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ARTICLE



On the doggedness of self-enhancement and self-protection: How constraining are reality constraints?

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ABSTRACT

Self-enhancement and self-protection are constrained by reality. But to what extent? Broader constraints, often considered powerful, such as East-Asian culture, religion, mind-body practices, and prison environments are not particularly effective deterrents. Narrower constraints, also considered powerful, such as self-reflection and mnemonic neglect, are not very helpful either. Deliberate and systematic laboratory efforts, both at the intrapersonal level (e.g., explanatory introspection, salience of one's faults) and the interpersonal level (e.g., accountability, relationship closeness), can boast success in constraining self-enhancement and self-protection strivings, but the success is mixed, difficult to implement, and probably short-lived. The doggedness (potency and prevalence) of self-enhancement and self-protection are due to the functions or social benefits with which they are associated or confer: psychological health, goal pursuit and attainment, leadership election, and sexual selection. These functions are traceable to our species' evolutionary past.

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That self-enhancement and self-protection are constrained by reality is a truism. And, of course, as a truism there is some truth in it. But how constraining are reality constraints? This article contends that they are not as constraining as they could or perhaps should be. Reality gives in frequently, especially when it bites. Apprehensions of the truth about oneself are traded off for the sake of protecting, sustaining, or enhancing one's self-regard. The trade-off, albeit questionable on some grounds, is useful to the individual on other grounds.

Self-enhancement and self-protection

Self-enhancement is motivated. It is manifested in strivings to preserve or augment the favorability of one's self-views (Alicke, Zell, & Guenther, 2013; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Self-protection is also motivated. It is manifested in strivings to avoid or diminish the unfavorability of one's self-views (Sedikides, 2012; vanDellen,

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Campbell, Hoyle, & Bradfield, 2011). Self-enhancement and self-protection are instances of approach and avoidance motivation, working in tandem to sustain or elevate one's self-regard (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Elliot & Mapes, 2005).

The self-enhancement and self-protection strivings are legend. A panoply of 60 has been distilled via factor analyses in four broad families (Hepper, Gramzow, & Sedikides, 2010). One is *favorable construal* – comprising strivings that reflect self-serving cognitions (e.g., better-than-average beliefs, comparative optimism, advantageous interpretation of ambiguous feedback). Another is *positivity embracement* – comprising strivings that reflect self-beneficial interactions with the social environment (e.g., selectively approaching individuals who are likely to deliver positive feedback, presenting the self auspiciously, assuming credit for the successes of the dyad or group). The third family is *self-affirming reflections* – composed of strivings that refer to self-bolstering responses to self-threat (e.g., pondering one's values, comparing favorably the present with the past self, resorting to counterfactual thinking). The fourth and final family is *defensiveness* – consisting of self-shielding strivings that are triggered by self-threat (e.g., self-handicapping, defensive pessimism, discounting of unflattering feedback). Moreover, the number 60 was a conservative estimate, as it did not include a good deal of other strivings (for a review, see Alicke & Sedikides, 2011), with new strivings being identified all the time (Dunning, 2018; O'Brien & Kardas, 2016; Ong, Goodman, & Zaki, 2018; Guenther, Taylor, & Alicke, 2015; Steimer & Mata, 2016; Stephan, Shidlovski, & Sedikides, 2018; for a review, see Ferris, Johnson, & Sedikides, 2018).

Reality constraints

There is little dispute that, when it comes to the reality of who they are, and the constraints imposed by that reality, people heed to it (Kunda, 1990; Strube, Lott, Le-Xuart-Hy, Oxenberg, & Deichmann, 1986; Trope, 1983), because they need to (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004; Higgins, 2005; Hoorens, 2011). There is an epistemic and a utilitarian argument in favor of doing so. Taking account of reality constraints is logical and reasonable. Pursuing accurate information about oneself has positive value, and is indeed undergirded by a motive of its own (i.e., self-assessment; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). So, to self-assess realistically is often (i.e., not always) the right thing to do. Further, being duly constrained by reality permits the individual to appraise accurately their strengths and weaknesses, their place in status hierarchies, and the plausibility of their goals (Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011; Mahadevan, Gregg, & Sedikides, 2018; Trope, 1986). Such rationality can forestall the anxiety that uncertainty about one's social environment begets (Hogg, 2007), solidify the clarity of one's self-concept (Campbell, 1990), and prevent the criticism or hurt that one is bound to encounter or feel (Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007; Vangelisti & Hampel, 2012). So, being highly attuned to reality constraints looks like the smart thing to do.

Yet, on balance, people desire and expect to receive positive feedback (Gaertner, Sedikides, & Cai, 2012; Hepper, Hart, Gregg, & Sedikides, 2011), and, following engagement in problem-solving tasks, solicit positive over accurate feedback (Gregg, Hepper, & Sedikides, 2011; for reviews, see: Brown & Dutton, 1995; Gregg et al., 2011; Sedikides, 2018). It is not that people are oblivious to reality constraints (e.g., objective standards or veridical social checks; Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Buckelew,

Byrd, Key, Thornton, & Merwin, 2013; Preuss & Alicke, 2009). Rather, self-enhancement and self-protections strivings are not fully and duly subject to reality constraints, especially when the self feels to be under siege. I will review both indirect and direct evidence for this proposal, relying on diverse samples (university students, community members, prisoners), disparate methodologies (field studies, laboratory experiments, meta-analyses), and varied cultures (East-Asian, Western). The review will be illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Indirect evidence for a cavalier orientation toward reality constraints: on the doggedness of self-enhancement

The broader context might serve to weaken the self-enhancement motive (or strengthen the self-assessment motive). If so, one would correspondingly expect subdued self-enhancement strivings. Instances of broader context include culture, religion, mind-body practices, and prison environments.

Culture

East-Asian culture has been held by some to thwart self-enhancement strivings compared to Western culture. The former culture allegedly forges (through socialization practices) an interdependent self by promoting societal embeddedness, relational harmony, and responsibility to others. The latter culture, in contrast, allegedly forges an independent self by promoting self-sufficiency, distinctiveness, and personal success (for reviews, see: Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The data, however, have not been friendly to the assertion that East-Asian culture is particularly effective in overpowering self-enhancement strivings. For starters, the abovementioned 60 strivings, distilled in four families, are equally prevalent in East-Asian culture (Hepper, Sedikides, & Cai, 2013). More revealing are the results of a comprehensive meta-analysis that included 299 samples and 126,916 participants (Dufner, Gebauer, Sedikides, & Denissen, 2018). This meta-analysis examined East-West differences in strivings that were self-reported, such as better-than-average judgments, downward social comparisons, and the self-serving bias. It also examined East-West differences in striving that featured an objective benchmark, such as standardized criteria (e.g., test scores) or impartial testimonies (i.e., informant reports). Objective benchmarks (also known as criterion-discrepancy measures) are especially relevant to the topic of this article, as they can permit the determination of how attuned strivings are to reality. The meta-analysis found that Easterners and Westerners self-enhance to an equivalent degree on both self-reports and criterion-discrepancy measures.

Members of the two cultural groups may manifest equivalent levels of self-enhancement, in part, by deploying distinct strategies that reflect cultural norms. In particular, Easterners self-enhance on the cultural ideal of collectivism; for example, they believe they are superior to ingroup members on agreeableness, cooperativeness, and loyalty. Westerners, however, self-enhance on the cultural ideal of individualism; for example, they believe they are superior to their doppelgänger on uniqueness, originality, and leadership. Stated otherwise, Easterners regard collectivism, whereas Westerners regard individualism, as central to their self-definition (i.e., personally

important), and this self-centrality drives perceptions of superiority. The empirical record supports this interpretation (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003; for reviews, see: Chiu, Wan, Cheng, Kim, & Yang, 2011; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Cai, 2015).

Religion

Religion is considered a potent suppressor of self-enhancement strivings. Christianity, as a case in point, is purported to serve an ego-quieting function (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2013). Both the Old Testament (Isaiah 14:12 – the story of Lucifer) and the New Testament (1 John 2:16) depict self-enhancement as a worldly temptation that undercuts God's good will for humanity. The Catholic Church in the Catechism classified *superbia* (i.e., vanity/pride) as one of the seven deadly sins, and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) labelled it the deadliest of all deadly sins (Pope, 2002). Loving the self (*amor sui*) is antithetical to loving God (*amor dei*) according to Augustine of Hippo (354–430; see O'Donovan, 1980), and church attendance keeps *amor sui* in check according to Martin Luther (1530; see Kolde, 1914). Not only religious authorities, but philosophers (Kierkegaard, 1962), evolutionary theorists (Darwin, 1998), sociologists (Durkheim, 1995), and psychologists (Baumeister, 1991; Haidt, 2012; Leary, 2004) have also aligned with the view that Christianity quiets the ego.

A corollary of the above theorizing is that Christians will self-enhance less than non-Christians, if at all. The data, however, have not been supportive of this corollary (Gebauer, Sedikides, & Schrader, 2017). In terms of the better-than-average effect (Alicke, 1985), Christians believed that, compared to fellow Christians, they were more likely to live up to commandments of faith (e.g., "I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have no other gods before me," "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain") and commandments of communion (e.g., "Thou shalt honor thy mother and thy father," "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods"). In terms of a criterion-discrepancy measure, the overclaiming task (Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003), Christians overclaimed knowledge both on communal domains (e.g., "international health charities," "parenting and childcare") and on religious domains (e.g., "important Christian saints," "key stories of the New Testament") more than non-believers did. Lastly, Christians, compared to non-believers, scored higher on communal narcissism (Gebauer, Sedikides, Verplanken, & Maio, 2012).

Religious self-enhancement is also sensitive to cultural norms: self-enhancement strivings are tactical. People self-enhance more strongly on religiosity when they live in cultures that place a particularly positive value on religion (e.g., USA vs. UK) or when they occupy cultural settings in which religion reflects a particularly positive social identity (e.g., Christian US universities vs. secular US universities; Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010). Relevantly, religious self-enhancement is associated with more psychological benefits, specifically adjustment (e.g., the extent to which an individual endorses such attributes as "healthy," "optimistic," and "resilient") and greater self-esteem, in religious than secular cultures (Gebauer, Sedikides, & Neberich, 2012; Gebauer et al., 2017).

Mind-body practices

Mind-body practices are often touted as powerful antidotes to self-enhancement strivings. In both yoga and Buddhist philosophy, the self (or ego) and its proclivity to

exaltation are denounced as sources of ill-being (Collins, 1992). It is imperative, then, to quiet the ego. Yoga and meditation exercises can do just that, claim both relevant practitioners (Aurobindo, 1996; Dalai Lama, 2009) and research psychologists (Carlson, 2013; Leary & Diebels, 2017). Such exercises are presumed to eradicate self-enhancement strivings by undermining the importance one assigns to their personal characteristics or actions (Leary & Diebels, 2017; Ryan & Rigby, 2015).

Again, however, the data have not been sympathetic to these ideas (Gebauer et al., 2018). Students in eight Hatha Yoga schools engaged in weekly 90-minute yoga exercises (e.g., “asanas” or postures, “pranayamas” or breathing, “savasana” or relaxation) for a period of 15 weeks. In some weeks, students executed those exercises and then completed the dependent measures (treatment condition); in other weeks, the same students completed the measures first and then executed the exercises (control condition). In the treatment condition, participants perceived yoga as more central to their self-definition, rated themselves as superior yogis to the average student in their class, and scored higher on communal narcissism (e.g., “I will be well known for the good deeds I will have done”). Self-centrality mediated the “effect” of yoga practice on self-enhancements (i.e., better-than-average effect, communal narcissism). In a separate study, participants with prior meditation experience engaged in a weekly 15-minute and audio-guided loving-kindness Metta Meditation, which emphasizes the importance of mindfulness and a life-orientation towards others, for a total of four weeks. In some weeks, participants engaged in meditation and then completed the dependent measures (treatment condition), and in other weeks did the reverse (control condition). Treatment condition participants viewed meditation as more self-central, considered themselves superior to the average student in their class on communal traits (e.g., free from envy), and scored higher on communal narcissism. As before, self-centrality mediated the “effect” of meditation on self-enhancement (i.e., better-than-average effect, communal narcissism). Of note, in both studies, participants in the treatment conditions reported comparative psychological benefits, as assessed by self-esteem, hedonic well-being (e.g., “I am happy,” “The conditions of my life are excellent;” Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) and eudemonic well-being (e.g., autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life; Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

A reason mind-body practices have become popular in the West (Cramer et al., 2016) and have emerged as a legitimate topic of psychological inquiry (Karremans, Schellekens, & Kappen, 2017; Van Dam et al., 2018) is their psychological benefits (Sedlmeier et al., 2012). The research described above (Gebauer et al., 2018) raises the possibility that these benefits are due to mind-body practices strengthening rather than weakening self-enhancement. Self-enhancement, after all, is known to be associated with, or confer, well-being or adjustment benefits across cultures (Dufner et al., 2018).

Prison environment

Few realities are as physically constraining as being imprisoned. Moreover, being imprisoned seems liable to impose psychological constraints too. In particular, being convicted of breaking important social, moral, or ethical rules would appear to furnish good prima facie evidence of objective shortcomings. In the face of such shortcomings, and also due to harm reduction programs, a modicum of humility might be deemed appropriate.

And yet prisoners self-enhance (Sedikides, Meek, Alicke, & Taylor, 2014). In particular, when adult prisoners compared themselves to other prisoners on a variety of prosocial traits (e.g., honest, moral, kind to others, trustworthy, law-abiding), they rated themselves as superior. More startlingly, when prisoner compared themselves to community members on the same set of prosocial traits, they rated themselves as superior on all of them except law-abidingness; here, they perceived their standing as equivalent to those who were not behind bars. Research on unrealistic optimism also attests to a relative lack of self-insight (Kruger & Dunning, 1999) among prisoners. For example, they predict lower levels of recidivism than base rates would suggest (Dhimi, Mandel, Loewenstein, & Ayton, 2006).

Direct evidence for a cavalier orientation toward reality constraints: on the doggedness of self-protection or when accuracy hurts

The self-assessment motive might be fortified (or the self-protection motive diluted) in the absence of social context rife with normative pressures. This might be so when participants are instructed to process self-relevant information as scrupulously as possible in their own privacy – anonymously and confidentially. Here, a researcher would expect to observe muted self-protection strivings. Both the self-reflection task and the mnemonic neglect task provide fertile grounds for addressing this issue.

The self-reflection task: strategic self-ignorance

The self-reflection task allows participants the opportunity to acquire veridical self-knowledge free of self-presentational or evaluative concerns (Sedikides, 1993, 2018). University students (here: at a Western university) are presented with sets of 12 questions referring to various traits. The traits vary in terms of how negative or positive they are, and how central or peripheral they are to participants' self-definition. Examples of negative central traits (i.e., important for participants not to have) are *unfriendly* and *untrustworthy*; of positive central traits (i.e., important for participants to have) are *friendly* and *trustworthy*; of negative peripheral traits (i.e., unimportant for participants not to have) are *unpredictable* and *immodest*; and of positive peripheral traits (i.e., unimportant for participants to have) are *predictable* and *modest*. The 12 questions that refer to each trait vary in diagnosticity – the probability that the behavior is present provided the corresponding trait is present. Examples of high diagnosticity questions are: "Have I ever betrayed someone's confidence in me?" (untrustworthy), "Would I introduce a new classmate to my friends?" (friendly), "Do people never know what's going to come out of my mouth in any situation?" (unpredictable), "Do I take the focus off myself and redirect it to others?" (modest). Participants read all 12 questions and then select the three most important questions that they would ask themselves to find out what kind of a person they truly are. So, the implied emphasis is on the pursuit of accurate self-knowledge, which should activate an otherwise more dormant self-assessment motive. Yet, despite such instructional encouragement, participants do not only strive for accurate self-knowledge.

In particular, if the self-assessment motive guided the pursuit of self-knowledge, then participants would be equally likely to choose high diagnosticity questions to find out if

they possessed negative central traits or positive central traits. That is, learning that they were unkind and untrustworthy would be as valuable to them as learning that they were kind and trustworthy. However, if the self-protection motive guided the pursuit of self-knowledge, then participants would be less likely to choose high diagnosticity questions to find out if they possessed negative central traits relative to positive central traits. Learning that they were unkind and untrustworthy would be less valuable to them, posing a threat to self. Sure enough, participants selected lower-diagnosticity questions when reflecting on their negative as opposed to positive central traits. (Note: The diagnosticity of questions selected for negative peripheral traits did not vary from the diagnosticity of questions selected for positive peripheral traits, as negative peripheral traits are not a self-threat.) These result patterns emerged even when participants generated their own questions and even when they engage in the self-reflection task the way a scientist would. However, the patterns did not emerge when participants completed the task in reference to an acquaintance rather than the self. When attempting to figure out what kind of a person an acquaintance was, participants were equally likely to choose high diagnosticity questions for negative central and positive central traits. Taken together, participants shied away from truthful self-knowledge when it was likely to hurt. Conceptually similar findings have been obtained with variants of this paradigm (Hepper & Sedikides, 2012), cross-culturally (Kim, Chiu, Peng, Cai, & Tov, 2010), and in naturalistic settings (Skowronski, 2011).

The mnemonic neglect task: forgetting one's faults

The mnemonic neglect task also offers an opportunity for veridical self-understanding unencumbered by evaluative or self-presentational considerations (Sedikides & Green, 2000). On the basis of an ostensibly valid personality test, students (here: in a Western university) receive feedback in the form of 32 high diagnosticity behaviors. Eight of these behaviors exemplify negative central traits (e.g., *unkind*: "Would refuse to lend classnotes to a friend who was ill"), eight positive central traits (e.g., *kind*: "Would help a handicapped neighbor paint his house"), eight negative peripheral traits (*complaining*: "Would constantly talk about how much stuff there is to be done"), and eight positive peripheral traits (e.g., *uncomplaining*: "Would minimize bad experiences when telling about them"). Crucially, half of the participants are informed that these are behaviors *they* are likely to enact, whereas the remaining half are informed that these are behaviors *an acquaintance* (Chris, a hypothetical peer) is likely to enact. After an intervening period in which participants work on a distractor assignment (e.g., a geography problem), they are unexpectedly asked to recall as many of the feedback behaviors as possible.

If the self-assessment motive guided feedback recall, then participants would be equally likely to remember behaviors exemplifying negative central and positive central traits. Here, participants would process information about their faults (negative central traits) as deeply as information about their strengths (positive central traits). This would reflect an equivalent desire to conclude that they were likely to behave kindly or unkindly, regardless of the broader implications of such a behavior for them (i.e., being an unkind person). Participants might also be expected to process equally deeply, and so to recall equally well, unfavorable and favorable feedback about Chris, having no epistemic axe to grind. By contrast, if the self-protection motive guided feedback recall,

then participants would be less likely to remember behaviors exemplifying negative central than positive central traits, when those behaviors were predicated of them personally. Here, participants would process information about their faults less deeply than information about their strengths. They would be less inclined to conclude that they were likely to behave unkindly than kindly, given the broader implications for their self-concept. As it happens, participants selectively forget behavioral feedback that bears on central negative central traits (as opposed to positive central traits), but only when that feedback is predicated of them (as opposed to Chris). In addition, the pattern does not hold for peripheral traits, regardless of their valence or predication. This selective amnesia is due to the threat that negative central feedback represents for the self (Green & Sedikides, 2004; Green, Sedikides, & Gregg, 2008). Conceptually similar findings have been obtained with variants of the mnemonic neglect task paradigm (Sedikides, Green, Saunders, Skowronski, & Zengel, 2016), across different cultures (Sedikides et al., 2016; Tan, Newman, & Zhang, 2014), and in naturalistic sites (Ritchie et al., 2015; Ritchie, Sedikides, & Skowronski, 2017).

Setting boundaries to self-enhancement and self-protection

The twin motives of self-enhancement and self-protection, and their corresponding strivings, are potent and prevalent to the point of being problematic in terms of their impact on business (Chatterjee & Pollock, 2016; Sedikides & Campbell, 2017), politics (Garrard, 2017; Watts et al., 2013), and science (Diamandis, 2013; Diamandis & Bouras, 2018). Keeping these strivings in check has been proven challenging, as various efforts have failed (Cai et al., 2011; Plous & White, 1995) or been compromised by the elasticity of strivings (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Critcher, Helzer, & Dunning, 2011). However, this does not mean that the strivings are boundless; instead, they may be tamable at least in the short run. I consider two broad paths that researchers have taken to delineate striving boundaries: intrapersonal and interpersonal.

Intrapersonal boundaries

How could people become more receptive to unfavorable, but diagnostic, feedback about themselves? Perhaps by counteracting the potency of the self-protection motive through activation of the *self-improvement* motive (Sherman & Hartson, 2011). The latter motive was activated in an experiment that implemented the mnemonic neglect task (Green, Sedikides, Pinter, & Van Tongeren, 2009). For half of participants, jumbled sentences included words conveying self-improvement (e.g., aspiration), whereas for the other half no sentence included such words. Next, participants completed an ostensibly valid personality test, received behavioral feedback allegedly implied by it, and finally performed a surprise recall task. In the control condition, participants exhibited selective forgetting of their weaknesses (i.e., had poorer recall for negative central than for positive central behaviors). However, this pattern was abolished in the self-improvement activation condition: here, participants were equally likely to recall feedback about their weaknesses and strengths. In another experiment also featuring the mnemonic neglect task (Green et al., 2008), participants manifested selective amnesia following ego-deflation (i.e., a failure experience), but recalled feedback about their feats and follies to an equivalent degree following ego-inflation (i.e., a success experience).

People may also be more willing to acknowledge their negative characteristics and downplay their positive ones following explanatory introspection (Sedikides, Horton, & Gregg, 2007). This entails contemplating not only whether, but also why, one might have negative and positive traits (i.e., generate reasons for it). In contrast, regular introspection involves pondering simply whether one has negative and positive traits. Participants who engaged in explanatory introspection (vs. regular introspection and control) were more likely to endorse negative traits and decrease the endorsement of positive traits. For explanatory introspection to be effective, however, participants needed to write down the reasons they had generated, a process that led to an increase in uncertainty about themselves. In another line of research, belief in the superiority of one's political beliefs was reduced as result of increased awareness these beliefs (due to external feedback), with an accompanying proclivity to attend to information previously considered inferior (Hall & Raimi, 2018.)

But what happens when people receive experimental instructions to describe their negative traits (Cheung, Wildschut, Sedikides, & Pinter, 2014)? They oblige, but they spontaneously adopt diminutive terms, such as "a little bit." More critically, when happens when participants receive experimental instructions to acknowledge their most appalling behavior, such as the most despicable thing they did to someone else (Preuss & Alicke, 2017)? Despite recognizing their fault, participants engaged in a series of inventive self-protection or self-enhancement maneuvers. In particular, they minimized the degree to which their action represented the kind of person they were, claimed a low probability of repeating this action, argued that others were more likely to repeat this action than they were, and predicted greater subsequent moral improvement when comparing themselves to peers who admitted the same misdeed. However, having read descriptions of these actions, observers did not share participants' self-exculpatory self-evaluations; instead, they were very critical of these untoward actions.

Interpersonal boundaries

Interpersonal checks may also deter self-protection and self-enhancement strivings. Accountability is a case in point. In one line of research, participants wrote an essay (on "Should the United States pursue exploration of the planet Mars?") and subsequently were asked to grade it. Before doing so, however, half were informed that they would have to explain, justify, and defend their grades to another person (i.e., audience; accountability condition), whereas the remaining half learned that their grades would be confidential and untraceable to them (control condition). Participants in the accountability condition gave their essays lower grades. This reduction in the self-enhancement strivings (i.e., positivity of self-evaluations), however, was achieved only when participants were identifiable to their audience, only when identifiability lead to evaluation apprehension, and only when evaluation apprehension instigated a focus on their limitations as writers (Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002). Relatedly, participants also tone down the positivity of their self-presentations under accountable (i.e., presence of a friend) than unaccountable (i.e., presence of a stranger) conditions (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995), although they often mismanage the impressions they convey to others (Steinmetz, Sezer, & Sedikides, 2017).

Relational closeness is another case in point. Here, the two self-motives (i.e., self-enhancement and self-protection) may conflict with the need to belong (Gabriel, Valenti, & Young, 2016). Indeed, self-protection strivings subside. In the mnemonic neglect task, participants uncharacteristically remember feedback about the weaknesses as much as feedback about their strengths, when it is delivered by a close other rather than a stranger (Green et al., 2009). Also, when participants are bolstered via thinking about the personal significance of a close relationship, they open up to negative feedback. In one study (Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005), participants completed a demanding intellectual ability task, and then visualized a relationship that was positive and close (e.g., friend), negative and close (e.g., mother-in-law), or neutral (e.g., checkout clerk). Afterwards, all participants received unfavorable performance feedback. Subsequently, they indicated their interest in receiving additional feedback that would highlight their liabilities regarding the intellectual ability in question. Participants who had visualized a positive close relationship indicated greater willingness in receiving liability-focused feedback than their counterparts. To be exact, they did not desire unfavorable feedback, but they were less averse to doing so.

The self-serving bias too is curtailed by close relationships. Following completion of an interdependent-outcomes creativity task, dyads of strangers or friends received either unfavorable or favorable performance feedback. Strangers exhibited the self-serving bias: They took credit for the dyadic success, but attributed blame for the dyadic failure to their partner. Friends, however, refrained from the self-serving bias: Neither did they claim the success as their own nor did they shift the blame for failure to their partner (Campbell, Sedikides, Reeder, & Elliot, 2000). This pattern was also obtained when relational closeness was induced experimentally among strangers (who did not anticipate future interactions). Unacquainted participants engaged in a 9-minute exercise, which prompted the gradual escalation of self-disclosure via the exchange of questions and answers of increasing intimacy (e.g., "Where are you from?", "What are your hobbies?", "Describe the last time you felt lonely"). This exercise fostered closeness. Then all participants completed the creativity task. However, those in the relational closeness condition worked with the same partner, whereas those in the relational distance condition worked with a different partner. Feedback followed. Relationally distant participants manifested the self-serving bias, but relationally close participants did not (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998). Similar findings were obtained with Japanese participants (Takata, 2003). Regardless, even in relationally close dyads, participants do not respond kindly to selfishness: They reciprocate the self-serving bias to a partner who has showed it (tit-for-tat; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 2002).

How can self-enhancement and self-protection be explained?

Explanations for self-enhancement and self-protection can be advanced at the societal level of analysis. According to one account, self-enhancement is a product of economic inequality. In support, although self-enhancement strivings (in the form of the better-than-average effect) were observed across 15 nations, their magnitude varied as a function of socioeconomic differences: Cultures with higher inequality evinced stronger self-enhancement above and beyond the individualism/collectivism dimension (Loughnan et al., 2011). Given the polarization of benefits and costs, individual will

compete for social superiority (Kerbo, 2011), which they will express as self-enhancement. This view is reinforced by findings that individuals higher on the socio-economic ladder report a stronger better-than-average effect (Varnum, 2015) and greater self-esteem (Twenge & Campbell, 2002).

According to another account, self-enhancement is due to exposure at a younger age to a particular socio-historical context. In support, persons who reached adulthood during an economic recession are less likely to be narcissistic in later life (Bianchi, 2018). Emerging adults are impressionable, as they rely heavily on their socio-economic environment for the formation of their identities, beliefs, and value systems (Duncan & Agronick, 1995). This view is reinforced by findings that experiences obtained during emerging adulthood can influence later beliefs and values in a manner that reflects the pressing concerns of the relevant developmental period (Giuliano & Spilimbergo, 2014). In all, more affluent socio-economic environments will beget independence and a focus on the self (i.e., more self-enhancement), whereas harsher socio-economic environments will beget interdependence and a focus on others (i.e., less self-enhancement; Park, Twenge, & Greenfield, 2014).

The above two accounts certainly have some explanatory power. Self-enhancement and self-protection, however, are far broader phenomena. For starters, they have been observed throughout history, called different names in different historical periods (e.g., “hubris” in ancient Greece, “superbia” in early Christianity, “arrogance” in the middle ages), and been embodied by a host of public figures across ages (e.g., Cleon, Julius Caesar, Napoleon). The strivings are genetically influenced (Luo, Cai, Sedikides, & Song, 2014; Luo, Liu, Cai, Wildschut, & Sedikides, 2016), and have a neurophysiological basis (Cai, Wu, Shi, Gu, & Sedikides, 2016; Yang et al., 2018). They are found among young children (Thomaes, Brummelman, & Sedikides, 2017). They are spontaneous or automatic (Paulhus, Graf, & Van Selst, 1989), and are observed not only explicitly but also implicitly (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Yamaguchi et al., 2007). And they extend to one’s possessions (Nesselrode, Beggan, & Allison, 1999), beliefs (Taber & Lodge, 2006), theories (Gregg, Mahadevan, & Sedikides, 2017), children (Wenger & Fowers, 2008), and ingroups (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). Most everything, it seems, that is linked to the self acquires a positive value (Gebauer, Riketta, Broemer, & Maio, 2008).

As such, no matter how undesirable, even comical, self-enhancement and self-protection strivings some times are and look from an observer standpoint (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Sedikides, Hoorens, & Dufner, 2015; Steinmetz et al., 2017), they need to be taken seriously. Why do they persist? I summarize four explanations.

Psychological health

Self-enhancement is positively associated with, or augments, psychological adjustment (Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Recent meta-analytically findings concur. Self-enhancement covaries with, and predicts, higher levels of life satisfaction and positive affect, as well as lower levels of negative affect and depression, across cultures (Dufner et al., 2018). Experimental findings also concur (O’Mara, Gaertner, Sedikides, Zhou, & Liu, 2012). Participants reported on their psychological adjustment (i.e., life satisfaction, subjective well-being, depression,

anxiety, stress) at Time 1. At Time 2, they were randomly assigned to the self-enhancement condition (where they described how a central trait was more descriptive of them than others) or the self-effacement condition (where they described how a central trait was less descriptive of them than others), and completed the same measures of psychological adjustment. Participants who self-enhanced (vs. self-effaced) reported higher psychological adjustment from baseline, in both Western and Eastern cultures.

Goals

Self-enhancement is positively associated with, or augments, the motivation to pursue personally important goals and the attainment of such goals (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Longitudinal research on academic achievement is consistent with this assertion. Relevant studies assess academic self-enhancement (e.g., belief in superior achievement) and then track academic performance among university students. Higher academic self-enhancement predicts both stronger motivation to succeed academically (Gramzow & Willard, 2006; Willard & Gramzow, 2009) and better grades (Chung, Schriber, & Robins, 2016; Dufner et al., 2012; Gramzow, Johnson, & Willard, 2014).

Experimental research has also supported this assertion. As one example, participants who received self-enhancing (vs. self-improving) feedback judged it as more satisfying than useful, became more optimistic about their performance, and indicated stronger intentions to persist on the task at hand (Sedikides et al., 2016). As another example, participants who self-enhanced on creativity (i.e., brought to mind recent instances in which they were creative and more so than others) generated more creative solutions to a task compared to those who (1) self-effaced about creativity, (2) neither self-enhanced nor self-effaced about creativity, or (3) brought to mind positive thoughts about a task unrelated to creativity (O'Mara & Gaertner, 2017). Facilitation of goal pursuit and achievement may be partly due to self-enhancement conducting to psychological health (Chung et al., 2016; Dufner et al., 2012).

Besides performance goals, the self-motives may also facilitate interpersonal goals. Self-protection, in particular, may manifest itself as a form of self-deception. It has been theorized that, by hiding one's misdeeds from one's self, the individual is more capable of convincing and deceiving others of his or her benevolence (von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). Preliminary empirical evidence is consistent with this theoretical view (Smith, Trivers, & von Hippel, 2017).

Leadership election

Self-enhancement (in the form of narcissism) appears to be linked to being elected as a leader. Indeed, narcissists are perceived as possessing many of the prototypical leader characteristics (e.g., self-efficacy, dominance, charisma; Nevicka, 2018). This would explain why they are rated as leaders in both educational (Judge, LePine, & Rich, 2006) and organizational (Schnure, 2010) settings. This might also explain why they get elected. In one study (Brunell et al., 2008), groups of four unacquainted members (managers or undergraduate students) discussed various topics and then proceeded to

select their leader. Members high on narcissism were more likely to be elected as leaders than those low on narcissism. Apparently, narcissists' extraversion, confidence in their opinion, and self-esteem exuded leadership potential. Self-enhancement may also confer leadership election benefits through a protracted sequence: self-enhancement is linked to psychological health, which encourages achievement (Chung et al., 2016; Dufner et al., 2012), which in turn promotes leadership.

Sexual selection

Self-enhancement also confers a sexual selection advantage. In a 17-session speed-dating study, participants rated the respective individual on desirability as a short-term and long-term partner. The self-enhancement index consisted of the discrepancy between self-rated attractiveness and actual attractiveness (i.e., height and body mass index, observer-rated facial and vocal appeal). Participants rated self-enhancers as more desirable short-term (but not long-term) mates (Schroeder-Abe, Rentzsch, Asendorpf, & Penke, 2016). A meta-analysis also confirmed that self-enhancement (in the form of narcissism) is positively related to attractiveness (Holtzman & Strube, 2010).

One reason for why self-enhancers (e.g., narcissists) are seen as attractive (and thus desirable short-term partners) has to do with their vanity, reflected in their preoccupation with physical appearance. Narcissists are more likely to sport flashy clothing and engage in excessive grooming, which influence observer judgments of attractiveness (Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008) and help them create positive first impression (Holtzman & Strube, 2013). A second reason is their boldness (Dufner, Rauthmann, Czarna, & Denissen, 2013). Relatedly, self-enhancement's sexual selection advantage may be transmitted through psychological health and leadership election.

Concluding remarks

Self-enhancement and self-protection strivings emerge even when they should not: in East-Asian culture, religious environments, mind-body practices, and prison settings. The strivings even emerge when individuals engage in deep self-reflection about the nature of the self – privately, anonymously, and confidentially – under the explicit instruction to pursue accurate self-knowledge. Finally, they emerge in similar accuracy-fostering circumstances when one recalls feedback about the self.

Self-enhancement and self-protection strivings are thus remarkably dogged, more than one would have guessed. Yet, it pays off to find out if they can be controlled, as lower self-enhancement strivings may help individuals maximize their social environment, and less acute self-protection strivings may help them to come to terms with deficiencies that match reality (and perhaps open the road to improvement). Systematic attempts to curtail these strivings have met with mixed success. Typically, a chain of processes is required for effective curtailment (e.g., accountability → identifiability → evaluation apprehension → focus on weakness). This chain is difficult to implement in an intervention. Also, it is not clear for how long the striving can be kept subdued; likely, not for long, and perhaps not for more than a few minutes.

The doggedness of self-enhancement/self-protection may be due to the psychological and social functions that they serve. In particular, they are positively related, or

conduce, to psychological health, goal pursuit and attainment, leadership election, and sexual selection. It is possible that all these functions can be traced back to the ancestral environment, as evolutionary thinking suggests (Holtzman, 2018; Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000; von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). If self-enhancement and self-protection strivings are functional and doggedly persistent, society might have to consider how to channel them suitable and constructively rather than take measures to eradicate them (Papageorgiou et al., 2018; Sedikides & Campbell, 2017).

In all, people are greatly concerned with reality, and they have to be. However, they are also unduly eager to compromise it, when it is likely to sting, as part of a broader trade-off. To paraphrase Alexander Pope (1711), self-protection and self-enhancement rush in where self-assessment fears to tread.

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