Reports

"You're Just Saying That." Contingencies of self-worth, suspicion, and authenticity in the interpersonal affirmation process ☆

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ABSTRACT

A model of the role and costs of contingent self-worth in the partner-affirmation process was tested. Actors whose self-worth was contingent on appearance or intelligence claimed to have expressed their particular heightened sensitivity to their romantic partners. Suggesting a cost to these reactions, actors' beliefs about having expressed heightened sensitivity, in turn, predicted their doubts about the authenticity of partners' positive feedback in the domain of contingency, independently of whether partners claimed to deliver inauthentic feedback. Suggesting a cost for partners, partners of contingent actors appeared to detect actors' expressions of sensitivity in the domain of contingency and respond by delivering inauthentic feedback to actors in the domain, which in turn predicted partners' increased relationship anxiety and decreased satisfaction. Results suggest that contingent self-worth may undermine the functioning of the partner-affirmation process through actors discrediting partners' positive feedback and partners behaving in an inauthentic and controlled manner.

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People depend on their romantic partners to meet their needs (Clark & Mills, 1993; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Among these needs is the need to feel good about the self; people want their partners to see them in a manner that affirms their feelings of self-worth (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). In many cases, the process by which a partner affirms our feelings of self-worth happens easily, as when a partner regularly delivers positive feedback or dispels doubts about our inadequacies. In turn, partners can feel good about themselves and their relationships through providing this support (Clark & Grote, 1998).

However, this process does not work well for everyone. Some people, even those with loving and admiring partners, do not feel adequately valued by their partners and often react to their own failures with relationship-damaging behaviors (Crocker & Park, 2004; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). How does the partner affirmation process go awry? In the current research, we test the role of contingencies of self-worth as psychological vulnerabilities

that may undermine the partner-affirmation process. In particular, by expressing heightened emotional vulnerabilities and sensitivities in a particular domain to partners, contingent individuals may come to doubt the authenticity of partners' positive feedback in that domain and have partners who feel compelled to provide inauthentic feedback relevant to performance in that domain. Our model is illustrated in Fig. 1. We discuss each path in detail below.

Path A: Contingent actors believe they expressed self-worth sensitivity to partners

For people who have self-worth that is contingent on performance in a particular domain, successes and failures in that domain generalize to their felt worth as a person (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). They feel valuable when they succeed in the domain and worthless when they fail (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, 2003). Contingent self-worth also motivates people to strive for success and avoid failure in the domain as a means of validating their worth (Crocker & Park, 2004; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

Due to this emotional vulnerability and pursuit of self-esteem, those who have highly contingent self-worth (termed "actors" in our model) may frequently express their particular self-esteem sensitivity to their romantic partners. They are likely to do so because people generally depend on romantic partners to meet their needs, including self-esteem needs (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992;
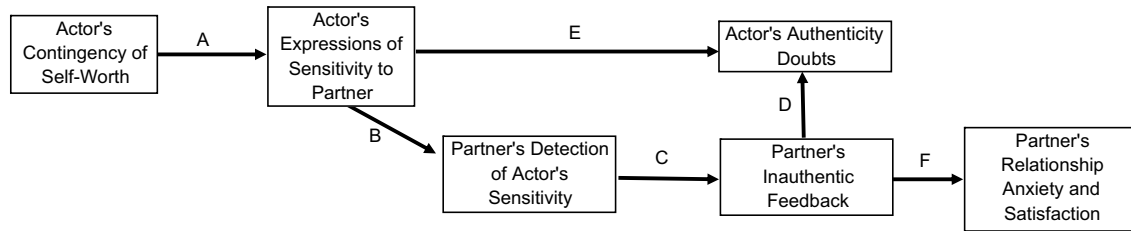
Fig. 1. Model of contingencies of self-worth, partner authenticity, and authenticity doubts.

Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Reis et al., 2004). This expression of sensitivity may include a variety of specific behaviors, such as seeking reassurance about their standing in the relevant domain (Joiner, Katz, & Lew, 1999) and responding to threats in the domain with hurt feelings or antagonism (Crocker & Park, 2004; Murray et al., 2006; Park & Crocker, 2005). For example, Sarah, having a sense of self-worth that is contingent on her physical appearance, may frequently ask Derek, her partner, whether she looks fat, and she may become angry and defensive when he suggests sharing a low calorie meal.

These responses may have provided some emotional gratification at the time they occurred. For instance, having one's request for reassurance be met with a partner's reassuring response likely provides a boost to feelings of self-worth. Reacting to threat with hostility might provide a temporary sense of safety (Murray et al., 2006) or vindication (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006). However, later, reflecting on these prior reactions might cause actors to come to the conclusion that they have expressed their heightened sensitivity to partners and, as described later, this belief may come at a cost. That is, our model posits a particular means by which these responses might entail a trade-off between short-term emotional gratification and long-term well-being (see also Baumeister & Scher, 1988; Crocker & Park, 2004).

Path B: Partners detect actors' sensitivity

Contingent actors' beliefs about expressing sensitivities should, to some extent, reflect their actual behavior. As a result, partners should, to some extent, agree with actors' claims that they expressed sensitivity. Partners may be especially likely to detect this information because it conveys information about actors' needs, and people typically monitor the other's needs in close relationships (Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986). Although we do not know of evidence that people are aware of others' specific contingencies of self-worth, people do seem to detect their partners' expressions of general sensitivity, including reassurance seeking (Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005) and hostile reactions to negative evaluation (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003). Continuing with our example, Derek likely detects Sarah's need for reassurance and her emotional vulnerability regarding attractiveness.

Path C: Partners who detect actors' sensitivity deliver inauthentic feedback in the domain

Partners who perceive actors as especially emotionally dependent on feedback in a particular domain are likely to respond by "walking on eggshells" when providing such feedback, including cautiously concealing negative evaluations and exaggerating positive evaluations. This is likely to be the case for both other-oriented and selfish reasons. In terms of other-oriented reasons, people usually care about their partners' needs (Reis et al., 2004), including

their emotional well-being. As such, they often tell altruistic lies to benefit close partners (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998), especially when partners appear emotionally invested in the performance domain (DePaulo & Bell, 1996). In terms of selfish reasons, people want happy relationships and they wish to avoid being the target of a partner's anger. The consequences of delivering less-than-positive feedback to a highly contingent partner may elicit reactions that interfere with these goals. Indeed, one's own happiness may be dependent on the partner's happiness (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), and ingratiating deception is common when people are dependent on targets (Jones, 1964). Hence, when actors' have communicated heightened vulnerability to feedback in particular domains, partners may sacrifice their own authenticity to care for actors' psychological welfare or avoid the negative consequences of actors' threat. Continuing with our example, Derek likely responds to his observations of Sarah's emotional vulnerability regarding her attractiveness by cautiously providing overly positive feedback, perhaps telling Sarah that she looks great even when she does not, and avoiding any behavior that might suggest negative views of her appearance.

Path D: Actors detect partners' inauthentic behavior

Partners may communicate their lack of authenticity to actors. This might occur, for instance, before partners learn of actors' sensitivities, when partners unintentionally communicate less positive evaluations through nonverbal channels than what is expressed verbally (DePaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985), when partners expresses negative evaluations during a moment of anger, or when partners succumb to actors' pursuit of more veridical evaluations (Swann, 1987). Indeed, lies are more often detected in close relationships than in distant relationships (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998) and people are generally able to detect others' ingratiation attempts (DePaulo et al., 1985; Jones, Stires, Shaver, & Harris, 1968) and exaggerated positive emotions (Pataki & Clark, 2004). That is, Sarah may realize Derek's lack of authenticity when, after repeatedly inquiring as to whether she looks fat, he finally concedes that she could lose a few pounds or when his avoidance of eye contact and suggestions for light meals betray his explicit positive feedback.

Path E: Actors' expression of sensitivity engenders authenticity doubts

For contingent actors, suspicion about partners' authenticity may occur even when partners are authentic. Once actors believe they have expressed their emotional vulnerability, social scripts regarding how others react to this vulnerability may influence their interpretation of partners' feedback. Indeed, people expect feedback recipients to receive exaggerated evaluations from others when recipients are invested in the feedback (DePaulo and Bell, 1996; Lemay & Clark, in press) or when evaluators are dependent on recipients' good will (Jones et al., 1968; Vonk, 1998). Hence,