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Self-Verification Theory

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Synonyms

[Self-confirmation](#); [Self-validation](#)

Definition

Self-verification is a social psychological theory that asserts that people want others to see them as they see themselves and will take active steps to ensure that others perceive them in ways that confirm their stable self-views.

Introduction

Self-verification theory proposes that people prefer to be seen as they see themselves, even if their self-views are negative (Swann 2012). The theory holds that people act according to the preference for evaluations that verify their self-views by working to ensure that their experiences confirm and reinforce their self-views. For example, those who see themselves as likable seek out and embrace others who evaluate them positively, whereas those who see themselves as dislikable

seek out and embrace others who evaluate them negatively.

Origins of Self-Verification

Self-verification theory is based on the premise that people have a powerful desire to confirm and thus stabilize their firmly held self-views. This idea was first articulated by Prescott Lecky (1945) who proposed that chronic self-views give people a strong sense of coherence. For this reason, people are motivated to maintain their self-views. Self-verification theory (Swann 1983) developed Lecky's idea that stable self-views organize people's efforts to maximize coherence. This emphasis on the crucial role of chronic self-views in organizing efforts to attain coherence distinguishes self-verification theory from consistency theories such as cognitive dissonance. Self-verification involves efforts to bring actual or perceived social reality into harmony with longstanding beliefs about the self rather than maximizing the logical or psychological consistency of relevant cognitions present in the immediate situation.

This desire for stable self-views can be understood by considering how and why people develop self-views in the first place. Theorists have long assumed that people form their self-views by observing how others treat them (e.g., Mead 1934). People become increasingly certain of these views as they acquire more and more

evidence to support them. Once firmly held, self-views enable people to make predictions about their worlds and guide their behavior, while they maintain a sense of continuity, place, and coherence. In this way, stable self-views not only serve a pragmatic function of stabilizing social relations but also serve an epistemic function of affirming people's sense that things are as they should be. Indeed, firmly held self-views serve as the centerpiece of an individual's knowledge system. As such, when people strive for self-verification, the viability of that system hangs in the balance. It is thus unsurprising that by mid-childhood, children begin to display a preference for evaluations that confirm and stabilize their self-views (e.g., Cassidy et al. 2003). Indeed, when adults provide inflated praise to children with low self-esteem, it can backfire by lowering these children's self-worth in the face of setbacks (Brummelman et al. 2016).

If stable self-views are essential to human functioning, those who are deprived of them should be seriously impaired. Evidence supports this proposition. Consider a case study reported by the neurologist Oliver Sacks (1985). Due to chronic alcohol abuse, patient William Thompson suffered from memory loss so profound that he forgot who he was. Thompson desperately attempted to recover his previous identity. For instance, he sometimes developed hypotheses about who he was and then tested these hypotheses on those who happened to be present. Thompson was doomed to enact such tests repeatedly for the remainder of his life. His case not only shows that stable self-views are essential to psychological well-being, but also that self-views are essential to guiding action. Plagued by a sense of self that kept disappearing, Thompson did not know how to act toward people. In a very real sense, his inability to obtain self-verification deprived him of his capacity to have meaningful interactions with the people around him. No wonder, then, that people enact numerous strategies designed to elicit support for their self-views.

The Process of Self-Verification

People may use three distinct processes to create self-verifying social worlds. First, people may construct self-verifying "opportunity structures," i.e., social environments that satisfy their needs. They may, for example, seek and enter relationships in which they are apt to experience confirmation of their self-views (e.g., Swann et al. 1989) and leave relationships in which they fail to receive self-verification (Swann et al. 1994).

A second self-verification strategy involves the systematic communication of self-views to others. For example, people may display "identity cues" – highly visible signs and symbols of who they are. Physical appearances are a particularly important type of identity cue. The clothes one wears, for instance, can advertise numerous self-views, including one's political leanings, income level, religious convictions, and so on (e.g., Gosling 2008).

People may also communicate their identities to others through their actions. Depressed college students, for example, were more likely to solicit unfavorable feedback from their roommates than were non-depressed students (Swann et al. 1992a). Doing so, moreover, actually elicited negative evaluations. That is, the more unfavorable feedback they solicited in the middle of the semester, the more their roommates derogated them and convinced them to make plans to find another roommate at the end of the semester.

And what if people's efforts to obtain self-verifying evaluations fail? Even then, people may still cling to their self-views through yet another strategy of self-verification – "seeing" nonexistent evidence. Self-views may guide at least three stages of information processing: attention, recall, and interpretation. For example, an investigation of selective attention revealed that participants with positive self-views spent longer examining evaluations they expected to be positive, and people with negative self-views spent longer scrutinizing evaluations they expected to be negative (Swann and Read 1981). Participants in a follow-up study displayed signs of selective recall. In particular, participants who perceived themselves positively remembered more positive

than negative statements, and those who perceived themselves negatively remembered more negative than positive statements. Finally, numerous investigations have shown that people tend to interpret information in ways that reinforce their self-views. People with low self-esteem perceive their partners' feelings toward them as being more negative than they actually are (e.g., Murray et al. 2000). Together, attentional, encoding, retrieval, and interpretational processes may stabilize people's self-views by allowing them to "see" their worlds as offering more confirmation for their self-views than actually exists. These strategies therefore represent a special case of the tendency for expectancies to channel information processing.

Generality of Self-Verification Effects

Researchers have replicated the basic self-verification effect (i.e., people with negative self-views preferred and sought negative over positive evaluations) dozens of times. Just as people with positive self-views preferred to interact with a positive evaluator, people with negative self-views preferred to interact with someone who evaluated them negatively. Further, people with negative self-views seem to be truly drawn to self-verifying interaction partners rather than simply avoiding non-verifying ones. For example, when given the option of being in a different experiment, people with negative self-views chose to interact with a negative evaluator over participating in another experiment. Similarly, they chose being in a different experiment over interacting with a positive evaluator (Swann et al. 1992b).

Both men and women self-verify and do so regardless of whether self-views refer to qualities that are easily changed and regardless of whether the qualities in question are specific (intelligence, sociability, dominance) or global (self-esteem, depression). People are particularly likely to seek self-verifying evaluations if their self-views are confidently held, important, or extreme.

People with negative self-views display a clear tendency to seek and embrace negative rather than positive romantic partners. Although the early

demonstrations of self-verification strivings were conducted in the laboratory, later field studies showed a parallel pattern. The first study in this series was designed to compare how people with positive self-views and negative self-views react to marital partners whose appraisals differed from theirs in positivity (Swann et al. 1994). The investigators recruited married couples who were either shopping at a local mall or horseback riding at a ranch. The researchers approached potential participants and invited them to complete a series of questionnaires. They began with the Self-Attributes Questionnaire, a measure that focused on five attributes that most Americans regard as important: intelligence, social skills, physical attractiveness, athletic ability, and artistic ability. Then participants completed it again. This time, however, they rated their spouse. Finally, husbands and wives completed a measure of their commitment to the relationship. While each person completed these questionnaires, his or her spouse completed the same ones. The researchers thus had indices of what each participant thought of themselves, what their spouses thought of them, and how committed they were to the relationship.

How did people react to positive or negative evaluations from their spouses? People with positive self-views responded in the intuitively obvious way – the more favorable their spouses were, the more committed they were to their relationship. By contrast, people with negative self-views displayed the opposite reaction; the more favorable their spouses were, the *less* committed they were. Those with moderate self-views were most committed to spouses who appraised them moderately. Subsequent researchers have attempted to replicate this effect, and although the strength of the effect has varied, a number of studies reveal evidence that people prefer self-verifying spouses, even if their self-views are negative.

The Personal and Social Psychological Utility of Self-Verification

There is growing evidence that self-verification strivings predict a variety of important outcomes.

These outcomes occur at several levels, including the individual, interpersonal, and societal level of analysis.

Individual Outcomes

For the roughly 70% of people who have positive self-views (e.g., Diener and Diener 1995), the case for the personal adaptiveness of self-verification strivings is clear and compelling. Self-verification strivings bring stability to people's lives, rendering their experiences more coherent, orderly, and comprehensible than they would be otherwise. Success in acquiring self-verifying evaluations may bring with it important psychological benefits. For example, insofar as people's partners are self-verifying, their relationships will be more predictable and manageable. Such predictability and manageability may not only enable people to achieve their relationship goals (e.g., raising children, coordinating careers), it may also be psychologically comforting and anxiety reducing.

For people with negative self-views, however, the fruits of self-verification strivings are adaptive in some instances but not in others. When such views accurately reflect immutable personal limitations (e.g., lack of height), seeking verification for negative self-views will be adaptive. In such instances, seeking and receiving self-verifying evaluations will satisfy the individual's need for coherence and make him or her feel understood. When negative self-views are not grounded in reality, however, self-verification strivings may lead people with lots of positive qualities to needlessly stay in unhealthy relationships that verify their negative self-views. Moreover, individuals with inappropriately negative self-views are more receptive to social support that validates their negative feelings and less receptive to social support that could "rescue" them – for example, feedback that reframes the situation in a positive way (Marigold et al. 2014).

Interpersonal Outcomes

Groups may also benefit from self-verification strivings. Self-verification helps people feel understood, and feeling understood in turn makes people feel more connected to the group.

In fact, research indicates that when members of small groups receive self-verification, for either positive or negative self-views, their creative performance improves, and this is partially mediated by feelings of connection with other group members (Swann et al. 2003). Presumably, when self-verification reigns within groups, knowing that others were predictable and reliable made people more comfortable with one another, and this laid the groundwork for superior performance.

Self-verification processes seem to be especially useful in small groups composed of people from diverse backgrounds. That is, out of a fear that they will be misunderstood, members of diverse groups may often be careful to avoid expressing controversial ideas. Self-verification may reduce such fear by convincing them that they *are* understood. For this reason, they may open up to their co-workers. Such openness may, in turn, lead them to express off-beat ideas that lead to problem-solving. Performance may benefit (Swann et al. 2004). Evidence also suggests that verifying feedback (negative feedback for those with low self-esteem and positive feedback for those with high self-esteem) can even improve creativity.

In addition, eliciting negative but self-verifying evaluations may help to keep anxiety at bay. For example, one set of investigators (Wood et al. 2005) contrasted the reactions of high and low self-esteem participants to success. Whereas high self-esteem persons reacted quite favorably to success, low self-esteem participants reported being anxious and concerned, apparently because they found success to be surprising and unsettling. Similarly, others (Ayduk et al. 2013) observed participants' cardiovascular responses to positive and negative evaluations. When people with negative self-views received positive feedback, they were physiologically "threatened" (distressed and avoidant). In contrast, when they received negative feedback, participants with negative self-views were physiologically "challenged" or "galvanized" (i.e., cardiovascularly aroused but in a manner associated with approach motivation). The opposite pattern emerged for people with positive self-views.

Societal Outcomes

Self-verification processes are also adaptive for groups and the larger society. For example, self-verification can help eradicate social stereotypes. In small groups, those who offer other group members self-verification are more likely to individuate them – recognize them as unique individuals rather than as exemplars of social stereotypes (Swann et al. 2003). Over time, such treatment could influence targets and perceivers alike. Targets who are treated as unique individuals will be encouraged to develop qualities that reflect their idiosyncratic competences and capacities. At the same time, perceivers who individuate other group members may begin to question their social stereotypes.

There is also evidence that self-verification strivings may play a role in extreme behaviors committed on behalf of a group. In a recent series of studies, investigators identified a group of people whose personal identities were “fused” with a group identity (Swann et al. 2009). Because the personal and social self are functionally equivalent among such individuals, challenging one is tantamount to challenging the other. Consistent with this view, when these individuals had a personal self-view activated by challenging its validity, they displayed compensatory self-verification strivings by reasserting their group identity. Among fused persons, such compensatory activity took the form of increased willingness to perform extraordinary behaviors for the group.

The Dark Side of Self-Verification Processes

In general, self-verification strivings are adaptive and functional, as they foster feelings of coherence, reduce anxiety, improve group functioning and erode social stereotypes (Swann et al. 2000).

Nevertheless, for those who possess inappropriately negative self-views, self-verification may thwart positive change and make their life situations harsher than they would be otherwise.

Self-verification theory’s most provocative prediction is that people should prefer self-confirming evaluations even if the self-view in

question is negative. For example, self-verification theory predicts that those who see themselves as disorganized or unintelligent should prefer evidence that others also perceive them as such. It is obvious why people work to maintain some negative self-views. After all, everyone possesses flaws and weaknesses, and it makes perfect sense to develop and maintain negative self-views that correspond to these flaws and weaknesses. For example, people who lack some ability (as in those who are tone-deaf or color blind) will have numerous reasons for bringing others to recognize their shortcomings.

Self-verification strivings may, however, have deleterious consequences when people develop *inappropriately* negative self-views – that is, self-views that exaggerate or misrepresent their limitations (e.g., believing that one is fat when one is thin or unintelligent when one is bright). But the adaptiveness of self-verification strivings are much less clear when people develop globally negative self-views (e.g., “I am worthless”). Active efforts to maintain such negative self-views by, for example, gravitating toward harsh or abusive partners are surely maladaptive. Once ensconced in such relationships, people who seek therapy for their psychological distress may be unable to benefit from the therapy because returning home to a self-verifying partner may undo the progress that was made in the therapist’s office (Swann and Predmore 1985). And the workplace may offer little solace, for the feelings of worthlessness that plague people with low self-esteem may make them ambivalent about receiving fair treatment, ambivalence that may undercut their propensity to insist that they get what they deserve from their employers (Weisenfeld et al. 2007).

Furthermore, if people with negative self-views are stressed by positive information, over an extended period such information might actually produce debilitation. Empirical support for this possibility comes from several independent investigations. An initial pair of prospective studies (Brown and McGill 1989) compared the impact of positive life events on the health outcomes of people with low versus high self-esteem. Positive life events (e.g., improvement in living

conditions, getting good grades) predicted increases in health among high self-esteem participants but decreases in health among people low in self-esteem. It is remarkable that positive life events were apparently so unsettling to people with low self-esteem that their physical health suffered.

Clearly, for those who develop erroneous negative self-views, it is important to take steps to disrupt the self-verifying cycles in which they are often trapped. More generally, such instances illustrate how the process of self-verification can sometimes have negative consequences even though it is adaptive for most people most of the time.

Boundary Conditions of Self-Verification Processes

Self-enhancement theory is perhaps self-verification theory's strongest rival formulation. It is one of social psychology's earliest theories. By positing a vital and universal human need to view oneself positively, Allport (1937) sowed the seeds for what would develop into a patchwork of loosely related propositions dubbed "self-enhancement theory." Today this theory has received considerable support, including evidence that people are motivated to obtain, maintain, and increase positive self-regard. There are also indications that the desire for self-enhancement is truly fundamental. First, whether one examines people's social judgments, attributions, or overt behaviors, there appears to be a widespread tendency for them to favor themselves over others (Leary 2007). Second, traces of a preference for positivity emerge at a tender age. For example, as early as four and a half months of age, children preferentially orient to voices that have the melodic contours of acceptance (Fernald 1993). Third, among adults, a preference for positive evaluations emerges before other preferences (Swann et al. 1990). In particular, when forced to choose between two evaluators quickly, participants selected the positive evaluator even if they viewed themselves negatively. Only when given

time to reflect did participants with negative self-views choose the negative, self-verifying partner.

Yet as potent as the desire for positivity may be, the results summarized earlier in this chapter indicate that self-verification strivings are quite robust. In light of the existence of numerous relevant studies, the most appropriate means of testing the relative merits of self-enhancement versus self-verification approaches was to review all available studies that meet the design criteria specified by the two theories. In a comprehensive meta-analysis (Kwang and Swann 2010), self-verification strivings were equal to, or stronger than, self-enhancement strivings, pointing to the existence of a more balanced and variegated motive system than one driven purely by self-enhancement.

Perhaps the most parsimonious way of conceptualizing the relationship of self-verification and self-enhancement is to recognize each motive as emerging as part of a sequential process. Immediate responses are more likely to be self-enhancing, while more considered responses are more likely to be self-verifying. This is because self-enhancement strivings require only one step: upon classifying the evaluation, people embrace positive evaluations and reject negative evaluations. In contrast, self-verification strivings logically require at least two steps. After classifying the evaluation, it must be compared to the self-view, for only then can the person discriminate verifying evaluations from non-verifying ones. Depriving people of cognitive resources while they choose an interaction partner should interfere with their ability to access their self-concept (Swann et al. 1990) and block self-verification from unfolding.

New Directions/Extending the Theory

Research on self-verification has been moving in at least four distinct directions. One approach focuses on tradeoffs between self-verification and other motives such as positivity, particularly in close relationships (e.g., Neff and Karney 2005). One fascinating issue here is how people create and sustain idiosyncratic social worlds that

are disjunctive with the worlds that they have created outside the relationship (Swann et al. 2002). In particular, how are people able to compartmentalize their identities and navigate between social worlds in which they have negotiated distinctive identities (Swann and Bosson 2008)? And how does self-verification unfold in a world that is not only outside of a given relationship but outside a given lifetime? A new theme that has emerged recently involves the impact of self-verification strivings on how we want to be perceived after we die. For example, a series of studies (Heintzelman et al. 2016) suggest that individuals want to be remembered as they really are when they are no longer with us. Even when negative qualities of the self were made salient, the majority of participants (61%) preferred to be remembered as they really are.

Another emerging theme has explored how self-verification plays out within and between groups. Cross-cultural studies of self-verification support the universality of self-verification strivings (Seih et al. 2013). Not only is the self-verification motive found among groups around the world, but recent work has also explored how people verify their group identities as well as their personal identities (e.g., Chen et al. 2004). Interestingly, people strive to verify group identities that are negative as well as positive (Gómez et al. 2009). The latter evidence is provocative because it challenges social identity theory's assumption that people maintain positive and distinctive social identities as a means of bolstering their feelings of well-being (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Other work interested in differential self-verification effects based on social identity has compared the self-verification strivings of mono-racial and multiracial individuals. Multiracial people may expect less verification of their race-related identities since those identities may be less visibly apparent. As a result, multiracial individuals are more interested in interacting with others who see them as they see themselves (Remedios and Chasteen 2013).

One final current direction of research tackles the problem of improving individuals' self-esteem. This is a particular challenge because self-verification on the part of those with low

self-esteem can lead them to seek out negative feedback, which then reinforces that low self-esteem in a cyclical process. It turns out that simple-minded approaches to this problem not only fail to work, they may actually backfire. For example, repeating positive self-affirmations makes people with high self-esteem feel better but actually makes those with low self-esteem feel worse (Wood et al. 2009). This is because messages that are disjunctive with one's experiences and representation of reality are perplexing and unsettling. Such messages are not an effective strategy for raising self-esteem for those who need it most: people with low self-esteem.

A potential solution may be to simultaneously verify a person's perception of themselves (e.g., "I know you have low self-esteem and agree that you may have some negative qualities irrelevant to our relationship") but also encourage the development of more positive self-views in the future. In addition, reframing compliments from a partner in a more abstract way that encourages the individual with low self-esteem to reflect on the meaning and significance of that compliment is helpful. Such reframing may encourage people with low self-esteem to feel more positively about themselves and their relationships (Marigold et al. 2007).

Conclusion

Self-verification theory has been and continues to be a generative area of research that has helped researchers explore the many ways in which people strive to create around themselves worlds that are coherent with their enduring views of themselves. So powerful is the desire for self-verification that people will sometimes work to confirm self-views that are negative.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Self-concept content](#)
- ▶ [Self-enhancement bias](#)
- ▶ [Self-enhancement motives](#)
- ▶ [Self-esteem](#)
- ▶ [Social identity theory](#)

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