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# Self-Evaluation: To Thine Own Self Be Good, To Thine Own Self Be Sure, To Thine Own Self Be True, and To Thine Own Self be Better

Article in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* · January 1997

DOI: 10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60018-0

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SELF-EVALUATION: TO THINE  
OWN SELF BE GOOD, TO THINE  
OWN SELF BE SURE, TO THINE  
OWN SELF BE TRUE, AND TO  
THINE OWN SELF BE BETTER

Constantine Sedikides

Michael J. Strube

1. Introduction

The greatest magnifying glasses in the world are a  
man's own eyes when they look upon his own person.

Men very seldom change; try though we will,  
beneath the shifts of exterior doctrine, our  
hearts so often remain what they were.

(Murray Kempton "O'er Moor and Fen"  
*Part of Our Time*, 1955)

I have to live with myself, and so  
I want to be fit for myself to know;  
I want to be able as days go by,  
Always to look myself straight in the eye.  
I don't want to stand with the setting sun  
And hate myself for the things I've done.

(Edgar A. Guest, *Myself*)

All progress is based upon a universal innate desire  
on the part of every organism to live beyond its income.

(Samuel Butler, 1835-1902)

It is a scientific and cultural truism that self-evaluation, the process by  
which the self-concept is socially negotiated and modified, is motivated.  
Motives have long been postulated to color the ways in which people  
select self-relevant information, gauge its veracity, draw inferences about

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themselves, and make plans for the future. Indeed, the notion that self-evaluation is motivated goes several millennia back. Epicureanism (e.g., Epicurus, 341-270 B.C.; Hermarchus of Mitylene-successor to Epicurus; Polystratus-successor to Hermarchus) argued that the pursuit of pleasure is the predominant motive of human behavior. According to this view, individual actions are morally appropriate insofar as they produce pleasure, and are morally reprehensible if they generate pain. Thus the construction of the self and a supporting social network is based on the goal of increasing one's personal pleasure. For example, the most important criterion for the selection of friends and intimate others is their ability to augment one's positive outcomes. By contrast, Skepticism (e.g., Pyrrho of Elis, 365-275 B.C.; Arcesilaus of Pitane, 315-241 B.C.; Aenesidemus of Cnossus-early part of the first century B.C.) declared the epistemological superiority of old knowledge to new knowledge. By viewing new information (about the self or other objects) with caution, one can avoid feelings of doubt and insecurity stemming from possible inferential pitfalls and conflicting data. Yet another philosophical school, the Socratic philosophy (e.g., Socrates, 470-399 B.C.; Euclid of Megara, 450-380 B.C.; Antisthenes of Athens, 445-365 B.C.), proclaimed accurate knowledge of one's self (gnothi seauton) as the highest human virtue. According to this philosophical school, accurate self-knowledge should be sought, regardless of its positive or negative implications, and is attainable through intense self-examination. Finally, Growth philosophers (e.g., Aristotle, 384-322 B.C.; Democritus, ca. 460-370 B.C.; Hippocrates, ca. 460-377 B.C.) emphasized change, growth, and improvement in both plant and animal (including human) life. According to this view, self-development is defined by attempts to improve one's skills, relationships, and well-being.

The enduring concern with these topics is evident in the wealth of contemporary research. Indeed, in many ways, modern psychologists have merely provided new labels for the motives first proposed by the Epicurean, Skeptic, Socratic, and Growth philosophers. These motives-now commonly referred to as self-enhancement, self-verification, self-assessment, and self-improvement, respectively-are the focus of the present chapter. In this chapter, we hope to accomplish three objectives. First, we will define the four motives and provide a selective review of research that indicates their prevalence. Second, we will address the issue of how the four motives operate together to regulate self-evaluation. To facilitate this discussion, we will present a conceptual framework for understanding the interplay of the four motives. This framework will serve as a useful heuristic for consideration of potential moderators that govern the expression of the four motives. Finally, we will discuss several topics and problems related

to the self-evaluation motives that we believe are in need of empirical attention.

It is important at the outset to define clearly the boundaries of this chapter. The chapter is partly a review of the literature, but we will make no attempt to review exhaustively all of the literature related to self-evaluation motives. That is (at least) a book-length task that has been ably achieved in parts by several previous reviews. Instead, our review will serve to justify the claim that four basic self-evaluation motives have been demonstrated convincingly so far and that the crucial question is not “do they exist?” but rather “when do they operate?” and “in whom do they operate?”: Likewise, our attempt to integrate the four motives is not presented as the only conceptual model. Rather, we offer it as a (not necessarily *the*) means for moving the discussion along lines that we think will be productive, that is, defining the situational and individual differences conditions that moderate the expression of self-evaluation motives. The model that we present is not without empirical support, but it is best thought of as a set of working hypotheses awaiting empirical test. Finally, our speculations at the end of this chapter are meant to remind researchers that empirical work to date has taken certain aspects of the self-evaluation process for granted or has neglected other important issues. We attempt to highlight some of these issues in need of scrutiny. One overriding concern that guides this chapter is that research on self-evaluation motives has become a large enterprise without much organization or an agenda for future work. We hope to provide some organization and a clear indication of questions, problems, and issues in most immediate need of attention. Toward that end, we hope to span research areas that have been traditional adversaries, or that have benignly neglected each other. This last objective is consistent with another Hellenistic school of thought, Eclecticism. The Eclectics (e.g., Quintus Sextius-born ca. 70 B.C.; Cicero, 106-43 B.C.; Seneca, A.D. 4-65) believed that the most sensible philosophical strategy is to combine the best that the various doctrines have to offer. We turn first to a discussion of the basic tenets of each motive and a review of supporting research.

### **11. Primary Tenets of the Self-Enhancement, Self-Verification, Self-Assessment, and Self-Improvement Perspectives**

The self-enhancement, self-verification, self-assessment, and self-improvement perspectives<sup>1</sup> are all concerned with “something” that people

<sup>1</sup> Each of these four terms will be used interchangeably to refer to either the motive that presumably guides self-evaluation or the corresponding theoretical perspective.

seek to enhance, verify, assess, or improve. We assume that this “something” is the self-concept, defined for the purposes of this chapter as the cognitive representation of one’s own attributes (Kililstrom & Cantor, 1984; Markus & Wurf, 1987; for a discussion of structural properties of the selfconcept, see Kilhstrom & Klein, 1994). The self-concept (oftentimes abbreviated as “self”) contains knowledge about personality traits, abilities, values, beliefs, expectations, motives, life events, relationships with significant others, possessions, and appearance (Markus, 1983; McGuire, 1984; Tedeschi, 1986). It contains also knowledge about the views of one’s self that are held by others, which may only partly overlap with one’s own views; nevertheless, self-evaluation can be directed at modifying others’ views of the self (impression management). One oversimplification that we will make is to treat all these diverse self-attributes similarly. Our treatment is not meant to imply that the structure and content of the self is unimportant in understanding the operation of self-evaluation motives; we simply must ignore this part of the self-evaluation process in the interest of brevity and focus.

#### A. SELF-ENHANCEMENT

According to the self-enhancement perspective, people are motivated to elevate the positivity of their self-conceptions and to protect their self-concepts from negative information. People are concerned with increasing the positivity or decreasing the negativity of the self as a means for achieving a high level of self-esteem. (For versions of the self-enhancement view, see: Arkin, Cooper, & Kolditz, 1980; Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Bradley, 1978; Brown, 1991; Brown & Dulton, 1995; Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995; Greenwald, 1980; Pyszezyiiski & Greenberg,

For the purposes of this review, we will use the term “self-enhancement” to mean both attempts to increase the positivity of one’s self-concept and attempts to diminish the negativity of one’s self-concept. We acknowledge, however, that the attempt to increase the positivity of the self and the attempt to decrease its negativity may have distinct antecedents and consequences (Paullms & Reid, 1991; Rhodewalt, Morf, Hazlett, & Fairchild, 1991; Tice, 1991). The term “positivity strivings” has been introduced in the literature (Swarm, Hixon, & De La Ronde, 1992; Swarm, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992; Swarm, WenAaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992) as an alternative to the term “self-enhancement.” However, in order to be consistent with the bulk of past research (including our own), we opt to define clearly the old term rather than use the new one. By the term *self-enhancement* we do not wish to imply any innate process that drives the organism toward the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain; we also do not wish to equate self-enhancement with the organism’s struggle for survival. By self-enhancement we simply mean the individual’s propensity to augment the positivity, or diminish the negativity, of the self-concept.

1987; Sackeim, 1983; Steele, 1988; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994; Tesser, 1986, 1988.)

## B. SELF-VERIFICATION

According to the self-verification perspective, people are motivated to maintain consistency between their self-conceptions and new self-relevant information. A confidently held view of the self provides some measure of perceived control over the world. Moreover, if one's self-conceptions are shared by others then social transactions are more predictable. Selfverification thus fosters a sense of control and predictability in an often chaotic social environment. People's primary concern is not with sustaining the positivity of self-conceptions; instead, it is with authenticating existing (either positive or negative) self-conceptions. (For accounts of the selfverification view, see: Aronson, 1969; Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; James, 1890/1950; Lecky, 1945; Secord & Backman, 1965; and Swarm, 1983, 1990.)

## C. SELF-ASSESSMENT

According to the self-assessment perspective, people are motivated to obtain a consensually accurate evaluation of the self. To accomplish this objective, people are interested predominantly in the diagnosticity of self-relevant information, that is, the extent to which the information can reduce uncertainty about an aspect of the self. People seek diagnostic information regardless of its positive or negative implications for the self and regardless of whether the information affirms or challenges existing self-conceptions. In sum, self-assessment serves the function of increasing the certainty with which self-knowledge is held. (For renditions of the self-assessment perspective, see: Festinger, 1954; Haan, 1977; Johoda, 1958; Kelly, 1967; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Nisbett & Valins, 1972; Schachter, 1959; Suls & Miller, 1977; Sorrentino & Hewitt, 1984; Trope, 1983,1986; Vaillant, 1977; Weiner, 1980.)

## D. SELF-IMPROVEMENT

According to the self-improvement perspective, people are motivated to improve their traits, abilities, skills, health status, or well-being. This motive is conceptually different from the other three motives (Taylor, Neter, & Wayment, 1995). Whereas self-enhancement is concerned with maximizing the positivity of the self-concept, self-improvement focuses on genuine

improvement, which does not necessarily include self-concept positivity. Whereas self-verification is concerned with maintaining consistency between old and new self-relevant information, self-improvement focuses on self-concept change. Finally, whereas self-assessment is concerned with increasing the accuracy of self-knowledge, self-improvement focuses on self-concept betterment regardless of self-concept accuracy. Attempts at self-improvement will result in a sense of progress, growth or hope. (For descriptions of the self-improvement perspective, see: Collins, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Harackiewicz, Manderlink, & Sansone, 1992; Harlow & Cantor, 1995; Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Taylor et al., 1995; Taylor, Wayment, & Carrillo, 1996; Wayment & Taylor, 1995; Wheeler, 1966)

### III. Supportive Evidence

In this section, we present evidence that supports the operation of each self-evaluation motive. Each motive is taken as an independent entity, without reference to any competition it may have from other self-evaluation motives. Our objective in this section is simply to highlight that ample empirical evidence exists for each motive.

#### A. SELF-ENHANCEMENT

Empirical tests of the self-enhancement perspective are characterized by remarkable diversity in the choice of independent variables, dependent variables, and experimental designs. This diversity stems from the lack of a single guiding theoretical proposition or a single primary moderator that would dictate a common methodology. Instead, a general assumption that humans are self-bolstering or self-protective underlies the research. The following summary of empirical findings supporting the selfenhancement perspective is organized on the basis of the dependent measures used.

##### *1. Recall and Processing of Self-Relevant Information*

The recall and processing of self-relevant information provides one means of investigating self-enhancement under the assumption that the contents of memory will reflect the nature of the underlying self-evaluation motive. Research using these measures indicates that human memory can clearly

be self-enhancing. People show memory distortions that exalt their own performance (Crory, 1966), remember positive self-relevant attributes better than negative ones (Kuiper & Derry, 1982; Kuiper & MacDonald, 1982; Kuiper, Ofinger, MacDonald, & Shaw, 1985; Mischel, Ebbesen, & Zeiss, 1976; Skowronski, Betz, Thompson, & Shannon, 1991), and remember success feedback better than failure feedback (Silverman, 1964).

Human information processing is also self-enhancing. People process positive self-relevant information faster than negative self-relevant information (Kuiper & Derry, 1982; Kuiper & MacDonald, 1982; Kuiper et al., 1985; Skowronski et al., 1991) and spend more time reading favorable than unfavorable information about themselves (Baumeister & Cairns, 1992). People seek out less information to support their favored conclusions than their unfavored conclusions (Ditto & Lopez, 1992), and manifest selfprotective behavior when making risky decisions (Josephs, Larrick, Steele, & Nisbett, 1992; Larrick, 1993), when engaging in negotiations (Kramer, Newton, & Pommerenke, 1993), and when examining healthrelated messages (Lieberman & Chaiken, 1992). Additionally, people perceive their level of physical attractiveness or performance less accurately and more positively than others do (Feingold, 1992; John & Robins, 1994), and regard positive affect terms as more applicable to the self than negative affect terms, especially when people think about experiencing affect in the future (Staats & Skowronski, 1992). Furthermore, people muster up evidence in support of personal qualities that they believe are socially desirable (Kunda & Sanitioso, 1989; Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990), and reconstruct their pasts in a self-serving fashion (Ross, 1989; see also W. M. Klein & Kunda, 1993). Finally, people define traits and abilities in a self-serving manner (Dunning & Cohen, 1992; Dunning & McElwee, 1995). Even the prototypes of categories that people use for social judgment are self-serving: Highly self-descriptive elements are viewed as central to positive prototypes, whereas negative prototypes are composed of features that are not self-descriptive (Dunning & McElwee, 1995; Dunning, Perie, & Story, 1991). Thus, the social world is construed idiosyncratically and in ways that are self-enhancing.

## 2. *The Above-Average Effect*

People perceive themselves as above average in an extraordinary range of personal characteristics and activities. Compared to the average person, most people believe that they are happier (Freedman, 1978), do better work (Cross, 1977), possess finer leadership abilities and social skills (College Board, 1976/1977), and have higher driving ability (Svenson, 1981), greater managerial adeptness (Larwood, 1978), higher ethical standards



(Bairnhart, 1968), as well as better health prospects (Kirscht, Haefner, Kegeles, & Rosenstock, 1966; Larwood & Whittaker, 1977). People also believe that their self-attributes are more positive and less negative compared to the average person (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986; J. D. Campbell, 1986). Furthermore, people estimate the likelihood of positive events (e.g., getting and maintaining a desirable job, having a gifted child) to be higher for themselves than the average person, and estimate the likelihood of negative events (e.g., being involved in an automobile accident, being a crime victim) to be lower for themselves than the average person (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986; Regan, Snyder, & Kassin, 1995; Robertson, 1977; Weinstein, 1980, 1982). These findings are all the more remarkable in their consistent violation of the statistical rule that only half of a population can fall above the median. Individuals sustain such unduly positive beliefs, at least in part, by selectively generating and evaluating supportive causal theories (Kunda, 1987, 1990).

### 3. *Causal Attributions*

Biased attributional responses have been found frequently, indicating that causal inferences are swayed in part by a concern for self-enhancement. For example, people are more likely to attribute favorable outcomes to the self than to someone else, and are more likely to attribute unfavorable outcomes to another person than the self—a phenomenon known as the self-serving bias (Fiedler, Semin, & Koppetsch, 1991; Green & Gross, 1979; Mirels, 1980; Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976; for reviews, see Arkin et al., 1980; Bradley, 1978; Greenwald, 1980; Mullen & Riordan, 1988; Ross & Fletcher, 1985; Zuckerman, 1979). In fact, excuse making is a common way of coping with failure (C. R. Snyder & Higgins, 1988). Additionally, people cope with a threat by seeking and imposing meaning on life events. Such coping maneuvers include affirmation of an unrelated facet of the self (Steele, 1988), interpretation of ambiguous feedback as positive (Jacobs, Berscheid, & Walster, 1971), and denial (Janoff-Bulman & Tirnko, 1987).

### 4. *The Self-Relevance of Failure or Weakness*

Consistent with a self-enhancement motive, individuals regard tasks at which they have failed as less relevant to the self than tasks at which they have succeeded (Hill, Smith, & Lewicki, 1989; Lewicki, 1984; Tesser & Paullms, 1983; Wyer & Frey, 1983), a process termed by Tajfel and Turner (1986) “social creativity.” In a similar vein, people consider their weaknesses as common and their strengths as unique (J. D. Campbell, 1986;

Marks, 1984). Behaviors consistent with self-conceptions are also perceived as unique (Kulik, Sledge, & Mahler, 1986).

##### 5. *Social Comparison Processes*

Self-enhancement has been demonstrated in the comparison of self to others. People either reduce the amount of social comparison (Gibbons, Persson Benbow, & Gerrard, 1994) or make downward rather than upward comparisons when they experience failure or negative affect (Amabile & Glazebrook, 1982; Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Hakrailler, 1966; Kruglanski & Mayseless, 1990; Levine & Green, 1984; Taylor, Falke, Shoptaw, & Lichtman, 1986; Wills, 1981, 1983, 1991; Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985). Downward social comparison increases psychological adjustment (Affleck, Termen, Weiffer, Fifield, & Rowe, 1987), reduces feelings of being upset (Hakrailler, 1966), and enhances state self-esteem, especially in people who are chronically low in self-esteem (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989; Gibbons & McCoy, 1991; Reis, Gerrard, & Gibbons, 1993). People avoid social comparisons when they suspect that the outcome will be negative (Brickman & Bulman, 1977), particularly when the outcome involves important aspects of the self (Gibbons et al., 1994; Tesser, 1988). In fact, people choose as friends those individuals who excel in domains of relatively minor importance to the self (Tesser, 1988). This secures avoidance of direct comparison with their friends on self-relevant attributes that could result in self-detraction, but allows indirect association with their friends' positive but self-irrelevant qualities, a process that is likely to produce self-magnification **without threat** (Cialdini et al., 1976).

##### 6. *Self-Presentation*

Self-presentation refers to the strategic management of the impressions one is communicating to an audience. The audience can be either internal (Greenwald & Breckler, 1985; Schlenker, 1986; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982) or external (Baumeister, 1982, 1986b; Jones & Pittman, 1982). Further, the self-presentational tactics can be either direct, such as releasing positive information about the self, making excuses for socially unskillful behavior, and self-handicapping (Arkin & Baurngardner, 1985; Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Berglas & Jones, 1978; Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; R. L. Higgins, Snyder, & Berglas, 1990; Mayerson & Rhodewalt, 1988; Schlenker, 1975; Shepperd & Arkin, 1989), or indirect, such as basking in the accomplishments of a friend, blasting the achievements of an enemy, boosting (i.e., removing) the negative qualities of a person with whom one has found the self associated (Cialdini et al., 1976; Cialdini &

Richardson, 1980; Finch & Cialdini, 1989). Regardless, an overarching self-presentational objective is to lead an audience toward a favorable image of the self (Frey, 1978; Greenberg & Pys=ynski, 1985; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, Weigold, & Hallam, 1990). Note that the self-presentation need not be positive; the goal is to produce favorable outcomes or avoid negative outcomes, which might sometimes be accomplished best by, for example, a self-presentation of modesty (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995; Stires & Jones, 1969) rather than aggrandizement, or skepticism rather than unconditional positive regard. The key point is that people are sensitive to the unique situational demands and likely public evaluations of different behaviors.’

## 7. *Summary and Conclusions*

People process, remember, and judge self-relevant information, as well as present and compare themselves, in a manner that will place the self in the best possible light. People will go as far as deceiving themselves in order to achieve this state (Goleman, 1985; Lockard & Paullms, 1988; Paulhus & Levitt, 1987; Sackeim & Gur, 1979). The tendency to engage in the development of a positive self has been found even among depressed persons (Pelham, 1991 a, 1993). Across diverse measures and situations, the literature offers sound support for the self-enhancement motive.

### B. SELF-VERIFICATION

In the typical test of the self-verification perspective, participants are presented with a variety of feedback opportunities from which they can choose to find out whether they possess a particular attribute. The typical dependent measure focuses on the degree to which the participant demonstrates a preference for feedback that is consistent with an existing self-conception. Most commonly, the dependent measures have been concerned with differential attention to and recall of self-referential feedback, solicitation and interpretation of different types of feedback, causal attributions, and behavior in response to nonverifying feedback.

#### 1. *Attention and Recall*

Consistent with a desire for confirmation of important self-attributes, participants spend more time scrutinizing interpersonal feedback when that feed-

‘ Both the literatures on self-presentation and on social comparison are good examples of areas of vast complexity and subtle nuances that we cannot hope to capture in a brief review. Our intent simply is to note that self-enhancement is demonstrated by research in these areas.

back is expected to verify rather than to disconfirm a feature of the self (Swann & Read, 1981b, Experiment 1). Furthermore, consistent with the processing biases, participants recall selectively information that is likely to verify rather than contradict their self-beliefs (Cartwright, 1956; Shrauger, 1982; Silverman, 1964; Swann & Read, 1981b, Experiment 2). Participants also remember self-concept consistent feedback more accurately than self-concept inconsistent feedback (Suinn, Osborne, & Page, 1962).

## *2. Feedback Solicitation and Interpretation*

People solicit self-confirming rather than self-disconfirming feedback from their interaction partners (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & LaPrelle, 1985; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992, Experiment 2; Swann & Read, 1981a, Experiment 1; Swann & Read, 1981 b, Experiment 2). They are even willing to spend more money for the acquisition of self-verifying feedback (Swann & Read, 1981 a, Experiment 2). Furthermore, people process information in ways that support an existing self-view. For example, people examine closely and dismiss self-refuting feedback as inaccurate (Doherty, Weigold, & Schlenker, 1990; Frey & Stahlberg, 1986; Markus, 1977; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Holt, 1985; Shavit & Shouval, 1980; Shrauger, 1982; Shrauger & Lund, 1975) or rate it as less diagnostic than self-affirming feedback (Swann & Read, 1981 a, Experiment 3). People also devalue the credibility of the source of self-refuting feedback (Frey, 1981; Halperin, Snyder, Shenkel, & Houston, 1976; Shrauger & Lund, 1975; Wyer & Frey, 1983). Finally, seeking self-verifying feedback early in the semester is related to evaluations of roommates at the end of the semester: Roommates of dysphorics who had sought confirmation of their negative self-views earlier in the semester were more rejecting of those dysphorics at the end of a semester. Clearly, a concern for self-verification can exist even when this concern is likely to result in rejection (Swann, Wenzel, Krull, & Pelham, 1992).

## *3. Causal Attribution and Behavior*

The causal inferences made about behaviors are biased toward sustaining previously held self-conceptions (Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987). For example, individuals attribute self-confirming behaviors to dispositional factors and self-disconfirming behaviors to situational factors (Kulik et al., 1986). In a related vein, individuals sustain their self-conceptions by selectively generating and testing confirming causal theories (Kunda, 1987). Behavioral evidence also supports the self-verification view. When individuals receive interpersonal feedback that is self-disconfirmatory, they discredit it behaviorally (Brown & Smart, 1991; Dutton & Lake, 1973; Swann & Hill, 1982).

#### 4. Summary and Conclusions

Taken together, past research indicates that people perceive, select, interpret, and recall information in a way that sustains existing self-beliefs. Furthermore, people choose behaviors that reciprocate confirmation, and actively avoid or discredit disconfirming evidence. Self-verification occurs even for self-attributes that are evaluated negatively and among people with negative self-views (De La Ronde & Swann, 1993; Swann, Hixon, & De La Ronde, 1992; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992; Swann, WenAaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992). In summary, there is substantial evidence in support of the self-verification motive.

#### C. SELF-ASSESSMENT

Experimental tests of the self-assessment perspective are relatively homogeneous due largely to the primary importance of uncertainty and diagnosticity in this perspective. In the typical self-assessment experiment, participants are presented with tasks of varying degrees of diagnosticity. The concept of diagnosticity is communicated to participants by telling them that tasks (e.g., aptitude or personality tests) of high diagnosticity can measure accurately characteristics of the self, whereas tasks of low diagnosticity are not capable of measuring self-attributes unequivocally. The dependent measures in these experiments focus on whether participants prefer, choose, or are influenced more by the high- versus low-diagnosticity tasks. According to the self-assessment perspective, diagnostic tasks should be viewed more favorably because they allow a more accurate appraisal of self-attributes, particularly when there is high uncertainty about the level of those self-attributes. The evidence in favor of the self-assessment perspective comes primarily from research on task preference, task choice, and task performance.

##### 1. Task Attractiveness and Preference

Past research indicates that people rate high diagnosticity tasks as more attractive than low diagnosticity tasks (Strube & Roemmele, 1985; Trope, 1979, Experiment 2; Trope, 1980), and prefer to engage in high diagnosticity rather than low diagnosticity tasks (Brown, 1990, Experiments 1-4; Buckert, Meyer, & Schmalt, 1979; Strube, Lott, Le-Xuan-Hy, Oxenberg, & Deichmann, 1986; Strube & Roemmele, 1985; Trope, 1975; Trope & Brickman, 1975). People also manifest greater willingness and stronger intentions to work on high-diagnosticity tasks relative to low-diagnosticity tasks (Trope, 1979, Experiment 2; Trope, 1980).

## 2. Task Choice

Although the preference rating research indicates a desire to engage in diagnostic tasks, in the absence of expected task performance, such ratings may reflect self-presentation rather than a true striving for accuracy. Thus, more convincing evidence for the self-assessment motive is provided by the choice to perform a particular task. Research on task choice demonstrates that people actually choose to test themselves on high-diagnosticity compared to low-diagnosticity task items (Buckert, Meyer, & Schmalt, 1979; Trope, 1975, 1979, Experiment 1; Trope, 1982; Trope & Brickman, 1975) or tasks (Brown, 1990, Experiment 1; Sachs, 1982; Strube et al., 1986; Zuckerman et al., 1979, Experiments 1 and 2).

## 3. Task Construction, Persistence, and Success

When given the opportunity to engage in the task, individuals prefer to construct high-diagnosticity tasks to measure their abilities (Trope & BenYair, 1982, Experiment 1) and persist longer on low-diagnosticity tasks (Trope & Ben-Yair, 1982, Experiment 2). The inverse relation between task diagnosticity and persistence is to be expected. More behavioral attempts are needed on a low-diagnosticity task in order to extract the same amount of information that can be obtained from a high-diagnosticity task in fewer attempts. Individuals also solve a greater number of high-diagnosticity problems (Trope, 1982), presumably because they are more motivated by the information available in such problems.

## 4. Summary and Conclusions

When offered the opportunity to rate, select, or engage in tasks of varying diagnosticity, people favor high-diagnosticity tasks. These effects oftentimes occur despite the self-esteem implications of feedback: Success diagnosticity and failure diagnosticity have been demonstrated to produce comparable effects (Strube & Roemmele, 1985; Strube et al., 1986; Trope, 1980). The extant literature thus supports the self-assessment perspective. Interestingly, when self-assessment effects have been demonstrated, either the experimental conditions have typically created perceptions of uncertainty about a valued ability or a novel but valued ability is presumed to be the focus of investigation. These are, of course, the circumstances where a desire for information would be expected to be strongest.

## D. SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Evidence for the empirical distinctiveness of the self-improvement motive has been provided by Taylor et al. (1995). Feelings of threat or inadequacy

are more likely to instigate the self-improvement motive (and, to a lesser degree, the self-enhancement motive) than any other motive. Objective information is deemed more useful for improvement (and, to a lesser extent, for assessment) than for enhancement or verification. More importantly, future information is considered most useful when the goal is to self-improve rather than self-enhance, self-verify, or self-assess.

Additional evidence for the self-improvement motive comes from social comparison research on cancer victims' coping skills. These patients make upward comparisons when choosing interaction partners among other cancer victims (Molleman, Pruyn, & van Knippenberg, 1986; Taylor, Aspinwall, Gittliano, Dakof, & Reardon, 1993; Taylor & Dakof, 1988). The upward comparison in choice of contacts is interpreted as an attempt on the part of the patients to learn how to cope successfully with the disease (Taylor et al., 1995; for reviews, see: Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wood, 1989; Wood & Taylor, 1991). Upward social comparisons for the purpose of self-improvement occur frequently (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992) and in several other domains, such as (1) coping with arthritis (DeVellis et al., 1991), mental instability, coronary disease, diseases of the vertebrate system, and psychosomatic complaints (Buunk, 1995), (2) dieting (Helgeson & Taylor, 1993), (3) performance on novel tasks (Gruder, 1977; Wheeler et al., 1969), and (4) performance on leisure activities (e.g., the game of bridge; Nosanchuk & Erickson, 1985) (for a review, see: Collins, 1996).

#### *1. Summary and Conclusions*

Although more thorough empirical documentation of the self-improvement motive is needed, the existing data make a quite convincing case for the independent operation of this motive. People are motivated to improve the deficiencies they perceive in themselves.

### **IV. Conceptual Integration**

We next propose a theoretical model, the Self-Concept Enhancing Tactician (SCENT) model,<sup>4</sup> that allows integration of the four perspectives. As we have argued, there is sufficient evidence to support the operation of

<sup>4</sup> The SCENT model builds on some of the assumptions and postulates of its intellectual predecessor, the dynamic self-seeking model described by Strube and Yost (1993). However, the scope of the SCENT model is quite different from the scope of the dynamic self-seeking model. The former intends to provide an integrational framework for the four self-evaluation motives, whereas the latter was developed in the context of research on control motivation.

each motive. Accordingly, we believe that this area needs to move to new generations of research (Zanna & Fazio, 1982). The more productive question is not “do the motives exist?” but rather the questions “under what circumstances do the motives operate?” and “who are the people in whom a given motive is more prevalent than other motives?” In other words, what situational and personality moderators determine the emergence and interplay of the four motives (Sedikides & Strube, 1995)? We believe that the SCENT model provides some guidance in answering that question. Note, however, that our presentation of a theoretical model is meant as a set of working hypotheses that we hope will help direct future research in fruitful ways. We make no claims that the SCENT model represents the true state of affairs; we only claim that it is, in our opinion, a reasonable approximation subject to empirical test and modification.

#### A. THE SCENT MODEL

The SCENT model makes three assumptions that underscore the adaptive, pragmatic, and dynamic aspects of the self-evaluation process. Furthermore, the model offers three postulates or working hypotheses that emphasize the strategic and self-serving nature of the self-evaluation process. The assumptions and postulates will be considered below, and will permeate our ensuing discussion of moderators.

##### *1. Assumptions*

The SCENT model assumes that the self-evaluation process is adaptive; that is, each of the four self-evaluation motives is adaptive for the individual (Heider, 1958; Jones & Gerard, 1967). Adaptiveness, however, is not an easy construct to define; its definition must be linked to the relevant situation, and even then it may not be clear what exactly is adaptive or most adaptive for the individual. Nevertheless, putting aside the difficulties in defining adaptiveness, it is worth noting that researchers from each camp have contended that the motive preoccupying their research is adaptive. For example, it has been argued that self-enhancement is adaptive: In order to be effective in coping with the world, the individual must have a positive and well-protected self-concept, even if that self-concept is not truly accurate. A positively biased self-concept can provide the will or general self-efficacy necessary to initiate novel action (Brown, 1991; Brown & Dutton, 1995; Taylor & Brown, 1988). As R. B. Cairns (1990) put it, self-cognitions do not always have to be veridical in order to be functional . . . Even if one is sick and anxious and poor, there should be reason to get up in the



morning.” (p. 77). Further, it has been argued that self-verification is adaptive: The confirmation of existing self-attributes helps maintain consistency and thus predictability of the social milieu, which provides the individual with feelings of security and control (Swarm, 1983, 1990). Additionally, it has been argued that self-assessment is adaptive: Accurate knowledge of one’s abilities assists in placing sensibly the individual in the appropriate position in social hierarchies and in environments in which demands are well-matched to abilities. Self-assessment can thus allow better planning that will likely optimize individual success (Strube, 1990; Trope, 1986). Finally, it has been argued that self-improvement is adaptive (Taylor et al., 1995; Taylor & Lobel, 1989). Improving one’s intellectual, social and physical skills is a vital prerequisite for exceeding old boundaries and achieving goals set far into the future. In the context of the SCENT model, we consider the adaptiveness argument equally plausible for all four motives and, indeed, take as a given that the motives are so prevalent because they are adaptive for the individual.

Note, in that regard, that the adaptiveness issue is one major difference between the SCENT model on the one hand, and the views of Taylor and Brown (1988, 1994) and Colvin and colleagues on the other (Block & Colvin, 1994; Colvin & Block, 1994; Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995). Taylor and Brown have proposed that self-enhancement is the most important contributor to mental health, whereas Colvin and colleagues have argued for the primacy of self-assessment in determining mental health. According to the SCENT model, however, all four motives can be important contributors to mental health, albeit in different ways and under different circumstances.

The SCENT model also assumes that the self-evaluation process is pragmatic. By that term we mean that self-evaluative processes are not only adaptive, but must be viewed as such from the individual’s standpoint (Lopes, 1991; White, 1984; see Strube, Yost, & Bailey, 1992, for a fuller discussion of the pragmatic philosophical view and its utility for contemporary research on the self). This assumption considers the view of a normatively objective and rational organism as unnecessary. Instead, the organism is expected to exhibit “bounded rationality- (H. Simon, 1957), that is, rationality from the standpoint of the individual’s perception of self and environment, limited though it may be. Although normative criteria are useful, they often ignore the idiosyncratic situational and person-by-situation contingencies with which an individual must grapple. Normatively irrational behavior may frequently be the most rational option available to an individual. Work from the self-verification camp is particularly instructive on this point. Actively seeking negative information about the self may seem irrational from a normative standpoint, but is sensible in the context

of producing a predictable social world for someone with a negative self-concept. Recent work on self-handicapping (Deppe & Harackiewicz, 1996) is also illustrative. High self-handicappers did not practice much before a game of pinball. However, they became more involved in the task and enjoyed it better. The tactical maneuver of not practicing enough removed some of the performance pressure and allowed the high self-handicappers to become absorbed in the task and develop intrinsic motivation for it.

Finally, the SCENT model assumes that the four motives are dynamically interrelated; they do not usually operate independently. Instead, the motives typically serve complementary purposes in the self-evaluation process, and understanding this dynamic interplay will be one of the most important tasks for future research.

## 2. Postulates

The most fundamental postulate of the SCENT model is that the adaptive, pragmatic, and dynamic functions of self-evaluation are primarily served through strategic self-enhancement (cf. Strube & Yost, 1993). The individual is motivated to achieve outcomes that will lead to a most positive self-concept, but the individual does not necessarily attempt to achieve this objective through brute self-aggrandization (for a discussion of the physiological costs of such attempts, see Shedler, Mayman, & Manis, 1993). Instead, the individual usually proceeds through ways and mannerisms that are subtle, are perceptive of the balance between immediate and delayed rewards, and are sensitive to the pressures of the social and cultural context.

More specifically, the SCENT model postulates that self-enhancement concerns can be carried out either directly through flagrant attempts to increase self-concept positivity (what we call *candid* self-enhancement) or, perhaps most often, indirectly through attempts to self-verify, self-assess, or self-improve (what we call *tactical* self-enhancement). Stated otherwise, self-verification, self-assessment, and self-improvement serve ultimately self-enhancement ends. We recognize that proponents of the self-verification, self-assessment, and self-improvement camps may not find this hierarchy particularly appealing, but we remind readers that the SCENT model is intended to guide empirical resolutions of any such debates. Indeed, as we hope to demonstrate, the assumptions underlying the SCENT model suggest several useful directions for research that should ultimately address the relative importance or hierarchical nature of self-evaluation motives.

A second postulate of the SCENT model is that the process of self-evaluation consists of two major components: information and action (Strube & Yost, 1993). The information component represents the generation, refinement, and testing of hypotheses about the quality of self-environment fit (Kruglanski, 1990; M. Snyder, 1981; Trope & Bassok, 1982). This information reflects how well attributes or abilities of the self match with the demands of a given situation. The data that result from the information process, or the implications inferred from these data, can be used in turn to carry out candid and (most often) tactical self-enhancement through action. Thus, the action component represents the opportunistic reaction to existing conditions or the strategic creation of new conditions that either produce positive outcomes or avoid negative outcomes.

Information and action are conceptualized best as mutually dependent. To the extent that information about self-environment fit is reasonably accurate, is likely to lead to skill improvement, and is verifying of self-beliefs, resulting actions are more likely to succeed. Success is more likely because creation of, or reaction to, performance settings can be guided more carefully and therefore the outcome will be more self-enhancing than a less informed action. Likewise, action provides crucial feedback about the validity, rate of improvement, verifying value, or even valence (i.e., positivity-negativity) of the information on which it was based.

As mentioned previously, the information component can be carried out through the activation of either the self-enhancement motive (candid self-enhancement) or the activation of the self-verification, self-assessment, or self-improvement motive (tactical self-enhancement). The activation of a particular motive depends on the type of existing information. An example illustrates this point. If, as the SCENT model suggests, the validity of existing self-knowledge is crucial to self-enhancement, then one critical moderator of motive activation is the certainty of information about a relevant self-attribute. When there is high certainty about a self-attribute in a given situation, then gathering additional diagnostic information is unnecessary and inefficient. Instead, simple confirmation of the self-attribute is the more pragmatic response. Self-verification thus maintains the integrity of self-knowledge against periodic challenge and helps the individual resist unwarranted changes in self-conceptions. It promotes stability in the self in the face of an often disordered social world. Such stability should promote long-term functioning of the self. On the other hand, when no information is available, an accuracy-driven process is more adaptive. Through self-assessment, the individual learns

the contingencies necessary for informed and sensible transactions with the social environment.'

The information one gathers about the self can then be used to create situations strategically or react to environmental events in ways that maximize the positivity of the self. The key point is that self-environment fit is not a random process. People plan to enter or avoid certain situations, and they attempt to respond in self-enhancing ways once in situations no matter how they arrived there. The self-verification, self-assessment, and self-improvement motives are viewed as central to building and maintaining the validity of the self-knowledge base crucial to the most enhancing individual responses. Of course, this does not mean that all responses will appear to be enhancing to the observer. Some apparently self-destructive behaviors (e.g., self-handicapping, defensive pessimism, health-care negligence, staying in an abusive relationship) might seem to violate notions of enhancement. But, such behaviors may be the best or most strategic available response to the individual, at least from that individual's standpoint (Baumeister & Scher, 1988). Sometimes the best or most tactical response is the least aversive of several onerous alternatives.

As argued previously, the information and action features of the SCENT model do not operate independently nor are they mutually exclusive within a given situation. Self-verification, self-assessment, and self-improvement often generate information that reflects well on the self (i.e., they are selfenhancing). Furthermore, action is itself informative, sometimes confirming existing beliefs, sometimes offering new and constructive (i.e., likely to lead to improvement) information about intellectual, social, and physical skills. The information and action components need not operate congruently, however. The long-term demands for accurate and constructive information sometimes dictate that unflattering (i.e., nonenhancing or verifying of negative attributes) information about the self be uncovered in the short run. And, some immediate responses to environmental demands may be uninformative (i.e., unassessing and nonverifying) about improvement and enhancement of self-environment transactions. The potential moderators that determine the interplay of these processes will be discussed shortly.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, matters are never quite this simple. It is possible to have abundant but conflicting information that produces considerable uncertainty about a self-attribute. Under these conditions, several self-evaluative consequences can be anticipated. The high uncertainty could lead to self-assessment, as has been demonstrated in research we reviewed previously. But, uncertainty has also been assumed to be an underlying antecedent of self-handicapping (Jones & Berglas, 1978), which intentionally severs the link between performance and underlying ability level. Possible moderators include the presence or absence of an audience (e.g., Kolditz & Arkin, 1982) or the self-esteem of the actor (e.g., Rhodewalt, Morf, Hazlett, & Fairfield, 1991). In the latter case, high self-esteem individuals may appear to construct barriers to their success, but do so largely to test their limits—a clear attempt to generate diagnostic information.

A third postulate of the SCENT model concerns the functions that the four self-evaluation motives are assumed to serve. As argued previously, self-enhancement is assumed to elevate self-esteem, self-verification is assumed to elevate control, self-assessment is assumed to reduce uncertainty, and self-improvement is assumed to instill a sense of progress and hope. In the context of the SCENT model, we do not view control, certainty, and sense of progress as functions that an individual would necessarily seek for their own sake. Rather, control, certainty, and sense of progress are important to individuals precisely because they are so crucial to the more basic desire for self-enhancement.

Thus, the SCENT model postulates that when self-enhancement is carried out effectively through the information and action components, self-esteem, control, certainty and sense of progress will be high—at least in the relative sense for the individual. That is, successful self-environment fit represents high control and certainty and simultaneously produces high levels of self-esteem and sense of progress for the individual.<sup>7</sup>

### *3. Additional Issues*

Before turning to a discussion of potential moderators that influence the processes postulated by the SCENT model, it is necessary to highlight and clarify some general issues pertaining to the model. First, the SCENT model identifies self-enhancement concerns as primary relative to the other three self-evaluative concerns, a proposition in line with recent research on the early stages of processing of self-relevant information (Beggan, 1992; Bylsma, Tomaka, Luhtanen, Crocker, & Major, 1992; Feys, 1991; Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995; Hoorens & Nuttin, 1993; Krueger & Clement, 1994; Paulbus & Levitt, 1987). This emphasis is also in line with our belief that self-development, like development of the organism as a whole, arises from basic survival principles that are translated into basic concerns about pleasure and pain. The model does not suggest mindless and selfish hedonism, however. We share with many scholars the assumption that the self is embedded inextricably in a larger social and cultural context and can be defined only with reference to that context (Baldwin, 1897; Baumeister, 1986a; Cooley, 1902; Cushman, 1990; Gergen, 1982; Hofstede, 1991; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Mead, 1934; Triandis, 1989). Consequently, self-enhancement necessarily must take into account the general concerns of others. Thus, although periodic selfish behaviors may arise, consistently selfish behavior is not likely to be tolerated, because it violates the social

<sup>7</sup> We are not suggesting that self-enhancement results always in psychological or social benefits; instead, it can sometimes backfire (e.g., Baumeister, 1989; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996).

contract by which the self is defined. In this sense, the SCENT model argues for what might be called “bounded hedonism- (Strube & Yost, 1993). The importance of this bounded hedonism is that the most selfish response is not necessarily the one that will be exhibited. Nonetheless, self-esteem consequences are the most immediate outcomes of the self-enhancement process and provide the essential cues as to the utility of the individual’s actions (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995).

A second issue is the temporal frame of reference in which a self-enhancing behavior is considered. Immediate self-enhancement may conflict with long-term self-enhancement objectives that might be served better by a less enhancing immediate response. The literature on control relinquishment (Strube, Berry, & Moergen, 1985; Strube & Werner, 1985) provides an informative example. Willingly giving up control to another person may seem maladaptive, because it communicates acceptance of another’s superiority. On the other hand, control relinquishment may be the most efficient means to satisfying long-term objectives (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). The phenomenon of defensive pessimism is another example (Cantor & Norem, 1989; Norem & Cantor, 1986). Expressing pessimism regarding one’s impending performance may appear counterproductive. However, this strategy cushions the individual against the debilitating effects of anxiety, and thus maximizes the achievement of a long-term selfenhancing response (e.g., task success). The implication is that whether an individual will self-enhance in the short run or not depends on more than immediate concerns. Stated differently, whether an individual will attempt to self-enhance candidly or tactically and the quality of that attempt must be viewed within a particular self-environment context.

A related consideration is the relative “worth” of information and affect in situations in which the desire for accurate or improving information conflicts with the desire for immediate enhancement. The distinction between information value and affective value has been noted frequently in the literature (Pelham, 1991b; Raynor & McFarlin, 1986), most notably in the distinction between self-enhancement theories (Greenwald, 1980; Tesser, 1988; Tesser & Cornell, 1991) and self-verification theories (Backman, 1988; Lecky, 1945; Swarm, 1990) on the one hand, and in the distinction between self-enhancement theories and self-assessment theories on the other (Trope, 1980; Trope & Neter, 1994). The SCENT model views the distinction as a conflict between immediate self-enhancement and longterm self-enhancement. Long-term self-enhancement might be served best by forgoing immediate self-enhancement in favor of informative (i.e., assessing or improving) but possibly unflattering behavior.

Finally, researchers have a tendency to focus on a single self-relevant attribute or behavior at a time. But a more realistic picture of self-enhance-

ment would include conflicts between competing self-enhancement concerns within the same situation. For example, a person's immediate concerns for demonstrating scholarly prowess might dictate an ostentatious display of knowledge during the next cocktail party. However, the person's immediate social concerns for being a "good host" might dictate keeping his or her own opinions and knowledge in check so that the guests can display their positive qualities. Which self-enhancement concern "wins?" The winner probably depends on the self-attribute on which greater weight is placed in the person's self-definition or on the immediate needs for self-enhancement (i.e., has self-esteem suffered a recent blow?). By implication, understanding the self-enhancement decisions of others requires knowledge of the structure of their self-identities and their changing needs for immediate self-enhancement.

These issues and their speculative development are not necessarily weaknesses in the SCENT model; they are weaknesses in current understanding of self-evaluative processes. We raise them to alert researchers to their presence, in hope that the issues will be addressed in future work.

#### *4. Moderators*

The self-evaluation process, as conceptualized in the SCENT model, undoubtedly operates differently in different situations and for different people. We take it as a given that moderators of the self-evaluative process exist, and we view the next task for researchers in this area to be the identification and empirical testing of those moderators. A side benefit of such research will be the refinement of integrative models such as the one presented here. Toward that end, we describe in this section moderators that are suggested by past research or implied by the SCENT model.

When we speak of moderators, we mean variables that regulate the activation and relative prevalence of candid versus tactical self-enhancement on the one hand (i.e., self-enhancement vs. self-assessment, self-enhancement vs. self-verification, self-enhancement vs. self-improvement), and of different forms of tactical self-enhancement on the other (e.g., competitive tests of pairs of the self-verification, self-assessment, and selfimprovement motives). Our exposition will be partial and selective, because only a subset of self-evaluation motive pairs has received empirical attention. Furthermore, the interplay of multiple motives will be occasionally highlighted.

Some of the moderators that we will consider are conceptualized best as explicit boundary conditions tied to the definitions of certain theoretical camps. A good example is the certainty with which a self-attribute is held. As we mentioned previously, proponents of the self-assessment perspective

argue (and demonstrate) that concerns about accurate information are most apparent when individuals are uncertain about an important self-attribute. By contrast, self-verification proponents have assumed that confirmation of existing self-attributes is most likely when those self-attributes are held confidently. Other moderators that we will describe have been identified in research that has pitted two self-evaluation motives against each other. Although such competitive tests might seem misguided in retrospect, they are also informative about potential boundary conditions for the different motives.

We discuss six classes of moderators: information-relevant moderators, affect-related and valence-related moderators, resource availability, social factors, cultural context, and individual differences.

*a. Information-Relevant Moderators.* One class of moderators derived from the SCENT model postulates that the generation and maintenance of information about self-attributes and abilities is a key component of the self-evaluation process. We label this class of moderators as information-relevant moderators, and we define them as variables that affect the likelihood of active information acquisition and the quality of the information that is gathered. We consider five moderators: task diagnosticity, attribute importance, attribute modifiability, temporal orientation, and consequentiality of outcomes.

Task diagnosticity represents how well a test or task reveals underlying abilities or attributes following different performance outcomes. A task that cannot resolve uncertainty about an underlying ability is uninformative and likely to obviate concerted information search despite a high need for uncertainty reduction. The importance of the diagnosticity variable has been demonstrated primarily in comparative tests of the self-enhancement and self-assessment perspectives. Indeed, the distinction between diagnosticity of successful versus unsuccessful task outcomes has been a longstanding benchmark for determining the relative prevalence of the two motives in a given situation. According to the self-enhancement perspective, people should express a preference for high diagnosticity of success tasks because such tasks are likely to unveil their talents, but should avoid high diagnosticity of failure tasks because such tasks are likely to disclose their limitations. According to the self-assessment perspective, however, people should exhibit an equal preference for tasks of high success diagnosticity and tasks of high failure diagnosticity because the discovery of capabilities and liabilities are both important in reducing uncertainty about abilities (assuming equal uncertainty about relevant skills and limitations).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In all fairness to the self-assessment perspective, it ought to be stated that self-assessment theorists recognize that people expect success diagnosticity to enhance both the accuracy of self-knowledge and self-esteem, whereas they expect failure diagnosticity to enhance the accuracy of self-knowledge but decrease self-esteem (Trope, 1979; Trope & Brickman, 1975).



Trope (1980) reported that perceived task attractiveness increased both with diagnosticity of success and with diagnosticity of failure. Strube et al. (1986, Experiment 1) also found that task preference increased as a function of both success and failure diagnosticity, but this finding has not been universally obtained (Strube et al., 1986, Experiment 2), and some investigators have found that the two forms of diagnosticity interact. For example, Strube and Roemmele (1985) reported that participants preferred high over low diagnosticity of success tasks, but manifested no preference for higher over lower diagnosticity of failure tasks, a finding that is seemingly in line with the self-enhancement perspective. At the same time, however, participants clearly preferred the task that was high in both forms of diagnosticity to any other task. Proponents of each perspective can find support for their views in this interaction. In our view, of course, such debates are unprofitable. Clearly, diagnosticity is important. The key questions are when and how it directs either the information or action components of the self-evaluation process.

The resolution to this debate may lie in a methodological misgiving we have about task preference studies. Most such studies do not assess participants' beliefs about the probability of success on the tasks, but these beliefs may account for the stronger effects often reported for diagnosticity of success manipulations compared to diagnosticity of failure manipulations. College students (the usual samples studied) probably believe that success is more likely than failure (Strube et al., 1986), and thus view diagnosticity of success as more relevant than diagnosticity of failure. One study that did consider participants' beliefs about probability of success was conducted by Strube et al. (1986, Experiment 2). Participants were presented with descriptions of test forms varying in their degrees of diagnosticity of success and of diagnosticity of failure. They were asked to make judgments of each test's informativeness and to indicate the percentage of test items they expected to answer correctly. Overall, participants expected to perform relatively well on the tests, verifying the assumption that college students expect to succeed. Furthermore, the majority of participants (65%) preferred tasks that were high on both diagnosticity of success and diagnosticity of failure. Mathematical models taking into account individual success and diagnosticity ratings provided support for both the self-assessment and selfenhancement models. However, support for the self-assessment model was stronger. When the contribution of the self-assessment motive was controlled statistically, the self-enhancement motive was found to be unrelated to test preferences. On the other hand, when the contribution of the selfenhancement motive was controlled statistically, the self-assessment motive emerged as a reliable predictor of test preferences.

Additional studies have also manipulated diagnosticity, but have included other variables that suggest that task informativeness is not the only nor the most critical consideration in the decision to engage in candid self-enhancement or tactical self-assessment. For example, Brown (1990, Experiment 2) found that participants were eager to seek more knowledge about their abilities after success as test validity (a variable conceptually similar to test diagnosticity) increased, but were not concerned with additional opportunities for ability evaluation following failure especially when test validity was high. This result suggests a primary concern for self-enhancement despite the presence of an informative task. The prior performance feedback (success or failure) introduced an additional moderator that may have overridden or modified the effects of diagnosticity. In one sense, this study provides a useful contrast to other studies in the self-assessment tradition. Although task diagnosticity was included, it was not the only decision-relevant variable and perhaps was not the most crucial influence on the decision to enhance or assess. Particularly in the case of prior failure, the immediate need to protect the self-esteem may be far more important than acquiring additional information. This seems especially likely in the context of laboratory studies in which the long-term consequences of information may be less cognitively accessible than immediate self-esteem concerns.

A similar conclusion can be reached from a study by Sachs (1982), who provided participants with either contingent or noncontingent success feedback on a test. Sachs reported that participants who received noncontingent success feedback avoided the selection of diagnostic problems on a second test to a significantly greater extent than did participants who received contingent success feedback. Sachs concluded that induction of threat to the self-concept leads to avoidance of diagnostic information (see also footnote 6). Although this study does suggest that prior self-concept threat may override the influence of task diagnosticity, it is important to note that Sachs failed to distinguish between diagnosticity of success and diagnosticity of failure, a distinction that is potentially crucial in the decision to seek information. The same criticism applies to three of four other experiments reported by Brown (1990, Experiment 1, 3, and 4).

Also relevant to this discussion are two experiments reported by Cioffi (1991). Cioffi manipulated the clarity and outcome of medical diagnoses, rather than the diagnosticity and outcome of task performance. Specifically, participants received either clear or unclear medical diagnoses that revealed either illness or wellness. The case of clear medical diagnoses is of particular interest to the present discussion. In this case, participants accepted the diagnosis at face value when it revealed wellness, but disparaged the validity of the test when it revealed illness. One interpretation of this finding is

that people, because of their concern with the affective implications of feedback, engaged in information processes (i.e., derogating the threatening test) likely to verify the positivity of the self rather than test the self accurately.

In summary, studies that have included a manipulation or measure of task diagnosticity have found it to be a critical determinant of self-assessment versus self-enhancement. However, task diagnosticity does not always assert a primary role, particularly when an immediate threat to the self is imminent. The possible interplay of immediate threat to the self and the desire for accurate information is highlighted by studies that require an actual self-assessing task choice rather than merely stating a task preference that need not be followed up with action. On the one hand, a public task performance is more likely to implicate the self than mere judgments of task attractiveness, expressions of task preference, or intentions to perform the task. Thus, self-enhancing behavior (e.g., avoidance of task involvement that is high in diagnosticity of failure) should be especially evident in settings that require actual task engagement (Strobe & Roemmele, 1985; Strube et al., 1986). On the other hand, it is also possible that short-term concerns about the accuracy of information about a relevant self-attribute could override immediate self-enhancing actions. This is particularly likely to be the case in most research in the self-assessment tradition in which the informational qualities of tasks are emphasized. Indeed, instructing participants to be accurate induces a problem-solving orientation toward avoiding threats to the self (Butler, 1993). In some earlier research (Trope, 1980; Trope, 1982; Trope & Ben-Yair, 1982, Experiment 1), participants were not requested to select tasks that they believed they would carry out subsequently. However, in other research (Buckert et al., 1979; Strub( Roemmele, 1985; Strube et al., 1986; Trope, 1975; Trope, 1979, Experiment 1; Trope, 1982; Trope & Brickman, 1975; Zuckerman et al., 1979, Experiments 1 and 2) participants chose the tests that they would presumably complete. Most pertinent are studies that required participants to choose a test, which they believed they would perform, from among tests varying in diagnosticity of success and diagnosticity of failure (Strube et al., 1986). Results from such studies indicate that a majority of participants choose tests that are simultaneously high in diagnosticity of success and diagnosticity of failure. Moreover, close examination of diagnosticity perceptions indicates that most participants choose tasks that they perceive to be the most diagnostic of the available options (Strube et al., 1986; Strube & Roemmele, 1985). These studies highlight the point that not all behaviors are immediately self-enhancing. Sometimes the urgency of acquiring accurate information means forgoing immediate self-gratification. Of course, it is again possible that these college samples did not view failure as a likely

outcome and so had little to lose by selecting apparently the most rational option (i.e., that option that is diagnostic of both success and failure).

Although uncertainty about a self-attribute may instigate a search for accuracy, and task diagnosticity reflects the uncertainty-reducing ability of a task, those are not the only information-relevant factors that are taken into account in the striving for accuracy. Two other crucial moderators are self-attribute importance and self-attribute modifiability. Presumably, the motivation to seek accurate information about an uncertain self-attribute should be highest for important self-attributes; these are features of the self-attribute should be highest for important self-attributes; these are features of the self with the most critical implications for self-enhancement. Self-attribute modifiability should also play an important role. Acquiring diagnostic information about a self-attribute is potentially most relevant for self-attributes that can be modified; in this case, accurate information can be used to produce changes in behavior. In the case of unmodifiable self-attributes, the accuracy of information has less apparent utility.<sup>7</sup>

Relatively few attempts have been made to examine these moderators. This reflects, in part, the assumption by most researchers that important self processes are only engaged when the self-assessment tradition (Strube & Roemmele, 1985; Strube et al., 1986; Trope, 1980) has emphasized the importance of the abilities required for success on experimental tasks. Thus, self-attribute importance typically has been held constant at a (presumed) high level. Self-attribute modifiability largely has been ignored. A recent study by Dunning (1995) examined the role of trait importance and trait modifiability in inducing self-assessment versus self-enhancement. Participants were informed that they would be examined on standardized tests of integrative orientation. This trait was manipulated to be perceived as either important (i.e., relevant to success in postgraduate schools) or unimportant, and as either modifiable (i.e., highly changeable, least stable) or unmodifiable. Both self-enhancement and self-assessment concerns were more likely to emerge when this trait was important than unimportant to participants. That is, participants were more likely to solicit feedback after an initial test trial when the trait was described to them as important than when it was described as unimportant. However, the direction of self-evaluation depended on the modifiability of the trait: Self-enhancement was more likely when the trait was perceived as important and unmodifiable, but self-assessment was more likely when the trait was perceived as important and modifiable. That is, when integrative orientation was described as

<sup>7</sup> It may not be possible to abandon completely accuracy concerns even when the self-attribute is unmodifiable. Adaptive responding requires strategic construction or selection of situations that best match self-attributes (Strube & Yost, 1993). This matching requires reasonable knowledge of both modifiable and unmodifiable self-attributes.

important and unmodifiable, participants were more likely to solicit feedback after an initial success trial than after an initial failure trial. On the other hand, when integrative orientation was described as important and modifiable, participants were equally likely to solicit feedback regardless of whether they had received success or failure feedback on an initial trial. . In a somewhat similar vein, Yberna and Buunk (1993; see also Buunk, Collins, Taylor, Van Yperene, & Dakof, 1990, and Testa & Major, 1990) reported that participants who experienced failure preferred an upward as opposed to downward comparison only when they perceived having control over their future performance. Participants were willing to forgo the immediate harm to the self of upward comparison for the sake of acquiring information that could contribute to self-improvement. Participants even earned higher grades on a college course when they were led to make internal and controllable attributions for their prior poor performance (Noel, Forsyth, & Kelley, 1987). These studies, however, did not manipulate or measure self-attribute certainty or task diagnosticity. Thus, like most self-evaluation studies, they have examined some, but not all, moderators crucial for understanding the motivation to seek accuracy or enhancement. This is a common limitation in the literature. The complexity of the self-evaluation process is often not met with designs of equal complexity.

Another line of research (Sedikides, 1993) highlights the interplay of several of the moderators that we have discussed thus far. This research examined self-reflection, defined as the private consideration of possession of traits. In the process of inquiring about the possession of personality traits, people can ask themselves (and subsequently answer) hypothetical questions that are either high or low in diagnosticity. A high-diagnosticity question asks about a behavior that is highly probable when a person possesses a trait (e.g., extraversion) and highly improbable when the person possesses the alternative trait (e.g., introversion). Participants self-reflected on traits that were either central (i.e., high in self-descriptiveness and importance) or peripheral (i.e., low in self-descriptiveness and importance) to their self-concepts. Furthermore, participants engaged in the experimental tasks by choosing questions to ask themselves and then answering the questions with a yes or no response. If people are motivated by immediate self-enhancement concerns, they should choose high-diagnosticity questions when self-reflecting on positive (particularly central) traits because they desire to validate the positive aspects of the self. Furthermore, people should choose low diagnosticity questions when self-reflecting on negative (particularly central) traits, because people do not desire to find out that they possess such traits. On the other hand, if the primary objective when engaging in self-reflection is the reduction of one's uncertainty about the self, people should be more interested in the diagnosticity of questions that

are more pertinent to peripheral than central traits. People will be more uncertain about the peripheral traits, because they are less likely to have accumulated self-knowledge on such traits. Trait valence (e.g., positivity or negativity) should be irrelevant to self-reflection.

The results were consistent with the notion that people are guided by immediate self-enhancement concerns. Participants (1) preferred higher diagnosticity information when examining the self on positive compared to negative traits, (2) chose higher diagnosticity information when self-reflecting on central positive rather than central negative traits, (3) selected higher diagnosticity information to self-reflect on central positive rather than peripheral positive traits, and (4) did not prefer higher diagnosticity information to self-reflect on peripheral as opposed to central traits. The results of this investigation suggest that, at least for self-reflection, immediate self-enhancement concerns can predominate over self-assessment concerns when relevant variables are simultaneously present in a given situation. Of course, one important difference between the Sedikides (1993) study and research in the self-assessment tradition is that diagnosticity is manipulated explicitly in the latter and so may be a more salient part of the decision to assess rather than enhance. Also, in many selfassessment studies uncertainty is manipulated or made salient as well. These distinctions are a reminder that engagement in either candid or tactical self-enhancement is influenced by a complex interplay of many variables.

We will conclude our exposition of information-relevant moderators by discussing two variables that can determine the activation and operation of multiple motives. These variables are temporal orientation and consequentiality of outcomes. Temporal orientation moderates the emergence of several pairs of motives. First, temporal orientation moderates the emergence of self-assessment versus self-enhancement concerns (Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995; see also Festinger, 1964). When people engage in goal setting, they are influenced by self-assessment concerns: In the process of deliberating their courses of action, people become more realistic in their thinking (i.e., they become aware of their vulnerability), perhaps because of fear of invalidity (Kruglanski, 1990). However, when people implement the course of action they designed, they are influenced predominantly by selfenhancement concerns: Their thinking becomes dominated by positive illusions, perhaps because people are inaccurate estimators of completion time for their actions (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994). Another example in which temporal orientation moderates the operation of self-enhancement versus self-assessment is provided by the research of Shepperd, Quelling, and Fernandez (1996). Students are unrealistically optimistic about their exam grades in the beginning of the school session, but become more accurate (and eventually pessimistic) as the exam date approaches. Like-

wise, sophomores and juniors are more optimistic about their likely salary at their first full-time occupation than are seniors who are facing graduation and the job market. Second, temporal orientation moderates the emergence of self-enhancement versus self-verification concerns. Dating partners seek out self-enhancement, whereas married partners seek out self-verification. Specifically, dating persons express high levels of intimacy for partners who evaluate them favorably, but married persons (even the ones with negative self-views) express high levels of intimacy for partners whose evaluations are consistent with these persons' self-views (Swarm, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). Finally, temporal orientation moderates the emergence of self-enhancement versus self-improvement concerns. People are likely to seek out self-enhancement on attributes of the present self, but are likely to seek out self-improvement on attributes that pertain to the future self (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Harlow & Cantor, 1995; Taylor et al., 1995). For example, people will pursue positive feedback regarding a significant possession of theirs (e.g., automobile, boat, house), but will pursue improving feedback with regard to their career prospects as a singer, basketball player, or scientist.

Consequentiality of outcomes can also determine the emergence of multiple motives. Take, for instance, the relative prevalence of self-enhancement versus self-improvement, and of self-improvement versus self-assessment. When choosing among sequences of outcomes, people select sequences with trends of improvement over time rather than pursuing immediate gratification by selecting the most favorable or least unfavorable outcome. That is, in the case of consequential outcomes (i.e., outcomes that are perceived to be contingent on performance), people are concerned with self-improvement rather than self-enhancement (Loewenstein & Prelec, 1993). Examples of consequential outcome domains include education, professional settings, and leisure activities. Examples of nonconsequential outcome domains include one's perceived standing on a variety of personality traits. Interestingly, concern with self-improvement is higher when the task is important to the self than when it is not (Bandura, 1991; Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1995). In such cases, the individual is likely to seek self-assessment first followed by self-improvement (Butler, 1993; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Ruble & Frey, 1991). When considering the option of becoming a professional pianist, the individual will first seek to obtain an accurate portrait of her musical talent and subsequently pursue feedback that is likely to fine-tune her strengths or cultivate new ones.

*b. Affect-Related and Valence-Related Moderators.* A second class of moderators reflects the role of affect, mood, and emotion of self-evaluation. A central postulate of the SCENT model is that the positivity of the self is a crucial determinant of the direction of self-evaluation. It seems equally

likely that current positivity in the form of mood or emotion has an influence on the direction of self-evaluation. Surprisingly, mood as a moderator has not been given adequate empirical attention. One line of research has shown the sad mood induces self-focused attention, whereas happy mood induces external-focused attention (Sedikides, 1992b; Wood, Saltzberg, & Goldsamt, 1990; see also Conway, Glanopoulos, Csank, & Mendelson, 1993; for an opposing view, see Salovey, 1992). One implication from this research is that sad mood may be more likely than happy mood to evoke a thorough (perhaps objective) examination of self-attributes. Another line of research has demonstrated a mood-congruency effect: Sad mood leads to negative self-perception, whereas happy mood leads to positive self-perception (Sedikides, 1992a), at least when ratings of the self are temporally immediate rather than distant (Sedikides, 1994) and with regard to peripheral rather than central self-conceptions (Sedikides, 1995). Based on these two lines of research, it is predicted that individuals in a sad mood are more likely to self-assess, whereas individuals in a happy mood are more likely to self-enhance. This proposition is indirectly supported by research demonstrating that mildly depressed persons (Alloy & Abramson, 1979; Coyne & Gotlib, 1983; Rueffirnan, West, & Pasahow, 1985; Watson & Clark, 1984) and sick persons (Kulik & Mahler, 1987) do not engage in as much self-enhancement as normals do. The proposition is also supported by evidence suggesting that negative mood induces higher performance standards than either neutral or positive moods (Cervone, Kopp, Schaumann, & Scott, 1994). Finally, the proposition is supported by research showing that participants in a neutral or happy mood make internal and stable attributions for success in both hypothetical cases and real-life exam performances, whereas participants in a sad mood make self-critical attributions (Forgas, Bower, & Moylan, 1990).

A conceptually related moderator is self-conception valence, that is, whether positive or negative aspects of the self-concept are involved in the self-evaluative setting. When positive self-concept attributes are at stake, the objectives of the information and action components are congruent. People will be motivated to maintain the positivity of such attributes. However, when negative self-concept attributes are at stake, two theoretical perspectives make contrasting predictions. According to the selfenhancement view, people will be motivated to elevate the valence of their self-conceptions (i.e., make them more positive). According to the self-verification perspective, however, people will be motivated to preserve their negative self-conceptions. Several investigations (Aronson & Carlsmith, 1962; Crary, 1966; Curtis & Miller, 1986; Korman, 1968; Silverman, 1964; Swarm & Hill, 1982; Swarm, Pelham, & Krull, 1989; Swann & Read, 1981b; Wills, 1981) have demonstrated that people confirm their self-



attributes, regardless of their valence. In a related vein, research has demonstrated that individuals with negative self-concepts are not more likely to self-enhance than are individuals with positive self-concepts (Brown, 1986; Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988; Campbell, 1986), despite the common assumption that individuals with negative self-concepts should self-enhance more because they need to compensate for their dim self-views.

However, self-conception valence per se cannot provide conclusive evidence for the strength of self-enhancement vis ~ vis self-verification. It is often unclear whether the “negative” self-conceptions are perceived as so by the participant; that is, negative self-conceptions often have been defined as such by the experimenters rather than by the participants. This replaces the appropriate idiographic definition of valence with a normative definition of questionable validity. The second reason is that self-concept valence by itself may not be the only consideration; centrality of the positive or negative self-conceptions may also be crucial. Do people verify self-conceptions that they perceive to be highly negative, and also highly self-descriptive and self-defining? In this case, the self-enhancement perspective postulates that people will unequivocally accept or strongly confirm their positive central self-conceptions, and will vehemently deny their negative central attributes. By contrast, positive peripheral and negative peripheral attributes should demand less strategic attention. However, the self-verification perspective proposes that people will tend to confirm both their positive central and negative central attributes to a greater degree than their positive peripheral and negative peripheral attributes, respectively. Studies that cross self-conception valence with self-conception centrality have the potential to differentiate between self-enhancement and self-verification. The one experiment that crossed these two variables (Sedikides, 1993, Experiment 4) provided support for self-enhancement. Specifically, participants in this study answered yes (i.e., confirmed) or no (i.e., disconfirmed) to questions they themselves had generated in an effort to find out whether they possessed various personality traits. The traits were either positive or negative, and either central or peripheral to participants’ existing self-concepts. Participants confirmed the possession of central positive traits to a greater extent than the possession of central negative traits. (For conceptually similar findings, see Campbell, 1986.) However, as was true in our previous discussion of the different impact of success and failure diagnosticity hinging on the probability of success, so too might the difference between confirmation of positive and negative self-attributes depend on their predominance. Swann (1990) and Taylor and Brown (1988) have argued, for example, that people pursue positive self-verifying information because their self-concepts are predominantly positive. The rarity of negative (especially

central) self-conceptions may account for their less self-confirmation and for the lack of investigations that cross self-conception valence with self-conception centrality.

Taking a different approach, Shrauger (1975) distinguished between cognitive responding (e.g., perceptions of feedback self-descriptiveness, feedback recall) and affective responding (e.g., pleasure or disappointment resulting from the feedback). He postulated that cognitive responding will follow a self-verification pattern, whereas affective responding will follow a self-enhancement pattern. Swarm et al. (1987; see also McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981) reported findings consistent with this proposition. Participants delivered a speech and received feedback-ostensibly from another participant-as to how self-confident they appeared to be. This bogus feedback was either favorable or unfavorable. Subsequently, participants indicated their reactions to feedback. Cognitive reactions were indexed in terms of perceived feedback accuracy, perceived feedback diagnosticity, perceived evaluator competence, and internal versus external attributions regarding feedback. Affective reactions were indexed in terms of the Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist (Zuckerman & Lubin, 1965), which measures depression, anxiety, and hostility. Participants with negative self-conceptions regarded unfavorable feedback as more accurate and diagnostic than favorable feedback, perceived the evaluator who delivered unfavorable feedback as more competent than the evaluator who gave favorable feedback, and were more likely to make self-attributions for failure than success. At the same time, though, participants with negative self-conceptions felt more depressed, anxious and hostile when they received unfavorable than favorable feedback. Additional investigations (Brown et al., 1988; Jussim, Yen, & Aiello, 1995) have also corroborated the notion that cognitive responding is self-verifying, whereas affective responding is self-enhancing.

*c. Resource Availability.* A third class of moderators reflects resource availability and derives from the SCENT model's assumption that self-evaluation is pragmatic and sensitive to current demands and available assets. Availability of cognitive resources and its impact on self-evaluation has been studied by Swarm, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, and Gilbert (1990; Hixon & Swarm, 1993; but see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Cather, Gat, & Sideris, 1995). They found that when participants had the opportunity to invest cognitive effort into comprehending and analyzing external feedback, they self-verified. However, when participants did not have the resources necessary to perform elaborate cognitive operations on the feedback, they self-enhanced (see also: Paulhus, 1993; Paulhus, Graf, & Van Selst, 1989). This finding highlights a potentially important feature of the self-perception process: People are quite aware of the costs involved in seeking information and do not follow an "at any cost" approach. Instead,



the cognitive costs of information search and acquisition may far outweigh and render prohibitive a search for accuracy, consistency, or positivity.

Similarly, availability of coping resources should moderate the activation of self-assessment versus self-enhancement. When faced with mandatory negative performance feedback, participants spend more time reading about their past successes than when faced with optional negative feedback. Furthermore, when being reminded of their past successes, participants are more willing to receive negative performance feedback (Trope & Neter, 1994; for conceptually similar findings, see Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993).

*d. Social Factors.* A different class of moderators, social factors, reflects the social context within which self-evaluation must operate. As we noted previously, self-evaluation cannot be shamelessly self-aggrandizing. People rely on others to validate their selves and to provide a system of norms and expectations that form the self-evaluation arena. Thus, social context is a vital consideration in the form that self-evaluation will take.

To begin with, we note a variable that moderates the collective presence or absence of self-enhancement and self-improvement: *controlling versus non-controlling context of social feedback*. This variable is present in social settings, and, more specifically, performance settings in which the individual receives positive feedback from an expert regarding the quality of the individual's performance. When positive feedback is given in a noncontrolling manner (e.g., "Good, you did well at that"), self-enhancement and selfimprovement concerns come into play. The feedback enhances perceived competence and, subsequently, intrinsic motivation. However, when feedback is given in a controlling manner (e.g., "Good, you did just as you should"), the two self-evaluation motives do not become operative: Perceived competence and intrinsic motivation are undermined (Fisher, 1978; Ryan, 1982).

Social comparison often provides the social context in which the individual operates. Level of abstractness of the target with which the self is compared moderates self-enhancement versus self-assessment. When the self is compared with an abstract target, self-enhancement concerns direct self-evaluation. However, when the comparison involves a concrete person, self-assessment concerns become prevalent. The emergence of selfassessing concerns is due predominantly to two factors: the influential role of concrete or vivid information (compared to abstract or vague information) on social judgment, and the presence of personal or live contact (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; see also: Codol, 1975; Perloff & Fetzer, 1986; and Weinstein, 1983).

The simple prospect of being accountable to another person—even when the other person lacks the power to control rewards or

outcomes-can also affect the relative prevalence of self-enhancement versus self-assessment.

Participants in a study by Sedikides, Holcomb, and Dardis (1996, Experiment 1) wrote a one-page essay in response to the question, "Should the United States pursue the exploration of the planet Mars?" and subsequently were asked to grade their essays on five dimensions: clarity of thinking, writing style, smoothness of sentence and paragraph transition, logic of argumentation, and persuasiveness of argumentation. Half of the participants were assigned to the accountability condition, whereas the remaining half were assigned to the unaccountability condition of the experiment. Participants in the accountability condition were informed that they would have to "explain, justify, and defend" their grades "on each and every dimension" to another person (i.e., recipient). Participants in the unaccountability condition were told that their grades would be "completely confidential and not traceable to you personally." In fact, their grades ostensibly would be read by a researcher at another university. Accountable participants assigned their essays lower grades than did unaccountable participants. Accountable participants self-assessed (i.e., their grades were more accurate according to an external criterion), whereas unaccountable participants self-enhanced. This pattern was unaffected by recipient status (i.e., an expert versus a novice in writing skills; Sedikides, Holcomb, & Dardis, 1996, Experiment 2). Instead, the state of accountability induced a relatively high fear of evaluation and, subsequently, a disproportionate attentional focus on one's weaknesses (Sedikides, Holcomb, & Dardis, 1996, Experiments 3-5).

Another social factor, relationship closeness, can also place boundaries on self-enhancement. The moderational role of relationship closeness was examined by Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, and Elliot (1996, Experiment 1). Participants reported to the laboratory with either a stranger or a friend, and engaged in an interdependent outcomes task (i.e., an ostensible creativity test) in which individual contributions were not identifiable. Following the completion of the task, participants received either success or failure false feedback at the dyadic level. Next, participants indicated who was more responsible for the outcome of the creativity test. Participants who collaborated on the task with a stranger exhibited the self-serving bias: They took responsibility for successful outcomes but assigned blame to their partner for failure outcomes. However, participants who collaborated on the task with a friend did not manifest the self-serving bias: They were equally likely to take responsibility for both outcome success and outcome failure.

One explanation for these findings is that undoubtedly friends would interact with each other outside of the laboratory at the end of the experiment, but strangers likely would not engage in future interactions. Thus, friends may be willing to downplay their personal contributions to the task for the sake of relationship maintenance. However, this explanation was

disconfirmed by a subsequent experiment (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1996, Experiment 2). In this experiment, all participants were paired with strangers. Hence, the possibility for future interaction was diminished. Relationship closeness was induced in half of the participant dyads. That is, half of the participants became (and reported being) close to their partners through a self-disclosure task. Next, all participants completed the creativity test. As in Experiment 1, participants manifested the self-serving bias when working with a nonclose other, but not when working with a close other.

Why do people become less self-enhancing when they have a close relationship with their co-workers? One explanation is that people have a more positive impression of their close co-workers and expect for their close co-workers to reciprocate the self-effacing response. This explanation was supported empirically (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1996, Experiment 3; see also: Brown, 1986; Hall & Taylor, 1976; Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976). In fact, when close co-workers fail to reciprocate and instead provide a self-serving response, people's responses become as self-enhancing as in the case of nonclose co-workers (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1996, Experiment 4).

The extent to which a self-attribute can be verified by others-known as attribute ambiguity-can also influence whether people seek accurate information about it or persist with illusions regarding their standing on that dimension (Brown, 1986). Ambiguous tasks allow a somewhat distorted selfimage to persist without detection, and so do ambiguous situations such as private as opposed to public nature of the context in which self-evaluations are made (Brown & Gallagher, 1992) or an audience of strangers as opposed to an audience of friends (Tice et al., 1995). On occasions of self-evaluation on unambiguous tasks (as in research reported by Trope and his colleagues), self-assessment concerns should predominate. However, in the case of selfevaluation on ambiguous tasks or in ambiguous settings, candid self-enhancement concerns should prevail. The data are consistent with this hypothesis. For example, in a study by Felson (1981), student football players rated their athletic ability along both ambiguous attributes (e.g., sense of the game) and unambiguous attributes (e.g., running speed). Coaches also rated the student athletes on the same attributes. The athletes rated their ability more positively than the coaches did on the ambiguous attributes but not on the unambiguous attributes. (For conceptually parallel findings, see: Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991; Kenrick & Stringfield, 1980; Sherman, Presson, & Chassin, 1984; and Suls & Wan, 1987).

Cialdini and De Nicholas (1989) made a similar observation. They noted that, in Some situations, people refrain from enhancing

self-descriptions. In such situations, individuals may be perceived as dishonest or unreliable.



As Cialdini and De Nicholas (1989, p. 626) stated, “Under those circumstances, favorable self-reports are likely to damage social image. Consequently, people are reluctant to self-aggrandize in the face of a public, disconfirming reality (Arkin, Appleman, & Burger, 1980; Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Schlenker, 1975; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Ungar, 1980; Weary et al. 1982).” However, in such circumstances people are likely to engage in compensatory self-presentation “by describing themselves more favorably on personality traits about which the observer had no reliable information” (Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989, p. 626). These data underscore an additional issue: Reported self-attributes may be public claims that do not correspond to private beliefs (Baumeister, 1982; Brown & Gallagher, 1992; Leary, Robertson, Barnes, & Miller, 1986; Miller & Schlenker, 1985; Tetlock, 1980). This potential discrepancy poses an additional difficulty for research attempting to distinguish multiple self-evaluation motives. The striving for accurate self-knowledge need not be accompanied by a particularly accurate self-presentation.

*e. Cultural Context.* Cultural context, and more specifically the individualism/collectivism dimension of culture (Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994), moderates the emergence of the self-enhancement versus the self-assessment motive. For example, members of collectivistic (e.g., Oriental) cultures are less likely than members of individualistic (e.g., Western) cultures to have unrealistically optimistic beliefs (Heine & Leliman, 1995) and to exhibit the self-serving bias (Kashima & Triandis, 1986; Isozaki & Takahushi, 1988; Shikanai, 1984). In fact, Japanese engage in more extensive information search before they conclude that their task performance is above average than before they conclude that their performance is below average, thus demonstrating self-effacement (Takata, 1992; see also Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982; Hamaguchi, 1985; Shikanai, 1978; and Stipek, Weiner, & Li, 1989).

Based on the previous findings, one might conclude that members of collectivistic cultures do not self-enhance. However, this conclusion may not be warranted. Instead, one may need to clarify which self is under evaluative scrutiny. Two relevant aspects of the self include the collective self (the self as an interchangeable group member) and the individual self (the self as a unique individual) (B. Simon, Pantaleo, & Mummendey, 1995; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Members of collectivistic societies may self-enhance by overrating aspects of the collective self. That is, they may believe privately that they are above-average group members. This possibility (which we are currently testing) would be **consistent with the emphasis** of the SCENT model on self-attribute importance. People are most likely to enhance on important self-attributes. Being a better-than-average group member is a more important self-

attribute for members of collectivistic cultures than is for members of individualistic cultures.

f. *Individual Differences.* A final class of moderators includes individual differences, or what Roney and Sorrentino (1995) termed the “who” question. This class of moderators is a reminder that self-evaluation, as conceptualized in the SCENT model, is part of a larger self-system that exerts systematic pressure on the form that self-evaluation takes.

Several individual differences variables moderate the strength of self-enhancement concerns. Evidence suggests that high self-esteem people (Baurgardner, Heppner, & Arkin, 1986; Brown & Gallagher, 1992; Brown & Smart, 1991; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987; Jussim et al., 1995; Swarm, 1987; Wood, Beech-Giordano, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994), nonshy individuals (Alden, 1987; Arkin et al., 1980; Meleshko & Alden, 1993), people high in self-concept certainty (Baumgardner, 1990) and self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996), mastery-oriented children (Diener & Dweck, 1980), highly self-conscious people (Carver, Antoni, & Scheier, 1985), high self-monitors (Krosnick & Sedikides, 1990), high self-handicappers (Strube & Roemmele, 1985), narcissists (Emmons, 1987; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991), nonrepressors (Davis, 1987; Hansen & Hansen, 1988), persons who are high in hardiness (Allred & Smith, 1989; Florian, Mikulincer, & Taubman, 1995; Rhodewalt & Agustsdottir, 1984; Wiebe, 1991) and high in self-complexity (Dixon & Baumeister, 1991) are influenced more than their counterparts (low self-esteem people, shy individuals, low self-concept certainty and clarity people, helpless children, uncertainty-oriented persons, people low in self-consciousness, low self-monitors, low self-handicappers, nonnarcissists, repressors, individuals low in hardiness and self-complexity, respectively) by self-enhancement concerns.

Other individual-differences variables moderate the emergence of self-assessment versus self-improvement. Persons high in achievement motivation (Koestner & McClelland, 1990; McClelland & Koestner, 1992) and competence valuation (Epstein & Harackiewicz, 1992; Harackiewicz & Manderlink, 1984; Reeve & Deci, 1996) are more likely than their counterparts to be influenced by self-assessment and self-improvement concerns. Still a third class of individual-differences variables moderates the operation of self-assessment versus self-verification. Persons high in uncertainty orientation (Brouwers & Sorrentino, 1993; Sorrentino & Short, 1986), persons with a high desire for self-appraisal (Strube & Yost, 1993), Type A's (Strube, Boland, Manfredo, & Al-Falaij, 1987), and perhaps persons high in need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982), low in need for closure (Kruglanski, 1990), and low in personal need for structure (Neuberg & Newsom,

1993) are likely to be more prone than their counterparts to self-assessment as

opposed to self-verification concerns. Finally, persons high in preference for consistency (Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995) may be more prone than their counterparts to self-verification concerns.

These findings and speculations await further empirical test, particularly attempts to assess the simultaneous role of the moderators discussed thus far and individual-differences variables. Promising forays into this direction of investigation have already discovered that: (1) although high self-esteem persons react both privately and publicly in a self-enhancing manner to evaluative feedback, low self-esteem persons react in a self-enhancing manner only in the case of public exposure (Baurngardner, Kaufman, & Levy, 1989); (2) although incongruent self-concept participants seek out more information about themselves compared to congruent self-concept participants, this effect is amplified in the case of participants whose incongruent self-conceptions are held with high certainty (Woike & Baurngardner, 1993); and (3) upward social comparison is less likely to make high self-esteem people feel bad than it is to make low self-esteem people feel bad (Buunk et al., 1990; Hemphill & Lehman, 1991; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992).

## V. A Life-Span Developmental Approach

One additional problem worth considering is the developmental trajectory of the self-evaluation motives. To date, little attempt has been made to consider the motives from a life-span developmental approach, yet selfenhancement, self-verification, self-assessment, and self-improvement may be predominantly operative at different developmental stages. We will examine the possibility of a differential developmental pattern of the four motives in the context of a five-stage theory proposed by E. T. Higgins (1991), and in the context of socioemotional selectivity theory proposed by Carstensen (1995).

Children go through several developmental changes in their ability to represent self-other contingencies with accompanying consequences for self-evaluation. During the period of early sensorimotor development (which occupies roughly the first year of life), children develop the ability to represent mentally the relation between two events, and can anticipate the response of a significant other to some feature or behavior they possess. For example, the baby cries anticipating that this will produce a response from the caregiver. This anticipatory reaction represents a rudimentary form of role taking, an ability that will serve as the cornerstone for the development of self-evaluative processes. Infants learn at this age too the **fundamental truth that** much of their pleasure and pain depends on others.

During the stage of late sensorimotor and early interrelational development (beginning between 18 months and 2 years), children's ability to represent events mentally increases substantially. The child is capable of not only representing the relation between two events, but also the relation between two relations. That is, children can anticipate the caregiver's response to their actions and their own subsequent psychological states (e.g., comfort, anxiety) that will result from the caregiver's actions. Selfrecognition also emerges at this time. The ability to take one's self as the object of one's perception sets the stage for the emergence of concerns about self-assessment, stability of the self, and self-improvement.

It is during the late interrelational and early dimensional developmental level (between the ages of 4 and 6 years) that children develop the ability to role-take, namely to evaluate a certain attribute of the self both from their own perspective and from a significant other's perspective. Children now identify with a significant other and evaluate themselves according to the significant other's standards. The recognition and embracement of others' standards facilitates the emergence of concerns about mastery. Consequently, the quest for accuracy and improvement should be a major task. So too should children at this age be concerned about stable self-views if only to provide reassurance in the face of so much change and novelty. Indeed, the early and middle childhood years are such a fertile time of self-development that it is likely that all motives are operative. Strategic self-enhancement should also be quite prevalent as children develop the ability to manipulate directly the social world for their benefit in a wider variety of ways. For example, around the age of 6, children's self-presentational skills are well in place. Children change their affective displays for the purpose of manipulating another person's perception of their emotions (Gross, 1989). The developing ability to manipulate one's affective displays for personal gains continues well into the next 3 years of life (Gnepp & Hess, 1986; Saarni, 1984).

During the late dimensional and early vectorial stages (between the ages of 9 and 11 years), children develop the ability to perceive themselves in terms of permanent qualities or dispositional characteristics. Children can now evaluate themselves across time and situations along some attribute dimension. As a result, the valence of their behavioral outcomes becomes incorporated into stable dispositional characteristics. As more characteristics are incorporated into the self-concept, children become capable of making an evaluation of the self as a whole. This can have serious ramifications in that children now face the possibility of global negative selfevaluations. Thus, self-enhancement concerns should become quite important during this stage to safeguard against the possibly negative implications of children's behavior for their self-concepts. Indeed, children at this age

(as well as the early part of the late vectorial level-see below) rank themselves more positively than they are ranked by their peers (Omark, Strayer, & Freedman, 1980; Ruble, Eisenberg, & Higgins, 1994) and by their teachers (Xie, Mahoney, & Cairns, 1996). Even rejected children (Patterson, Kupersmidt, & Greisler, 1990) and at-risk children (Cairns & Cairns, 1981, 1984) perceive themselves more favorably than they are perceived by their peers.

During the late vectorial developmental level (between the ages of 13 and 16 years) children develop the ability to represent interrelations of different perspectives on the self. Children can self-evaluate based on standards provided by multiple self-guides. To the extent that self-evaluative standards are discrepant, this developmental stage will be characterized by identity confusion. Presumably, the self-assessment and self-improvement motives will exert a substantial influence on the self-evaluation process to resolve these identity crises.

Self-assessment and self-improvement concerns continue to be important in late adolescence and early adulthood. During that age period, the future is perceived as open-ended. Individuals are confronted with such tasks as the quest for independence from family and old friends, and the exploration of their occupational, social, and romantic involvement options (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). The formation of a clear and stable self-concept through the acquisition of new information acquires primary importance. New information is gathered through engagement in novel tasks and by joining novel social networks, something that often requires geographical relocation. Given these demands, self-assessment and self-improvement will be the most adaptive motives.

In middle adulthood, though, self-enhancement and self-verification should acquire particular importance, because this is the time when the individual makes life-long commitments and settles down professionally, personally, and socially (Levinson et al., 1978). The need for acquisition of novel information is relatively low, and the formation of the self-concept is essentially complete. Instead, the individual needs to feel that she or he has made good life decisions (self-enhancement). Furthermore, this view is in need of frequent reinforcement by the professional and social milieu (self-verification).

In old age, self-verification concerns should remain adaptive. Given that the future is seen as limited, attention shifts to immediate psychological needs. One critical need is the regulation of emotion. Older adults value an emotionally stable life (Ryff, 1991) and pursue this goal through frequent contacts with familiar others (e.g., spouses, children, long-time friends) (Fredrickson & Carstensen, 1990; Lang & Carstensen, 1994). Familiar others are likely to provide the individual with self-verifying feedback. It

is possible, however, that self-assessment concerns emerge again as well. Previously certain knowledge about skills may need to be reassessed in light of declining physical and mental abilities.

Admittedly, this discussion is highly speculative. However, the discussion serves to illustrate the potentially differential significance of the four motives across the life span. We hope this discussion will provide some guidance to future research in the area.

## **VI. Concluding Remarks**

We have concentrated on four motives (self-enhancement, self-verification, self-assessment, and self-improvement) assumed to account for a major portion of the variance in self-evaluation. In the first part of the chapter, we reviewed pertinent empirical evidence stemming from independent tests on the four motives. We concluded that each motive has substantial support when considered alone. In the second part of the chapter, we outlined a model of self-evaluation, the SCENT model, that attempts to integrate these motives within a single conceptual framework. Within this framework, we discussed several moderators of the self-evaluation process.

It is clear that future work should identify additional moderators that determine when a motive will be active. The implicit versus explicit nature of motives (Epstein, 1994; McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989) is one such moderator. Do implicit motives (derived from stories that participants write in reference to pictures) and explicit or self-attributed motives (derived from participants' self-reports) exert differential effects on self-evaluation? Are implicit motives more likely to implicate selfenhancing tendencies than are the remaining three motives (Swarm, 1990; Woike, 1995)? In another vein, do perspective taking (Cadinu, Arcuri, & Koddja, 1993) and the generation of multiple causal explanations for one's performance (Anderson, 1982; Anderson & Sechler, 1986) place boundaries on self-enhancement? Are unexpected and stressful life events more likely to bring about self-assessment, self-enhancement, or self-verification concerns? Are self-improvement concerns more prevalent in individuals who are high (as opposed to those who are low) in hardiness and resiliency?

Several additional issues, beyond the quest for moderators, await future attention. Some are fundamental to the area of self-evaluation, such as the issue of whether indeed the four motives serve unique functions. It is true that self-enhancement elevates self-esteem, self-verification increases a sense of control, self-assessment induces a sense of certainty, and self-improvement instills a sense of progress? Is it likely for a given motive to

serve multiple functions, as the SCENT model would suggest? Other issues

in need of empirical attention would clarify facets of motive activation and operation. For example, what are the processing stages involved in selfassessment? Under what circumstances will the self-enhancement, selfverification, and self-assessment process be discontinued? If one is to propose a filter that removes negative self-relevant information, at what processing stage (i.e., encoding, storage, retrieval, or use) should the filter be placed? Finally, a broader developmental perspective should yield insights into the particular life problems that give rise to each motive. In summary, although considerable progress has been made toward understanding how individuals come to know themselves and use that information to draw inferences about themselves, much work remains before a complete account is attained.

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