To Belong or to Self-Enhance? Motivational Bases for Choosing Interaction Partners

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The present research investigated motives for choosing interaction partners in people with varying levels of self-esteem. The authors predicted that high self-esteem individuals would choose to interact with someone who provided positive feedback about their personalities, regardless of his or her interest in forming a relationship, whereas those with low self-esteem would choose to interact with someone who expressed interest in forming a relationship, regardless of his or her assessment of their personalities. In four studies, participants were asked to choose between two interaction partners who provided feedback that included different combinations of acceptance and positivity. Results supported the authors’ prediction. Discussion addressed the hierarchical nature of social motivation and the seemingly paradoxical interaction preferences of low self-esteem individuals.

People choose to interact with one another for many different reasons. The attempt to specify the relative salience of such reasons, let alone their sometimes-conflicting relations, is clearly a daunting if not an impractical task for theory and research. Some personal bases for interaction, however, seem to be more fundamental than others in that they express fundamental motives that find expression in diverse settings and relationships. When circumscribed in this way, the task of calibrating the bases for interaction preference becomes more feasible. Our concern in the present research centers on the role played by two motives widely judged to be fundamental to interpersonal preferences: the need to establish and maintain meaningful connections with other people (cf. Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Fromm, 1956; Horney, 1945; Maslow, 1968) and the need for self-esteem (e.g., Allport, 1939; Baumeister, 1982; E. E. Jones, 1964; Sedikides, 1993; Steele, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tesser, 1988). Both of these motives are accepted as fundamental by psychologists of virtually all persuasions and both have been implicated in a host of significant personal and interpersonal phenomena. Reducing the playing field to two central motives makes it somewhat more reasonable to consider their relative salience, or at least their respective domains of influence. This was our general tack in the present research. The more specific aim was to assess the ways in which belongingness and self-esteem needs shape an individual’s desire for interaction with others who provide feedback relevant to the satisfaction of these needs.

We note at the outset that the need to belong and the need for self-esteem tend to covary so that the satisfaction of one often means the satisfaction of the other. There is reason to think, first of all, that self-esteem needs are satisfied through relationships, with one’s level of self-esteem providing a measure of the quality of one’s social connectedness (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Harter, 1990; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Peplau & Perlman, 1982). There is also evidence of causality in the other direction, with one’s level of self-esteem influencing the quantity and quality of one’s social relationships (e.g., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Levin & Stokes, 1986; Peplau & Perlman, 1982). The need to belong and the need for self-esteem, in other words, have a reciprocal causal relation, making it entirely reasonable that they

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should admit to concordant levels of satisfaction for a
given individual.

Nonetheless, these motives are independent in prin-
ciple and they can be satisfied by somewhat different
mechanisms. For its part, the need for self-esteem can be
met through achievement (Bandura, 1977; Kernis,
1995), social comparison (Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Tesser,
1986, 1988; Tesser & Campbell, 1983; Wills, 1981), self-
presentation (Baumeister, 1982; E. E. Jones & Pittman,
1982; Schlenker, 1980; Schlenker & Leary, 1982), or self-
affirmation (Steele, 1988). Belongingness needs, in
turn, can be met through simple acceptance or the
promise of sustained interactions (Baumeister & Leary,
1995). Being perceived in positive, hence self-
enhancing, terms may facilitate such acceptance but it is
not necessary. Indeed, people's sense of belongingness
often derives from nonvoluntary relationships, such as
families and work settings, in which people may expect
sustained interaction regardless of their views of one
another. It is possible, then, for people to have their self-
esteeem needs met without a concomitant feeling of
belonging and for belongingness needs to be satisfied
through relationships that provide little or no self-
esteeem enhancement. On what basis, then, do people
choose interaction partners when the need to belong
and the need for self-esteem are disentangled in this
way? Is one need more pressing than the other or does
their relative prepotence depend on some other theo-
retically meaningful factor?

SELF-ESTEEM AND BELONGING

A strong case can be made, first of all, that the need to
belong is the most basic of all social motives (cf. Baumeis-
Belonging to groups has clear survival and reproductive
value (Ainsworth, 1989; Buss, 1990; Hogan, Jones, &
Cheek, 1985) as well as more immediate social benefits
(Bowlby, 1969; Schachter, 1959), and it has been shown
to protect people from the experience of negative affect
(Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Horney, 1945; Wheeler, Reis, &
Nezlek, 1983). When belonging needs are not met, people
will go to great lengths to secure social contact, presum-
ably lowering their threshold for acceptable interac-
tions. A lonely person, for example, might be thrilled at
the prospect of interacting with someone whom others
consider a complete bore. In the language of social
exchange (e.g., Rusbult, 1980, 1987; Thibaut & Kelley,
1959), the socially needy person has a low comparison
level (CL) for considering the reward value of a relation-
ship. By the same token, because a person whose belong-
ing needs are satisfied has a correspondingly higher
standard for acceptable interactions, his or her basis for
choosing interaction partners is likely to extend beyond
simple acceptance to encompass other sources of reward
and need satisfaction.

The differential thresholds for acceptable interac-
tions and relationships on the part of people with met
versus unmet belonging needs have implications for how
these people react to social feedback. The key idea here
is that low self-esteem people are more eager to be
included by others, regardless of the benefits provided
by forming such relationships. In contrast, high self-
esteeem people tend to have more friends, to experience
less loneliness, and to be closer with their families (Hob-
foll, Nadler, & Leiberman, 1986; Levin & Stokes, 1986).
Because they experience greater satisfaction of their
belonging needs than do those with low self-esteem, high
self-esteem people would seem to be less motivated
to make new friends or to join new social groups. This
idea is consistent with Leary et al.'s (1995) suggestion
that a person's level of self-esteem is a reliable indicator
of how well his or her belonging needs are met. Accord-
ing to their sociometer hypothesis, a person with high
self-esteem is well connected to other people and con-
tent with his or her social relations, whereas a person
with low self-esteem is poorly connected to others and
feels deprived in his or her social relations. This suggests
that high and low self-esteem people will have different
standards for accepting overtures for interaction from
others and correspondingly different standards for the
feedback that potential interaction partners are likely to
provide.

Consider first the person with high self-esteem. Feel-
ing content with the quality of his or her social relations,
this person will maintain relatively high standards in
establishing new relationships. Only those potential
partners who hold promise for providing rewarding out-
comes and social feedback consistent with his or her
positive self-evaluation are likely to be considered
acceptable. People who instead provide negative feed-
back about the person's actions and attributes are likely
to be firmly rejected. Support for this connection
between self-esteem and reaction to social feedback can
be derived from a variety of psychological and sociologi-
cal literatures (see Baumeister, Smart, & Bowden, 1996).
It appears that people with high self-esteem are highly
tuned to the feedback provided by others, reacting
favorably to positive feedback and unfavorably, even vio-
lently, to negative feedback.

Consider now the person with low self-esteem. In line
with the sociometer hypothesis, this person may be said
to be primarily concerned with securing sustained inter-
actions with others, and accordingly, he or she has a rela-
tively low threshold for assessing the likely reward value
of potential relationships. Although this person clearly
has unmet self-esteem needs and thus is drawn to posi-
tive feedback from others, he or she is willing to down-
play that concern in favor of a more fundamental concern with simply being accepted as a relationship partner (Brockner, 1983; Jacobs, Berscheid, & Walster, 1971; Moreland & Levine, 1989; Reik, 1944; Walster, 1965). Even interaction with someone who does little or nothing to satisfy this person’s self-esteem needs might nonetheless be welcomed as an interaction partner so as to feel socially connected (e.g., Roy, 1977; Strube, 1988).

The differential motivational orientations of low and high self-esteem people should be manifest in their relative preferences for potential interaction partners. Assume, for example, that a high and low self-esteem person are each asked to choose between two such partners: one who provides positive feedback about the person but has no desire to establish a relationship with him or her and one who provides less flattering feedback but expresses interest in establishing a relationship. Our analysis predicts different choices by the high and low self-esteem individuals. Because the high self-esteem person has satisfactory social relations, his or her concern centers on maintaining a high level of self-regard. He or she should therefore choose to interact with the positive evaluator who is uninterested in forming a relationship. In marked contrast, belonging concerns are paramount for the low self-esteem person, so he or she should choose to interact with the negative evaluator in the hope that there would indeed be sustained interaction with him or her.

LOW SELF-ESTEEM AND FEEDBACK PREFERENCE

As noted at the outset, although belongingness and self-esteem needs are distinguishable in principle, they are likely to covary in many, if not most, social settings. Indeed, if people have direct and unambiguous information concerning the likely attainment of only one of these motives, it is conceivable that they can use this information to predict the likely attainment of the other motive. This possibility sheds new light on what has been described as the puzzle of low self-regard (Baumeister, 1993). The puzzle is simply that people with low self-esteem sometimes prefer to interact with others who view them in an unfavorable rather than favorable light (see De La Ronde & Swann, 1993; Swann, 1990; Swann & Schroeder, 1995). From the perspective of self-esteem needs per se, this tendency makes no sense whatsoever; if anything, low self-esteem people should be especially eager to interact with positive evaluators and correspondingly defensive with respect to negative evaluators.

In explaining this seemingly counterintuitive tendency, Swann (1990) has argued that consistency concerns often take precedence over enhancement concerns because of the greater potential for prediction and control provided by consistent information. Research on self-verification has gone on to suggest, however, that a concern with consistency can be decomposed into yet more basic pragmatic and epistemic concerns (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). Thus, when probed for the rationale underlying their choice of negative evaluators as interaction partners, low self-esteem people note that these potential partners are less likely to be disappointed in subsequent interactions with them than are positive evaluators and that interactions with negative evaluators are more likely to proceed smoothly rather than awkwardly. This reasoning is clearly consistent with our reasoning regarding the relative concerns with belonging and self-esteem enhancement on the part of low and high self-esteem people. Quite simply, low self-esteem people prefer interactions with negative evaluators because they feel they have a greater chance of establishing and sustaining a relationship with someone who knows what he or she is getting into than with someone who enters the relationship with inflated, hence erroneous, expectations regarding their social worth.

Unfortunately, research to date has yet to investigate this interpretation of self-verification strivings or, more generally, to assess the relative strengths of belonging and self-esteem needs on the part of low and high self-esteem people. The focus in self-verification research, for example, has been on low and high self-esteem participants’ preference for feedback per se, typically with positive evaluators pitted against negative evaluators. Thus, when low self-esteem participants choose the negative evaluator, it cannot be determined whether the choice is dictated by consistency concerns per se or by inferences regarding the likely satisfaction of belonging needs.

OVERVIEW OF PRESENT RESEARCH

We first conducted a pilot study in which participants responded to questionnaires that assessed the association between self-esteem and personality variables related to need for belonging. We predicted that self-esteem would be inversely related to need for affiliation, social anxiety, shyness, and public and private self-consciousness and positively related to sociability. Next, in a series of four experiments, we disentangled self-esteem and belongingness needs by using orthogonal manipulations of evaluative feedback (positive vs. negative) and interest in establishing a relationship (acceptance vs. rejection) from potential interaction partners. Participants with high, moderate, and low self-esteem were provided with information about a pair of evaluators generated by various subsets of this factorial crossing and were asked to choose one of them for a subsequent interaction. In Experiment 1, the choice consisted of a positive and negative evaluator, both of whom expressed a strong interest in forming a relationship. In Experi-
ment 2, participants were presented with the same choice of positive and negative evaluators; however, both evaluators also provided rejecting feedback to participants. This experiment allowed us to explore whether the same pattern for partner preferences emerges outside of the context of an accepting environment. In Experiment 3, evaluative feedback and acceptance feedback were crossed such that participants chose between a positive evaluator who had little interest in forming a relationship and a negative evaluator who had strong interest in forming a relationship. This experiment added to the previous experiments by forcing participants to indicate the relative importance of evaluative versus acceptance feedback. In Experiment 4, participants were asked to select either a positive evaluator who had strong interest in forming a relationship or a negative evaluator who had weak interest in forming a relationship. This study enabled us to resolve alternative interpretations of Experiment 3 by pitting self-consistency motives against acceptance motives.

Our primary prediction was that low self-esteem participants would make their choice on the basis of relationship opportunities, whereas high self-esteem participants would make their choice on the basis of self-esteem enhancement opportunities. Because belonging needs are satisfied by both evaluators in Experiment 1, we anticipated that low as well as high self-esteem participants would attend to the feedback provided by the evaluators. The prediction for high self-esteem participants was straightforward: They were expected to choose the positive/accepting evaluator over the negative/accepting evaluator. Our prediction for low self-esteem participants was more tentative. Because both evaluators satisfied low self-esteem participants’ belonging needs, however, it is conceivable that residual self-verification tendencies on their part would motivate them to choose the negative evaluator. In Experiment 2, in contrast, belonging needs were not satisfied by either partner. Thus, we anticipated that all participants, regardless of self-esteem, would make their choice on the basis of self-esteem needs and consequently choose the positive evaluator.

In Experiment 3, self-enhancement and acceptance motives were pitted against one another by having participants choose between a positive/rejecting evaluator and a negative/accepting evaluator. We predicted an effect for self-esteem, with low self-esteem participants choosing the negative/accepting evaluator and high self-esteem participants choosing the positive/rejecting evaluator. Results in accord with this hypothesis, however, would not clarify whether low self-esteem participants based their choice on consistency concerns (negative feedback) or belonging concerns (acceptance feedback). To demonstrate the primary importance of acceptance motivation on the part of people with low self-esteem, we asked participants in Experiment 4 to choose between a pair of evaluators who represented a positive correlation between self-esteem and belonging considerations. We anticipated that all participants, regardless of self-esteem, would favor the positive/accepting evaluator over the negative/rejecting evaluator. Because moderate self-esteem represents a blend of high and low self-esteem, we expected these participants to provide evidence of both self-esteem and belonging needs in the four experiments.

PILOT STUDY

Method

Participants. The study included 309 undergraduates (109 males, 195 females) from Florida Atlantic University who participated in the study for course credit in an introductory psychology class. Five individuals did not indicate their gender.

Procedure. Participants completed questionnaires in mass testing sessions that were counterbalanced for order. Participants responded to Helmreich, Spence, and Stapp’s (1975) Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI), which provides a global measure of social self-esteem. The TSBI has been widely used in research relevant to the points addressed in the present research (e.g., Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992). The TSBI consists of 16 items, each with a 5-point response scale anchored by not at all and very much. The range of possible scores is thus 16 to 80, with higher scores reflecting higher self-esteem. We also included measures of sociability and shyness (Cheek & Buss, 1981), need for affiliation (Friis & Knox, 1972), and self-consciousness (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975), which measures public and private self-consciousness and social anxiety. After completing the questionnaires, participants were thanked for their participation and debriefed.

RESULTS

Correlational analyses revealed that self-esteem is strongly associated with belonging needs. In particular, self-esteem was inversely related to shyness, social anxiety, private self-consciousness, and need for affiliation, $r(308) = -.76$, $r(308) = -.65$, $r(308) = -.22$, $r(308) = -.46$, respectively, all $p < .001$, and positively related to sociability, $r(308) = .35$, $p < .001$. There was no association between public self-consciousness and self-esteem, $r(308) = .02$, $p = ns$.

Next, we conducted a simultaneous regression to assess the unique contribution of sociability, shyness,
social anxiety, public and private self-consciousness, and need for affiliation in predicting self-esteem. Consistent with our hypothesis, need for affiliation (β = -.12), sociability (β = .12), shyness (β = -.53), social anxiety (β = -.20), and public self-consciousness (β = .08) each provided unique variance in predicting self-esteem, t > 2.19, all ps < .03, collectively accounting for 64% of the variance of the model. Private self-consciousness was not independently related to self-esteem (β = -.06), t = 1.51, ns.

DISCUSSION

As anticipated, low self-esteem was associated with heightened need for affiliation, a direct measure of belonging concerns. Low self-esteem also was associated with high social anxiety and shyness and with low levels of sociability. This pattern of results suggests that individuals low in self-esteem wish to belong to groups but may lack the skills and ability to do so. The nonreliable relation between public self-consciousness and self-esteem was surprising; presumably, individuals with low self-esteem should be especially aware of how they appear to others because such information is informative about likely acceptance versus rejection. The regression analysis, though, did establish that public self-consciousness shared unique variance with self-esteem. Conceivably, the shared variance between public and private self-consciousness in the regression model may have artificially inflated the correlation between public self-consciousness and self-esteem. To address this possibility, we replicated the regression but did not include private self-consciousness in the model. The results revealed that the independent effects of public self-consciousness were no longer related to self-esteem (β = .05), p = .13. All other predictors remained statistically reliable. Aside from this null finding, the pilot data provide initial support for the underlying assumption in the following four studies: Low self-esteem individuals choose to interact with partners who they think will satisfy their need to belong. The pilot data did not provide evidence for this need on the part of people with relatively high self-esteem. Presumably, their preference for interaction partners center on other concerns, such as maintaining or enhancing their self-esteem.

EXPERIMENT 1

In Experiment 1, we examined the role of evaluative feedback in preference for interaction partners. Participants with varying levels of self-esteem indicated their relative preference for interacting with two evaluators, both of whom indicated clear acceptance of the participants but who differed in their respective evaluative feedback.

For high self-esteem participants, the prediction was straightforward: Because positive feedback is both consistent and enhancing for them, they should prefer to interact with a positive/accepting rather than with a negative/accepting evaluator. For low (and moderate) self-esteem participants, the predictions were more equivocal. On one hand, the satisfaction of belonging needs should free low self-esteem participants to embrace positive feedback. On the other hand, by choosing the negative evaluator, low self-esteem participants are in a position to satisfy their epistemic needs (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992) and belonging needs at the same time. Yet a third possibility is that feedback valence plays a minor role in interaction preference; faced with two evaluators who indicate acceptance, low self-esteem participants may not show a clear preference for either the positive or the negative evaluator.

METHOD

Participants

The experiment included 47 undergraduates (16 males, 31 females) who participated in exchange for course credit in their psychology classes. Two weeks prior to participation in the experiment, they completed several questionnaires in the mass pilot testing situation described above, including the TSBI (Helmreich et al., 1974). The mean self-esteem score was 56.1, with no differences in the mean scores of males (M = 56.8) and females (M = 55.8), t(45) < 1.1, ns. In line with prior research using the TSBI, participants who scored below the 30th percentile (raw score of 52) were considered to have low self-esteem, those who scored between the 30th and 70th percentile (55 to 60) were considered to have moderate self-esteem, and those who scored above the 70th percentile (60) were considered to have high self-esteem.

Procedure

Participants were seated in a small room in a three-room office suite and were told that they would be participating in a getting-acquainted study. The experimenter explained that two same-sex undergraduates had independently read their responses to some of the questionnaires that the participants had completed at the earlier session. These questionnaires measured sociability and shyness (Cheek & Buss, 1981), public and private self-consciousness (Fenigstein et al., 1975), and social self-esteem (Helmreich et al., 1974). Participants were informed that each person had attempted to form an impression of them and had been asked to write a brief summary of this impression. Participants were then provided an opportunity to read these summaries. After reading the evaluators’ impressions, participants were
informed that they would have an opportunity to meet the evaluator of their choice for a 30-minute getting-acquainted conversation. The experimenter left participants alone for 10 minutes, during which time they answered several questions regarding each evaluator and decided which one they wanted to meet.

The evaluations we employed were identical to those used as social feedback manipulations in research on self-verification by Swann and his colleagues (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992; Swann, Wenzlaff, et al., 1992). The positive evaluation was worded as follows:

Based on this person’s responses to the questionnaires, I believe that this person is socially self-confident. He (she) seems at ease with people he (she) does not know very well. He (she) seems to have little doubt about his (her) social competence and seems to be highly confident. I am highly certain of my evaluation.

The negative evaluation was worded as follows:

From looking at this person’s answers, he (she) appears to be ill at ease in social situations. There are probably times when he (she) is around other people and just doesn’t know quite what to do or say. There are times when this person likes being around people, but in some social situations he (she) is uncomfortable and anxious. I am pretty certain that this accurately describes him (her).

Each summary then went on to express the person’s attitude about interacting with the participant. Both the positive and negative evaluators indicated that he or she “was looking forward to meeting the participant and they would probably make good friends.”

A separate page was attached to the evaluators’ summaries that asked participants to make ratings of the evaluations and evaluators. First, each evaluation was rated with respect to its accuracy and its favorability; 9-point scales with appropriately labeled endpoints were provided for this purpose. Participants then indicated their desire to interact with each evaluator, using a 9-point scale anchored by not at all and very much. At the end of the 10-minute period, the experimenter returned and asked if participants had decided which person they wanted to meet in the getting-acquainted session. After soliciting this choice, the experimenter debriefed participants concerning the purpose and procedure of the experiment, swore them to secrecy, and dismissed them.

RESULTS

All measures except choice of evaluator were analyzed by ANOVAs, with one between-participant variable (self-esteem) and one within-participants variable (evaluator feedback/acceptance). There were no main effects or interactions involving sex, so this variable was excluded from the analyses reported below.

Perception of Evaluator Assessment

An ANOVA performed on evaluator positivity revealed only a main effect for evaluator, $F(1, 44) = 21.75, p < .001$. The positive/accepting evaluator was seen as providing more favorable feedback ($M = 8.0$) than was the negative/accepting evaluator ($M = 3.7$). Results for evaluator accuracy also revealed an evaluator main effect, $F(1, 44) = 5.29, p < .03$, such that the positive/accepting evaluator was considered a more accurate judge than was the negative/accepting evaluator ($M = 7.0$ vs. 5.7). The Self-Esteem × Evaluator interaction was not statistically reliable, $F(2, 44) = 1.29, n.s$, and pairwise comparisons demonstrated that judgments of each evaluator’s accuracy did not vary as a function of self-esteem (see Table 1). Among high self-esteem participants, however, the positive/accepting evaluator was rated as more accurate than was the negative/accepting evaluator. This difference was marginally reliable for moderate self-esteem participants, $p < .12$. Low self-esteem participants, meanwhile, did not report any difference in the respective accuracy of the positive/accepting and negative/accepting evaluators.

Desire for Interaction

An ANOVA on desire for interaction revealed a reliable evaluator effect, $F(1, 44) = 7.49, p < .01$, with greater desire expressed for the positive/accepting evaluator than for the negative/accepting evaluator ($M = 7.5$ vs. 6.4). Simple effects analyses revealed a reliable self-esteem effect for ratings of the positive/accepting evaluator, $F(2, 44) = 3.46, p < .05$. As is evident in Table 2, high self-esteem participants indicated greater desire to interact with this evaluator than did the moderate and low self-esteem participants, $t(33) = 2.13, p < .05$, and $t(22) = 3.28, p < .01$, respectively. For the negative/accepting evaluator, meanwhile, there were no reliable differences among the self-esteem groups, $F < 1$. When the data were blocked on self-esteem, results revealed that high self-esteem participants preferred the positive/accepting evaluator over the negative/accepting evaluator, $t(11) = 2.91, p < .02$, and that neither the moderate nor the low self-esteem participants preferred one evaluator over the other, both $t$s < 1.1, n.s.

Choice of Evaluator

The pattern of results for ratings of interaction desire was echoed in the choice data. Chi-square analyses revealed that the choice of the positive versus negative evaluator differed as a function of self-esteem, $\chi^2(2) = 6.56, p < .04$ (see Table 3). Fischer’s binomial $t$ tests revealed that the high self-esteem participants chose the
positive/accepting evaluator more frequently than did moderate and low self-esteem participants, \( t(33) = 2.14, p < .03 \), and \( t(22) = 2.50, p < .01 \), respectively.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of this experiment demonstrate an important link between self-esteem and the bases for choosing interaction partners. For high self-esteem participants, the crucial factor was how positively versus negatively they were seen by the potential partners. Although they were clearly accepted by both partners, these participants showed a clear preference for the evaluator who satisfied their needs for self-enhancement. For low and moderate self-esteem participants, on the other hand, the valence of the partners’ respective feedback played at best a minor role in dictating interaction preference. Because both partners indicated that they could relate well to them, these participants did not show a clear preference for either one in their ratings, even though each partner provided a considerably different evaluation of them.

At the same time, however, the choice data did indicate a preference for the negative partner on the part of low (but not moderate) self-esteem participants. This tendency is consistent with theoretical treatments of self-verification strivings that emphasize epistemic needs (e.g., Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). From this perspective, low self-esteem participants chose to interact with the person that they felt was most likely to confirm their own low level of self-regard. Although such epistemic motivation cannot be ruled out unequivocally with recourse to the present data, there are two reasons to suspect that it may not capture the dynamics at work in the present study. First, the perceived accuracy data indicate that low self-esteem participants did not feel that the negative evaluator had better insight into them than did the positive evaluator. The presumption of accuracy on the part of one’s interaction partner, of course, is an essential link in the epistemic account. Second, as noted above, preference for the negative evaluator was not observed when low self-esteem participants expressed their relative desire to interact with each evaluator. It appears, in other words, that feedback became salient for low self-esteem participants when their task involved making a decision as opposed to making a judgment.

An alternative to the epistemic interpretation that incorporates these points centers on a more pragmatic concern that is said to fuel self-verification strivings (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). Thus, when low self-esteem participants were faced with the prospect of actually interacting with one of the partners, negative feedback may have served to strengthen their belief that they would be accepted by him or her. In particular, these participants may have felt that the subsequent interaction would have a better chance of proceeding smoothly and without disappointment if the interaction partner did not have unrealistically high expectations regarding their interpersonal behavior. From this perspective, low self-esteem participants did not choose the negative evaluator because of his or her presumed accuracy but because of his or her presumed tolerance to possible social shortcomings on their part.

**EXPERIMENT 2**

What would happen then if neither evaluator provided acceptance feedback? In the absence of belongingness satisfaction, individuals with low self-esteem have unclear bases for choosing one interaction partner over another. It could be argued that with their acceptance needs unmet by either evaluator, low self-esteem individuals become concerned with self-verification and thus should choose to interact with the negative evaluator. High self-esteem individuals, on the other hand,

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**TABLE 1: Perceived Accuracy of Evaluator by Self-Esteem and Evaluator Attitude (Experiment 1)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluator Attitude</th>
<th>Self-Esteem</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive/accepting</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.6a</td>
<td>6.8ab</td>
<td>6.8ab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative/accepting</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.2b</td>
<td>5.6ab</td>
<td>6.7ab</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Higher numbers mean greater perceived accuracy. Means not sharing a common subscript differ at \( p < .05 \).

**TABLE 2: Desire to Meet Evaluator by Self-Esteem and Evaluator Attitude (Experiment 1)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluator Attitude</th>
<th>Self-Esteem</th>
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<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive/accepting</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.6a</td>
<td>7.2b</td>
<td>6.8b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative/accepting</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.2b</td>
<td>6.0b</td>
<td>6.1b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Higher numbers mean greater desire. Means not sharing a common subscript differ at \( p < .05 \).

**TABLE 3: Choice of Evaluator by Self-Esteem and Evaluator Attitude (Experiment 1)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluator Attitude</th>
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<th>High</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive/accepting</td>
<td></td>
<td>83% (10)</td>
<td>48% (11)</td>
<td>33% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative/accepting</td>
<td></td>
<td>17% (2)</td>
<td>52% (12)</td>
<td>67% (8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses indicate frequency.
should favor the positive/rejecting evaluator over the negative/rejecting evaluator because the former would provide them with an opportunity to maintain or enhance their self-view. Moderate self-esteem individuals, too, may choose to interact with the positive evaluator because of the opportunity for self-enhancement it affords.

**Method**

**Participants**

The experiment included 50 undergraduates (5 males, 45 females) from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who participated in exchange for course credit in their introductory psychology course. Participants took part in large pretesting sessions in which they completed the TSBI, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1979), and the Rosenberg (1965) measure of global self-esteem. Using the same criteria as employed in Experiment 1, participants were identified as having low, moderate, or high self-esteem based on their responses to the TSBI. Participants who scored below the 30th percentile (raw score below 53) were considered to have low self-esteem, those who scored between the 30th and 70th percentile (53 to 60) were considered to have moderate self-esteem, and those who scored above the 70th percentile (60) were considered to have high self-esteem. The distribution of self-esteem ratings was similar for both the Florida Atlantic University and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill samples.

**Procedure**

The procedure was identical to that employed in Experiment 1 except for the content of the descriptions ostensibly written by the two potential interaction partners. Both descriptions expressed rejection of the participant (e.g., a belief that they would not get along very well and would not be likely to form a friendship) but differed in their respective assessments of the participant’s personality. Thus, participants were asked to choose between an evaluator who provided positive feedback but rejected the participant and an evaluator who provided negative feedback and also rejected the participant. As in Experiment 1, participants had 10 minutes to think about the two partners, make ratings on each one, and decide with whom they would like to meet in a get-acquainted conversation.

**Results**

All measures except choice of evaluator were analyzed by ANOVAs, with 1 between-participant variable (self-esteem) and 1 within-participants variable (evaluator feedback/acceptance). There were no main effects or interactions involving sex, so this variable was excluded from the analyses reported below.

**Perception of Evaluator Assessment**

An ANOVA demonstrated a significant main effect only for evaluator positivity, $F(1, 47) = 150.79, p < .001$. The positive/rejecting evaluator was rated as providing more favorable feedback ($M = 5.5$) than was the negative/rejecting evaluator ($M = 3.7$). Results for evaluator accuracy also revealed an evaluator main effect, $F(1, 47) = 10.11, p < .01$, such that the positive/rejecting evaluator was viewed as a more accurate judge ($M = 5.8$) than was the negative/rejecting evaluator ($M = 4.1$). This main effect was qualified by an Evaluator × Self-Esteem interaction, $F(2, 47) = 7.69, p < .01$. Subsequent comparisons decomposing this interaction revealed a reliable self-esteem effect for the positive/rejecting evaluator, $F(2, 47) = 7.79, p < .01$. The positive feedback was reported to be more accurate by high self-esteem participants ($M = 6.9$) than by moderate ($M = 5.6$) or low self-esteem participants ($M = 4.5$), all $t$s > 2.54, all $p$s < .02. A self-esteem effect also was found for the negative/rejecting evaluator, $F(2, 47) = 4.48, p < .02$. The negative feedback was considered to be more accurate by low self-esteem participants ($M = 5.6$) than by moderate ($M = 3.7$) or high self-esteem participants ($M = 3.5$), all $t$s > 2.68, all $p$s < .02. Further pairwise comparisons revealed that individuals with high and moderate self-esteem felt that the positive feedback more accurately described them, all $t$s > 2.65, all $p$s < .02. Low self-esteem individuals did not report differential accuracy on the part of positive and negative evaluators, $t(12) = 1.11, ns$.

**Desire for Interaction**

An ANOVA on desire for interaction revealed a reliable evaluator effect, $F(1, 47) = 31.61, p < .001$, with greater desire expressed for the positive/rejecting evaluator than for the negative/rejecting evaluator ($M = 5.5$ vs. 3.7). Pairwise comparisons revealed that high, moderate, and low self-esteem participants all reported more interest in interacting with the positive/rejecting evaluator, all $t$s > 2.27, all $p$s < .04. When the data were blocked on evaluator feedback, meanwhile, tests for simple effects revealed a reliable self-esteem effect for both the positive/rejecting evaluator, $F(2, 47) = 8.1, p < .01$, and the negative/rejecting evaluator, $F(2, 47) = 6.55, p < .01$. The high self-esteem participants expressed stronger desire to interact with the positive/rejecting evaluator ($M = 6.6$) than did the moderate ($M = 5.1$) and low self-esteem participants ($M = 4.8$), all $t$s > 2.86, all $p$s < .01. Similarly, the high self-esteem participants
expressed greater interest in meeting the negative/rejecting evaluator (M = 5.2) than did the participants with moderate (M = 2.9) or low self-esteem (M = 2.9), all ts > 2.76, all ps < .02.

Choice of Evaluator

Analyses of the choice data were consistent with the desire for interaction ratings. All participants, regardless of their self-esteem level, chose to interact with the positive/rejecting evaluator more frequently than with the negative/rejecting evaluator, χ²(2) = 1.45, ns. Of the participants, 71% with high self-esteem, 86% with moderate self-esteem, and 83% with low self-esteem chose to interact with the positive/rejecting evaluator.¹

DISCUSSION

The results of Experiment 2 indicate that low self-esteem participants did not seek out negative (consistent) feedback, as self-verification theory would suggest, but instead preferred to interact with the positive evaluator. With belongingness issues essentially a moot point, they in effect had to choose the lesser of two evils. Low self-esteem participants, however, were not completely satisfied with their choice, as indicated by the relatively low level of interest they expressed in meeting either evaluator (M = 4.8 and 2.9 for the positive/rejecting and negative/rejecting evaluators; both values at or below the scale midpoint). These data stand in marked contrast to the data obtained in Experiment 1, where acceptance feedback on the part of both evaluators led low self-esteem participants to express strong interest in meeting either evaluator (M = 6.8 and 6.1 for the positive/accepting and negative/accepting evaluators; both values above the scale midpoint). Thus, the results of the first two studies highlight the importance of acceptance feedback for determining low self-esteem individuals’ preference for interaction partners.

Participants with high self-esteem, on the other hand, chose the positive/rejecting evaluator in Experiment 2 at approximately the same rate (71%) as they selected the positive/accepting evaluator in Experiment 1 (83%). Acceptance feedback, then, did not seem to influence the rate at which high self-esteem individuals chose to interact with a positive evaluator. In these two studies, moreover, high self-esteem participants expressed interest in meeting the positive evaluator regardless of whether that evaluator was accepting (M = 8.2 in Experiment 1) or rejecting (M = 6.6 in Experiment 2). Thus, the results of the first two studies indicate that, in contrast to low self-esteem individuals, high self-esteem individuals’ motive for choosing interaction partners centers more on self-esteem concerns than on belonging needs.

EXPERIMENT 3

Although we have made a case for the importance of acceptance feedback in low self-esteem individuals’ partner preferences, the particular feedback combinations that we have employed have yet to separate the natural covariation of self-esteem and belonging satisfaction in social life that we identified at the outset. This covariation makes it difficult to isolate the relative salience of these two motives. What happens when they are pitted against one another so that people must choose between someone who sees them positively but has no interest in interaction and someone else who sees them negatively but expresses a strong interest in interaction nonetheless? This is the issue addressed in Experiment 3. Our theoretical rationale posits that self-esteem needs are paramount for people with high self-esteem, whereas belonging needs tend to be more pressing for those with low self-esteem. Hence, we predicted that participants with high self-esteem would express a preference to interact with a positive/rejecting evaluator, whereas participants with low self-esteem would prefer to interact with a negative/accepting evaluator.

METHOD

Participants

The experiment included 45 undergraduates (14 males and 31 females) from Florida Atlantic University who participated in exchange for course credit in their psychology courses. In large pretesting sessions, participants completed the same questionnaires that were administered in Experiment 1. Using the same criteria employed in Experiment 1, participants were identified by their TSBI score as having low, moderate, or high self-esteem. In the experimental session, two participants (one male and one female) did not fully understand the instructions and their data were excluded from analysis. The final sample thus consisted of 43 participants.

Procedure

The procedure was identical to that of Experiment 1 and 2 but with different combinations of evaluative and interaction feedback ostensibly provided by the two potential partners. One of the partners provided positive feedback but expressed little interest in interacting with the participant (positive/rejecting), and the other partner provided negative feedback but expressed strong interest in interacting with the participant (negative/accepting). As in the earlier experiments, participants had 10 minutes to think about the evaluations given by the two partners, make ratings on each one, and decide with whom they would like to meet in a getting-acquainted conversation.
RESULTS

All measures except choice of evaluator were analyzed by ANOVAs, with 1 between-participant variable (self-esteem) and 1 within-participants variable (evaluator feedback/acceptance). There were no main effects or interactions involving sex, so this variable was excluded from the analyses reported below.

Perception of Evaluator Assessment

Results for perception of evaluator positivity demonstrated a reliable Self-Esteem × Evaluator interaction, F(2, 40) = 3.45, p < .05. Planned comparisons revealed that high self-esteem participants felt that the positive/rejecting evaluator had a more positive impression of them than did the negative/accepting evaluator (M = 7.46 vs. 5.0), t(11) = 3.54, p < .005. Neither the moderate nor the low self-esteem participants, however, felt that they were viewed more favorably by one evaluator than by the other (M = 6.5 vs. 6.4 for moderate self-esteem, 5.6 vs. 5.8 for low self-esteem), t < .5, ns.

For perception of evaluator accuracy, results revealed a reliable effect for self-esteem, F(2, 40) = 4.17, p < .03, with moderate self-esteem participants reporting greater accuracy than both high and low self-esteem participants, t(24) = 2.92, p < .01, and t(28) = 1.90, p < .07. This effect was qualified, however, by a reliable interaction between self-esteem and evaluator, F(2, 40) = 23.83, p < .001, which we decomposed through simple effects with the data blocked on evaluator. These analyses revealed reliable self-esteem effects for both the positive/rejecting evaluator, F(2, 40) = 11.88, p < .001, and the negative/accepting evaluator, F(2, 40) = 20.82, p < .001. Subsequent comparisons revealed that high self-esteem participants considered the positive/rejecting evaluator to be more accurate (M = 6.8) than did the moderate self-esteem participants (M = 5.4), t(24) = 2.56, p < .02, who in turn considered this evaluator to be more accurate than did the low self-esteem participants (M = 4.0), t(28) = 2.39, p < .03. Conversely, both moderate and low self-esteem participants felt that the negative/accepting evaluator had a more accurate view of them (both Ms = 7.0) than did their high self-esteem counterparts (M = 3.3), t(24) = 5.73 and t(28) = 5.39, ps < .001 (see Table 4).

Desire for Interaction

An ANOVA performed on participants’ desire to interact with each of the evaluators revealed reliable effects for both self-esteem, F(2, 40) = 4.11, p < .01, and evaluator, F(1, 40) = 21.05, p < .001. High and moderate self-esteem participants expressed greater overall interest in the subsequent interaction (M = 6.2 and 6.3, respectively) than did low self-esteem participants (M = 4.9), t(28) = 2.40 and 2.30, respectively, both ps < .03. The positive/rejecting evaluator, meanwhile, was considered a less desirable interaction partner (M = 4.8) than was the negative/accepting evaluator (M = 6.7), t(42) = 4.37, p < .001.

These main effects were qualified by a reliable Self-Esteem × Evaluator interaction, F(2, 40) = 7.07, p < .01, which we decomposed through simple effects with the data blocked on evaluator (see Table 5). For the positive/rejecting evaluator, there was a reliable effect for self-esteem, F(2, 40) = 7.32, p < .01, with greater desire to interact with this person on the part of high and moderate self-esteem participants than on the part of low self-esteem participants, t(28) = 3.96, p < .001, and t(28) = 2.10, p < .05, respectively. There was also a marginally reliable self-esteem effect for the negative/accepting evaluator, F(2, 43) = 2.39, p = .10. Participants with moderate self-esteem had greater interest in interacting with this person than did participants with high self-esteem, t(24) = 2.35, p < .03. Planned comparisons revealed that participants with low and moderate self-esteem were more eager to interact with a negative/accepting evaluator than with a positive/rejecting evaluator, t(16) = 4.9, p < .001, and t(12) = 4.0, p < .01, respectively. In contrast, individuals with high self-esteem expressed equal interest in meeting both evaluators, t < 1.

Choice of Evaluator

The results of chi-square analyses corroborated the findings obtained for interaction preference. As predicted, the majority of the high self-esteem participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4: Perceived Accuracy of Evaluator by Self-Esteem and Evaluator Attitude (Experiment 3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluator Attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive/rejecting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative/accepting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Higher numbers mean greater perceived accuracy. Means not sharing a common subscript differ at p < .05.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 5: Desire to Meet Evaluator by Self-Esteem and Evaluator Attitude (Experiment 3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluator Attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive/rejecting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative/accepting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Higher numbers mean greater desire. Means not sharing a common subscript differ at p < .05.
chose to interact with the positive/rejecting evaluator, whereas the majority of participants with moderate and low self-esteem chose to interact with the negative/accepting evaluator. \( \chi^2(2) = 9.1, p < .02 \) (see Table 6). Fischer’s binominal \( t \) tests confirmed that the high self-esteem participants differed from both the moderate and low self-esteem participants, \( t(24) = 1.99, p < .03 \), and \( t(28) = 3.83, p < .01 \), respectively. The low and moderate self-esteem participants did not differ reliably in their choices, \( t(31) < 1 \), ns.

**DISCUSSION**

The data from Experiment 3 provide support for our hypotheses regarding the salience of different motives as a function of self-esteem. Given a choice between enhancing their self-image and establishing a relationship, participants with high self-esteem opted for enhancement and those with low and moderate self-esteem opted for relationship building. Presumably, the high self-esteem participants felt secure in their social connectedness to other people and were concerned instead with maintaining a positive image of themselves in the eyes of an interaction partner. The low (and moderate) self-esteem participants, on the other hand, presumably were less secure in their social relations and were therefore primarily concerned with being accepted, even if this meant being perceived in less favorable terms by an interaction partner.

It is also the case that the same pattern was observed for judgments of evaluator accuracy. Whereas high self-esteem participants felt that the positive/rejecting evaluator was more accurate, the low and moderate self-esteem participants felt that the negative/accepting evaluator had better insight into them. This raises the possibility that participants’ preferences were driven by epistemic concerns (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). On this view, participants simply expressed a desire to interact with the evaluator that perceived them in a manner that validated their own self-view. Recall, however, that epistemic concerns were not a critical factor in Experiments 1 and 2, at least not for low self-esteem participants. In both studies, low self-esteem participants did not differ in their reported accuracy of positive and negative evaluations, but they did display a clear preference for interacting with partners who were likely to accept rather than reject them. What is common to all three experiments, then, is a desire on the part of low self-esteem participants to interact with the evaluator who is more likely to appreciate them as potential relationship partners.

**EXPERIMENT 4**

The hypothesized link between acceptance concerns and partner preference on the part of low self-esteem individuals is further highlighted in the fourth experiment. In this study, participants were asked to choose between an evaluator who provided positive feedback and acceptance and an evaluator who provided negative feedback and rejection. We predicted that participants with low self-esteem would favor the positive/accepting evaluator, even though the negative/rejecting evaluator provides feedback that is consistent with their self-views. High self-esteem people should also prefer the positive/accepting evaluator, but their motivation centers on self-esteem enhancement rather than acceptance concerns.

**Participants**

The experiment included 46 undergraduates (19 males and 27 females) from Florida Atlantic University who participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement in their psychology courses. Two weeks prior to participation in the experiment, they attended a mass testing session, where they completed several questionnaires, including the TSBI. Using the same criteria identified earlier, participants were identified as possessing high, moderate, or low self-esteem.

**Procedure**

The procedure was identical to that employed in the previous three studies except for the content of the descriptions ostensibly written by the two potential interaction partners. Participants were asked to choose between an evaluator who provided positive feedback and accepted the participant and an evaluator who provided negative feedback and rejected the participant. As in Experiments 1, 2, and 3, participants had 10 minutes to think about the two partners, make ratings on each one, and decide with whom they would like to meet in a get-acquainted conversation.

**RESULTS**

All measures except choice of evaluator were analyzed by analyses of variance (ANOVA), with 1 between-participant variable (self-esteem) and 1 within-participants variable (evaluator feedback/acceptance). Preliminary analyses revealed no main effects or interac-

**TABLE 6: Choice of Evaluator by Self-Esteem and Evaluator Attitude (Experiment 3)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluator Attitude</th>
<th>Self-Esteem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive/rejecting</td>
<td>62% (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative/accepting</td>
<td>38% (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses indicate frequency.
tions involving sex, so this variable was not included in the analyses reported below.

**Perception of Evaluator Assessment**

Results for the item assessing participants’ perception of evaluator positivity revealed a reliable effect for evaluator, $F(1, 43) = 89.45, p < .001$. Not surprisingly, the positive/accepting evaluator was recognized as providing a more favorable assessment of participants than was the negative/rejecting evaluator ($M = 8.0$ vs. $3.7$).

Results for the item assessing participants’ perception of evaluator accuracy also revealed a reliable effect for evaluator, $F(1, 43) = 8.66, p < .01$, such that the positive/accepting evaluator was considered to be more accurate than was the negative/rejecting evaluator ($M = 6.4$ vs. $4.5$). This effect was qualified, however, by a reliable Self-Esteem $\times$ Evaluator interaction, $F(2, 43) = 11.80, p < .001$, which we decomposed through simple effects analyses with the data blocked on evaluator. These analyses revealed reliable self-esteem effects for both the positive/accepting evaluator, $F(2, 43) = 8.05, p < .001$, and the negative/rejecting evaluator, $F(2, 43) = 9.33, p < .001$ (see Table 7). High and moderate self-esteem participants viewed feedback provided by the positive/accepting evaluator as more accurate than did low self-esteem participants, $t(21) = 3.21$ and $t(31) = 3.86$, respectively, both $p < .001$. Low self-esteem participants, meanwhile, tended to view feedback provided by the negative/rejecting evaluator as more accurate than did moderate and high self-esteem participants, $t(31) = 3.45$ and $t(21) = 4.38$, respectively, both $p < .001$. On balance, then, participants viewed evaluator feedback as accurate to the extent that it corresponded with their own self-assessment.

**Desire for Interaction**

Results for interaction preference revealed a reliable effect for evaluator, $F(1, 43) = 17.39, p < .001$. Participants preferred the positive/accepting evaluator more than the negative/rejecting evaluator ($M = 7.3$ vs. $4.9$).

**Choice of Evaluator**

Chi-square analyses demonstrated that the majority of each self-esteem group tended to choose the positive/accepting evaluator rather than the negative/rejecting evaluator for the subsequent interaction, $\chi^2(2) = 4.06, ns$. In particular, $62\%$ of the high self-esteem participants, $87\%$ of the moderate self-esteem participants, and $60\%$ of the low self-esteem participants chose to interact with the positive evaluator who expressed interest in meeting the participant.

**TABLE 7: Perceived Accuracy of Evaluator by Self-Esteem and Evaluator Attitude (Experiment 4)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluator Attitude</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive/accepting</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative/rejecting</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Higher numbers mean greater perceived accuracy. Means not sharing a common subscript differ at $p < .05$.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of Experiment 4 verify what most laypeople would take as self-evident: People would rather interact with someone who has a positive view of them and expresses a desire to have an interaction than with someone who has a negative view of them and expresses little interest in having an interaction. This finding, though, is not necessarily self-evident when considered in light of theory and research on self-verification (cf. Swann, 1990). One of the most intriguing and counterintuitive conclusions generated by this research concerns the response of low self-esteem people to positive feedback from other people. Although such people clearly have unmet self-esteem needs and hence would benefit from interaction with a positive evaluator, considerable evidence suggests that they are more concerned with maintaining a consistent view of themselves and, for this reason, are drawn to those who provide confirmatory, yet negative, feedback about their personalities. At first blush, then, the results observed in this study are at odds with this reasoning in that all participants, even those with low self-esteem, preferred the positive evaluator.

Upon examination, however, there may not be a contradiction between the present results and the logic of self-verification strivings. It appears that the motive for self-verification can itself be disassembled into yet more basic motives (e.g., Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). In particular, when participants are queried as to why they prefer to interact with those who provide consistent as opposed to flattering feedback, they commonly cite pragmatic reasons—among them the belief that someone who sees them in the same way they see themselves is likely to be more accepting during the interaction and hence less likely to reject them. This implies that it is not the valence of the feedback per se that is critical but rather the implications of the feedback for achieving sustained interactions with the evaluator. In this light, it is not surprising that low self-esteem participants in the present study preferred to interact with the positive rather than the negative evaluator because the former but not the latter indicated a desire to interact with them.
Self-verification strivings, however, are said to reflect epistemic concerns in addition to purely pragmatic considerations. Thus, people prefer to interact with someone who provides consistent feedback because such feedback provides evidence that one’s judgments about the self are reasonably accurate and provide a coherent model with which to predict outcomes (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). The clear implication is that low self-esteem people prefer negative feedback because they feel it is more accurate than positive feedback. The results from Experiment 4 are at odds with this presumed basis for self-verification because low self-esteem participants considered the negative/rejecting evaluator to be more accurate in his or her assessments yet showed a pronounced preference for the positive/accepting evaluator. In this experimental arrangement, at least, epistemic motivation was not the driving force in the choices of low self-esteem participants.

A substantial minority of low self-esteem participants, however, did select the negative/rejecting evaluator over the positive/accepting evaluator. This finding suggests that for some individuals with low self-esteem, epistemic concerns play a prominent role in their preferences for interaction partners. Even here, though, epistemic concerns may reflect a more fundamental pragmatic concern. In particular, these people may prefer someone who sees them accurately (i.e., somewhat negatively) because such a person knows in advance what he or she is getting into and hence is less likely to experience subsequent disappointment with them during their interaction. In effect, some people with low self-esteem may feel insecure regarding their likely acceptance even when they have received feedback that manages to dispel such concerns for other low self-esteem people. Future research is clearly warranted to assess this possibility.2

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Taken together, the data from Experiments 1 through 4 are consistent with the suggestion that people's desire to interact with others reflects two basic motives—the need to belong and the need for self-esteem—and that the relative prepotence of these motives can be understood in terms of individual variation in self-esteem. Because a person's level of self-esteem provides a measure of how well he or she is connected to other people (cf. Leary et al., 1995), it also provides a basis for predicting what he or she will be most concerned with in choosing among potential interaction partners. Someone with low self-esteem presumably is insecure in his or her social relations and thus looks for signs of acceptance in potential partners. Someone with a relatively positive self-assessment, on the other hand, has a more secure sense of social connectedness and thus is not as attuned to signs of likely acceptance on the part of potential interaction partners. With his or her belonging needs met, the high self-esteem person focuses instead on maintaining his or her level of self-regard and thus chooses to interact with those who are likely to provide favorable rather than unfavorable feedback.

This perspective on self-esteem and social relationships is consistent with various lines of theory and research. Within personality psychology, Reik (1944) reported clinical and anecdotal data suggesting that a loss of self-esteem renders people more susceptible to falling in love with someone who expresses interest in establishing a relationship with them (see also Sullivan, 1953). Within experimental social psychology, meanwhile, the manipulation of self-esteem has been shown to affect reactions to those who provide feedback suggestive of acceptance versus rejection. Dittes (1959), for instance, found that individuals with low self-esteem tend to show greater dislike for others who reject them than do individuals with high self-esteem. Walster (1965), in turn, demonstrated that low self-esteem individuals show greater attraction to strangers who indicate acceptance than do high self-esteem individuals. Jacobs et al. (1971) found evidence for both tendencies: As compared to high self-esteem individuals, those with low self-esteem expressed heightened attraction for strangers who communicated clear acceptance and heightened dislike for strangers who communicated clear rejection. Within developmental psychology, meanwhile, there is evidence that the absence of parental support and affection is associated with deficits in self-acceptance, social skill, and mastery orientation—a constellation that represents low self-esteem in children (e.g., Ainsworth, 1973; Bijou & Baer, 1965; Bowlby 1969; Coopersmith, 1967; Erikson, 1959; Gewirtz, 1969). The direction of causality in this relationship is hardly unequivocal, but it is plausible to assume that parental acceptance is a prerequisite for high self-esteem in children. In sum, several otherwise distinct lines of theory and research all converge on the notion that low self-esteem is associated with a relatively heightened sense of insecurity in one's social relations.

There is also evidence that high self-esteem is associated with heightened sensitivity to the valence of socially mediated feedback regarding personal traits and skills. In particular, several lines of research suggest that people with high self-esteem react strongly to information or expressed opinions that threaten their inflated self-views (e.g., Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Baumeister, Smart, & Bowden, 1996; Baumeister & Tice, 1985; McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981). In reviewing this evidence as well as relevant sociological data, Baumeister et al. (1996) argue that high self-esteem puts people at risk for violence when they receive feedback that calls into question their self-perceived
qualities. By the same token, considerable evidence suggests that high self-esteem people react favorably to others who provide positive feedback regarding their personal traits, skills, and qualities (S. C. Jones, 1973; Shrauger, 1975; Swann, 1990).

We should note that the manipulation of evaluative feedback employed in this research was not symmetrical with respect to valence. Although the positive feedback provided by evaluators was rather flattering about the participant’s social competence, the negative feedback can better be described as fairly neutral rather than pejorative in this regard, noting only that the participant tended to be ill at ease in social situations. This asymmetry is reflected in participants’ ratings of feedback favorability: Although the negative feedback was in fact considered less favorable than the positive feedback, it tended to be rated as only slightly below the scale midpoint on this dimension.

There is reason to think, however, that positive-negative asymmetry is inherent in both self-concept and social feedback. With respect to self-concept, research suggests that most people think fairly well of themselves (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tesser, 1988) and that the majority of people with low self-esteem tend to view themselves in neutral rather than derogatory terms (e.g., Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). With respect to social feedback, there are social norms that mitigate against the communication of highly negative sentiments to other people in social interaction, regardless of the evaluator’s private assessment (e.g., Tesser & Rosen, 1975). In light of these positive-negative asymmetries in everyday life and social encounters, it is not surprising that research concerned with the interplay of self-esteem and social feedback has commonly employed rather bland manipulations of negative feedback, such as that employed in the present research (e.g., Swann, Wenzlaff, et al., 1992). Future research employing more extreme values of negative feedback may be warranted in the interest of calibrating the effects of positivity and negativity per se, of course, but the outcomes of such efforts would seem to have correspondingly less ecological validity.

There is a sense, though, in which the manipulation of evaluative feedback employed in the present research may have limited generalizability to social interaction. In everyday encounters, people certainly note and comment on one another’s social skill and confidence, the general qualities that formed the basis of evaluator feedback in this research. It is also the case, however, that people commonly make more pointed comments about one another, focusing on specific traits, abilities, attitudes, and the like. It is not at all clear that positive versus negative feedback regarding such qualities would elicit the same reactions on the part of low and high self-esteem people as did the positive and negative feedback employed in the present experiments. This is because the very globality of self-esteem makes it difficult to know how someone with high or low self-esteem regards him or herself on a specific dimension. Even someone with a highly negative self-concept may view him or herself positively in various domains, such as intelligence or sensitivity (e.g., Pelham, 1993). There is no guarantee, then, that negative feedback regarding a specific attribute will be confirmatory for a low self-esteem person—or for that matter, that positive feedback will be nonconfirmatory. Because our concern centered on people’s reactions to feedback that was unambiguous in this regard, we employed manipulations of feedback that were directly relevant to participants’ sense of self. In view of the centrality of self-perceived social skill and comfort to global self-esteem (e.g., Coopersmith, 1967; Helmreich et al., 1974; Rosenberg, 1965; Schlenker & Leary, 1982), both participants’ self-esteem and evaluator feedback were defined and operationalized in these terms. It remains for future research to determine whether the effects observed in this research can be generalized to other sources of self-esteem and to social feedback that has varying degrees of relevance to recipients’ self-perceived qualities.

The present perspective provides insight into the apparent paradox of low self-esteem. An impressive body of evidence suggests that people with low self-esteem often respond skeptically to positive feedback from others and tend to feel more comfortable with negative appraisals of their skills and attributes (cf. De La Ronde & Swann, 1993; Lecky, 1945; Secord & Backman, 1965; Swann, 1990). In explaining this apparent exception to self-enhancement (and reinforcement principles), Swann and his colleagues have pointed out that low self-esteem people do not seek out negative feedback because it is intrinsically rewarding. Rather, negative feedback satisfies more basic concerns with prediction and control in interpersonal relations. One particularly salient concern is the likelihood that an interaction with someone will result in acceptance versus rejection. In this light, negative feedback has pragmatic value for low self-esteem people in that the purveyor of such feedback has relatively low expectations for the interaction and thus is less likely to experience disappointment and reject them. The motive, then, is not self-consistency per se but social acceptance. Hence, when evidence of acceptance is provided independently of feedback, low self-esteem people are in a sense free to accept positive feedback, as in Experiment 4, or simply ignore it, as in Experiment 3. The results of the present research sug-
suggest that acceptance was indeed the prepotent concern for participants with low and moderate self-esteem. Although our theoretical rationale centers on a distinction between low and high self-esteem, the results that we obtained suggest that moderate self-esteem may also be associated with somewhat unique effects. In a crucial respect, of course, participants with moderate self-esteem behaved the same as those with low self-esteem. In all four experiments, both groups evinced a preference for the evaluator who held greater potential for satisfying their belonging needs. They differed, however, in their respective judgments of how accurately they were perceived by this evaluator. The participants with moderate self-esteem indicated that the person with whom they preferred to interact also had the best insight into their personalities—the positive evaluators in Experiments 1, 2, and 4, and the negative evaluator in Experiment 3. The preference for the accepting evaluator on the part of low self-esteem participants, however, was not linked to their assessment of this person’s accuracy in judging them. In Experiments 1 and 2, they selected the positive evaluator even though they did not report that he or she had described them more accurately than had the negative evaluator. And in Experiment 4, low self-esteem participants expressed a preference for interacting with the positive evaluator, even though they felt the negative evaluator had better insight into them.

These findings suggest that although both low and moderate self-esteem people are motivated by belonging concerns, only those with moderate self-esteem are concerned with being perceived accurately by their relationship partners. This apparent epistemic concern, however, is not rooted in the degree of congruence between self-assessment and the appraisals provided by someone else because evaluatively divergent appraisals can be seen as equally accurate depending on the evaluator’s potential for satisfying one’s belonging needs. Rather than using the satisfaction of epistemic needs to determine interaction desirability, then, people with moderate self-esteem use interaction desirability to assess the satisfaction of epistemic needs. In effect, such people want accuracy as well as acceptance and hence are inclined to see accepting evaluators as insightful, regard-...
emotional costs that might otherwise be associated with physical hardship and occupational failure. By the same token, all the successes in the world cannot make up for rejection by one’s social network. From this perspective, then, positive feedback and other factors that promote self-esteem enhancement represent frosting on the cake—concerns that assume importance only after more basic needs with inclusion are met. Presumably, low self-esteem people, in contrast, are those who have satisfied their belonging concerns and can safely turn their attention to advancing their position in the group.

NOTES

1. We also analyzed the preference and choice data using the Rossi (1966), Self-Esteem Scale and the Raskin and Hall (1979) Narcissistic Personality Inventory. The results were consistent with the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI). All individuals, regardless of their level of narcissism or self-esteem, preferred and chose to interact with the positive/rejecting evaluator.

2. It is also the case that more than one third of the high self-esteem participants chose to interact with the negative/rejecting rather than the positive/accepting evaluator. This choice does not seem to follow from either pragmatic or epistemic concerns. One possibility here is that high self-esteem individuals view interaction with a rejecting evaluator as an opportunity to convince the person that his or her initial impression is wrong. The possibility of changing the person’s impression from negative to positive affords high self-esteem individuals a means of validating their self-perceived social skills and thereby experiencing greater self-enhancement. This interpretation cannot be addressed with recourse to the present data, of course, and thus must be considered tentative pending the outcome of subsequent research. Nonetheless, the conversion of negative evaluators has been discussed in the context of self-verification strivings (Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992) and is consistent with Aronson and Linder’s (1965) gain-loss theory of attraction. It also reflects the quite reasonable assumption that people with high self-esteem are confident of their interpersonal skills and believe that they have the ability to influence the positive/rejecting evaluator.

3. This perspective also sheds light on the documented connection between low self-esteem and self-concept uncertainty (e.g., Baumeister, 1992; Campbell, 1996; Vallacher, 1978). The development of a self-concept is ultimately a social phenomenon in which the reflected appraisals provided by other people play a key role. Quite simply, such feedback provides the basis for knowing whether one is socially skilled or inept, interesting or boring, persuasive or unconvincing, and so on. The failure to process social feedback, then, is likely to promote a corresponding decrement in certainty regarding one’s social self. If, as the present research suggests, people with low self-esteem attend to social feedback because of its cue value for social acceptance rather than because of its relevance for self-concept per se, it is not surprising that the cumulative effect would be a relatively impoverished self-concept indexed by a high degree of uncertainty with respect to social trait dimensions. In effect, the person with low self-esteem does not fully exploit one of the most informative bases of self-understanding made available by other people. Although this interpretation of heightened uncertainty on the part of low self-esteem people is consistent with the theoretical rationale and results of the present research, it is necessarily speculative pending the results of further research.

4. Participants may have made a variety of inferences about each evaluator aside from the favorability and accuracy of the respective feedback that he or she provided. In Experiment 4, for instance, the negative/rejecting evaluator might have seemed intolerant and hard to please, particularly when juxtaposed with the positive/accepting evaluator. Inferences about the evaluators, moreover, could conceivably have varied as a function of the participants’ level of self-esteem. Participants with high self-esteem might have regarded the negative/accepting evaluator as socially needy, for example, whereas those with low self-esteem may have viewed this person as sensitive and empathic. Future research is clearly warranted to investigate the nature of such inferences and their role in mediating people’s reactions to social feedback. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing this point to our attention.

REFERENCES


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