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 with a focus on how it has helped understand the psychology of praise and how some long-standing theoretical debates have informed our understanding of praise. 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 information processing is self-enhancement. People have an innate tendency to evaluate themselves favorably and have a strong desire to maintain 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. In this chapter, we aim to summarize how self-enhancement theory advances our understanding of the psychology of praise. In doing so, we briefly review theoretical debates and real-world manifestations of praise. By identifying boundary conditions to self-enhancement-driven praise, we contribute to our understanding of when and why praise might have adaptive and maladaptive effects.

Praise through a self-enhancement lens

The self-enhancement motive

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 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 evaluations about the self is adaptive and helps people maintain their mental health (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower & Grunewald, 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. Given that self-enhancement research has mostly focused on how people deal with the positivity or negativity of self-relevant information, the self-enhancement literature should be particularly relevant in understanding the psychology of praise. More specifically, because such self-relevant information is often encountered in the form of feedback, 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 is generally defined as "actions taken by (an) external agent(s) to provide information regarding some aspect(s) of one’s task performance" (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996, p. 255). Feedback information is not neutral to the feedback receiver; by its very nature, it contains information that signals positive and negative aspects about the self, and as such, feedback might promote or hurt one’s feelings of self-worth. To avoid threats to the self-concept, people tend 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 rather than negative feedback, for example by seeking less feedback from managers who are known to give harsh evaluations (Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004). 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 (Tsui,
More generally, people shape their social environments to increase the likelihood of receiving praise (e.g., Hepper, Hart, Gregg, & Sedikides, 2011). Furthermore, people process positive self-relevant information faster than negative self-relevant information and spend more time reading favorable information (for reviews, see Anseel et al., 2007; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Thus, reactions to praise and its counterpart, criticism, 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).

As praise is not always easily given, people develop different strategies to acquire positive information about themselves, even if this does not involve explicit feedback from others. For instance, people connect with or distance themselves from others to put themselves in a favorable light and when cued to remember a performance event, will report having been praised, while in reality no feedback was given at all (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Furthermore, in the absence of public praise, gossip or talking informally about others who are not present, is a covert 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 they are doing better than the target (Martinescu et al, 2014). People use gossip to self-enhance by denigrating their competitors and increasing perceptions of their own attractiveness (Reynolds et al, 2018). Furthermore, being praised by others through positive gossip feels good, to the same extent as receiving direct positive feedback (Martinescu et al, 2019).

**Positivity, consistency, or accuracy?**
Self-enhancement is pervasive when dealing with feedback, suggesting that this motive is all-overpowering. 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, examining the primacy of self-enhancement. How people process information appears to be determined by self-enhancement but also various other self-evaluation motives, which nuances the seemingly overpowering human need for praise. 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, sometimes motivating people to prefer negative feedback over praise (Swann, Rentfrow, & Guin, 2002). Similarly, people may seek diagnostic self-relevant information that 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. Although self-enhancement is dominant, the other self-motives have adaptive value, and work in concert to determine cognition, emotion and behavior (Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

**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, in favor of other adaptive behaviors. The urge to seek praise is especially strong in psychologically ‘unsafe’ environments, where individuals’ positive self-concept is threatened (e.g., by the mere prospect of receiving negative information). To reestablish a feeling of overall positivity individuals are likely to exhibit behaviors that reaffirm the self (Campbell &
Sedikides, 1999). However, research has shown that self-enhancement can be curtailed. For instance, seeking and receiving praise is limited by cognitive constraints. If people feel accountable, by anticipating that they have to explain their self-views to an audience or will be individually assessed by others, they are more likely to acknowledge weaknesses (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). Similarly, when cognitive resources are plentiful or people are encouraged to reconsider, the self-assessment motive often prevails (Trope, 1986), leading people to seek out accurate instead of positive feedback. Finally, individual differences such as a learning goal orientation or a growth mindset may lead people to seek negative feedback instead of praise (VandeWalle, 2003), because negative feedback is more instrumental for learning than praise.

Identifying the boundaries of embracing praise is crucial to our understanding of learning and development. Negative feedback is a key aspect of how employees regulate their efforts and performance in sports, education or at work (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). People need information about their current performance to signal how actual performance levels may be discrepant from their goals or perceived performance levels and guide and adjust their effort, work strategies, or their goals. Thus, identifying the boundaries of self-enhancement strivings is important if we want to understand how praise may not only satisfy self-enhancement needs, but may also regulate learning and development.

**New Developments**

**Current 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).

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 few disagreeing opinions, 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 & Chiu, 2011).

Thus, one important question is how to balance the benefits and drawbacks of seeking praise and self-enhancement. Self-affirmation research suggests that once people reach an adequate level of positive self-regard, they cope better with self-threats (Steele, 1988). Therefore, self-enhancement might be a maintenance motive rather than an incessable driver for more positivity: once we have self-enhanced 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. Others who feed individuals’ self-enhancement desires may have ulterior motives, such as manipulating their needs,
attitudes, and consumption behaviors. For example, social media platforms, which offer vast opportunity for self-enhancement, 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 the quest for praise, employees and students are increasingly drawn to social media for 'likes' and 'views', which results in lower focus and performance, as well as higher anxiety and mental health issues (Gupta & Irwin, 2016; Li & Lin, 2019). Due the abundance of unfavorable social comparisons people can draw between themselves and others in online environments, people might feel worse about themselves, and experience loneliness, low self-worth, body shame, and poor mental health (Hanna et al, 2017). Online self-enhancement risks introducing a vicious cycle, where people hungry for praise post more self-flattering content, which may not receive sufficient praise, further fueling their need for self-enhancement.

Social media has become embedded in current society and culture, making it difficult to discontinue usage, in fear of becoming disconnected from others, and missing out on important news and invitations (Bullinger & Vie, 2017). 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, acknowledging that individuals themselves may not be best equipped to do so.

‘Real-world’ Applications

The abundant research on self-enhancement has generated 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 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. Advertisers strive to create campaigns that will be shared online, helping them reach target audiences through electronic word of mouth. People are inclined to share content that makes them look well informed, helpful or funny (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Self-enhancement applications also include 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. This is in line with evidence showing that self-enhancement motivates acting morally in public, but not necessarily in private (Dong et al, 2019).

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 and refined recommendations about the exact inflection points where positive self-enhancement effects may turn into maladjusted cognition and behaviors that ultimately hurt one's life satisfaction and mental health.


Brown, J.D., Farnham, S.D., & Cook, K.E. (2002). Emotional responses to changing feedback: is it better to have won and lost than never to have won at all? *Journal of Personality, 70*, 127-141.


