

# Allure of Negative Feedback Self-Verification Strivings Among Depressed Persons

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## ABSTRACT

We propose that people with negative self-views are rejected because they gravitate to partners who view them unfavorably. In relation to nondepressed college students ( $n = 28$ ), depressives ( $n = 13$ ) preferred interaction partners who evaluated them unfavorably (Study 1). Similarly, in relation to nondepressives ( $n = 106$ ), depressives ( $n = 10$ ) preferred friends or dating partners who evaluated them unfavorably (Study 2). Dysphorics ( $n = 6$ ) were more inclined to seek unfavorable feedback from their roommates than were nondepressives ( $n = 16$ ); feedback-seeking activities of dysphorics were also associated with later rejection (Study 3). Finally, people with negative self-views ( $n = 37$ ) preferentially solicited unfavorable feedback, although receiving such feedback made them unhappy, in comparison with people with positive self-views ( $n = 42$ ; Study 4). It seems a desire for self-verification compels people with negative self-views to seek unfavorable appraisals.

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Consider this: People with negative self-concepts seem to behave in ways that generate the very conditions from which they suffer. As paradoxical as this assertion may seem, a growing body of evidence suggests that it may be true. For example, after a mere 15 min of unstructured interaction, depressed college students can cause unsuspecting strangers to become anxious, dysphoric, and rejecting ([Strack & Coyne, 1983](#)). This and related evidence (e.g., [Coyne, 1976](#); [Coyne & Gotlib, 1983](#); [Coyne, Kahn, & Gotlib, 1987](#); [Hooley, Orley, & Teasdale, 1986](#); [Howes & Hokanson, 1979](#); [Marks & Hammen, 1982](#); [Weissman & Paykel, 1974](#)) has led some to conclude that one problem with depressed people is that they are the unwitting architects of the social conditions that make them miserable (e.g., [Andrews, 1989](#); [Barnett & Gotlib, 1988](#)).

Researchers have sought to explain such paradoxical behavior by asserting that the tendency of depressives to despoil their social environments is inadvertent, the unintended byproduct of unrelated propensities and motives. For example, just as some have suggested that depressives alienate others through excessive approval seeking (e.g., [Coyne, 1976](#); [Gasparikova-Crasnec & Post, 1984](#); [Hokanson, Loewenstein, Hedeon, & Howes, 1986](#)), others have pointed to a persistent violation of sex role stereotypes (e.g., [Hammen & Peters, 1978](#)), inappropriate self-disclosure (e.g., [Gurtman, 1987](#);

[Jacobson & Anderson, 1982](#)), introversion and overdependence (e.g., [Barnett & Gotlib, 1988](#)), and so on. Unfortunately, researchers have yet to establish the causal role of any one of these factors in a convincing fashion (e.g., [Gurtman, 1987](#); [King & Heller, 1984](#)).

In this report, we suggest that the rejection-cultivating activities of depressives are not nearly so inadvertent as previous workers have assumed. Specifically, we propose that people with negative self-views (i.e., persons who are depressed or suffer from low self-esteem) tend to create and embrace rejecting social worlds. Although this hypothesis may seem perilously close to accusations of masochism, it is quite different. That is, we hold that people who possess negative self-views prefer rejecting social worlds because such worlds have become familiar and predictable to them. As a result, although they may recoil at the prospect of being rejected, they are simultaneously drawn to unfavorable feedback because it engenders a feeling of existential security and control. These notions are elaborated by self-verification theory.

In the tradition of consistency theorists (e.g., [Aronson, 1968](#); [Festinger, 1957](#); [Lecky, 1945](#); [Secord & Backman, 1965](#)), self-verification theory ([Swann, 1983](#), [in press](#)) assumes that people are invested in preserving their self-conceptions and that they do so by soliciting self-verifying feedback. The theory departs from most consistency theories, however, by abandoning the notion that people strive to maintain consistency for its own sake (see also [Andrews, 1989](#); [Epstein, 1985](#); [Lecky, 1945](#); [Secord & Backman, 1965](#)) and assumes instead that people work to confirm their firmly held self-conceptions out of a desire to maximize their perceptions of prediction and control (e.g., [Heider, 1958](#); [Kelly, 1955](#); [Lecky, 1945](#); [Rodin, 1986](#)).

The prediction and control motive leads people to entertain two distinct considerations when they contemplate social feedback. From an epistemic perspective a desire for prediction and control means that feedback that confirms firmly held self-conceptions is welcomed (because it tends to fortify people's feelings of existential security) and feedback that disconfirms their self-conceptions is avoided (because it engenders fear that they may not know themselves after all). Therefore, purely intrapsychic reasons—related to persons' preferences for the predictable and familiar—may motivate people to seek self-verifying social feedback. Moreover, this ought to be true even if the self-verifying feedback happens to be negative. <sup>1</sup>

The control motive implicates interpersonal as well as intrapsychic considerations. Specifically, to exert control over their social relationships, people are bound to honor identities to which they have laid claim (e.g., [Athay & Darley, 1981](#); [Goffman, 1959](#); [Swann, 1984](#)). This means that they must work to ensure that others do not form appraisals that are overly negative (which may, for example, cause others to patronize them) or overly positive (which may cause others to place extravagant demands on them). In short, pragmatic as well as epistemic considerations motivate people to bring others to see them as they see themselves.

The literature suggests that people enact a host of strategies in an effort to verify their self-views (see [Swann, 1990](#), for a review). For example, researchers have shown that people choose interaction partners who are apt to confirm their self-views (e.g., [Robinson & Smith-Lovin, in press](#); [Swann, Hixon, & De La Ronde, in press](#); [Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990](#); [Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, in press](#)), they elicit self-confirmatory feedback (e.g., [Coyne, 1976](#); [Coyne et al., 1987](#); [Curtis & Miller, 1986](#); [Pelham, 1991](#); [Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989](#); [Swann & Read, 1981a](#), [1981b](#)), they

pay more attention to self-confirmatory feedback ( [Swann & Read, 1981a](#) ), and they recall it better (e.g., [Crary, 1966](#) ; [Silverman, 1964](#) ; [Suinn, Osborne, & Page, 1962](#) ; [Swann & Read, 1981a](#) ). Moreover, people embrace self-verifying feedback as being especially accurate, credible, and diagnostic (e.g., [Crary, 1966](#) ; [Korman, 1968](#) ; [Markus, 1977](#) ; [Shrauger & Lund, 1975](#) ; [Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987](#) ), and they attribute it to their own dispositions (e.g., [Swann et al., 1987](#) ). Finally, even people with negative self-views display this preference for self-verifying feedback by choosing unfavorable feedback over favorable feedback!

We must stress that evidence that people with negative self-views display a preference for unfavorable feedback does not mean that they enjoy receiving unfavorable evaluations. To the contrary, research has shown that, at some level, people with negative self-views desire favorable, self-enhancing feedback (e.g., [Jones, 1973](#) ; [Taylor & Brown, 1988](#) ) and suffer when they encounter unfavorable feedback. [Swann et al. \(1987\)](#) , for example, found that people with negative self-views were every bit as likely as people with positive self-views to express unhappiness after receiving unfavorable feedback. Furthermore, in a later study [Swann et al. \(1989\)](#) showed that even people with low global self-esteem are eager to receive favorable feedback as long as it pertains to their (rather rare) positive attributes. Finally, when people with negative self-views are induced to choose interaction partners while they are deprived of the cognitive resources they need to compare the feedback with relevant self-knowledge (the decision must be made quickly or while the persons are under cognitive load), they choose interaction partners who appraise them favorably ( [Swann et al., 1990](#) ). These data suggest that people with negative self-views do indeed desire favorable, self-enhancing appraisals but that when the self-enhancement and self-verification motives clash, self-verification prevails under some conditions (e.g., when persons' self-views are firmly held; for a discussion, see [Swann, 1990](#) ).

Our analysis therefore implies that although people with negative self-views may not be aware of it, they are of two minds when it comes to social feedback. On the one hand, a desire for self-enhancement causes them to be smitten by favorable feedback (e.g., [Jones, 1973](#) ; [Tesser, 1988](#) ). On the other hand, once they compare favorable feedback to their self-conceptions and recognize that it conflicts with their self-views, they are inclined to eschew such feedback in favor of unfavorable feedback.

Research on the verification of negative self-views may be relevant to the processes that underlie and maintain depression. After all, negative self-views—such as worthlessness, repulsiveness, and excessive self-criticism—are a hallmark of depression ( [Beck, 1967](#) ; [Ellis, 1977](#) ). Furthermore, depressed people display many of the same tendencies that have been documented in studies of people with negative self-concepts: They recall negative information selectively ( [Blaney, 1986](#) ), take responsibility for negative outcomes ( [Sweeney, Anderson, & Bailey, 1986](#) ), and evaluate themselves in a self-deprecating manner ( [Ruehlman, West, & Pasakow, 1985](#) ). Finally, scores on measures of depression are closely associated with scores on measures of self-esteem and self-concept, sometimes approaching .80. The research literature therefore suggests that depressed people, like others with negative self-views, may preferentially seek unfavorable feedback.

To test this proposition, we conducted four studies. Each investigation was designed to offer a unique vantage point on the processes whereby depressed people attain rather unfavorable appraisals. Study 1 was a laboratory investigation in which depressed and nondepressed participants chose between favorable or unfavorable interaction partners. Study 2 was a survey study in which participants indicated

how they wanted their relationship partners to appraise them. Study 3 was a prospective field investigation in which we examined subjects' feedback-seeking activities as well as the relation between feedback seeking and the subsequent appraisals of relationship partners. Finally, Study 4 was a laboratory investigation that focused on the relative influence of subjects' self-views and affective states on their feedback-seeking activities.

## Study 1

### Method Participants.

Students in introductory psychology at the University of Texas at Austin completed the short form of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-SF: [Beck & Beck, 1972](#)) during a large pretesting session 2—6 weeks before their participation in the study. The BDI-SF contains 13 items and correlates .96 with the full-scale (21-item) BDI ([Beck & Beamesderfer, 1974](#)).

Because we were concerned with our participants' chronic dispositions, we followed [Kendall, Hollon, Beck, Hammen, and Ingram's \(1987\)](#) suggestion that persons whose classifications changed over time be ignored. To this end, when participants reported to the laboratory, we readministered the BDI-SF. Those 28 persons who scored 0 on both the first and second administrations were classified as nondepressed (4 of the participants who scored 0 had higher scores in the second administration). <sup>2</sup>Those 43 persons who scored 5—14 ( $M = 9.97$ ) on both administrations were classified as dysphoric (6 participants became less depressed, and 3 became more so). Finally, those 13 persons who scored 15 and above on both administrations ( $M = 18.0$ ) were classified as depressed (2 participants became less depressed). These cut-offs are compatible with the recommendations of [Beck and Beamesderfer \(1974\)](#).

### Procedure.

Participants reported individually for an experiment that was billed as a comparison of two ways people form impressions of others, personality tests and getting-acquainted meetings. The experimenter asked if the participant would allow three other students to evaluate some responses the participant had made to a personality test completed earlier in the semester. When the participant agreed (all participants did so), the experimenter explained that he would give each of the three evaluators a different part of the personality test results and have each form an opinion of the participant. He then indicated that after the evaluations were made he would show them to the participant so that the participant could decide how much he or she preferred to interact with each evaluator. The experimenter noted that he would use the participant's preference ratings in assigning interaction partners but would not disclose the participant's preferences to the evaluators.

After delivering this introduction, the experimenter announced that he was departing to an adjacent room to arrange for the evaluations to be made. In reality, he went to the control room to retrieve a set of evaluations that had been prepared in advance. When he returned, he presented three evaluations to the participant (counterbalanced for order across participants). Each evaluation consisted of a series of ratings on 7 bipolar trait scales (e.g., uninteresting—interesting). Each rating ranged from 1 to 10. On the average, one set of ratings was favorable ( $M = 9$ ), one was neutral ( $M = 6$ ), and one was unfavorable ( $M = 3$ ).

After reviewing the evaluations the participants rated the favorableness, credibility, and



self-descriptiveness of each of the three evaluators on a scale from 1 to 6. Also, on a 10-point scale, the participants indicated how much they expected each evaluator to like them after a getting-acquainted meeting. Finally, and most important, the participants indicated how much they wanted to meet each of the evaluators on a scale from 1 (*do not want to meet at all*) to 10 (*want to meet very much*).

After completing these ratings each participant was thoroughly debriefed, with special emphasis on the fact that the feedback was entirely fictitious and that this deception was a necessary part of the procedure. The experimenter also encouraged participants to ask questions or voice their concerns. All participants indicated that they understood the rationale and justification for the bogus evaluations, and none reported any objections to the procedure.

### **Results Desire to interact.**

Were nondepressed persons especially apt to choose the favorable evaluator and were depressed persons especially inclined to choose the unfavorable evaluator? Yes. As can be seen in [Figure 1](#), just as nondepressed persons were eager to interact with the favorable evaluator, depressed persons were inclined to interact with the unfavorable evaluator. The preferences of dysphoric participants fell between those of the other two groups. A Depression (depressed, dysphoric, or nondepressed)  $\times$  Evaluator (unfavorable, neutral, or favorable) regression-based analysis of variance (ANOVA) corroborated this conclusion with a reliable interaction between depression and evaluator,  $F(4, 162) = 6.93, p < .001$ . Just as nondepressives displayed a reliable preference for the unfavorable evaluator over the unfavorable evaluator,  $F(1, 27) = 67.90, p < .001$ , depressives displayed a reliable preference for the unfavorable evaluator over the favorable one,  $F(1, 12) = 5.95, p < .03$ . Dysphoric participants displayed a preference for the favorable over the unfavorable evaluator that was somewhat weaker than the preference displayed by the nondepressed participants,  $F(1, 42) = 26.11, p < .001$ . Depression had no impact on preferences for the neutral evaluator,  $F(4, 162) = 1.42, ns$ .

### **Ratings of evaluation favorableness and self-descriptiveness.**

The evaluations were perceived as intended. That is, the favorable evaluator was perceived as the most positive ( $M = 4.64$ ), the unfavorable evaluator was judged as the least positive ( $M = 2.87$ ), and the neutral evaluator was rated in between ( $M = 4.00$ ). In support of this conclusion, a Depression  $\times$  Evaluator ANOVA yielded a reliable main effect of evaluator,  $F(2, 162) = 19.63, p < .001$ . This analysis also revealed a main effect of depression,  $F(2, 81) = 8.05, p < .001$ : Nondepressed participants judged all three forms of feedback to be more positive ( $M = 4.15$ ) than did either dysphoric ( $M = 3.69$ ) or depressed participants ( $M = 3.64$ ). There was, however, no interaction between depression and feedback favorableness ( $F < 1$ ).

Furthermore, the participants anticipated that evaluators' appraisals would not be altered by any interactions between them. That is, when asked how much the evaluators would like them after a meeting, the participants indicated that the favorable evaluator would like them the most ( $M = 6.93$ ), the unfavorable evaluator would like them the least ( $M = 4.93$ ), and the neutral evaluator would fall in between ( $M = 5.95$ ). A Depression  $\times$  Evaluator ANOVA revealed that this evaluator effect was reliable,  $F(2, 162) = 14.44, p < .001$ . There was also a marginally reliable depression effect,  $F(2, 81) = 2.66, p < .08$ : Nondepressed participants believed that they would be most liked ( $M = 6.38$ ), depressed persons believed that they would be least liked ( $M = 5.61$ ), and dysphoric participants fell in the middle ( $M = 5.74$ ). As in the preceding analysis, no interaction between depression and evaluator emerged,  $F(4, 162) = 1.46, ns$ . These data undermine the notion that the participants may have chosen unfavorable partners

in an effort to bring around such evaluators to see the participants in a more positive manner.

The high correlation between self-descriptiveness and credibility ( $r = .68$ ) led us to combine them into one self-descriptiveness—credibility measure. Participants' perceptions of the self-descriptiveness—credibility of the evaluations also conformed to expectation. That is, just as nondepressed persons indicated that favorable evaluations ( $M = 4.02$ ) were more self-descriptive than unfavorable ones ( $M = 2.56$ ), depressed participants indicated that unfavorable evaluations ( $M = 3.54$ ) were more self-descriptive than the favorable ones ( $M = 2.92$ ). This pattern of means produced a reliable interaction in a Depression  $\times$  Evaluator ANOVA,  $F(4, 162) = 3.12, p = .02$ . Furthermore, correlational analyses indicated that participants were more interested in interacting with evaluators to the extent that they perceived their evaluations as self-descriptive, average  $r(82) = .33, p < .005$ .

## Study 2

The results of Study 1 indicate that depressed persons gravitate toward interaction partners who perceive them in a rather negative manner. Although self-verification theory assumes that people's specific self-views (i.e., their cognitive representations of self) are responsible for such activities, the somewhat undifferentiated affective states of depressed persons may have played a role. That is, many contemporary treatments of depression attribute the negative behaviors of depressives to how they feel about themselves (e.g., [Heise, 1985](#)); indeed, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (rev. 3rd ed.; [American Psychiatric Association, 1987](#)) classifies depression as an affective disorder, marked by persistent dysphoric mood. Thus, the results of Study 1 lead one to ask whether the negative feedback-seeking activities of depressives are driven by their cognitions or emotions.

To assess the relative impact of cognitive and affective factors on the activities of depressives, we included in Studies 2 and 3 measures that fell at different points along the cognition—affect continuum (we recognize, of course, that measures of pure cognition or affect are not available). In particular, we sought to tap cognitions by including [Pelham and Swann's \(1989\)](#) Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ), an index of people's specific beliefs about themselves (e.g., intelligence, sociability, attractiveness, etc.). We sought to measure affects by including the Negative Affectivity subscale of [Watson, Clarke, and Tellegen's \(1988\)](#) Positive and Negative Affectivity Scale (PANAS), wherein *negative affectivity* is conceptualized as a dimension of distress and unpleasurable engagement, including anger, contempt, disgust, guilt, and fear.

We expected that the more depressed people were, the more they would prefer relationship partners who thought poorly of them. In addition, we anticipated that people's beliefs about themselves rather than their global affective states would drive these preferences.

### Method Participants.

We recruited 245 male and 256 female undergraduates enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin by offering them credit in their introductory psychology course. Ten men and 3 women were dropped from the study because they completed their questionnaires improperly. This left a total of 488 participants in the sample.

### Procedure.

The participants completed a questionnaire. In addition to measures of self-views and preferred

appraisals, the questionnaire included 120 items that were irrelevant to our concerns in this study (these items pertained to the structure of self-knowledge and affect). These additional items were included to avoid sensitizing participants to our interest in their self-views.

As in Study 1, we measured depression with the BDI-SF. Those who scored 0 ( $n = 106$ ) were classified as nondepressed; those who scored 5—14 were classified as dysphoric ( $n = 80$ ;  $M = 7.55$ ); and those who scored 15 and above were classified as depressed ( $n = 10$ ;  $M = 18.0$ ).

We measured the participants' cognitions about themselves with the SAQ, a measure of self-ratings for 10 attributes that college students consider highly important: intellectual capability, skill at sports, physical attractiveness, competency in art or music, social skills, leadership ability, common sense, emotional stability, luck, and discipline. The SAQ is temporally stable, as indicated by a test—retest reliability coefficient for the short form of .77 over 4 months ( [Pelham & Swann, 1989](#) ). For each of the ten attributes, participants rated themselves in relation to other college students their own age on graduated-interval scales from 1 ( *bottom 5%* ) to 10 ( *top 5%* ). Participants' responses were summed to form a composite index of their specific self-views.

The measure of affective states was the PANAS. Although we were interested only in the Negative Affectivity subscale, we administered the Positive Affectivity subscale to preserve the integrity of the scale.

The measure of preferred specific appraisals consisted of participants' indications of how they wanted a friend or dating partner to rate them on the 10 SAQ items. For the measure of preferred global appraisal by a dating partner or friend, the participants responded to the item, "Ideally, I would like my dating partner [good friend] to view me ..." on a scale from *very negatively* (1) to *very positively* (9).

### **Results Preferred specific appraisals.**

Did depressed participants prefer that their friends and dating partners perceive them in a rather unfavorable manner? To address this issue, we performed a series of one-way ANOVAs based on depression status. In support of the self-verification formulation, participants who were depressed preferred that their friends and dating partners view them less favorably on the SAQ attributes than did participants who were nondepressed,  $F$  s(1, 194) = 10.32 and 4.09, respectively,  $p$  s < .018. As shown in [Table 1](#) , in this and all subsequent analyses of this study, dysphoric participants fell in between the other two groups.

### **Preferred global appraisals.**

The ANOVAs also revealed that depressed persons wanted a good friend to view them less positively in a global sense than did nondepressed persons,  $F$  (1, 194) = 5.90,  $p = .003$ . Although depressives and nondepressives wanted to be seen in an equally positive manner by their dating partner ( $F < 1$ ), depressives liked their current dating partners less and believed that their partners liked them less than did nondepressives,  $F$  s(1, 194) = 8.73 and 14.56,  $p$  s < .0001. Furthermore, this tendency for depressives to believe that they were disliked by their dating partners prevailed even when we controlled for the effects of how much they liked their partners,  $F$  (1, 194) = 7.12,  $p = .001$ . The latter finding suggests that a negative response bias or an assumed reciprocity mechanism could not explain depressives' perceptions of how much they were liked.

### **Relative influence of cognition and affect.**

To assess the relative contribution of cognitive and affective factors to preferred appraisals, we entered the SAQ and PANAS Negative Affectivity scores of all participants in the original sample into a simultaneous multiple regression, with the preference of participants on all the dependent variables as the criterion. In general, the results suggested that cognitive processes were more potent determinants of preferred appraisals than were affective ones. For example, when we examined the preferred specific appraisals, large effects of the SAQ emerged,  $F_s(1, 468) = 202.15$  and  $228.67$ ,  $p_s < .001$ , for a friend and a dating partner, respectively, in contrast to relatively modest effects on the Negative Affectivity subscale,  $F(1, 468) = 3.53$ ,  $p = .06$ , for a friend and  $F(1, 468) = 15.68$ ,  $p = .001$ , for a dating partner. Similarly, the analysis of preferred global appraisals revealed stronger effects of the SAQ,  $F_s(1, 473) = 24.98$  and  $19.99$ ,  $p_s < .001$ , in comparison to the Negative Affectivity subscale ( $F_s < 1$ ). When the BDI-SF was added as a predictor to each of the foregoing regression analyses, in all but one case the unique BDI-SF effect was minimal ( $F_s < 1$ ), whereas the SAQ effects remained highly reliable, which suggests that the depression effects reported earlier in this section were driven by the participants' self-conceptions rather than by their affective states. Finally, it does not appear that the predictive advantage of the SAQ over the PANAS Negative Affectivity subscale can be attributed to psychometric superiority. That is, data collected by [Pelham and Swann \(1989\)](#) indicate that, if anything, the Negative Affectivity subscale is more internally consistent ( $\alpha = .86$ ) than the SAQ ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

### Study 3

Although the results of Studies 1 and 2 clearly suggest that depressed people prefer and enter into relationships with relatively unfavorable friends and dating partners, we know of no evidence that depressed persons actually seek negative appraisals in the context of their ongoing relationships. We also lack evidence that depressed people's efforts to acquire negative reactions actually bear fruit in the form of unfavorable appraisals from their relationship partners. To illuminate these issues we conducted a follow-up study.

Study 3 was a prospective study of pairs of college roommates. At the beginning of the academic semester, we measured participants' depression scores as well as their conceptions of themselves and of their roommates. After 5 weeks we examined the tendency of dysphoric and nondepressed participants to solicit favorable or unfavorable feedback from their roommates. At the end of the semester, we again assessed depression, the appraisals roommates had of one another, and their desire and plans to maintain their roommate relationships.

We expected that depressed participants would be particularly inclined to solicit unfavorable feedback from their roommates and that such feedback-solicitation activities would be associated with the extent to which their roommates rejected them. Moreover, we anticipated that such feedback-seeking activity would be more closely associated with participants' self-views than with their affective states.

#### Method Participants.

Forty-eight pairs of same-sex freshmen roommates (20 men and 76 women) in dormitories at the University of Texas at Austin participated in this study. Smokers were paired with one another; otherwise, the assignment of roommates was determined randomly. We promised all participants either course credit (some were students in introductory psychology) or \$10 for participating in a three-part longitudinal study with their roommate. We eliminated 5 participants because they completed questionnaires improperly.



We classified participants as nondepressive if they had a score of 0 at the beginning and end of the semester ( $n = 16$ ) and dysphoric ( $n = 6$ ;  $M = 10.08$ ) if they scored 6 or more on the BDI-SF at the beginning and end of the semester (see [Beck & Beamesderfer, 1974](#)). The rarity of depressed people (above 14 on the BDI-SF) in an unselected college student sample prevented us from including a depressed group.

### **Procedure.**

The study was conducted in three large group sessions held during the 2nd, 7th, and 12th weeks of the semester. During the first session an experimenter introduced the study as an investigation of the way roommates get to know one another. He then had participants complete the BDI-SF, the short form of the SAQ (SAQ-S; [Pelham & Swann, 1989](#)), the PANAS, and some filler items that were irrelevant to our concerns in this study (see [Swann et al., 1989](#)).

In addition to the measures of self-conceptions and affect, participants indicated their global appraisals of their roommates' value and worthiness. That is, participants rated their roommates on reworded versions of 10 items from the Self-Esteem Scale ([Rosenberg, 1965](#); e.g., "I feel that my roommate is a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others").

### **Measure of feedback seeking.**

During the second session the participants completed a measure of feedback seeking. The experimenter introduced it in the following manner:

In this study of roommate relationships, we are using a variety of questions. You can help us in our selection of questions for session three. ... Since open-ended questions must be individually scored for content, we will be able to include only a limited number on the last questionnaire. With this in mind, please choose two questions from each area that you would like your roommate to answer about you during the last session. With your roommate's permission, we may be able to provide you with systematic feedback about yourself based on his or her answers to the questions you choose.

The measure consisted of five sets of questions, each corresponding to one of the five SAQ-S attributes. Six leading questions made up each set; three probed for favorable feedback and three probed for unfavorable feedback. For example, three questions probed for favorable feedback with regard to skill at sports (e.g., "What is this person's greatest asset at sports and games?"), and three others probed for unfavorable feedback about skill at sports (e.g., "In the area of sports, what is this person's largest problem?"). Similarly, three questions probed for favorable feedback about intellectual capability (e.g., "What is this person's greatest intellectual strength?"), and three questions probed for unfavorable feedback in this same domain (e.g., "What about this person makes you think she would have problems in academia?"). Research on hypothesis testing and communication has demonstrated that people's answers to such leading questions characteristically confirm the premises inherent in the questions (e.g., see [Fazio, Effrein, & Falender, 1981](#); [Grice, 1975](#); [Snyder & Swann, 1978](#)) and that respondents as well as objective observers understand this (e.g., [Swann, Giuliano, & Wegner, 1982](#)).

Participants were invited to choose from each set of six questions the two questions to which they most wished to receive answers. This measure, then, allowed us to determine whether the participants solicited favorable or unfavorable feedback with regard to each of the five SAQ-S attributes.

## Measure of roommate's appraisal and desire and plans to remain in the relationship.

During the third session the participants completed the same measure of their appraisal of their roommate that they completed during the first session. In addition, participants filled out measures of their desire and plans to change roommates. Finally, they completed several items that addressed issues irrelevant to our concerns in this study (see [Pelham & Swann, 1989](#)).

We took several steps to discourage roommates from recognizing and discussing our true purposes. For example, in each session we embedded our key items in a questionnaire that contained numerous items, many of which changed from one session to the next. In addition, after the first and second sessions, we entreated the participants to refrain from discussing the study with their roommates.

## Results

We examined the relation between our measures of self (depression, negative affectivity, and specific self-views) and our measures of feedback seeking, appraisals of roommates, and desires and plans of roommates to leave the relationship. In addition, we examined covariation between the measures of feedback seeking and the reactions of roommates.

### Feedback seeking.

We expected that participants who were rather depressed would be especially inclined to solicit negative feedback from their relationship partners. Just such a pattern of data emerged. A Depression (dysphoric or nondepressive)  $\times$  Solicited Feedback (favorable or unfavorable; within-subjects variable) ANOVA revealed a reliable interaction between depression and feedback seeking,  $F(1, 21) = 19.77, p < .001$ . As can be seen in [Table 2](#), just as nondepressives were more inclined to seek favorable feedback than dysphorics,  $F(1, 21) = 19.49, p < .001$ , dysphorics were more inclined to seek unfavorable feedback than nondepressives,  $F(1, 21) = 19.48, p < .001$ . Complementary analyses indicated that although nondepressives displayed a clear preference for favorable feedback, dysphorics were equally inclined to solicit favorable and unfavorable feedback ( $F < 1$ ).

To assess the relative contribution of cognitive and affective factors to feedback seeking, we entered the SAQ-S and PANAS Negative Affectivity scores of all participants in the original sample into a simultaneous multiple regression, with feedback seeking as the criterion. The results suggested that cognitive factors were more potent determinants of feedback seeking than were affective ones, in that there was a reliable effect of the SAQ-S,  $F(1, 88) = 5.38, p = .023$ , but no impact of the Negative Affectivity subscale,  $F(1, 88) = 2.02, ns$ . When we added the BDI-SF as a predictor, marginally reliable BDI-SF and SAQ effects emerged,  $F_s(1, 87) = 3.58$  and  $3.34, p_s < .072$ , but the PANAS effect was negligible ( $F < 1$ ).

### Appraisals of roommates.

We expected that the roommates of dysphorics would respond to the negative feedback-seeking activities of their roommates by forming unfavorable perceptions of them. The results confirmed our expectation. A Depression  $\times$  Time of Appraisal (Session 1 or Session 3; a within subjects variable) revealed a reliable interaction between depression and time of appraisal,  $F(1, 21) = 5.71, p = .026$ . The means displayed in [Table 2](#) indicate that roommates were equally favorable toward dysphorics and nondepressives during Session 1 ( $F < 1$ ), but that by the end of the semester, they had become less favorable toward dysphorics,  $F(1, 21) = 5.33, p < .031$ , but not toward nondepressives ( $F < 1$ ).

Note that these data do not imply that being depressed early in the semester means that one will inevitably be the target of contempt by the end of the semester. That is, this analysis included only those who remained depressed throughout the semester. When we examined those 6 participants who were depressed at the outset of the semester but later recovered, we found that their roommates' appraisals did not change over the course of the semester ( $M s = 44.67\text{---}45.33, ns$ ).

### **Desires and plans of roommates to stay in the relationship.**

The means displayed in [Table 2](#) indicate that the roommates of dysphorics were especially inclined to desire,  $F(1, 21) = 11.22, p = .003$ , and plan,  $F(1, 21) = 3.11, p = .092$ , to break off the relationship. These data suggest that when the roommates of dysphorics rated them in a negative fashion, they meant business. That is, not only did roommates derogate dysphorics, they made plans to avoid them in the future.

### **Covariation between feedback seeking and roommates' reactions.**

Did participants who sought negative feedback tend to suffer rejection? Apparently so. The more participants sought unfavorable feedback during the middle of the semester, the more likely their roommates were to derogate them later,  $r(21) = .31, p = .073$ , to desire to terminate the relationship,  $r(21) = .38, p = .030$ , and to plan to get a new roommate,  $r(21) = .39, p = .032$ .

Were these correlations between feedback seeking and subsequent appraisals due to a tendency for participants who were initially depressed to remain depressed because they elicited negative feedback? Probably not. This rival hypothesis, for example, implies that the more negative the appraisals of roommates at the beginning of the semester, the more targets will later experience depression. The data revealed a nonsignificant trend in the opposite direction: The more negative the roommate's appraisals were at the beginning of the semester, the less prone targets were to subsequent depression,  $r(11) = .26, ns$ . Moreover, this relation persisted even when the initial depression of targets was covaried out,  $r(10) = .27$ .

In short, participants who sought relatively unfavorable feedback (i.e., depressives) tended to alienate their roommates. Although this does not necessarily mean that such feedback-seeking activities were of themselves alienating, it does suggest that our measure of feedback seeking was sensitive to processes that had an important bearing on the nature and outcome of our participants' relationships.

## **Study 4**

Together, the results of Studies 1—3 suggest that depressed people enact a quest for relatively unfavorable feedback that culminates in their own rejection. Somewhat more tentatively, our findings also indicate that the beliefs rather than the affective states of depressives drive their feedback-seeking activities. One reason why the latter hypothesis must be viewed tentatively is that one could argue that our particular measure of affective states (PANAS Negative Affectivity subscale) was somehow inappropriate (but see [Watson et al., 1988](#)). Furthermore, the notion that affect is unrelated to feedback seeking is thrown into question by evidence that at least one effort to manipulate affect has altered subsequent feedback seeking. [Mischel, Ebbesen, and Zeis \(1973\)](#) found that improving the affective states of participants by giving them favorable feedback increased the extent to which they sought positive feedback. Of course, feedback manipulations may influence cognitions as well as affective states. Furthermore, some (e.g., [Hammen, 1977](#)) have questioned the reliability of Mischel et al.'s

findings. Nevertheless, to examine the possibility that inductions of affect influence feedback seeking independent of persons' self-views, we conducted a fourth investigation in which we manipulated our participants' affective states and then measured subsequent feedback seeking.

Study 4 was a laboratory study that combined aspects of the procedure used in Study 3 with that used by [Mischel et al. \(1973\)](#). Specifically, as in Study 3, we measured participants' self-conceptions and later gave them an opportunity to solicit favorable or unfavorable feedback. As did Mischel et al., however, we manipulated affect by providing the participants with favorable or unfavorable feedback. Also, in an effort to establish the generality of the link between self-views and feedback seeking, we focused on the participants' self-perceptions of their sociability rather than the ability-related attributes examined in Studies 2 and 3.

### **Method Participants and measure of self-concept.**

We recruited 87 female undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin by offering them credit in their introductory psychology course. The participants were drawn from a large sample of students who had completed the short form of [Helmreich, Spence, and Stapp's \(1974\)](#) Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI) during a pretest session at the beginning of the semester. This scale measures self-perceived sociability (e.g., "I have no doubts about my social competence" and "I am not likely to speak to people until they speak to me"). Scores on the TSBI may range from 16 to 80; the actual range in our sample was 33—74. We classified the participants who scored below the 30th %ile (54) as *negative self-concept* and those who scored above the 70th %ile (63) as positive self-concept. Those who scored in the middle of the scale were not recruited. Experimenters remained unaware of participants' TSBI scores throughout the experimental procedure.

### **Procedure.**

One of four experimenters introduced the experiment as an investigation of the impressions people form of others on the basis of nonverbal behavior. The participant's role, the experimenter explained, would be to deliver a speech that ostensibly would be observed by three expert raters. Each of the three raters would supposedly observe the participant by watching a private video monitor from behind a soundproof, one-way mirror. To ensure that participants believed that the raters formed their impressions independently, the experimenter explained that each rater had access to a different video monitor. One monitor allegedly focused on the participant's face and head, a second on her hands and torso, and a third one on her legs and feet.

After this introduction the experimenter presented the participant with the speech that she was to deliver. The speech consisted of several unremarkable excerpts from Desmond Morris's *The Naked Ape*. The experimenter explained that the participant was free to leave after delivering the speech but could remain if she wished to examine the impressions that the raters had formed of her. All participants indicated that they wished to stay and examine the raters' impressions. In reality, there were no raters behind the one-way mirror; the evaluations participants received had been prepared in advance.

### **Manipulation of feedback.**

The participant waited for 5 min while the raters ostensibly prepared their evaluations. In the favorable and unfavorable feedback conditions, the experimenter returned and explained that the first evaluator had formed a general impression of the participant. The experimenter then handed the participant a handwritten evaluation. In the favorable feedback condition, the first evaluator asserted that the



participant was socially skilled.

From the way she looked reading this speech this person seems socially self-confident. I'd say she probably feels comfortable and at ease around other people she doesn't know very well. She seems to have little doubt of her social competence. That's about all I could tell about her.

In the unfavorable feedback condition, the evaluation was simply the negation of that used in the favorable feedback condition.

From the way she looked reading this speech this person doesn't seem real socially self-confident. I'd say she probably feels somewhat uncomfortable and anxious around other people she doesn't know too well. She seems to have some doubts about her social competence. That's about all I could tell about her.

In the no-feedback condition participants learned nothing about their performance. **Measure of affective responses.**

At this point all participants completed a measure of state anxiety and depression. The measure of state anxiety was [Spielberger, Gorsuch, and Lushene's \(1970\) State—Trait Anxiety Index \(STAI\)](#). The measure of depression consisted of 20 representative items drawn from [Zuckerman and Lubin's \(1965\) Multiple Affect Adjective Check List \(MAACL\)](#). The response format of the MAACL items was transformed so that it was identical to that of the STAI items. The sum of the 20 items we used were highly correlated ( $r = .98$ ) with total MAACL depression scores in a separate sample of 75 undergraduates.

**Measure of feedback seeking.**

After the participant completed the mood measure, the experimenter seated her in front of a microprocessor. The experimenter explained that the raters had evaluated the participant by answering a series of questions about her on a computer wired to the one in front of the participant. The experimenter noted that although time constraints made it impossible for the participant to examine all of the raters' answers, she could examine the answers to 5 out of 12 questions answered by the second rater. After ensuring that the participant understood how to operate the computer, the experimenter left the room, and the participant scrutinized the 12 questions.

The computer was programmed so that the participant could display all of the rater's questions on the screen and choose the 5 to which she most wanted to examine the answers. The computer recorded the participant's selections as she made them, and these selections provided the major measure of feedback seeking. Four of the questions solicited positive information (e.g., "Why would this person be fun to be with?"), 4 questions solicited negative information (e.g., "Why would this person have trouble getting along with others?"), and 4 solicited neutral information (e.g., "Why did this person attend the University of Texas?").

At the end of the experimental session, the experimenter thoroughly debriefed each participant, with special emphasis on the fact that the feedback was entirely fictitious and that this deception was a necessary part of the procedure.

**Results**

We were interested in the relation between the self-conception and feedback variables as well as the

participants' affective states after the manipulation of initial feedback and the measure of feedback seeking. In addition, we examined the degree of covariation between our measures of affect and feedback seeking.

### **Affective states after the initial feedback.**

We expected that favorable feedback would produce relatively positive affective states and that unfavorable feedback would produce relatively negative affective states. The results of a Self-Conception (positive or negative)  $\times$  Feedback (favorable, unfavorable, or none) ANOVA supported this prediction. Specifically, participants were more depressed when they received unfavorable feedback (MAACL,  $M = 38.9$ ) than when they received no feedback or favorable feedback ( $M$ s = 32.2 or 29.0, respectively),  $F(2, 80) = 5.08, p = .008$ . Unfavorable feedback also made participants more anxious (STAI,  $M = 42.4$ ) than did no feedback or favorable feedback ( $M$ s = 37.8 or 31.8, respectively),  $F(2, 79) = 6.82, p < .002$ . Finally, participants with high self-esteem tended to be less depressed,  $F(1, 80) = 9.30, p = .003$ , and less anxious,  $F(1, 79) = 5.48, p = .022$ , than their low self-esteem counterparts. No interactions between feedback and self-conception emerged.

### **Feedback seeking.**

Did participants who possessed negative self-conceptions solicit more unfavorable feedback and less favorable feedback than those who possessed positive self-conceptions? Yes. A Self-Conception  $\times$  Manipulated Feedback (favorable, unfavorable, or none)  $\times$  Solicited Feedback (favorable or unfavorable; within-subjects factor) ANOVA revealed only an interaction between self-conception and the type of solicited feedback,  $F(1, 73) = 10.79, p = .002$ .<sup>3</sup> The means are displayed in [Table 3](#). Simple effects analyses revealed that just as participants with positive self-conceptions were more inclined to seek favorable feedback than were those with negative self-conceptions,  $F(1, 77) = 11.77, p < .001$ , participants with negative self-conceptions were more inclined to seek unfavorable feedback than those with positive self-conceptions,  $F(1, 77) = 5.85, p < .005$ . Further inspection of the means indicated that although participants with positive self-views displayed a clear preference for favorable feedback, those with negative self-views displayed a marginally reliable preference for unfavorable feedback over favorable feedback. As expected, the manipulation of feedback had no main or interactive effects on subsequent feedback seeking.<sup>4</sup>

### **Covariation between measures of affect and feedback seeking.**

Correlational analyses lent further support to the notion that the participants' affective states were unrelated to their feedback-seeking activities. For example, neither level of depressive mood nor level of anxiety was related to the amount of favorable or unfavorable feedback participants sought (all  $r$ s  $< .13, ns$ ).

In sum, the results of Study 4 offer further evidence that people with negative self-views are more likely to solicit unfavorable feedback than those with positive self-views. In addition, contrary to [Mischel et al.'s \(1973\)](#) findings, we found that feedback-seeking activities are independent of people's affective states.<sup>5</sup> Apparently, people who think poorly of themselves search for unfavorable feedback even when they are just recovering from a recent experience with such feedback.

# Discussion

Why do depressed people get rejected by their relationship partners? We assumed that out of a desire to make their worlds predictable and controllable, depressed people work to confirm and thus stabilize their negative self-views by actively seeking rather negative appraisals. Consistent with this reasoning, in Study 1, depressives chose interaction partners who perceived them unfavorably over those who perceived them favorably. Similarly, in Study 2, depressives were more inclined to display a preference for friends and dating partners who had negative appraisals of them than nondepressed participants were. Moreover, Study 3 revealed not only that dysphoric participants were especially inclined to solicit negative feedback from their college roommates, it also showed that such negative feedback-seeking activities were associated with getting rejected at the end of the semester. The latter data hint that negative feedback-seeking activities may actually cause rejection.

Several aspects of our findings suggest that depressives' negative self-views rather than their affective states drove their feedback-seeking activities. In Studies 2 and 3, participants' preferences and feedback-seeking activities were more closely associated with their beliefs about themselves than with their affective states. Furthermore, in Study 4, a measure of self-conceptions was associated with feedback seeking, but a manipulation of affect was not. From this perspective, although depressive affect may very well contribute to the problems of depressed persons, our data indicate that it is their negative self-views that drive their search for relatively unfavorable feedback.

The results of Study 4 helped undermine the notion that the feedback-seeking activities of depressives represented a masochistic quest for self-abasement. Not only did participants with negative self-views feel bad when they encountered unfavorable feedback, their feeling states were unrelated to their subsequent feedback-seeking activities. A masochism interpretation of our findings is also called into question by evidence from other research that indicates that people with negative self-views seek favorable feedback as long as they can abide by the principles of self-verification when they do so. Consider, for example, that even people with low self-esteem prefer feedback about their strengths over feedback about their weaknesses ( [Swann et al., 1989](#) ) and that people with negative self-views do seek favorable feedback when they have been deprived of cognitive resources ( [Swann et al., 1990](#) ). These and similar findings (e.g., [Gasparikova-Crasnec & Post, 1984](#) ) suggest that when people with negative self-views contemplate favorable feedback, they are torn between a desire for self-enhancement and a desire for self-verification; although they may decide to seek unfavorable feedback, they do so in spite of, rather than because of, the unhappiness that such feedback brings. Indeed, their desire for positive feedback may very well inspire a sense of ambivalence about their life situation that brings them to the therapist's door and propels their recovery!

Another consequence of the fact that people with negative self-views are motivated to attain favorable as well as unfavorable feedback is that they may sometimes display a *relative* preference for unfavorable feedback. For example, although depressives displayed a reliable preference for the unfavorable evaluator over the favorable one in Study 1 and people with negative self-views displayed a similar, albeit marginally reliable, preference for unfavorable feedback in Study 4, dysphorics displayed a slight preference for favorable feedback in Study 2. Perhaps the most obvious interpretation of this finding is that the self-views of our dysphorics were simply not negative enough for them to seek truly negative feedback: Witness the fact that dysphorics displayed a similar preference for favorable feedback in Study 1. Our findings therefore support previous indications that people work to verify their firmly held

negative self-views only; unless people have accessed quite negative self-views, their desire for self-enhancement mutes or even overrides their desire for self-verification (e.g., [Maracek & Mettee, 1972](#) ; [Pelham, 1991](#) ; [Swann & Ely, 1984](#) ; [Swann et al., 1989](#) ).

We recognize that some readers may be tempted to characterize the activities of our participants in terms of [Alloy and Abramson's \(1979, 1988\)](#) suggestion that depressives process feedback in an evenhanded manner and nondepressives display a preference for favorable, self-enhancing feedback. One problem with this interpretation is that it cannot explain the fact that depressives preferred the unfavorable evaluator over the favorable one in Study 1. More generally, recent research has cast doubt on the notion that depressives have a generalized predisposition to form more veridical perceptions of the world than do nondepressives (e.g., [Benassi & Mahler, 1985](#) ; [Campbell & Fehr, 1990](#) ; [Dunning & Story, 1991](#) ; [Dykman, Abramson, Alloy, & Hartlage, 1989](#) ; [Martin, Abramson, & Alloy, 1984](#) ; [Vazquez, 1987](#) ).

### **Why Do Persons With Negative Self-Views Embrace Negative Feedback?**

Although our data disconfirm the notion that there exists a pervasive tendency for all people to seek favorable, self-enhancing feedback, these data are compatible with reinforcement theory. In particular, self-verification processes theoretically promote feelings of existential security associated with the validation of self-knowledge as well as confidence that personal interactions will proceed without incident. From this vantage point, self-verification processes are a means of cultivating a certain class of reinforcers rather than a means of forsaking reinforcement (e.g., [Chapanis & Chapanis, 1964](#) ).

Having said this, we acknowledge that none of the data reported in this article compel a self-verification interpretation of the tendency for depressives to seek rather negative feedback. Nevertheless, related research does support a self-verification interpretation and argues against several alternative interpretations of our findings. We first consider evidence that the epistemic and pragmatic considerations specified by self-verification theory channel the choice of interaction partners.

#### **Epistemic and pragmatic considerations.**

[Swann, Hixon, and De La Ronde \(in press\)](#) offered fairly direct evidence to indicate that epistemic concerns channel preferences for relationship partners. Their major finding was that married persons with negative self-views were more committed to spouses to the extent that their spouses appraised them negatively. Of interest here was the evidence that participants were more committed to the extent that their partners' appraisals "made them feel that they really knew themselves."

The results of two additional research projects have provided further evidence that epistemic as well as pragmatic considerations fuel self-verification strivings. [Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler \(in press\)](#) , for example, had participants think aloud as they chose interaction partners. Independent judges who listened to these spontaneous verbalizations identified two particularly common reasons why people with negative self-views chose unfavorable partners, epistemic (e.g., "the evaluator reassured the speaker by confirming his self-view") and pragmatic (e.g., "the speaker expected that he and the evaluator would get along well during the upcoming meeting"). Similar effects emerged when these investigators examined participants with positive self-views.

A second series of studies by [Swann, Wenzlaff, and Tafarodi \(1992\)](#) indicated that dysphoric people respond to positive feedback by seeking to restore their sense of worthlessness. Dysphoric and nondysphoric participants received global positive feedback (e.g., "you are intelligent and socially



competent"). Later, they received an opportunity to solicit feedback from a different evaluator. This encouraged nondysphoric participants to solicit feedback about their strengths, and dysphorics to solicit feedback about their weaknesses. Given the absence of pragmatic reasons for participants to have displayed such feedback-seeking activities, it seems likely that they were attempting to satisfy epistemic concerns. [6](#)

In short, recent research has suggested that epistemic as well as pragmatic considerations are sufficient to cause self-verification strivings. At the same time, we make no claim that these considerations are necessary for people to seek self-confirmatory feedback. In fact, we now consider several variables that may sometimes motivate such feedback-seeking activities.

### **Self-improvement.**

Do persons with negative self-views prefer unfavorable relationship partners and social feedback purely out of a concern for improving themselves (e.g., [Trope, 1986](#))? Evidence from [Swann, Hixon, and De La Ronde \(in press\)](#) suggests not. Those investigators found that married persons with negative self-views who self-verified were less apt to state that their partner might help them improve themselves than participants who did not self-verify. Moreover, adding self-improvement to the regression equation in which partner appraisal was used to predict commitment among married persons with negative self-views had little impact on the partner appraisal effect.

Other evidence further diminishes the viability of self-improvement as a rival hypothesis. For example, [Swann et al.'s \(1989\)](#) participants were no more inclined to seek self-verifying negative feedback about relatively improvable attributes (e.g., social skills) than they were about relatively immutable ones (e.g., intelligence). In addition, when [Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler \(in press\)](#) asked participants to think aloud as they chose interaction partners, they almost never mentioned self-improvement as a reason for choosing an unfavorable interaction partner. Finally, the self-improvement hypothesis suggests that persons who are rather low in the certainty of their self-views ought to be particularly inclined to self-verify because they may be more likely to harbor hopes that they can improve themselves. Contrary to this, there is ample evidence that increments in certainty of negative self-views are associated with greater amounts of self-verification activities (e.g., [Maracek & Mettee, 1972](#) ; [Pelham, 1991](#) ; [Swann & Ely, 1984](#) ; [Swann, Hixon, & De La Ronde, in press](#) ; [Swann, Pelham, & Chidester, 1988](#) ).

### **Covariate of depression or of low self-esteem.**

It is always possible that some covariate of our participants' negative self-views (e.g., anxiety) caused them to seek relatively unfavorable feedback. Nevertheless, this notion cannot explain evidence that the very same persons seek favorable feedback about their strengths and unfavorable feedback about their weaknesses (e.g., [Swann et al., 1989](#) ). Additionally, this rival hypothesis begs the question of why any such hypothetical covariate would have caused our participants to seek relatively unfavorable feedback.

### **College students.**

Recently collected evidence argues against the idea that self-verification effects may be restricted to college student populations (e.g., [Raynor & McFarlin, 1986](#) ). That is, [Swann, Hixon, and De La Ronde \(in press\)](#) recruited participants from a shopping mall and also a horse ranch in central Texas and found that people with negative self-views who were married self-verified by being more committed to spouses to the extent that the spouses perceived the participants unfavorably.

## Self-Verification and Related Theories

To the extent that self-conceptions can be viewed as distillations of previous relationships, our findings complement suggestions that people strive to reenact earlier interactional patterns, both in therapy (see [Freud's, 1912/1958](#), discussion of transference and [Rappaport's, 1958](#), suggestion that social feedback acts as a "stimulus nutriment" that nourishes psychological structures) and over the course of development (e.g., [Bowlby, 1982](#); [Sroufe, 1983](#); [Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986](#)). Proponents of various interpersonal approaches to personality have likewise embraced the notion that people work to reenact earlier relationship patterns (e.g., [Berne, 1964](#); [Carson, 1969](#); [Sullivan, 1953](#); [Wachtel, 1977](#)).

Our formulation also has a certain intellectual kinship with [Beck's \(1967, 1976\)](#) suggestion that depressives harbor self-destructive cognitions that perpetuate their depressed states (see also [Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978](#); [Hammen, 1977](#); [Wenzlaff & Grozier, 1988](#)). Yet we differ with Beck on at least two counts. First, [Beck's \(1967\)](#) original theory suggested that people with negative self-views seek unfavorable feedback only insofar as their self-views have been activated by stressful events. Insofar as receiving negative feedback is a stressful event, one may have expected that participants in Study 4 would be more inclined to seek negative feedback in the unfavorable-feedback condition than in the favorable- or no-feedback conditions. This was not true, which suggests that negative self-views need not be activated by negative events for people to solicit unfavorable feedback.

Our data also suggest that depressives may play a somewhat more active role in perpetuating their depressive states than [Beck's \(1967\)](#) theory suggests. That is, although many have suggested that depressogenic cognitions play a powerful role in organizing people's perceptions of social reality (e.g., [Blaney, 1986](#); [Ruehlman et al., 1985](#); [Sweeney et al., 1986](#)), they have stopped short of suggesting that they alter the actual nature of that reality. We go one extra step by suggesting that once people become convinced that they are worthless, they externalize this belief by bringing their relationship partners to share this appraisal of them and ultimately to reject them (e.g., [Wachtel, 1977](#)). From this perspective, depressogenic cognitions are problematic because of their undesirable interpersonal as well as intrapsychic consequences.

This emphasis on the interpersonal consequences of depression echoes [Coyne's \(1976\)](#) proposal that depressives actively transform their social environments into hostile, unpleasant habitats. Like Coyne, we believe that depressed persons behave in ways that systematically alienate their relationship partners and that they thereby lower the probability that they will recover and raise the risk that they will become even more depressed. Coyne's view of the psychological mechanisms that underlie such activities is very different from ours, however: Whereas Coyne suggested that depressed people inadvertently elicit negative reactions through excessive reassurance-seeking, we believe that depressives actively (although not necessarily consciously or intentionally) evoke such reactions as a means of verifying their self-conceptions.

We suspect that [Coyne's \(1976\)](#) and our own formulation may have each captured a portion of the psychological reality of depressives. If so, it is easy to imagine how depressives blend their desire for self-verification and self-enhancement. They may, for example, seek reassurance in a manner that belies their suspicion that they will fail to attain such reassurance, such as by repeatedly accusing their partners of not loving them or of being disloyal.

## Clinical Implications

Many theorists, including [Adler \(1917\)](#), [Beck \(1967, 1976\)](#), [Horney \(1945\)](#), [Rogers \(1951\)](#), and [Sullivan \(1953\)](#), have argued that self-concept change is a central goal of therapy. Despite this, the research literature suggests that therapy sometimes has no lasting and substantial impact on self-conceptions (e.g., [Wylie, 1979](#)). Our findings may help explain why. That is, once people form negative conceptions of themselves, they actively and systematically seek relationship partners who see them as they see themselves. These relationship partners may then stabilize their self-views ( [Swann & Predmore, 1985](#) ) by providing them with a steady supply of unfavorable feedback.

To be sure, because our studies focused on people who merely displayed depressive symptoms, we do not know whether people who are diagnosed with clinical depression will behave as our participants did (see [Kendall et al., 1987](#) ). Nevertheless, the linear relation between depressive symptomatology and preference for unfavorable feedback in our data suggests that clinically depressed persons may simply do more of what our depressives did. Even if this conjecture turns out to be incorrect, our findings may ultimately prove relevant to clinical depression because they suggest that the presence of depressive symptoms may initiate negative interpersonal processes that sustain dysphoric states and eventually lead to full-blown cases of depression (see also [Coyne, 1976](#) ; [McNeil, Arkowitz, & Pritchard, 1987](#) ).

One possible implication of our findings is that improving the social skills of depressed persons will not of itself alleviate their difficulties. That is, to the extent that depressives gravitate toward persons who disdain them, all that much more social skill will be needed for them to win the acceptance and love that they crave. One solution to this problem may be to make such persons aware of the active role they play in creating their own difficulties. Insight into the self-defeating quality of their own actions may put them in a better position to seek relationship partners and feedback that enhance their perceptions of self-worth, and this will in turn eradicate the negative self-views that motivate them to embrace negative social feedback (e.g., [Andrews, 1989](#) ).

We make one cautionary note, however. Recognition of the causal role that people with negative self-views play in bringing about their own unhappiness must not lead therapists to "blame the victim." After all, our analysis implies that people with negative self-views are actually victims in a dual sense: They are victims not only of their present social conditions but also of the events that have led them to develop negative selfviews in the first place. Furthermore, although our participants displayed an active preference for relatively negative feedback, our analysis suggests that they did so out of a nonconscious desire to bolster their perceptions of existential security and interpersonal control rather than a conscious desire to flagellate themselves (see [Kohut's, 1984](#) , discussion of disintegration anxiety). In fact, the ultimate irony may be that such a benign set of motives may cause people with negative self-views to create the very social conditions that cause them misery.

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## 1

We must emphasize that people self-verify in the interests of bolstering their perceptions of control rather than their actual amounts of control. For example, although verifying a negative self-concept by choosing a relationship partner who appraises one negatively may engender the perception of control, such a choice may well result in the availability of less actual control than would be available in a relationship with a more favorable partner.

## 2

[Kendall, Hollon, Beck, Hammen, and Ingram \(1987\)](#) expressed a concern that people who score 0 on the Beck Depression Inventory may be overly optimistic Pollyannas. Although this may be true of people who score 0 on the full scale, we used the short form of the scale. Given that a 0 score was the modal nondepressed score in our samples, Kendall et al.'s argument, if applied to the short form, would imply that the typical nondepressed person in our sample was such an overoptimist.

## 3

The sample sizes for the cells vary slightly across dependent measures because participants occasionally failed to complete specific items. Also, because the correlation between the amount of positive and the amount of negative feedback solicited was  $-1.0$ , the results of this analysis are identical to the results of an analysis of either feedback type performed separately. Finally, because we were concerned that our analysis of the responses of individual participants might violate assumptions of statistical independence, we examined the correlation between the short form of the Beck Depression Inventory, the short form of the Self-Attributes Questionnaire, the Negative Affectivity subscale of the Positive and Negative Affectivity Scale, and the feedback-seeking scores of roommates at the end of the semester. The



correlations ranged from  $-.14$  to  $.16$ , which indicated that such concerns were unwarranted.

#### 4

Preliminary analyses indicated that the feedback-seeking data collected by one experimenter deviated from that collected by the others. This discrepancy produced a reliable interaction between experimenter and self-concept on the measure of feedback seeking,  $F(3, 62) = 3.82, p < .02$ . An analysis of feedback seeking with the deviant experimenter deleted offers even stronger support for our conclusions. Specifically, participants with positive self-views sought reliably more favorable than unfavorable feedback and participants with negative self-views sought reliably more unfavorable than favorable feedback ( $p$ 's  $< .025$ ).

#### 5

[Hammen \(1977\)](#), who also gave participants feedback about a social task, as compared with feedback for an intellectual task used by [Mischel et al. \(1973\)](#), was also unable to replicate their findings. The contradictory findings may therefore reflect the nature of the task.

#### 6

This evidence that people strive to verify their global self-conceptions may seem to contradict earlier research that indicated that people work to verify their specific self-conceptions but that their global self-conceptions were unrelated to feedback seeking (e.g., [Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989](#)). The contradiction is more apparent than real because in the earlier research no effort was made to activate participants' global self-knowledge by presenting them with self-discrepant feedback.

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Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Depression and Preferred Appraisals (Study 2)*

Measure	Subject group		
	Depressive	Dyphobic	Nondepressive
Preferred specific appraisal			
By friend	5.57 <sub>a</sub>	5.72 <sub>a</sub>	6.28 <sub>a</sub>
By dating partner	5.94 <sub>a</sub>	6.33 <sub>a</sub>	6.67 <sub>a</sub>
Preferred global appraisal			
By friend	6.00 <sub>a</sub>	6.63 <sub>a</sub>	6.97 <sub>a</sub>
By dating partner	7.00 <sub>a</sub>	7.11 <sub>a</sub>	7.31 <sub>a</sub>
Liking for dating partner	5.60 <sub>a</sub>	5.80 <sub>a</sub>	6.86 <sub>a</sub>
Estimate of dating partner's liking	4.50 <sub>a</sub>	5.71 <sub>a</sub>	6.89 <sub>a</sub>

*Note.* All dependent measures range from 0 to 8 with a theoretical mean of 4.0. Means with different subscripts differ significantly according to a two-tailed *t* test ( $p < .05$ ).

Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Participants' Feedback Seeking and Roommate's Appraisal and Desire and Plans to Remain in the Relationship (Study 3)*

Measure	Subject group	
	Depressive	Nondepressive
Type of feedback sought		
Favorable	5.29	7.88
Unfavorable	4.71	2.12
Roommate's appraisal		
Beginning of semester	46.00	47.06
End of semester	38.29	45.81
Roommate's desire to stay	4.00	7.00
Roommate's plans to stay	3.43	4.50

*Note.* Data are mean scores. For the type of feedback sought, higher scores indicate more feedback solicited (range, -10-10). For roommate's appraisal, higher scores indicate more favorable appraisals (range, 10-50). For roommate's desire to stay, higher scores indicate greater desire to maintain the relationship (range, 1-9). For roommate's plans to stay, higher scores indicate greater plans to maintain the relationship (range, 1-5).

Table 3.

**Table 3**  
*Feedback Seeking As a Function of Self-Concept (Study 4)*

Feedback sought	Self-concept group	
	Positive	Negative
Favorable	2.07	1.48
Unfavorable	3.33	1.81

*Note.* For the positive self-concept group,  $n = 42$ , and for the negative self-concept group,  $n = 37$ . Data are mean scores. Higher scores indicate more information seeking (range, 0-6).

Figure 1. Self-verification and depression in Study 1.

