When people have problems understanding something—either because they feel incompetent or because the thing is new and complex—people explain the thing in terms of essences and categories, types and dispositions (Wicklund, 1999). When people understand something well, however, they explain its activity in terms of processes, contingencies, and interactions. For instance, when people explain the actions of strangers, they invoke broad essences known as “traits,” such as “She said something nice because she’s a friendly person.” When people explain the actions of friends, in contrast, they invoke contingencies and interactions, such as “He’s pretty friendly, although he can be aggressive when he’s losing at sports” (Idson & Mischel, 2001).

Explanations in terms of dispositions versus contingencies extend beyond person perception into explanation more broadly. Kurt Lewin (1935) was among the first to note that scientific theories differ in their approach to explanation. Some theories search for variability in surface behavior, categorize behavior based on the observed variations, and then ascribe essences to the categories (Wicklund, 1990). Lewin traced
this mode to Aristotle, who would explain motion through different essential tendencies of objects. In the
Galileian mode, in contrast, theories search for continuities underlying seemingly different events.
Similarities in abstract principles thus take priority over similarities in concrete observations. A cart rumbling
down a muddy path and a perfect sphere rolling down a smooth plane are different apparently but identical
conceptually. The examples involve the same conceptual variables, such as friction and mass; they merely
differ in the levels of the variables.

Motivation psychology is no stranger to essence explanations. Early theories of motivation posited
instincts to explain variability in behavior. William McDougall (1908/1960), probably the most famous
instinct theorist, inferred instincts from his observations of behavior. People sometimes explore their
environments, so he assumed a “curiosity instinct.” But sometimes people fear new things, so he further
assumed a “flight instinct.” Different behaviors reflect different motivations; similar behaviors reflect similar
motivations. Things that seem different phenotypically are assumed to be different genotypically—no
apparent differences are merely apparent. The notion that apparently-antagonistic behaviors (like curiosity
versus anxiety, or approach versus avoidance) might stem from the same set of processes was not considered.

The Aristotelian approach never quite left motivation psychology, and it recently found fertile
ground in the study of self and motivation. The prevailing model of self-motivation posits a set of “self-
motives”—self-enhancement, self-assessment, self-verification, and self-improvement—from which self-
motivated activity derives (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). We hope to show that the self-motives approach to
explaining self-motivation, like McDougall’s instinct model, is inadequate—it infers the motive from
behavior and then explains behavior with the motive. In the first part of our chapter we review the premises
of the self-motives approach and present some criticisms. We then present objective self-awareness (OSA)
theory as a model of self-motivation. OSA theory assumes that seemingly diverse behaviors—such as
accepting or denying responsibility for failure—stem from the same underlying dynamics. We’ll argue that
some phenotypic behavioral differences—like avoiding or seeking negative information, or approaching
and avoiding one’s failures—share genotypic dynamic identities. Models of self-motivation based on taxonomies
are thus unnecessary.
Self-Motives as a Theory of Self-Motivation

We’ll take the SCENT model of self-motives (Self-Concept Enhancing Tactician; Sedikides & Strube, 1997) as our prototype for the self-motives approach. The SCENT model is specified in the most detail and represents the views of researchers working in the self-motives tradition. Research based on this tradition is widely-known. In fact, a recent textbook on the social psychology of the self uses the SCENT model as the framework for its discussion of self-motivation (Hoyle, Kernis, Leary, & Baldwin, 1998). So while many researchers would disagree with some of the SCENT model’s technical points, most would agree with its core premise: that self-motivation is founded on a small set of independent motives. The SCENT model proposes four motives, which we review below briefly.

The Four Self-Motives

The self-enhancement motive leads people “to elevate the positivity of their self-conceptions and to protect their self-concepts from negative information” (Sedikides & Strube, 1997, p. 212). The motive is inferred from behaviors such as preferring downward social comparison, judging oneself as “better than average” on many dimensions, defining positive traits in terms of one’s own abilities, and attributing failure to external causes and success to internal causes.

The self-assessment motive leads people “to obtain a consensually accurate evaluation of the self...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” (Sedikides & Strube, 1997, p. 213). Self-assessment is inferred from seeking feedback about performance, creating tasks that enable feedback, preferring diagnostic tasks, and blaming self for failure.

The self-verification motive leads people “to maintain consistency between their self-conceptions and new self-relevant information” (Sedikides & Strube, 1997, p. 213). This is inferred from behaviors like preferring self-consistent information and choosing interaction partners who verify one’s self-image.

The self-improvement motive leads people to “improve their traits, abilities, skills, health status, or well-being” (Sedikides & Strube, 1997, p. 213). This motivates seeking genuine improvement and personal growth. The motive is inferred from behaviors such as actively approaching and coping with problems,
seeking information that enables improvement, practicing existing skills, and choosing to work on remedial tasks that reduce deficiencies.

These four motives are distinct, so the motives can cooperate, conflict, or operate independently of each other. Conflict has received the most attention, particularly how self-verification can clash with self-enhancement (Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989) and how self-enhancement can clash with self-assessment (Trope & Neter, 1994). The SCENT model assumes a hierarchical arrangement in which self-enhancement reigns over the others. The verification, assessment, and improvement motives are seen as local means of achieving the distal goal of making the self more positive (Sedikides & Strube, 1997, p. 225). Testing this assumption seems difficult. Assuming a hierarchy isn’t necessary for the self-motives approach, and other researchers in the self-motives tradition would disagree.

**Criticisms of the SCENT Model**

We think that the SCENT approach is inadequate, for six reasons. First, it infers the motive from the behavior. If every different behavior were attributed to a different motive, psychology would degenerate into a chaotic eclecticism. There must be some continuities in motivation. Either we assume that things that seem different at the behavioral level always have different causes, or we assume that sometimes they have similar causes. If we assume the latter, then we need to specify the similar causes. The SCENT approach does not seek similarities among the motives (apart from subordinating them all to self-enhancement) and thus fails to consider the possibility of underlying dynamic continuities.

Second, the self-motives approach nears circularity. It infers self-enhancing tendencies from behavior and then explains behavior with the self-enhancing tendencies. It isn’t entirely circular, because the same observation isn’t used for both purposes. An earlier observation (past research) implies the self-motive, which then explains the present (and similar) observation. Either way, the four self-motives seem like descriptive labels for activity rather than explanatory concepts. Do people make external attributions for failure because they were motivated by self-enhancement, or is “self-enhancement” a description of this sort of activity?

Third, the self-motives approach can’t be contradicted by research. What happens when a study finds
that people avoid performance feedback? This can be explained by self-enhancement motivation. But what if people seek feedback? This must have reflected self-assessment motivation. And what if nothing happened? Two motives must have conflicted. No matter what a study finds, one of the four motives can be invoked as the cause of the observed behavior. We suggest that the reader take a moment to consider how to design a study to show that self-enhancement motivation (or any of the four motives) was operating without using seemingly self-enhancing behavior as the criterion—it’s an interesting methodological exercise.

Fourth, the SCENT approach can’t predict when one versus another motive will guide activity. Imagine an experiment in which people work on a task. The task’s importance is manipulated (high versus low), and everyone gets failure feedback. So how will importance affect interest in a remedial task, our DV? Will people approach or avoid the task? It’s hard for the SCENT model to make a prediction one way or the other—but it can explain either finding afterwards. Instead of prediction, it can only compile a list of moderators observed after the fact (Freitas, Salovey, & Liberman, 2001; Trope & Pomerantz, 1998), but the prediction is not required by the self-motives approach. Finding moderators is an important part of research—but we think it matters whether the moderators stem from intuition or whether they’re derived from a theory.

Fifth, the four self-motives are not circumscribed. For instance, people want to self-improve because there is a self-improvement motive. But when do they not want to self-improve? In our reading of the SCENT model, it seems people want to do so limitlessly, all the time, in all contexts—except inasmuch as they also want to self-enhance, self-assess, and self-verify. The only boundary for a given self-motive is the fact that three other self-motives exist. Like a four-party democracy, the four self-motives act as reciprocal checks-and-balances for the others.

Sixth, and finally, we wonder why there are only four self-motives. If we don’t know the boundaries of the motives, then nothing keeps us from positing new ones. Indeed, if we’re inferring motives from observed behaviors, then we can posit a new motive whenever we observe a (seemingly) new behavior. Why not a fifth “self-protective” motive to explain denial of responsibility for negative events? Why not a sixth “self-expansive” motive to explain including others in the self-concept? What conceptual reason prevents
this? If observed behavior is the criterion for asserting a motive, rather than deeper conceptual continuities, then the diversity of motives is limited only by the diversity of observations.

*Past Theories as Non-Examples*

We can illuminate the problems with the SCENT approach by viewing what other theories would look like if they adopted the same explanatory structure. We’ll use some of Jack Brehm’s theories as non-examples.

What would reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) look like if it followed the SCENT model? First, it would posit two independent motives: a “freedom motive” and a “conformity motive,” creating an ASCII (Autonomy-Seeking but Conformity-Increasing Individual) model of reactance. The freedom motive is seen in the tendency to react against influence attempts; the conformity motive is seen in the tendency to comply. The ASCII model would have to posit these two motives because we have observed instances of failed and successful influence. Concrete variability requires conceptual variability, in the Aristotelian mode—different behaviors (like compliance and reactance) can’t reflect the same underlying processes. When formulated this way, ASCII reactance theory makes no predictions. Do attractive groups create reactance or compliance (Brehm & Mann, 1975)? Well, does the group arouse one or the other motive? We can’t know unless we do the study. The real reactance theory, in contrast, makes subtle predictions because it specifies variables—such as the magnitude of the threat to freedom, the importance of the freedom, the implications for other freedoms, and whether people feel free to do something. Likewise, the ASCII reactance model can’t say when people *won’t* react; it can only say that the antagonistic motives to react and to comply limit each other reciprocally. The real reactance theory, in contrast, can specify the boundaries of reactance using its variables.

What would cognitive dissonance theory (Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976) look like if it followed the SCENT model’s example? We observe times when people change their attitude in response to contrary information, and observe other times when people bolster the original attitude. So we would need to posit two independent motivational tendencies—attitudinal stability and attitudinal change—yielding the BOMBAST (Being Ostensibly Motivated to Bolster and to Shift Thoughts) model of cognitive dissonance. So when people must choose between two alternatives, how will their attitudes change?
The BOMBAST model can’t make predictions because it derives the theoretical concepts from the observations, thus preventing predictions about new events. The real dissonance theory, however, describes processes and variables—such as commitment, resistance to change, and magnitude of the discrepancy—which enable the theory to extend beyond the observations that inspired it.

Objective Self-Awareness as a Theory of Self-Motivation

In this section we’ll present objective self-awareness theory as an alternative model of self-motivation (Duval & Silvia, 2001; Silvia & Duval, 2001a). The revised theory builds on the original theory of self-awareness (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Wicklund, 1975) by adding new assumptions about affect and causal attributions. In this section we’ll present an overview of the processes assumed by the theory; our recent book presents the theory in detail (Duval & Silvia, 2001, chap. 2-7). The following section shows how objective self-awareness theory can reinterpret the four self-motives in dynamic terms, and, more importantly, make new predictions about self-motivated activity.

Mechanisms of Self-Motivation

Self-Focused Attention and Self-Evaluation

Objective self-awareness (OSA) theory argues that self-motivation is founded on a small set of interacting elements. We assume that people have a concept of self, derived from encountering different social perspectives (Shibutani, 1961). The features of the self-concept can be compared to internalized standards of correctness that specify features the self ought to have. Standards can be unattainable, vague, abstract, perfectionistic, idiosyncratic, and inconsistent with other standards. Other theories have suggested different kinds of standards—such as ideals versus oughts (Higgins, 1987) or approach versus avoidance goals (Carver & Scheier, 1998)—but all standards share the functional quality of specifying a feature that the self should have.

People don’t constantly monitor how self fares relative to its standards. Most self-theories go awry by assuming that simply failing to meet a standard will reduce self-esteem. Almost everything people do violates at least one standard, given the number, complexity, perfectionism, and abstraction of standards. People have so many features of self, and so many standards relevant to the features, that there must be a
mechanism that connects a specific aspect of the self to a specific standard. OSA theory diverges from nearly every other self-theory by specifying when standards affect self-evaluation. People only compare self with standards to the extent that attention is self-focused. Unlike most animals, people can consider self as an object with features. This state of “objective self-awareness” promotes comparison of self with standards. If people aren’t self-focused, then self–standard discrepancies won’t impact activity. Self-awareness theory, in this sense, is primary over other theories of self-evaluation because so few theories consider when people self-evaluate in the first place.

Situational factors influence the momentary level of self-awareness (Duval & Silvia, 2001, chap. 2). Attention orients on self whenever the self stands out from the background formed by the social context or past experience. Being distinctive in some way—the one actor among a crowd of observers, the one woman in a group of men—will draw attention to self because of figure–ground principles of attention. Stimuli reminding the person of the self’s object status—hearing recordings of one’s voice or seeing one’s image on TV—should also increase self-awareness, particularly if they involve experiencing the self in unusual ways. Finally, targeting the attention system directly, such as by priming self-relevant knowledge or consuming alcohol, will affect self-awareness. Much has been made of individual differences in self-focused attention, known as private self-consciousness (Buss, 1980). We suspect that “trait self-awareness” reflects enduring situational consistencies or enduring beliefs that self deviates from a reference group.

In short, self-evaluation requires self-focused attention. Many studies show that standards are inert when self-focus is low, even when people are preselected for extreme standards (e.g., Gibbons, 1978; Silvia, 2002) and when standards are explicitly induced and manipulated (e.g., Duval & Lalwani, 1999). People will only appraise how self relates to standards to the extent that attention is self-focused. Situational features influence the momentary levels of self-focused attention, and thus the degree of self-evaluation. But what happens once people begin self-evaluating?

Causal Attributions for the Experience of Discrepancies

When people are self-focused and thus comparing self with standards, they typically notice disparities between how the self is and how the self should be. OSA theory is rooted in consistency theories
of motivated cognition (Heider, 1960; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). We assume that people prefer congruity between different aspects of self, congruity between different standards, and congruity between self and standards. Self–standard discrepancies thus generate negative affect because the ideal state is maximal similarity between self and standards. The catch, however, is that people don’t necessarily know why they feel bad. We assume that the experience of affect does not contain information about its cause. If it did, “misattribution” would be impossible—people would inherently know why they feel bad. If emotions don’t immediately tell us why we feel the emotion, then we need another process to interpret the affective experience and connect it to a cause. This is the process of causal attribution. When events occur that are surprising, unexpected, inconsistent, complex, or imbalanced, people make attributions for why the event occurred (Weiner, 1985). When people suddenly experience negative affect, attributitional processes will seek to connect this event to a likely cause. The attribution process is often automatic, and thus experienced as perception rather than as inference (Heider, 1958a).

Attributions are fundamental to self-motivation, for two reasons. First, attributions direct action. If people don’t know why they feel bad, then they also don’t necessarily know what to do about it. If negative affect doesn’t contain information about its cause, then it also doesn’t contain information about specific situated actions that would make people feel better. Attributions for the problem give people a foothold into possible solutions for the problem. As Heider (1958b) argued, “attribution serves the attainment of a stable and consistent environment, gives a parsimonious and at the same time often an adequate description of what happens, and determines what we expect will occur and what we should do about it” (p. 25). By telling people what caused an event, attributions give people expectations about what might change the event. Attributions thus suggest targets for action. We assume that people will act on the perceived cause of the problem, all else being equal. If people think that they feel badly because their standards are too high, then they’ll change the standards; if people think that self was the cause of failure, then they’ll change self (Duval & Lalwani, 1999).

Second, attributions undergird self-motivation because they influence evaluations. Based on Heider’s (1958a) analysis of tendencies toward congruity between unit and sentiment relations, we have suggested
that attributions lead to attitude formation (Duval & Silvia, 2001, chap. 7). When people attribute the cause of failure to self—that is, connect the self to the negative event in a cause–effect unit relationship—then people will evaluate the self negatively because connected elements become similar in valence. This is one way of thinking about “state self-esteem.” If people attribute their failure to another person, then they should dislike that person as well as anything similar to the person. By connecting positive or negative events to the self, to other people, to standards, or to anything else, attributions lead people to evaluate the perceived cause positively or negatively.

Interaction of Self-Evaluation and Attribution: Can the Person Meet a Standard?

Thus far we’ve seen how self-focused attention leads people to recognize discrepancies between self and standards, and how people then make attributions for the negative affect aroused by the discrepancy. Self–standard comparison and causal attribution are the two core processes in objective self-awareness theory. But there’s a catch—the comparison process can affect the attribution process. We assume that there are motives associated with attributional processes. People want to make coherent, simple, and consistent attributions (Heider, 1958a). Linking events to their “most plausible causes” accomplishes this general goal (Duval & Duval, 1983). But sometimes attributional simplicity conflicts with self–standard consistency. Imagine a case where a person fails and self is the most plausible cause of failure. Attributing the experience of failure to self will create discrepancies but it will also connect the event to the most likely cause. Attributing failure externally, in contrast, averts discrepancies but at the cost of making a less consistent attribution. The first attribution privileges the attribution system; the second, the comparison system. This conflict arises whenever the self is the most plausible cause for a negative event (more precisely, for any event that would create a self–standard discrepancy upon attribution to self).

So what happens when people are the most plausible cause for a negative event? We assume that this conflict is reconciled by people’s perceived rate of progress toward reducing the discrepancy. People compromise. If people believe they can rapidly reduce the problem, then they’ll attribute the problem to self. This promotes a consistent attribution and creates a discrepancy—but people expect the discrepancy to be quickly reduced. If people feel unable to reduce the problem, either at all or at too slow of a rate, then they’ll
attribute the problem externally. Blaming something else isn’t the most consistent attribution, but it does avoid an intractable self–standard discrepancy. And people then attribute failure to the next-most likely cause (Silvia & Duval, 2001b), which satisfies the attributional goal to some degree. Many studies support these predictions. When perceived rate of progress is low, people blame the environment and other people for their failure (Duval & Silvia, 2002), disengage from the task (Carver & Scheier, 1998), and avoid remedial tasks (Duval, Duval, & Mulilis, 1992). When rate of progress is high, however, people blame themselves for failure, experience reduced self-esteem (Duval & Silvia, 2002), take responsibility for the problem (Lalwani & Duval, 2000), and actively try to reduce the discrepancy (Duval et al., 1992; Duval & Lalwani, 1999).

Summary

These are the concepts and dynamics posited by objective self-awareness theory. Self-focused attention can uncover self–standard discrepancies; attributions determine how people deal with the problem and how they feel about the perceived cause; and self-evaluation can sometimes affect attributions. Self-motivation thus rests in the interplay of two systems that reflect motives for consistent cognitive organization (Heider, 1960): a system that prefers congruity between self and standards, and a system that prefers simple attributional structure. Note that we described each concept without relying on past observations. We did not infer that self-focused attention leads to self–standard comparison because we have observed it in the past. Self-awareness theory makes assumptions about constructs and how they relate—this lets the theory make predictions about new observations.

Reinterpreting the Self-Motives

In this section we’ll see how objective self-awareness theory reinterprets the four self-motives. We hope to show that apparently opposing behaviors stem from the same dynamics, not from opposing motives. Not only can the theory recast each motive in terms of dynamic processes, but it can specify boundaries and make new predictions.

Self-Enhancement

Self-enhancement motivation has been inferred from behaviors like attributing failure externally, defining traits in terms of the self’s qualities, viewing oneself as better than average, and making downward
social comparisons. But the boundaries of self-enhancement are poorly defined in the self-motives approach. Self-awareness theory, in contrast, makes firm predictions about when people will self-enhance. First, we recast self-enhancement in terms of comparing self with standards of correctness. Statements such as “people strive for self-concept positivity” are vague unless we know what indicates a positive self. As a more specific alternative, we argue that people want to be congruent with their internalized standards, which specify the qualities of “the good self.”

Framing self-enhancement in terms of meeting personal standards makes new predictions. As a general rule, “self-enhancing” activity should be more likely when people are self-focused. If a person isn’t comparing self with standards, then the person won’t recognize or care about discrepancies—meeting standards won’t be a concern. Failure feedback, for instance, has little impact on self-serving attributions and self-esteem when self-awareness is low (Duval & Silvia, 2002; Silvia & Duval, 2001b), a finding hard to reconcile with a blanket self-enhancement motive.

When people are self-focused and thus self-evaluating against their standards, then people’s perceived ability to reduce the discrepancy influences “self-enhancing” activity. When self-focused people fail, they self-enhance when they feel unable to deal with the problem—they blame the environment and other people for their problem, have no change in self-esteem, avoid remedial tasks, and so forth. When self-focused people feel able to improve, however, they blame self for the problem, experience reduced self-esteem, and actively try to do something about the problem. And when people are not self-focused, very little happens. They admit that their performance was substandard, but they do not act defensively or experience changes in self-esteem (Duval & Silvia, 2002). Such findings are not easily explained within the self-motives approach, even after the fact, but they are predicted by OSA theory.

We suspect that other symptoms of self-enhancement—like self-serving trait definitions, better-than-average effects, and downward comparisons—follow the same dynamics. Research on trait definition usually involves self-relevant traits for which people have standards, and thus potentially have discrepancies (Dunning, 1999). If a person defines a standard (e.g., a good leader) in terms of the qualities that the self already has, then the person has effectively ensured that self will be consistent with the prototype. If the trait
is irrelevant to a person’s standards, or if the person feels discrepant but able to improve, then we suspect that people wouldn’t define traits in terms of the self. Likewise, viewing the self as better-than-average probably reflects the fact that most standards are defined in terms of relative performance. Because many traits and abilities have no objective index, people judge the self through social comparison (Festinger, 1954). Perceiving self as better-than-average thus reduces a perceived discrepancy between self and a standard defined by relative performance. If so, then the effect should vary as an interactive function of self-focus and ability to improve the problem. Likewise, downward social comparison makes self seem closer to a standard due to the contrast with the unfortunate person’s position. Consistent with our analysis, Wills (1981) found that people make downward comparisons only when they can’t improve.

In short, people show “self-enhancing” activity according to the boundaries predicted by self-awareness theory. When self-awareness is low, people don’t self-enhance. When self-awareness is high, people self-enhance when they feel unable to improve, and don’t self-enhance when they feel able to improve. Rather than a blanket motive bounded only by other blanket motives, self-enhancement seems to have a circumscribed pattern of dynamics.

Self-Assessment

Although the idea of a general motive “to know oneself” has an intuitive appeal, research shows that “self-assessment motivation” applies rather narrowly. Sedikides and Strube (1997) find that signs of self-assessment appear only when people are highly uncertain about an important self-aspect. This hardly indicates a broad motive, self- or otherwise. We also doubt that studies forcing people to take or create tasks can show “self-assessment motivation,” even when subsequent feedback is optional. Claiming a motive to understand the self seems premature unless we know how many people don’t care and would rather not take the task at all.

Either way, the basic main effect is that people prefer diagnostic tasks and performance feedback when they are uncertain about an important ability. An underappreciated point is that “diagnosticity” of a task is confounded with the participant’s attributions for task performance. If a task is diagnostic, then the feedback says something about one’s ability—an internal attribution is implied. If a task is not diagnostic,
then the feedback implies nothing about one’s ability. Diagnosticity thus implies performance attributions. In fact, participants seem to understand this. People predict that their self-esteem will go up on tasks that are diagnostic of success and go down on tasks diagnostic of failure (Trope, 1986). Attributional processes, which we view as foundational to self-motivation, are thus lurking in the background of self-assessment.

OSA theory predicts that concerns about self’s properties only come about when people are self-focused, as people are in the typical psychology experiment (Duval & Silvia, 2001, chap. 2). When self-focus is lowered, “self-assessment” motivation should be minimal. When self-focus increases, however, people recognize that self could fail to meet a standard. As before, the dynamics of self-awareness predict that if people feel capable of initially succeeding or eventually improving, then they should prefer diagnostic tasks because success on such a task will reveal self–standard congruity and thus boost self-esteem (Duval & Silvia, 2002, Study 3). If people do not feel capable of initially succeeding or eventually improving, they should prefer the non-diagnostic task, avoid feedback, and generally wish to leave the field.

A study of private self-consciousness supports our analysis (Carver, Antoni, & Scheier, 1985). People were given success or failure feedback on a first test. They were then allowed to choose items for the second test. Some items allowed feedback, and other items did not. People who succeeded on the first task probably expected to do well on the second similar task; people who failed probably expected to do poorly. When self-consciousness was high, people who succeeded chose more items with feedback, and people who failed chose more items without feedback. When self-consciousness was low, however, people seemed unmotivated by self-assessment. Other research finds that people seek feedback when they can improve and avoid feedback when they can’t improve (Dunning, 1995). People also make upward social comparisons when they feel they can improve but not when they can’t improve (Ybema & Buunk, 1993).

For self-assessment, then, the core variables asserted by self-awareness theory—self-focused attention, probability of improvement, and attributions—nicely cover extant findings and suggest new predictions. When people aren’t particularly self-focused, potential successes and failures are insignificant because people aren’t self-evaluating (Carver et al., 1985). When people become self-focused, they become concerned with possible failure, particularly for “diagnostic tasks,” which imply that self is responsible for
success and failure. As with other areas, probability of improvement should moderate defensive versus constructive activity. If people feel able to succeed, or if they feel able to improve should they fail, then they should seek feedback and approach the task. If people feel unable to improve, however, they should avoid diagnostic tasks and feedback.

As before, a seemingly blanket motive shows a coherent, circumscribed pattern of dynamics. And, interestingly enough, the dynamics of self-assessment resemble the dynamics of self-enhancement described earlier. Presumably contrary self-motives (like assessment and enhancement) and presumably contrary activities (like feedback seeking and avoidance) stem from the same set of processes. We thus begin to see why self-awareness theory is a general theory of self-motivation.

Self-Verification

Self-verification is inferred from activities such as choosing to interact with someone who confirms one’s self-view and liking others who are similar, even when the self-view and the dimensions of similarity are negative (Griffitt, 1966; Swann et al., 1989). We interpret these effects in terms of the consistency motivation that leads people to prefer consistent, harmonious organizations of knowledge and experience. Objective self-awareness theory belongs to social psychology’s group of “consistency theories.” We assume that people prefer consistency between aspects of self, between their standards, and between self and standards. The theory focuses on self–standard consistency, but it argues for a broad cognitive consistency motive (Heider, 1958a, 1960). In a consistency model, enhancement becomes striving for consistency between self and standards, and verification becomes striving for consistency between different self-aspects and between incoming and existing self-knowledge. We thus view conflicts between enhancement and verification as chimerical. If both activities stem from cognitive consistency motivation, then any “motive conflict” is merely apparent.

OSA theory makes predictions concerning when people will “self-verify” versus “self-enhance.” When people are self-focused and perceive a discrepancy, they are motivated to deal with the discrepancy. But if self-focused people do not perceive a discrepancy, then self–standard congruity isn’t a concern. Other kinds of congruity can then become significant. So if an experimenter shows the participant evaluations by
two different people—one self-consistent and one self-inconsistent—then this creates inconsistency between existing and incoming self-information. People will try to resolve this incongruity by choosing exposure to the consistent information. So increased self-focused attention should amplify “self-verification,” interpreted here as consistency restoration, when people don’t perceive a self–standard discrepancy. When self-focused people perceive a discrepancy, then the dynamics described earlier (appraising one’s ability to improve, making attributions for performance) will occur.

It is surprising that self-awareness dynamics have never been intersected with self-verification. Some indirect support for our view comes from experiments on introspection and self-verification. People were asked to evaluate and select evaluations that matched or contradicted their self-concepts; no self–standard discrepancies were induced. When people could introspect about their choices—a process involving self-awareness—the preference for self-consistent evaluations was enhanced (Hixon & Swann, 1993).

**Self-Improvement**

Self-improvement motivation assimilates easily into the dynamics of OSA theory. The SCENT model’s view of self-improvement fails to say when people don’t care about self-improvement, and it fails to specify which self-aspects the person wants to improve. Human incompetence is vast. Most people freely admit they are bad at bowling, bad at mental math, bad at running, bad at avoiding unhealthy foods, and so on. If people know they’re bad at so many things, why don’t they want to self-improve all of these things? Why don’t people drop everything to improve at topiary gardening? Perhaps “it isn’t important”; but why isn’t it important? The notion of a *general* motive to self-improve is too vague to be useful—people don’t want limitless expertise at everything. A model of self-improvement must specify *when* people care about improvement, and *what* specific things they want to improve.

OSA theory argues that recognizing a discrepancy between self and a standard is a necessary condition for self-improvement. “Improvement” is impossible unless people (1) think improvement is needed (i.e., see a discrepancy), and (2) have some representation of what an improved self would look like (i.e., a standard). So people don’t self-improve their topiary gardening skills because they have no standards related to it. Discrepancies are impossible without standards, so motivation to reduce discrepancies is absent.
Only when people have a standard for a self-aspect and feel they fall short of the standard does “self-improvement motivation” become an issue.

But OSA theory is even more specific than this. When people feel discrepant and think they can reduce the discrepancy, then they will attempt self-improvement. When people feel unable to improve their situation, they’ll avoid the situation. A lot of research supports this prediction. Self-focused people who felt able to improve their deficient performance spent more time on remedial tasks and signed up for a second remedial session more quickly. When people felt unable to improve, they spent less time on the remedial tasks and procrastinated signing up for them when forced to do so (Dana, Lalwani, & Duval, 1997; Duval et al., 1992; Mulilis & Duval, 1995).

The effect of expected improvement on activity is moderated by self-attribution for the discrepancy. Earlier we argued that attributions undergird self-motivation because people try to change the perceived cause of their problem. When people see the self as responsible for failing and feel they can improve, they try to change the self to match the standard. When people feel their poor performance was caused by something else, they try to change that other thing. For instance, people who attributed failure to self worked significantly harder on a second practice trial. Self-attributions significantly mediated the effects of the manipulations on subsequent “self-improving” activity. But when people attributed failure to the standard, they changed the standard. They didn’t try to change self, even though they felt able to do so (Dana et al., 1997; Duval & Lalwani, 1999). Research in other areas also finds that self-attributions mediate effects of feedback on interest in remedial tasks (Hong et al., 1999).

Self-improvement effects, then, are easily predicted by self-awareness dynamics. Self-improvement only becomes an issue when people feel discrepant from a standard. This is why people don’t try to improve all self-aspects simultaneously. Unlike the SCENT model, OSA theory can predict specifically when people care about improvement, what specific things they’ll try to improve, as well as when people avoid improvement opportunities. And as before, the dynamics of self-improvement are identical to the dynamics of the other self-motives. The same processes—self-focused attention, perceived ability to improve, and attributions—predict the seemingly different effects. Once again, we see how OSA theory can be a general
view of self-motivation.

Summary

Objective self-awareness theory offers a general system of self-motivation—it collapses qualitative distinctions between self-motives and supplants them with a dynamic analysis of underlying processes and their interactions. Do people perceive a discrepancy between self and their standards? If so, do they feel they can do anything about it? Is the experience of the discrepancy attributed to self or to something else? With just a few concepts and some assumptions about their relations, objective self-awareness theory shows how the dynamics of the four self-motives are basically identical. If apparently antagonistic behaviors—like seeking and avoiding diagnostic tasks, or blaming self versus another person for one’s failure—have the same dynamic underpinnings, then we can reject the claim that opposing behaviors stem from opposing motives.

While objective self-awareness theory can reinterpret past research on self-motivation, we would like to emphasize the theory’s new predictions. We can only allude to some of the predictions here (see Duval & Silvia, 2001), but most of them concern the role of attributions in self-motivation. We predicted that (self-focused) people who feel they can improve experienced reduced self-esteem because they attribute failure to self (Duval & Silvia, 2002); past work argued people simply brush off failure when they expect improvement (Dunning, 1995). We predict that attributions mediate between expecting to improve and trying to improve; other theories assume that improvement expectancies directly enhance motivation (Bandura, 1997; Carver & Scheier, 1998). Likewise, we predict when people will change standards rather than self, whereas other theories view standards as inflexible (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Higgins, 1987). And most significantly, we make predictions about when people will self-evaluate and when they will be unmotivated, whereas other theories imply that self-motivation is a continuous process (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Many of our predictions have not yet been tested directly, and thus suggest directions for future research. We would particularly encourage direct tests of the self-awareness analysis of self-verification and self-assessment, described earlier.

How Many Animals Live in the Self-Zoo?

Tesser (2000) has described the social psychology of the self as a “self-zoo.” Theories of the self
abound—the price of admission to the self-zoo is merely the word *self* and a hyphen. In the interests of thinning the herd, we suggest that the social psychology of the self should emphasize the study of how the self relates to motivation and emotion. Social psychologists, like naive psychologists, want to know what people *do*—so how does the self relate to activity and experience? Ironically, the social psychology of the self started as the study of self and motivation, if we trace the field’s roots to Aronson’s (1969) self-esteem model of cognitive dissonance and Duval and Wicklund’s (1972) original theory of objective self-awareness.

For this reason, there is much to respect about the self-motives approach, represented by the SCENT model (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). The study of self-motives has reoriented social psychologists toward issues of motivation, generated interesting research, and brought issues of conflict back into self-motivation. Yet we would like social psychology to view the self-motives model as a starting point rather than a destination. Progress requires going beyond “different motives cause different behaviors.” What are the core processes and mechanisms that lead people to accept or deny responsibility for negative events, to respond constructively or defensively to failure, to seek or avoid opportunities for improvement? What is the inner architecture of self-motivation?

Models look backward by inducting concepts from past observations; theories look forward by predicting new observations based on assumptions of how concepts should relate. By positing a few mechanisms capable of variation and interaction—like self-focused attention, standards, affect, and attributions—objective self-awareness theory enables complex predictions for superficially different but conceptually similar events. The theory accounts for existing findings and makes new predictions about self-motivated activity. In doing so, the theory unites seemingly different behaviors by showing their deeper dynamic continuities.
References


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