Praise from a self-enhancement perspective: More, I want more?

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Abstract

Positive self-evaluation is a fundamental human need, enabling individuals to face challenges or pursue new opportunities in their environment. In the past decades, several lines of research have provided support for the overpowering effect of self-enhancement motivation in directing individuals' attention and behavior relative to other self-evaluation motives. In the current chapter, we briefly summarize the basics of self-enhancement theory, how it has helped understand the psychology of praise and how some long-standing theoretical debates have been solved. In the second part, we review new theoretical issues that have emerged in recent years, summarize new manifestations of self-enhancement in the study of praise and 'real-world' applications of these insights.

"How defenseless we are in the face of flattery" -

Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

One of the earliest and most fundamental insights in the human psyche is that information about the self is not processed in a neutral or objective way. The self is the central point of reference for thinking, feeling and making decisions. How people feel and think about themselves plays a crucial role in how they navigate their lives (e.g., Allport, 1937; James, 1890). An extensive stream of research in social psychology has systematically examined how selecting, processing, remembering, and reacting to information about the self is driven by an intricate combination of motives. Perhaps the strongest motive to drive such information processing is the self-enhancement motive. People have an innate tendency to evaluate themselves favorably and have a strong desire to maintain these favorable feelings about themselves. Various human attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors can be traced back to this basic self-enhancement motive (for an overview of empirical findings, see Sedikides & Gregg, 2008), with praise probably being the most visible manifestation of the self-enhancement motive.

Praise through a self-enhancement lens

In an early review on how people react to appraisals about themselves, Shrauger (1975) was one of the first to coin the term 'self-enhancement', as the desire of people to think favorably of themselves. The desire to think well of oneself has emerged as one of the most important and strongest human motivations, deeply wired in the brain and observed in most cultures (Cai, Wu, Shi, Gu, & Sedikides, 2016). Once formed, the self-concept is fairly stable and generally positive. Because maintaining positive illusions about the self is adaptive and helps people maintain their mental health (Taylor, Kennedy, Reed, & Bower, 2000), people will go out of their way to acquire information that sustains these positive self-conceptions and try to protect their self-concept from negative information. The psychology of praise is perhaps best understood by examining how people seek, react to and process feedback (e.g., Anseel, Lievens, & Levy, 2007; Anseel et al., 2015). Feedback information is not neutral to the feedback receiver; by its very nature, it contains information that signals positive or negative aspects about the self, or a combination of those, and as such, feedback might hurt one's feelings of self-worth, self-esteem and self-confidence. To avoid such threat

to the self-concept, people have generally been found to embrace positive feedback and dismiss or avoid negative feedback. Studies on feedback-seeking behavior have shown that individuals prefer interaction partners that are expected to give positive feedback rather than negative feedback and, more generally, people will shape their social environments to increase the likelihood of receiving praise (e.g., Hepper, Hart, Gregg, & Sedikides, 2011). People with low performance expectations refrain from seeking feedback more than those with high expectations, to avoid the drop in self-worth associated with negative feedback. Similarly, at work, people seek less feedback from managers who are known to give harsh evaluations. People process positive self-relevant information faster than negative self-relevant information and spend more time reading favorable information (e.g. for reviews, see Anseel et al., 2007, Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Reactions to feedback are typically based on a simple, almost reflex-like cognitive appraisal of the feedback message: 'If feedback is negative, then dismiss it as inaccurate, but if feedback is positive, then embrace it as the truth' (Anseel & Lievens, 2006). Thus, people will develop different strategies to acquire positive information about themselves, even if this does not involve explicit feedback given by others. For instance, they will compare themselves with others who are worse off to feel better about themselves, connect with or distance themselves from other people to put themselves in a favorable light, and generally remember self-related positive information better than self-discrepant information, even if they never received positive feedback at all (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). The self-enhancement motive is especially strong in psychologically 'unsafe' environments, where the positivity of the self-concept is under threat. People who experience a threat to the self-concept (e.g., the mere prospect of receiving negative information) are more likely to exhibit behaviors that would lead to a positive view of oneself to reaffirm the self and establish a feeling of overall positivity (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999).

Theoretical debate

The wealth of findings on the pervasiveness of the self-enhancement motive when dealing with feedback seems to suggest that this motive is all-overpowering when it comes to processing information. For instance, an early study on praise described people as being driven to think about themselves "as favorably as they can get away with" (Smith, 1968). Are people insatiable when it comes to praise? Do people only want more positive feedback?

This question has been the subject of a fierce scientific debate in the past decades, with the primacy of self-enhancement as a key assumption to be tested. How people process information appears not only to be determined by the self-enhancement motive. Various other self-evaluation motives have been identified. For instance, a self-verification motive may drive people to maintain consistency between their self-views and new self-relevant information, even when those self-views are negative. People driven by self-verification strivings may thus actually prefer negative feedback over praise (Swann, Rentfrow, & Guin, 2002). Similarly, to obtain an unequivocal, accurate evaluation of the self, people may be most concerned about how diagnostic self-relevant information is - the extent to which that information can reduce uncertainty about an aspect of the self (Trope & Neter, 1994). According to the self-assessment motive, people seek diagnostic information, regardless of its positive or negative implications for the self and regardless of whether the information affirms or challenges existing self-conceptions. Reconciling these different perspectives, Sedikides and Strube (1997) proposed that the various self-evaluation motives work in concert to determine cognition, emotion and behavior.

Boundaries to embracing praise

Studying the interplay between different self-evaluation motives has been instrumental in identifying those conditions wherein people may refrain from their quest for praise. A range of studies has shown that self-enhancement can be curtailed. For instance, seeking praise occurs mainly in domains that are important to people (Crocker, 2002). The familiarity of the event might be another important factor. People consider frequently occurring positive events, like finding a loving romantic partner, as being more likely to happen to themselves but consider rarely occurring positive events, like winning the lottery, as comparatively more likely to happen to others (Chambers, Windschitl, & Suls, 2003). Seeking and receiving praise is also limited by cognitive constraints. People evaluate their work less favorably if they know that they will have to explain their self-views before an external audience. If people feel accountable, for instance by anticipating that they will be individually assessed by others, they are more likely to acknowledge areas where they are not so strong (Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002). Seeking and embracing praise also becomes less likely when people are asked to elaborate on their feedback or generate reasons for why they might perhaps not be doing

as well as they initially thought (Anseel, Lievens, & Schollaert, 2009; Sedikides, Horton, & Gregg, 2007). Similarly, when cognitive resources are plentiful or people are encouraged to reconsider, the self-assessment motive often prevails (Troe, 1986), leading people to seek out accurate instead of positive feedback. As the dynamics of praise driven by self-enhancement strivings and the conditions that curtail it have been firmly established, we turn to new manifestations and contexts where self-enhancement phenomena have been observed.

New Developments

New contexts, manifestations, and phenomena

Social media platforms offer vast opportunity for self-enhancement by seeking praise from others. Users typically post flattering pictures depicting themselves, attractive activities, appetizing meals, or make announcements about personal achievements. Users also have access to highly curated content posted by others in their social network, fostering social comparisons. The content available on social media is often overly positive and self-flattering, sometimes creating large gaps between the image presented online and the true self (Gil-Or et al, 2015). Recent research shows that use of social media has negative affective consequences: people feel morally superior to others who are less popular than themselves, and feel sad, jealous or inferior to those who receive more praise. Users of social networking sites are likely to experience loneliness and low self-worth, body shame and poor mental health, especially if they have a high tendency to compare themselves with others or seek their approval (Hanna et al, 2017; Stapleton et al, 2017). Therefore, searching for praise and validation in online environments is likely to make people feel worse about themselves, due the availability of many unfavorable social comparisons. This could set in motion a vicious cycle, where people hungry for praise post online more self-flattering content, but which may not receive sufficient praise, further fueling their need for self-enhancement.

Gossip, or talking informally about others who are not present, has recently gained researchers' attention as another strategy for self-enhancement. People are especially interested in gossip about others who are similar to themselves, as they can draw relevant social comparisons from this gossip. Hearing negative gossip about others is self-enhancing, making people feel proud of themselves compared to the target (Martinescu et al, 2014). Gossipers can self-enhance by disclosing

negative information or by manipulating information about gossip targets. For example, people gossip to denigrate their sexual competitors to increase perceptions of their own attractiveness (Reynolds et al, 2018). Furthermore, when people overhear positive gossip about themselves, they are likely to feel privileged that others promote their positive reputation and self-image and may value this form of praise as much as direct positive feedback (Martinescu et al, 2019). Thus, gossip may provide self-enhancement opportunities for those who send, receive, and are targets of gossip.

New theoretical issues

A theoretical issue which has remained on the research agenda is the adaptive value of self-enhancement relative to potential negative consequences. Recent research supports the idea that self-enhancement is generally beneficial, because it increases psychological resilience and adjustment (Dufner et al, 2018). For example, after self-enhancement on a task-relevant aspect of the self, people have higher beliefs in their ability to complete the task, increasing effort and performance (O'mara & Gaertner, 2017). Furthermore, self-enhancement in times of extreme adversity, like grief from bereavement or being a victim of civil war, is associated with healthy coping (Bonanno et al, 2002).

However, when self-enhancement is disconnected from reality and rationality, or is not believable, it can contribute to maladjustment. Baumeister and colleagues (2003) warn that indiscriminate praise promotes narcissism, whereas praise should be used sparingly as a reward for progress or for socially desirable behavior. For example, business leaders who receive high levels of praise and are surrounded by colleagues who express opinions similar with their own, make more biased strategic decisions, ultimately harming their performance (Park et al, 2011). Inflated praise makes children emotionally vulnerable and has been found to harm their self-efficacy beliefs (Brummelman et al, 2014). Similarly, overly positive self-assessments may instigate psychological distress and vulnerability to depression (Kim & Kiu, 2011).

Thus, one important question is whether it is possible to balance the benefits and drawbacks of seeking praise and self-enhancement, and how to do so. Self-affirmation research suggests that self-enhancement might be a maintenance motive rather than an incessable driver for more positivity. Once people reach an adequate level of positive self-regard, they cope better with self-threats (Steele, 1988). This means that, once we have optimally self-enhanced on social media, through gossip, or by being

praised for real qualities or achievements, we may be better equipped to withstand challenges to the self-concept.

However, not all self-enhancing information genuinely reflects one's qualities, progress, good behavior, or praiseworthy results. People who feed our self-enhancement desires may have ulterior motives, such as manipulating our needs, attitudes, and consumption behaviors. Social media platforms have been suggested to deliver instant gratification and to be addictive, with an estimated 210 million people who are compulsive, pathological internet users (Longstreet & Brooks, 2017). Presumably partly driven by self-enhancement needs, employees and students are increasingly drawn to social media, which results in lower focus and performance at work or school, as well as higher anxiety and mental health issues (Gupta & Irwin, 2016; Li & Lin, 2019). Therefore, an interesting public debate and research topic that is taking shape is whether institutional policies should regulate or nudge the use of these platforms in certain contexts.

'Real-world' Applications

The abundant research on self-enhancement has led to a wide range of applications. Knowledge that people who feel accepted by others are less likely to feel threatened by negative feedback and are more receptive to criticism (Trope & Neter, 1994) has led to the development of the “sandwich feedback technique”, where negative feedback is delivered alongside praise. Although its efficacy is somewhat contested (Brown, Farnham, Cook, 2002), this is a widely popular way of delivering performance feedback.

Marketers and advertisers rely heavily on self-enhancement insights to sell products. For example, Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud, used psychoanalytical theory to understand “irrational” motives that may underlie purchasing decisions, and how different categories of people can be manipulated (Bernays, 1928). More recently, advertisers strive to create campaigns that will be shared online, helping them reach target audiences through electronic word of mouth. Research shows that people are inclined to share content that makes them look good, for example by appearing to be well informed, helpful to others, to have a sense of humor, or good taste (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Self-enhancement applications have also included fundraising and crowdsourcing on social media. Facebook users have raised over 1 billion US dollars between 2015 and late 2018 (Facebook, 2018).

By donating money to fundraisers set up by their contacts, or by calling for donations for noble causes themselves, people signal socially desirable behavior, and are likely to receive praise and support.

In sum, self-enhancement is a powerful driver of behavior, that is manifested in ever-more diverse ways, as new communication technologies arise. Although maintaining a positive and optimistic self-view is essential for well-being, promoting psychological resilience and self-efficacy, the pursuit of praise and self-enhancement can also fuel negative self-views, anxiety, vulnerability to addiction or manipulation. In a sense, our relationship with praise can be summarized by the famous dictum of physicist Paracelsus: "All substances are poisons; there is none of which is not a poison. The right dose differentiates a poison from a remedy" (Bernoulli, 1994). The self-enhancement literature seems to have attained a mature stage, allowing it to make more specific predictions (Edwards & Christian, 2014) and refined recommendations about the exact inflection points at which positive self-enhancement effects may turn into maladjusted cognition and behaviors that ultimately hurt one's sense of life satisfaction and mental health.

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