



Inflating and deflating the self: Sustaining motivational concerns through self-evaluation[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Self-evaluations may shift dynamically to serve motivational concerns.
- Self-evaluation inflation is associated with promotion focus concerns.
- Self-evaluation deflation is associated with prevention focus concerns.
- Results support the idea of strategic shifts in self-evaluation positivity.

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ABSTRACT

The ways in which individuals think and feel about themselves play a significant role in guiding behavior across many domains in life. The current studies investigate how individuals may shift the positivity of self-evaluations in order to sustain their chronic or momentary motivational concerns. Specifically, we propose that more positive self-evaluations support eagerness that sustains promotion-focused concerns with advancement, whereas less positive self-evaluations support vigilance that sustains prevention-focused concerns with safety. The current studies provide evidence that self-evaluation *inflation* is associated with promotion concerns whereas self-evaluation *deflation* is associated with prevention concerns, whether regulatory focus is situationally manipulated (Studies 1, 2b, and 3) or measured as a chronic individual difference (Study 2a). Following regulatory focus primes, individuals in a promotion focus showed relatively greater accessibility of positive versus negative self-knowledge compared to individuals in a prevention focus (Study 1). In an ongoing performance situation, participants in a promotion focus reported higher self-esteem than participants in a prevention focus (Studies 2a and 2b). Finally, individuals in a promotion focus persisted longer on an anagram task when given an opportunity to focus on their strengths versus weaknesses, which was not the case for individuals in a prevention focus (Study 3). Across studies, the predicted interactions were consistently obtained, although sometimes the effects were stronger for promotion or prevention motivation. We discuss implications for existing models of the motives underlying self-evaluation.

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Introduction

Life provides ample opportunities for boosts and blows to our sense of self, occasions that often prompt self-reflection and assessment. These self-musings cut across domains, influencing behavior in almost every life arena, and can be guided by a number of underlying motivational concerns. Often we just want to feel good about ourselves; we

find ways to protect and even enhance our self-views (e.g., Hepper, Gramzow, & Sedikides, 2010). Sometimes we want confirmation that others see us the way we see ourselves, whether that view is positive or negative (e.g., Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003). Sometimes we seek accuracy and certainty, even if it does not enhance or verify (e.g., Trope, 1986; Trope & Brickman, 1975). Sometimes we want to know how we can do better in the future (e.g., Taylor, Neter, & Waymant, 1995; Wood, 1989). In general, research in self-evaluation has focused on these four motives underlying self-evaluation—self-enhancement, self-verification, self-assessment, and self-improvement (Gregg, Hepper, & Sedikides, 2011; Sedikides & Strube, 1995, 1997). In this paper, we explore an additional motive underlying self-evaluation—to sustain underlying motivational concerns. Specifically, we propose that individuals' self-evaluations can sustain

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or disrupt their underlying motivational concerns and that, depending on these concerns, individuals may be differentially motivated to enhance or deflate the positivity of self-views.

Motivated self-evaluation

There are multiple motives for self-evaluation. Understanding the relation among these motives and the circumstances under which particular motives will dominate has been an aim of self-evaluation research (Chang-Schneider & Swann, 2010; Hepper et al., 2010; Sedikides & Strube, 1995; Stinson et al., 2010; Swann, 1984; Swann & Schroeder, 1995; Taylor et al., 1995; Trope, 1986). In general, motives regarding self-protection (e.g., avoiding negative self-views) and self-enhancement (e.g., promoting more positive self-views) have been seen as fundamental (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Brown, 2010; Hepper et al., 2010; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Sedikides & Strube, 1995; Steele, 1988; Tesser, 2001; Yamaguchi et al., 2007). There is considerable support for the notion that the motive to protect and enhance a positive self-view is primary, though cultures may differ in the ways in which this motive is expressed (e.g., Chiu, Wan, Cheng, Kim, & Yang, 2011). In general, however, people see more good than bad when they look in the mirror (Alicke, 1985), see their own traits as particularly desirable (Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995), and believe that their future is blessed relative to others (Weinstein, 1980). When cognitive resources are constrained, the self-enhancement motive appears to be the default (Hixon & Swann, 1993; Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990; Swann & Schroeder, 1995).

When, then, are individuals motivated to see the darker or weaker sides of themselves? Research suggests that people will evaluate themselves less positively or seek potentially negative self-information primarily in circumstances when motives for self-verification, accurate self-assessment, or self-improvement are activated. For pragmatic reasons, individuals may prefer a relationship partner who contributes to their self-verification, facilitating smooth interpersonal interaction. For instance, although people prefer their dating partners to see them positively (regardless of how they see themselves), people prefer their married partners to see them as they see themselves (self-verification) (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). Epistemic concerns may also support negative self-evaluation; confirming one's views of self, even if negative, can provide a sense of coherence and stability (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). When traits are seen as important and modifiable, individuals may be willing to see weakness if it corresponds to accurate self-assessment or facilitates self-improvement (Dunning, 1995; Trope, 1986). This type of research suggests that negative self-views are functional to the extent that they support objective or subjective truths about the self.

However, some evidence suggests that negative self-evaluations might have an additional self-regulatory function beyond their conveyance of some (oft painful) truth. For example, Baumeister, Tice, and Hutton (1989) proposed that expressed self-evaluations might be strategically employed to deflect or create expectations in others; self-evaluation may be self-presentational. Indicating low self-esteem or low confidence in oneself can be one way to manage the expectations of others in the face of possible failure (e.g., "I'm not so hot. Don't count on me to save the day."). Dampened self-evaluations may be embraced not only in an attempt to have a balanced or accurate view of oneself, but also because they can be strategically useful in interpersonal interactions. Embracing a dampened view of the self is a cautious tactic that can minimize regret if things go awry (cf. Josephs, Larrick, Steele, & Nisbett, 1992).

Research on defensive pessimism further suggests that negative self-views can be helpful not only to manage the expectations of others, but also to increase one's own motivation and engagement in goal pursuit (Norem, 2008; Norem & Cantor, 1986a,b; Showers, 1992). Defensive pessimists "expect the worst" when entering a new situation, despite the fact that they generally do not perform differently than those with

a more optimistic outlook (Cantor & Norem, 1989; Cantor, Norem, Niedenthal, Langston, & Brower, 1987). In contrast to "true" pessimism, defensive pessimism serves two goals—a self-protective goal of preparation for possible failure in the future and a motivational goal of increasing vigilance in the present to prevent potential negative outcomes in the future (Seery, West, Weisbuch, & Blascovich, 2008). In support of this idea, it has been shown that when the strategic coping mechanisms of defensive pessimists were disrupted, they performed more poorly (Norem & Cantor, 1986b; Showers, 1992). Simply pointing out the inconsistency between their current expectations and past performance disrupted their ability to harness vigilance in their preferred way (Norem & Cantor, 1986b). Furthermore, defensive pessimists who focused on negative rather than positive outcome possibilities for an upcoming social interaction talked more, exerted more effort, and had their conversations rated more positively by the confederates with whom they were interacting (Showers, 1992). This research suggests that for some individuals, focusing on negativity may be used to manage the self more effectively.

We propose that the dynamics observed in defensive pessimism (focusing on and harnessing negativity as a way to self-regulate) may be one example of a broader motivation underlying self-evaluation. Specifically, individuals may strategically shift their self-views not only downwards, but also upwards, as a way to sustain and maintain preferred motivational orientations. Our perspective suggests a dynamic, proactive view of self-evaluation; self-evaluations are not always retrospective reflections on the past, but may be strategically shifted to serve future self-regulation and goal pursuit. Furthermore, because individuals may differ in the extent to which inflated versus deflated self-evaluation sustains or disrupts their chronic or momentary motivational concerns, individuals may be differentially motivated to inflate or deflate the self. Individuals may therefore shift the positivity of self-evaluations to support the strategic orientation that best sustains or "fits" their motivational concerns (e.g., Higgins, 2000).

For example, for individuals who need to be eager to sustain their motivational concerns, more positive self-evaluations should support the eagerness they need. In contrast, for individuals who need to be vigilant to sustain their motivational concerns, relatively less positive self-evaluations should support the vigilance they need. Because individuals differ in whether they have motivational concerns that are sustained by either eagerness or vigilance, self-evaluations could be enhanced or dampened tactically in the service of supporting what people need motivationally. This should be true based on an individual's current motivational state, both when that state arises from chronic individual differences and when it arises temporarily from situational induction. We examined these ideas by taking advantage of past research on regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997). In the next section, we outline the connections between regulatory focus theory and the current predictions.

Regulatory focus, self-evaluation, and sustaining motivational concerns

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) identifies two underlying self-regulatory systems (promotion, prevention) that have been differentially associated with the use of eager versus vigilant strategies (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Grant & Higgins, 2003; Higgins & Molden, 2003; Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001; Molden & Higgins, 2005; Scholer & Higgins, 2010). Individuals can differ both chronically and temporarily in their sensitivity to promotion versus prevention concerns (e.g., Higgins et al., 2001; Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994; Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997), which in turn influence strategic preferences.

The promotion system is concerned with hopes and aspirations (ideals) and accomplishments. Individuals in a promotion focus are sensitive to gains versus nongains (i.e., the difference between "0" and "+1") and they regulate more effectively using eager approach strategies (Higgins, 2000, 2005, 2009). Eager strategies serve promotion

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