of self-worth is precarious, it is liable to wax and wane with everyday triumphs and disappointments. Indeed, there is evidence that unstable self-esteem is linked to the placing of greater importance upon particular sources of self-esteem (Kernis et al., 1993) and to fears of social rejection (Greenier et al., 1999). Furthermore, unstable self-esteem predisposes people to react antisocially in a manner indicative of psychological fragility. For example, self-esteem level and self-esteem stability interact in an interesting way to predict self-reported proneness to anger and hostility: people with high and unstable self-esteem report the greatest proneness, and people with high and stable self-esteem, the least (Kernis et al., 1989).

A similar pattern of interaction characterizes psychological reactions to valenced feedback and mental simulations of doing well or poorly. Specifically, people whose self-esteem is both high and stable are relatively unaffected, whereas those whose self-esteem is high but unstable become self-aggrandizing or self-defensive (Kernis et al., 1997). For people low in self-esteem, the pattern is less clear-cut, though instability may be predictive of *reduced* defensiveness. In other words, self-esteem instability may not be wholly negative when self-esteem is low. Indeed, although self-esteem instability is concurrently associated with greater depression among people with high self-esteem, it is associated with *less* depression among those with low (Kernis et al., 1991). Perhaps people with low/unstable self-esteem are better able to mobilize self-protective strategies than those with low/stable self-esteem. One study (Kernis et al., 1992) found that the former were more likely than the latter to use excuses to mitigate negative feedback, a practice which could guard against persistent dysphoria. In contrast, people with high/unstable self-esteem were more likely than those with high/stable self-esteem to use excuses to magnify positive feedback. This discrepancy suggests that self-esteem instability drives some of the self-protection/self-enhancement discrepancies usually attributed to levels of self-esteem per se (Tice, 1993).

However, self-esteem instability is hardly a blessing. Over and above self-esteem level, it correlates with deficits in intrinsic motivation and self-determination (Kernis et al., 2000), predicts depression longitudinally in interaction with daily hassles (Kernis et al., 1998), and predicts more extreme reactions to negative events (Greenier et al., 1999). Explorations of the links between self-esteem instability and other indices of fragile self-esteem stability will prove a fertile area of future research.

EPILOGUE

The self is a key locus of motivation and affect (Gaertner et al., 2002; Sedikides and Brewer, 2001). Our intent in this chapter has been to document some interesting ways in which social psychology has shown this to be so, and thereby to highlight the value of empirical forays into the nature of the self. Unfortunately, we had no space even to summarize, much less scrutinize, the equally wide-ranging and intriguing research literatures, both classic and contemporary, on the semantic/representational and the executive/self-regulatory aspects of self (see Baumeister, 1998, 2000). We nonetheless hope to have conveyed to our readers a vibrant sense of what social psychology has told us about selfhood and of its potential to tell us ever more about it in the years ahead.

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