Self-discrepancy and elaboration of self-conceptions as factors influencing reactions to feedback

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Abstract

Previous research examined the predictions of the self-enhancement theory and the self-consistency theory regarding reactions to self-relevant feedback. In the present study two circumstances that are supposed to moderate self-enhancement and self-consistency motives have been examined: the elaboration of a self-conception and the discrepancy between the actual self and a personal standard. One hundred and fourteen participants received either positive, consistent, or negative feedback regarding their results on a personality test. Affective and cognitive reactions to fictitious feedback were measured as dependent variables. In accordance with prior empirical evidence, affective reactions followed the self-enhancement theory and cognitive reactions were in line with the self-consistency theory. Moreover, affective and cognitive reactions were influenced by the elaboration of a self-conception and the discrepancy between the actual self and a personal standard as predicted. Regarding affective reactions, the predictions of the self-enhancement theory were more clearly supported when self-conceptions were less elaborated or when people perceived a high self-discrepancy. Regarding cognitive reactions, the predictions of the self-consistency theory were more clearly supported when self-conceptions were highly elaborated or when people perceived a low self-discrepancy. Copyright © 1999 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

In previous research two theories have been investigated, predicting how people react towards different kinds of feedback in various aspects of daily life. According to the self-enhancement theory, people are motivated to enhance their self-esteem in order to achieve a high level of personal worth (Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Stahlberg,
Thus, people react more favorably to positive feedback about their self-conceptions regardless of their level of self-esteem. The self-enhancement perspective was supported by a lot of empirical evidence (see Dittes, 1959; Frey & Stahlberg, 1986; Jacobs, Berscheid & Walster, 1971; Skolnick, 1971; Walster, 1965). Other researchers, however, proposed that people strive towards consistency between their self-conceptions and the information that is relevant to these self-conceptions (Heider, 1958; Lecky, 1945; Swann, 1990). The self-consistency theory states that people with a low self-conception react more favorably to negative feedback than to positive feedback because negative feedback confirms their low self-conception. The opposite pattern of results should occur for people with a high self-conception. The self-consistency theory was also supported by a great deal of empirical evidence (see Deutsch & Solomon, 1959; Ickes & Layden, 1978; Shrauger & Lund, 1975; Swann & Read, 1981a,b).

Shrauger (1975) tried to reconcile the fierce debate between the advocates of the self-enhancement theory and the self-consistency theory. He proposed that the nature of reaction (affective versus cognitive) moderates the self-enhancement and self-consistency motive. The affective reaction (e.g. satisfaction with feedback) follows the predictions of the self-enhancement theory, whereas the cognitive reaction (e.g. assessment of the information source) corroborates the predictions of the self-consistency theory. The empirical evidence regarding affective and cognitive reactions to self-relevant feedback supported Shrauger’s prediction in most cases (see Jussim, Yen & Aiello, 1995; McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981; Swann, Griffin, Predmore & Gaines, 1987; Sweeney & Wells, 1990).

The integrative self-schema model (Petersen & Stahlberg, 1995; Stahlberg, Petersen & Dauenheimer, 1996, 1999) states that the elaboration of a self-schema (schematic versus aschematic) is a further circumstance moderating self-enhancement and self-consistency motives. Self-schemata are cognitive-affective structures that influence the processing of self-related information (Markus, 1977). A dimension is classified as schematic when people assess themselves as extreme on that dimension and rate the dimension as highly important. Moreover, Fiske and Taylor (1991) suggested that schematic dimensions are held with a high certainty. In contrast, a dimension is characterized as aschematic when people assess themselves as moderate on that dimension, when they report a low certainty regarding this assessment, and when they rate the dimension as less important. According to the integrative self-schema model, reactions to feedback should follow the predictions of the self-consistency theory when dimensions are schematic and reactions to feedback should corroborate the predictions of the self-enhancement theory when dimensions are aschematic.

In order to test our hypotheses we had to modify the experimental design that is usually used in this area of research. In previous studies people have been given self-esteem measures and divided into high and low self-esteem groups. After completing a task or test, people received bogus feedback (positive or negative) regarding their performance. In this 2 (self-esteem: high versus low) × 2 (feedback: positive versus negative) design, positive feedback is consistent for the high self-esteem group and negative feedback is consistent for the low self-esteem group. Unfortunately, this experimental design is not suitable to test our hypotheses. As mentioned above, aschematic dimensions are characterized by a moderate assessment on that dimension. Thus, both positive and negative feedback is inconsistent with the moderate assessment on that dimension. Therefore, we developed a new manipulation of
feedback and differentiated between positive, negative, and consistent feedback. Positive feedback is characterized by a score that deviates from a person’s assessment in the direction of their ideal self, whereas negative feedback scores deviate from a person’s assessment in the opposite direction of their ideal self. Consistent feedback scores equaled a person’s assessment on that dimension. Concerning this new manipulation of feedback, the predictions of the self-enhancement and self-consistency theory have to be adjusted. The prediction of the self-enhancement theory is that people should react more favorably to positive than to consistent and negative feedback. According to the self-enhancement theory, positive feedback enables people to enhance their self-esteem, whereas consistent and negative feedback is less suitable for this goal. The prediction of the self-consistency theory is that people should react more favorably to consistent than to positive and negative feedback. Consistent feedback confirms their self-conception, whereas positive and negative feedback are both inconsistent.

According to the integrative self-schema model (Petersen & Stahlberg, 1995; Stahlberg et al., 1996, 1999), schematic dimensions should include various well-elaborated cognitions that have many connections among themselves and are combined with cognitions of other self-schemata. These connections result in a high resistance to change and cause people to react more favorably to feedback which is consistent with their self-schemata. Thus, reactions regarding schematic dimensions should be more in line with the self-consistency theory. Opposed to this, aschematic dimensions are characterized by a smaller number of dimension-relevant cognitions with fewer connections among themselves and to other self-schemata. This implies a low resistance to change. Thus, people could change their aschematic self-conceptions more easily in the direction of a more flattering self-image. They should react more favorably to positive feedback as predicted by the self-enhancement theory. The hypotheses derived from the integrative self-schema model were confirmed in a study by Stahlberg et al. (1999).

Our main goal in the present research is to investigate whether all components of a self-schema concept (extremity, certainty, and importance) elicit the same pattern of reactions to feedback. Swann (1990) predicted that reactions on self-conceptions which are held with high certainty follow the self-consistency theory. A great deal of empirical evidence supports this assumption (see Dutton, 1972; Jones & Schneider, 1968; Marecek & Mettee, 1972; Pelham, 1991a; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann, Pelham & Chidester, 1988). Moreover, Pelham (1991a) found that the certainty and extremity of self-conceptions are highly associated, whereas the certainty and importance of self-conceptions are relatively independent. Thus, we combined certainty and extremity to operationalize the elaboration of a self-conception.

In accordance with the integrative self-schema model, we proposed that reactions to feedback follow the predictions of the self-consistency theory when self-conceptions are highly elaborated. People should react more favorably to consistent than to positive and negative feedback.

Furthermore, we investigate whether discrepancies between actual selves and personal standards influence the reactions to feedback. The self-awareness theory proposes that self-focused attention leads to comparisons of actual selves with personal standards (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). When people perceive a discrepancy between their actual self and their personal standards, they are motivated to reduce this discrepancy. Thus, it could be assumed that high discrepancies between actual
selves and personal standards elicit reactions that follow the predictions of the self-enhancement theory. When people perceive a self-standard discrepancy they should react more favorably to positive feedback, because this feedback is close to their standards. This reaction should take place, particularly when the self-conception in question is important. In contrast, when people perceive a low discrepancy between actual selves and personal standards and the self-conception in question is unimportant, their reactions to consistent feedback should be more positive.

In sum, the three variables mentioned above should affect the self-enhancement and the self-consistency motives. In general, the affective reactions should follow the predictions of the self-enhancement theory (Hypothesis 1). Moreover, the predictions of the self-enhancement theory should be more clearly supported when self-conceptions in question are less elaborated (Hypothesis 1a) or highly discrepant (Hypothesis 1b). In contrast, cognitive reactions should follow the predictions of the self-consistency theory (Hypothesis 2). Furthermore, the predictions of self-consistency theory should be more clearly supported when self-conceptions in question are highly elaborated (Hypothesis 2a) or less discrepant (Hypothesis 2b).

**METHOD**

**Overview**

Participants were told to assess themselves on 15 personality attributes. The data of each participant were used to identify attributes with a high versus low elaboration of a self-conception and a high versus low self-discrepancy. As a next step participants completed a personality test. Afterwards, fictitious feedback was given on four attributes that had been classified according to the elaboration and the self-discrepancy. Participants received either positive, consistent, or negative feedback. This procedure resulted in a 3 (feedback: positive versus consistent versus negative) × 2 (elaboration of a self-conception: high versus low) × 2 (self-discrepancy: high versus low) design with feedback as a between-subjects variable and elaboration and self-discrepancy as within-subject variables.

**Participants**

One hundred and fourteen students (49 females, 65 males) at the Universities of Kiel and Mannheim participated in the experiment. Participants were between 19 and 31 years of age, with an average age of 23.5 years.

**Procedure and materials**

The session was introduced as an experiment to validate a new computer-based personality test. The program started with a short introduction. Then, participants received fifteen personality attributes (self-confidence, spontaneity, willingness to compromise, self-control, assertiveness, masculinity, self-centeredness, willingness to form a relationship, imagination, affiliation, achievement, empathy, balance, stability, and expressiveness) and were asked five questions regarding each attribute.
Elaboration of a self-conception

First, participants rated their actual self on a 21-point rating scale anchored at the ends with very low (−10) and very high (+10), respectively. Next, the certainty with which the self-conception is held was assessed on an 11-point rating scale ranging from not at all certain (0) to extremely certain (10). A self-conception was classified as highly elaborated by an actual self rating of $\geq 4$ (high extremity) and a certainty rating of $\geq 6$. Opposed to this, a less elaborated self-conception was characterized by an actual self-rating of $\leq 3$ (low extremity) and a certainty rating of $\leq 5$.

Self-discrepancy

Participants were asked to assess their desired self on a 21-point rating scale anchored at the ends with very low (−10) and very high (+10), respectively. The computer program calculated the discrepancy between the scores of the actual self (see above) and the desired self. Additionally, participants rated the importance of a self-conception on an 11-point rating scale ranging from not at all important (0) to extremely important (10). A high self-discrepancy was classified by a discrepancy score of $\geq 2$ and an importance rating of $\geq 6$, whereas a low self-discrepancy was characterized by a discrepancy score of $\leq 1$ and an importance rating of $\leq 5$. After that, participants were given the Gough and Heilbrun Adjective Check List (1965) and received fictitious feedback about their test performance.

Feedback

On the basis of the criteria mentioned above, the computer program measured whether the fifteen personality attributes were highly or less elaborated and highly or less discrepant. Next, (1) a highly elaborated and highly discrepant attribute, (2) a highly elaborated and less discrepant attribute, (3) a less elaborated and highly discrepant attribute, and (4) a less elaborated and less discrepant attribute were selected. If more than one personality attribute was selected for a category, the program chose the attribute that showed a better fit of the criteria mentioned above. Participants received either positive, consistent, or negative feedback for all four attributes. Feedback given was based on the rating of the actual self and the ideal self. The ideal self was also assessed on a 21-point rating scale ranging from very low (−10) to very high (+10). In the positive and negative feedback condition the scores deviate four points from the participants’ actual self in or opposite to the direction of their ideal self, respectively. A score that equaled the rating of the actual self was given in the consistent feedback condition.

Dependent measures

Affective reaction

First, participants should rate their spontaneous emotions: ‘Which spontaneous emotions are aroused within you?’ (0 = very negative emotions to 10 = very positive emotions)
emotions). Second, participants were supposed to report their satisfaction with the result: ‘How satisfied are you with your result?’ (0 = not at all satisfied to 10 = extremely satisfied). A high level of internal consistency (Alpha = 0.93) was found for a scale based on these two items. The two item scores were averaged and used as dependent measure.

Cognitive reaction

‘How accurately do you think this result describes you?’ (0 = not at all accurately to 10 = extremely accurately) was the question participants were asked in order to rate the accuracy of feedback. In a further question they should rate the accuracy of the test items: ‘How accurately do the test items measure the personality attribute?’ (0 = not at all accurately to 10 = extremely accurately). A scale based on these two items also displayed a high level of internal consistency (Alpha = 0.83). Again, the two item scores were averaged and used as dependent measure.

Finally, all participants were carefully debriefed about the fictitious nature of the feedback. This was achieved by means of a process-debriefing (see Ross, Lepper & Hubbard, 1975).

RESULTS

Preliminary results

Ratings of the actual self and certainty determined the classification of personality attributes as highly or less elaborated. The mean ratings of these variables are presented in Table 1. For ratings of the 15 personality attributes provided by each participant, a proportion of 33.4 per cent was classified as highly elaborated ranging from 27.0 per cent for masculinity to 39.3 per cent for willingness to form a relationship.

Table 1. Mean ratings of the actual self, certainty, importance, and the discrepancy between the actual self and the desired self for 15 personality attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Actual self</th>
<th>Certainty</th>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Discrepancy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>5.84</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>7.11</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneity</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>6.73</td>
<td>1.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to compromise</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>6.49</td>
<td>6.49</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-control</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertiveness</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>6.10</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculinity</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>5.97</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-centeredness</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>5.03</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to form a relationship</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>6.87</td>
<td>1.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagination</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>6.84</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>6.44</td>
<td>6.47</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>6.30</td>
<td>6.93</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>6.17</td>
<td>6.84</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressiveness</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
relationship, and a proportion of 27.3 per cent was classified as less elaborated ranging from 19.3 per cent for willingness to form a relationship to 34.7 per cent for expressiveness. The self-discrepancy (high versus low) of the 15 personality attributes was operationalized by importance ratings and the discrepancy between the actual self and the desired self. The mean ratings of these variables are shown in Table 1. A proportion of 25.1 per cent of ratings for the 15 personality attributes met the criteria for a high self-discrepancy, ranging from 16.7 per cent for self-centeredness to 32.3 per cent for self-confidence, and a proportion of 25.7 per cent of these ratings met the criteria for a low self-discrepancy, ranging from 17.3 per cent for self-confidence to 33.7 per cent for self-centeredness. Moreover, we measured whether the elaboration correlated with self-discrepancy. First, we computed separate $z$ scores for the ratings of all four items. Next, we combined the actual self and certainty ratings to form a single index of elaboration and the discrepancy and importance ratings to form a single index of self-discrepancy. The average correlation was 0.16 ranging from 0.02 for self-confidence to 0.31 for willingness to compromise. These results reveal that the elaboration and the self-discrepancy are relatively independent variables.

**Affective reaction**

The dependent measures affective reaction and cognitive reaction were submitted to a $3 \times 2 \times 2$ (feedback: positive versus consistent versus negative) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the last two factors serving as within-subject variables. We hypothesized that affective reactions should follow the predictions of the self-enhancement theory. Consistent with our hypothesis, participants reported more positive affect in the positive feedback condition ($M = 6.97$) than in the consistent ($M = 5.51$, $p < 0.01$) or negative feedback condition ($M = 3.88$, $p < 0.01$), feedback main effect $F(2,111) = 54.52$, $p < 0.001$.

**Elaboration of a self-conception**

One of our key hypotheses was that the predictions of the self-enhancement theory should be more clearly supported, when self-conceptions in question are less elaborated than highly elaborated (Hypothesis 1a), resulting in an interaction between feedback and elaboration. The ANOVA revealed the predicted Feedback $\times$ Elaboration interaction, $F(2,111) = 3.67, p < 0.05$. The means are displayed in Figure 1. In line with the self-enhancement theory, participants reported more positive affect in the positive feedback condition ($M = 7.05$) than in the consistent ($M = 4.99$, $p < 0.01$) and negative feedback condition ($M = 3.79$, $p < 0.01$) when self-conceptions are less elaborated. On highly elaborated self-conceptions participants experienced also more positive affect in the positive feedback condition ($M = 6.90$) than in the negative feedback condition ($M = 3.97$, $p < 0.01$), whereas affect ratings in the positive and consistent feedback condition differ only marginally ($Ms = 6.90$ and 6.03, respectively, $p < 0.07$).¹ These results are only partially supportive of the

¹Further analyses revealed that the kind of highly elaborated self-conceptions (positive versus negative) did not influence reactions, resulting in a non-significant Feedback $\times$ Highly Elaborated Self-Conception (positive versus negative) interaction, $F < 1$.

self-enhancement theory, corroborating Hypothesis 1a. Looking at the results from a different angle, participants reported more positive affect receiving consistent feedback on highly elaborated self-conceptions than on less elaborated self-conceptions ($M_s = 6.03$ and $4.99$, respectively, $p < 0.05$). This result could be taken as preliminary clue that affective reactions on highly elaborated self-conceptions are partially driven by the self-consistency motive.

**Self-discrepancy**

We hypothesized that the predictions of the self-enhancement theory should be more clearly supported, when self-conceptions in question are classified as highly self-discrepant than less self-discrepant (Hypothesis 1b). Consistent with our hypothesis, an interaction between feedback and self-discrepancy was found, $F(2,111) = 15.82$, $p < 0.001$. As can be seen in Figure 2, a clear self-enhancement pattern occurred only when participants perceived a high self-discrepancy. They displayed more positive affect ratings in the positive feedback condition ($M = 7.36$) than in the consistent ($M = 4.72$, $p < 0.01$) and negative feedback condition ($M = 3.49$, $p < 0.01$). When participants perceived a low self-discrepancy the results are only partially supportive of the self-enhancement theory. They showed more positive affect in the positive feedback condition ($M = 6.59$) than in the negative feedback condition ($M = 4.27$, $p < 0.01$) which is in line with the self-enhancement theory but their affective reactions in the positive and consistent feedback condition did not differ significantly ($M_s = 6.59$ and 6.30, respectively).

These results could also be viewed in an alternative way, comparing affective reactions between highly and less discrepant self-conceptions. Participants reported marginally more positive affect on highly discrepant self-conceptions than on less discrepant self-conceptions receiving positive feedback ($M_s = 7.36$ and 6.59, respectively, $p < 0.10$). Furthermore, participants experienced marginally less positive affect on highly discrepant self-conceptions than on less discrepant self-conceptions.
when they received negative feedback ($M$s = 3.49 and 4.27, respectively, $p < 0.10$). Both results indicate that the self-enhancement motive is more pronounced in the case of self-conceptions with a high discrepancy than in the case of self-conceptions with a low discrepancy. Additionally, we found that participants receiving consistent feedback reported more positive affect in the case of self-conceptions with a low discrepancy than in the case of self-conceptions with a high discrepancy ($M$s = 6.30 and 4.72, respectively, $p < 0.01$). A possible explanation of the result is that in the case of self-conceptions with a low discrepancy affective reactions are additionally influenced by the self-consistency motive.

Cognitive reaction

We hypothesized that cognitive reactions should follow the self-consistency theory (Hypothesis 2). This hypothesis was confirmed. Participants displayed higher cognitive ratings in the consistent feedback condition ($M$ = 6.28) than in the positive ($M$ = 5.73, $p < 0.10$) and negative feedback condition ($M$ = 4.59, $p < 0.01$), main effect of feedback $F(2,111) = 22.61$, $p < 0.001$.

Elaboration of a self-conception

Furthermore, we hypothesized that the predictions of the self-consistency theory should be more clearly supported, when self-conceptions in question are highly elaborated than less elaborated (Hypothesis 2a), resulting in an interaction between feedback and elaboration. The predicted Feedback $\times$ Elaboration interaction was found, $F(2,111) = 4.16$, $p < 0.001$. As shown in Figure 3, the self-consistency pattern occurred only when self-conceptions are highly elaborated. Participants' cognitive response in the consistent feedback condition ($M$ = 6.65) were higher than in the
positive \((M = 5.72, \ p < 0.05)\) and negative feedback condition \((M = 4.41, \ p < 0.01)\).\(^2\) On less elaborated self-conceptions participants' cognitive response in the consistent feedback condition \((M = 5.90)\) was also higher than in the negative feedback condition \((M = 4.76, \ p < 0.05)\) which is in line with the self-consistency theory but their cognitive reactions in the consistent and positive feedback condition did not differ significantly \((M_s = 5.90 \text{ and } 5.74, \text{ respectively})\). Thus, participants did not show a clear self-consistency pattern when self-conceptions are less elaborated. An alternative look at the results supports this issue. Participants displayed a marginal higher cognitive response on highly elaborated self-conceptions than on less elaborated self-conceptions when they receive consistent feedback \((M_s = 6.65 \text{ and } 5.90, \text{ respectively, } p < 0.10)\).

**Self-discrepancy**

Our last key hypothesis was that the predictions of the self-consistency theory should be more clearly supported, when self-conceptions in question are classified as less self-discrepant than highly self-discrepant (Hypothesis 2b). The ANOVA revealed the predicted Feedback \(\times\) Self-discrepancy interaction, \(F(2,111) = 12.03, \ p < 0.001\). The self-consistency pattern emerged only when participants perceived a low self-discrepancy (see Figure 4). Cognitive reactions were rated higher in the consistent feedback condition \((M = 6.52)\) than in the positive \((M = 5.33, \ p < 0.01)\) and negative feedback condition \((M = 4.74, \ p < 0.01)\). In contrast, participants did not display a clear self-consistency pattern when they perceived a high self-discrepancy. In line with the self-consistency theory, participants' cognitive response in the consistent feedback condition \((M = 6.03)\) was higher than in the negative feedback condition \((M = 5.72, \ p < 0.05)\) and negative feedback condition \((M = 4.41, \ p < 0.01)\) did not affect cognitive reactions, resulting in a non-significant Feedback \(\times\) Highly Elaborated Self-Conception (positive versus negative) interaction, \(F < 1\).

\(^2\)Further analyses revealed that the kind of highly elaborated self-conceptions (positive versus negative) did not affect cognitive reactions, resulting in a non-significant Feedback \(\times\) Highly Elaborated Self-Conception (positive versus negative) interaction, \(F < 1\).
but their cognitive reactions in the consistent and positive feedback condition did not differ significantly ($M$s = 6.03 and 6.13, respectively).

**DISCUSSION**

As already outlined, two theoretical positions have been developed: (1) that individuals are motivated to enhance their self-esteem, and (2) that individuals' self-evaluations are affected by a self-consistency motive. Although research indicates that both motives operate in reactions to feedback of different types, the moderators that influence the strength of each motive have not been extensively investigated. Recently, Sedikides and Strube (1995, 1997) have argued that research testing potential moderators of self-evaluation motives is necessary in establishing an integrative theory of self-evaluation. Therefore, we investigated whether elaboration of a self-conception and self-discrepancy are moderating affective and cognitive reactions to feedback.

As predicted affective reactions follow the predictions of the self-enhancement theory. Participants' affective ratings were more positive in the positive feedback condition than in the consistent and negative feedback condition. Furthermore, affective reactions were moderated by the elaboration of a self-conception and the discrepancy between the actual self and the desired self. On less elaborated and highly discrepant self-conceptions predictions of the self-enhancement theory were more clearly supported than on highly elaborated and less discrepant self-conceptions, supporting our hypotheses.

Consistent with our hypothesis, cognitive reactions follow the predictions of the self-consistency theory. Participants reported a more positive cognitive response after consistent than after positive or negative feedback. Additionally, the cognitive reaction was influenced by the elaboration of a self-conception and the self-
discrepancy. On highly elaborated and less discrepant self-conceptions the predictions of the self-consistency theory were more clearly supported than on less elaborated and highly discrepant self-conceptions.

In the present study we developed a new manipulation of feedback in order to test our hypotheses. In contrast to prior research, we differentiated between positive, negative, and consistent feedback and adjusted the predictions of the self-enhancement and self-consistency theory. Remarkably, the findings in the present study supported Shrauger's predictions that affective reactions follow the predictions of the self-enhancement theory, whereas cognitive reactions corroborate the predictions of the self-consistency theory, replicating the results of several empirical studies (Jussim, Yen & Aiello, 1995; Swann, Griffin, Predmore & Gaines, 1987; Sweeney & Wells, 1990). Thus, the new manipulation of feedback provides an alternative opportunity to investigate self-enhancement and self-consistency motives.

A further difference to prior research was that we investigated whether participants differ in their reactions on highly and less elaborated self-conceptions. We did not differentiate between positive and negative highly elaborated self-conceptions because we assume that both self-conceptions will follow the predictions of the self-consistency theory. This could be viewed as a limitation of the present study. It is possible that a person's reaction differs on positive and negative elaborated self-conceptions. In contrast, we provided some preliminary results that the reactions are quite similar (see footnotes 1 and 2), although future research is needed to investigate this question more extensively.

Finally, we would like to address a question that has often been discussed in the context of the self-enhancement and self-verification debate. Swann and his colleagues (Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull & Pelham, 1992; Swann, Wenzlaff & Tafarodi, 1992) as well as other authors (Andrews, 1989; Coyne, 1976; Shrauger, 1982) have repeatedly suggested that the verification of negative self-conceptions may be relevant to the process of how people manage to become and to remain depressive. Although in our own research we do not present any data that are explicitly related to this question some speculations about the implications of our findings for these questions might be warranted:

(1) Swann's (Swann et al., 1992) findings that the important factor in the self-verification process of depressed persons is their negative self-concept can be specified: Our own research suggests that self-verification will only occur for negative self-conceptions that are held with high certainty. Furthermore, Pelham (1991b) showed that depressed persons' self-conceptions are not entirely negative, even depressed persons possess self-conceptions which are very positive and at the same time held with high certainty. Again, our findings would suggest that under these conditions even depressed people would react positively to a feedback that confirms these self-conceptions leading to a high stability of these positive self-views.

(2) Whereas both Swann et al. (1992) as well as Pelham (1991b) concluded that the negative self-conceptions are causal in the self-verification of depressive persons, our findings suggest another important factor that might contribute to who recovers quickly from depression and who does not. Besides certainty of actual self-conception, self-discrepancy was the other important factor that influenced the relative dominance of self-enhancement and self-verifications processes.
less discrepant self-conceptions participants were no longer interested in self-enhancement and reacted more in line with self-verification predictions. This might be an important finding because it adds a more motivational factor besides the purely cognitive factor of actual self-views to the picture. Depressives are often characterized not only by negative self-concepts or negative self-esteem. They are also described by apathy, pessimism concerning the future, a lack of initiative, helplessness and hopelessness (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978; Beck, 1967, 1976; Seligman, 1975). It might therefore be possible that self-verification is also fueled by these motivational deficits that accompany depression (low discrepancy between the actual self and the desired self and low importance of a self-conception). This again will lead to the dominance of the self-verification process compared to the self-enhancement process. However, we freely acknowledge that at this point, these assumptions are merely speculative but if supported by future research they might have implications for the therapy of depression.

REFERENCES


Reactions to feedback


