# What's Positive About Self-Verification?

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## Abstract

Self-verification theory assumes that people work to preserve their self-views by seeking to confirm them. As is the case with other processes advocated by positive psychology, self-verification is presumed to be a fundamentally adaptive process. Intrapsychically, self-verification strivings maintain psychological coherence, reduce anxiety, improve physical health, and may foster authenticity. Interpersonally, they encourage people to gravitate toward honest relationship partners, foster trust and intimacy in relationships, and ensure predictability in one's behavior, which further promotes trust. Although self-verification is adaptive overall, it may lead to the perpetuation of negative self-views. Nevertheless, identifying the underlying processes in self-verification may lend insight into how to raise self-esteem. It is posited that to help raise the self-esteem of someone with a negative self-view, one should first provide the person with self-verification and subsequently provide positive feedback that challenges the negative self-views. In these and other instances, understanding the self-verification process more deeply may also shed light on how to define and build happiness.

**Keywords:** acceptance, happiness, positivity, self-esteem, self-verification

The original title of John Steinbeck's acclaimed novel *Of Mice and Men* was "Something That Happened" (Shillinglaw, 1994). This title reflects Steinbeck's life philosophy of accepting things as they are without judgment (Shillinglaw, 1994), an approach he called "is thinking." He once wrote that this mode of thinking "concerns itself primarily not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather with what actually 'is' . . . " (Steinbeck, 1951). Steinbeck thought "is thinking" was adaptive because it fostered understanding and acceptance. Self-verification theory is very much in the spirit of "is thinking," as it asserts that people are motivated to seek confirmation of their positive—and negative—self-views (Swann, 1983). Self-verifiers, therefore, prefer to be around "is thinkers," people who see them as they believe they "actually" are, not as they want to be, should be, or could be. In this chapter, we contend that, like "is thinking," self-verification is also adaptive, both for the reasons

that Steinbeck identified and because of other intrapsychic and interpersonal benefits associated with self-verification. We describe these benefits in the course of providing a brief overview of self-verification theory.

## What Is Self-Verification?

Self-verification theory begins with the assumption that once people form their self-views, these self-views come to provide them with a powerful sense of coherence and a related capacity to predict and control their worlds (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Because self-views serve these critically important functions, people become invested in maintaining them, even if their self-views happen to be negative (Swann, 1983). As a result, when given the opportunity, people will choose to interact with others who see them as they see themselves. Specifically, just as people with positive self-views prefer interaction partners who see them positively,

people with negative self-views prefer interaction partners who appraise them negatively (e.g., Hixon & Swann, 1993; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992; Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989).

Not only does self-verification theory predict the relationship partners people choose, it also predicts how happy people are in those relationships and whether they remain in the relationships. Research has shown that people experience greater relationship quality and more intimacy in romantic relationships when partners verify their self-views (De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). Conversely, people tend to withdraw from relationships in which the relationship partner fails to provide self-verification. For example, Swann and Pelham (2002) found that college students with negative self-views who had roommates who appraised them positively made plans to find a new roommate. In a similar way, married people with negative self-views became less intimate with partners who saw them in a more positive way than they saw themselves (e.g., Burke & Stets, 1999; De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Ritts & Stein, 1995; Schafer, Wickrama, & Keith, 1996; Swann et al., 1994) and even separated from or divorced overly positive, nonverifying partners (e.g., Cast & Burke, 2002).

Self-verification theory's prediction that people who have positive self-views gravitate toward others who see them in a positive light is hardly surprising, as it squares well with self-enhancement theory's assumption that people want to think well of themselves (Jones, 1973). The symmetric proposition—that people with negative self-views prefer partners who view them negatively—is less obvious to most people, however. Nevertheless, as we shall show, the notion that the self-verification strivings of people with negative self-views prevail over their self-enhancement strivings is more understandable when one recognizes that for people with negative self-views, negative evaluations are reassuring and credible; unexpectedly, positive evaluations can be profoundly disquieting and anxiety provoking. In this way, receiving self-verification provides psychological coherence, a feeling that one's self and the world are as one thinks they are. Psychological coherence, however, is just one benefit of self-verification. We will illustrate in this chapter that irrespective of the type of self-view one has, receiving confirmation of one's self-view, as in the case of self-verification, is associated with a host of intrapsychic and interpersonal benefits.

## Self-Verification Theory and Positive Psychology

How is self-verification relevant to positive psychology? Positive psychology is the study of "what works" and "what is right" with human functioning (Sheldon & King, 2001); it specifically focuses on the adaptive aspects of human behavior. In keeping with such priorities, we suggest that self-verification is adaptive, serving many positive purposes for the individual. In this chapter, we first consider how self-verification is adaptive intrapsychically, that is, for the individual him- or herself, and then we will reflect on how it is adaptive interpersonally, that is, in social relationships. Additionally, we will address limitations in this argument by considering instances in which self-verification may not be adaptive. Finally, we will explore how an understanding of self-verification strivings can shed light on how to avert or remedy such maladaptive outcomes.

### How Is Self-Verification Adaptive Intrapsychically?

Self-verification is adaptive intrapsychically for the role it plays in fostering psychological coherence, reducing anxiety, improving physical health, and cultivating authenticity. That said, we hasten to add that although most of the foregoing variables have been linked empirically to self-verification, the last one—authenticity—has not. It will remain for future researchers to test our suggestion that self-verification fosters authenticity.

*Self-verification promotes psychological coherence.* Psychological coherence, a sense that things are as people think they are, is a key positive outcome associated with self-verification; it has been identified as an important source of emotional comfort (Swann, Chang-Schneider, & Angulo, 2007). Self-verification strivings foster psychological coherence because they lead to the validation of self-views. People choose not to interact with individuals who do not confirm their self-views and thus avoid the feelings of a lack of psychological coherence that would result. Comments of self-verifiers from a study of Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler (1992) provide evidence that psychological coherence is associated with the self-verification process and is desirable to people. When self-verifiers with negative self-views were asked to explain why they chose to interact with a confederate who evaluated them negatively, one participant said, "Yeah, I think that's pretty close to the way I am. [The negative evaluator] better reflects my own view of myself, from experience." Not only is psychological coherence desirable, but as the

following comment from another participant illustrates, psychological coherence is so important to people that it trumps desire for positive appraisals from others. One participant with a negative self-view explained why he or she chose to interact with a confederate who viewed him or her negatively in the following way: "I like the [favorable] evaluation but I am not sure that it is, ah, correct maybe. It *sounds* good, but [the negative evaluator] . . . seems to know more about me. So, I'll choose [the negative evaluator]." Psychological coherence is appealing and comforting to people, and it is a central intrapsychic benefit of self-verification.

*Self-verification reduces anxiety.* Self-verification not only provides feelings of psychological coherence, it actually reduces anxiety (for a review, see Swann, Chang-Schneider, & Angulo, 2007). That is, research has shown that verifying feedback leads to lower levels of anxiety than nonverifying feedback. Mendes and Akinola (2006), for example, observed people's cardiovascular responses to positive and negative evaluations, which could be either self-verifying or nonverifying. When people with negative self-views received positive feedback, they were physiologically "threatened" (avoidant and distressed). When they received negative feedback, they were physiologically "galvanized" (i.e., cardiovascularly aroused but in a positive way related to approach motivation). People with positive self-views reacted in opposite ways to the positive and negative feedback. Similarly, Wood, Heimpel, Newby-Clark, and Ross (2005) compared the reactions to success experiences of high- versus low-self-esteem participants. High-self-esteem individuals reacted favorably to success, but low-self-esteem individuals became anxious, apparently because the feedback was not consistent with their self-views (cf. Lundgren & Schwab, 1977). Similarly, Ralph and Mineka (1998) observed students' reactions to receiving grades on a midterm examination and found that students with low self-esteem experienced the greatest increase in overall distress, including anxious and depressive symptoms, after they received grades that were considered successful to them. That is to say, low-self-esteem participants responded with more distress to grades that they deemed acceptable than they did to grades that they considered to be failures. Events that are not self-verifying, therefore, increase anxiety even if they are positive, just as self-verifying events and feedback reduce anxiety even if they happen to be negative.

*Self-verification improves health.* Since positive but nonverifying events have been shown to cause

stress for people with negative self-views, over an extended period of time these types of experiences can be detrimental to physical health. There is some support for this self-verification hypothesis. For instance, in a pair of prospective studies, Brown and McGill (1989) assessed the impact of positive life events on health outcomes for high- and low-self-esteem people. For participants with high self-esteem, positive life events (e.g., getting very good grades, improvement in living conditions) predicted increases in health. For participants with low self-esteem, positive life events predicted "decreases" in health. Shimizu and Pelham (2004) replicated and extended this finding. They found that positive life events predicted increased illness for low-self-esteem individuals. This pattern emerged even when controlling for negative affectivity, thus undermining an alternative hypothesis that negative affect influenced both self-reported self-esteem and reports of physical symptoms. Apparently, for people with negative self-views, the gap between positive life events and a chronically negative identity may be sufficiently psychologically threatening that it undercuts physical health (cf. Iyer, Jetten, & Tsivrikos, 2008).

*Self-verification and authenticity.* Self-verification may foster authenticity, which can be defined as "the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise" (Kernis, 2003, p. 1). Research has shown that when an individual's inner experience is validated, authenticity is enhanced (Kernis); research related to self-verification has illustrated that people choose to interact with others who validate their self-views, or inner experience, suggesting that self-verification may promote authenticity. Adding further strength to this argument, Leary (2003) posits that authentic actions arise when people believe they can be accepted by being themselves. Deci and Ryan (1995) argue that authenticity in children emerges when caregivers love the children for being who they are. In a similar way, Harter, Marold, Whitesell, and Cobbs (1996) found that among adolescents, higher quality of support from classmates (scores range from conditional to unconditional) predicted more true-self behavior (defined as acting in ways that are the "real me"). Since self-verifiers seek relationships with others who see them as they see themselves, they surround themselves with relationship partners who are with them based on who they feel they actually are (i.e., "is thinkers"). Such a social environment may promote authenticity (cf. Deci & Ryan, 1995; Harter et al., 1996; Leary, 2003).

A process that promotes authenticity is beneficial because authenticity is, itself, a character strength

(Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Authenticity is also related to other positive psychological outcomes, such as more positive affect (Harter et al., 1996) and greater psychological well-being (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997). In turn, a lack of authenticity has been associated with negative psychological outcomes, such as neuroticism (Horney, 1950) and narcissistic disorders (Bleiberg, 1984).

Strengthening the connection between self-verification and authenticity is research showing that an absence of self-verification processes is associated with inauthenticity. Horney (1950) found that neurotics strive to have others see them in a more positive way than they see themselves, reflective of a lack of self-verification strivings and inauthenticity. Specifically, neurotics often create an all-powerful, idealized image of the self to compensate for feelings of weakness and inadequacy; they subsequently portray this idealized self to others in an effort to gain approval, and, consequently, they lose touch with the real self (Horney, 1950). To illustrate this point, consider the example of a person who is a phenomenal artist, a mediocre athlete, and grumpy in the mornings. According to Horney, if this person is neurotic, he or she may promote an idealized self to gain approval from others. Instead of choosing to interact with others who see this individual as he or she is, the person might choose to interact with people who see him or her as a phenomenal artist, a superb athlete, and always cheery in the mornings. This would foster *in*authenticity. Similarly, Bleiberg (1984) found that narcissistic disorders, an extreme form of inauthenticity, can emerge among children when caregivers do not accept the true self of a child; narcissistic children attempt to create idealized selves to meet the expectations of the caregivers, thereby experiencing "alienation from authenticity" (p. 510). Kernis (2003) also contends that failing to validate the legitimacy of the inner experience of a child is detrimental to the development of authenticity. Therefore, when self-verification strivings are absent and people have relationships with others who do not see them as they see themselves, inauthenticity may emerge. In the worst case scenarios, this inauthenticity may even result in neuroses and narcissistic disorders.

## How Is Self-Verification Adaptive Interpersonally?

Self-verification strivings are adaptive interpersonally because they encourage people to enter into relationships with honest "is thinking" relationship partners, thereby leading to greater intimacy and trust in relationships. Furthermore, self-verification is associated with greater predictability in people's behavior, which allows interactions to flow smoothly and is also related to greater trust in relationships (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). Empirical findings support the relationship between intimacy and self-verification, predictability in behavior and self-verification, and, in turn, harmonious social interactions and self-verification. As was the case with the authenticity argument in the previous section, the connection drawn between trust and self-verification has yet to be tested empirically. Here again, we hope that our speculations will offer a theoretical foundation for future empirical research in the area.

### INTIMACY

Self-verification strivings are associated with greater intimacy in relationships. Swann et al. (1994) offer empirical support for the connection between self-verification and intimacy in a study of married couples. They found that participants reported having more intimacy when their spouses saw them as they saw themselves; this finding held for people with positive self-views and for people with negative self-views. Even among people with positive self-views, those whose spouses viewed them in an "extremely" favorable way tended to withdraw from the relationship. Furthermore, a recent meta-analysis of self-verification in marriage relationships supported the robustness of the tendency for people whose spouses viewed them in a self-verifying way to enjoy superior relationship quality (Chang-Schneider & Swann, 2009), irrespective of whether people had positive or negative self-views. Furthermore, Cassidy (2001) posits that intimacy "is making one's innermost known, sharing one's core, one's truth, one's heart, with another" (p. 122); this is the essence of self-verification—seeking out relationship partners who see you as you believe you truly are. Cassidy explains further that the ability to have intimacy is related to secure attachment in childhood, and secure attachment "is thought to be associated with validating the truth of the child's experiences" (p. 143). The connection here is drawn between intimacy and the validation of inner experience, which is a part of the self-verification process.

Feeling understood, a key part of intimacy (Cassidy, 2001; Reiss & Shaver, 1988), might be responsible for the connection between self-verification and intimacy. Comments from self-verifiers provide evidence that feeling understood drives

self-verification. In one study (Swann et al., 1992), self-verifiers with negative self-views were asked to explain why they chose to interact with a confederate who evaluated them negatively. One participant said, "Well, I mean, after examining all of this I think [the negative evaluator] pretty much has me pegged." Another participant mentioned, "Since [the negative evaluator] seems to know my position and how I feel sometimes, maybe I'll be able to get along with him." The satisfaction of feeling understood, an integral part of intimacy, attracts people to relationship partners who confirm their self-views.

Another possible pathway to greater intimacy might be related to the way in which self-verification strivings can help people to identify relationship partners they believe to be honest. Choosing interaction partners who see people as they see themselves could be equivalent to choosing interaction partners who are deemed to be honest. Consistent with this notion, previous studies have shown that people endorse the validity of feedback only insofar as it confirms their self-conceptions (Crary, 1966; Markus, 1977). Identifying honest relationship partners could increase intimacy in one's life because honesty in relationships breeds intimacy (Lerner, 1993). Lerner argues that "closeness requires honesty" and that "truth telling" is "the foundation of... intimacy" (p. 15). Although it might be somewhat tempting to surround ourselves with others who see a glorified version of who we actually are, doing so does not bring intimacy into our lives; ultimately, it is not satisfying. To opt for the alternative of being around others who see us as we feel we actually are not only creates deep intimacy but is rewarding and validating at the deepest level.

### HARMONIOUS SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

The behavior of both the self-verifier and his or her interaction partners becomes more predictable through the self-verification process, which allows social interactions to flow more smoothly. The process is negotiated like this: The self-verifier acts in predictable, consistent ways to communicate a stable self-view to others, and through a process of surrounding him- or herself with others who consistently confirm that self-view, the interaction partners' behavior becomes predictable too. This mutual predictability facilitates more harmonious social relations. One can imagine that if a relationship partner did not have a stable self-view and assumed distinct personalities on different days, that would put a strain on social relationships. The importance of acting in predictable ways is particularly salient in considering the

evolutionary perspective, where mutual predictability among small hunter-gatherer groups would have facilitated a more effective division of labor and better promoted survival (Goffman, 1959; Swann, Chang-Schneider, & Angulo, 2007). Predictability in a person's behavior is a highly valued characteristic in relationship partners (Athay & Darley, 1981; Rempel et al., 1985).

### TRUST

Greater predictability in people's behavior, which results from the self-verification process, not only allows social interactions to flow more smoothly, but it also enhances trust. Rempel et al. (1985) characterized predictability of a relationship partner's behavior as one of the three components of their model of trust, along with dependability and faith. Other literature has similarly articulated that predictability is a key aspect of trust (Tyler, 2001). The centrality of predictability in establishing trust can be illustrated in student–teacher relationships. Imagine an elementary school teacher who has a policy that when students answer questions without raising their hands three times, students will miss recess. If this teacher's response to students failing to raise their hands is predictable (i.e., he or she keeps to the policy), this breeds trust in the student–teacher relationship. Alternatively, acting in unpredictable ways by failing to stick to the policy altogether or enforcing the policy arbitrarily erodes trust. In essence, the self-verification process leads to greater predictability in people's behavior which leads to more trust.

Another way in which self-verification strivings might enhance trust is by encouraging people to seek out interaction partners they deem to be honest, a positive consequence of self-verification discussed in the previous section on intimacy. Honesty in the relationship, in turn, fosters trust (Lerner, 1993). Shrauger and Lund (1975) offer further evidence of the connection between self-verification and the identification of honest interaction partners; they found that people expressed greater confidence in an evaluator's perceptiveness when the evaluator's impression confirmed their self-conceptions. Self-verification leads to finding honest interaction partners, and honesty leads to trust.

In sum, self-verification is adaptive for relationships in that it encourages people to identify and prefer honest relationship partners, fostering intimacy and trust in relationships; it also encourages predictability in behavior, which leads to more harmonious social interactions and further promotes

trust. But if the self-verification process is adaptive for most people most of the time, like any adaptive process, there may be instances in which it is maladaptive. In the next section of this chapter, we consider some such instances.

## When Is Self-Verification Maladaptive?

Although self-verification has many benefits for people with positive and negative self-views, it does contribute to the perpetuation of these self-views, which may be problematic for people whose self-views are negative. Although some have challenged the notion that higher self-esteem is better (Kernis, 2003) and asserted that higher self-esteem is not always related to greater well-being (Ryan & Brown, 2003), much research linking low self-esteem to depression (Murrell, Meeks, & Walker, 1991; Reinherz, Giaconia, Pakiz, & Silverman, 1993; Roberts, Gotlib, & Kassel, 1996; Robinson, Garber, & Hillsman, 1995; Trzesniewski et al., 2006) and high self-esteem to happiness (Diener & Diener, 1995; Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Shackelford, 2001) provides reason to see the perpetuation of low self-esteem via self-verification as potentially maladaptive (see also Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McClarty, 2007).

To be sure, all people possess flaws and limitations that are difficult, if not impossible, to change. For example, some people are less artistic, physically strong, or musical than others, and adopting overly positive, inaccurate assessments of their capacities can inhibit personal growth and flourishing. Nevertheless, the self-views associated with low self-esteem and depression may often be unfounded, as the basis for concluding that one is "worthless" is often quite subjective and arbitrary. Consider the example of depressed individuals who often have inaccurate, negative beliefs about their competence and likability. Self-verification predicts these individuals will choose to interact with others who see them negatively, even though the negative views are not accurate, because these relationships maintain psychological coherence, a sense that things are as one thinks they are. This cycle will perpetuate the negative, false self-views of these individuals in a way that may prevent them from realizing their true capabilities and attaining happiness.

If self-verification can be maladaptive for low-self-esteem individuals (comprising approximately one-third of the population; Swann, 1987), finding a way to effectively raise self-esteem seems necessary. Although self-verification does not, itself, raise self-esteem, understanding how it operates provides valuable information in understanding how to increase self-esteem. Additionally, self-verification may aid the process of raising self-esteem by stabilizing an individual's self-view, thereby creating a firm, safe foundation ready for meaningful change. As we explain next, the process of self-verification can be seen as a necessary but not sufficient step for raising self-esteem.

## What Can Self-Verification Reveal about Raising Self-Esteem?

Attempting to raise others' self-esteem by simply telling individuals with negative self-views that they are wrong about themselves is unlikely to bear fruit. That is, this strategy is unlikely to be successful because research related to self-verification shows that people work to preserve their self-views, and people will either avoid interaction partners who do not verify their self-views or will withdraw emotionally from the relationship. People's self-views are deeply rooted and provide psychological coherence, so attempting to completely overhaul them will be discordant with people's deeply held convictions and will be disconcerting, confusing, and, consequently, unproductive. Steinbeck would call the approach of attempting to raise another's self-esteem through sheer persuasion "teleological thinking," as opposed to "is thinking" (also called "non-teleological thinking"), discussed previously. Teleological thinking is based not on what *is* but on what *could be* or *should be* (Steinbeck, 1951). Steinbeck warns that effective change cannot come from teleological thinking. He gave the following counsel: "In their sometimes intolerant refusal to face facts as they are, teleological notions may substitute a fierce but ineffectual attempt to change conditions which are assumed to be undesirable, in place of the understanding-acceptance which would pave the way for a more sensible attempt at any change" (Steinbeck, 1951, p. 138). He, therefore, advises that change is better effected through "is thinking." If, however, "is thinking" is concerned with accepting things as they are, how can this lead to change?

The answer is that validating others' self-views, as occurs in self-verification and is a characteristic of "is thinking," is a necessary first step in this slow process of change. It provides fertile soil for change by fostering stability, coherence, and a sense of feeling understood and accepted. Deci and Ryan (1995) support this notion by positing that fostering self-esteem in another entails "valuing the other for who he or she is and taking that other's frame of reference ... it means beginning by accepting and

relating to the self of the other. It is precisely the acceptance of *self*—first by others and then by one-self—that supports the development and maintenance of true self-esteem" (p. 46). This type of acceptance is analogous to Carl Rogers' (1961) notion of "unconditional positive regard," the concept that therapists could facilitate personal growth and successful change in clients by providing an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance. Rogers elaborated on this concept in his book, *On Becoming a Person*, in which he wrote: "So I find that when I can accept another person, which means specifically accepting the feeling and attitudes and beliefs that he has as a real and vital part of him, then I am assisting him to become a person" (p. 21). He underscored the somewhat counterintuitive relationship between acceptance and change when he wrote, "the curious paradox is that when I accept myself as I am, then I change" (Rogers, 1961, p. 17). Accepting what another is actually feeling, as opposed to what one thinks the individual should feel or could feel, is a necessary first step to change. In this way, self-verification constitutes a necessary first step in the process of raising self-esteem, but it is not sufficient.

Positive feedback, which challenges negative self-views, must accompany verification but must come in manageable doses. Research has shown that positive feedback from an interaction partner can encourage an individual to internalize a new self-view (Jones, Gergen, & Davis, 1962), so positive comments have the potential to raise self-esteem, but they must be carried out in combination with verification. A study by Finn and Tonsager (1992) revealed that integrating verification and positivity does, in fact, raise self-esteem. College students who received feedback about a problem-focused personality test in a supportive environment experienced an increase in self-esteem, even though the feedback was often negative. Finn and Tonsager believe that the results are due to the combination of "creating a positive emotional tone, while verbally offering self-confirmatory (and often negative) feedback" (p. 285). In essence, Finn and Tonsager found that this combination of accepting another's reality or truth while slowly and gently infusing positivity raises self-esteem.

In a similar way, combining an acceptance of one's current reality with positive change is evident in various types of therapies. In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), clients are taught not to try to control thoughts or feelings but to observe them nonjudgmentally and to accept them, while changing behaviors in beneficial ways to better

their lives (Hayes, 1994). In Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), the dialectic between acceptance and change is also central (Baer, 2003). Clients are taught to accept themselves completely, while working to change their behaviors and environments to improve their lives (Baer, 2003). Acceptance and positivity, this combination in this sequence, may serve as a road map for raising self-esteem.

## What Can Self-Verification Reveal about Happiness?

Understanding the self-verification process may offer insight not only into raising self-esteem but also into building and even defining happiness. We contend that encouraging people to accept themselves, in effect offering themselves self-verification, is a key component of happiness.

Our argument is based on the assumption that self-acceptance, including acceptance of one's vulnerabilities, imperfections, and the full range of one's emotions, is an integral part of happiness. This perspective differs from many contemporary conceptualizations of happiness, which define happiness as the frequency of positive emotions and infrequency of negative emotions (for a review, see Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). In contrast, we suggest that happiness is more aptly described as a compassionate embracing or acceptance of a fuller range of emotions, rather than one's overall amount of positive emotions or net value of positive minus negative emotions.

The belief that happiness encompasses a wide range of feelings and emotions has been articulated by Matthieu Ricard (2003) in his book *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill.* He writes: "we so often confuse genuine happiness with merely seeking enjoyable emotions," but happiness is about learning how to "reduce the gap between appearances and reality" (pp. 26, 23). That is to say, it is about acceptance. He added: "There exists a way of being that underlies and suffuses all emotional states, that embraces all joys and sorrows that come to us. . . . The Sanskrit word for this state of being is *sukha*" (p. 25). In these quotations, Ricard underscores the significance of acceptance, specifically accepting all emotions—in essence, accepting ourselves. He elaborates on this concept of *sukha* when he writes: "*Sukha* is the state of lasting well-being that manifests itself when we have freed ourselves of mental blindness and afflictive emotions. It is also the wisdom that allows us to see the world as it is, without veils or distortions. It is, finally, the joy of moving toward inner freedom

and the loving-kindness that radiates toward others" (p. 25). Again, Ricard echoes the notion that happiness is not about attempting to reframe all emotions as positive ones or "merely seeking enjoyable emotions"; it is associated with the warm welcoming of "the world as it is."

Equally important to self-acceptance is acceptance by others. For example, research on the impact of social support in the face of traumatic events has shown that significant others frequently respond to a loved one who is a trauma victim by forcing cheerfulness and displaying an optimistic facade (Wortman & Dunkel-Schetter, 1979, 1987). Forced cheerfulness, however, minimizes the victim's situation, which may make the victim feel abandoned or rejected (Dakof & Taylor, 1990). In a similar way, Dakof and Taylor (1990) found that minimization of trauma by social support providers (i.e., family, physicians, and nurses) was one of the most frequent complaints of cancer victims. Furthermore, Ingram, Betz, Mindes, Schmitt, and Smith (2001) found that forcing optimism or downplaying an individual's concerns (e.g., saying the victim "should look on the bright side") is such a common and unsupportive response that it was one of the four main factors upon which these authors loaded all negative, unsupportive responses to difficult life events. This type of reaction was not only characterized by victims as being unsupportive, it was also associated with depressive symptoms.

Ironically, the implicit belief that happiness can be achieved by shoehorning all experiences into positive ones may have the opposite of the effect intended. When a person does not feel that their negative feelings are validated or accepted by others in the social support network, their physical and mental health suffers. In short, acceptance is essential to enduring happiness at both an intrapsychic and interpersonal level, but it is often overlooked in the definition and measurement of happiness. Our theoretical perspective suggests that a more expansive definition of happiness, as well as appropriate measures, is needed to reflect a richer understanding of the nature and origins of the construct.

## Conclusion

Self-verification theory assumes that individuals work to maintain their self-views by seeking confirmation of them irrespective of whether their self-views are positive or negative. This process is related to positive psychology because it is presumed to be fundamentally adaptive, providing many intrapsychic and interpersonal benefits. In fact, self-verification

strivings facilitate the development of some of the most intrinsically rewarding aspects of life; prominent among them are authenticity of self and intimacy in relationships.

To be sure, although self-verification strivings are fundamentally adaptive, they may perpetuate inaccurate self-views which will be particularly problematic if they are inappropriately negative. Nevertheless, in such instances, it is the erroneous nature of the initial self-view rather than the process of self-verification that is the root of the problem. Once a self-view is formed, the individual places a psychological premium on its verification, and any attempts to deny it result in defensive reactions that can have unproductive consequences.

Understanding the critical importance of self-verification processes offers insights into how to raise self-esteem. We suggest that to help raise the self-esteem of someone with a negative self-view, one should first offer the person self-verification and only then provide positive feedback that challenges the negative self-views. This ordered combination of acceptance plus positivity will theoretically engender positive self-views without evoking defensiveness. Once such positive self-views are in place, the process of self-verification can resume anew, but this time it will be in the service of promoting personal and social realities that are both truthful and adaptive. From this vantage point, people will become like Steinbeck's "is thinkers" in a deeper sense, as they think about themselves in a new, more meaningful, more complete, and more sustaining way.

But understanding self-verification not only offers insight into how to raise self-esteem, it also offers a new perspective on the optimal strategy for enhancing and even defining happiness. In particular, self-verification theory underscores the importance of accepting oneself fully, including vulnerabilities, imperfections, and the full range of one's emotions, and suggests that such acceptance may be crucial to happiness. From this perspective, the key to happiness may reside not in continually striving to improve the reality of who one is but in embracing the reality and incorporating it more fully into one's self-view, relationships, and work—into one's life.

## Questions about the Future of the Topic

1. If happiness is best attained through self-acceptance, it becomes important to develop ways of bolstering self-acceptance. How would you go about this?

2. Recent research has questioned the cross-cultural generality of some motives, such as the desire for positive evaluations. Might self-verification strivings also be limited to Westerners?

3. Finn and Tonsager were successful in changing the self-views of people with low self-esteem. Do you think that their findings would generalize to people with depression? Why or why not?

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CHAPTER

# 45

# Reality Negotiation

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## Abstract

This chapter presents an overview of the development and status of the reality negotiation construct and relates it to a variety of coping processes. The reality negotiation construct follows from the social constructionist tradition and first appeared in discussions of how excuses protect self-images by decreasing the causal linkage to negative outcomes. The reality negotiation construct was later expanded to include a discussion of how the process of hoping may be used to increase perceived linkage to positive outcomes. In the two decades since these constructs were first introduced, four individual differences measures have been developed, and the effects of these reality negotiation techniques have been studied extensively. Reality negotiation techniques can be both maladaptive and adaptive and have been shown to be associated with coping and social support in a variety of populations. The chapter concludes by highlighting a few areas in which reality negotiation research could expand to further its relevance and applicability to the field of positive psychology.

**Keywords:** coping, excuses, hope, self-handicapping

## Reality Negotiation Defined

The reality negotiation (RN) construct first appeared in Snyder and Higgins's (1988a, 1988b) discussions of how excuses protect self-images. These authors proposed that people continually assess their degree of causal linkage to self-relevant outcomes and employ attribution and appraisal strategies to manipulate the extent of those linkages (Higgins & Snyder, 1991).

Thinking about RN initially emphasized shifting causal attributions for "negative" outcomes from "sources that are relatively more central to the person's sense of self to sources that are relatively less central" (Snyder & Higgins, 1988b, p. 23), a definition that incorporated only a (causal) linkage dimension. In 1989, Snyder introduced a valence dimension along with his construct of "hoping" (see chap. 30). In contrast to excuses, hoping was seen as a process of "increasing" causal linkages to "positive" outcomes. Subsequently, the RN construct has incorporated both linkage and valence dimensions, contrasting excusing (self-esteem maintenance) and hoping (self-esteem enhancement) processes.

This linkage–valence framework has been represented as a two-dimensional matrix wherein "linkage to outcome" (none to total) formed the $X$-axis and "valence of outcome" (positive to negative) formed the $Y$-axis. Accordingly, an individual's relation to any given outcome can be mapped onto this matrix. People wishing to enhance or preserve a positive image would likely work to "decrease" linkages to negative outcomes, to "decrease" the negativity of those outcomes, or both. When faced with positive outcomes, people might be expected to work toward "increasing" their causal linkages and/or toward "increasing" their positive valence. In contrast, people with negative self-theories might try to distance themselves from positive outcomes (Barone, Maddux, & Snyder, 1997; Snyder & Higgins, 1997).