

CHAPTER 05 SELF-ASSESSMENT

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CHAPTER 05

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Throughout our lives, we receive a great deal of feedback about ourselves. Our report cards provide clues to our intelligence, our scorecards shed light on our athletic prowess, and our dance cards hint at our likability. Considering how much information we collect, it seems reasonable to assume that we know how intelligent, athletic, and likable we really are.

In this chapter, we will examine whether people assess themselves accurately, focusing on socially valued qualities, such as one's warmth, competence, and character. The first section of the chapter documents that people's self-views are not entirely accurate. The second section shows that inaccuracy occurs because most people see themselves as "better" than they really are, especially when they compare themselves with others. The third section of this chapter considers how people are able to construct and maintain overly positive self-views. Here we will review a variety of cognitive and behavioral strategies that people use to avoid, dismiss, or neutralize negative feedback. Finally, we will examine strategies that help people cope less defensively with criticism, rejection, and the like.

Before we begin, it is useful to ask why it is important to study the accuracy of self-knowledge. First, as a practical matter, it's important to understand whether self-views are truthful. Dating websites, for example, abound with people's pronouncements regarding their personality, talents, and tastes (e.g., attractive, intelligent man with a creative streak seeks a mate with a warm sense of humor and knowledge of fine wines). Potential suitors rely on these assessments when making overtures, so it's important to know whether these assessments can be trusted. People also use their self-assessments to make important decisions in life. An aspiring tennis player, for example, may forgo a college scholarship because she believes she has the talent to make it on the professional tour. Finally, physicians and therapists use their client's self-assessments to make treatment plans and recommendations. For all of these reasons, it's important to study the accuracy of self-knowledge (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004; Wilson & Dunn, 2004).

I. **Accuracy and Bias in Self-Knowledge**

The conflict between the need to be accurate and the desire to feel good about ourselves is one of the major battlegrounds of the self, and how this battle is waged and how it is won are central determinants of who we are and how we feel about ourselves. – (T. Wilson, 2002, p. 39)

A. **Motives That Guide The Search for Self-Knowledge**

When people assess themselves, they do not do so in a dispassionate, disinterested way. Instead, they are guided by several important motives that push them in one direction or another (Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

1. **Accuracy**

First, an accuracy motive can lead people to seek the truth about themselves, without regard to whether they learn something good or bad (Trope, 1986). Two considerations are thought to underlie this need. First, people may believe that they have a moral obligation to know what they are really like. This admonition is prominent in theological and philosophical thought. The existentialist philosophers, for example, held that people have an ethical obligation to uncover their true nature. People who evade self-understanding were considered to be weak, cowardly, and living a depraved or purposeless existence.

People might also seek accurate self-knowledge for its instrumental value. In some situations, knowing what we are really like can help us achieve other goals. One of these goals is survival. Let's imagine, just as an example, that I think of myself as incredibly fleet of foot when, in fact, I'm slower than a snail. If all I'm doing is running around a track by myself, my inaccurate beliefs about myself are probably doing me no harm. But if I intend to taunt a wild beast to see if I can outrun it when it gets mad and turns on me, it probably would be helpful for me to know how fast I really am; otherwise, I will die! The point here is that accurate self-knowledge is sometimes adaptive; sometimes, it is important for us to know what we are really like (Festinger, 1954).

2. **Self-Enhancement**

Self-enhancement needs also influence self-assessment. In Chapter 2, we noted that James (1890) identified certain emotional states that always involve oneself as a reference. Feeling proud of ourselves or ashamed of ourselves are examples of what James had in mind. The self-enhancement motive refers to the fact that people strive to experience these positive emotional states and avoid experiencing these negative emotional states. In many (though not all) cultures, feelings of self-worth are promoted by thinking of oneself in favorable terms—as exceptionally kind, likable, intelligent, and attractive, for example. In this case, self-enhancement needs lead people to seek information about themselves in such a way that they are apt to conclude that they possess these qualities.

3. **Self-Consistency and Self-Verification**

A final force to consider is known as the consistency motive. In Chapter 1 we saw that our ideas about ourselves serve several important functions: They influence the way we process information, they guide our behavior, and they serve as goals toward which our future behavior is oriented. Many theorists believe these functions give rise to a motive to protect the self-concept against change (e.g., Epstein, 1980; Lecky, 1945; Swann, 1996). This motive leads people to seek and embrace information that is consistent with what they think they are like, and to avoid and reject information that is inconsistent with what they think they are like.

According to self-consistency, the mind is a unit, an organized system of ideas. All of the ideas which belong to the system must seem to be consistent with one another. The center or nucleus of the mind is the individual's idea or conception of himself. If a new idea seems to be consistent with the ... individual's conception of himself, it is accepted

and assimilated easily. If it seems to be inconsistent, however, it meets with resistance and is likely to be rejected. (Lecky, 1945, p. 246)

The self-consistency motive plays an important role in Swann's self-verification theory (Swann, 1996). Self-verification theory contends that once people develop ideas about what they are like, they strive to verify these self-views. Consider, for example, a person who thinks of herself as highly intelligent. According to Swann, this person is motivated to verify this view of herself. To do so, she can (a) engage in activities that demonstrate her acumen; (b) selectively seek, accept, and retain information that confirms her wisdom; and (c) attempt to convince others that she possesses a brilliant mind.

Two considerations are thought to drive the search for self-verifying feedback (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). First, we feel more comfortable and secure when we believe that other people see us as we see ourselves. Imagine how unsettling it would be if you suddenly learned you were not the person you thought you were. Seeking self-verifying feedback helps people avoid this anxiety and epistemic confusion. The search for self-verifying feedback is also fueled by more pragmatic, interpersonal concerns. Self-verification theory assumes that our social interactions proceed more smoothly and profitably when other people view us as we view ourselves. This consideration gives people a second reason to selectively seek self-verifying feedback.

An especially controversial aspect of self-verification theory is the predictions it makes when people hold negative views of themselves. The theory asserts that people are just as interested in confirming their negative self-views as they are in corroborating their positive self-views. We will examine the support for this prediction later in this chapter.

B. *Are Self-Assessments Accurate?*

Having discussed several motives that guide the search for self-knowledge, we are ready to examine how accurately people assess themselves.

1. *Correspondence Between Self-Evaluations and Objective Criteria*

The most obvious (and decisive) way to determine whether people's views of themselves are accurate is to compare these views with some objective criterion. Consider, for example, the correlation between people's perceptions of their intelligence and their scores on an IQ test. Given the importance of intelligence in our culture and the fact that people routinely receive feedback on their intellectual abilities throughout schooling, we might expect that people are quite accurate with respect to where they fall on this dimension. This is not the case. People's self-appraisals of their intelligence and their scores on standardized IQ tests hover around .3 (Borkenau & Liebler, 1993; Hansford & Hattie, 1982). A correlation of this magnitude means that roughly 65% of individuals correctly classify their intelligence as high or low and 35% misclassify themselves. Because a 50-50 split would be expected by chance, these findings provide only modest evidence that people know what they are really like.

Intelligence is a broad construct with many components, making it difficult to judge. People's ideas about themselves may be more accurate when a narrower, more specific domain is considered. There is some reason to believe this is so. Students' self-appraisals of ability in school ("How good a student are you?") are substantially correlated with their actual classroom performance (Fauce, 1984; Felson, 1984). This is especially true when we look at the association between self-ratings of ability and performance in particular subject areas. For example, students' judgments of how good they are in math are highly correlated with their classroom performance in this area (Marsh, 1993). This finding suggests that people's ideas about themselves in very specific domains may be rather accurate.

This is not always the case, however. For example, one study found a .2 correlation between physicians' ratings of their knowledge of a disease and their scores on a test that measured their knowledge (Tracey, Arroll, Barham, & Richmond, 1997). Other studies have found that employees' assessments of their competence at work are weakly correlated with their actual productivity (Dunning et al., 2004).

Even when sizable correlations are found, they do not necessarily show that people know what they are really like. Consider the (hypothetical) examples in Table 5.1, in which students' assessments of their class rank are compared with their actual class rank. Example 1 shows a perfect correlation between estimated class ranking and actual class ranking, with all three students correctly gauging their actual class rank. Examples 2 and 3 also show a perfect correlation between estimated class rank and actual class rank, despite the fact that all three students underestimate their class standing in Example 2 and overestimate their class standing in Example 3. This is the problem with correlations. They tell us whether people are relatively accurate with respect to their rank-order, but they do not tell us whether people are accurate in an absolute sense. Even though this problem has been known for some time (Cronbach, 1955) and can be addressed using alternative statistical techniques (Gonzales & Griffin, 1995), researchers have rarely considered the issue when assessing the accuracy of people's self-views (for exceptions, see Gramzow, Elliot, Asher, & McGregor, 2003; Epley & Dunning, 2006; John & Robins, 1994; Shepperd, 1993).

Table 5.1. Three hypothetical examples concerning the relation between estimated and actual class rank. **All three examples show a perfect correlation between estimated class rank and actual class rank, but only the first example provides evidence of accuracy.**

Example 1		Example 2		Example 3	
Estimated Class Rank	Actual Class Rank	Estimated Class Rank	Actual Class Rank	Estimated Class Rank	Actual Class Rank
25	25	05	25	93	25
50	50	10	50	96	50

75	75	15	75	99	75
$r = 1.00$		$r = 1.00$		$r = 1.00$	

Several years ago, I conducted a study to investigate which of the examples shown in Table 5.1 matches students' assessments of their class standing. On the day of the final exam in my social psychology class, I asked students to estimate their final class rank. I then examined the correspondence between these estimates and the students' actual class rank. Although the correlation between the two measures was sizable ($r = .65$), Figure 5.1 shows that students' estimates of their class rank exceeded their actual class rank by a considerable degree. Moreover, whereas 75% of the students overestimated their scores, often by a sizable amount ($M = 24.38\%$), only 25% of the students underestimated their class standing, and by a very small amount ($M = 7.5\%$). In short, there was evidence for relative accuracy, but very little evidence for absolute accuracy.

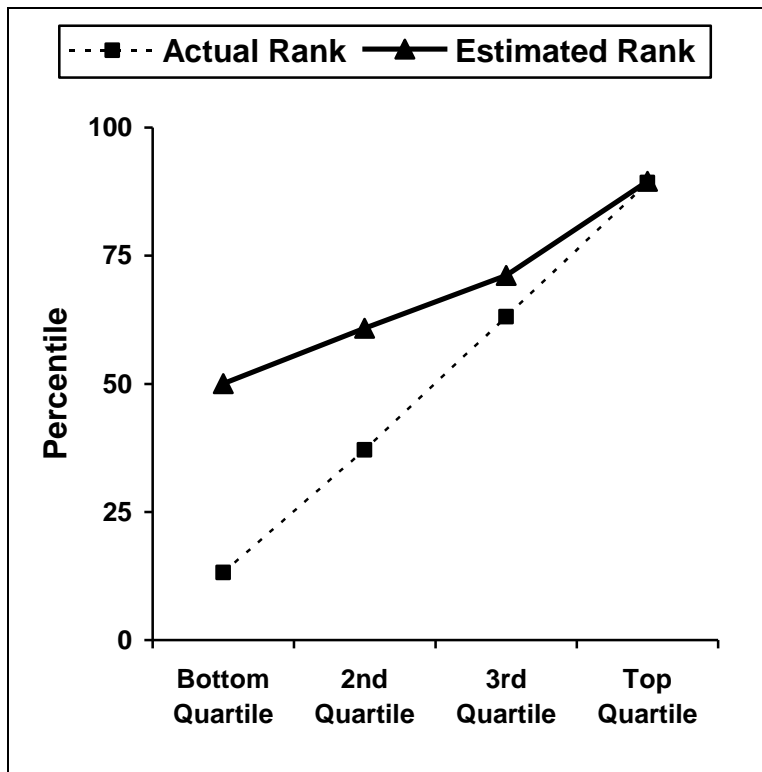


Figure 5.1. Estimated and Actual Class Standing of College Students. **Before taking a final exam, students were asked to estimate their final class standing. Although these reports were highly correlated with actual class standing, most students overestimated their ranking to a considerable degree.** (Source: Brown, 1992, Unpublished data, University of Washington)

A glance at Figure 5.1 shows that top-performing students were more accurate in their self-assessments than were students in the bottom 50% of the class. Does this mean that highly competent students possess greater insight into themselves than do those who lack competence? Although some researchers have suggested that this is so (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), most of the evidence indicates otherwise: Top-performing students appear more accurate, not because they

possess any special insight into themselves, but simply because their high performance attainments happen to match their highly positive self-appraisals (Burson, Larrick, & Klayman, 2006; Krueger & Mueller, 2002).

2. **Self-Other Agreement**

Another way to gauge the accuracy of people's self-assessments is to examine the association between self-appraisals and the judgments of others. Although self-other agreement does not constitute accuracy (i.e., reliability is not validity), some attributes, such as attractiveness and popularity, are socially defined. In such cases, the judgments of others provide an appropriate standard for gauging the accuracy of people's self-views.

Consider first, people's perceptions of their attractiveness. In a meta-analysis involving over 5,000 participants, Feingold (1992) reported that the correlation between people's perceptions of their own attractiveness and how attractive they are regarded by others was .24. Importantly, this rather modest value does not arise because observers disagree on who is attractive and who is not. In fact, just the opposite is true: Inter-rater agreement in these studies is generally high, typically exceeding .60. Taken together, these findings indicate that people are in strong agreement about the attractiveness of others, but these consensual judgments do not coincide with people's perceptions of their own attractiveness.

The situation is somewhat different when we examine the correspondence between people's perceptions of their personality traits and the way they are perceived by others. Research in this area has found substantial self-other agreement for traits that are unambiguous (Hayes & Dunning, 1997) or clearly manifested in behavior (Funder & Drobny, 1987). For example, people who are very talkative, outgoing, and sociable tend to think of themselves as being extroverted, and they are judged by others to be extroverted as well. Conscientiousness shows a similar effect. People who are meticulous in their appearance and fastidious in their bearing recognize that they are conscientious and are rated that way by others. These effects are so robust that they are found with only minimal acquaintanceship: After knowing someone for only a few minutes, our impression of how outgoing or conscientious the person is correlates highly with what the person thinks he or she is like (Albright, Kenny, & Malloy, 1988; Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Watson, 1989). This concordance even arises when people visit a personal website on the World Wide Web (Vazire & Gosling, 2004).

Of course, this last finding does not mean that strangers know you as well as your good friends or family. Funder and Colvin (1988) found consistent evidence that the personality judgments of friends correlated more highly with people's self-assessments than did the judgments of strangers. Husbands and wives also show substantial agreement regarding one another's personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1988; McCrae, 1982). These effects appear to be particularly large for attributes that are hidden from view (i.e., attributes that do not have clear behavioral referents). For example, although strangers are able to judge your sociability, only your family and friends can judge how intellectually curious you are (Paulhus & Bruce, 1992; Paunonen, 1989).

A final variable that influences the strength of self-other agreement is the desirability of the trait. The more desirable the trait, the less correspondence there is between people's self-ratings and the way they are rated by others (John & Robins, 1993; Park & Judd, 1989). One interpretation of this finding is that people's ideas about themselves in nonevaluative domains are largely accurate, but their thoughts about themselves in highly evaluative domains are not.

To summarize, people's ratings of their personality traits often are correlated (sometimes substantially) with the judgments of others (Funder, 1987, 1995). This correspondence may indicate that people know what they are really like. At the same time, agreement does not constitute accuracy. My wife and I may agree that I am creative, but this concordance doesn't make it so (Costa & McCrae, 1988; McCrae, 1982). Furthermore, as noted earlier, correlations do not provide an unambiguous estimate of accuracy. Finally, it's also important to bear in mind that the agreement that exists is limited to evaluatively neutral traits. People's judgments of themselves in evaluative domains do not correspond highly with the judgments of others.

The lack of correspondence between self-assessments and the judgments of our peers has an interesting consequence: In some cases, other people's judgments about what we are like are more accurate than our own assessments (Kolar, Funder, & Colvin, 1996). For example, in a study of surgical residents, peer ratings of competence were a better predictor of performance on a standardized exam than were self-assessments of competence (Risucci, Tortolani, Ward, 1989). Similar findings have been found in judgments of leadership ability, with peer evaluations providing more accurate judgments of leadership potential than self-evaluations (Bass & Yammarino, 1991). And when it comes to romance, friends can sometimes more accurately predict the break-up of a relationship than can relationship partners themselves (MacDonald & Ross, 1999).

3. **Behavioral Prediction**

Examining the correspondence between self-assessments and behavior provides another way to assess the accuracy of self-knowledge. Colloquial phrases, such as "Put your money where your mouth is?" or "You can talk the talk, but can you walk the walk?" call attention to the fact that people's self-assessments do not always translate into behavior.

Several research areas have examined how accurately people can predict their own behavior. First, a vast literature has examined the correspondence between personality and behavior. Personality is often measured with self-report, so much of this research is relevant to whether people's views of themselves accurately predict their behavior. This research has found only limited evidence that they do. To illustrate, those who describe themselves as "extremely honest" are only slightly less likely to refrain from cheating when given the opportunity to do so than are those who claim simply to be "somewhat honest" (Mischel, 1968). In a similar vein, people's attitudes (as expressed by self-report) do not always predict their actions. For example, people who describe themselves as "environmentally conscious" do not always act in an environmentally responsible manner (Wicker,

1969).

Moreover, people overestimate their ability to predict their own behavior. In one study, university students were asked how likely they would be to engage in a variety of behaviors in the coming weeks (e.g., declare a major, vote in an upcoming election) (Vallone, Griffin, Lin, & Ross, 1990). They then indicated how certain or confident they were of their predictions. Despite the obvious difficulties involved in predicting one's future, the students were very confident in their prognostications. This confidence turned out to be unfounded. Less than two-thirds of the students' behavioral predictions came true, a value well under the degree of certainty they expressed. One interpretation of these findings is that people mistakenly believe that their self-knowledge is accurate enough to allow them to unerringly predict their own behavior.

Prediction errors are especially likely for positively valued outcomes. Epley and Dunning (2000) asked college students whether they would contribute to a campus charity drive in the coming week. Although 83% of the students said they would, only 43% actually did so (see also, Greenwald, Carnot, Beach, & Young, 1987; Sherman, 1980). Importantly, these errors are less apparent when people predict other people's behavior, indicating that self-assessments are uniquely biased (Epley & Dunning, 2000; Helweg-Larsen & Shepperd, 2001).

4. ***Affective Forecasting: Predicting How One Will Feel in the Future***

People frequently base decisions on their anticipated emotional reaction to various outcomes (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007). For example, a person might think "I know I would be devastated if I left my relationship partner, so I'll stay in the relationship even though I'm not happy now." Decisions like these assume that our self-knowledge is so accurate it can be used to predict our future emotional states. There are good reasons to question this assumption (Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, in press; Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998; Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000). In general, people overestimate the emotional impact and duration of future events. For example, if you were asked to predict how you would feel if you landed your dream job after graduation, you would probably say that you would be elated for an extended period of time. In fact, the joy you feel will probably be less intense and fade more quickly than you realize.

Researchers have identified several reasons why people overestimate the emotional impact of positive and negative events. First, they base their judgment on the event itself, without taking into account that many other events will also affect their happiness (Wilson et al., 2000). After all, people who land their dream job still feel bad if their marriage takes a turn for the worse, and people who lose their jobs still feel happy if they fall in love. People also underestimate their ability to neutralize the negative effects of negative outcomes, thereby by exaggerating how disappointed they are likely to be. Finally, people base their affective forecasts on highly dramatic but atypical prior events rather than less extreme but more common ones (Morewedge, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2005). For example, when asked how happy they think they will be on their next vacation, people base their prediction on

their happiest vacation, instead of mentally taking an average of all of their prior trips.

C. **Summary**

To summarize, people's self-assessments are not entirely accurate. Modest agreement exists between people's self-views and their standing in domains that are objectively defined (e.g., intelligence) and in domains that are consensually determined (e.g., attractiveness). Additionally, although people's judgments of their personality correspond with the judgments of others, this agreement occurs largely in nonevaluative domains. Finally, people are not very good at predicting how they will behave in particular situations or how they will react to future events. Considering all of the evidence, it seems fair to conclude that people's beliefs about themselves in socially valued domains do not bear a strong resemblance to their objective qualities.

II. **Self-Enhancing Self-Assessments**

The modest degree of accuracy that characterizes self-assessments does not occur because individuals' self-appraisals are randomly distributed. It occurs because, to varying degrees, most individuals appraise themselves in ways that are overly positive.

A. **The Better than Average Effect**

Suppose you randomly sample a group of people and ask them, "Compared to most other people, how kind are you?" What do you think you would find? Logically, your sample should be evenly split between people who say they are less kind than others, just as kind as others, and more kind than others. But this does not occur. Instead, the vast majority of your sample will say they are kinder than most other people. This tendency — known as the better than average effect — occurs for a wide range of characteristics. Among other things, people believe they are (a) more virtuous, honorable, and moral than others; (b) more competent, talented, and skilled than others; (c) more compassionate, understanding, and sympathetic than others; and (d) more flexible, perceptive, and insightful than others (for reviews, see [Alicke, Dunning, & Krueger, 2005](#); [Chambers & Windschitl, 2004](#); [Dunning et al., 2004](#); [Taylor & Brown, 1988](#)). People even claim to be more human than most other people, believing they are especially likely to possess attributes that are essential aspects of human nature ([Gaunt, Leyens, & Demoulin, 2002](#); [Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, & Bastian, 2005](#); [Leyens et al., 2000](#)).

The tendency to view oneself in unrealistically positive terms also applies to one's extended self. People view their friends, family members, romantic partners, and fellow group members as better than most other people, too ([Brown, 1986, 1991](#); [Brown & Kobayashi, 2002](#)). The bias even extends to one's pets! When researchers asked participants to compare their pet with the "average pet," they found an overwhelming tendency for people to rate their pets more positively than other people's pets ([El-Alayli, Lystad, Webb, Hollingsworth, & Ciolli, 2006](#)).

Although the better than average effect is extensive, several factors limit its

magnitude. For example, the bias is reduced (though not eliminated) (a) when people compare themselves with a specific other person rather than most other people (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995); (b) the attribute under consideration is uncontrollable rather than controllable (Alicke, 1985); (c) the comparison is indirect rather than direct (Klar & Giladi, 1997); and (d) people believe they must justify their claims to an audience (Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002). Moreover, people don't think they are good at everything. Many people concede that they can't juggle, tune a piano, or replace a carburetor, and this admission is often associated with a tendency to believe one is below average in these domains (Kruger, 1999). In cases like these, people tend to devalue the attribute's importance or believe it can be acquired with practice (Brown, 1991; Brown, Dutton, & Cook, 2001).

In most studies, the better than average effect involves computing mean differences between self-ratings and ratings of most other people. If, in the aggregate, people rate themselves more positively than they rate others, we are warranted in concluding that, on average, people are unrealistically positive. We don't know, however, how many people show this tendency. A survey conducted by the College Board in 1976 provides some insight on the matter (cited in Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). In this survey, nearly one million high school students were asked to compare themselves with their peers. Seventy percent rated themselves above the median in leadership ability, 60% rated themselves above the median in athletic ability, and 85% rated themselves above the median in their ability to get along well with others. Of these, 25% placed themselves in the top 1%!

Similar results are found with adults. In a survey of over 700 engineers at two Bay Area companies, only one engineer classified himself or herself as below average, and more than 2/3 of the sample rated their performance in the top 5% of their peers (Zenger, 1992). Another study found that 94% of college professors believe they do above average work (Cross, 1977), and when asked to judgment their contentment with their life, 86% of middle-age adults placed themselves in the upper 35% of the population (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). Finally, people facing threats to their health (e.g., cancer patients, people with HIV) show the same self-aggrandizing bias when evaluating themselves relative to other patients with their disease (Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakof, 1990; Helgeson & Taylor, 1993; Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, & Aspinwall, 1991).

B. ***Exaggerated Beliefs in Personal Control***

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the
difference.

---*Serenity Prayer*, Reinhold Niebuhr

Niebuhr's prayer underscores the importance of accurately judging one's control over environmental outcomes. Although this ability would seem to be essential for effective functioning, numerous lines of research from the areas of human learning, social, and clinical psychology have shown that individuals exaggerate their ability to bring about desired outcomes (for reviews, see Abramson

& Alloy, 1980, Taylor & Brown, 1988). Jenkins and Ward (1965) were one of the first investigators to examine this issue in an experimental setting. In the studies they conducted, participants were given a series of problems and were asked to detect the relation between their actions (e.g., pressing or not pressing a button) and an environmental outcome (e.g., whether or not a light came on). In some conditions, participants' responses exerted control over the onset of the light; in other conditions, the light appeared independent of whether or not participants pressed the button. Across these variations, there was a general tendency for participants to overestimate their control over the onset of the light. The general tendency for people to exaggerate their ability to produce desired outcomes has been dubbed the *illusion of control* (Langer, 1975).

The experimental situation Jenkins and Ward (1965) constructed is admittedly artificial and unfamiliar. People may be better at judging their control under more mundane and familiar conditions. Langer (1975) addressed this issue in the context of gambling events that are entirely determined by chance. Langer had participants cut cards against a competitor, with the one choosing the higher card being the winner. In one condition, the competitor was poorly dressed and nervous; in the other condition, the competitor was dapper and composed. Logically, these variations shouldn't affect the amount of money participants wagered, but they did. Even though participants understood that ability played no role in the game, they wagered more money when competing against the nervous competitor than when competing against the composed competitor. Related research has found that people are less willing to sell a lottery ticket they have chosen than one given to them, presumably because they believe the act of choosing the number increases their odds of winning. These findings provide further evidence that people misjudge their ability to bring about desired outcomes.

Exaggerated beliefs in personal control also underlie superstitious behaviors. Many individuals engage in rituals or own objects they believe will produce desired results. By definition, these behaviors and possessions represent distorted beliefs in one's ability to bring about desired outcomes (or ward off undesirable ones). Finally, exaggerated beliefs in personal control contribute to inaccurate predictions of future behavior. Consider a phenomenon known as the planning fallacy (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994). When people predict how long it will take them to complete various projects (e.g., make home repairs, revise "The Self"), they routinely underestimate the amount of time it will take, in part because they believe they have more control over their time than is actually the case (Koehler & Poon, 2005). This is true even though people know they have failed to complete tasks on time in the past (leading Buehler et al. to quip that "people can know the past and still be doomed to repeat it!").

C. *Unrealistic Optimism*

The belief that one is capable and efficacious fuels another self-enhancing belief known as unrealistic optimism. When asked to predict the future, most people believe they are more likely than their peers to experience a wide variety of pleasant events, such as having a gifted child, owning their own home, or living past

the age of 80, and much less likely than their peers to experience a wide variety of negative events, such as being involved in an automobile accident, being a crime victim, or becoming seriously ill (for reviews, see [Helweg-Larsen & Shepperd, 2001](#); [Klein & Helweg-Larsen, 2002](#); [Taylor & Brown, 1988](#); [Weinstein & Klein, 1995](#)). Since not everyone's future can be rosier than that of their peers, the optimism people exhibit seems illusory.

People are not optimistic for all events. For example, optimism is reduced or eliminated when the event is uncontrollable. In addition, people think they are less apt than others to experience very rare positive events (such as winning a lottery), and equally likely to experience common negative events (such as catching a cold) ([Chambers, Windschitl, & Suls, 2003](#)). Finally, it's important to underscore that people are not wholly unaware of their absolute level of risk. For example, although smokers believe they are less likely to get cancer than most other smokers, they also concede that they are more likely to get cancer than are nonsmokers ([Gerrard, Gibbons, & Bushman, 1996](#); [Gladis, Michela, Walter, & Vaughan, 1992](#); [van der Velde, van der Plight, & Hooykaas, 1994](#)). In this sense, the optimism people display is relative, not absolute.

D. ***Do People Really Believe They Are So Wonderful?***

1. ***Biased Perceptions of Bias***

Considering the prevalence of the better than average effect, one might suspect that people are aware that their assessments are biased. Not so. In fact, just the opposite is true. People believe they are more accurate and less biased than are most other people. For example, [Friedrich \(1996\)](#) told students about the better than average effect, and then asked them to indicate how often they and the average person succumbed to the bias. Although students conceded that their judgments were occasionally biased, they believed other people's assessments were more frequently biased than their own. Subsequent research has shown that this tendency is a very general one, as people believe that other people's assessment are more tainted by wishful thinking, self-interest, greed, and ideology than are their own ([Ehrlinger, Gilovich, & Ross, 2005](#); [Kruger & Gilovich, 2004](#); [Miller & Ratner, 1998](#); [Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004](#); [Pronin, Kruger, Savitsky, & Ross., 2001](#); [Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002](#); [Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995](#)).

2. ***Cross-Cultural Research on the Better than Average Effect***

Most of the research on the better than average effect comes from North American samples. This sampling bias raises a question: Do people from other cultures also think of themselves, in overly positive terms? To address this issue, researchers have most often examined how people in East Asian countries, such as Japan, China, and Korea, evaluate themselves. The evidence on the universality of self-enhancement is mixed. On the one hand, East Asians are generally more modest and less self-promoting than are North Americans and Western Europeans ([Cai, Brown, Deng, & Oakes, 2007](#); [Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999](#)). At the same time, East Asians also view themselves in more positive terms than they view most other people. To illustrate [Brown and Kobayashi \(2002\)](#) asked college

students in Japan and America to evaluate themselves, most other students at their university, and their best friend on a variety of traits and abilities (e.g., competent, friendly, well-liked). Figure 5.2 shows that although the Japanese students were more modest than the Americans, they were just as apt to regard themselves and their best friend more positively than they regarded most other students at their university. Along with other research, these findings show that the better than average effect occurs in Eastern cultures as well as Western ones (see also, Kobayashi & Brown, 2003; Kurman, 2001; Kurman & Sriram, 1997; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003).

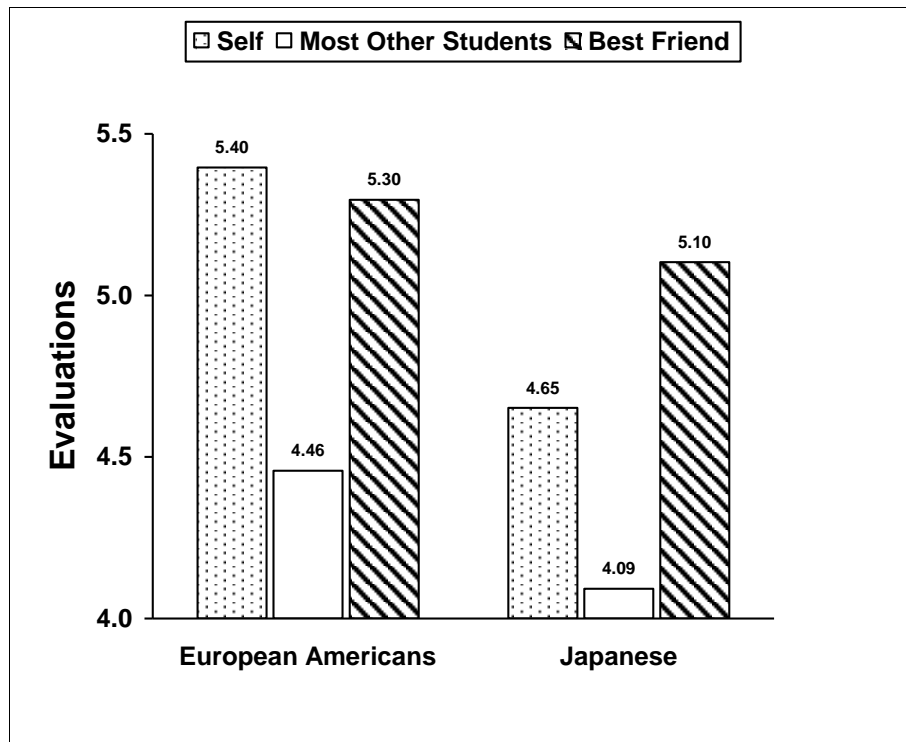


Figure 5.2. The Better Than Average Effect in America and Japan. Students in America and Japan rated themselves, other students at their university, and their best friends on a variety of evaluative dimensions (e.g., competent, friendly, responsible). Although evaluations were generally more modest in Japan than in America, both cultural groups evaluated themselves and their best friends more favorably than most other students. This finding is consistent with the claim that the better than average effect does not just occur in North American/Western cultures. (Source: Brown & Kobayashi, 2002, *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 5, 145-167)

3. **Implicit Measures Show a Better than Average Effect**

Studies of implicit self-evaluations provide further evidence that people truly believe they are better than others. Unlike explicit measures, which directly ask people “What do you think you are like?”, implicit measures assess self-evaluations indirectly by examining the ease with which people associate themselves with positive and negative stimuli. This strategy minimizes the possibility that people will deliberately misrepresent their self-assessments.

The Implicit Association Test developed by [Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz \(1998\)](#) illustrates this approach. With this test, participants simultaneously classify words into two categories. For example, they might see the word “SUNSHINE” on a computer screen and tap the ‘d’ key if the word describes them or is positive, and the ‘k’ key if the word describes other people or is negative. On alternative trials, the keying is reversed, requiring participants to press the ‘d’ key if the word describes them or is negative and the ‘k’ key if the word describes other people or is positive. Because easy judgments are made more quickly than difficult ones, the amount of time it takes participants to make these judgments can be used to assess their implicit attitudes.

If people’s implicit self-evaluations are more positive than their implicit evaluations of others, they ought to make their classifications more quickly when SELF and POSITIVE share the same response key than when OTHERS and POSITIVE share the same response key. [Cai and Oakes \(2006\)](#) tested this hypothesis in a study with European Americans and Chinese college students. Mirroring the results with explicit measures, Figure 5.3 shows that students in America and China exhibited an implicit self-positivity bias. Moreover, the effect was very general: 93% of the European American students and 90% of the Chinese students were faster to classify items when SELF and POSITIVE shared the same response key than when they did not. Similar findings have been reported by others, establishing that implicit positive self-evaluations occur across cultures ([Hetts et al., 1999](#); [Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997](#); [Kitayama & Uchida, 2003](#); [Kobayashi & Greenwald, 2003](#); [Yamaguchi et al., 2007](#)).

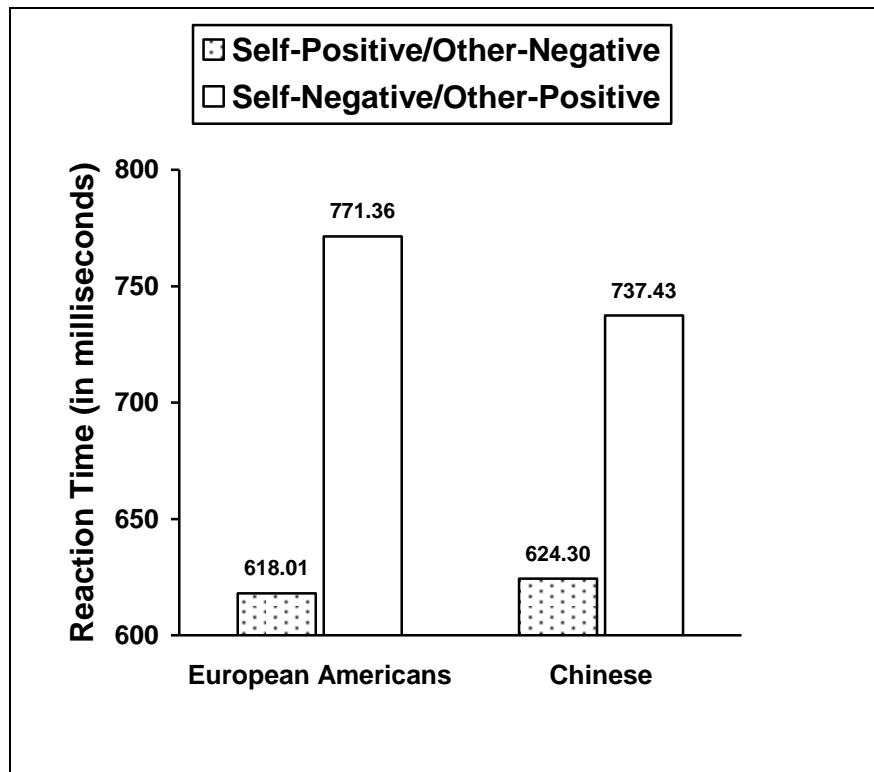


Figure 5.3. Implicit Evaluations of Self and Others in America and China. **Both cultural groups showed an implicit better than average effect, suggesting that people implicitly believe they are better than others.** (Source: Cai & Oakes, 2006, unpublished data, Sun Yat-Sen University, China)

E. **Summary**

In summary, most people regard themselves (and those who are part of their extended self) in more positive terms than they regard people in general. Insofar as it is logically impossible for most people to be *better* than most other people, this bias suggests that people's views of themselves are inaccurate. In a moment, we will examine factors that contribute to this bias. Before we do, keep several points in mind. First, we have focused on people's beliefs about their socially valued abilities and psychological qualities. People show greater accuracy when it comes to qualities that are less evaluative (e.g., their tidiness or punctuality). Moreover, the degree of bias is not excessive. People are not completely unaware of what they are like. A student who gets very poor grades is unlikely to think of herself as being the smartest person in class. Instead, people's views of themselves in evaluative domains tend, on average, to be slightly more positive than can be justified.

Finally, not everyone is self-enhancing. Some people's self-views are more modest, and some people are even self-deprecating. Sometimes these differences are associated with greater accuracy; sometimes they are linked to inaccuracy. We will discuss these differences in Chapter 10. At that time we will also consider whether these biases are beneficial or detrimental to psychological and physical well-being.

III. **Biases in the Processing of Personal Information**

Having documented that people view themselves in overly positive terms, let's consider how they are able to do so. How, for example, are the majority of people able to sustain a belief that they are kinder, more loyal, and more sincere than their peers? Several processes conspire to sustain these beliefs. Some of these processes are motivated (i.e., people form an erroneous judgment *because* it makes them feel better about themselves to do so), whereas others are cognitive (e.g., people reach an inaccurate conclusion about themselves because they lack access to pertinent information or misuse the information they do possess). Regardless of how these processes originate, they produce a self-enhancing self-portrait that is more beautiful than warranted.

A. **Self-Serving Trait Definitions**

The ambiguity of most traits and abilities is one factor that produces self-enhancing self-assessments. Consider, for example, what it means to be honest. Does it mean you never *fudge* on your income taxes? Regularly tell your friends what you think of their new clothes and hair styles? Always correct a waiter when he forgets to charge you for some item? All of these examples, and more, are indicative of honesty, but none is necessary or defining. This opens the door for individuals to define honesty in ways that cast themselves in a favorable light.

As first discussed in Chapter 4, people do define traits in self-serving ways (see [Dunning, 2005](#)). For example, [Dunning, Perie, and Story \(1991\)](#) had participants rate themselves on two sets of attributes relevant to leadership. One set of attributes emphasized task-oriented qualities (e.g., ambitious, independent, and competitive); the other set emphasized interpersonal skills (e.g., friendly, agreeable, pleasant). Later, participants were asked what qualities are important to leadership. Participants who believed they possessed many task-oriented qualities also believed that successful leaders were ambitious, independent, and competitive. In contrast, participants who thought they possessed well-developed interpersonal skills believed that successful leaders were friendly, agreeable, and pleasant. In short, participants defined leadership in ways that matched their own perceived strengths. Follow-up research has found that self-serving trait definitions increase when people have received negative personal feedback (e.g., failed a test), suggesting that these definitions are shaped by a desire to boost feelings of self-worth ([Beauregard & Dunning, 1998](#); [Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995](#)).

B. **Selective Exposure to Positive Feedback**

After deciding what qualities define a trait, individuals must gather information to determine whether they possess it. This search is rarely unbiased. Instead, individuals use a variety of strategies to ensure that most of the feedback they receive about themselves is positive.

1. **Selective Information-Seeking**

First, individuals avidly seek information about themselves when they expect it to be positive, but approach it reluctantly when they expect it to be negative. In

one study, participants were first led to suspect that they had high ability or low ability at an intellectual task (Brown, 1990). Later, they were given the opportunity to learn more about their ability. Those in the high-ability condition expressed a good deal of interest in learning more about themselves, whereas those in the low-ability condition were ambivalent. This pattern, which was especially pronounced when participants sought information under private (rather than public) conditions, ensures that people will ordinarily learn mostly good things about themselves (see also, Sachs, 1982).

Not only the amount, but the type of information people seek maximizes their exposure to positive feedback. Sedikides (1993) had participants select three questions they would ask themselves if they wanted to learn whether they possessed a trait. The traits varied with respect to whether they were positive or negative and of high or low importance, and the questions varied with respect to their diagnostic value, with some questions being very informative and others being relatively uninformative. Participants were more likely to choose highly diagnostic questions for important, positive traits than for important, negative ones, suggesting that they were more interested in learning whether they possessed good qualities than bad ones.

2. ***Selective Recall for Desired Conclusions***

Suppose someone asked you whether you are kindhearted. One way to answer this question is to search your memory for times you have acted compassionately. If you selectively retrieve acts of kindness (e.g., one time I helped an elderly woman carry her groceries) instead of instances of inconsideration (e.g., one time I quickly pulled into a parking spot before an elderly woman beat me to it), you will probably answer that you are very compassionate indeed. The larger point is that one way people decide whether or not they possess a trait is by recalling trait-relevant behaviors (Klein & Kihlstrom, 1987; Klein & Loftus, 1988).

Selective recall can fuel self-aggrandizing self-assessments. To illustrate, participants in one study read a story about another student who was doing well or poorly in school (Kunda & Sanitioso, 1989). The participants were also told that the student was either very extraverted or very introverted. As expected, participants described themselves as outgoing and congenial when they believed extraversion predicted success, but as relatively shy and reserved when they believed introversion predicted success. Follow-up research found that this occurred because participants selectively searched their memories for times they had acted in either an extraverted or introverted fashion (Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990). Participants who were told that extroversion predicted success more readily recalled instances in which they were gregarious and outgoing than those who were told that introversion predicted success. By selectively remembering past behaviors that imply the possession of a positively-valued trait, people convince themselves that they possess many positive qualities (see also, Gramzow & Willard, 2006; Sanitioso & Niedenthal, 2006; Sedikides & Green, 2000, 2004).

3. **Selective Affiliation**

Most people spend more time with people who like them than with people who dislike them. Think about your friends for a moment. Don't you think they have many positive qualities? Chances are, they think the same about you (otherwise they wouldn't be your friends)! Choosing to interact with people who like and admire us ensures that most of the interpersonal feedback we receive is positive. To the extent that we incorporate this feedback into our self-views, we end up thinking positively about ourselves (Sanitioso & Wlodarski, 2004).

4. **Strategic Social Comparison**

Strategic social comparison processes also contribute to self-aggrandizing self-assessments. Suppose I want to know whether I am athletic and intelligent. If I compare my athletic ability with most Nobel laureates and my intellectual ability with most professional athletes, I will probably conclude that I possess both of these qualities in abundance. Had I reversed the targets of these comparisons, I would undoubtedly have come to some very different conclusions about myself!

Wheeler and Miyake (1992) found that this sort of strategic social comparison is quite common. They asked University of Rochester students to keep track of how often they compared themselves with another person over a 10-day period. The students also indicated whether the person they compared with was better than they were on the relevant dimension (my roommate is more popular than I am), the same as them (my roommate and I both get good grades), or worse than them (my roommate is more phony and superficial than I am). Downward comparisons were most frequent and made people feel better about themselves (see also, Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1991; Gibbons et al., 2002).

Under some circumstances, people simply invent worse-off others to promote perceptions of superiority (Goethals, 1986; Klein, Blier, & Janze, 2001). For example, a student who is having trouble with her math homework may assume that other students are having even more difficulty with their assignments. Tendencies like these increase when people feel threatened in some manner, either because they have just failed an important task or are confronting a threat to their health or well-being (Affleck & Tennen, 1991; Brown & Gallagher, 1992; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987; Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985).

As a last resort, people may stop comparing themselves with others altogether. Gibbons, Benbow, and Gerrard (1994) tracked the social comparisons of college freshman as the students made the transition from high school to college. Some of the students were satisfied with their academic performance during their first year of college, while others believed they were performing poorly. Figure 5.4 shows that social comparisons were generally less frequent during the end of the first year than at the beginning, but this decline was especially steep among students who believed they were performing poorly. These findings suggest that people may stop comparing with others when comparisons become too unflattering.

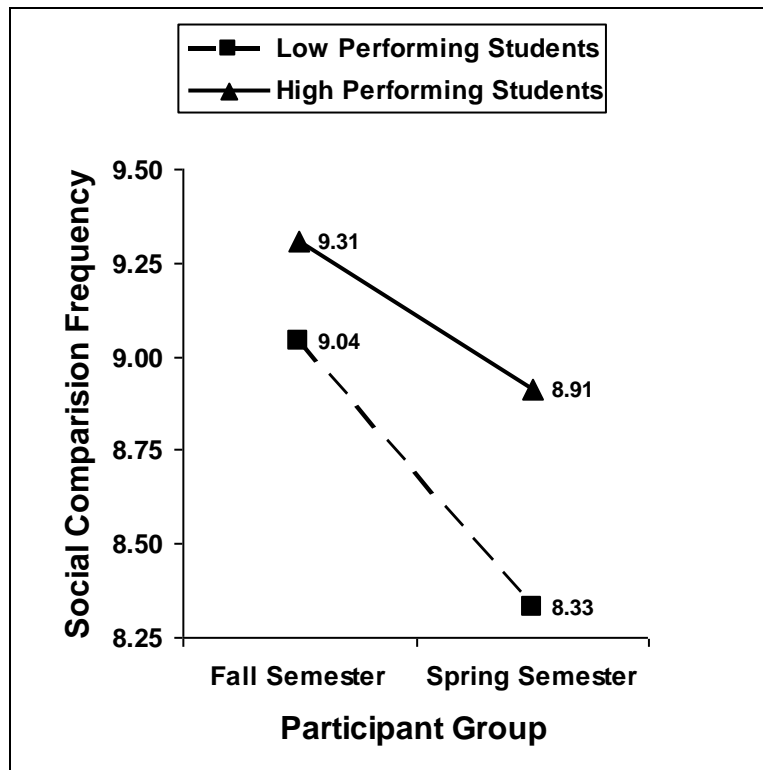


Figure 5.4. Changes in Social Comparison In College Freshman. Throughout their first year of college, high performing and low performing students reported how often they compared themselves with their peers. The data show that social comparison decreased in frequency for both groups, but this was especially true of students who felt they were performing poorly. These findings show that social comparisons decrease when they become unflattering. (Source: Gibbons, Benbow, & Gerrard, 1994, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 638-652)

C. **Questioning the Validity of Negative Feedback**

Try as they might, individuals cannot entirely evade negative feedback. This doesn't mean that they passively accept its implications, however. Instead, they call upon a variety of strategies to dismiss or obscure its impact.

1. **Self-Serving Evaluation of Information**

First, people doubt the credibility of negative feedback, believing it is more tainted by error than is positive feedback. To illustrate, [Ditto and Lopez \(1992\)](#) told participants they were being tested for the presence of a medical condition that makes people susceptible to pancreatic disorders. (The condition was actually fictitious.) Participants were further told that they would test themselves for the presence of the disorder, using a self-administered saliva test in which a strip of test paper, dabbed with the participant's saliva, was dipped into a solution. Ditto and Lopez found that participants who were led to believe that they possessed the deficiency took longer to decide that their test results were complete, were more likely to repeat the test, and rated the test as less accurate than did participants given a favorable test result (see also, [Croyle, Sun, & Louie, 1993](#); [Ditto, Munro,](#)

Apanovich, Scepansky, & Lockhart, 2003; Ditto, Scepansky, Munro, Apanovitch, & Lockart, 1998). These findings explain the common observation that people frequently seek a second opinion when a diagnosis is bad, but rarely do so when the diagnosis is good.

2. ***Self-Serving Attributions***

Self-serving attributions also promote positive self-views by diluting the impact of negative feedback. One of the most reliable findings in social psychology over the last 20 years is the pervasive tendency for individuals to make asymmetric attributions for positive and negative outcomes (for reviews, see [Campbell & Sedikides, 1999](#); [Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004](#); [Zuckerman, 1979](#)). Positive outcomes are attributed to stable, central aspects of the self (e.g., “I received a high test grade because I am smart”), but negative outcomes are attributed either to external factors (e.g., “I received a low test grade because the test was unclear”) or less central aspects of the self (e.g., “I received a low test grade because I studied the wrong material”). By denying that negative outcomes are due to one’s enduring character, abilities, or traits, individuals are able to hold on to their self-enhancing beliefs even when confronted with negative feedback.

In an early and influential review of this phenomenon, [Miller and Ross \(1975\)](#) reported that self-serving attributions were more apparent for positive outcomes than for negative ones. Subsequent research has failed to support this conclusion. If anything, just the opposite is true: Individuals will occasionally concede that they succeeded because of good fortune or an easy test, but they will rarely attribute failure to enduring personal deficiencies ([Campbell & Sedikides, 1999](#)).

Part of the confusion may have arisen because researchers were comparing internal attributions (attributions to personal factors) versus external attributions (attributions to factors other than oneself). This distinction ignores a crucial matter. The critical issue is not whether negative outcomes are attributed to personal factors, but whether they are attributed to highly valued and stable aspects of oneself. Students, for example, will freely admit that they did poorly on an exam because they didn’t try hard or because they studied the wrong material. What students don’t do, however, is readily attribute a poor performance to a general lack of intelligence ([Brown & Cai, 2008](#)).

This finding bears on another issue. It is widely assumed that people tend to make dispositional attributions for behavior ([Gilbert & Malone, 1995](#); [Ross, 1977](#)). A dispositional attribution is an attribution to a stable, inherent property of a person, such as the person’s character, ability, or personality. No such bias exists when people make attributions for their own behavior. Instead, it depends entirely on whether the outcome in question is good or bad ([Malle, 2006](#)). People routinely make dispositional attributions for positive outcomes (e.g., “I got promoted because I am smart, dependable, and energetic”), but they rarely make dispositional attributions for negative outcomes (e.g., “I got fired because I am dumb, undependable, and lazy”). Instead, people attribute negative outcomes to external factors (e.g., “My boss is a jerk”) or to less valued aspects of themselves (e.g., “I’m

just not suited for this particular line of work”).

3. **Self-Handicapping**

Occasionally, individuals will even work to undermine the informational value of negative feedback, a phenomenon known as self-handicapping (Jones & Berglas, 1978). Students who don't study for exams or athletes who fail to practice before an important competition might be exhibiting self-handicapping behaviors. These behaviors make success less likely, but they allow individuals to dismiss failure as nondiagnostic and uninformative of one's abilities. If one doesn't try hard, one can always attribute failure to lack of effort; and if one should succeed despite an impediment, success is even more revealing of high ability.

Berglas and Jones (1978) tested the conditions that promote self-handicapping behavior. They first led some male participants to believe that they were likely to succeed on an upcoming test; other participants were led to believe that future success was unlikely. All of the participants were then told that the second part of the experiment involved testing the effects of two new drugs on test performance. One of the drugs purportedly facilitated test performance; the other supposedly impaired test performance. The participants were then given a choice as to which drug they wished to ingest. Participants who doubted their ability to succeed preferred the performance-inhibiting drug, even though the drug made success even less likely.

Findings like these make an important point about psychological life. Often, what's important to people is not simply whether they succeed or fail, it's whether these outcomes reveal something positive or negative about the self. With self-handicapping, people actively risk failure because doing so ensures that failure does not implicate valued aspects of the self (e.g., low ability). In this manner, people are able to cling to an image of competency even if they fail.

Self-handicapping is not the same as excuse making (Leary & Shepperd, 1986). To appreciate the difference, consider a student who says “I could have done better in math class but I had so many other responsibilities last quarter.” Although the student is offering an excuse for failure, thereby deflecting attention away from low ability, this is only self-handicapping if the student willingly took on more responsibilities than she could handle in order to create a ready excuse for failing.

Self-handicapping most commonly occurs when individuals are unsure of their ability and base their feelings of self-worth on their accomplishments. Under these circumstances, self-handicapping can provide short-term benefits by reducing anxiety during performance and preserving an image of competency in the event of failure (Deppe & Harackiewicz, 1996; McCrea & Hirt, 2001; Rhodewalt, Morf, Hazlett, & Fairfield, 1991). In the long-run, however, self-handicapping appears to be maladaptive, predicting poor academic performance, depressed affect, and illness (Martin, Marsh, & Debus, 2001; Midgley, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 1996; Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005). In extreme cases, substance abuse can become a chronic form of self-handicapping with severe negative consequences.

D. ***Diluting the Impact of Negative Feedback***

Every day we experience grave threats to our [feelings of self-worth]... Not only big things but little things put us in the wrong: we trip up in an examination, we make a social boner, we dress inappropriately for the occasion. The [self] sweats. We suffer discomfort ..., and we hasten to repair the narcissistic wound. (Allport, 1961, p. 155).

Some negative feedback is so clear that individuals are forced to accept its validity. After numerous failed auditions for the high school band, a student is bound to concede that he lacks musical ability when it comes to playing the tuba. In situations like these, individuals turn to a variety of secondary strategies that minimize the overall impact of negative feedback.

1. ***Selective Importance***

One way individuals minimize the impact of an acknowledged limitation is by trivializing its importance. Those who believe that they are intellectually gifted but inept in social situations tend to believe that intellectual ability is of greater importance than sociability; the reverse holds true for those who believe they perform better in social situations than in intellectual settings. To some extent, the tendency to see one's positive qualities as more important than one's negative qualities is quite logical. After all, the individual who makes her living as an athlete may reasonably believe that coordination and strength are more important than are analytical ability and creativity.

Experimental research has shown, however, that people alter their perceptions of importance to match their perceived strengths and weaknesses. In one investigation, participants first learned about a (fictitious) intellectual ability called "integrative orientation" (Brown, 2005). After indicating how important they thought it was to be high in integrative orientation, the participants took a test that (allegedly) measured the ability and received bogus feedback indicating that they were either high or low in the ability. Afterward, they rated the ability's importance again. Figure 5.5 shows that participants' post-feedback ratings were self-enhancing: Participants who received positive feedback raised their importance ratings, but those who received negative feedback lowered their importance ratings (see also, Elliot, Faler, McGregor, Campbell, Sedikides, & Harackiewicz, 2000). By altering the perceived importance of a trait, individuals are able to accept a limitation while ensuring that its overall impact on feelings of self-worth is negligible.

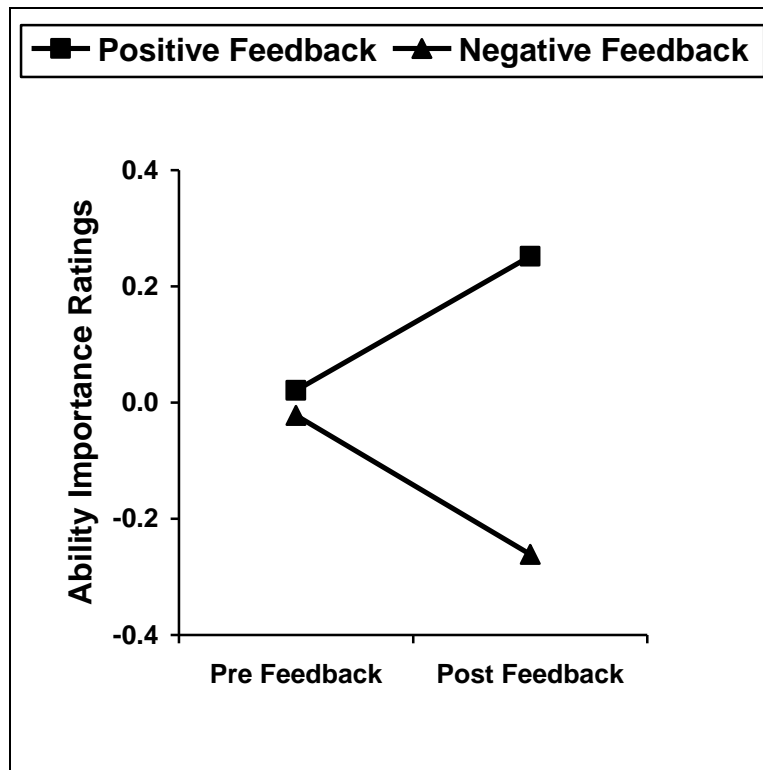


Figure 5.5. Ability Importance Ratings Before and After Receiving Positive or Negative Feedback. Participants first heard about a (fictitious) intellectual ability, and then indicated how important they thought it was to possess. Later, they received positive or negative feedback regarding the ability and rated its importance again. Participants who learned they possessed the ability increased their importance ratings, while those who learned they did not possess the ability decreased their importance ratings. These data shows that individuals cope with negative feedback by trivializing its importance. (Source: Brown, 2005, Unpublished data, University of Washington.)

2. *Selective Consensus*

Closely related to the strategy of selective importance is a tendency to exaggerate the number of individuals who share one's limitation. Although people routinely underestimate the number of people who share their perceived strengths (e.g., few people can solve crossword puzzles as quickly as I can), they overestimate the number of people who share their perceived deficiencies (e.g., lots of people are bad at math) (Campbell, 1986; Marks, 1984; McGregor, Nail, Marigold, & Kang, 2005; Mullen & Goethals, 1990). Viewing one's shortcomings as common softens the negative impact of an accepted liability.

3. *Selective Diagnosticity*

Individuals also cope with negative feedback by derogating its diagnosticity. In one study, participants competed against a confederate in a test of general knowledge (Greve & Wentura, 2003). Knowledge in four areas was sampled—politics, history, natural science, and the arts—and the confederate always outperformed the participant in two of the four categories. Afterward, participants indicated the extent to which knowledge in each category was diagnostic of being a

knowledgeable person “in general.” Participants believed the categories they won were more relevant to being “smart in general” than were the categories they lost (see also, [Wentura & Greve, 2004, 2005](#)). By reducing the diagnostic value of an acknowledged weakness, individuals accept a limitation without conceding an overall lack of ability.

4. ***Compensatory Self-Enhancement***

Finally, individuals offset negative feedback by compensating for it. For example, a man who has recently been rebuffed by his lover may counter this blow to self-worth by exaggerating his athletic prowess ([Baumeister & Jones, 1978](#); [Brown & Smart, 1991](#); [Eisenstadt, Leippe, & Rivers, 2002](#)). In an experimental demonstration of this effect, [Oakes \(2005\)](#) first led participants to succeed or fail at an alleged test of their verbal ability. Afterward, participants rated their intellectual competence (“How intelligent and smart are you?”) and their social skills (“How kind and friendly are you?”). Figure 5.6 shows that failure at an intellectual task lowered participants’ evaluations of their intellectual competence, but raised their evaluations of their social competence. This type of compensatory self-enhancement allows individuals to accept negative feedback while preserving overall feelings of self-worth (see also, [Cadinu & Cerchioni, 2001](#)). In some cases, individuals may even work harder and perform better at a task as a compensatory self-enhancement strategy ([Johnson & Stapel, 2007](#)). For example, a person who fails an exam at school may strive extra hard to win at tennis later that day.

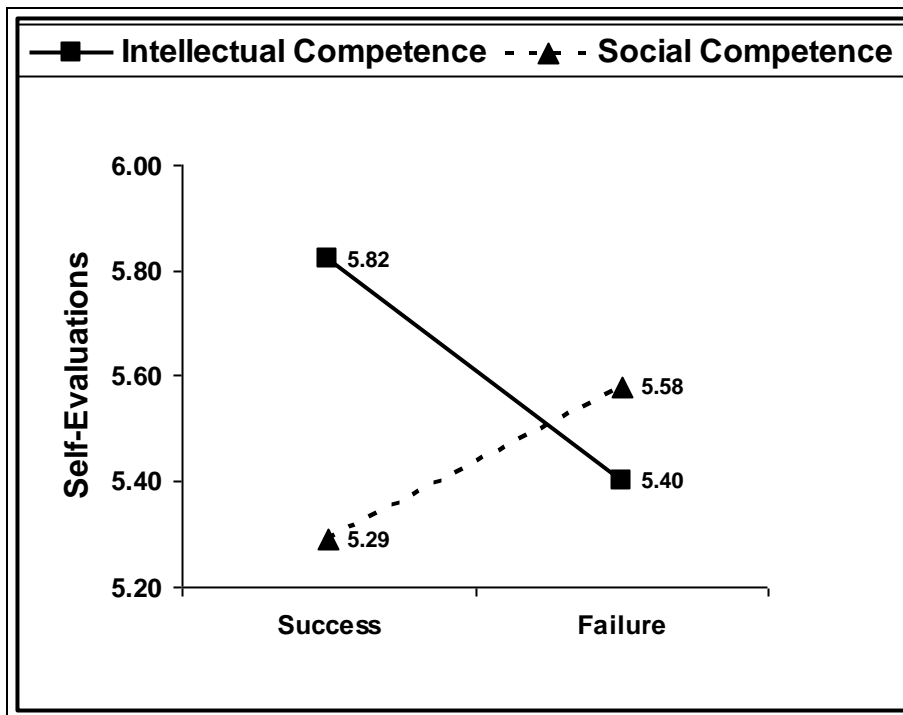


Figure 5.6. Compensatory Self-Enhancement. After receiving success or failure feedback on an intellectual test, participants rated their intellectual competence and their social competence. In comparison with success, failure lowered participants' evaluations of their intellectual competence but raised their evaluations of their social competence. These findings show that individuals compensate for failure in one domain by enhancing their virtues in other areas. (Source: Oakes, 2005, unpublished data, University of Washington)

E. *Coping with Inconsistency: Cognitive Dissonance Theory*

If you're like most people, you probably think it's a good idea to save electricity and gasoline. At the same time, you probably don't always turn off the lights when you leave home, or bike or walk to school instead of drive your car. In short, you sometimes act in an inconsistent manner—believing one thing, but doing another. According to Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), inconsistencies like these create psychological discomfort (called cognitive dissonance) that people are driven to reduce (Elliot & Devine, 1994).

1. *Attitude Change Following Attitude-Behavior Inconsistency*

One way to reduce dissonance is to change your attitude to coincide with your behavior. This reduces dissonance by reconciling the inconsistency between what you believe and what you've done. In one experimental demonstration of this effect, Croyle and Cooper (1983) first identified students who favored the sale of alcohol on their college campus. Later, the students were asked to write an essay regarding this topic. Some of the students were allowed to write an essay favoring the sale of alcohol, while others were asked to write essays opposing the sale of alcohol. Among those writing essays in opposition, some were told they must write the essay (low choice condition) and some were told they could refuse if they wanted (high choice condition). Finally, after writing their essays, participants in all

three experimental conditions indicated again how strongly they supported the sale of alcohol on campus.

As all of the participants had previously indicated that they supported the sale of alcohol on campus, writing an essay opposing its sale should create cognitive dissonance. One way to reduce dissonance is to rationalize, justify, or excuse the behavior. This route is readily available to students who were forced to write the attitude inconsistent essay (e.g., I don't really favor banning alcohol on campus, but they made me say I did). But what about students who freely chose to write the attitude inconsistent attitude? Although they can't easily justify their behavior, they can reduce dissonance by changing their attitude to match their behavior. For this reason, dissonance theory predicts that participants who freely chose to write attitude-inconsistent essays will change their attitudes to match their behavior. Figure 5.7 shows that these predictions were confirmed. Only participants who freely chose to write an essay opposing the sale of alcohol on campus increased their support for a proposed ban. Presumably, their change in attitude was motivated by a desire to reduce cognitive dissonance.

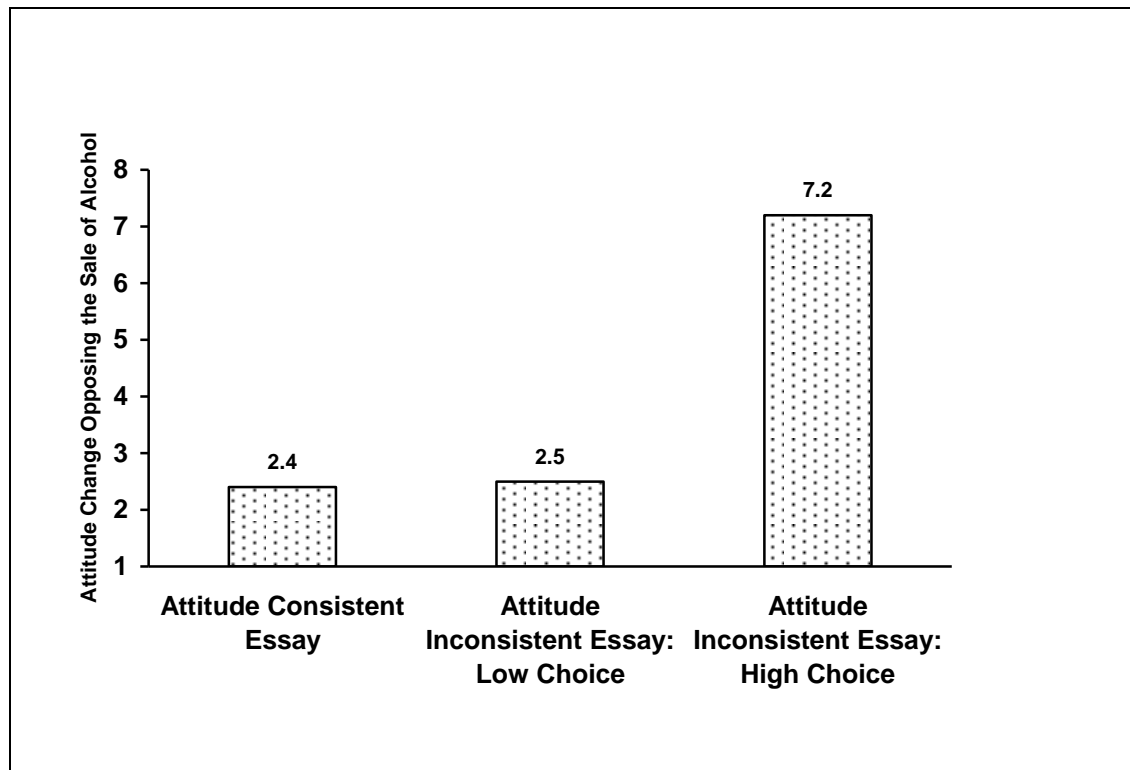


Figure 5.7. Cognitive Dissonance and Attitude Change. Participants who initially favored the sale of alcohol on campus wrote essays that were consistent with their attitude or inconsistent with their attitude. Among those who wrote inconsistent essays, some did so under conditions of low choice, whereas others did so under conditions of high choice. Later, all participants indicated whether they favored banning alcohol on campus. The data show that only participants who freely chose to write inconsistent essays changed their attitude, presumably as a means of reducing cognitive dissonance. (Source: Croyle & Cooper, 1983, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45, 782-791)

2. **Self-Affirmation Theory**

Festinger's original formulation did not view dissonance reduction as a self-enhancement strategy. As the theory has evolved, however, self-enhancement has occupied an increasingly central role, leading some theorists to conclude that dissonance-induced attitude change is driven by a desire to promote or protect a positive self-image (Greenwald & Ronis, 1978; Stone & Cooper, 2001). Steele's self-affirmation theory offers one example of this approach (Steele, 1988). Self-affirmation theory assumes that people strive to think of themselves as competent, moral, and reliable, and that inconsistent behavior threatens these beliefs. Accordingly, they change their attitude to restore self-integrity.

Steele and Lui (1983) conducted an experiment to test this idea. All of the participants in the experiment wrote essays supporting a tuition hike at their university, a position that was inconsistent with their true attitudes. As in many dissonance studies, some participants wrote the essay under conditions of low choice and other participants wrote the essay under conditions of high choice. Typically, we should find that high choice participants change their attitudes but

that low choice participants do not. A third condition was added to this basic procedure, however. In this condition, participants wrote the essay under conditions of high choice but were then given the opportunity to restore a positive self-image by reminding themselves that they hold many fine values in life. Finally, attitudes toward a tuition hike were measured.

As predicted by Steele's (1988) self-affirmation theory, the data displayed in Figure 5.8 show that participants who willingly wrote an essay supporting a tuition hike did not change their attitudes if they were first given an opportunity to affirm their self-worth. These findings suggest that people can tolerate a good deal of inconsistency as long as they are able to view themselves in generally positive terms (see also, [Aronson, Blanton, & Cooper, 1995](#); [Blanton, Cooper, Skurnik, & Aronson, 1997](#); [Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993](#)).

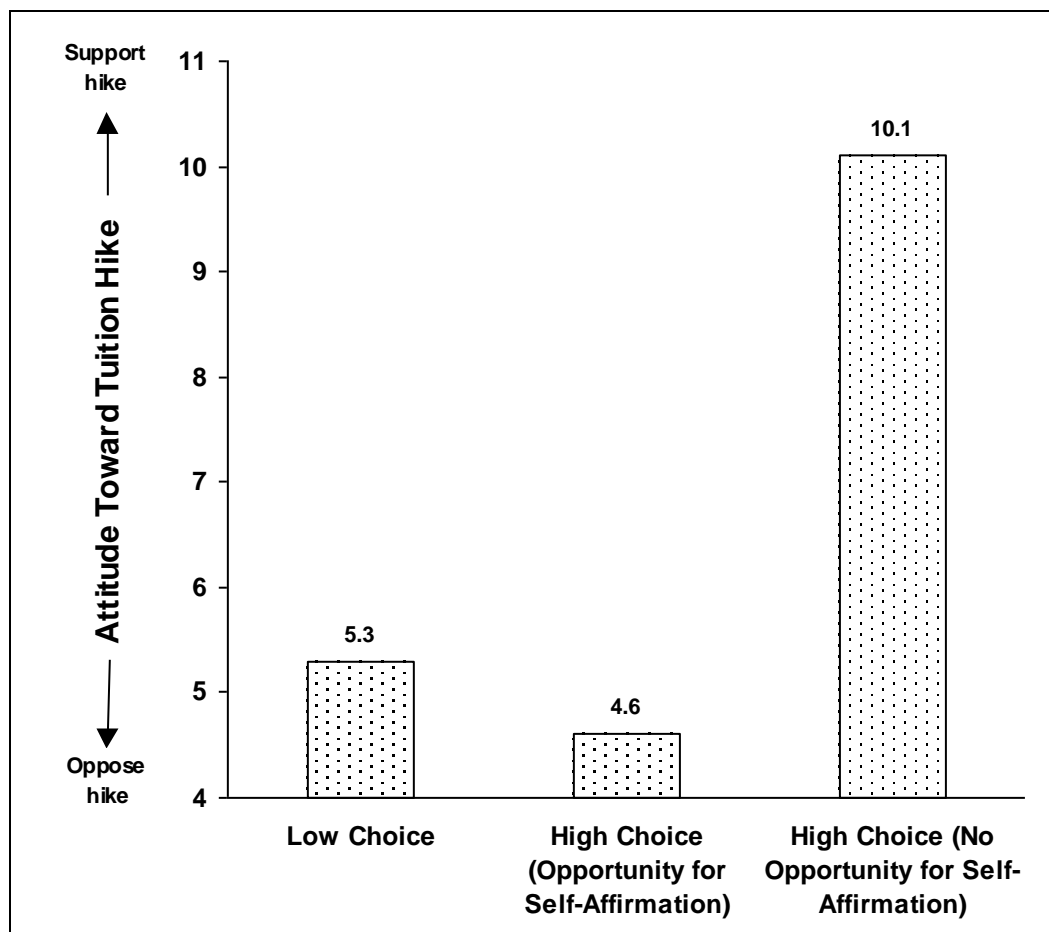


Figure 5.8. Attitudes Toward a Tuition Hike as a Function of Choice and an Opportunity for Self-Affirmation. **All of the participants wrote an essay supporting a tuition hike at their university. Only participants who freely chose to write the essay *and* were given no opportunity to affirm a positive self-image subsequently expressed positive attitudes toward a tuition hike. These data suggest that people can tolerate inconsistency if they are able to remind themselves that they are a good person in general. (Source: Steele & Lui, 1983, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45, 5-19)**

IV. Theoretical and Applied Issues

Having reviewed a great deal of research regarding the accuracy of self-knowledge and the means by which people promote a positive self-image and protect their feelings of self-worth, it is appropriate to step back and take a broader view of what this research literature reveals about self-assessment.

A. *Revisiting the Motives that Guide the Search for Self-Knowledge*

First, the findings we have reviewed speak to the motives that guide the search for self-knowledge. Although numerous philosophers, theologians, and psychologists have argued that people strive to know the truth about themselves, the research we reviewed shows that most people do not assess themselves

accurately. This poses a problem for the accuracy position: If people actively seek the truth about themselves, why don't they possess it? Although there is some reason to believe that people would have difficulty finding the truth even if they looked for it (Felton, 1993), our review suggests that most people don't look all that hard to begin with. When it comes to attributes that are highly desirable, people seek positive, rather than necessarily accurate feedback about themselves (Brown, 1990; Brown & Dutton, 1995a; Sedikides, 1993, Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

1. ***Do People Never Seek the Truth?***

This does not mean, however, that people never seek the truth. Prior to making a decision, people tend to be more open to hearing all sides of an issue, including ones that suggest they may be ill-suited for undertaking a particular course of action (Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995). People are also more inclined to seek accurate feedback when they are in a good mood or otherwise confident that they can handle the emotional consequences of negative feedback (Trope & Pomerantz, 1998). Third, people are more likely to seek accurate feedback for qualities they believe they can cultivate with practice (Dunning, 1995; Trope, Gervy, & Bolger, 2003). For example, many people take tennis lessons to help them learn to play better. Fourth, some people are more inclined than others to seek accurate self-knowledge (Sorrentino & Roney, 2000; von Hippel, Lakin, & Shakarchi, 2005). Fifth, as noted earlier, people do possess accurate self-knowledge of many personality traits that are very specific and not highly evaluative (e.g., punctuality). Finally, it's also important to bear in mind that low correlations between reality and perception do not mean that nobody possesses accurate self-knowledge. Instead, they signify only that any given person is only slightly more likely to be right than wrong.

2. ***Self-Verification and the Self-Consistency Motive***

Self-enhancement theory can readily explain why most people preferentially seek and embrace positive information about themselves. Self-consistency theory can also explain this fact. Because most people assess themselves positively, the search for positive feedback could reflect a self-consistency motive (i.e., a desire to protect the self-concept against change).

But what about people with negative self-views? According to the self-enhancement model, these people also desire positive feedback; according to the self-verification model, these people desire negative feedback. As counterintuitive as this latter position may seem, it is not without apparent support. Almost all of the biases we have reviewed in this chapter are less characteristic of people with negative self-views than of people with positive self-views (Swann, 1996). For example, people who believe they have low ability at some task are less apt to attribute failure to external factors than are people who think they are highly able (Dutton & Brown, 1997; Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987).

In consideration of this evidence, De La Ronde and Swann (1993) have concluded that people possess two independent motives: a desire for favorable feedback and a desire for self-verifying (congruent) feedback. Normally, people satisfy these dual needs by seeking favorable feedback for their positive self-views

(Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989). For example, a person who thinks she is smart but uncoordinated ordinarily seeks confirmation from others that she is intelligent, but she does not try to convince other people that she is clumsy. However, if circumstances are such that she is forced to confront this issue (e.g., she is asked to pitch for the office softball team), she will take steps to ensure that others see her as she sees herself. Under these circumstances, people prefer authentic negative feedback to inauthentic positive feedback.

B. ***Are All Biases and Errors Motivated?***

The fact that self-assessments are positively-biased does not mean they are shaped only by self-enhancement needs. Instead, many of the biases we have reviewed are also influenced by nonmotivational factors, such as the inappropriate use of statistical reasoning or lack of access to pertinent information (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Dunning et al., 2004; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). To illustrate, consider the better than average effect. Certainly, believing we (and our friends and loved ones) are better than most other people enhances feelings of self-worth. But cognitive factors also contribute to the bias. When making comparative judgments of all types, people tend to give greater weight and attention to the target than the referent (Klar & Giladi, 1999). For example, if you are asked “How great is Seattle compared to Boston?”, your judgment would be based mostly on your attitude toward Seattle (the target) rather than on your attitude toward Boston (the referent). The same is true when people directly compare themselves with others. When people are asked “How kind are you compared to most other people?”, their answer is based mostly on how kind they think they are rather than the perceived kindness of others. Simply reversing the question (i.e., “How kind are most other people compared to you?”) reduces the magnitude of the better than average effect (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004).

Cognitive factors can also explain why people believe their judgments are less biased than the judgments of others. Consider the role of **naïve realism**. This term refers to the tendency for people to believe that their perception of the world is a passive reflection of the world as it really is, rather than an active, cognitive construction formed by schemas, expectancies, and attitudes (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004; Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002; Reeder, Pryor, Wohl, & Griswell, 2005). Failing to appreciate how actively they shape their own perceptions, people assume that anyone who doesn't see things as they see them must be biased. After all, what other explanation can there be? If I believe I am seeing things as they really are, only bias can explain why other people disagree with me. Thus, whereas the motivational model assumes we see more bias in others because it makes us feel good about ourselves to do so, the naïve realism account assumes we see more bias in others simply because we are unaware of how much we shape our own reality.

C. ***Logical Inferences Fuel Self-Enhancement***

Even when inferences, judgments, and conclusions are motivated, they are often generated by processes that are plausibly logical. It could hardly be otherwise: In order for people to believe they are sensible and rational, they must

fashion their judgments from processes that seem reasonable and fair (Bersoff, 1999; Klein & Goethals, 2002). Pyszczynski and Greenberg (1987) have developed a model to explain how logical processes can produce desired conclusions (see also, Kunda, 1987, 1990). Their model assumes that after an event occurs, a likely causal hypothesis is generated. Inference rules needed for testing the hypothesis are then settled on. Subsequently, data relevant to testing the hypothesis are gathered, and the validity of the data are evaluated. Finally, the data are weighted and integrated and a final causal judgment is reached.

Table 5.2 illustrates Pyszczynski and Greenberg's (1987) model. In this example, a student has done poorly on an important exam. Initially, the student may generate a self-serving causal hypothesis. Rather than deciding she lacks ability, she decides the test questions were picky and tricky. She might then settle on an inference rule that is especially congenial to her self-serving hypothesis. Perhaps she concludes that in order to properly test her hypothesis, she need only determine whether at least one of her fellow students also found the questions to be ambiguous. When gathering data relevant to testing this proposition, she might then be prone to sample from the population in such a way that her hypothesis is apt to be supported. For example, she might query only students who did at least as poorly, if not worse, on the exam as she did. If these students also found the test questions to be vague, her hypothesis would seemingly have received support. In the event that any evidence inconsistent with the hypothesis is encountered, it can be dismissed as invalid or, at the very least, less relevant. For instance, if another student who did poorly didn't find the questions confusing, the attributor may dismiss that student's perceptions as atypical and aberrant (e.g., "He's so out of it, he probably didn't even read the questions!"). By adhering to such a strategy, the student is able to cling to the belief that her conclusion regarding the faulty test questions is fully justified on the basis of the available evidence.

Table 5.2. Steps Leading to a Self-Serving Attribution for a Poor Test Performance

<u>Step</u>	<u>Illustration</u>
Generate a self-serving causal hypothesis.	The tests questions were tricky and picky.
Devise inference rules for testing the hypothesis.	Find out if anyone else thought the questions were unfair.
Gather data relevant to testing the hypothesis	Ask only people who did poorly on the exam what they thought of the questions.
Evaluate the validity of the data	Accept as valid the perceptions of people who thought the questions were unfair, and dismiss as invalid the perceptions of anyone who though the tests questions were clear.
Integrate the data for form a final attribution	Weigh the data and decide that the test questions were poorly constructed.

D. ***Flexibility in Self-Enhancement***

The large number of self-enhancement biases we have documented suggests

that feelings of self-worth can be promoted and protected in a variety of ways. A student who has failed an exam, for example, could (a) attribute the grade to external factors (the test questions were tricky and picky); (b) derogate the importance of the course (everybody knows psychology is just common sense); (c) compare with worse-off others (at least I didn't fail like my friend, Sal); or compensate by (d) exaggerating the positivity of alternative qualities (I am a great athlete) or (e) affirming one's overall sense of integrity and adequacy (I am a good person).

Considering that feelings of self-worth can be restored in so many ways, researchers have wondered whether these strategies are largely interchangeable or are somehow unique. Most of the evidence on this issue points to their comparability (Tesser, Crepaz, Collins, Cornell, & Beach, 2000). Earlier we noted that self-affirmations reduce dissonance-induced attitude change (Steele & Liu, 1983). Similar effects have been found with many other self-enhancement biases. For example, in comparison with people who are not given an opportunity to affirm their overall worth, those who are allowed to affirm an important value are less likely to engage in downward social comparison (Spencer, Fein, & Lomore, 2001), self-handicap (Siegel, Scillitoe, & Parks-Yancy, 2005), and make self-serving causal attributions (Sherman & Kim, 2005). These findings suggest that feelings of self-worth can be restored in a variety of ways, and that defensive responding subsides once they are reestablished (Correll, Spencer, & Zanna, 2004; Creswell, Welch, Taylor, Sherman, Gruenewald, & Mann, 2005; Fein & Spencer, 1997; Schimel, Arndt, Banko, & Cook, 2004; Tesser & Cornell, 1991).

E. **Overcoming Defensiveness**

In most self-affirmation research, the affirmation manipulation is given *after* individuals have received negative personal feedback. A complementary program of research has investigated whether self-affirmations given *before* negative feedback is received can reduce defensiveness (see Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Consider, for example, an investigation by Sherman, Nelson, and Steele (2000). In this study, some women were given an opportunity to affirm themselves before reading a research report that linked caffeine consumption to fibrocystic disease, a precursor to breast cancer. Some of the women were regular coffee drinkers and some were not. After reading the article, the participants indicated whether they agreed there was an association between caffeine consumption and fibrocystic disease.

Acknowledging the dangers of caffeine consumption poses a threat to regular coffee drinkers. To minimize the threat, they can deny that any association exists between caffeine and fibrocystic disease. The critical question of interest is whether self-affirmation reduces this form denial. The data displayed in Figure 5.9 shows that it did. Although coffee drinkers were more likely than non coffee drinkers to deny the dangers of caffeine when they had not first affirmed themselves, they were more accepting of the risks following self-affirmation. Along with other research, these findings suggest that people may be more open to receiving negative feedback when they are first allowed to remind themselves that they have high integrity and worth (Trobe & Neter, 1994; Trope & Pomerantz, 1998).

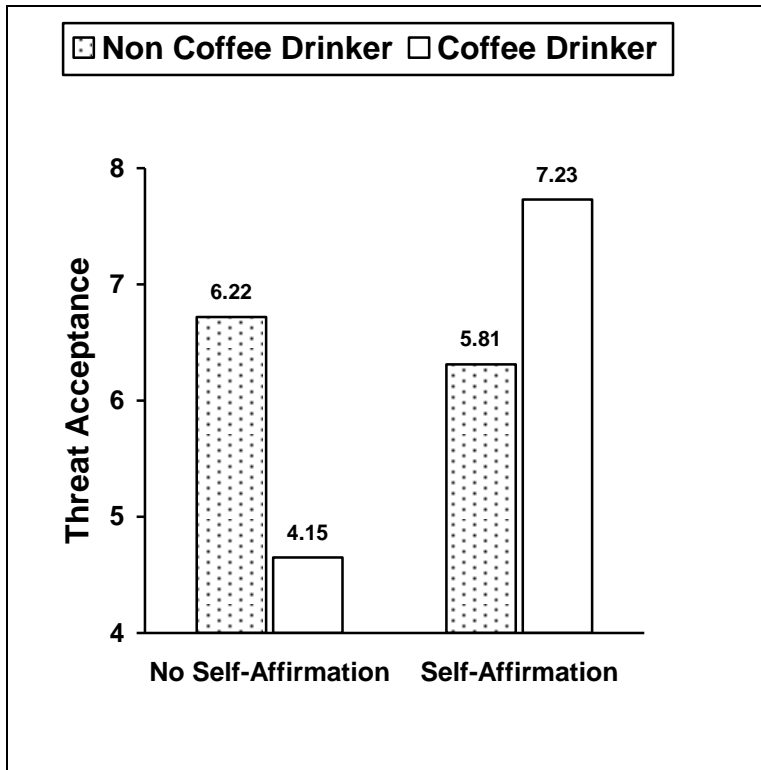


Figure 5.9. Self-Affirmation Reduces Defensive Self-Enhancement. **Female participants** read a report linking caffeine consumption to fibrocystic disease, a precursor of breast cancer. Among women who were regular coffee drinkers, those who were first allowed to affirm an important value were more accepting of the threatening feedback than were those who were not allowed to affirm an important value. These findings suggest that self-affirmation can reduce defensive self-enhancement, thereby allowing individuals to accept threatening feedback. (Source: Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26, 1046-1058)

V. Chapter Summary

In this chapter we examined how people assess themselves. We began by identifying three motives that guide the search for self-knowledge. These were (a) self-enhancement needs, (b) accuracy needs, and (c) self-consistency needs. We then reviewed evidence regarding the accuracy of self-knowledge. Here we found only modest evidence that people possess accurate self-views about socially valued qualities, such as their warmth, intelligence, or popularity. For the most part, the lack of accuracy arises because, to varying degrees, people evaluate themselves in overly positive terms, especially compared to their beliefs about most other people.

Next, we examined various mechanisms that enable people to maintain their positive self-views. Some of these mechanisms ensure that individuals receive predominantly positive feedback in their lives; others question the validity of negative feedback; and still others minimize the degree to which negative feedback implicates central aspects of the self.

We concluded by considering some theoretical and applied issues. Here we saw that motivational and cognitive processes combine to produce self-serving judgments, and that self-affirmations can reduce the defensive processing of personal information.

- People actively acquire knowledge of themselves throughout their lives. The search for self-knowledge is shaped by three broad concerns: self-enhancement needs (a desire to feel good about ourselves and to avoid feeling bad about ourselves); accuracy needs (the need to know what we are really like); and consistency needs (a desire to keep our self-views consistent and to protect them against change).
- Research assessing the accuracy of people's self-views has turned up mixed evidence that people know what they are really like. People's self-views in nonevaluative domains (e.g., "How punctual and conscientious are you?") are fairly accurate, but their self-views in highly evaluative domains (e.g., "How intelligent and attractive are you?") are not. People are also overly confident about their ability to predict their future behavior, particularly behaviors that are socially desirable or positive. Taken together, these findings suggest that people's ideas about themselves in evaluative domains are rarely a faithful representation of what they are really like.
- Most people regard themselves (and those who are part of their extended selves) in highly positive terms. They believe they have many positive qualities and few negative qualities. This bias is especially apparent when people compare themselves with their peers. Many (if not most) people believe they are *better* than most other people.
- Various mechanisms help people maintain their positive self-views. Most people eagerly seek feedback when they think it will be positive, but reluctantly seek it when they think it will be negative. Under some circumstances, people actively obscure the informational value of negative

feedback by erecting barriers to their own success. People also selectively affiliate with those who like them, and compare themselves with others in ways that are designed to promote and maintain positive self-views.

- Personal information is often biased in a self-serving manner. Motivational and cognitive processes combine to produce these biases. People use information-processing strategies to justify and support their self-enhancing beliefs. These strategies involve biases in memory, and the generation and evaluation of self-serving causal theories.
- Affirming important values before receiving personally threatening information can reduce defensiveness.

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