

Striving to Be Known by Significant Others: Automatic Activation of Self-Verification Goals in Relationship Contexts

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Extending research on the automatic activation of goals associated with significant others, the authors hypothesized that self-verification goals typically pursued with significant others are automatically elicited when a significant-other representation is activated. Supporting this hypothesis, the activation of a significant-other representation through priming (Experiments 1 and 3) or through a transference encounter (Experiment 2) led participants to seek feedback that verifies their preexisting self-views. Specifically, significant-other primed participants desired self-verifying feedback, in general (Experiment 1), from an upcoming interaction partner (Experiment 2), and relative to acquaintance-primed participants and favorable feedback (Experiment 3). Finally, self-verification goals were activated, especially for relational self-views deemed high in importance to participants' self-concepts (Experiment 2) and held with high certainty (Experiment 3). Implications for research on self-evaluative goals, the relational self, and the automatic goal activation literature are discussed, as are consequences for close relationships.

Keywords: self-verification, automatic goal activation, self-evaluative motives, relational self, transference

People pursue a variety of goals in their daily lives, including goals that impact how the self is evaluated. Which self-evaluative goal is pursued often depends on the social context. In some situations, such as a job interview, the goal to be seen favorably is likely to lead to a successful interview performance. In other contexts, such as in long-term relationships with significant others, the goal to self-verify—that is, to be seen by others as one sees the self—is critical for developing closeness and intimacy (e.g., Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). In the present research, we examined the automatic activation of self-evaluative goals associated with people's significant others and close relationships.

We propose that self-evaluative goals associated with significant others are automatically elicited when a significant-other representation is activated, leading people to seek the kind of self-evaluative feedback they typically seek from significant others. Building on research suggesting that people often seek self-

verification from significant others (e.g., Swann et al., 1994) and on research suggesting that significant-other representations are readily activated and applied in a variety of social contexts (e.g., Andersen & Chen, 2002), in three experiments, we examined the automatic activation and pursuit of self-verification goals following the activation of a significant-other representation.

Automatic Goal Activation and Pursuit

Research indicates that goals are mentally represented constructs, much like traits and stereotypes (Bargh, 1990; Bargh & Gollwitzer, 1994; Kruglanski, 1996). Accordingly, goal constructs can be activated by relevant features in the environment, thereby eliciting goal-directed responses. Although goals may be consciously chosen and initiated, goal activation and pursuit may also occur automatically, in the absence of conscious choice, initiation, and guidance (for a review, see Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2004). Consciously and nonconsciously activated goals result in the same outcome—they guide one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in a goal-consistent fashion. For example, Chartrand and Bargh (1996) showed that the nonconscious activation of an impression formation goal led to the same memory outcomes (resulting from goal-consistent information processing) as seen among people who were explicitly given the same impression formation goal.

Evidence for automatic goal activation extends beyond information-processing goals. For instance, the tasks researchers used to prime trait constructs (e.g., scrambled sentence tests) have also been used to activate achievement and cooperation goals, leading people to, respectively, excel in a verbal task and cooper-

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ate more in a resource-dilemma situation (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trotschel, 2001). Other work has shown that subliminal priming of the means of attaining a goal heightens the goal's accessibility and increases persistence and performance on goal-relevant tasks (Shah & Kruglanski, 2003). Research has also found that priming stereotypes (e.g., nurses) automatically activates associated goals (e.g., helping others; Aarts et al., 2005), that observing someone engage in a goal-implying behavior activates the implied goal (Aarts, Gollwitzer, & Hassin, 2004), and that priming social power with situational cues may automatically activate the goals that people associate with power (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001). Overall, such findings indicate that goals can be automatically activated by a variety of environmental cues. The present research focused on significant others as situational triggers for automatic goal activation and pursuit.

Automatic Activation of Goals Associated With Significant Others

The notion that significant others influence the self—such as by shaping the goals that people pursue—is as old as the discipline of psychology itself (James, 1890). In recent years, this influence has been conceptualized in terms of linkages between mental representations of significant others and knowledge designating the relational self, which refers to the self that one is in the context of one's relationship with a particular significant other. For example, research on relational schemas has shown that self and significant-other schemas are linked by an interpersonal script specifying regularities in interaction between self and other (Baldwin, 1992). In attachment theory, it is maintained that mental models of the self and others, formed in interactions with significant others, are linked in memory (Bowlby, 1973; Collins & Read, 1994). Similarly, research on transference, the phenomenon whereby aspects of prior relationships reemerge in interactions with new others, has shown that each of a perceiver's significant-other representations is linked to knowledge representing the relational self associated with the important other (Andersen & Chen, 2002).

Due to such linkages between significant others and self, when a significant-other representation is activated, this activation automatically spreads to the associated relational self, leading people to think, feel, and behave in ways that reflect the person they are when with the significant other (for a review, see Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006). Given that significant-other representations are chronically accessible (e.g., Andersen, Glassman, Chen, & Cole, 1995)—that is, they are in a chronically high state of activation readiness—this implies that people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors may often reflect those associated with their significant others.

Germane to the current experiments, a small body of research has shown that activation of a significant-other representation might automatically activate associated goals. For instance, when a significant-other representation is activated by a new person who resembles the significant other, the goal to approach or avoid the significant other is expressed in relation to the person (Andersen, Reznik, & Manzella, 1996). Other work has shown that subliminal priming of a significant-other representation can trigger the pursuit of associated interpersonal goals, such as helping (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003). The activation of a significant-other representation also increases the accessibility of goals that people perceive sig-

nificant others to hold for them, as well as goal commitment and persistence (Shah, 2003a). Moreover, when such activation occurs, significant others' expectations about one's goal attainment color one's own appraisals of the difficulty of attaining the goal (Shah, 2003b). Finally, research has shown that subliminal exposure to the name of a security-enhancing attachment figure led participants to self-disclose more, consistent with the activation of a proximity-seeking goal (Gillath et al., 2006).

As illustrated in the above examples, past demonstrations of significant others as triggers of automatic goal activation have focused on interpersonal goals (e.g., closeness, helping) or on goals that people perceive that a significant other holds for them (e.g., achievement). The current research extends past work by testing the hypothesis that the self-evaluative goals people pursue in their relationships are automatically elicited following the activation of a significant-other representation.

Self-Evaluative Goals Associated With Significant Others

What self-evaluative goals do people pursue? It is hard to argue against the notion that people often seek esteem-enhancing appraisals of themselves. This esteem-enhancing tendency known as self-enhancement has been called a fundamental goal of human existence (Allport, 1937), and research has shown that it predicts future reports of well-being in a multitude of contexts, including relationship ones (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Taylor & Brown, 1988). As a result, self-enhancement is considered by some to be the default goal of self-evaluation (e.g., Paulhus & Levitt, 1987; Sedikides, 1993; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

However, research suggests that at times people seek to be known and understood—that is, they pursue self-verification goals—leading them to seek evaluations that are consistent with their preexisting self-views, regardless of whether their self-views are favorable, unfavorable (Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989), or objectively accurate (Swann, Rentrow, & Guinn, 2003). Self-verification efforts are driven by epistemic and pragmatic concerns arising from a fundamental need for prediction and control (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). From an epistemic standpoint, being verified bolsters prediction and control by providing assurance that one's self beliefs are sensible. On a pragmatic level, being verified confers prediction and control by providing assurance that others hold appropriate expectations about one and hence that interactions with others will proceed smoothly. In support of self-verification theory, people prefer interaction partners who confirm their self-views (Swann et al., 1992) and attend especially carefully to self-confirmatory information (Swann & Read, 1981). Furthermore, self-verification is particularly likely to be sought for self-views of high importance to the self-concept (Pelham, 1991; Swann & Pelham, 2002) and for self-views held with high certainty (Chen, Chen, & Shaw, 2004; Pelham & Swann, 1994). Important and certain self-views represent core aspects of the self. Thus, having these self-views verified is especially crucial for satisfying people's needs for self-understanding.

In addition to seeking verification of highly important and highly certain self-views, people appear to be especially inclined to seek self-verifying appraisals from some sources—namely, significant others—over others because the costs of not being verified by significant others are particularly high. Specifically, on an

epistemic level, because significant others are in an especially good position to evaluate us and hence ought to know and understand us, it would be particularly undermining of our sense of prediction and control if they did not verify us. Pragmatically speaking, because interactions with significant others are frequent and consequential, it is critical that they hold expectations that match our own self beliefs. Consistent with the notion that people are especially inclined to pursue self-verifying appraisals from significant others, spouses (Swann et al., 1994) and partners in long-term relationships (Campbell, Lackenbauer, & Muise, 2006; Katz, Anderson, & Beach, 1997) feel most intimate when they are verified by one another. Other work shows that spouses in satisfied marriages tend to verify each other on specific attribute dimensions (Neff & Karney, 2002, 2005) and that romantic partners react especially positively to verifying feedback regarding important and low visibility traits (Campbell, 2005), presumably because such traits are harder to discern and, thus, imply greater understanding from their partner.

The Present Research

If people pursue self-verification goals in their significant-other relationships, this implies that such goals are stored in memory as part of the relational self. Accordingly, we hypothesized that when a significant-other representation is activated, thereby activating the associated relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002), self-verification goals are automatically elicited. To test this overarching hypothesis, in Experiment 1, we used a priming exercise to activate a significant-other representation and assessed participants' desire for verifying appraisals from others in general. In Experiment 2, we used a transference paradigm in which participants anticipated an interaction with a partner who resembled a significant other and thereby activated the corresponding significant-other representation. We then assessed participants' desire to verify their highly important relational self-views. Finally, in Experiment 3, we used the same priming exercise as in Experiment 1, but we then assessed the desire for verification of relational self-views held with high certainty and did so by comparing participants' preferences for three different forms of personality feedback.

Across experiments, the measures used to assess self-verification pitted self-verification against self-enhancement tendencies. Self-enhancement has been demonstrated in a broad array of social contexts, including relationship ones (e.g., Murray et al., 1996) and, as we have noted, is considered by many to be the default self-evaluative goal (e.g., Paulhus & Levitt, 1987; Sedikides, 1993). Accordingly, under conditions in which a significant-other representation was not activated, we expected people to exhibit primarily self-enhancement tendencies. In contrast, we hypothesized that individuals primed with a significant-other representation would show less self-enhancement and would instead exhibit self-verifying tendencies, particularly for their important and certain self-views.

The present experiments extend several different literatures. Specifically, by examining self-evaluative goals in our work, we extend the range of goal types studied in the automatic goal activation literature, as well as the range of automatic, significant-other influences examined in the relational-self literature. Furthermore, our studies extend the large self-evaluation literature by

being the first, to our knowledge, to propose that self-evaluative goals are stored as part of people's relational selves and are activated when a significant-other representation is activated.

Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we primed participants with either a significant other, an acquaintance, or an inanimate object and then assessed their desire for self-verification, using procedures adapted from past work (Chen et al., 2004; Swann, Bosson, & Pelham, 2002). In this prior work, participants rated themselves on a set of generally important attribute dimensions and indicated how they desired others to view them on these same dimensions. Self-verification was then indexed in terms of the correspondence between self- and desired ratings, with closer correspondence indicating greater self-verification. Our participants made similar self- and desired ratings—but did so after the priming manipulation as part of an ostensibly unrelated task. We predicted that relative to acquaintance- and object-priming, significant-other priming would result in greater correspondence between self- and desired ratings, suggesting the automatic activation of self-verification goals.

Method

Participants

One hundred and seventy two undergraduates (125 women, 47 men) at a large public university participated in small groups in partial fulfillment of psychology course requirements.

Procedure

After greeting participants, the experimenter explained that the study involved completing four unrelated packets of questionnaires from different researchers. The first packet included a measure of participants' self-views, interspersed among several filler measures. The second was a writing exercise that served as the priming manipulation (see below). The third contained a mood measure and a measure assessing participants' desired appraisals from others. The final packet included demographic items, suspicion probes and, for participants in the significant other and acquaintance prime conditions, questions about their relationship with the person they wrote about in the second packet. The second packet was timed (see below), whereas the others were self-paced. Upon completing the packets, participants were debriefed and thanked.

Priming Manipulation

For the second packet, the experimenter explained that each participant would need to write an essay about two topics among various essay topics. For the first essay, a filler, all participants wrote about a campus building. For the second essay, participants were randomly assigned to write about a significant other (SO), an acquaintance (ACQ), or an inanimate object (tree). SO participants were asked to write about a person who is important in their life, one whom they have known for a long time and whom they know well. They were told the person should also be someone whom they like and with whom they share a close, stable relationship. ACQ participants wrote about a person whom they have not

known for a long time and do not currently know well, but whom they like and might become closer to in the future. *tree* participants wrote about their knowledge of trees (e.g., the physical features of trees). The SO essay was intended to activate the corresponding significant-other representation, whereas the ACQ essay was intended to similarly activate a social representation, but of a person low in significance (i.e., a nonsignificant other). Finally, the tree condition was deliberately nonsocial and was meant to serve as a baseline against which the other two conditions could be compared. In wide-ranging research, similar tasks have been used to activate a particular construct in memory (e.g., Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003).

Measures

Self-view ratings. Participants' self-views were assessed with a version of the Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ; Pelham & Swann, 1989). Specifically, participants rated themselves on six dimensions (intellectual ability, social skills, physical attractiveness, artistic ability, athletic ability, leadership ability), using a 19-point percentile scale (5% = *way below average*, 95% = *way above average*). We chose the self-attributes in the SAQ because they have been used in the vast majority of self-verification research, presumably because of their general importance across many everyday contexts, including close relationships. The mean rating on each dimension ranged from 55% to 74%. Averaging across dimensions ($\alpha = .72$), the overall mean self-view ($M = 62.40\%$) was only mildly above the scale midpoint denoting *average* (50%), and was considerably below the high end of the scale (95%). Table 1 (Experiment 1) displays the means for participants' averaged self-view ratings by prime condition.

Desired appraisals. Participants were asked to rate, on the same 19-point percentile scale, how they would ideally like to be viewed by others on the same six dimensions used to assess their own self-views. The mean desired appraisal for each dimension ranged from 62% to 82%. Averaging across dimensions ($\alpha = .75$), the overall mean desired appraisal ($M = 70.17\%$) was considerably below the high end of the scale (95%), similar to participants'

self-views. Table 1 (Experiment 1) displays the means for participants' averaged desired-appraisal ratings by prime condition.

Self-evaluation index. To assess self-verification, we subtracted participants' ratings of their self-views from their desired appraisals for each dimension and then averaged across dimensions ($\alpha = .76$). Scores closer to zero indicate self-verification, a greater desire to be seen as one sees the self. In contrast, because all of the SAQ dimensions were positive, positive scores indicate self-enhancement, a desire to be seen more positively than one sees the self.

Positive and negative mood. The Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) was used to assess how much participants were feeling various affective states at the moment (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*). Separate indices of positive ($\alpha = .88$) and negative ($\alpha = .88$) mood were computed.

Demographics and suspicion. In addition to demographic items, participants completed two open-ended suspicion probes ("Did you find anything strange or unusual in any of the tasks you completed?" and "What ideas or hypotheses do you think the researchers are trying to study?").

Relationship ratings. SO and ACQ participants indicated their relationship to the person they wrote about in the second packet (e.g., mother, friend) and their length of acquaintance. They also rated how positive their relationship is ($-3 = \textit{very negative}$, $+3 = \textit{very positive}$), how close they are with the person (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very*), how much they interact with him or her (1 = *not much at all*, 7 = *very much*), and how stable their relationship is (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very*).

Results

In response to the suspicion probes, no participant expressed any awareness of the link between the priming manipulation and our other measures, suggesting that the activation of self-evaluative goals as a result of the priming manipulation was automatic (e.g., Bargh, 1992, 1994). However, 9 participants were excluded because they expressed suspicion regarding our interest in the relation between self-views and desired appraisals, and 7 were excluded because they did not follow instructions (e.g., had substantial missing data). All analyses were based on the remaining sample ($n = 156$). There were no mood or gender differences across priming condition; thus, these variables are not discussed further.

Characteristics of Significant Others and Acquaintances

SO participants ($M = 122.74$ months) indicated longer relationships than did ACQ participants ($M = 9.45$ months), $t(97) = 7.86$, $p < .001$, as well as greater closeness to the person they wrote about ($M_{SO} = 6.40$; $M_{ACQ} = 3.66$), more interaction with him or her ($M_{SO} = 5.96$; $M_{ACQ} = 4.28$), and a more stable relationship ($M_{SO} = 6.25$; $M_{ACQ} = 4.68$), $ps < .001$. All participants named someone they felt positively about (i.e., both the SO and ACQ means were positive), as instructed, but SO participants ($M = 2.43$) rated their relationship somewhat more positively than did ACQ participants ($M = 2.02$), $t(98) = 2.31$, $p < .05$, perhaps simply because there was more of a relationship to speak of in the SO condition. Most ACQ participants (83.3%) wrote about a friend. SO participants were also most likely to write about a friend

Table 1
Mean Self-Ratings and Desired-Appraisal Ratings for SO-, ACQ, and Tree-Primed Participants (Experiment 1) and for Own- and Yoked-SO Participants for Their High and Low Importance Relational-Self Attributes (Experiment 2)

Group	Self	Desired
Experiment 1		
SO	64.95	70.33
ACQ	63.74	73.15
Tree	63.08	71.23
Experiment 2		
Own		
High importance	73.22	77.98
Low importance	66.70	78.07
Yoked		
High importance	67.64	74.37
Low importance	72.40	80.73

Note. SO = significant other; ACQ = acquaintance.

(42.6%), but they also named their mother (16.7%) and their romantic partner (14.8%) with some frequency.

Automatic Activation of Self-Verification Goals

The central prediction in Experiment 1 was that self-verification goals should be elicited following the activation of a significant-other representation. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), with prime as the between-subjects factor and scores on the self-evaluation index as our dependent measure. This analysis was significant, $F(2, 153) = 3.61, p < .05$. Planned contrasts provided direct support for our hypothesis. Specifically, scores on the self-evaluation index were significantly smaller (i.e., closer to zero) for SO participants ($M = 5.38\%$) than for ACQ participants ($M = 9.41\%$), $t(153) = 2.61, p < .05$, and marginally significantly smaller for SO participants than for *tree* participants ($M = 8.15\%$), $t(153) = 1.85, p = .07$. It is interesting to note that the mean score on the self-evaluation index was positive and higher in the ACQ condition than in the *tree* condition, suggesting greater self-enhancement tendencies among ACQ participants, but this difference was only a trend, $t(153) = 0.81, ns$. Overall, these results indicate that participants primed with a significant-other representation were most likely to report wanting to be seen by others in a manner consistent with how they see themselves.

Self-verification goals should be more likely to be pursued in relation to significant others than in relation to acquaintances because of the higher epistemic and pragmatic stakes at play in significant-other relationships. Supporting this, when a composite of participants' ratings of closeness, amount of interaction, and relationship stability ($\alpha = .88$) was included as a covariate, the SO-ACQ difference on the self-evaluation index was no longer significant ($F = .33, ns$). This suggests that it is precisely because significant-other relationships are characterized by closeness, frequent interaction, and stability that they are associated with the pursuit of self-verification goals.

Discussion

Experiment 1 provided initial evidence that self-verification goals are elicited following the activation of a significant-other representation, leading people to express a desire to be seen by others in a way that is consistent with the way they see themselves. The present results align with research suggesting that people are especially inclined to seek verifying appraisals from significant others (e.g., Swann et al., 1994), but to our knowledge, they constitute the first explicit evidence for the automatic activation of self-evaluative goals, in general, and of self-verification goals, in particular.

It is important to acknowledge that scores on the self-evaluation index were positive across prime conditions, indicating self-enhancement tendencies. However, the mean score on the self-evaluation index for SO-primed participants ($M = 5.38\%$) fell just above the lowest notch on the 5%–95% percentile rating scale, indicating that on average, SO-primed participants wanted to be seen only very slightly above their preexisting self-views. In contrast, the ACQ ($M = 9.41\%$) and *tree* means ($M = 8.15\%$) fell considerably above the lowest scale notch and, in fact, were closer to the second scale notch. The positivity of the scores on the

self-evaluation index in the ACQ and *tree* conditions suggests strong self-enhancement tendencies, consistent with research that indicates that a desire to be seen favorably is likely to operate as a kind of default self-evaluative tendency (e.g., Paulhus & Levitt, 1987; Sedikides, 1993).

Experiment 1 showed that self-verification goals could be automatically elicited when a significant-other representation is primed via a writing exercise. But can self-verification goals be activated in the course of an actual social interaction with another person? In Experiment 2, we aimed to answer this question and, in doing so, increase the external validity of our results.

Experiment 2

In Experiment 2, we sought to demonstrate the automatic activation of self-verification goals following the activation of a significant-other representation in the context of a transference encounter. According to the social-cognitive model of transference (Andersen & Glassman, 1996; Chen & Andersen, 1999), transference reflects the activation and the use of a significant-other representation in an encounter with a new person. When this occurs, we interpret and respond to the new person as if he or she were the significant other. For example, we make representation-derived inferences, ascribing characteristics of the significant other to the new person (Andersen & Cole, 1990), as well as representation-derived evaluations, expressing like or dislike for the person reflecting our evaluation of the significant other (Andersen & Baum, 1994).

To test the hypothesis that self-verification goals can be automatically elicited upon the activation of a significant-other representation in an encounter with a new person, in Experiment 2, we used the two-session paradigm typically used in research on transference. In this paradigm, participants generated descriptors about a significant other in an initial session. Weeks later, participants took part in an ostensibly unrelated experiment in which they anticipated an interaction with a new person. Prior to the interaction, participants were given descriptors about their upcoming interaction partner. The descriptors were based on ones generated by participants about their own significant other (own SO) in the initial session, thereby eliciting transference, or were based on the significant-other descriptors generated by a yoked participant (yoked SO). After reading the descriptors about their interaction partner, participants completed the same self-evaluation measure used in Experiment 1. However, extending Experiment 1, in which participants rated how they desired to be seen by others in general, Experiment 2 participants rated how they desired to be viewed by their upcoming interaction partner.

In the present experiment, we also extended Experiment 1 by assessing participants' desire to verify their relational self-views. As noted, research indicates that activation of a significant-other representation spreads to the relational self, thereby activating relational self-views or conceptions of the self in the context of the significant-other relationship (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Baldwin, 1992). Thus, we reasoned that relational self-views are likely to be the target of the self-verification goals that we hypothesize are set into motion by the activation of a significant-other representation. Although the self-views in Experiment 1 were assumed to be generally important to participants' self-concepts across various contexts, including their close relationships, in Experiment 2, we

explicitly tested the idea that activation of a significant-other representation leads people to seek verification of their relational self-views by using a self-view measure that asked participants to consider themselves in relation to their significant other.

Finally, as noted, people are especially likely to seek verification of self-views that are very important to defining the self (e.g., Swann & Pelham, 2002). In Experiment 2, we sought to directly test the moderating role of self-view importance. Specifically, we had participants nominate attributes of high and low importance in defining their relational self. Our central prediction was that self-verification goals would be automatically activated in the context of transference (i.e., in the own-SO condition but not in the yoked-SO condition), thereby leading people to seek self-verifying appraisals of their important, but not unimportant, relational self-views.

Method

Participants

Participants were 63 undergraduates (46 women, 17 men) enrolled in psychology courses at a large public university. Participants were given course credit for their participation in the initial, descriptive session and either course credit or monetary compensation (\$10) for the second session. They were run in groups of 6 or fewer in the first session and were run individually in the second.

Procedure

The procedures were based largely on those used in past research on transference (e.g., Andersen & Baum, 1994; Hinkley & Andersen, 1996).

Descriptive session. Participants were told that the study entailed completing two questionnaires. In the first, they were asked to name a significant other who “you have known for a long time, you like, is important to you, has had a significant impact on your life, and with whom you tend to behave differently toward, compared to other people.” These criteria were designed to steer participants toward identifying a positively evaluated and distinct significant other. Finally, because self-verification strivings are more likely when concerns about acceptance are low, such as in marital or other established relationships (e.g., Swann et al., 1994), participants were told the person they named should be someone who “accepts you regardless of your strengths and weaknesses.” Participants indicated the first name of their significant other, as well as the length and type of relationship they shared with the person. Using 9-point Likert scales (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*), they then rated how close they are to the person, how well the person knows them, and how much they can be themselves around him or her—qualities that are likely to be associated with significant others from whom one typically seeks and receives self-verification.

Next, participants generated seven positive and seven negative descriptors to characterize their significant other. They were told to begin each descriptor with their significant other’s first name, to limit each to six words (e.g., “Steve is full of energy”), and to not refer to themselves or a third person. Participants then rank-ordered the seven descriptors in each set in terms of their impor-

tance to describing the significant other. These rank-orders allowed us to control for the importance of the descriptors used in the learning phase of the experimental session (see below). Finally, participants were given a list of 42 attributes and told to classify 10 as descriptive, 10 as counterdescriptive, and 12 as irrelevant (neither descriptive nor counterdescriptive) with respect to their significant other. This task provided a pool of attributes for use as filler items in the learning phase and recognition–memory test of the experimental session (see below).

For the second questionnaire, participants were asked to describe themselves when they are with the significant other they named in the first questionnaire (i.e., their associated relational self). Specifically, they were given a list of 20 moderately favorable and unfavorable attributes (e.g., self-confident, outgoing, moody, childish) and were asked to rate their standing on each of the attributes when they are with the significant other, using the same 19-point percentile scale (5% = *way below average*, 95% = *way above average*) used in Experiment 1. Afterward, participants rated the importance of each attribute, using a 9-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all important*, 9 = *extremely important*) and then nominated the 6 most and 6 least important attributes in terms of describing their relational self. Participants were then partially debriefed and asked whether they would participate in an unrelated study conducted by a honors thesis student. Most indicated being willing to do so.

Experimental session: Learning phase. Participants returned for the experimental session several weeks after the descriptive session ($M = 2.87$ weeks). Upon the participant’s arrival, a different experimenter explained that the purpose of the study was to help the psychology department establish a mentoring program that would pair upper classmen with lower classmen as part of an orientation for the psychology major. The specific goal was to shed light on how to “best match personalities for this program.” Participants were then told there was another participant down the hall with whom they would have a getting-acquainted interaction. Beforehand, they would be given some information about their upcoming interaction partner so as to assess the “effects of one person of the pair having information about his or her partner prior to actually meeting him or her.” Participants were told that their partner had been interviewed before the study and that the interviewer had written 10 descriptors about the partner on index cards. They were told to read each descriptor once. Finally, the experimenter noted that the interviewer was instructed to provide both positive and negative descriptors, so participants would see some of both.

Before the second session, participants were paired, with one participant in each pair randomly assigned to the own-SO condition and the other assigned to the yoked-SO condition. For own-SO participants, some of the descriptors generated in the descriptive session about their significant other were used to describe their upcoming partner; thus, the partner resembled their own significant other. The yoked partners of own-SO participants saw these same descriptors, which of course were not descriptive of their significant others. Such yoking controlled for the content of the descriptors presented in the own-SO and yoked-SO conditions, thereby enabling us to rule out the possibility that anyone’s significant-other descriptors could elicit transference.

Of the 14 significant-other descriptors listed by own-SO participants in the descriptive session, 3 moderately descriptive positive

and negative descriptors (ranked 4th, 5th, & 6th in descriptive importance) appeared in the binder. Names of significant others were substituted with gender-matched pronouns (i.e., “He is full of energy” instead of “Steve is full of energy”). Use of both positive and negative descriptors allowed us to assess evaluation derived from the overall significant-other representation rather than from individual descriptors (see below). To help disguise the 6 significant-other-derived descriptors, three-word filler descriptors (e.g., “She is studious”) were created with 4 attributes randomly selected from the 12 irrelevant attributes that own-SO participants had nominated in the descriptive session, thus resulting in a total of 10 descriptors about the partner. These descriptors were presented in a fixed random order. After reading them, participants were asked to spend a few minutes imagining what it will be like to interact with their partner, while the experimenter left the room ostensibly to check on the partner.

Experimental session: Test phase. Upon returning, the experimenter informed participants that they would now fill out several measures tapping their current impressions of themselves and their partner. Participants were assured that their partners would not see any of their responses. The first set of items assessed representation-derived evaluation of the partner, one of two standard measures of transference. Because the significant others examined in this study were all positively evaluated, evidence for transference on this evaluation measure would take the form of more positive evaluations of the upcoming partner among own-SO participants than among yoked-SO participants. The seven items tapped participants’ overall evaluation of the partner (e.g., “How much do you think you will like this person?” “In general, how positive is your impression of this person?”). Participants responded to these items using 7-point Likert scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*).

Next, participants were given the list of 20 attributes used in the descriptive session to assess the relational self, but the font and ordering of the list was altered so as to minimize any connection to the earlier session. For each attribute, participants rated how they desired to be viewed by their upcoming partner, using the same 19-point percentile scale (5% = *way below average*, 95% = *way above average*) on which they made their relational-self ratings in the descriptive session. Table 1 (Experiment 2) displays the means of own-SO and yoked-SO participants’ self-ratings and desired-appraisal ratings for their high- and low-importance relational self-attributes separately.

To assess participants’ desire for self-verification, we calculated the self-evaluation index by subtracting participants’ desired rating for each attribute from its corresponding self-rating. Because positive and negative scores carried different meanings for favorable, versus unfavorable, attributes, we recoded the scores so that positive scores always indicated participants wanting to be seen by their partner more positively than they rated their relational self (i.e., self-enhancement), whereas scores closer to zero always indicated participants wanting to be seen by the partner in a manner that corresponded with how they saw their relational self (i.e., self-verification).

To examine the moderating role of the importance of relational self-views on self-verification tendencies, we averaged the recoded scores for participants’ six high-importance relational self-attributes and for participants’ six low-importance attributes. Our main hypothesis was that the greatest self-desired correspondence

(i.e., scores closest to zero) should be seen among own-SO participants for their high-importance relational self-attributes. For these participants, the activation of a significant-other representation should activate self-verification goals, leading them to desire verification from their partner on highly important relational self-attributes.

After the self-verification measure, participants worked on a 1-min distracter task and then completed the other standard measure of transference, a 15-item recognition–memory test designed to assess representation-derived inferences about the partner. Participants were asked to indicate how confident they were that each item had been presented earlier in the learning phase about their partner, using a 4-point scale (1 = *not at all confident*, 4 = *extremely confident*). Of the 15 test items, 8 were the descriptors that own-SO participants had generated in the descriptive session about their significant other but that did not appear in the learning phase about the partner. Three items were randomly selected from the set of 4 irrelevant descriptors that appeared in the learning phase. The final 4 items were created from 4 randomly selected, irrelevant attributes from the remaining pool of irrelevant attributes. Our focus was on participants’ recognition–memory confidence ratings for the 8 items that described own-SO participants’ significant other but that did not appear in the learning phase. Higher confidence ratings for these items reflect making inferences about the partner on the basis of an activated significant-other representation, which we expected to be more likely among own-SO participants than among yoked-SO participants.

After the recognition–memory test, participants were told they were in a control condition, which meant that they would not meet their partners after all. They were then asked to respond to the same suspicion probes used in Experiment 1, after which they were fully debriefed and thanked.

Results

No participant expressed suspicion about a link between the descriptors given about their interaction partner and our dependent measures, thus indicating that any activation of self-evaluative goals occurring as a result of exposure to the descriptors was automatic, occurring outside of participants’ conscious awareness. Five participants were excluded because they did not follow instructions in the descriptive session (e.g., substantial missing data). To maintain perfect yoking, the yoked partners of these participants also had to be excluded. Only 2 participants expressed suspicion that there was no other participant or that the two sessions were linked. One of them was excluded because he did not have a yoked partner. The other was retained to avoid having to exclude both him and his yoked partner; analyses conducted with and without these two participants did not differ substantially. Finally, 1 participant and her partner had to be excluded because she was a research assistant of Serena Chen, with prior knowledge of this research. All of the analyses reported below were conducted on the remaining sample ($n = 50$). Gender was not related to our variables of interest and is therefore not reported in subsequent analyses.

Characteristics of Significant Others

Participants were most likely to name a parent (34%) or friend (30%) as their significant other, followed by a sibling (16%),

romantic partner (12%), and other relative (8%). Average relationship length was 13.22 years (range = 10 months to 24 years). Participants reported that they were very close ($M = 8.30$) to their significant other, that the person knew them well ($M = 7.90$), and that they could be themselves around the person ($M = 8.26$)—all suggesting that participants named significant others from whom they typically seek and receive self-verification.

Importance of Relational Self-Attributes

To ensure that the six high- and six low-importance relational self-attributes participants nominated in the descriptive session did in fact differ in importance, we averaged the importance ratings participants made for each attribute set. We then subjected the two averages to a 2×2 (Own-SO/Yoked-SO \times Attribute Importance) mixed ANOVA, with attribute importance as the within-subjects factor. This analysis yielded only an expected attribute importance effect, with attributes nominated as high-importance ($M = 7.90$) being rated significantly higher than low-importance attributes ($M = 2.57$), $F(1, 48) = 545.29$, $p < .001$.

Measures of Transference

To determine whether transference occurred for own-SO participants relative to yoked-SO participants, we compared the two groups on representation-derived evaluation and inferences, with the prediction that own-SO participants would use their activated significant-other representation to evaluate and perceive their upcoming partner more so than their yoked-SO counterparts.

Representation-derived evaluation. Responses to the seven items tapping participants' evaluation of their partner were averaged ($\alpha = .75$). As shown in Figure 1A, participants anticipating interacting with a partner who bore some resemblance to their own positively evaluated significant other and who thus should have activated the representation of this person evaluated the partner significantly more favorably ($M = 4.74$) than did yoked-SO participants ($M = 4.35$), $F(1, 48) = 4.18$, $p < .05$.

Representation-derived inferences. To examine representation-derived inferences about the partner, we compared the average of own-SO and yoked-SO participants' recognition-memory confidence ratings for the eight critical test items. To account for individual differences in recognition-memory accuracy, we controlled for ratings on the seven test items reflecting irrelevant attributes. As predicted, the analysis of covariance was significant, $F(1, 46) = 4.31$, $p < .05$. As shown in Figure 1B (adjusted means), own-SO participants ($M = 1.46$) made more representation-derived inferences about their partner than did yoked-SO participants ($M = 1.25$). Together, these results indicate that our resemblance manipulation was successful in activating a significant-other representation (i.e., transference) in the own-SO, but not yoked-SO, condition.

Automatic Activation of Self-Verification Goals

Our central hypothesis was that when transference occurs by virtue of the activation of a significant-other representation in

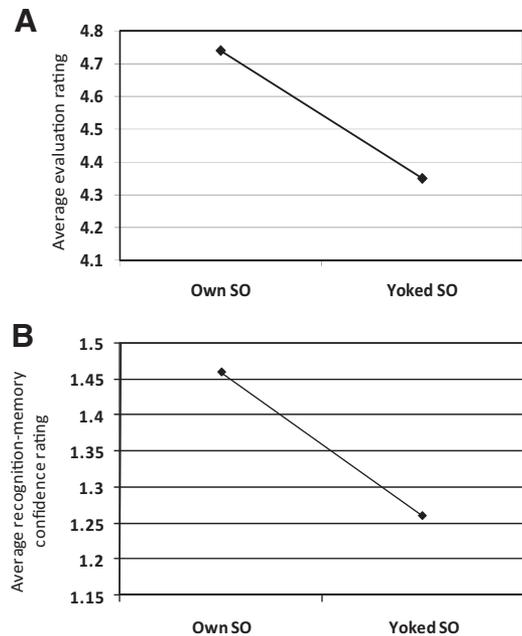


Figure 1. A: Average of seven evaluation ratings used to assess representation-derived evaluation of the partner. Higher numbers indicate a more favorable evaluation. B: Average recognition-memory confidence ratings for eight representation-derived items used to assess representation-derived inferences about the partner. Higher numbers indicate greater representation-derived inferences. SO = significant other.

an encounter with a new person, the relational self is automatically activated along with self-verification goals, leading participants to seek verification of their important relational self-views. Thus, we predicted that relative to yoked-SO participants, own-SO participants would show greater correspondence in how they rated themselves and how they desired to be viewed by their partner, particularly for their high-importance relational self-attributes. To test this, we subjected scores on the self-evaluation index representing participants' desire for verification of their six high- and six low-importance attributes to a 2×2 (Own-SO/Yoked-SO \times Attribute Importance) mixed ANOVA, with attribute importance as the within-subjects factor. This analysis yielded an attribute importance effect, $F(1, 48) = 5.77$, $p < .05$, which was qualified by the predicted interaction, $F(1, 48) = 4.61$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 2 for means).

Among own-SO participants, the correspondence between self- and desired ratings was significantly greater (i.e., the difference score was closer to zero) for high-importance relational self-attributes ($M = 4.76\%$) than for low-importance relational self-attributes ($M = 11.73\%$), $F(1, 48) = 10.35$, $p < .01$. Moreover, the correspondence between own-SO participants' self- and desired ratings for their high-importance attributes was, on average, less than one notch (i.e., 5%) on the 19-point percentile scale. In contrast, for low-importance attributes, own-SO participants showed a clear, self-enhancing desire to be seen more positively by their partner than they saw themselves.

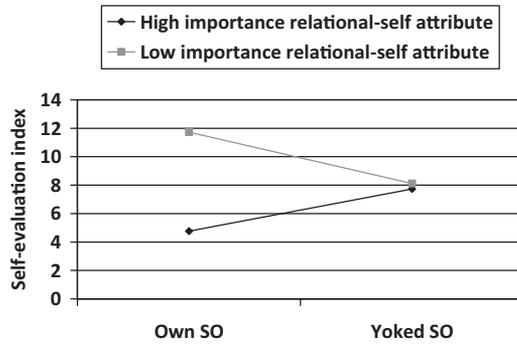


Figure 2. Scores reflect self-ratings minus desired-appraisal ratings as a function of own–significant other/yoked–significant other condition and relational self-attribute importance. Lower scores indicate greater correspondence between self- and desired-appraisal ratings, whereas higher scores indicate self-enhancement tendencies. SO = significant other.

Turning to the yoked-SO condition, the correspondence between self- and desired ratings for high-importance attributes ($M = 7.73\%$) did not differ from that seen for low-importance ones ($M = 8.12\%$; $F < 1$), which makes sense given that the relevant relational self was not activated among these participants. Instead, for both sets of attributes, yoked-SO participants showed self-enhancement tendencies. Indeed, whereas own-SO participants' desired ratings for high-importance attributes fell, on average, within the same scale notch as their self-ratings on these attributes, yoked-SO participants' desired ratings for both high- and low-importance attributes exceeded their self ratings by, on average, greater than one scale notch in a self-enhancing direction.¹

Discussion

In Experiment 2, we tested the hypothesis that when the activation of a significant-other representation in an encounter with a new person who resembles the significant other occurs—that is, when transference occurs—the relational self is activated and self-verification goals are automatically elicited. As a result, people should seek verification of their highly important relational self-views. Supporting this, own-SO participants distinguished between attributes they had deemed high in importance and those they had deemed low in importance with regard to their relational self several weeks earlier, exhibiting significantly greater correspondence between their self and their desired ratings for the former set of attributes than for the latter. In contrast, yoked-SO participants did not distinguish between their high-importance attributes and their low-importance attributes, instead exhibiting self-enhancement tendencies across the board. Finally, own-SO participants made stronger representation-derived evaluations and inferences about their upcoming partner than did yoked-SO participants, thus confirming that the self-verification effect seen in the own-SO condition emerged in the context of transference.

As in Experiment 1, scores on the self-evaluation index were positive across conditions. However, consistent with our central prediction, scores on the self-evaluation index were lowest among own-SO participants for their high-importance relational self-attributes. The fact that scores on the self-evaluation index were

lowest for the relational self-attributes that own-SO participants rated highest in importance is consistent with evidence that self-verification goals are especially strong for important self-views, given the high epistemic and pragmatic costs of failing to have these core self-views verified (e.g., Swann & Pelham, 2002). In contrast, the strong self-enhancing tendency seen among own-SO participants for their low-importance relational self-attributes may have reflected a compensatory response of sorts; that is, these participants may have been seeking especially favorable appraisals on their low-importance attributes to offset the self-verifying—and less exalted—appraisals they sought for their high-importance ones. This account is reminiscent of Hinkley and Andersen's (1996) finding that participants for whom negative relational self-aspects had been activated in a transference encounter were especially likely to respond to what was essentially a threat to the self by bringing to mind positive, nonrelational self-aspects.

Regarding yoked-SO participants, one might wonder why they did not show at least somewhat greater self-verification for their high-importance attributes than for their low-importance attributes, given evidence that self-verification tendencies are generally strong for important self-views. In Experiment 2, we focused on the desire for verification of self-views that participants explicitly nominated with respect to a relational self in the descriptive session. Yet, for yoked-SO participants, neither a significant-other representation nor its associated relational self was activated in the experimental session. In essence, then, the attribute importance ratings were irrelevant for these participants because the relational self linked to these ratings was not activated. Thus, it is unsurprising that yoked-SO participants did not show any differential desire for verification of attributes that they had deemed high, versus low, in importance to one of their relational selves several weeks earlier.

Overall, using different priming techniques, self-view measures, and experimental contexts, both Experiments 1 and 2 provided support for our central hypothesis that self-verification goals are stored in memory as part of the relational self and, thus, are automatically elicited by the activation of a significant-other representation. However, both experiments relied on the same measure of self-verification goals—a limitation addressed in Experiment 3. In addition, although scores on the self-evaluation index of significant-other-primed participants in both experiments were the lowest—indicating the greatest correspondence between self-views and desired appraisals (i.e., self-verification)—these scores

¹ The difference between own-SO and yoked-SO participants for the high-importance relational self-attribute was not significant ($F = 1.60$, $p = .21$). A reader may see this nonsignificant result as a nonreplication of the SO-ACQ difference seen in Experiment 1. However, although Experiment 2's own-SO participants and Experiment 1's SO-primed participants are comparable, yoked-SO participants in Experiment 2 are not comparable with ACQ-primed participants in Experiment 1. Experiment 1's ACQ-primed participants had a specific representation of an acquaintance activated, whereas Experiment 2's yoked-SO participants did not have any particular representation activated. Moreover, the responses of both SO- and ACQ-primed participants pertained to the same self-views (assessed via the SAQ) in Experiment 1, whereas in Experiment 2, own-SO participants' responses presumably reflected the relational self, as their relational self-views were activated upon the activation of a significant-other representation. This was not the case among yoked-SO participants.

were still positive, suggesting that self-enhancement tendencies were operating at least to some extent alongside the hypothesized self-verification goals. This suggests an alternative interpretation of our results—namely, that people prefer appraisals from others that satisfy both self-verification and self-enhancement goals (Morling & Epstein, 1997). In Experiment 3, we included a condition reflecting a compromise of self-verification and self-enhancement goals in an attempt to rule out this alternative interpretation.

Experiment 3

Experiment 3's participants were primed with either a significant other or an acquaintance and were then exposed to three different types of feedback about their personality with a procedure adapted from past work (Bosson & Swann, 1999; Giesler, Josephs, & Swann, 1996). All three types of feedback pertained to a specific relational self-view but satisfied self-verification goals, self-enhancement goals, or a compromise of self-verification and self-enhancement goals. Participants indicated their preferences for each feedback type; their preferences for self-verifying feedback served as the key dependent measure. Thus, Experiment 3 extended the first two experiments with a different and well-validated measure of self-verification. This measure, coupled with our within-subjects manipulation of feedback, also allowed us to directly compare self-verification and self-enhancement tendencies (which was not possible in Experiments 1 & 2).

Finally, research suggests that epistemic and pragmatic concerns are especially high not only for high-importance self-views (e.g., Swann & Pelham, 2002) but also for self-views that people hold with high certainty (Pelham & Swann, 1994). Extending the prior experiments, in Experiment 3, we included a test of the moderating role of self-view certainty by varying whether the feedback participants received pertained to a relational self-view they held with high, versus low, certainty (determined on the basis of their responses to a prescreening questionnaire).

Experiment 3's main hypothesis was that among participants who received feedback about a highly certain relational self-view, those primed with a significant-other representation would show a stronger preference for self-verifying feedback than would acquaintance-primed participants and relative to self-enhancing feedback about the same self-view. In contrast, we did not expect prime differences when the feedback pertained to a low certainty relational self-view. In addition, some research has shown that people may aim to satisfy both their desires for self-verification and self-enhancement by seeking appraisals that are slightly, but not overly, more favorable than their self-views (Morling & Epstein, 1997). By including a condition in which participants received such compromise feedback, we addressed the alternative interpretation that participants primed with a significant-other representation would prefer feedback satisfying both self-verification and self-enhancement goals over strictly self-verifying feedback.

Method

Participants

Participants were 109 undergraduates (76 women, 33 men) enrolled in psychology courses at a large public university. Par-

ticipants were run in small groups and were given course credit or monetary compensation (\$10) for their participation.

Prescreening Survey

Participants filled out a prescreening survey, which was embedded in a battery of questionnaires administered to all students in introductory psychology courses at the start of the semester. In this survey, participants provided the name of a significant other and indicated the type of relationship (e.g., brother, cousin) shared with this person. The instructions were the same as those used for Experiment 1's significant-other priming manipulation.

After naming their significant other, participants provided information about their relational self by rating how much each of the 20 attributes (e.g., self-confident, outgoing, moody, childish) used in Experiment 2 described them when with their significant other. These ratings were made with the same 19-point (5%–95%) percentile scale used in Experiment 2. Participants then rated the certainty with which they held each relational self-view, using a 9-point Likert scale (1 = *not certain at all*, 9 = *very certain*). They then nominated their 5 most certain and least certain relational self-attributes from the list of 20 attributes, in a manner similar to how Experiment 2's participants nominated high- and low-importance relational self-attributes. Participants were recruited for the experimental session if they had moderate self-views (i.e., rated themselves above 20% and below 80% on the 5%–95% percentile rating scale) for their most certain and least certain relational self-attribute. This restriction allowed us room to manipulate different types of feedback about these relational self-views in a plausible manner in the experimental session (see below).

Procedure

As noted, the procedure used in the experimental session was adapted from prior work (e.g., Bosson & Swann, 1999; Giesler et al., 1996; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989). The session took place in a room with six computers that were separated by dividers so that participants could not see each other. Participants were told that they would be receiving feedback about their personality from three different computer programs. The feedback was purportedly based on their responses to the battery of questionnaires they completed at the beginning of the semester as well as their responses during the experiment itself.

At the start of the session, participants filled out a handful of filler tasks to bolster the claim that the computer programs were gathering information about their personality. Interspersed among these filler tasks was a priming task similar to the one used in Experiment 1. Specifically, participants were asked to write about either the significant other (SO) they had described during prescreening or an acquaintance (ACQ). In the SO condition, the name of the significant other each participant described in the prescreening survey, as well as the participant's relationship with this person (e.g., Joe, who is your father), appeared on the computer screen.

After completing the filler and priming tasks, participants were given three different types of feedback (i.e., verifying, compromise, and enhancing) about either the most certain or least certain relational self-attribute that they nominated in the prescreening

survey. Thus, feedback type was manipulated within-subjects, whereas self-view certainty was manipulated between-subjects. Following exposure to each type of feedback, participants responded to questions assessing their feedback preferences. They then responded to various items about their relationship with the person (SO or ACQ) they wrote about in the priming task. Finally, participants completed demographic and suspicion items, after which they were debriefed and thanked.

Feedback Manipulation

The three types of feedback were presented in counterbalanced order (order had no effect on our dependent measures and, thus, is not discussed further). Participants were randomly assigned to the high or the low self-view certainty condition, such that all three types of feedback pertained to the self-view they had nominated in the prescreening survey to be their most certain or least certain relational self-view. As an overview, verifying feedback provided participants with feedback on their relational self-view that exactly corresponded with their ratings of themselves during prescreening. Compromise feedback provided participants with feedback on their relational self-view that was slightly more favorable than were their earlier ratings, to satisfy both self-verifying and self-enhancing goals (as in Morling & Epstein, 1997). Finally, enhancing feedback provided feedback that was considerably more favorable than were participants' earlier ratings.

More specifically, in the verifying condition, the computer program indicated that participants' standing on their (most certain or least certain) relational self-attribute was identical to their prescreening rating on this attribute. For example, if a participant rated himself or herself at 70% on the trait *outgoing* during prescreening, the verifying feedback read as follows:

You scored a 70% on the trait *outgoing*. This is about how you rated yourself on this trait dimension in the prescreening survey. Taking into account the full spectrum of your responses indicates that your standing on *outgoing* is about what your initial rating of yourself on this trait dimension would suggest.

The feedback in the compromise and enhancing conditions took one of two forms, depending on the valence of the relational self-attribute in question. For moderately positive attributes such as *creative*, the feedback indicated that participants were slightly (compromise condition) or considerably (enhancing condition) more creative than what they rated themselves as during prescreening. In contrast, for moderately negative attributes such as *childish*, the feedback indicated that participants were slightly (compromise condition) or considerably (enhancing condition) less childish than how they rated themselves earlier. In the compromise condition, the feedback always indicated a standing that was 5 percentile points above participants' prescreening ratings for positive attributes and 5 percentile points below, for negative attributes. In the enhancing condition, the feedback always indicated a standing of 95% for positive attributes and 5% for negative attributes.

For example, if a participant had given himself a rating of 70% on the moderately positive trait *creative* in the prescreening survey, the compromise feedback read as follows (compromise feedback for the moderately negative trait *childish* appears in brackets):

You scored a 75% [65%] on the trait *creative* [childish]. This is slightly higher [lower] than how you rated yourself on this trait dimension in the prescreening survey. Taking into account the full spectrum of your responses indicates that you are slightly more [less] *creative* [childish] than what your initial rating of yourself on this trait dimension would suggest.

The highly favorable enhancing feedback read as follows (enhancing feedback for the moderately negative trait *childish* appears in brackets):

You scored a 95% [5%] on the trait *creative* [childish]. This is considerably higher [lower] than how you rated yourself on this trait dimension in the prescreening survey. Taking into account the full spectrum of your responses indicates that you are substantially more [less] *creative* [childish] than what your initial rating of yourself on this trait dimension would suggest.

Measures

Feedback preferences. Participants' reactions to the feedback were measured with a composite of five items adapted from past research (Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987). The items were "How much do you think a stranger could learn about you from reading this feedback?" "How positive is the feedback?" "How negative is the feedback?" (reverse scored), "How positive was your experience of receiving this feedback?" and "What is your overall impression of the feedback?" Responses were made on 7-point Likert scales (for the first four items, 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; for the last item, 1 = *not at all positive*, 7 = *very positive*). Participants' responses across the items were reliable for the verifying ($\alpha = .84$), compromise ($\alpha = .85$), and enhancing ($\alpha = .86$) feedback conditions. Higher values on each composite indicated greater preference for the feedback.

Relationship ratings. Participants rated the significant other or acquaintance they described in the priming task by responding to the following questions: "How close are you with the person?" "How positive is your relationship with the person?" and "How long have you known the person?" on 9-point Likert scales (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*).

Demographic and suspicion measures. Lastly, participants completed the demographic items and the two open-ended suspicion probes used in Experiments 1 and 2.

Results

As in Experiments 1 and 2, no participant expressed any awareness of the link between the priming manipulation and our subsequent measures, suggesting that the effects of the priming task on the activation of self-evaluative goals were automatic in nature. Five participants, however, were excluded from the analyses—four because they were suspicious about the experimental procedures (e.g., did not believe the program could give them personality feedback), and one because of an experimenter error (i.e., giving the participant feedback on the wrong attribute dimension). The following results were based on the remaining sample ($n = 104$). The results are reported collapsed across gender as no gender differences emerged for our dependent variables.

Characteristics of Significant Others and Acquaintances

SO participants ($M = 4.72$) indicated longer relationships than did ACQ participants ($M = 2.57$), $t(102) = 14.75$, $p < .001$, as

well as greater closeness to the person they wrote about ($M_{SO} = 4.78$; $M_{ACQ} = 2.48$). All participants named someone they felt positively about (i.e., both the SO and ACQ means were positive), as in Experiment 1, but SO participants ($M = 4.67$) rated their relationship somewhat more positively than did ACQ participants ($M = 4.09$), $t(102) = 4.50$, $p < .05$. Overall, in comparison with ACQ-primed participants, SO-primed participants reported closer and more stable relationships with the person they wrote about during the priming task, as was expected.

Characteristics of Relational Self-Attributes

In terms of participants' prescreening ratings of their standing on their (most certain and least certain) relational self-attributes, both SO-primed ($M = 56.52$) and ACQ-primed ($M = 58.79$) participants indicated moderate relational self-views, as intended, with no differences between the groups $t(102) = 0.79$, *ns*. In addition, participants did indeed rate the relational self-attribute they nominated as highest in certainty significantly higher in certainty ($M = 7.25$) than the relational self-attribute they nominated as lowest in certainty ($M = 5.59$), $t(102) = 4.29$, $p < .001$.

Automatic Activation of Self-Verification Goals

Our central hypothesis was that self-verification goals would be automatically activated among SO-primed participants, leading them to seek verification of their high certainty relational self-views. Thus, we predicted that SO-primed participants would indicate a stronger preference for feedback that verified a relational self-attribute held with high certainty than would ACQ-primed participants and relative to self-enhancing feedback about the same attribute. No such differences were expected in the low-certainty condition.

To test these predictions, we subjected the composite of participants' feedback preferences for each of the three types of feedback to a $2 \times 2 \times 3$ (Prime \times Self-View Certainty \times Feedback) mixed ANOVA, with feedback as the within-subjects factor. This analysis yielded a feedback main effect, $F(2, 200) = 8.38$, $p < .01$, a Prime \times Feedback interaction $F(2, 200) = 13.73$, $p < .01$, and a marginally significant Self-View Certainty \times feedback interaction $F(2, 200) = 2.78$, $p = .06$. However, all of these effects were qualified by a significant three-way interaction $F(2, 200) = 3.87$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 3 for means). To decompose this interaction, we present a series of follow-up tests conducted within each self-view certainty condition—first testing differences across prime conditions and then testing differences across feedback conditions.

Differences across prime conditions for high-certainty relational self-views. First, we compared the feedback preferences of SO-primed participants with those of ACQ-primed participants and found that SO-primed participants indicated stronger preferences for feedback that verified a relational self-attribute than did ACQ-primed participants, $F(1, 100) = 5.32$, $p < .05$. This result supports our prediction that participants primed with a significant-other representation would be more motivated to verify their high-certainty relational self-view than would their ACQ-primed counterparts. In contrast, ACQ-primed participants reported stronger preferences for enhancing feedback about their high-certainty

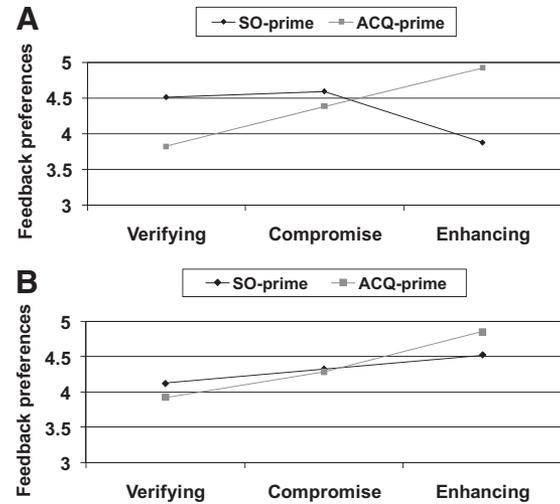


Figure 3. Average feedback preferences for verifying, compromise, and enhancing feedback as a function of priming condition for high and low certainty relational self-attributes. Higher scores indicate greater preference. A: High certainty relational self-attribute. B: Low certainty relational self-attribute. SO = significant other; ACQ = acquaintance.

relational self-view than did their SO-primed counterparts, $F(1, 100) = 10.14$, $p < .01$. This suggests that ACQ-primed participants were focused on self-enhancement goals, a finding consistent with the pattern seen among Experiment 1's ACQ-primed participants. It is interesting to note that preferences for the compromise feedback did not differ by prime condition ($F < 1$).

Differences across feedback conditions for high-certainty relational self-views. Next, we compared feedback preferences for verifying, compromise, and enhancing feedback within each prime condition for the same high-certainty relational self-view. Differences in feedback preferences emerged for SO-primed participants, $F(2, 44) = 6.06$, $p < .05$. More specifically, SO-primed participants had stronger preferences for verifying feedback than for enhancing feedback on the same high-certainty relational self-view, $F(1, 22) = 5.44$, $p < .05$, once again supporting our hypothesis that self-verification goals would be activated among SO-primed participants. ACQ-primed participants' preferences also differed across the three feedback conditions, $F(2, 48) = 11.87$, $p < .01$. More focused tests showed that ACQ-primed participants had stronger preferences for enhancing feedback relative to verifying feedback, $F(1, 24) = 16.37$, $p < .01$, once again suggesting that self-enhancement goals were especially salient among ACQ-primed participants.

In terms of the compromise feedback, SO-primed participants preferred this feedback significantly more than the enhancing feedback, $F(1, 22) = 9.23$, $p < .01$, but to an equal extent as the verifying feedback ($F < 1$). ACQ-primed participants, on the other hand, preferred the compromise feedback significantly more than the verifying feedback, $F(1, 24) = 10.67$, $p < .01$, and significantly less than the enhancing feedback, $F(1, 24) = 5.93$, $p < .05$. In other words, ACQ-primed participants' feedback preferences corresponded directly to the positivity of the feedback, with stron-

ger preferences emerging with increasingly positive feedback—a pattern suggesting the operation of self-enhancement goals.

Differences across prime conditions for low-certainty relational self-views. In the low-certainty relational self-view condition, no differences were found between SO-primed participants and ACQ-primed participants in their feedback preferences ($F_s < 1$), as anticipated.

Differences across feedback conditions for low-certainty relational self-views. In terms of differences in feedback preferences within each prime condition for the low-certainty relational self-view, no differences were found for SO-primed participants ($F < 1$). This lack of differences found for SO-primed participants, among whom self-verification goals were presumably activated, fits our hypothesis that self-verification tendencies should emerge specifically for high-certainty self-views but not for low-certainty self-views. In contrast, ACQ-primed participants once again preferred verifying feedback about their low-certainty relational self-view significantly less than compromise feedback about the same self-view, $F(1, 32) = 6.60, p < .05$, and preferred compromise feedback significantly less than enhancing feedback, $F(1, 32) = 6.82, p < .05$. Thus, just as was seen for their counterparts in the high-certainty relational self-view condition, ACQ-primed participants' feedback preferences for a low-certainty relational self-view corresponded to the positivity of the feedback in a self-enhancing manner.

Discussion

Experiment 3 once again tested our overarching hypothesis that when a significant-other representation is activated, self-verification goals are automatically elicited, leading people to seek verification of their self-views. Supporting this hypothesis, SO-primed participants exhibited significantly greater preference for verifying feedback on a highly certain relational self-attribute in comparison with ACQ-primed participants. SO-primed participants also showed a general preference for verifying feedback over enhancing feedback regarding their highly certain relational self-attribute. No differences in preferences emerged regarding feedback about a low-certainty relational self-attribute. In contrast, ACQ-primed participants' feedback preferences were driven by the positivity of the feedback in both high- and low-certainty relational self-view conditions.

In terms of compromise feedback, we included this condition because the results of Experiments 1 and 2 suggested that self-enhancement goals were operating to some extent alongside the hypothesized self-verification tendencies. This raised the possibility, suggested by prior research, that people prefer feedback that satisfies self-enhancement and self-verification goals simultaneously over feedback satisfying either of these goals separately (Morling & Epstein, 1997). Although both SO- and ACQ-primed participants reported fairly strong preferences for compromise feedback for their highly certain relational self-attribute, these preferences were not stronger than were the preferences they reported for their most preferred type of feedback (i.e., verifying feedback in the SO-prime condition and enhancing feedback in the ACQ-prime condition). Thus, our findings do not support the earlier work. Instead, it appears that SO-primed participants preferred the compromise feedback as much as the verifying feedback because both types of feedback satisfied their desire for self-

verification. In contrast, ACQ-primed participants expressed default preferences for self-enhancement by favoring the feedback offering the most exalted appraisal of themselves. Of course, our findings may diverge from Morling and Epstein's (1997) because we examined the pursuit of these goals upon the activation of a significant-other representation, whereas this earlier work examined self-evaluative tendencies in general.

General Discussion

Theory and research suggest that self-verification goals are associated with significant others (e.g., Swann et al., 1994). Significant others are among the most qualified evaluators in our lives and are individuals with whom we interact frequently. Thus, the threat to our sense of prediction and control is especially great when a significant other fails to provide self-verifying appraisals. We hypothesized that if self-verifying appraisals tend to be sought from significant others, then self-verification goals should be stored in memory as part of the self one is when with a significant other—that is, the relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002)—and should therefore be automatically elicited following the activation of a significant-other representation.

Supporting this hypothesis, SO-primed participants in Experiment 1 reported greater desire for self-verification than did ACQ- and *tree*-primed participants, as seen in the higher correspondence between their self-views and their desired appraisals from others. Experiment 2 also demonstrated the automatic activation of self-verification goals following the activation of a significant-other representation, only in the context of a transference encounter with a new person. Moreover, this experiment documented self-verification strivings with regard to relational self-views and showed that consistent with past self-verification findings, the importance of these self-views moderates self-verification tendencies. Own-SO participants, for whom a significant-other representation was activated, but not yoked-SO participants, exhibited a significantly stronger desire for verifying appraisals from their partner for their high-importance relational self-attributes, relative to appraisals sought for their low-importance relational self-attributes.

Finally, Experiment 3 replicated and extended the results from the first two experiments, by showing that SO-primed participants reported stronger preferences for verifying feedback regarding a highly certain relational self-view than did ACQ-primed participants and relative to enhancing feedback. Such results were not seen when the feedback pertained to a low-certainty relational self-view, consistent with research indicating that self-verification strivings are especially likely for high-certainty self-views. In contrast to their SO-primed counterparts, ACQ-primed participants showed the strongest preference for enhancing feedback regardless of self-view certainty.

Relations to Broader Literatures

The present research speaks to and extends several different literatures. First, the effects that emerged in all three experiments can be characterized as automatic in nature in that participants were not consciously aware of the link between our priming manipulations and measures of self-evaluative goals (e.g., Bargh, 1992). As such, our studies fit squarely in the literature on auto-

matic goal activation, but extend this literature by documenting the automatic activation of *self-evaluative* goals. Thus, just as is true for a variety of other goals, the present results suggest that self-evaluative goals may operate in the absence of conscious choice, initiation, and guidance.

Readers familiar with the automatic goal activation literature may wonder, though, whether our studies do in fact demonstrate the activation of (self-verification) goals *per se*. Förster, Liberman, and Friedman (2007) have delineated a variety of principles that help distinguish goal priming from the priming of nongoal constructs. One of these principles is that goal-priming effects involve value—that is, the positive or negative evaluations people assign to things. Goals and values may be related in a number of ways, but most relevant to our research is the idea that goals change value—that is, they lead people to evaluate objects that facilitate goal achievement more positively than objects that interfere with goal attainment. Nongoal effects should not lead to such changes in value. Applied to our research, Experiment 3's dependent measure, feedback preferences, can be seen as an index of the value participants assigned to different kinds of feedback. Consistent with our assertion that we activated self-verification goals, SO-primed participants assigned positive value to (i.e., they preferred) verifying feedback more so than did ACQ-primed participants for their high-certainty relational self-view. Moreover, SO-primed participants assigned greater value to verifying feedback than to enhancing feedback for this self-view. These findings support a goal-activation interpretation of our results, but additional research is needed to explore Förster et al.'s (2007) principles of goal activation further.

Second, the role of significant others in self-evaluation has been recognized by both past (e.g., James, 1890) and contemporary researchers (e.g., Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996). Our findings advance this work by suggesting that the activation of a significant-other representation—for example, in the context of transference—may be an instigator of self-evaluative processes. As noted at the outset, significant-other representations are chronically accessible (Andersen et al., 1995; Chen, Andersen, & Hinkley, 1999); our findings therefore suggest that the activation of significant-other representations is one possible mechanism by which self-evaluative tendencies are perpetuated. Continuing in this vein, our results point to a potentially nonconscious and therefore difficult barrier to self-concept change among people who hold unfavorable self-views. Specifically, people with unfavorable self-views may automatically seek feedback that verifies and maintains these self-views whenever a significant-other representation is activated—and do so without any awareness that their feedback-seeking efforts are colored by the activation of self-verification goals. This possibility sheds light on possible mechanisms underlying evidence that people with negative self-concepts seek out self-verifying feedback (Giesler et al., 1996).

Finally, our findings extend previous research on the relational self and goal activation and pursuit. Whereas prior research examining significant others as triggers of automatic goal activation has focused on interpersonal goals (e.g., helping) or goals people believe a significant other holds for them (e.g., achievement), the current findings suggest that self-verification goals are also linked to the relational self and are therefore set into motion by the activation of a significant-other representation. In addition, the vast majority of self-verification research has focused, implicitly

or explicitly, on self-views at the individual level of self-representation, although some recent work suggests that self-verification motives may extend to the collective level of self-representation (e.g., Chen et al., 2004). In Experiments 2 and 3, we explicitly assessed participants' desire for verifying appraisals of their relational self-views and therefore documented direct evidence for self-verification strivings at the relational level of self-representation.

Caveats and Future Directions

The present experiments assessed self-verification goals in an experimental setting after the activation of a significant-other representation through a writing exercise (Experiments 1 & 3) or through a transference encounter with a new person (Experiment 2). Though the transference encounter involved an anticipated interaction with a new person, in none of the experiments were self-verification goals assessed during actual interactions with others—something researchers should examine in the future. Along these lines, it would also be interesting, in the future, for researchers to examine the degree to which people's pursuit of self-verification goals following the activation of a significant-other representation is successful and to examine the implications of the successful or failed pursuit of verifying appraisals on the development of relationships with new others. On the latter, seeking verifying appraisals from new others may lead, for example, to a greater chance of developing a long-term relationship because these new others would have a clear sense of one's attributes, both positive and negative, thereby minimizing the chances for future disappointment. On the other hand, particularly for someone with negative self-views, seeking verifying appraisals from a new other could lead to a largely negative initial impression, thus impeding relationship development.

Finally, we hypothesized that significant others serve as triggers of the automatic activation of self-verification goals, given existing theory and research suggesting that the epistemic and pragmatic underpinnings of these goals have unique relevance in the context of significant-other relationships. The present experiments, however, focused solely on positively evaluated significant others. For negatively evaluated significant others, one possibility is that self-verification goals may be similarly activated in these relationship contexts. Alternatively, research suggests that self-enhancement motives tend to operate in new and unstable relationships (e.g., Swann et al., 1994). This implies that to the extent that one's relationship with a negatively evaluated significant other is insecure—for example, because the significant other is viewed as nonaccepting—one might expect the activation of such a significant-other representation to activate self-enhancement goals. Future research is needed to investigate this question.

To conclude, the present findings demonstrate that self-verification goals are stored as part of people's relational selves and can be automatically elicited by the activation of a significant-other representation, leading people to seek the kind of self-verifying appraisals they typically seek from their significant others. In this way, self-verification tendencies people have exhibited in the past with their significant others may resurface in present-day interactions with new others.

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