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# Overly Positive Self-Evaluations and Personality: Negative Implications for Mental Health

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## ABSTRACT

The relation between overly positive self-evaluations and psychological adjustment was examined. Three studies, two based on longitudinal data and another on laboratory data, contrasted self-descriptions of personality with observer ratings (trained examiners or friends) to index self-enhancement. In the longitudinal studies, self-enhancement was associated with poor social skills and psychological maladjustment 5 years before and 5 years after the assessment of self-enhancement. In the laboratory study, individuals who exhibited a tendency to self-enhance displayed behaviors, independently judged, that seemed detrimental to positive social interaction. These results indicate there are negative short-term and long-term consequences for individuals who self-enhance and, contrary to some prior formulations, imply that accurate appraisals of self and of the social environment may be essential elements of mental health.

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Traditional conceptions of mental health have held that well-adjusted people perceive relatively accurately the impact and ramifications of their social behavior and possess generally valid information about the self. Jahoda (1958) described the mentally healthy person as someone "able to take in matters one wishes were different, without distorting them to fit these wishes" (p. 51). Allport (1937) also placed great importance on accurate self-knowledge, stating that

> an impartial and objective attitude toward oneself is held to be a primary virtue, basic to the

> development of all others. There is but a weak case for chronic self-deception with its crippling self-justifications and rationalizations that prevent adaptation and growth. And so it may be said that if any trait of personality is intrinsically desirable, it is the disposition and ability to see oneself in perspective.(p. 422)

Despite the long influence of these and related writings, and their obvious accordance with common sense, the reality-based view of mental health recently has undergone serious challenge.

In a highly influential and provocative article, Taylor and Brown (1988) surveyed the then-current social psychological literature and concluded that mentally healthy individuals characteristically manifest three "pervasive, enduring, and systematic" (p. 194) illusions. These illusions are *unrealistically positive self-evaluations*, *exaggerated perceptions of control or mastery*, and *unrealistic optimism* . They educed this conclusion from studies purportedly demonstrating that depressed and low-self-esteem individuals exhibit more accurate perceptions than persons who are not depressed or who are high in self-esteem. They further argued that individuals who engage in such self-enhancing positive illusions are more disposed to be psychologically healthy. This radically different view of mental health has become widely cited and suddenly popular.

Taylor and Brown's influential conclusion hinges on whether the studies they evaluate have used valid, even reasonable, criteria for self-enhancement. Three criteria have been used, prior to and subsequent to the publication of Taylor and Brown's review.

First, several studies reviewed by Taylor and Brown (1988) , and other more recent studies, report that participants rate themselves more favorably and less negatively than generalized others (e.g., an unknown hypothetical average college student). These findings have been used to conclude that the perception most people have of themselves is unrealistic and overly positive (e.g., Alicke, 1985 ; Alloy & Ahrens, 1987 ; Brinthaupt, Moreland, & Levine, 1991 ; Brown, 1986 ; Pyzczynski, Holt, & Greenberg, 1987 ). Moreover, participants who like themselves and experience relatively high levels of positive affect have been reported to exhibit a greater discrepancy between self-ratings and ratings of a generalized other than participants who feel less positively about themselves and who manifest relatively high levels of negative affect (e.g., Agostinelli, Sherman, Presson, & Chassin, 1992 ; Brown, 1986 ). These data have been interpreted as indicating that whereas most people tend to self-enhance, high-self-esteem individuals are more likely to exhibit self-enhancing tendencies than are low-self-esteem individuals.

A second set of studies has demonstrated that when people are asked to rank themselves in comparison to "most other people" on broad personality characteristics or on general abilities, the majority of people rank themselves higher than most other people. Because logically all or most people cannot rank higher than the median rank, it has been concluded that people exaggerate their positive personal characteristics ( Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991 ; Larwood & Whitaker, 1977 ; Pelham & Swann, 1989 ; Svenson, 1981 ; Weinstein, 1980 ).

A third set of studies has shown that people tend to recall more positive than negative information about the self ( Crary, 1966 ; Kuiper & Derry, 1982 ; Kuiper & MacDonald, 1982 ; Kuiper, Olinger, MacDonald, & Shaw, 1985 ; Silverman, 1964 ). This finding is particularly pronounced for individuals who have high self-esteem or who experience relatively high levels of positive affect. Persons low in self-esteem or who are moderately dysphoric tend to recall a less imbalanced number of positive and

negative characteristics. These results have been interpreted as indicating that well-functioning individuals exhibit distortions in memory and recall that serve to enhance their self-regard (e.g., Kuiper & Derry, 1982 ; Kuiper & MacDonald, 1982 ).

However, this evidence and these conclusions recently have undergone critical reevaluation ( Colvin & Block, 1994 ). A key point of Colvin and Block's critique is that these several kinds of studies, just cited, are generally uninformative about the process, meaning, and effect of self-enhancement because they all lack a reasonable operationalization of self-enhancement. To evaluate whether a person accurately views him- or herself, a comparison of the individual's self-description with valid external criteria for that person is required ( Colvin & Block, 1994 ; Cronbach & Meehl, 1955 ). This minimum standard generally has not been observed. As a result, prior studies investigating self-enhancement have been plagued by ambiguous results permitting alternative explanations.

For example, studies comparing participants' self-descriptions with their descriptions of generalized others are of obscure implication. In an unknown number of instances, when a participant describes him- or herself more favorably than an unknown and hypothetical average person, he or she will be accurate (i.e., some individuals are indeed better off than the average individual). A normative finding that, on average, individuals view themselves as better than average, does not separate the accurate individuals from the inaccurate, self-enhancing individuals. In other cases, the application of valid logic may be responsible for discrepancies between self and other descriptions. College students typically have been the kind of people asked to participate in these experiments. College students know themselves to be relatively intelligent, they also know that intelligence varies greatly across individuals, and therefore it is logical and valid for them to rate themselves as higher in intelligence than an unknown, average person.

There is a further problem with attributing self-enhancement bias to all people who rate themselves "better off than most." Ranking oneself relative to "most others" on a broadly construed dimension is inherently problematic. If people are asked to rank themselves relative to others on happiness, for example, Jeff might rank himself highly because of his ability as a baseball player, Jackie might rank herself highly because of her musical talents, and John might rank himself highly because of the money he has accumulated. Because these are important and defining characteristics of one's self-concept, they represent appropriate choices on which to compare the self with others. It is thus conceivable that a majority of people can be better off than most when the dimension to be rated is vaguely defined and people are given the latitude to rank themselves on self-selected, often idiosyncratic categories. It has been demonstrated that when a dimension is clearly and precisely defined, thereby limiting private interpretations, the better-off-than-most effect diminishes ( Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989 ).

More generally, Robins and John (in press) point out that in fact most people can be better than average on any characteristic, as long as (a) the central tendency is taken to be indicated by the arithmetic mean rather than the median, and (b) even a small number of individuals are much below that mean (i.e., the characteristic's distribution is negatively skewed). For example, if the comparison group includes a few pathologically depressed individuals, then nearly everybody else in that group could be above the mean in happiness.

In other studies, the finding of a higher ratio of positive to negative trait descriptors for well-adjusted people than for poorly adjusted people does not imply that mentally healthy individuals exhibit an unrealistic self-enhancement bias, neither does it imply undue self-deprecation on the part of less mentally healthy individuals. Rather, this finding is definitional or tautological: Mentally healthy people

should have more positive things to say about themselves than should people who are poorly adjusted, think negatively of themselves, and are dysphoric ( J. Block & Thomas, 1955 ; Gjerde, Block, & Block, 1988 ; Kendall, Howard, & Hays, 1989 ; Rosenberg, 1985 ). Therefore, it is not surprising that when individuals are asked to recall self-defining characteristics, mentally healthy people recall positive traits with greater ease and frequency than do people lacking in mental health (e.g., Kuiper & Derry, 1982 ; Kuiper & MacDonald, 1982 ).

An additional limitation of these various approaches to studying overly positive self-evaluations is that, typically, self-reports of personality are used to identify the characteristics of self-enhancing people. A frequent finding from this kind of research has been that people who self-enhance also describe themselves as being high in self-esteem. This result, although robust, is of doubtful import. By definition, individuals who exhibit self-enhancing tendencies should positively distort affect-laden self-evaluations. Therefore, all self-report measures that contain a self-evaluation component may well be positively biased and of questionable validity for individuals with self-enhancing tendencies ( J. Block & Thomas, 1955 ; Shedler, Mayman, & Manis, 1993 ).

The preceding discussion suggests that the criteria for overly positive self-evaluation used in previous research have been problematic and therefore that the conclusion reached of a relation between positive illusions and mental health may be premature. To advance understanding further in this area will require more and different data from that reported to date. In particular, improved operationalizations of self-enhancement are necessary to examine the tendency of some people to evaluate their own characteristics in an overly positive way.

No single, perfect criterion for self-enhancement exists, nor should one be expected to exist. Research on self-enhancement is subject to the same logic and limitations as research on the accuracy of personality judgments (see Colvin & Funder, 1991 ; Funder & Colvin, 1988 ). A construct validity approach is required ( Cronbach & Meehl, 1955 ). That is, although no single definition of self-enhancement will suffice, if differing but conceptually reasonable operationalizations yield research that converges on the same general conclusion, we may eventually become convinced the conclusion is valid.

In this article, we used several different operationalizations of self-enhancement, with participants of various ages and from two independent samples. Each operationalization contrasts an individual's self-evaluations with observer evaluations of his or her personality. To the extent that these various and independent indicators generate similar and meaningful empirical relationships with independent sources of personality and behavioral data, a convergent characterization of the self-enhancing individual may be identified.

## Study 1

In Study 1 we assessed self-enhancement when participants were age 18 by comparing their self-descriptions with trained examiners' assessments of their personalities. We then related these self-enhancement scores to personality descriptions of the participants provided 5 years later by an entirely independent team of examiners.

### Method Participants

Participants were 101 23-year-olds, 51 men and 50 women, from an initial sample of 130 (see J. H.

Block & Block, 1980 , for an extended discussion of the aims of the study). The participants were initially recruited at age 3 while attending either a university-run or parent-cooperative nursery school. These participants live primarily in urban settings and were heterogeneous with respect to race, social class, and parent education. They had been assessed on a battery of widely ranging psychological measures at ages 3, 4, 5, 7, 11, 14, 18, and 23. We analyzed a subset of data collected at ages 14, 18, and 23 for this article.

**Personality Descriptions Examiner-based California Adult Q-set (CAQ).**

The personality characteristics of each participant were described by four examiner—assessors at age 18, and by six examiner—assessors at age 23, using the standard vocabulary of the CAQ ( J. Block, 1961/1978 ). The CAQ consists of 100 statements, each printed on a separate card, that describe a wide range of personality, cognitive, and social attributes. The task of the examiners was to sort these 100 statements into nine categories ranging from *least characteristic of the participant* (1) to *most characteristic of the participant* (9). The examiner was required to place a predetermined number of statements into each category (e.g., 5 in Categories 1 and 9, 8 in Categories 2 and 8, 12 in Categories 3 and 7, etc.). The personality descriptions were averaged across the examiners to obtain a composite personality description of each participant at age 18 and again at age 23.

These descriptions were provided by examiners who were doctoral-level personality or clinical psychologists, or advanced graduate students in a doctoral program in personality or clinical psychology. The examiners each had engaged the participant in one or more research procedures or had had other formal and informal contacts with the participant over the course of an assessment battery conducted across many sessions over several days. The Spearman—Brown average item reliabilities for the two composites were .59 for age 18 and .69 for age 23. It is important to note that two entirely independent teams of examiners provided personality descriptions for the age 18 and age 23 assessments.

**Adjective Q-set (AQS).**

The AQS consists of 43 adjectives (e.g., *energetic, adventurous, cheerful* ), each printed on a separate card, that cover a broad range of personality characteristics. At age 18, participants described their own personalities by placing each of the 43 cards into one of seven categories, using a rectangular distribution, ranging from *least descriptive of self* (1) to *most descriptive of self* (7). (See J. Block & Robins, 1993 , for additional details and analyses pertaining to the AQS.)

**Results and Discussion**

Self-enhancement was operationally defined as the discrepancy in favorability between self- and examiner ratings of personality. The derivation of the age 18 self-enhancement score required three steps. First, using the prototype approach ( J. Block, 1957 ), we developed a favorability prototype for the AQS and for the CAQ. For each of the 43 AQS items, four raters responded on a 1 ( *very unfavorably* ) to 7 ( *very favorably* ) scale to the question "How favorably or unfavorably would you regard a person who possessed this trait?" We aggregated the four sets of ratings to obtain a 43-item composite with an alpha reliability of .94. For the CAQ, nine raters provided responses on a 1 ( *very unfavorably* ) to 9 ( *very favorably* ) scale to the identically worded question for all 100 items. The resulting alpha reliability of this 100-item composite was .95 (see Funder & Dobroth, 1987 ). Second, we calculated participant and examiner favorability scores. The participant favorability scores were derived by correlating each participant's age 18 43-item AQS with the 43-item favorability composite. Resulting scores ranged from

– .21 to .89, with higher scores indicating greater self-evaluated favorability ( *M* = .51, *SD* = .31). [1] Examiner-based favorability scores were derived by correlating each participant's age 18 100-item CAQ description with the 100-item favorability prototype. Resulting scores ranged from – .49 to .91, with higher scores representing more favorable evaluations of participants' personalities by the examiners ( *M* = .69, *SD* = .40). Third, and finally, we calculated the discrepancy between self-evaluated and examiner-evaluated favorability by subtracting the Fisher transformed examiner score from the Fisher transformed self score ( *M* = – .28, *SD* = .41). Greater self-enhancement was indicated by relatively larger and more positive discrepancy scores.

We then correlated the self-enhancement scores from age 18 with each of the 100 CAQ items at age 23, separately for the male and female samples. The results are reported in Table 1 . Men who exhibited self-enhancing tendencies at age 18 were described relatively negatively 5 years later by assessors who had had no prior experience with the participants. Men who self-enhanced were described as being guileful and deceitful, distrustful of people, and as having a brittle ego-defense system. In contrast, men with lesser tendencies toward self-enhancement were described as relatively straightforward and forthright, possessing high intellect, and having an internally consistent personality. One can speculate, on the basis of the content of the correlates, that the self-enhancement observed in these young men represented efforts to compensate for shortcomings in coping and interpersonal skills.

Women who self-enhanced also were described in negative terms, although somewhat differently from men. Two items that strongly characterize these women–"sex-typed" and "regards self as physically attractive"–are not inherently negative in tone, but they connote a rigid, narcissistic style when combined with the women's other qualities, such as being thin-skinned, self-defensive, and denying of unpleasant thoughts and conflicts. Perhaps these women self-enhanced to look better to themselves, whereas the self-enhancing men enhanced to have others look more favorably on them. Women who tend to abstain from self-enhancement were described as introspective, complex, interesting, intelligent people. In general, these women appeared to look inward and accept what they saw more than women who tended to self-enhance.

In summary, these data suggest that long-term negative interpersonal and psychological consequences await both young men and young women who engage in self-enhancing tendencies.

## Study 2

In Study 2, self-enhancement scores were derived at age 23 and related to personality descriptions obtained at age 18. Again, self-enhancement scores and personality descriptions were strictly independent. A special feature of this study is that self-enhancement scores were related to personality descriptions offered by friends as well as examiner—assessors.

### Method Participants

Participants were the same individuals who participated in Study 1. Sample sizes occasionally differ because of incomplete data.

### Personality Descriptions Friends' CAQ descriptions.

At age 18, participants were asked to nom-inate a number of friends who might be willing to describe them using the CAQ method of personality description. In all, 62 participants were described by an average of 3 friends.

**Self CAQ description.**

At age 23, each participant described his or her own personality using a version of the CAQ modified to clarify certain items potentially unclear to lay persons ( Block, 1989 ).

**Examiner CAQ descriptions.**

As noted in Study 1, separate sets of examiner—assessors described the personalities of participants on the CAQ at age 18 and at age 23. In addition, participants' personalities were described at age 14 by 4 examiner—assessors using the CAQ.

**Results and Discussion**

As previously noted, different operationalizations of self-enhancement were deliberately used in order to improve the generality of the results obtained. In this study, we used the CAQ favorability prototype ratings described in Study 1 to create self and examiner measures of favorability, but in a different way. [2] We selected the 12 items rated most favorable (e.g., "dependable, responsible person," "is cheerful," "liked, accepted by people") to construct measures of self-evaluated and examiner-perceived favorability. Self-evaluated favorability was calculated by summing participants' CAQ self-descriptions on the 12 items; similarly, examiner-perceived favorability was calculated by summing examiners' composite ratings on the same 12 items. Participants' favorability scores ranged from 45 to 94 with $M = 77$ and $SD = 10$, whereas examiners' favorability scores ranged from 37 to 92, with $M = 72$ and $SD = 15$. The means were significantly different, $t(93) = 3.82$, $p < .001$, indicating that, in general, participants evaluated themselves more favorably than examiners. The reliabilities of the two measures were adequate (participant favorability $\alpha = .73$; examiner favorability $\alpha = .89$). We derived self-enhancement scores by subtracting examiner favorability from participant favorability ( $M = 5$, $SD = 12$).

These self-enhancement scores were correlated with all 100 friend-rated CAQ items, separately for men and for women. Self-enhancement scores also were correlated with the 100 examiner CAQ items, as rated by the examiner—assessors at age 18. The results are reported in Table 2 and in Table 3 . Men and women who self-enhanced at age 23 were portrayed relatively negatively 5 years earlier. Men who self-enhanced were earlier described by their friends as condescending in relations with others, having hostility toward others, and unable to delay gratification. In contrast, men who did not vaunt themselves were described earlier by their friends as sympathetic and considerate, having a clear-cut and consistent personality, and as having a giving way with others. Women who self-enhanced were described earlier by their friends as having hostility toward others, as self-defeating, and as having a brittle ego-defense system. Women who did not self-enhance were favorably described earlier by their friends: They were liked and accepted by people, cheerful, and viewed as having social poise and presence. These descriptions by close friends again indicate, but in a different way, that self-enhancement does not seem to be effective in influencing and facilitating positive perceptions of oneself by others. Friends are able to see through to the person behind the proffered mask.

Examiner—assessors of the participants at age 18 provided equally negative personality descriptions of men and women who exhibited self-enhancing tendencies 5 years later at age 23 (see Table 3 ). They described self-enhancing men and women as concerned with their own adequacy, as self-pitying, self-defeating, as basically anxious, and as lacking a sense of personal meaning in life. In contrast, examiners described men and women who did not self-enhance as personally charming, socially poised, and sought by others for advice.

The content of the CAQ items in Table 2 and Table 3 suggests that individuals who refrain from overly positive self-evaluations exhibit better psychological adjustment than people who self-enhance. To test this global conjecture, a broad, encompassing measure of psychological adjustment was needed. On the basis of the definition of ego resiliency offered by J. H. Block and Block (1980) , a construct that underlies dynamically resourceful psychological adjustment, nine raters previously had used the 100 CAQ items to describe the characteristics most salient of the prototypical ego-resilient person. The resulting prototype ( $\alpha$ = .95) was correlated with examiner CAQ composites at age 14 and at age 18; high scores indicated that a person was relatively ego resilient, whereas low scores indicated that a person was relatively ego brittle. We aggregated the age 14 and age 18 ego-resiliency scores and subsequently related them to self-enhancement scores at age 23. Results indicated that ego resiliency assessed in middle and late adolescence was negatively correlated with the tendency to self-enhance in early adulthood, $r$ (92) = – .40, $p$ < .001, suggesting that overly positive self-evaluations go along with an absence of resiliency. This result directly contradicts the thesis that self-enhancement and, more generally, positive illusions, are characteristic of people who are psychologically well adjusted (cf. Taylor & Brown, 1988 ).

## Study 3

The two longitudinal studies suggest that self-enhancement is associated with negative interpersonal consequences over time. In Study 3 we explored the more immediate and short-term concomitants of self-enhancement by examining the individual differences in social behavior associated with this tendency.

### Method Participants

Participants were 70 male and 70 female undergraduates from a northeastern university. They were videotaped in three different situations and also described their own personalities on a variety of measures. Peers were recruited by participants to provide descriptions of the participants' personalities. Overall, 128 participants were described by two peers, and 10 participants were described by a single peer. Across the analyses to be reported, the number of participants varies slightly because of incomplete data. [3]

### Procedure Participant data.

Participants responded to a campus advertisement requesting individuals to participate in a study of "how people perceive each other." Shortly thereafter, participants were scheduled to participate in a social interaction with an opposite-sex partner who also was a participant in the study. When the second participant appeared and it was verified that the 2 participants had not met each other previously, the male experimenter showed the participants into a small room equipped with a couch and a highly visible video camera and videocassette recorder. He invited the participants to sit on the couch, aimed the camera at them, activated the videocassette recorder, and left, saying "You can talk about whatever you'd like; I'll be back in about 5 minutes." Typically, a "getting-acquainted" conversation then ensued, in which participants exchanged names and home towns and discussed such topics as classes, athletics, and campus housing. After about 5 min, the experimenter returned and turned off the video equipment. He then led the participants to another room where they described their own personalities using the CAQ.

Approximately 4 weeks later, participants were contacted and scheduled to participate in another

videotaped interaction with a different, and again unfamiliar, opposite-sex partner. When both participants arrived, the experimenter proceeded exactly as in the first session. A few minutes after the interaction was completed, the experimenter handed each participant a clipboard and said:

> The next thing I do is hand each of you a pad of paper because some people like to be able to take some notes during the next part of the experiment. That is because the next part calls for the two of you to have a little debate. Specifically, the topic we have people debate is the use of capital punishment, because most people can come up with at least some arguments on both sides of that issue. I'll just flip a coin and have [name of one of the participants] call it. If it comes up what you call, you will be in favor of capital punishment and if it doesn't then you will be against it. [The experimenter then flipped the coin.] Okay, the debate will last about another five minutes. I'll just give you a short minute to collect your thoughts and then we'll start [Session 3].

After a brief pause, the experimenter said "Begin," activated the video recorder, and left the room. He returned 5 min later and turned off the equipment. For the purposes of the present analysis, we focus on the behavior occurring in this last session. By the time participants participated in this final session, they had become more relaxed in the research context, exhibited more friendly behavior, and had interacted on one prior occasion with their debate partner (see Funder & Colvin, 1991 ). Furthermore, because this last session–a debate–was considered likely to evoke self-evaluations associated with interpersonal success and failure, it was anticipated to be the most revealing of the situations with regard to the social behaviors of the participants. [4]

**Peer ratings.**

Participants were asked at the end of the first videotaped interaction to recruit two people in the immediate vicinity who knew them well and who would be willing to participate in the study. These peers were contacted and described the participant's personality using the CAQ. On average, these peers had known the participants for 18.5 months ( *SD* = 18.9; range from 2 to 137 months). Fifty-six percent of the peers described themselves as being primarily a friend of the participant, 33% as a roommate, 8% as a boyfriend or girlfriend, and 3% as other (e.g., a sibling). All peers were assured (truthfully) that their descriptions would not be made available to the participants they described.

**Behavioral coding.**

The coding scheme used to code the participants' videotaped debate behaviors consisted of a 62-item Q-sort deck ( J. Block, 1961/1978 ; Stephenson, 1953 ) that is called the *BQ* (for Behavioral Q-sort; Funder & Colvin, 1991 ). The BQ items were each written to describe categories of directly observable but psychologically meaningful behavior (e.g., Exhibits social skills, Behaves in a cheerful manner).

Each of the coders watched the 5-min debate videotape, which was to be coded a minimum of two times, and was permitted to watch the videotape as many times as desired so as to feel confident in providing behavioral descriptions of the particular participant. Coders then arranged the cards of the BQ deck into a forced, quasi-normal distribution ranging from 1 ( *not at all or negatively characteristic of the behavior of the person in question* ) to 9 ( *highly characteristic of the person's behavior* ). Coders were instructed to use the BQ items to describe only behaviors they had witnessed on the videotape and to avoid, so far as was possible, "playing psychologist" or making inferences about participants' general behavioral dispositions. Each 5-min interaction was coded by an average of six coders. The resulting aggregate

(Spearman—Brown) reliabilities of the BQ items ranged as high as .82, with a median reliability of .64 (for further information on the procedures, and on the reliabilities and item properties of all 62 BQ items, see Funder & Colvin, 1991 ).

### Results and Discussion

The measure of self-enhancement used in this study was derived by subtracting peer-rated favorability from self-rated favorability. To obtain this measure, participants' and peers' CAQ personality profiles were correlated with the full 100-item favorability prototype (as described in Study 1). The resulting scores ranged from – .25 to .78 for self-perceived favorability and from – .39 to .86 for peer-rated favorability. On average, participants' ( $M$ = .52) and peers' ( $M$ = .54) perceptions of favorability did not significantly differ, $t$ (136) = – .74, $p$ > .46.

Self-enhancement scores ( $M$ = – .02, $SD$ = .35) were related to independent ratings of social behavior in an opposite-sex dyad; the results are reported in Table 4 . Men characterized as possessing overly positive self-evaluations were observed to speak quickly, to interrupt their partner, to brag, and to express hostility, whereas men with lesser self-enhancing tendencies were found to exhibit social skills, to express sympathy and liking toward their partner, and to be liked by their partner. Similar to their male counterparts, women characterized as having self-enhancing tendencies also displayed a range of negatively evaluated behaviors: They were described as seeking reassurance from their partner, as acting in an irritable fashion, and as exhibiting an awkward interpersonal style. In contrast, women who did not manifest overly positive self-evaluations were observed to exhibit social skills, to enjoy the interaction with their partner, to like and be liked by their partner, and appear to be relaxed and comfortable.

These results suggest that both men and women who routinely self-enhance are also likely to manifest behaviors that are immediately detrimental to their social interactions. Thus, whatever the boost in self-esteem provided the person by an overly positive self-evaluation, on a day-to-day, ongoing basis the self-enhancing individual may tend to evoke distancing interpersonal reactions from the individuals encountered. In a psychodynamically perverse way, the consequent affective coolness on the part of the people in the social surround is likely to make the self-enhancers lonely and, in compensation, reinforce their narcissism. Over time, these effects would probably lead to the kind of negative interpersonal and psychological consequences seen in the two longitudinal studies (Studies 1 and 2).

## General Discussion

### Convergence of Evidence

We began this article by noting insufficiencies in the operationalizations of self-enhancement that have been used in previous research. The present research sought to escape these shortcomings by comparing directly self-evaluations with various external criteria that may be said to have an intrinsic validity. Across three studies, overly positive self-evaluation was indexed by the difference in favorability between participants' self-descriptions and independent descriptions of the participants by assessors and friends. The results consistently indicate that, for both sexes, friends and assessors hold relatively negative impressions of people who self-enhance. Furthermore, the negative relationship observed between ego resiliency and self-enhancement–further articulated by the specific CAQ correlates of self-enhancement–suggests that psychological adjustment is not facilitated by engaging in unrealistically positive self-evaluations (see also J. Block & Thomas, 1955 ). These data contravene Taylor and Brown's

(1988) thesis that positive illusions bring about and maintain psychological well-being and instead suggest that accurate appraisals of the self and of the social environment are essential elements of positive mental health.

Several aspects of the present data may make this conclusion particularly persuasive. First, the various operationalizations used in this article, in which a self view of personality was compared with an external view of the participant's personality, each represent a close mapping onto the conceptual definition of self-enhancement–an extremely favorable perception of self that is inconsistent with the social reality about the self. This conceptual apposition has not been used in most previous research, and when it has been invoked (e.g., Lewinsohn, Mischel, Chaplin, & Barton, 1980 ), the research involved has been beset with methodological or conceptual limitations (for an extended discussion, see Colvin & Block, 1994 ). Furthermore, the present results are based on naturalistic and highly generalizable data rather than on laboratory data often of unevaluated real-life meaning. Finally, our findings exhibit a remarkable degree of convergence across both sexes, two independent research programs, and two developmental periods. In addition, self-enhancement demonstrated a substantial degree of rank order stability from age 18 to age 23, $r$ (91) = .38, $p < .001$, providing further evidence for the generalizability of the self-enhancement construct and of the findings.

**Short-Term Versus Long-Term Consequences of Self-Deception**

The present results for the first time reveal long-term consequences of illusional cognitions about which, in the past, researchers could only speculate (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988 ). Studies 1 and 2 indicated that people with a tendency to self-enhance during their developmental transition to adulthood were characterized as being relatively maladjusted during adolescence and early adulthood. These findings contrast strikingly with those from the laboratory studies reviewed by Taylor and Brown (1988) that led them to conclude "it appears to be not the well-adjusted individual but the individual who experiences subjective distress who is more likely to process self-relevant information in a relatively unbiased and balanced fashion" (p. 196). How can these seemingly incompatible results be reconciled?

One possibility stems from the different implications that follow from brief laboratory experiments as compared to long-term longitudinal studies. Laboratory studies may be well suited to determine the immediate effect of an experimental manipulation. If the experiment happens to include a failure manipulation, individuals who self-enhance in response to the manipulation may well provide themselves a boost in positive affect to counteract their immediate sense of failure ( Weiner, 1990 ). The experiment, however, usually stops at this point; the long-term consequences associated with the recurring and regular use of self-enhancement have not before been studied. Yet, for large, implicative generalizations, such long-term consequences must be evaluated. The present analyses suggest that self-enhancement, while aiding one's self-esteem, is over the long term an ineffective interpersonal strategy with both friends and acquaintances and, therefore, the growth or development of self. A vicious cycle is generated whereby self-enhancement is rigidly and frequently used to maintain positive self-regard but at a continual and cumulative cost of alienating one's friends and discouraging new acquaintances. A deep albeit perhaps unrecognized and unacknowledged sense of uneasiness consequently may pervade the self-enhancer, hardly a condition conducive to mental health. Ultimately, we believe, to break this sad cycle an individual must achieve more accurate self-perceptions with acknowledgment, acceptance, and humor regarding one's inevitable and human frailties. One can then still like oneself and find rewarding social validation. Driven, suppressive, narcissistic claims of self-perfection, as our findings indicate, do not dispose one toward social adaptations that warrant being called "mentally healthy."

### On Cause and Effect

The theoretical picture of the self-enhancement process presented throughout this article generally views the tendency as a cause of interpersonal difficulties and psychological maladjustment. Of course, however, cause and effect are not easily separated at either the empirical or the theoretical level. The correlation coefficients presented in our several tables do not distinguish between the possibilities that self-enhancement causes difficulties in life, or that psychological maladjustment may be manifested, in certain individuals, by a tendency to unrealistically self-enhance ( J. Block & Thomas, 1955 ). In the end, no sharp distinction can or need be drawn. It seems abundantly clear from the present data that self-enhancement, far from serving as an aid to interpersonal or psychological adjustment, is part of a pattern of self-perception and behavior that must be viewed as unhealthy overall.

### Conclusion

In sum, the three studies we report in this article may provide a unique and even important contribution toward the understanding of self-enhancing behavior. Although there are inherent philosophical difficulties in asserting that observer ratings (or any other criterion) adequately represent "reality," it is also the case that the convergences observed among friends' and examiners' personality descriptions of self-enhancing individuals provide a compelling case that we have touched at least a social reality. We have found reliable individual differences in the tendency to self-enhance that relate to the individual's social stimulus value. The interpersonal implications of these differences are socially unfortunate and seem to have implications for psychological maladjustment.

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**1**

Throughout this research, we used the Fisher r—z transformation when averaging, and calculating the difference between, correlation coefficients.

**2**

A self-enhancement index in which self and examiner CAQ descriptions were related to the full 100-item CAQ favorability prototype produced results virtually identical to those reported in Table 2 and Table 3 .

**3**

These data are part of a larger research project on the accuracy of personality judgment. Several articles, spanning different conceptual domains, have used portions of the data reported in this study (e.g., Colvin, 1993 ; Colvin & Funder, 1991 ; Funder & Colvin, 1988 ; Funder & Colvin, 1991 ; Funder & Sneed, 1993 ). The analyses reported in this article have not been reported previously.

**4**

It was in fact the case that self-enhancement related to behavior only in the debate situation. We

speculate that this last situation evoked competitive, hostile, and narcissistic behaviors to a much greater degree than the first two situations, in which participants met and became acquainted with a member of the opposite sex and therefore were probably compelled to exhibit their "best behavior."

Table 1.

Table 2.

Table 3.

Table 4.

Table 4
*Self-Enhancement Correlated With Social Behavior in a Dyadic Interaction*

| BQ item | Self-enhancement |
|---|---|
| **Men ($n$ = 69)** | |
| 62. Speaks quickly | .34**** |
| 16. High enthusiasm and high energy level | .33*** |
| 55. Brags | .28** |
| 15. Interrupts partner (low = partner interrupts participant) | .27** |
| 18. Talks at rather than with partner (e.g., conducts monologue) | .23* |
| 35. Expresses hostility | .23* |
| 66. Displays ambition | .23* |
| 48. Expresses self-pity | .23* |
| 71. Is talkative (in this situation) | .20* |
| 8. Exhibits social skills | −.32** |
| 29. Partner seems to like him or her | −.32** |
| 23. Expresses sympathy toward partner | −.32** |
| 4. Seems genuinely interested in what partner has to say | −.28** |
| 13. Seems to genuinely like the partner | −.26** |
| 62. Shows genuine interest in intellectual matters | −.23* |
| **Women ($n$ = 68)** | |
| 17. Seeks reassurance from partner | .36*** |
| 52. Acts in an irritable fashion | .34*** |
| 39. Expresses interest in fantasy and daydreams | .32*** |
| 14. Exhibits an awkward, interpersonal style | .26** |
| 30. Expresses skepticism or cynicism | .26** |
| 36. Is unusual or unconventional in appearance | .25** |
| 37. Behaves in a fearful or timid manner | .24** |
| 35. Expresses hostility | .23* |
| 22. Expresses insecurity or sensitivity | .23* |
| 56. Overcommitted mentally or compulsive | .23* |
| 23. Shows physical signs of tension or anxiety | .23* |
| 48. Expresses self-pity or feelings of victimization | .20* |
| 8. Exhibits social skills | −.32*** |
| 65. Seems genuinely to enjoy interaction with partner | −.32*** |
| 60. Engages in constant eye contact with partner | −.28** |
| 7. Appears to be relaxed and comfortable | −.27** |
| 13. Seems to genuinely like the partner | −.27** |
| 24. Exhibits high degree of intelligence | −.26** |
| 50. Behaves in a cheerful manner | −.24** |
| 26. Initiates humor | −.23* |
| 29. Partner seems to like him or her | −.23* |
| 4. Overreacts (to interruptions) | −.21* |
| 54. Speaks fluently and expresses ideas well | −.20* |
| 69. Says or does unconvincing things (from partner's point of view) | −.20* |

Note. BQ = Behavioral Q-sort.
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$. ****$p < .001$.