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The Regulation of Self-Enhancement and Self-Protection

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The Regulation of Self-Enhancement and Self-Protection

One of the most enduring and cherished traditions of philosophical thought is the observation that people have an unduly favorable view of themselves. From Aristippus and Epicurus (De Witt, 1973; Tatarkiewicz, 1976), through Hobbes (1651/1950) and Bentham (1785/1928), to Freud (1905/1961) and Nietzsche (1886/1966), philosophers have commented on the human peculiarity to overrate (if not trumpet) strengths and to underrate (if not conceal) weaknesses. James (1890/1950) put it succinctly, when he suggested that “each of us is animated by a direct feeling of regard for his [self]” (p. 308). Characteristically, James regarded the self (the empirical “me”) as a collection of ego-relevant interests.

Taking James’ lead, social psychologists consider the human tendency for overvaluation of the self, or for guarding against undervaluation of the self, as a motive or a goal. The relevant terms are self-enhancement and self-protection. The former is expressed as strivings to maintain or raise one’s positive self-view, whereas the latter is expressed as strivings to defend or shelter one’s positive self-view. The self-view in question consists of beliefs that one is worthwhile, competent, warm, moral, attractive, and loveable (Baumeister, 1998; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003; Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

The pursuit of self-enhancement or self-protection goals can have beneficial consequences for the individual. For example, this pursuit maintains the integrity of the self-system (Steele, 1988; Tesser, 2000). It also positively predicts psychological adjustment (e.g., subjective well-being, optimism, planning, active coping) and negatively predicts psychological maladjustment (e.g., depression, anxiety, neuroticism, hostility) (Marshall & Brown, 2007; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult,

2004; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003). On the other hand, the pursuit of enhancement/protection goals can have psychological costs, such as risky decision-making, task disengagement, unpopularity, and failure to learn from one's mistakes (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Colvin & Griffo, 2007; Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007).

It follows, then, that it would be most adaptive for individuals to be able to regulate their enhancement and protection goals (cf. Carver, 2004; Schmeichel & Baumeister, 2004; Sedikides & Luke, 2007). It would be particularly useful for them to be able to switch from an enhancement/protection goal (e.g., striving for positive feedback) to an alternative goal (e.g., striving for feedback with improvement potential), as per situational demands. It would also be useful for them to be able to abandon enhancement/protection goals altogether or to finesse the satisfaction of such goals through subtle and indirect means—that is, through means that do not risk offending others.

The argument here is that individuals are indeed capable of regulating enhancement and protection goals (Sedikides & Gregg, in press; Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000; Tice, Baumeister, Shmueli, & Muraven, 2007). The objective of this chapter is to provide an illustration of how such regulation is carried out. These self-regulatory strategies will be discussed in the framework of goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002; Shah, Kruglanski, & Friedman, 2003). A description of the theory follows, succeeded by the application of the theory in the domain of enhancement and protection regulation.

Goal Systems Theory

Goal systems theory aims to provide an account of purposeful human behavior. The theory posits the interconnection of goals and means, and specifies their activation properties as a function of context. In particular, the theory has four main tenets, three of which are directly relevant to the research reported in this chapter.

According to the first tenet, cognitive networks of goals and means form three types of relations. First, the goals can be connected to each other. Second, the means can be connected to each other. Third, the goals are connected to the means. The interconnection between goals and means is particularly intriguing. A given goal can be connected to any sensible number of means. As such, if a goal is connected to six means, then by implication the goal can be attained through any of these means or any combination of these means. Stated otherwise, there are many means to achieve a given goal (*equifinality configuration*). Also, many goals can be linked to a single means (*multifinality configuration*).

If multiple goals can be linked to a single means, how does a given goal come to “capture” the means for its accomplishment (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991)? According to the second tenet of goal systems theory, this will depend on which goal is activated (*allocational property*). Given that cognitive resources are limited, activation of one goal often implies the inhibition of an alternative goal (Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2004). That is, investing processing resources (e.g., attention, effort) into a focal goal implies disinvesting processing resources from a competing goal. The focal goal becomes more, and the peripheral goal becomes less, attainable.

As stated above, a plethora of means can be suitable for the achievement of a goal. However, the means are not all substitutable (*contextual dependence property*). Which means, then, will be selected? This, according to the third tenet of the theory, depends on two factors. The first factor is the availability of means. Obviously, only contextually available means can be considered for selection, and, among contextually available means that are equally relevant to the goal, the most salient, vivid, or accessible one will be selected. The second factor is the nature of context. Some contexts render certain means more desirable than others. Thus, an agent is required that will exert a choice.

The fourth tenet of the theory refers to the affective consequences of choosing a goal. A good choice (i.e., regulatory fit) will make one feel “right,” whereas a bad choice will make one feel as if something is missing (Camacho, Higgins, & Luger, 2003). The former choice will increase, whereas the latter choice will decrease, motivation for goal-pursuit (Spiegel, Grant-Pillow, & Higgins, 2004). This tenet will not be discussed further, because it is not directly relevant to the research reported below. In contrast, the second tenet (allocational property) and third tenet (contextual dependence property) are particularly relevant to the current discussion. Therefore, the chapter will be structured around these two tenets.

Switching from Protection/Enhancement to Improvement:

The Allocational Property of Goals

Which goal will be pursued at any given time? As the second tenet of goal systems theory (i.e., the allocational property) specifies, goals often compete for available means, with the highest activated goal being more likely to capture a means. This tenet

helps explain several findings concerning the regulatory interplay between self-protection and self-improvement.

Indirect or Direct Activation of the Improvement Goal

Consider an experiment by Green, Pinter, and Sedikides (2005; see also Dauenheimer, Stahlberg, Spreeman, & Sedikides, 2002). Participants were forewarned that they would be presented with hypothetical feedback. Half of the participants imagined that the feedback pertained to them, and the source of the feedback was a person who knew them well. The other half of participants imagined that the feedback pertained to another person (Chris), and the source of the feedback was a person who knew Chris well. In addition, half of the participants learned that they would receive feedback on traits that were unmodifiable or inflexible across the lifespan (unmodifiable-traits condition), whereas the remaining half learned that they would receive feedback on traits that were modifiable and flexible across the lifespan (modifiable-traits condition).

The feedback was in the form of behaviors that the participant or Chris was likely to perform. Some of these behaviors were positive and some were negative. Also, some behaviors exemplified traits central to participants' self-definition (i.e., trustworthy, kind), and some exemplified traits peripheral to participants' self-definition (i.e., modest, uncomplaining). Feedback, then, could be negative, reflecting central traits, and referring to the self (*self-threatening*). Feedback also could be positive, reflecting central traits, and referring to the self (*self-affirming*). Finally, feedback could be *other-relevant* (reflecting central traits that are either negative or positive and refer to other) or *tangential* (reflecting peripheral traits that are either positive or negative and refer to either the self

or other). Following a distractor task, participants were asked to recall the behavioral feedback as well as they could.

In the unmodifiable-traits condition, participants recalled poorly self-threatening feedback (e.g., *An employer would not rely on you to have an important project completed by the deadline*) compared to self-affirming feedback (e.g., *You would offer to care for a neighbor's child when the babysitter could not come*). We have labeled this recall disparity (in the backdrop of other-relevant feedback and tangential feedback) the mnemonic neglect effect (Green & Sedikides, 2004; Sedikides & Green, 2000, 2004). Importantly, we have postulated that the self-protection goal drives feedback processing and recall. Behaviors exemplifying unmodifiable traits are relatively threatening and are thus memorially neglected, given that the implications of the feedback are inescapable. After all, there is nothing one can do to alter the underlying traits. In this case, then, participant would process self-threatening feedback shallowly, resulting in less elaboration, fewer retrieval routes, and poorer recall. In contrast, participant would process self-affirming feedback deeply, resulting in greater elaboration, more retrieval routes, and better recall (Brown & Craik, 2000; Craik, 2002).

Interestingly, however, in the unmodifiable-traits condition, participants recalled self-threatening feedback as well as self-affirming feedback. The mnemonic neglect effect was cancelled out. We reasoned that this is because the self-improvement goal (Kurman, 2006; Neiss, Sedikides, Shahinfar, & Kupersmidt, 2006; Sedikides, 1999; Taylor, Neter, & Wayment, 1995; Trope, Gervy, & Bolger, 2003) drove feedback processing and recall. Behaviors exemplifying modifiable traits are relatively non-threatening, given that the implications of the feedback are impermanent. After all, it is possible to alter the

underlying traits. Thus, processing the feedback thoroughly might confer long-term advantages (i.e., bettering one's important traits). In this case, then, participant would process self-threatening feedback deeply, resulting in increased elaboration, a relatively high number of retrieval routes, and relatively good recall.

A similar logic underpinned another investigation (Green, Sedikides, Pinter, & Van Tongeren, in press, Experiment 2), concerned with the pragmatics of close relationships. People may not have strong incentives to listen carefully to negative feedback, when its source is a stranger. After all, the stranger's knowledge of the participant leaves a lot to be desired, and the stranger may not be seen again. In this case, then, the self-threatening feedback is rather inconsequential: It lacks credibility, while there are no relationship constraints that would necessitate taking it seriously. Here, the self-protection goal would guide feedback processing and recall. In contrast, people do have incentives to listen carefully to feedback, when its source is a close other. After all, the close other's knowledge of the participant is vast, and the close other will be there to stay. In this case, the self-threatening feedback has consequences: It is credible, while relationship maintenance and nurturance is at stake (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). This entails a thorough consideration of the feedback and its long-term utility, that is, its potential to change the self in ways that are compatible to the relationship. Here, the self-improvement goal would guide feedback processing and recall.

We (Green et al., in press, Experiment 2) put these ideas to test. Participants reported to the laboratory accompanied either by a stranger or a close relationship (i.e., friend, romantic partner). Participants were randomly assigned to work on a social

perception task either with the stranger or the close relationship. They learned that one dyad member (the “receiver”) would complete a computer-based personality test. The test results would be reviewed by the other dyad member (the “sender”), who would provide feedback to the receiver. The two roles appeared to be randomly allocated, although all participants were assigned in actuality the receiver role.

Subsequently, participants completed a computer-administered personality test, the Michigan Omnibus Personality Inventory (MOPI), which allegedly provided highly accurate diagnoses of whether a person possessed a wide range of personality traits, and also produced the feedback in the form of behaviors that participants were likely to enact. Participants’ answers to the test were ostensibly transmitted to the sender. Participants learned that the sender was sifting through their MOPI answers to gain insights into their personality, as she or he had been instructed by the experimenter to select both positive and negative behaviors (from a larger pool of behaviors) that described the participant well. Finally, the receiver was provided with the feedback, which consisted of the same behaviors as in the previously described experiment (Green et al., 2005).

We hypothesized that participants would recall poorly self-threatening feedback, when its source was a stranger. In this case, feedback processing would be guided by the self-protection goal (i.e., it would be processed shallowly). However, participants would recall relatively well self-threatening feedback, when its source was a close relationship. In this case, feedback processing would be guided by the self-improvement goal (i.e., it would be processed deeply; Devine, Sedikides, & Fuhrman, 1989; Neuberg & Fiske, 1987). Mnemic neglect, then, would be present in the stranger-feedback condition, but

would be absent in the close relationship-feedback condition. The results confirmed the hypotheses.

In the two experiments discussed above (Green et al., 2005; Green et al. in press, Experiment 2), we assumed the activation of the self-improvement goal. In another experiment (Green et al., in press, Experiment 1), we induced this goal. In particular, we primed half of the participants with a self-improvement orientation. The priming task involved a sentence completion procedure, borrowed from Brown and Zagefka (2006). Participants were given a sheet containing 20 sets of four to six words, and they were instructed to remove one word to write a correct sentence using all the remaining words. Four of the word sets were fillers, whereas the other 16 sets consisted of words that were associated with self-improvement (e.g., optimizes, improved, aspirations, gain). In the control condition, we replaced 15 of the 16 improvement words with filler words (e.g., regarded, heels, tours, announced).

Next, we informed participants that time had come for them to take the MOPI. Participants in the self condition expected to receive feedback about their personality. In contrast, participants in the Chris condition were told that their answers would be used to validate the MOPI, and that they would receive feedback about another person (Chris) who had previously taken the MOPI and had given permission for the anonymous circulation of feedback. All participants read the same behavioral feedback as in the previously described experiments (Green et al., 2005; Green et al., in press, Experiment 2) at their own pace, completed a distractor task, and recalled as many behaviors as possible.

We reasoned that, in the control (no prime) condition, the self-protection goal would guide feedback processing and recall. Participants would process the self-threatening feedback in a relatively shallow manner and would recall it poorly. In the experimental (prime) condition, however, the self-improvement goal would guide feedback processing and recall. Participants would process the feedback in a relatively deep manner and would recall it well. We hypothesized, then, that the mnemonic neglect effect would emerge in the control condition, but would be cancelled out in the experimental condition. This is indeed what we found. In the experimental condition, participants recalled self-threatening feedback as well as they recalled self-affirming feedback.

Satisfaction of Protection/Enhancement Pave the Way for Improvement

The above discussion illustrates the regulatory interplay between self-protection and self-improvement. When indirectly or directly activated, improvement goals become potent. Interestingly, fulfillment of the psychological needs (e.g., self-esteem, self-affirmation) underlying protection/enhancement also gives rise to self-improvement. A study by Green, Sedikides, and Gregg (2008, Experiment 2; see also Raghunathan & Trope, 2002) demonstrates this point.

In the abovementioned research (Green et al., 2005, in press), the mixed behavioral feedback was a once-off affair. In the real world, however, different waves of feedback often follow in swift succession, with one wave being psychologically processed in the context of another. Green et al.'s (2008) Experiment 2 aimed to reproduce everyday life situations where self-threat is encountered not in isolation and devoid of context but rather against a backdrop of additional feedback. In this case, the

earlier feedback likely exerts a psychological effect, either by diminishing people's self-esteem (*ego-deflation*) or by augmenting it (*ego-inflation*). For example, after first learning that the chapter you submitted for the *Sydney Symposium* volume has been unconditionally accepted (ego-inflation) or definitively rejected (ego-deflation), you might subsequently arrive home to find your partner either commending you for always taking the trash out (positive feedback) or denouncing you for never doing the dishes (negative feedback).

In particular, the Green et al. (2008) Experiment 2 simulated the ongoing nature of feedback in daily life as follows. Participants initially received either unfavorable or favorable feedback from one type of source, followed by the usual behavioral information from another source. The feedback from the first source, designed to induce ego deflation or inflation, stemmed from an assessment of cognitive abilities (i.e., a creativity test). The feedback from the second source, designed to induce subsequent mnemonic neglect, stemmed from the way familiar others ostensibly perceived one's important social qualities (e.g., trustworthiness, kindness), as in the abovementioned research (Green et al., 2005, in press). How would initial ego-inflation or ego-deflation influence the processing and recall of self-threatening and self-affirming feedback?

We hypothesized that mnemonic neglect would be more pronounced following ego-deflation than following ego-inflation. Shaken by a self-diminishing experience, ego-deflated participants would shy away from self-threatening feedback and be more attuned to self-affirming feedback (Baumeister et al., 1993; Campbell, Baumeister, Dhavale, & Tice, 2003). In contrast, armored and buoyed by a self-augmenting experience (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988), ego-inflated participants would be able to take self-

threatening feedback in their stride, and would have a reduced need to bolster their self-views by rehearsing and recalling self-affirming feedback. Hence, we hypothesized that recall of self-affirming feedback would exceed recall of self-threatening information in the ego-deflation condition but not in the ego-inflation condition. Stated otherwise, feedback processing and recall would be guided by self-protection in the ego-deflation condition, but would be guided by self-improvement in the ego-inflation condition. The results were consistent with our hypotheses.

Does satisfaction of protection/enhancement goals (i.e., self-inflation) lead to direct preferences for feedback that is negative but has clear improvement potential? We carried out a study to address this question (Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005, Experiment 1; see also Trope & Pomerantz, 1998). Participants first took a valid and reliable intelligence test—the alleged “Alport-Jameson Intelligence Test”—, consisting of tough verbal, mathematical, and analytical questions that resembled those of the Graduate Record Examination. The duration of the test was 20 minutes, and participants were given 25-45 seconds to respond to each question, depending on question difficulty. Upon test completion, participants were informed that they would receive feedback shortly but, in the meantime, they were to engage in a brief exercise.

This exercise was actually the ego-inflation versus control manipulations. The ego-inflation procedure involved a relationship visualization task. Participants brought to mind a close-positive relationship and then spent several minutes describing what were the positive aspects of the relationship, why the relationship was special, what it meant to them, and how the relationship made them feel. In the control conditions, participants completed the same procedure for other types of relationships (i.e., close-negative and

neutral). Next, participants received feedback on the Alport-Jameson Intelligence Test. The feedback was uniformly negative. Participants learned that their scores fell on the 41st percentile, and their performance was poor. Finally, participants indicated the extent to which they desired additional feedback that focused on their liabilities, that is, on their intelligence shortcomings. For example, participants indicated how interested they were in reading liability-focused information, how interested they were in going out of their way to obtain such information, and how interested they were in receiving recommendations about such information.

We hypothesized that, in the control conditions, participants would express little, if any, interest in liability-focused information. Having just had a self-diminishing blow (i.e., close negative relationship) or a rather meaningless experience (i.e., neutral relationship), they would want to shun self-threatening information now matter how potentially improving it might be. In contrast, participants in the ego-inflation condition would express relatively strong interest in liability-focused information. Shielded and boosted by a self-augmenting experience (i.e., close-positive relationship), these participants would have a reduced need to defend their self-views and would thus be able to consider opportunities for improvement on a domain of considerable weakness (i.e., intelligence). Stated otherwise, the self-protection goal would guide liability-focused feedback preferences in the control conditions, but the self-improvement goal would guide such feedback preferences in the ego-inflation condition. The results were consistent with our hypotheses.

Summary

The research reviewed so far illustrates the allocation property of goal systems theory in the domain of self-evaluation. Self-protection is regulated in the presence of self-improvement. In particular, the self-protection goal is activated by default, and subsequently pursued, when individuals encounter self-threatening feedback. However, a competing goal, self-improvement, can be activated either by the attributes of the feedback per se (e.g., when it is future oriented and has constructive potential) or directly (e.g., through priming techniques). In this case, the improvement goal is pursued. Finally, the self-improvement goal takes precedence when the self-protection (or self-enhancement) goal is satisfied.

Abandoning or Finessing Protection/Enhancement:

The Contextual Dependence Property of Means

As the third tenet of goal systems theory (i.e., the contextual dependence property) indicates, multiple means may be relevant to a given goal. Means selection depends on means availability and contextual demands. This tenet also helps explain findings pertaining to the regulation of self-protection and self-enhancement. In particular, this tenet explains findings having to do with the abandonment or finessing of protection/enhancement goals in the presence of three types of norms: the social norm of accountability, the relational norm of fair treatment, and cultural norms of personhood (i.e., mandates on constitutes a “good person”). An illustrative discussion follows.

Abandoning Self-Enhancement Due to the Social Norm of Accountability

Assuming that protection and enhancement are the default self-evaluative goals (Dijksterhuis & Aarts, 2003; Paulhus, Graff, & van Selst, 1989; Wentura, Rothermund, & Bak, 2000), a rather compelling social norm would be required for their curtailment. An

example of such a norm is accountability, defined in this context as participants' expectation that they will be called on to explain, justify, and defend their self-views to an audience (i.e., one or more other persons). We (Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002) carried out an investigation in which we examined the extent to which accountability limits self-enhancement.

We hypothesized that accountability would indeed curtail self-enhancement. Participants would inhibit their self-enhancing tendencies in the knowledge that their self-evaluations would be inspected by an objective and independent party. Thus, participants would be under pressing reality constraints (Stapel & Schwinghammer, 2004), as the veracity of their self-views will be impartially assessed by an audience who is not only able but also willing to pose a challenge (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995).

All participants wrote an opinion essay on whether the United States should invest in planetary exploration. Participants then were informed that they would be asked to grade their own essays. Before actual grading took place, participants were split into the experimental and control conditions. In the experimental (i.e., accountability) condition, participants were led to believe that their grades would become available to Chris Becker, a PhD student in Logic and English Composition, who was allegedly well-published and had won teaching and writing awards. Participants were told in no uncertain terms that they would have to fully explain, justify, and defend their essay grades to Chris Becker. In the control (i.e., unaccountability) condition, participants were led to believe that their grades would be completely confidential and untraceable to them. Their grades would

allegedly be sent to researchers at another university who were investigating alternative grading systems.

The results were informative. Accountable participants assigned their essays lower grades than unaccountable participants. Accountability reduced self-enhancement (Sedikides et al., 2002, Experiment 1). This finding was replicated both when the audience (i.e., Chris Becker) was ostensibly high status (PhD candidate) and when the audience was ostensibly low status (high school student) (Sedikides et al., Experiment 2). Further research clarified the mechanisms underlying this enhancement-reduction effect. Accountable participants curtailed their self-enhancement strivings because they were identifiable (Sedikides et al., Experiment 3), felt evaluation apprehension (Sedikides et al., Experiment 4), and focused on their personal weaknesses as a writer (Sedikides et al., Experiment 4; Sedikides & Herbst, 2002). In summary, the situational norm of accountability curbs self-enhancement strivings.

Abandoning Self-Enhancement Relational Norm of Fair Treatment

An important norm in close relationships (i.e., friendships, romantic partnerships) is fair treatment. The expectation is to show concern for each other (Clark & Mills, 1979; Davis & Todd, 1985), to accommodate each other's interests (Rubin, 1985; Rusbult et al., 1991), and, more generally, to maximize outcomes for both persons involved (Argyle & Henderson, 1985; Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997). In fact, the outcome maximization expectation goes as far as sacrificing self-interest for the sake of the partner (Van Lange et al., 1997), given that the close other is part of the self (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Gabriel, Renaud, & Tippin, 2007). As such, an interdependent task involvement with a

close other would lead to a reduction or elimination of self-enhancement, even when future social interaction is not anticipated.

We (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998, Experiment 1) created such conditions in a laboratory experiment. Unacquainted participants were tested in dyads. They were informed that they would depart separately at the end of the experiment, thus precluding the possibility of an immediate social interaction. Subsequent social interaction was unlikely, due to the size of the students population at the university where the experiment took place (i.e., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), but students nonetheless were courteously discouraged from future interaction or at least from initiating such an interaction by talking about this experiment if they happened to see each other again. Next, all participants took the Relationship Closeness Induction Task (RCIT; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1999). This is a 9-minute escalated self-disclosure procedure, designed to induce relationship closeness. Participants take turns in answering three sets of questions. The first set consists of seven questions and is of low intimacy (e.g., “Where are you from?”). The second set consists of 12 questions and is of intermediate intimacy (e.g., “What would you like to do after graduating from this University?”). The third and final set consists of 10 questions and is of high intimacy (e.g., “Tell me one thing about yourself that most people who already know you don’t know”). In our experiment, the RCIT proved effective in inducing closeness.

Next, participants were informed that they would work with another person on a creativity project. Participants in the close relationship condition remained with the same partner. However, participants in the stranger condition switched to a new partner, who had just completed the RCIT with another person. As part of the creativity project,

participants were asked to generate, in 5 minutes, as many uses as possible for the objects “candle” and “brick.” The experimenter allegedly would place the participant’s and the partner’s uses in a box. In the end, the number of non-overlapping uses would count as the dyad’s combined creativity score. Following that, participants received either bogus success or bogus failure feedback at the dyadic level: The dyad had scored either at the 93rd percentile or the 31st percentile of the creativity continuum, compared to similar dyads. Finally, participants indicated under guarantee of confidentiality who, according to their opinion, was more personally responsible for the dyadic outcome (i.e., success or failure). Was it them or was it the partner?

In the stranger condition, participants took personal responsibility for the success of the dyad, but blamed the partner for the failure of the dyad. This is a replication of the self-serving bias, one of the most valid signatures of self-enhancement strivings (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004). However, in the close relationship condition, participants gracefully gave the partner equal credit for the dyadic success, and magnanimously assumed equal responsibility for the dyadic failure. In this condition, the self-serving bias was eliminated. (For a conceptual replication of these findings, see: McCall, Reno, Jalbert, & West, 2000). In a follow-up study (Sedikides et al., 1998, Experiment 1), we zeroed in on the mediation of this effect: Participants in close-relationship dyads refrained from self-enhancement because they formed a positive impression of their partner. In summary, the relational norm of fair treatment cancels out self-enhancement strivings.

Finessing Self-Enhancement Due to Cultural Norms of Personhood

The social norm of accountability and the relational norm of fair treatment contribute to the abandonment of protection or enhancement goals. In contrast, cultural norms of personhood contribute to the finessing of such goals. In particular, the manifestation of these goals takes a subtle or indirect form that is unlikely to offend others. An illustration of this point is provided next in the context of personhood norms of Western cultures (e.g., USA, Canada, England) and Eastern cultures (e.g., Japan, Taiwan, China).

Western and Eastern cultures differ in terms of their imperatives for what constitutes a good person or a good cultural member. In the West, the agency imperative or the individualistic dimension (e.g., personal effectiveness, social dominance) is valued. However, in the East, the communion imperative or the collectivistic dimension (e.g., personal integration, social connection) is valued. It is assumed that members of Western and Eastern culture internalize these imperatives and render them central elements of their self-concept. Thus, Westerners will consider individualistic attributes (e.g., traits, behaviors) as personally important, whereas they will consider collectivistic attributes as personally unimportant. In contrast, Easterners will consider collectivistic attributes as personally important, whereas they will consider individualistic attributes as personally unimportant.

The manifestation of self-enhancement is rarely crude and unvarnished. First, people self-enhance on attributes that they consider personally important rather than unimportant (Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Second, modesty norms are valued both in the West (Eagly & Aksen, 1971; Exline, Campbell, Baumeister, Joiner, & Krueger, 2004; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Schlenker, 1980) and the East (Bond,

Leung, & Wan, 1982; Crittenden, 1991; Gu, 1990). As such, lionizing the self comes with social repercussions, such as negative interpersonal evaluation and negative intragroup evaluation, including ostracism (Anderson, Ames, & Gosling, 2008; Forsyth, Berger, & Mitchell, 1981; Robinson, Johnson & Shields, 1995). It appears, then, that members then of both Western and Eastern cultures would do well to self-enhance strategically and tactically.

What constitutes tactical self-enhancement? This would be a self-enhancing mode that maximizes both intrapersonal (e.g., self-esteem) and interpersonal (e.g., acceptance) gains. One would maximize intrapersonal gains, if one boasted on personally important rather than unimportant attributes. Indeed, only minimal intrapersonal gains would be accrued by across-the-board bragging about one's talents and virtues. In addition, one would maximize interpersonal gains, if one boasted on attributes that members of their own culture value as well (thus ensuring acceptance) rather than on attributes that other cultural members would devalue or find offensive and awkward (thus risking rejection).

We obtained empirically support for these ideas both through direct experimentation (Gaertner, Sedikides, & Chang, in press; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003) and through the conduct of meta-analyses (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005, 2007a, 2007b). To begin with, Westerners regard individualistic attributes (e.g., independent, self-reliant, unique) as more personally important than collectivistic attributes (e.g., agreeable, compromising, loyal). However, Easterners regard collectivistic attributes as more important than individualistic attributes. In addition, Westerners self-enhance (i.e., regard the self as better-than-average) more on individualistic than collectivistic attributes, whereas Easterners self-enhance on

collectivistic than individualistic attributes. Finally, these subtle and indirect self-enhancement strategies have psychological health benefits both in the West (Taylor et al., 2003) and the East (Gaertner et al., in press), while ensuring optimal level of a interpersonal acceptance both in the West (Tannen, 1994; Wosinska, Dabul, Whetstone-Dion, & Cialdini, 1996) and the East (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Hsu, 1948).

In all, cultural norms of personhood trigger indirect and subtle forms of self-enhancement manifestation or self-enhancement regulation. Members of all cultures self-enhance. However, they do so in strategic and tactical ways, and in ways that maximize psychological and social benefits.

Summary

The research reviewed under this section illustrates the contextual property of goal systems theory in the domain of self-evaluation. Self-enhancement and self-protection are regulated efficiently in the presence of powerful norms. In particular, self-enhancement is decreased or abandoned when the social norm of accountability and the relational norm of fair treatment are contextually activated. Finally, the self-enhancement goal manifests itself tactically as a function of cultural norms of personhood: People self-enhance selectively on culturally and personally valued (rather than devalued) personality characteristics.

Concluding Remarks

One of the most fundamental human motives is to think well of the self—that is, to think of one's self slightly better than others do, and to think of one's self as somewhat better than objective facts warrant. The other side of the same motive is to

shield the self from negative and destabilizing feedback. These are referred to as the self-enhancement and self-protection motives or goals.

Enhancement and protection goals have intrapersonal (e.g., psychological health) benefits for the individual, but they may also have intrapersonal costs (e.g., failure to learn from one's own mistakes). This chapter examined how the benefits and costs of enhancement/protection goals are balanced. In particular, the chapter examined the regulation of enhancement and protection goals in the framework of goal systems theory. A major tenet of the theory posit that goals compete for capturing means, and the activated goal will capture the means for its accomplishment at any particular time, becoming the focal goal (allocational property). Another major tenet of the theory advocates that the context will determine which means will be selected for what goal (contextual dependence property).

The first part of this chapter reviewed research pertaining to the allocational property. Two goals were in competition for capturing the means (i.e., the available feedback). One was enhancement/protection, the other was improvement. First, participants switched from enhancement/protection to improvement, when the latter was indirectly activated. For example, the protection goal drove processing of self-threatening feedback on unmodifiable attributes or on feedback provided by a stranger; in this case, the feedback was poorly recalled. However, the improvement goal drove processing of self-threatening feedback on modifiable attributes or on feedback provided by a close other; in this case, feedback was relatively well recalled (Green et al., 2005; Green et al., in press, Experiment 2). Second, participants switched from enhancement/protection to improvement, when the latter was directly activated. For example, under default

conditions, the protection goal guided feedback processing, resulting in poor recall. However, when primed, the improvement goal did so, resulting in better recall (Green et al., in press, Experiment 1). Finally, the improvement goal influenced feedback recall and feedback preferences when the protection/enhancement goals had been attained through a positive experience (i.e., an ego-inflation manipulation; Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005; Green et al., 2008, Experiment 2).

The second part of the chapter reviewed research pertaining to the contextual dependence property. First, enhancement/protection goals retreated under the restrictive influence of the situational norm of accountability, where participants had to explain, defend, and justify their self-views to an impartial audience. Second, enhancement/protection goals were abandoned under the influence of the relational norm of fair treatment, where participants refrained from exaggerating their own contributions to a positive dyadic outcome or apportioning blame to the partner for a negative dyadic outcome. Finally, enhancement/protection goals were manifested tactically in a cultural context, in compliance with cultural personhood norms (i.e., mandates on what constitutes a good person in a given culture). Members of Western cultures internalize ideals of agency and independence, whereas members of Eastern cultures internalize ideals of communion and interdependence. Indeed, Westerners self-enhanced on individualistic, but not collectivistic, attributes, whereas Easterners self-enhanced on collectivistic, but not individualistic attributes.

Several related questions are worthy of further empirical attention. The fourth tenet of goal systems theory refers to the affective consequences of goal selection, predicting feelings of “rightness” in regulatory fit (optimal goal choice) but feelings of

“wrongness” in regulator misfit (suboptimal goal choice). Capitalizing on this principle, do people feel better when they select protection versus improvement goals, and under what circumstances will they feel better on one occasion versus another? Another question concerns regulatory failure. What are the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of regulatory breakdown during goal pursuit, such as the relentless pursuit of a self-protection and the accompanying failure to switch to self-improvement? Yet another question pertains to individual differences in the regulation of enhancement/protection goals. For example, are narcissists (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002) likely to rigidly pursue protection/enhancement goals, thus failing falling short of abandoning such goals even when self-improvement goals are cognitively accessible or contextually available? On the other hand, are securely attached persons likely to overpursue improvement goals at the expense of protection goals (Green & Campbell, 2000; Mikulincer & Arad, 1999)? Regardless, these and other questions vouch for a promising future of research on the regulation of self-enhancement and self-protection, and, more generally, on the regulation of self-evaluation strivings.

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