

SELF-ENHANCEMENT AND SELF-PROTECTION: POWERFUL, PANCULTURAL, AND FUNCTIONAL

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Abstract: The self-enhancement and self-protection motives (which respectively elevate or protect the positivity of the self-concept) are powerful determinants of social thinking and behaving. These motives are more prevalent than the self-assessment motive (which contributes to an accurate self-concept) or the self-verification motive (which works to confirm the self-concept). Moreover, the self-enhancement and self-protection motives are pancultural, as they are pervasive and influential in both Western and Eastern culture. Finally, these motives serve crucial mental health functions that are evident across cultures.

Key words: Psychological adjustment, Self-evaluation, Self-motives, Self-perception.

This article focuses on the motivation to self-enhance and self-protect. After defining these so called "valuation motives", I will provide a thumbnail description of the relevant literature and describe a series of laboratory experiments that establish the motives' crucial role in self-evaluation and behavior. Next, I will discuss the panculturality of the motives and highlight their mental health advantages.

VALUATION MOTIVES: SELF-ENHANCEMENT AND SELF-PROTECTION

Self-enhancement is defined as the motive to maintain or elevate the positivity of the self-concept. Self-protection is defined as the motive to protect the positivity of the self-concept against threatening information. I will refer to the two motives as valuation motives.

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The operation of the valuation motives is readily observed in behavior, cognition, and affect. Consider, for example, real-world behavior. Whether in books promoting the latest diet, health club memberships promoting fitness, or surgery promising to enhance one's appearance, large amounts of money are spent each year in attempts to better the self. Laboratory studies provide similar evidence of the powerful operation of the valuation motives on behavior (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). People present themselves to others in a favorable manner (Leary, 1995) and go to great lengths to appear moral without necessarily being so (Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999). They also prefer to associate with successful others as long as the success is not in a self-relevant domain that would threaten to overshadow one's performance (Tesser, 1988). People even engage in self-destructive behaviors, if those behaviors serve to protect their perceptions of the self as a competent person (Jones & Berglas, 1978).

The evidence for the operation of valuation motives on cognition is also plentiful. People rate themselves as better-than-average on a range of attributes, including intelligence, leadership, funniness, sociability, physical appearance, and athleticism (Alicke, 1985). In fact, they rate themselves more favorably than they rate their peers even when the peer ratings are based on behavioral estimates that they previously provided for themselves (Alicke, Vredenburg, Hiatt, & Govorun, 2001). Moreover, people consider their relationships and material possessions as superior to those of others (Beggan, 1992; Martz et al., 1998) while being convinced that they self-enhance less than others (Pronin, Yin, & Ross, 2002). People also emphasize their crucial role in successful outcomes but blame others or circumstances for failed outcomes (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Furthermore, they believe that positive life events are more likely to happen to them than to others and that negative life events are less likely to happen to them than to others (Weinstein, 1980). These overly positive and self-serving beliefs are developed and maintained through such cognitive processes and strategies as selective pursuit of favorable feedback, selective forgetting of threatening feedback, tactical construal of unavoidably negative feedback, and use of downward social comparisons (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003).

Behavior and cognition that occurs in the service of the valuation motives has affective consequences. For example, acting in such a way as to minimize discrepancies between a current state and goals (behavior

that is presumably propelled by the valuation motives) can instigate emotions such as contentment or elation, whereas behaviors that do not reduce the discrepancy between one's current state and one's goals can instigate sadness or anger (Higgins, 1999). Also, comparing the self to others can have either positive or negative affective consequences, depending on the nature (upward vs. downward) and target (ordinary vs. role model) of the comparison process (Lockwood & Kunda, 2000). In addition, elevated self-views are deeply entrenched in evaluative or affective preferences, as evidenced by implicit phenomena such as a preference for own name letters (Nuttin, 1985) and for persons, places and objects that resemble one's own name (Pelham, Carvallo, & Jones, 2005).

SELF-ASSESSMENT AND SELF-VERIFICATION

Along with valuation motives, at least two additional motives influence self-evaluation: self-assessment and self-verification. Self-assessment is defined as the motive to form an accurate image of the self (positive or negative). Self-verification is defined as the motive to preserve self-views (positive or negative).

The self-assessment motive is reflected in cognition and behavior. Take the case of task perceptions and task choices. From a self-assessment perspective, people care about and pursue accurate feedback. Hence, they should find high (as opposed to low) diagnosticity tests desirable, because such tests provide them with accurate feedback about the attribute being tested. For example, when gauging one's intelligence level, a validated IQ test will supply more veridical information about one's intelligence than a cross-word puzzle in a newspaper. Hence, the IQ test should be the preferred task. The results of several studies support this conjecture, showing that people in whom the self-assessment motivation is activated regard high diagnosticity tasks as more attractive and preferable than low diagnosticity tasks, and they indicate greater willingness and stronger intentions to work on them. Additionally, when given the opportunity, people choose high diagnosticity tasks, construct them, and persist on them (Strube, Lott, Le-Xuart-Hy, Oxenberg, & Deichmann, 1986; Trope, 1986).

The self-verification motive is also reflected in cognition and behavior. Task perception and choice is a case in point. From a self-verification

perspective, people care about and pursue feedback that bolsters their existing self-views. Hence, self-verifying (rather than self-discrepant) information should be desired and pursued. Indeed, people selectively attend to and recall self-confirming (as opposed to self-disconfirming) information, solicit and interpret ambiguous feedback as consistent with their self-views, make causal inferences that support their self-views, and often behave in a self-corroborating manner (Swann, 1990; Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003).

COMPARATIVE MOTIVE TESTING

When considered in isolation and tested independently, each of the motives described above can be shown to have a substantial influence on self-evaluation. What is the relative strength and prevalence of the motives, however? In circumstances in which the motives conflict, which motive will be the more powerful determinant of behavior, cognition, and affect? Which is the pre-eminent human self-evaluation motive?

Comparative empirical tests address this question, and the results of such tests have concluded that the valuation motives are the most powerful of the self-evaluation motivations. Below, I review some of the relevant experiments, first describing the research in which the valuation motives are pitted against the self-assessment motive, and then describing the research in which the valuation motives are pitted against the self-verification motive.

Valuation versus self-assessment motives

Individuals are often in the rather agreeable position of being able to choose, in private, the information that they want to know about themselves. For example, they can decide which personality test to download from the internet, which self-help book to read, or which friend to consult for a personal problem. These choices will vary depending on whether individuals desire affirmation or a reality check.

An experimental paradigm (Sedikides, 1993) simulated such situations. Participants were presented with a set of questions that varied in diagnosticity. They were instructed to select a subset of questions that they would ask themselves to find out if they had the underlying trait. The questions pertained to traits that were either positive and important (e.g., trustworthy: "Do my friends and family confide their problems to me?"), negative and

important (e.g., unkind: "Would I ignore someone's request to open a door, if their hands were full?"), positive and unimportant (e.g., predictable: "Do I have a daily routine?"), and negative and unimportant (e.g., complaining: "Do I exaggerate problems?"). Trait valence (i.e., positivity vs. negativity) and trait importance were determined both nomothetically and idiographically.

If participants were motivated by self-assessment, they should select the most highly diagnostic questions to ask themselves, regardless of the implications of these traits for their personality. Hence, participants' question selection strategy should not be influenced by positivity or negativity of the trait under consideration. On the other hand, if participants were motivated by valuation, they would not want to know if they possessed negative important traits: The truth would simply be too painful. Hence, participants should select high diagnosticity questions to find out if they had positive important traits (e.g., trustworthy), but low diagnosticity questions to find out if they had negative important traits (e.g., untrustworthy). The results demonstrated the pre-eminence of the valuation motives. Participants asked themselves high diagnosticity questions to find out if they had positive important traits, but low diagnosticity questions to find out if they had negative important traits. For example, participants selected the question "Would I follow through on a promise made to someone?" to find out if they were trustworthy, but the question "Do I stop at red lights?" to find out if they were untrustworthy. Alternatively, participants eschew the selection of high diagnosticity questions, such as "Would I cheat on my girlfriend/boyfriend," to find out if they were untrustworthy.

The relative strength of valuation versus self-assessment motives was put to test in another experimental setting. This setting simulated cases of externally-provided (as opposed to self-generated) feedback (Sedikides & Green, 2000). Examples of externally-provided feedback are results of one's performance on a standardized test, opinions that knowledgeable others express about the self, or the outcome of one's job interview. Participants received false feedback, ostensibly on the basis of a previously administered personality test. The feedback was in the form of high diagnosticity behaviors that participants were likely to enact. The behaviors exemplified either important (e.g., trustworthy) or unimportant (e.g., modest) traits. In addition, half of the behaviors were positive (e.g., trustworthy: "would keep secrets when asked to"; modest: "would take the focus off the self and redirect it to others"), and half were negative (e.g., untrustworthy: "Would

lie to parents"; immodest: "Would like to show off in front of others"). Moreover, the feedback referred either to the self (preceded by the stem "I am the kind of person who would ...") or to another person, "Chris" (preceded by the stem "Chris is the kind of person who would ..."), said to have taken the same personality test. Following exposure to the feedback items, participants were instructed to recall as many behaviors as possible.

If participants were motivated by self-assessment, they should manifest superior recall of negative and important behaviors for the self more so than for Chris. This prediction is borne out of the underlying cognitive processes that are assumed to be at work. Negative feedback about important self-attributes is particularly unsettling and likely to throw recipients into a state of uncertainty. In order to alleviate uncertainty, participants will process such feedback deeply by going over it repeatedly, comparing and contrasting the behaviors with similarly presented ones, and rethinking their meaning. The outcome of this effortful processing will be better memory for such behaviors. On the other hand, if participants were motivated by valuation, they should manifest poor recall for negative and important behaviors for the self more so than for Chris. Given that participants are threatened by such behaviors, they would avoid attending to or thinking about them, process them in a shallow manner, and, thus, recall them poorly. The findings supported the pre-eminence of the valuation motives: Participants poorly recalled feedback that threatened important aspects of the self. For example, participants recall poorly (for self but not Chris) such behaviors as "I would lie to my parents."

In both self-generated feedback settings and in externally-provided feedback settings, valuation emerged as the pre-eminent motives, overpowering the self-assessment motive. These conclusions converge nicely with other relevant findings: People have more favorable opinions of themselves than their objective behavior implies (Sherman, 1980), than objective standards warrant (Gosling, John, Craik, & Robins, 1998), and than external observers regard as appropriate (Epley & Dunning, 2000).

Valuation versus self-verification motives

As stated previously, individuals are often able to select, in private, the feedback that they wish to receive. For example, an individual can decide whether he/she would seek the advice of a friend who is known to be unconditionally positive and encouraging or the advice of a friend who is

known to agree always with him/her and validate his/hers self-views, regardless of whether they happen to be positive or negative at the time (e.g., agreeing on one occasion that the individual is organized, and also agreeing on another occasion that the individual is lazy).

The self-generated feedback paradigm was also implemented in a comparative test of valuation versus self-verification motives (Sedikides, 1993, Experiments 4-6). First, participants selected a subset of behavioral questions to ask themselves in order to determine if they had a trait. Then, participants answered each selected question with a "yes" or "no". These answers were assumed to reflect participants' attempts to either confirm or disconfirm possession of the trait implied by each behavior.

If participants were motivated by self-verification, they should be equally likely to confirm performance of behaviors reflecting positive traits that were important to them and also to confirm performance of behaviors reflecting negative traits that were important to them. The valence (i.e., positivity-negativity) of the trait relevant to each behavior should not influence participants' answers to each behavior question. However, if participants were motivated by valuation, they should be especially likely to confirm performance of behaviors reflecting self-important positive traits, but to disconfirm performance of behaviors reflecting self-important negative traits. The results attested to the pre-eminence of valuation motivation. Participants wholeheartedly confirmed performance of behaviors that reflected their self-important positive traits and strongly disconfirmed performance of behaviors that reflected their self-important negative traits.

The relative strength of valuation versus self-verification motives was also examined in an externally-provided feedback setting (Sedikides & Green, 2004). Participants who had previously described themselves either in positive (i.e., trustworthy, kind) or negative (i.e., untrustworthy, unkind) terms received false feedback. This feedback consisted both of positive and negative behaviors that participants were likely to enact. These behaviors were highly diagnostic of the possession of the behavior-relevant trait. Shortly following the delivery of the hypothetical behaviors, participants were instructed to recall them.

If participants were motivated by self-verification, the following pattern of results should emerge. Those with a positive self-view (i.e., trustworthy, kind) should display superior recall for positive behaviors (i.e., trustworthy, kind), whereas those with a negative self-view (i.e., untrustworthy, unkind)

should display superior recall for negative behaviors (i.e., untrustworthy, unkind). A different pattern of results is predicted, if participants are motivated by valuation. Regardless of the valence of their self-views, participants should display superior recall for positive behaviors. The findings bolstered the strength of the valuation motives: Participants recalled the positive behaviors better than the negative behaviors.

In summary, then, research in self-generated information search settings and in externally-provided feedback settings provided good evidence that the valuation motives are more powerful than the self-verification motive. This conclusion converges nicely with other relevant findings: Participants with both high and low levels of self-esteem indicate preferences for positive rather than negative feedback (Gregg, Hepper, Sedikides, Hart, & Pemberton, 2006) and for comparing themselves with less fortunate others (Wood, Michela, & Giordano, 2000).

ARE THE VALUATION MOTIVES PANCULTURAL?

It has been argued that the valuation motives are restricted to Western culture. For example, compared to Westerners (e.g., members of North American or European cultures), Easterners (e.g., members of Asian cultures), are more likely to self-efface and less likely to self-enhance (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999).

However, Sedikides, Gaertner, and Toguchi (2003) have recently challenged the argument that this seeming cross-cultural difference in self-enhancement reflects similar differences in valuation motives. In particular, Sedikides et al. argued that members of both cultures self-enhance, but their self-enhancement pattern depends on what is considered important by their corresponding culture. For Westerners, individualistic self-views (e.g., leader, original, self-reliant) are important and are promoted by the valuation motives. For Easterners, collectivistic self-views (e.g., cooperative, loyal, respectful) are important and are promoted by the valuation motives. Self-enhancement, then, will occur in both cultures but in different ways. Westerners will self-enhance on individualistic traits, Easterners on collectivistic traits. These differences should also be found within a certain culture. Those members of a culture for whom individualism is important will self-enhance on traits relevant to that individualistic construct; those members of a culture for whom collectivism is important will self-enhance on traits relevant to that collectivist construct.

Sedikides et al. (2003) demonstrated this exact pattern of strategic self-enhancement both between-cultures (i.e., American vs. Japanese participants) and within-culture (i.e., Americans high in independent self-construal vs. Americans high in interdependent self-construal). Stated otherwise, American and independent self-construal participants rated themselves as superior (i.e., above average) on individualistic traits, whereas Japanese and interdependent self-construal participants rated themselves as superior on collectivistic traits. Furthermore, these results have been corroborated by meta-analytic findings (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005).

In summary, these findings are inconsistent with the notion that the importance of the valuation motives (in particular, self-enhancement) varies dramatically across cultures. Instead, the evidence suggests that the valuation motives are universal, and so does additional recent evidence. Schmitt and Allik (2005) measured global self-esteem by administering the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale—the most widely used and validated measure of global self-esteem—in almost 17,000 participants, spanning 53 nations and 28 languages. Consistently with a universal perspective on the valuation motives, (a) all nations scored above the midpoint of the scale, manifesting positive self-evaluations, (b) in all nations self-esteem was correlated with the same variables (i.e., extraversion, neuroticism, romantic attachment styles), and (c) the factor structure of the scale was virtually identical across nations.

FUNCTIONS OF THE VALUATION MOTIVES

Given the strength, prevalence, and universality of the valuation motives, it is worth asking what the functions of the valuation motives are. The answer to that question is rather straightforward, because valuation motivation confers numerous advantages to positive human functioning.

Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, and McDowell (2003) showed that self-enhancement linearly predicts psychological adjustment. Self-enhancement was positively related to mental health (e.g., personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life), positively related to psychological resources (e.g., optimism, mastery, positive reframing, planning, active coping), and negatively related to mental distress (e.g., depression, anxiety, hostility). Relatedly, Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, and Rusbult (2004) demonstrated that high levels of self-enhancement positively predicted adjustment (e.g.,

subjective well-being) and negatively predicted maladjustment (e.g., depression, anxiety, neuroticism).

Furthermore, Bonnano, Field, Kovacevic, and Kaltman (2002) reported that self-enhancement was positively related to ratings of psychological adjustment (made by mental health experts on the basis of structured interviews) among Bosnian civilians exposed to urban combat at wartime. Also, in a sample of individuals whose spouses had died, Bonanno et al. (2002) found that self-enhancement predicted positive adjustment two years afterwards. Finally, in a study of survivors of the September 11th terrorist attacks who had been exposed to others' death and injury, Bonanno, Rennieke, and Dekel (2005) found that self-enhancement was associated not only with positive affect (among persons who experienced low physical danger) but also with resilience and reduced social constraints (i.e., perceived freedom to disclose one's woes).

Importantly, the functions of the valuation motives generalize across cultures. Self-serving attributions, self-enhancing social comparisons, self-efficacy, and optimism are negatively associated with depression and positively associated with self-esteem and life satisfaction, both in individualistic cultures (United States; Taylor et al., 2003) and in collectivistic cultures, such as China (Anderson, 1999), Hong Kong (Stewart et al., 2003), Korea, (Chang, Sanna, & Yang, 2003) and Singapore (Kurman & Siram, 1997). Also, in a 55-nation investigation, only individualism correlated with subjective well-being, even when controlling for other predictors (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995). In conclusion, the valuation motives are crucial to the maintenance of dispositions and behaviors that allow individuals to function adequately.

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Although self-assessment and self-verification do influence human cognition and behavior, the valuation motives exert the strongest influence. Moreover, this influence is widespread, as evidenced by its emergence in cross-cultural studies. The emotions, cognitions, and behaviors prompted by the valuation motives are associated with good mental health, and these benefits are also evident in cross-cultural studies. Self-enhancement and self-protection are powerful, pancultural, and functional.

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