

## Too Much of a Good Thing?\*

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*Self-discrepancy (SD) theories and self-enhancement (SE) theories have focused primarily on people's motivations to seek either self-consistent or self-enhancing feedback. The two sets of theories, however, also suggest different reactions to the feedback people receive from others. SE theories suggest that people react negatively to evaluations that are more negative than self-evaluations, but positively to evaluations that are more positive. SD theories, like identity control theory, suggest that people react negatively to either under- or overevaluation. We use data from newly married couples over the first three years of marriage to test these different predictions of SD and SE theories. The results indicate strong support for discrepancy theories overall, though an examination of potential moderators suggests that the discrepancy effect is larger when the relationship to the other is stronger. We discuss implications of these results for identity control theory.*

Identity control theory (ICT), like self-discrepancy theories generally, assumes that people are motivated to verify their identities by seeking feedback from others which is not discrepant from their own self-views (Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 1999; Higgins 1987; Higgins, Klein, and Strauman 1985; Stets and Burke 1996; Swann 1983). When the dimension of meaning that is relevant to the identity is one of evaluation, people want others to evaluate them at the same level as they evaluate themselves. Evaluations by others that are more negative than self-evaluations disconfirm their identity and lead to negative self-feelings, as do evaluations that are more positive than self-evaluations (Swann, Pelham, and Krull 1989).

In contrast, self-enhancement (SE) theories suggest that people are motivated pri-

marily to seek positive evaluations from others and to avoid negative evaluations. Jones (1973), for example, argued that people behave in a manner that leads to the maintenance or enhancement of their self-evaluation or self-esteem, and that individuals with low self-esteem ought to respond more favorably to positive evaluations from others than those with high self-esteem. Others have shown that people employ a number of strategies for enhancing their evaluations of themselves (Baumeister 1982; Brown, Collins, and Schmidt 1988; Kaplan 1975, 1980)

These theoretical perspectives focus on persons' *motivation* to seek to reduce discrepancy or to increase enhancement through their feedback from others; the two approaches also differ as to the *consequences* of the feedback for self-feelings. Although both ICT and SE theories suggest that people feel bad as a result of evaluations by others that are below the level of self-evaluation, they disagree on what happens when these evaluations are higher than self-evaluations. SE theories suggest that a person's self-esteem is enhanced; discrepancy theories such as ICT suggest that people feel bad as a consequence of being overevaluated.

These two motivations have been studied and discussed in the literature, and each has received some support. Yet we still lack a full

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understanding of these motivational perspectives and of the affective consequences of over- and underevaluation. Part of the problem may lie in the types of data that have been brought to bear on the problem. Many of the studies were conducted in laboratory in experiments that did not involve feedback from significant others interacting over an extended period. It is quite possible that without feedback or with feedback from non-significant others (in the laboratory, for example), the dynamics of these short-term relationships are quite different from those of more involved relationships (cf. Stets 2003).

In the present paper we examine this difference in the consequences of overevaluation that are predicted by ICT and SE theories, using data from newly married couples over the first years of their marriage. In this way we bring to bear data involving longer-term relationships between persons who are important to each other.

## THE MODELS

### *Identity Control Theory*

ICT is a self-discrepancy model that grows out of the structural symbolic interaction framework (Stryker 1980; Stryker and Burke 2000) and the perceptual control model of Powers (Powers 1973). Within this theory, an identity is a set of meanings one holds for oneself as an occupant of a particular role (role identity), as a member of a particular group or category (social identity), or as a unique individual (person identity). These meanings define who one is—what it means to be oneself. To a large extent, the meanings are shared within a culture; thus occupants of different social positions understand how to behave toward each other (Stryker 1980). This set of self-meanings constitutes the identity standard or reference against which perceptions of self-relevant meanings in the situation are compared. Self-verification occurs when there is no discrepancy between perceived self-meanings in a situation and the identity meanings held in the standard.

The comparator is the mechanism that compares the two sets of meanings and emits an error signal measuring any discrepancy or

lack of congruence. According to ICT, people are motivated to verify their identities by acting to modify the situation in order to keep perceived self-relevant meanings congruent with the self-meanings held in the identity standard, thereby reducing the error or discrepancy to zero. In this way, ICT is a theory about controlling self-relevant perceptions. When a discrepancy occurs—that is, when the error is not zero—people respond both affectively and behaviorally. The affective response to any discrepancy or to an increasing discrepancy is negative; to the lack of discrepancy or to a decreasing discrepancy, it is positive. The behavioral response is to modify the situation so that the perceived meanings again will match the meanings held in the standard. This is the self-verification process. In this way, self-views are maintained in the face of disturbances in the situation.

When the self-verification process involves interaction with others (as it most often does), we can distinguish between two ends of what is probably a continuum involving the time cycle in which the verification process occurs. At one end are easily corrected disturbances to self-relevant meanings in the situation. Explanations, apologies, justifications, adjustments to one's behavior, and so on quickly suffice to restore situational self-relevant meanings. At the other end are disturbances that result from conflicts developed in what have been called mutual verification contexts: that is, contexts in which two or more persons each act to verify the other(s) and thereby receive identity verification (Burke and Stets 1999). Conflicts exist when actions that confirm one identity result in disconfirmation of another (Burke 2002, 2003). To bring about mutual verification when conflicts exist, the identity standards involved must be adjusted. This process may take a great deal of time, perhaps more time than the people involved wish to devote to the problem (as in the case of divorce, for example) (Cast and Burke 2002).

### *Self-Enhancement Theories*

SE theories suggest that an actor's primary motivation is to receive the most positive evaluation possible from others by seeking out the positive and avoiding the

negative (Jones 1973). Positive evaluations, according to SE theories, produce positive self-feelings that result in short-term psychological benefits such as an increase of self-esteem (see Taylor and Brown 1988). Negative evaluation produces a corresponding reduction in positive feelings about the self.

Jones's (1973) self-esteem model provides a clear illustration of this tradition. He argues that actors need or desire to enhance and maintain their self-evaluation and will act to create that outcome. When positive feedback that satisfies this need is forthcoming, actors feel good about themselves, and their self-esteem increases. Conversely, negative feedback, which frustrates this need, leads to a decline in self-esteem. This need is conditioned upon the actor's situational and personal characteristics. For example, actors with high self-esteem are seen to be fairly complacent about this need, whereas those with low self-esteem are in greater need of positive feedback to bolster their self-esteem; thus they respond more favorably to such feedback than those with high self-esteem.

One of the reasons why Jones's (1973) argument exemplifies this tradition is that he presents two important extensions. The first concerns whether actors will accept or reject positive feedback. Jones argues that the self-esteem motive not only is oriented to the present, but also functions in a forward-looking manner. Accordingly, feedback is evaluated not only for its immediate value but also for its implications for the self in other, future encounters. Thus people may forgo receiving or acknowledging positive feedback if they feel that such a self cannot be maintained when called into question. Jones uses this argument to reinterpret research that seemingly supports a self-discrepancy motive: when actors are going to be tested or otherwise required to demonstrate that they deserve the positive feedback, they tend to be more conservative and to reject such feedback.

Second, Jones (1973) argues that the focus of the feedback has implications for self-esteem. When positive feedback focuses on characteristics of the self, an internal attribution, it enhances self-esteem more strongly than if it focuses on an outside cause, an

external attribution. Thus, positive feedback in which the self is seen as the causal force exerts a more powerful effect on one's self-esteem than positive feedback involving an outside force.

### *Comparing the Models*

Although each of these theoretical perspectives has received some support when tested independently, few studies have tested them comparatively. In one study that compared the two motivations directly, Swann and Read (1981) found that people sought to receive subjectively accurate feedback even when it may not have been positive. In another study, Sedikides (1993) found that people preferred to answer questions about themselves to which the answers would enhance rather than confirm their self-views.

Only the Swann and Read study, however, used interpersonal settings in which people actually had the chance of receiving feedback from others about themselves. No feedback was obtained in the Sedikides study; people only engaged in self-reflection. The Sedikides study makes clear that people prefer to think about their positive qualities if those qualities are central to the self, but would be willing to think about less positive aspects if those were not central to the self. Yet, this situation is not the same as how one handles actual feedback from others, and what kind of feedback one prefers from others who are important to the self. If one is to receive feedback from a significant other, would one feel better as a result of subjectively accurate but negative feedback or inaccurate but positive feedback?

Self-enhancement and self-discrepancy theories generally focus on individuals' different motivations, but the two theories also differ in another, implicit way: how each hypothesizes that individuals will react to evaluations by others. For the SE models, people should respond more positively as the other's evaluations of them become more favorable. This is relationship is linear: the more favorable the evaluation, the more favorable the response. For the self-discrepancy models such as ICT, people should respond positively only when there is no discrepancy between the other's evaluation of

them and their own self-evaluation, and negatively when the other's evaluation departs from their own in either a negative or a positive direction. This relationship is curvilinear. For both theories, negative evaluations produce negative self-feelings; the theories differ in how people are expected to respond to overly positive evaluations. The divergent predictions made by each of these theories are formalized in the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* When people receive feedback from others that is more negative than their view of themselves, they will experience negative self-feelings.

*Hypothesis 2a:* When people receive feedback from others that is more positive than their view of themselves, they will experience negative self-feelings (ICT).

*Hypothesis 2b:* When people receive feedback from others that is more positive than their view of themselves, they will experience positive self-feelings (SE).

Because each of these theoretical perspectives has received some support, it may be that there are conditions under which each applies. If that is the case, it is important to understand the conditions under which self-enhancement and self-verification occur so that the scope of the two theories can be understood more clearly. In the following discussion we consider a moderating factor suggested by prior research: the nature of the relationship between the person and the other (Swann, de la Ronde, and Hixon 1994). We explore the possibility that both theories are true, but under different conditions.

#### VERIFICATION OR ENHANCEMENT?

Swann (1990) and his colleagues (Swann et al. 1987) attempted to determine when people preferred consistency and when they preferred enhancement in feedback by others. He suggested a three-phase model involving a categorization phase, a comparison phase, and a strategic phase. In the *categorization phase*, people need only to categorize a stimulus as favorable (enhancing) or unfavorable. This happens very quickly, and nothing else is needed if the person is motivated only to seek enhancing or favorable stimuli. The affective reaction at this

phase would be happiness or sadness, depending on whether the stimulus was favorable or unfavorable in absolute terms.

In the *comparison phase*, more time and more cognitive work are required to discover whether the stimulus is accurate: that is, not discrepant from the self-view. For this purpose, the person must recover the relevant self-view and compare the stimulus with the self-view. The affective reaction in this phase would be comfort or anxiety, depending upon whether the stimulus was consistent with the self-view. A third phase then may ensue, the *strategic phase*, in which the person may formulate a plan to deal with the stimulus: avoiding it, or seeking it out.

This more complex model suggests that self-enhancement may be an immediate response. The more complex response of self-verification will occur, however, given cognitive resources, time and a motivation to use them. Early experimental results (Swann 1990) show support for this model, which begins to incorporate both the responses to feedback and individuals' motivations in dealing with the feedback. We see that immediate responses are made to the enhancing (or nonenhancing) character of the feedback, as suggested in SE theories, while later, more cognitively processed responses are made to the verifying (or nonverifying) quality of the feedback, as suggested in identity control theory.

Given this model, what conditions cause a person to stop processing after the immediate self-enhancing response to overevaluation? And what conditions facilitate or encourage a person to continue processing the overevaluation so as to recognize the lack of self-verification in that overevaluation? One suggestion is the nature of the person's relationship to the other who overevaluates him or her. For example, a study conducted by Swann et al. (1994), showed that persons who were dating were most intimate with partners who evaluated them favorably (enhancing), while married couples were most intimate with partners whose evaluations of them were most consistent with their own self-evaluations (verifying).

The authors suggested that the nature of the relationship—dating or marriage—determined whether the partner preferred positive

evaluations or subjectively accurate evaluations. Among dating couples, they argued, while the relationship is fresh and new and one partner is trying to impress the other, self-enhancement governs the responses to the momentary meanings, whether positive or negative. At this stage, there is little motivation for the cognitive work that is required for self-verification; dating couples are caught up in the emotional moment, so to speak. As time goes on (and marriage ensues), persons feel an increased impetus to think about the deeper meaning of the other's responses and how those relate to self. At this point in the relationship, a long future with the other is anticipated, and opportunities for self-verification are sought (Burke and Stets 1999).

This line of reasoning suggests that in new relationships or in relationships without a future, self-enhancement may be the dominant reaction to overevaluation: it makes one feel good, and no further thought is needed. In established, long-term relationships, however, self-verification is the dominant reaction: people have time to further process the overevaluation, realize that they are not being verified, and hence feel bad. This line of reasoning also would be consistent with Jones's (1973) argument that people may prefer subjectively accurate feedback if there are future implications; this would be the case in established, ongoing relationships that anticipate continued interactions which fulfill mutual expectations.

This point may explain experimental participants' positive reactions to overreward in studies of distributive justice (Hegtvedt 1990; Stets 2003). Being overrewarded is like receiving high evaluations for average performance, a rating that is not consistent with the self-view that one has performed at merely an average level. As Stets (2003) points out, the overreward is a positive message and tells the person that he or she is a good person, something that everyone likes to hear.<sup>1</sup>

Experiments conducted in a laboratory are short-term and generate fairly immediate reactions to the overreward. Any feedback

comes from persons with whom the participant is not likely to interact with in the future. Without impetus for further processing, individuals may hardly recognize that the rating is inconsistent with the self-view; Thus the immediate affective response is positive. In addition, the relationship to the experimenter is brief and has no long-term consequences; this fact further reduces any motivation to process more deeply what has happened. One may expect, as with the married couples of Swann, et al. (1994), that if the relationship with the experimenter or other participants were long-term, the reactions might not remain positive as additional meanings and truth in the relationship were sought.

Thus we expect that persons who have known each other for a shorter period may be tuned to the more immediate positive meanings of an overevaluation, while those who have been involved with each other for longer periods are more likely to take the time to process the discrepant information of an overevaluation, realize the lack of self-verification, and become upset about it. We thus suggest the following hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 3:* A person who has known another for a short period of time will react less negatively and more positively to an evaluation that is more positive than the person's self-evaluation than will a person who has known the other for a longer period.

Alternatively, it may not be how long the people have known each other but the strength of their relationship that matters. We can expect that the longer a relationship exists, the deeper the individuals' involvement with each other will be. Yet there may be some long term-relationships that are not deep, and some new relationships that have grown quite deep rather quickly. For this reason we suggest the following alternative hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 3a:* A person who is less deeply involved with another will react less negatively and more positively to an evaluation that is more positive than the person's self-evaluation than will a person who is more deeply involved with another.

<sup>1</sup> Yet there is some question about whether people who do not think well of themselves find this a positive message.

Thus far we have discussed affective responses to being under- or overevaluated, and one might wonder whether such affective responses would be expressed in more behavioral ways. If people react negatively to being under- or overevaluated, would the relationship in which this occurs be likely to suffer? Would people be more likely to separate or divorce when they do not receive the level of evaluation they desire?<sup>2</sup> Are more than self-feelings involved? To test these questions we offer the following three hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 4:* When people receive feedback from others that is more negative than their view of themselves, they will be more likely to break off the relationship.

*Hypothesis 5a:* When people receive feedback from others that is more positive than their view of themselves, they will be more likely to break off the relationship (ICT).

*Hypothesis 5b:* When people receive feedback from others that is more positive than how their view of themselves, they will be less likely to break off the relationship (SE).

## METHODS

### Sample

We examine these hypotheses using three waves of data from a longitudinal study of marital dynamics in the first two years of marriage (Tallman, Burke, and Gecas 1998). Each data-collection period included a 90-minute face-to-face interview, a 15-minute videotaping of a conversation focused on solving an area of disagreement, and four consecutive one-week daily diaries kept by each respondent. The present analyses are based on information gathered during the face-to-face interview at each point.

The sample was drawn from marriage registration records in 1991 and 1992 in two midsized communities in Washington State.

Of the 1,295 couples registered to marry, 574 met the criteria for involvement: both partners were over age 18, were marrying for the first time, and had no children. These couples were contacted and asked to participate; 286 completed all data-collection processes in the first period. There was a 15 percent attrition rate from the first data-collection period to the second, and an additional 4.2 percent attrition from the second period to the third. Couples who dropped out of the study after the first or second round were more likely to be young ( $p < .05$ ), less highly educated ( $p < .05$ ), and of a lower socioeconomic status ( $p < .05$ ).<sup>3</sup> All couples were interviewed individually; usually the first interview was held within a few weeks of their marriage.

### Measures

Each partner answered a series of five evaluative items asking them to describe themselves. The stem was "How would you rate yourself on . . . ?" The items were (1) intelligence, (2) physical appearance, (3) being likable, (4) friendliness, and (5) being an understanding person. Each respondent rated himself or herself on a scale ranging from 0 to 100. Later in the interview, each respondent was asked to rate his or her spouse using the same items. These questions were asked at all three interview points: immediately after the couple was married, a year later, and two years later.

We analyze responses to each of the items as well as the principal component of the five items. The principal component analysis showed that the first principal component accounted for 53 percent of the variance (eigenvalue = 2.62).<sup>4</sup> All remaining eigenvalues were less than 1.0. This principal component was standardized (zero mean and unit variance) and labeled *evaluation scale* for the analyses. The omega reliability for the scale .84 for the self and .83 for the spouse.

<sup>3</sup> A fuller description of the data and the data-collection process is available in (Tallman et al. 1998).

<sup>4</sup> To assure the use of the same weights for each year and for self and spouse ratings, we derived the principal component weights from an analysis of the ratings of intelligence, physical appearance, likability, friendliness, and understanding, pooled across the three years as well as across self and spouse ratings.

<sup>2</sup> Cast and Burke (2002) have examined the effect of lack of self-verification of the spousal role on the likelihood of divorce. In that analysis, however, they did not look at verification of the evaluative dimension, nor did they separate under- and overevaluation to examine the consequences of each.

We measured *self-evaluation discrepancy* for each of the five components as well as the overall evaluation scale in terms of the difference between each respondent's self-ratings and the ratings of the respondent provided by the spouse. For this step, each person's self-view was subtracted from his or her spouse's view of the person. Thus, for example, if I rated myself 85 on intelligence and my spouse rated me 80, the -5 point difference represents the degree to which my spouse saw me as less intelligent than I considered myself. Similarly, if I rated myself 85 and my spouse rated me 92, the +7 difference represents the degree to which my spouse saw me as more intelligent than I consider myself.

Because ICT is derived in part from perceptual control theory (Powers 1973), the desired measure would be the respondent's perceptions of the spouse's ratings of him or her (the reflected appraisals) rather than the actual ratings. It is the respondent's perceptions (with their accompanying biases) that are controlled by the identity. We use the spouse's ratings as a proxy for the respondent's perceptions of those ratings; thus we assume that the respondent's perceptions of their spouse's evaluations are relatively accurate in the sense that there is a strong correlation between the two. In general, this is a safe assumption based on the shared meanings in symbolic interaction, and it has been made in other research (Burke and Stets 1999).

In addition, this thinking is consistent with Kinch's (1963) theory of the self-concept, in which he postulates that a person's perceptions of another's responses to him or her reflect the other's actual responses. Although the link is not perfect, Kinch suggests that several conditions increase the accuracy of the perception: (1) ego's familiarity with the other, (2) the level of familiarity with the situation, and (3) the actor's past experiences in interpersonal situations. All of these should be present among the newly married couples in the present sample. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that a spouse's actual appraisals are correlated highly with the actor's perceptions of those appraisals, which the actor is using to assess and regulate discrepancies.

To obtain a robust test of the hypotheses, we examine the effects of discrepancy across five separate affective outcomes, three negative and two positive. The positive outcomes are two forms of self-focused affect, efficacy-based esteem and worth-based esteem (Gecas 1982; Gecas and Schwalbe 1983); depression, anger, and distress are the negative self-feelings.<sup>5</sup> The measure of *self-worth* is that used by Cast and Burke (2002). The scale is based on the seven items from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965) that focus on worthiness, and has an omega reliability of .88. Sample items from this scale are "I take a positive attitude toward myself" and "At times, I think I am no good at all" (reversed). A high score represents high self-worth. We standardized the final scale.

The nine-item measure of *self-efficacy* also was used by Cast and Burke (2002), and is drawn from the efficacy items of the Rosenberg scale as well as items in the Pearlin Mastery Scale (Pearlin et al. 1981). The omega reliability is .85. Sample items are "I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life" (reversed) and "I am able to do things as well as most other people." A high score on the scale represents high self-efficacy. We standardized the final scale.

*Depression* was measured with 12 items from the CES-D scale (Radloff 1977). Sample items include asking respondents on how many days during the last week did they "feel lonely," "sleep restlessly," and "feel they could not get going." Response categories range from 0 ("not at all") to 7 ("seven days"). The items form a single factor with an omega reliability of .95. We aligned and summed the items. Possible scores range from 0 to 84; high score indicates high levels of depression. The final scale was standardized.

<sup>5</sup> Although the concept of self-esteem has been used as representing the "self-concept," most researchers now distinguish between self-esteem as a self-evaluation or self-feeling and the self-concept as containing the more substantive aspects of the self, such as identities (see Rosenberg 1979). The two aspects of self-esteem examined here are understood to be self-feelings, but clearly differ from the other outcomes examined: depression, distress, and anger. Our intent is to examine a variety of outcomes.

We measured *anger* using five items from the hostility subscale of the SCL-90 (Derogatis et al. 1971). Respondents were asked, for example, how many days during the last week did they “get angry over things that weren’t really too important,” “have temper outbursts,” or “want to hurt somebody or smash something.” Response categories range from 0 (“not at all”) to 7 (“seven days”). Items were aligned and summed. The omega reliability for the scale is .83; a high score indicates high levels of anger. The final scale was standardized.

*Distress* was measured with nine items from the SCL-90 scale (Derogatis et al. 1971). Respondents were asked, for example, on how many days during the week did they “feel keyed up or overexcited,” “feel [their] hands trembling,” and “feel nervous or have an upset stomach.” Response categories range from 0 (“not at all”) to 7 (“seven days”). We aligned and summed the items. The omega reliability for the anxiety measure is .89. The final scale was standardized; a high score indicates high anxiety.

Finally, information regarding when the couple first met was collected during the initial interview. We then calculated the *length of time the couples had known each other* from the difference between the initial meeting date and the initial interview. We standardized this measure to have zero mean and unit variance. *Degree of involvement* was measured by taking the principal-component of four indicators: the degree to which the person loved his or her spouse (Rubin 1973), the degree to which the person was subjectively committed to their spouse (Burke and Stets 1999), the degree to which the person trusted their spouse (Larzelere and Huston 1980), and the degree to which the person was able to take the spouse’s role (Davis 1983). The omega reliability for this scale was .94; a high score indicates high involvement. The final scale was standardized. To measure leaving the relationship, we have information on whether the couple was *separated or divorced* by the time of the third interview. We coded this variable 1 if the couple was separated or divorced and 0 otherwise.

Means, standard deviations, and ranges of the measures for each year are displayed in Table 1. Because of the wide range in the

overall evaluation score (−5.1 to 3.8 standard deviations) we checked the data for outliers using Hadi’s (1992, 1994) procedure. Only one case was detected (the most negative in year 3). Analyses including and omitting this case were substantively identical; without theoretical justification for omitting this case, we included it.

### Analysis

The basic analytic procedure for these panel data is cross-sectional time-series regression (Baltagi 1995; Greene 1990), in which we allow the errors between wives and husbands to be correlated because of the nonindependence of these observations. This procedure combines information about the cross-sectional parts of the data with information on the time-series parts to provide estimates of effects. We estimate models in which the affective outcome is predicted by the self-verification discrepancy and the discrepancy squared. In this way we can test the first three hypotheses together. Figure 1 shows the pattern of results that may be obtained.<sup>6</sup> ICT predicts a curvilinear outcome, while SE theories predict a more linear outcome over the range. Both perspectives predict negative affective responses to feedback that is more negative than the self-evaluation. This is indicated on the left-hand side of the graph, where both lines show a more negative affective response as we move in the negative direction from the zero point (Hypothesis 1).<sup>7</sup> ICT also predicts a more negative affective response as we move to the right of the zero point, where the feedback is more positive than the self-evaluation (Hypothesis 2a). SE theories, on the other hand, predict a more positive affective response as we move to the positive side of the zero point (Hypothesis 2b).

<sup>6</sup> The graph is drawn on the assumption that the affective outcome is measured such that large positive values represent feeling good. For some of the outcomes presented, however, such as depression, large positive values represent feeling bad. In this case the linear component would have a negative slope and the curvilinear component would be U-shaped.

<sup>7</sup> Recall that the zero represents the point at which other’s evaluations are equal to the self-evaluations; there is zero discrepancy.



Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges of Variables Used in Analysis

Variable	Year 1			Year 2			Year 3		
	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range
Discrepancy									
Intelligence	4.29	13.38	-40/60	4.00	12.63	-25/60	3.22	13.17	-45/50
Physical appear.	12.63	16.47	-40/80	13.62	15.80	-40/60	12.41	16.60	-40/70
Likability	6.40	14.46	-40/50	6.32	16.08	-48/80	6.28	14.28	-60/55
Friendliness	4.91	15.86	-60/50	4.59	16.94	-70/70	4.66	14.73	-70/50
Understanding	3.12	17.58	-60/70	.94	19.56	-85/70	1.81	19.24	-90/70
Overall Evaluation Scale	.02	.96	-3.6/3.8	-.01	1.04	-3.8/3.7	-.03	1.01	-5.1/3.2
Self-Worth	-.03	1.00	-5.0/1.4	-.02	1.04	-5.0/1.4	.07	.95	-5.0/1.8
Self-Efficacy	-.05	.99	-4.4/1.7	.00	.99	-3.8/1.7	.08	1.02	-4.4/1.8
Depression	.12	1.08	-1.1/5.5	-.07	.94	-1.1/5.8	-.11	.93	-1.1/6.7
Anger	.04	.95	-.9/5.7	.00	1.00	-9/5.2	-.07	1.08	-.9/6.5
Distress	.09	1.06	-1.0/6.8	-.05	.91	-1.0/6.1	-.09	.98	-1.0/4.9
Acquaintance Length	-.02	.98	-1.1/4.2	-.01	1.00	-1.1/4.2	.05	1.04	-1.1/4.2
Involvement	.14	.93	-3.4/1.8	-.01	1.01	-5.0/1.8	-.20	1.06	-4.8/1.8
Separated or Divorced (%)	.00	.00	0	5.11	22.04	0/1	1.22	30.32	0/1

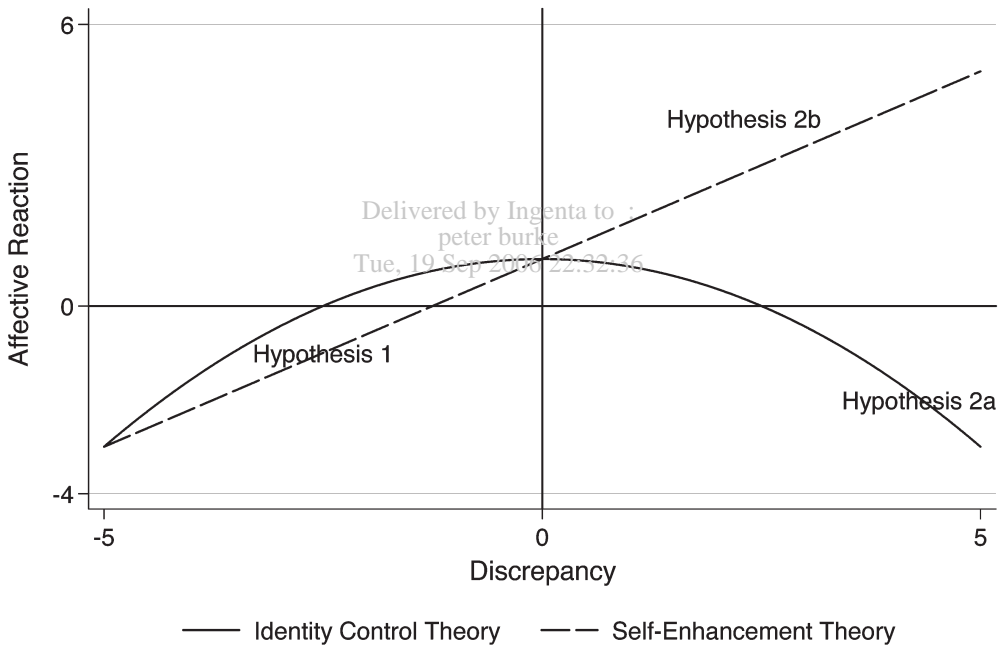


Figure 1. Hypothesized Relationships Between Affective Outcomes and Evaluation Discrepancy

By including both the linear and the curvilinear components in the regression model, we test both theories. If the curvilinear (squared) portion of the model is significant, then discrepancy models such as ICT are supported. SE predictions are supported by a failure of the curvilinear component to achieve significance while a significant linear component is obtained.

RESULTS

We begin with the results of a series of simple regression models in which self-worth, a positive self-feeling, is predicted by the self-verification discrepancy and the discrepancy squared for each of the three years. The results of this initial analysis for each of the five evaluative ratings, as well as the first principal component of the five, are present-

ed in Table 2, which shows that in all but one of the individual scale analyses (being an understanding person in year 3) the curvilinear (squared) component of the regression is significant and negative. In all three years, the principal component of the individual scales shows a significant squared relationship to the measure of self-worth. Results for the other affective outcomes display a very similar pattern. Figure 2 shows an example of the best-fitting curve using the principal component from year 2, predicting depression. These results support the self-discrepancy model of ICT. Examining each scale for each

year for each outcome is not parsimonious, however.

In the remaining analyses we therefore use cross-sectional time-series regression for the rating differences based on the overall (first principal component) evaluation scale for each of the five affective outcomes: self-worth, self-efficacy, depression, anger, and distress.<sup>8</sup> The results of these analyses relevant to Hypotheses 1, 2a, and 2b are presented in Table 3, which show a very similar

<sup>8</sup> Recall that in this procedure we are also correcting for correlated errors between husbands and wives because of their non-independence in the sample.

Table 2. Standardized Regression Coefficients for Self-Worth on Five Dimensions of Self-Evaluation Discrepancy and the Overall Principal Component

Dimension of Self-Evaluation Discrepancy	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3	
	Linear	Squared	Linear	Squared	Linear	Squared
Intelligence	-.118**	-.067*	-.053	-.218**	-.090*	-.142*
Physical Appearance	-.066	-.188**	.046	-.317**	-.065	-.150**
Likability	-.079*	-.179**	-.019	-.123*	-.157**	-.136*
Friendliness	-.110**	-.163**	-.020	-.153**	-.141**	-.147**
Understanding	-.063	-.149**	-.007	-.100*	-.095*	-.068
Overall Evaluation Scale	-.195**	-.062**	-.115**	-.118**	-.204**	-.084**

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

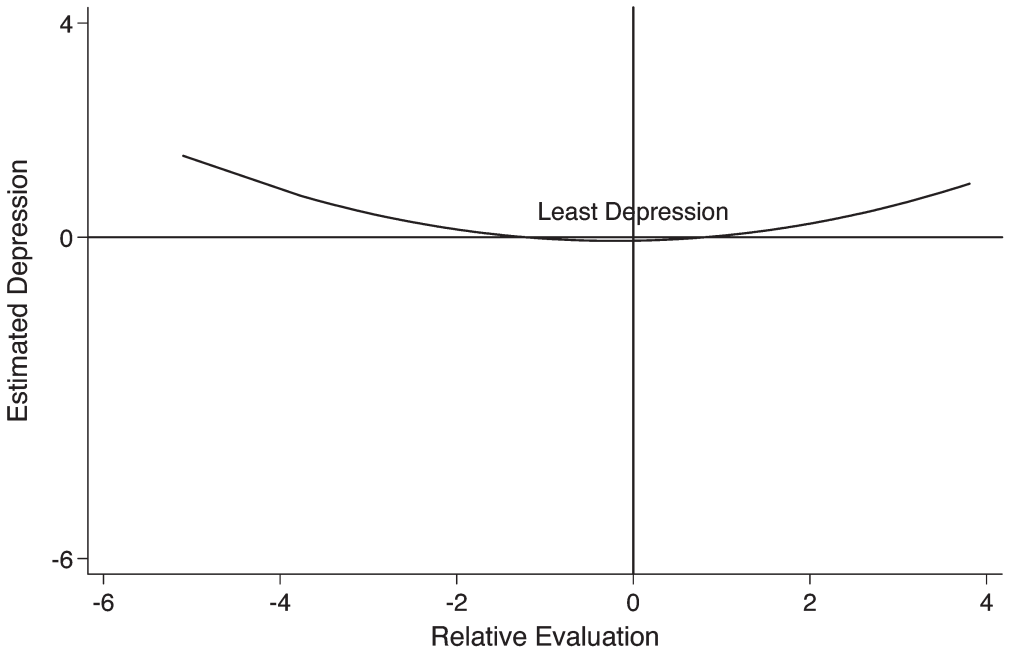


Figure 2. Relationship Between Depression and Overall Evaluation Discrepancy, in the Second Year

Table 3. Standardized Regression Coefficients for the Effects of Evaluation Discrepancy on Affective Outcomes

Component	Affective Outcomes				
	Self-Worth	Self-Efficacy	Depression	Anger	Distress
Linear	-.169**	-.141**	.027	.030	-.009
Squared	-.089**	-.066**	.066**	-.047**	.057**
Intercept	.089*	.066	-.065*	-.045	-.055
R <sup>2</sup>	.05**	.03**	.02**	.01*	.01*

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$

pattern across the five outcomes. In each case we find significant quadratic (squared) effects of evaluation discrepancy. For the positive affective responses, these are negative; for the negative affective responses, these are positive. Such results show an increased negative response to evaluation discrepancies, whether that discrepancy is the result of the other’s evaluating one more negatively or positively than one evaluates oneself.<sup>9</sup>

Figure 3 presents the results graphically. The two self-feelings (worth and efficacy) are

<sup>9</sup> In separate analyses not reported here, we also used as outcomes the full Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Pearlin Mastery Scale. The results are unchanged, but we report those outcomes because the measures of self-worth and self-efficacy are less confounded.

reduced by a discrepancy, while the indicators of depression, anger, and distress are increased by the discrepancy. In all cases, the results are consistent with the predictions based on ICT and are in opposition to the predictions of the SE theories. Thus Hypotheses 1 and 2a are strongly confirmed. Hypothesis 2b from the SE theories is not confirmed.

Although Hypotheses 1 and 2a are confirmed by these results, the R<sup>2</sup> values also make clear that these outcomes are not primarily a function of evaluation discrepancy but are determined largely by other factors. Nevertheless, the discrepancy exerts significant effects across a variety of affective outcomes. Further, although the R<sup>2</sup> values vary across the different outcomes, the coeffi-

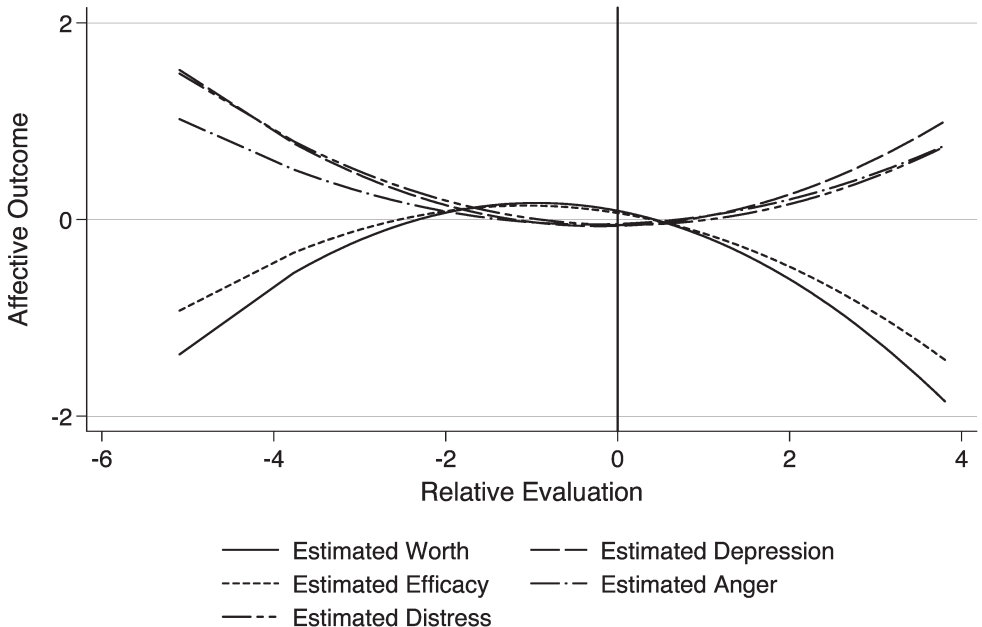


Figure 3. Relationship Between Affective Outcomes from Regressions on Overall Evaluation Discrepancy

cients for the squared component do not differ significantly in absolute magnitude across these outcomes ( $F = .67$ , n.s.). Thus the strength of the curved response appears to be approximately equal across the variety of outcomes investigated. We find a very robust if not especially strong effect of discrepancy.

We now examine the first of two potential moderators of the effect of overevaluation based on the nature of the relationship between the person and the other who overevaluates him or her. Hypothesis 3 concerns the whether persons who have not known each other for a long time are more inclined than those who have done so to see overevaluation by their partner in a positive light (enhancement) or whether they, too, react negatively to overevaluation like those who have known each other for a longer time. For this analysis we include the length of time variable as well as its interactions with the linear- and quadratic-effects components of evaluation discrepancy. If the interaction terms are significant, then we know that the length of time respondents have known each other moderates the linear and/or quadratic components of evaluation

discrepancy. If Hypothesis 3 is to be supported, the interaction terms for the quadratic component must be significant.

In the results of this analysis, presented in Table 4, we find that the interaction between length of acquaintance and the squared component is not significant for any of the outcomes. The estimated quadratic term holds for all respondents independent of how long they have known each other. Thus Hypothesis 3, concerning the moderating effects of length of acquaintance, is not supported.

Hypothesis 3a presented an alternative interpretation of the possible source of the moderating effect as the strength rather than the length of the relationship. To test this possibility we repeated the same analysis, substituting the strength of the relationship for length of the relationship. The results are presented in Table 5, where we find that the interaction between involvement and the squared component is significant for two of the five outcomes: self-worth and distress. The signs on these interaction coefficients indicate that as the degree of involvement with the partner increases, the relationship

Table 4. Standardized Regression Coefficients for the Effects of Evaluation Discrepancy on Affective Outcomes As Moderated by Length of Acquaintance

Component	Affective Outcomes				
	Self-Worth	Self-Efficacy	Depression	Anger	Distress
Linear Discrepancy	-.172**	-.141**	.025	.022	-.016
Squared Discrepancy	-.090**	-.067**	.069**	.050**	.060**
Acquaintance Length	.050	.028	-.041	-.057*	-.059*
Discrepancy $\times$ Acquaintance Length	.027*	—	.043*	.082**	.064**
Discrepancy Squared $\times$ Acquaintance Length	—	—	—	—	—
Intercept	.087*	.066	-.072*	-.052	-.060*
$R^2$	.06**	.03**	.02**	.02**	.02*

—  $p \geq .05$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$

Table 5. Standardized Regression Coefficients for the Effects of Evaluation Discrepancy on Affective Outcomes As Moderated by Involvement

Component	Affective Outcomes				
	Self-Worth	Self-Efficacy	Depression	Anger	Distress
Linear Discrepancy	-.168**	-.138**	.025	.034	-.004
Squared Discrepancy	-.091**	-.062**	.064**	.042**	.050**
Involvement	.073*	.094**	-.06*	-.115**	-.025
Discrepancy $\times$ Involvement	-.017	—	—	.048*	.043
Discrepancy Squared $\times$ Involvement	-.018*	—	—	—	.029*
Intercept	.087*	.062	-.062*	-.038	-.051
$R^2$	.06**	.04**	.02**	.02**	.02**

—  $p \geq .05$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$

follows a stronger, more pronounced curve; as the degree of involvement decreases, the curve becomes less. Thus we find some evidence for the existence of a moderating effect due to the strength of the relationship. Yet insofar as the moderation effect did not occur for three of the five outcomes, this result must be interpreted cautiously.

The final set of Hypotheses, 4, 5a, and 5b, concerns the behavioral outcome of leaving the relationship through separation or divorce as a consequence of being over- or underevaluated. For this analysis we use logistic regression to predict whether the couple becomes separated or divorced by the end of the second year following their marriage. Again, these hypotheses can be tested together by including both a term representing discrepancy and a term representing discrepancy squared. The results are displayed in Table 6 and are presented graphically in Figure 4.

The results show that the squared term is significant. This means that both underevaluation and overevaluation by a significant other have negative consequences, not only for the self-feelings of the persons involved, as we saw above, but for the relationship as

well. The greater the discrepancy in terms of being either over- or underevaluated, the greater the likelihood that the person will leave the relationship through separation or divorce. This finding confirms Hypotheses 4 and 5a, which are based on ICT, and disconfirms Hypothesis 5b, which is based on self-enhancement theories.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We began with the observation that although self-discrepancy (SD) and self-enhancement (SE) theories have focused primarily on people’s motivations to seek either self-consistent or self-enhancing feedback, these two sets of theories also suggest different reactions to evaluative feedback obtained from others. SE theories suggest

Table 6. Logistic Regression Results for the Effects of Self-Evaluation Discrepancy on Being Separated or Divorced

Component	Odds
Linear	.94
Squared	1.02*

\*  $p \leq .05$

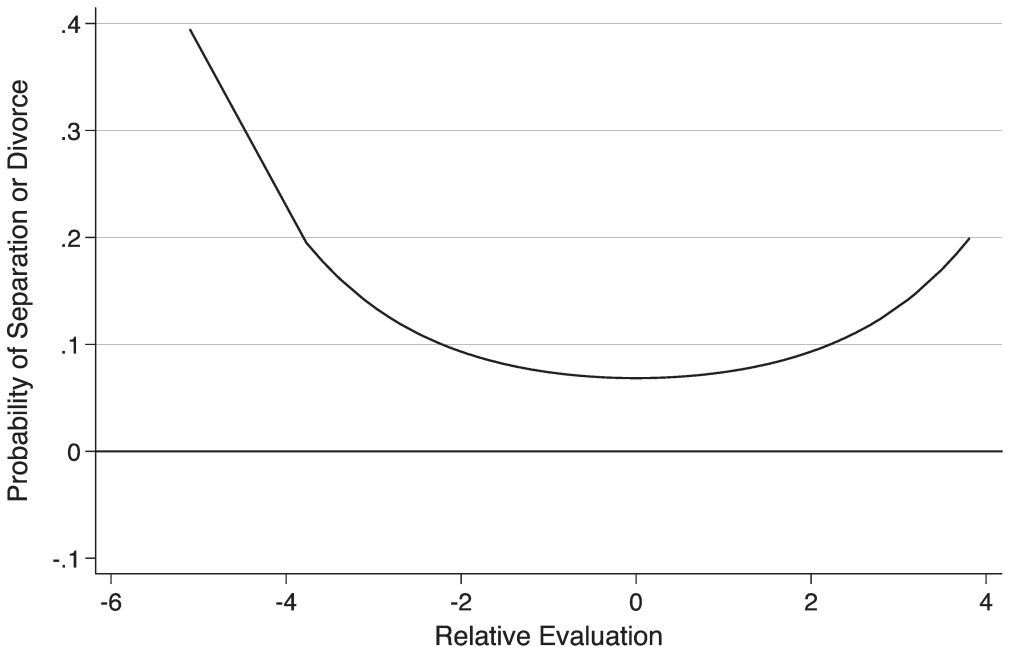


Figure 4. Relationship Between Probability of Separation or Divorce and Overall Evaluation Discrepancy

that people react negatively to evaluations that are more negative than their self-evaluations, but positively to enhancing properties of evaluations that are more positive than self-evaluations. In contrast, SD theories such as identity control theory (ICT) suggest that people react negatively to both under- and overevaluation because these are inconsistent with one's self-views. In addition to the affective outcomes of evaluation, we explored one behavioral outcome: leaving the relationship through separation or divorce in response to evaluation discrepancies.

We considered one factor that may influence whether a person's response follows the self-verification or the self-enhancement principle. This was the relationship between the partners: how long they know each other, and how deeply involved with each other they were. Consistent with Jones's (1973) theory on the effect of future expectations on the self-esteem motive, research comparing dating couples with married couples suggested that those who had known each other for a shorter time would be more likely to self-enhance, while persons in longer-term relationships would be likely to self-verify (Swann et al. 1994).

We used data from a longitudinal study of newly married couples to test these predictions. Overall the results strongly confirmed the predictions from discrepancy theories such as ICT. People felt worse about themselves when their spouse viewed them either more negatively or more positively than they viewed themselves. This very robust finding occurred across the five evaluative indicators as well as the common principal component, and it held across all three years. In addition, it held across five different affective response indicators and one behavioral outcome.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Although this point is not germane to the present argument, ICT suggests that people not only feel bad when there is a discrepancy, but also work to counteract the disturbance; while at the same time, persistent discrepancies lead to slow changes in the identity standard in the direction of the disturbance (Burke and Cast 1997; Cast, Stets, and Burke 1999). In separate analyses of the present data we find that when one's spouse overevaluates one, not only do negative feelings exist as shown here; also, the self-evaluation changes in the following year to become more posi-

Although these results are very strong, some caution is needed inasmuch as we lacked a measure of the reflected appraisals that ICT would desire, and instead used the actual appraisals as a proxy.

In examining the nature of the relationship as a potential moderator of the outcome, we found that the length of the relationship did not make a difference, but that the strength of the relationship moderated two of the affective responses: self-worth and distress. For these outcomes, the curvilinear response indicating a verification or a discrepancy orientation was stronger for persons who were more deeply involved in the relationship. This finding could be viewed as consistent with the results of Swann, et al. (1994) who compared married with dating couples.

To some extent, all of the respondents in the present sample were in strong, committed relationships, so that even those who were less deeply involved were considerably more involved than most respondents in laboratory studies. Thus the hint that the self-verifying response is stronger for more deeply committed relationships suggests that very short-term, uninvolved relationships may be required to generate the enhancing rather than the verifying reaction to overevaluation. This point is consistent with emerging laboratory results showing positive affect toward overevaluation in justice research. For example, Stets (2003) finds that participants react with gratitude and satisfaction to overreward, but if the overreward comes from a more familiar other whom the participant has been able to get to know, negative self-feelings of guilt and fear also begin to be felt. Such a reaction would be consistent with the beginnings of a verification response.

We are left with some tantalizing bits. Overall, among these married couples the consistency principle of the self-verification response governs the reactions to being overevaluated, though we find a hint that this response is weaker in less deeply involved relationships. Laboratory work shows that the enhancement principle generally governs people's reactions to overevaluation, though

Similarly, when one's spouse underevaluates one, initial negative feelings are present, and the self-evaluation becomes more negative in the following year.

we see a hint that this response is weaker in more strongly involved relationships. To verify our speculations about the differences, we need research across the whole range of relationships from the very weak, short-term, and uninvolved to the long-term and strongly committed.

Insofar as these differences in motivation and response between persons in more or less strong relationships are supported, the scope conditions of both self-discrepancy theories such as ICT and self-enhancement theories such as Jones's (1973) must be specified. Further, the ways in which such theories are tested may need to be modified. Laboratory studies seldom use participants who are involved in the deeper, longer-term relationships necessary to activate discrepancy motives and reactions, while the study of married couples may not identify the enhancement responses that occur for people in short-term, uninvolved relationships.

The scope conditions for both SE and ICT need to be understood more clearly. Future research must spell out in greater detail the exact aspects of a relationship that foster the simpler enhancement response or the more cognitively complex verification response.

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