

### Self-Verification and Contextualized Self-Views

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#### Abstract

Whereas most self-verification research has focused on people's desire to verify their global self-conceptions, the present studies examined self-verification with regard to contextualized self-views—views of the self in particular situations and relationships. It was hypothesized that individuals whose core self-conceptions include contextualized self-views should seek to verify these self-views. In Study 1, the more individuals defined the self in dialectical terms, the more their judgments were biased in favor of verifying over non-verifying feedback about a negative, situation-specific self-view. In Study 2, consistent with research on gender differences in the importance of relationships to the self-concept, women but not men showed a similar bias toward feedback about a negative, relationship-specific self-view, a pattern not seen for global self-views. Together, the results support the notion that self-verification occurs for core self-conceptions, whatever form(s) they may take. Individual differences in self-verification, and the nature of selfhood and authenticity, are discussed. (149 words)

#### Self-Verification and Contextualized Self-Views

Self-verification, the desire for others to verify our existing self-views, is a fundamental self-evaluative motive. People seek verification in order to maintain stable views of the self, as enduring self-views confer a “crucial source of coherence, an invaluable means of defining their existence, organizing experience, and guiding social interaction” (Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003, p. 369). Most self-verification research has focused on people's desire for verifying appraisals of their global self-conceptions. Extending this work, two studies examined self-verification with regard to contextualized self-views—

views of the self in particular situations and relationships. Both tested the hypothesis that people whose core sense of self includes such self-views strive to verify them. In so doing, these studies established a new role for individual differences in self-verification.

#### *Self-Verification: Striving to be Known*

Self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 1987) proposes that people desire verification of their core self-views. Self-verification strivings are thought to be in the service of broader, epistemic and pragmatic needs for predictability and control (Swann, 1990). On an epistemic level, receiving self-verification assures people that their beliefs about the self are sensible and thus that they can anticipate and exert some control over their outcomes. Pragmatically speaking, being verified bolsters prediction and control by assuring people that others hold appropriate expectations of them and thus that their social interactions will proceed smoothly. Supporting these assumptions about why people self-verify, Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler (1992) found that epistemic (e.g., “I'd feel more at ease with someone who can judge me for what I am”) and pragmatic (e.g., “Seeing as he knows what he's dealing with we might get along better”) concerns were among the top reasons participants gave for choosing a verifying over a non-verifying interaction partner.

Self-verification theory enjoys over two decades of empirical support. For example, people judge self-verifying information to be more valid than non-verifying information (Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987). They also attend more to, and thus better remember, the former over the latter (Swann & Read, 1981). Importantly, people who hold negative views of the self seek and receive self-verification, just as do people who hold positive views (e.g., McNulty & Swann, 1994; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989), indicating that self-verification motives may at times override well-documented self-enhancement ones.

On that note, research has identified moderating variables that render self-verification more or less likely to predominate other self-evaluative motives (for a review, see Swann & Schroeder, 1995). For example, self-verification is more likely when people have the cognitive capacity to introspect (Hixon & Swann, 1993), and when they have just learned that an evaluator views them in a non-verifying manner (Swann & Read, 1981). The more committed one is to an evaluator, the more verification is sought; for example, marital partners seek verification from each other more so than dating partners (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). As a final, especially relevant example, self-verification is most likely for central or core self-views (Chen, Chen, & Shaw, 2004; Pelham & Swann, 1994; Swann & Pelham, 2002a). The moderating impact of self-view centrality makes sense on both epistemic and pragmatic grounds. Central self-conceptions are core to a person's identity; thus, when they are not verified, the person's sense of knowing the self is especially undermined, and the potential for interpersonal misunderstandings and conflicts looms larger.

*Seeking Verification of Global and Contextualized Self-Views?*

At first, the notion that people seek verification as a means of maintaining coherence and continuity in the self would appear to imply that verification strivings pertain mainly to global self-views. As these self-views transcend time and situations, they would seem to capture who the self is most enduringly. Indeed, the instruments used to assess self-views in most self-verification research have tapped people's global, de-contextualized self-views. More broadly, numerous theories of the self and personality assume, tacitly or explicitly, that people conceptualize the self in stable, global terms (e.g., Greenwald, 1980; Markus, 1977; McCrae & Costa, 1996). Similarly, various self-esteem theories assume that people hold a global evaluation of the self (e.g., Wylie, 1974). Finally, long-held beliefs on the psychological importance of maintaining internal consistency (Festinger, 1957; Lewin, 1951) also connote that global self-views that hold across time and situations are most core to the self-concept, and thus that these are the self-views people seek to verify.

On the other hand, considerable research indicates that the self is multi-faceted (e.g., Higgins, 1987; Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984; Linville, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986), and that it is neither feasible nor adaptive for a person's entire array of self-knowledge to be accessible all at once (Markus & Wurf, 1987). The self's multiple facets have been linked to different functions (e.g., Greenwald & Breckler, 1985), as well as to contextual variations. Focusing on the latter, research has shown that situational manipulations produce malleability in the

self (e.g., Markus & Kunda, 1986), and that people use different attributes to describe themselves in different contexts (e.g., McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976). Interactionist views of personality also posit cross-situational variability in the self (Mendoza-Denton, Ayduk, Mischel, Shoda, & Testa, 2001; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Finally, from a person perception perspective, Swann (1984) has argued that perceivers aim for pragmatic more than global accuracy in their impressions of others. Pragmatic accuracy is circumscribed, reflecting impressions of a target within the confines of the perceiver's relationship with the target (see also Shoda & Mischel, 1993). This form of accuracy implies, then, that targets have relationship-specific selves that may differ from their global self-conceptions.

Together, the above lines of inquiry suggest that, beyond global self-conceptions, people possess contextualized self-views—views of themselves in specific situations and relationships. Although this assertion is unlikely to be contested given the current state of evidence, the contention that self-verification strivings extend to contextualized self-views may be another matter. For example, research suggests that viewing the self inconsistently across different social roles and contexts breeds psychological maladjustment (Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993). This work implies, then, that there may be negative consequences associated with holding contextualized self-views, raising questions as to why people would seek to verify and thus reinforce such self-views. On another note, one might infer that self-views that fluctuate across contexts merely reflect situational demands or strategic manipulations of the self, rather than the kind of core, authentic self-aspects that are the primary targets of self-verification strivings. Along the same lines, that self-verification researchers initially chose to focus on global self-conceptions, an emphasis that has largely continued, seems to reflect tacit assumptions that global self-views are most core to people's self-concepts and, accordingly, to imply that contextualized self-views are not core enough to elicit a desire for self-verification.

However, exceptions to the focus on global self-views exist. Most notably, Swann, Bosson, and Pelham (2002) examined self-verification with regard to people's self-views on dimensions that hold unique importance for their relationships (e.g., physical attractiveness in dating relationships). They found that relationship partners prefer self-enhancing feedback from one another on such dimensions, but self-verifying appraisals on others. For example, dating partners desired to be seen as more physically attractive than they typically saw themselves, but sought self-verifying feedback on dimensions of lesser relationship importance. Importantly, though, dating partners actually presented themselves to one another

as more attractive than they typically saw themselves, thereby deserving the positive appraisals they received on this dimension. Thus, within the context of their relationships, people act in ways to merit the exaggeratedly positive appraisals they seek from their partners on critical relationship dimensions, rendering these appraisals ultimately self-verifying.

This research suggests that self-verification strivings extend to contextualized self-views—at least to self-views that are uniquely important to relationships. In the present research, we took a broader perspective on the desire to verify contextualized self-views. Whereas Swann et al. (2002) focused on self-views of particular importance to a specific relationship, and assessed the desire for self-verification from the relevant relationship partner, we examined a range of contextualized self-views associated with different types of relationships as well as situations, and assessed self-verification strivings in general, rather than in relation to specific relationship partners. Most distinct, we incorporated a role for individual differences in self-verification. Specifically, we proposed that to the extent that people's core sense of self includes contextualized self-views, they should desire to verify these self-views.

Across two studies, we tested this hypothesis by identifying people for whom contextualized self-views are likely to be core self-conceptions, and then assessing their desire to verify these self-views. Past work indicates that the desire for self-verification manifests itself in two general forms: behavioral strategies aimed at controlling others' appraisals of the self, and cognitive strategies by which people "systematically distort their perceptions of social reality" (Swann, 1987, p. 1039). We focused on a cognitive strategy—namely, selective interpretation whereby people react more positively to feedback that verifies their self-views than to non-verifying feedback. Prior research indicates that people's affective reactions are sensitive to the self-enhancement implications of self-relevant feedback, whereas their cognitive reactions reflect self-verification implications (Swann et al., 1987). Given this, we assessed selective judgment in favor of verifying over non-verifying feedback with cognitive items referring to the accuracy and informativeness of the feedback.

In Study 1, we hypothesized that individuals high relative to low in naïve dialecticism (Peng & Nisbett, 1999) should be especially likely to show selective judgment in favor of verifying over non-verifying feedback about a situation-specific self-view (e.g., view of the self in discussion section). Building on evidence for gender differences in the importance of relationships to the self-concept (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997), Study 2 tested the prediction that women are more likely than men to judge verifying feedback about a relationship-specific self-views (e.g., view of the self

with one's parents) more favorably than non-verifying feedback. We examined different types of contextualized self-views (i.e., situation- and relationship-specific) across studies for generality's sake, but we deliberately focused on relationship-specific self-views in Study 2 because gender differences in the self-concept pertain to close relationships, rather than to contexts where other people may be present, but they are not necessarily relationship partners, nor are they the focus.

#### Study 1: Naïve Dialecticism

Naïve dialecticism, which is rooted largely in East Asian philosophical, religious, and folk traditions, is defined by three broad principles (Peng, Ames, & Knowles, 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). The principle of change posits that reality is dynamic, flexible, and ever-changing. As such, according to the principle of contradiction, opposing states, beliefs, and phenomena necessarily co-exist, as what constitutes reality at one moment may not at another. Finally, the principle of holism refers to the idea that everything is connected and thus that any given person, object, or event cannot be understood in isolation, independent from that to which it is connected; true meaning can only be derived from viewing things as inextricable parts of their surrounding context or field.

What implications does naïve dialecticism have for the self? Choi and Choi (2002) found that Koreans, who were assumed to be higher in dialecticism than Americans, showed less stability across contexts in their self beliefs, and were more tolerant of contradiction in these beliefs. Other work has shown that, relative to Americans, Chinese participants, who tend to be higher in dialecticism, reported greater ambivalence in their self-evaluations, consistent with the principle of contradiction (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004). Finally, research has found evidence for all three principles of dialecticism in the self-concepts of East Asians relative to Americans (Spencer-Rodgers, Boucher, Mori, Wang, & Peng, 2005). For example, although participants from both groups described themselves using more non-dialectical, global self-descriptors than dialectical ones, East Asians were more likely to use (1) temporally modified descriptors, which connote change; (2) logically opposing descriptors, which indicate contradiction; and (3) descriptors indicating a holistic awareness of their inherent relatedness to entities beyond themselves.

Together, the above strands of evidence suggest that highly dialectical individuals are especially inclined to construe the self in situation-specific terms. Indeed, this suggestion follows naturally from the principles of dialecticism. That is, the belief that the self is dynamic and ever-changing compels one to "tag" or demarcate conceptions of the self with the particular situations in which these

conceptions are in fact true. With regard to contradiction, situation-specificity leaves room for opposing self-views across different situations. Finally, incorporating the surrounding situation into one's self-conceptions is precisely what the principle of holism would dictate. If the core self-views of individuals who view the world and themselves in dialectical terms include references to specific situations, then these individuals should be particularly likely to exhibit a desire to verify these situation-specific self-views. Study 1 was designed to test this hypothesis.

#### *Overview*

Naïve dialecticism can be treated as a discrete, group-level variable that differs between cultures (Choi & Choi, 2002), or as a continuous, individual difference variable that varies within cultures (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004). Research has also used priming manipulations to instantiate different levels of dialecticism (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2005). In Study 1, we treated naïve dialecticism as an individual difference variable. Specifically, we used the Dialectical Self Scale (DSS; Spencer-Rodgers, Srivastava, Wang, Hou, & Peng, 2001) to assess variations among individuals within a U.S. sample. Past work has found meaningful variation within U.S. samples (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004; see also Peng & Nisbett, 1999). From a broader perspective, our treatment of naïve dialecticism can be seen as analogous to research on other constructs or dimensions (e.g., interdependence) for which group-level differences across cultures have been documented (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991), but meaningful variation nonetheless exists within cultures, with scales developed to measure such within-culture variation (e.g., Singelis, 1994).

Prior to recruitment, participants completed a prescreening survey that measured their situation-specific self-views. In the study, we assessed each participant's desire to verify a highly-central and negative situation-specific self-view. We focused on central self-views because self-verification strivings are especially likely for such self-views (e.g., Swann & Pelham, 2002a), and on negative self-views so as to minimize ambiguity as to whether our results reflect self-verification or self-enhancement. As noted, we measured the desire for self-verification in terms of cognitive reactions to verifying versus non-verifying feedback. As in past work (e.g., Swann et al., 1987), evidence for self-verification took the form of more positive reactions to verifying feedback. Our key hypothesis was that higher DSS scores would be associated with such a bias.

#### *Method*

##### *Participants*

Participants were 102 undergraduates (29 men, 73 women) enrolled in various psychology courses at a large public university who received

course credit or \$10 (US). The distribution of self-reported ethnic identity was: 43.1% European American, 56.9% East Asian Americans (Chinese, Korean, or Japanese). Participants were run in groups of no more than 5 participants. An additional 8 participants were excluded because they expressed suspicion ( $n = 3$ ) or they misunderstood the experimental instructions or procedure ( $n = 5$ ).

##### *Recruitment*

Participants were recruited based on their responses to a prescreening survey, which was embedded in a battery of questionnaires administered to all students in lower-division psychology courses at the start of every semester. In the survey, participants were presented with four everyday situations (discussion section, gym, party, cafeteria) and told to choose the two in which they were best able to describe themselves. They then rated how much each of five positive (considerate, conscientious, expressive, open-minded, and patient) and five negative (bossy, irresponsible, lazy, moody, and picky) attributes describes them in each of their chosen situations (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).<sup>1</sup> Next, they rated how central or important each of the attributes is in defining who they are in each situation (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Participants were recruited if they possessed at least one highly-central and negative situation-specific self-view. More specifically, we contacted any participant who rated at least one negative attribute to be both highly self-descriptive (6 or 7 on the 7-point scale) and central (5 or above on the 7-point scale), or at least one positive attribute as both highly *non*-self-descriptive (2 or below) and central (5 or above).<sup>2</sup>

##### *Procedure*

Upon arrival, participants were ushered to a computer carrel. The experimenter explained that the purpose of the study was to pilot test a new, computer-based personality test. After the test, each participant would receive feedback about his or her personality and then be asked to give feedback about the test. Participants were warned that due to time constraints, they would only receive feedback on a subset of the test questions.

Among other measures (see *Measures*), the personality test included the Dialectical Self Scale (DSS; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2005). After the test, a short paragraph of feedback appeared on the computer screen for each participant, ostensibly generated based on some of his or her test responses. In actuality, participants were randomly assigned to receive feedback that either verified (Verifying) or did not verify (Non-Verifying) the central and negative, situation-specific self-view identified by the prescreening survey. For participants with more than one such self-view, we gave them feedback pertaining to the attribute that they had rated most extremely on

self-descriptiveness (i.e., most descriptive if the trait was negative, and least descriptive if the trait was positive). Ties were broken by choosing the attribute rated highest in centrality and, if multiple attributes still qualified, by random selection. Because the feedback referred to the relevant situation, to make it believable that it was based on participants' test responses, the personality test included a bogus, 30-item questionnaire asking participants to rate their enjoyment of a range of activities in various situations (e.g., gym).

The first two sentences of the feedback paragraph was the same for all participants. It read:

Personality is reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Your personality has many different facets: you have some shortcomings, but many strengths as well.

The rest of the paragraph varied depending on participants' verification condition and the situation to which their self-view referred. For example, a participant in the Verifying condition who indicated in prescreening that she is bossy in discussion section received the following feedback:

Your responses to a subset of the questionnaires you just completed suggest that one facet of your personality is that, specifically in contexts such as discussion section, you tend to be bossy, where this facet of personality is revealed by your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Had the same participant been assigned to the Non-Verifying condition, her feedback would have read "...in contexts such as discussion section, you tend NOT to be bossy."

After reading their idiosyncratically-tailored feedback, participants responded to three items tapping their cognitive reactions (as in Swann et al., 1987). Specifically, they rated how accurate they thought the feedback was (1 = *not at all accurate*, 7 = *extremely accurate*), how much they agreed with it (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), and how much they thought a stranger could learn about them from it (1 = *nothing at all*, 7 = *a great deal*). Ratings were averaged to form an index of cognitive reactions ( $\alpha = .83$ ), with higher numbers indicating more positive reactions.

Finally, participants provided demographic information and were probed for suspicion, after which they were debriefed and thanked.

#### Measures

*Dialectical Self Scale (DSS)*. The DSS (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2005) appeared first in the personality test. Sample items are: "I often change the way I am, depending on who I am with," "I often find

that my beliefs and attitudes will change under different contexts," and "I believe my personality will stay the same all of my life" (reverse-scored). Participants rated their agreement with each item (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). After reverse-scoring the appropriate items, DSS scores were computed by averaging responses across items ( $\alpha = .89$ ), with higher scores indicating higher dialecticism. Comparably high reliability estimates have been found in other work (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2001, 2004, 2005). Also, DSS scores have been shown to predict self-concept stability and self-evaluative ambivalence (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004).

*Big Five Inventory (BFI)*. Participants then completed the Big Five Inventory (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991) by rating their agreement with each item (1 = *disagree strongly*, 5 = *agree strongly*). Of the five BFI dimensions (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness), we were mainly interested in distinguishing Openness (e.g., "Likes to reflect, play with ideas"), which reflects a tendency to perceive the world in more complex ways, from dialecticism, which might be seen as carrying similar connotations. After reverse-scoring the appropriate items, participants' ratings across the 10 Openness items were averaged ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

*Self-esteem*. Next, participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (RSEI; Rosenberg, 1965) by rating their agreement with each item (1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*). After reverse-scoring the appropriate items, self-esteem scores were computed by averaging across items ( $\alpha = .91$ ). This measure was included given evidence that dialecticism and global self-esteem are negatively correlated (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004).

*Implicit theories*. Participants then rated their agreement (1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*) with three items assessing their implicit theory of personality (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997). A sample item is "The kind of person someone is is something very basic about them and it can't be changed very much." Endorsing such an item implies holding an entity theory, the belief that personality is fixed, whereas disagreeing with it implies holding an incremental theory, or the view that personality is malleable. Ratings across the three items were averaged ( $\alpha = .86$ ). Higher numbers indicate a more entity theory of personality. As both an incremental theory and dialecticism allow for change in personality, we included this measure to distinguish the two.

*Personal Need for Structure (PNS)*. After the bogus questionnaire about enjoyment of activities in different situations (see above), participants completed the Personal Need for Structure scale (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993) by rating their agreement with each item (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). A

sample item is “I hate to be with people who are unpredictable.” After reverse-scoring the appropriate items, PNS scores were computed by averaging across items ( $\alpha = .84$ ). Higher PNS scores indicate a greater desire for simple structure. This desire has been linked to a tendency to organize social information in less complex and more unambiguous ways, suggesting that PNS scores may be negatively correlated with dialecticism.

*Self-Monitoring Scale.* Finally, participants completed the Self-Monitoring scale (Snyder, 1974). A sample item is “Even if I’m not enjoying myself, I often pretend to be having a good time.” Ratings were made on a 5-point scale (1 = *extremely uncharacteristic*; 5 = *extreme characteristic*). After reverse-scoring the appropriate items, self-monitoring scores were computed by averaging across items ( $\alpha = .72$ ). Higher scores indicate an ability and tendency to adjust one’s behavior to fit the current situation. Dialecticism and self-monitoring both recognize contextual variability in the self, although such variability does not reflect internalized self-aspects for high self-monitors, whereas for high-DSS individuals, it likely does reflect meaningful, core self-aspects.

#### Results and Discussion

##### *Cognitive Reactions to Feedback*

To test Study 1’s central hypothesis, we regressed participants’ cognitive reaction scores on standardized DSS scores and Verification condition (1 = Verifying, -1 = Non-Verifying). The only significant effect was the predicted 2-way (DSS x Verification) interaction,  $\beta = .24$ ,  $t = 2.34$ ,  $p < .05$ . As shown in Figure 1 (high and low DSS were plotted at  $\pm 1$  SD from the mean, respectively), higher DSS scores were associated with a clear bias in favor of verifying over non-verifying feedback about a situation-specific self-view, whereas lower DSS scores were associated with, if anything, a reverse bias. Separate follow-up tests for high- and low-DSS participant groups, created based on a median split of the distribution of DSS scores, showed that the Verification effect was highly significant in the high-DSS group ( $\beta = .41$ ,  $t = 3.09$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and not in the low-DSS group ( $\beta = -.18$ ,  $t = 1.32$ ,  $ns$ ). Thus, as hypothesized, the results for high-DSS participants showed a significant, contextualized self-verification pattern, whereas those for low-DSS participants did not.

##### *Ancillary Analyses*

To assess whether the various individual difference measures we included (openness, self-esteem, implicit theories, personal need for structure, self-monitoring) might somehow account for the above findings, we first examined the correlations between DSS scores and participants’ scores on these measures. DSS scores were significantly correlated with only self-esteem ( $r = -.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and self-monitoring ( $r = .27$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating higher dialecticism was

associated with lower self-esteem and higher self-monitoring. Nevertheless, for each measure, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis in which we entered standardized scores on the measure in the first step and then the Measure x Verification term in the second step. The third step included DSS and Verification, followed by the DSS x Verification term in the fourth and final step. Our predicted 2-way (DSS x Verification) interaction for cognitive reactions to the feedback remained significant in each of these analyses ( $ps < .05$ ). These results bolster the unique predictive power of individual differences in naïve dialecticism on self-verification strivings for situation-specific self-views.

To summarize, consistent with Study 1’s key prediction, high-DSS individuals, whose core self-views include situational referents, showed a clear bias in favor of verifying over non-verifying feedback about a highly-central and negative, situation-specific self-view—a pattern not seen among low-DSS participants. That high-DSS individuals’ self-verification strivings emerged for a negative self-view is incompatible with a self-enhancement account.

However, Study 1’s focus on negative self-views raises several questions. First, research indicates that high dialecticism entails an acceptance of *both* positive and negative aspects of the world, including the self, whereas low dialecticism is associated with viewing the world in *either* positive or negative terms (e.g., Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004). Since Study 1 only examined negative self-views, can our results be interpreted in valence terms? We do not think so. Although high-DSS individuals are more accepting of negative self-aspects than their low-DSS counterparts, if contextualized self-verification was not at play in the present study, then the principles of naïve dialecticism would have dictated comparable reactions to the verifying (i.e., negative) and non-verifying (i.e., positive) feedback, not more positive reactions to the former with higher DSS scores.

On a different note, theory and research suggest that collectivistic cultures, such as East Asian ones, tend to promote a self-critical orientation (e.g., Heine, Lehman, Markus, Kitayama, 1997; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunit, 1997). This orientation is defined by heightened attention to negative self-relevant information. As both self-criticism and naïve dialecticism are thought to be prevalent in East Asian cultures, can the present results be explained in terms of self-criticism? That is, perhaps high-DSS participants’ more positive reactions to the verifying feedback, which was negative, relative to non-verifying feedback, which was positive, were driven by self-criticism rather than self-verification? We think this unlikely for several reasons.

First, a self-criticism account of Study 1’s findings hinges on linking naïve dialecticism to East

Asian cultures. DSS scores were in fact higher among East Asian Americans ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $n = 58$ ) than European Americans ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $n = 44$ ) in our sample,  $t = 2.77$ ,  $p < .01$ . Thus, we examined cognitive reaction scores in a 2 x 2 (Ethnicity x Verification) ANOVA. If self-criticism were at work, we should expect a significant interaction, whereby ethnicity predicts feedback reactions. That is, due to their self-critical tendencies, East Asian Americans should react more positively to negative (verifying) than to positive (non-verifying) feedback. Although the pattern based on ethnicity paralleled the one based on DSS scores—with East Asian Americans favoring verifying ( $M = 4.16$ ) over non-verifying ( $M = 3.62$ ) feedback and European Americans not showing this preference ( $M = 3.51$ , verifying;  $M = 3.44$ , non-verifying), no significant effects emerged from this analysis. Moreover, when we re-conducted our original regression analysis including Ethnicity and the Ethnicity x Verification interaction as predictors, our critical DSS x Verification was slightly weakened, but remained marginally significant,  $\beta = .21$ ,  $t = 1.94$ ,  $p = .056$ . These analyses support our naïve dialecticism account of the data, and are inconsistent with a self-criticism one.

Alternatively, one might argue that the fact that high-DSS scorers had more negative self-esteem scores fits a self-criticism account of our findings in that global self-evaluations might be taken as a proxy for self-critical tendencies. However, this line of reasoning would predict that self-esteem would account for our results, which our ancillary analyses argue against. Overall, then, we do not see self-criticism as a very plausible account. Of course, definitive conclusions await a direct test. For example, future work might include a condition where participants receive positive, verifying or non-verifying feedback about a situation-specific self-view. A naïve dialecticism perspective would predict results similar to Study 1's, whereas a self-criticism one would not.

On a final note, it is worth pointing out that the reactions of low-DSS scorers are as striking and informative as those of their high-DSS counterparts. Research on global self-verification indicates that people are most apt to seek verification of their highly-central self-views. Thus, that low-DSS scorers did not show self-verification strivings for their highly-central situation-specific self-views suggests an overall lack of desire for contextualized self-verification. More broadly, it suggests that whether or not a person seeks verification of a self-view depends on more than the centrality of the self-view; self-verification strivings also hinge on whether the nature of the self-view (i.e., global vs. contextualized) is core to the person's self-concept.

#### Study 2: Gender and Relationships

In Study 2, we relied on a different basis for examining contextualized self-verification—namely,

gender differences in the self-definitional importance of relationships. Theory and research suggest that women tend to define themselves in terms of their relationships more so than men. For example, Josephs, Markus, and Tafarodi (1992) found that self-esteem hinges on having successful relationships for women, but on achieving separateness and independence for men. More broadly, Cross and Madson (1997) argued that much of the evidence for gender differences in cognition, affect, motivation, and behavior can be explained by the tendency for women to hold a relational construal of the self, whereas men tend to hold an independent self-construal. More recently, Gabriel and Gardner (1999) found that women are more likely than men to, for example, describe themselves using descriptors that refer to relationships, and to attend to relational forms of information. Perhaps most compelling, research has repeatedly shown that women score higher than men on the Relational Interdependent Self-Construal scale (RISC; Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000), which is a direct measure of the self-definitional importance of relationships.

Given such gender differences, we hypothesized that women would be more likely than men to desire verification of their relationship-specific self-views—views of themselves in the context of specific relationships. To test this, we used procedures similar to Study 1's, only we examined men and women's cognitive reactions to verifying versus non-verifying feedback about a highly-central and negative, *relationship-specific* self-view. In addition, Study 2 included a comparison condition in which participants received feedback about a highly-central and negative *global* self-view. Thus, this study used a 2 x 2 x 2 (Gender x Verification x Self-View) between-subjects design. In the relationship-specific self-view condition, we predicted that women would be more likely than men to favor verifying over non-verifying feedback. In contrast, in the global self-view condition, we expected both men and women to react to verifying feedback more positively. Such a finding would constitute a replication of considerable past evidence for the desire to verify global self-views.

#### Participants

Participants were 272 undergraduates (92 men, 180 women) enrolled in various psychology courses at a large public university who received course credit or \$10 (US). The distribution of self-reported ethnic identity was: 46.7% European American, 52.9% East Asian Americans, .4% other. Participants were run in groups of 5 or fewer. An additional 8 participants were excluded because they expressed suspicion ( $n = 3$ ) or they misunderstood the instructions or procedure ( $n = 5$ ).

### Recruitment

Study 2's recruitment procedures were similar to Study 1's. However, Study 2's participants completed one of two possible versions of the prescreening survey. The version they completed was determined by the random distribution of the larger battery of questionnaires in which our survey was embedded. In the relationship-specific self-view version, participants were presented with two pairs of relationships (friends/roommates, followed by parents/siblings). For each pair, they were told to choose the relationship in which they could best describe themselves. They then rated how much each of the attributes used in Study 1 describes who they are in each of their two chosen relationships (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Participants also rated how central each attribute is in defining who they are in each relationship (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). In contrast, participants in the global self-view version rated how much each of the attributes describes them in general, and then rated how central or important each attribute is in defining how they generally see themselves. Using Study 1's criteria, participants were recruited if they possessed at least one highly-central and negative self-view, only in this study the self-view was either a relationship-specific or global one.

### Procedure and Measures

The procedure and measures were nearly identical to Study 1's. The only difference was the content of the feedback paragraphs. Specifically, Study 2's participants received either verifying or non-verifying feedback about the highly-central and negative, relationship-specific or global self-view for which they were recruited. In the relational self-view condition, the feedback referred to the relevant relationship (e.g., "...in relationships such as with siblings, you tend to be patient"). Analogous to Study 1, to make it believable that this relationship-specific feedback was based on their test responses, the personality test included a bogus questionnaire for which participants had to rate how much they enjoyed a range of activities in various relationship contexts (e.g., with friends). In the global self-view condition, the feedback did not refer to any situation or relationship (e.g., "...in general, you tend to be patient"). After reading their feedback, participants responded to the same three cognitive reaction items used in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Finally, participants provided demographic information, were probed for suspicion, and then were debriefed and thanked.

### Results and Discussion

#### Cognitive Reactions to Feedback

We examined participants' cognitive reaction scores in a 2 x 2 x 2 (Gender x Verification x Self-View) ANOVA. This analysis yielded a Verification effect,  $F(1, 264) = 8.54, p < .01$  and a Verification x Self-View interaction,  $F(1, 264) = 4.59, p < .05$ , which

were qualified by the predicted 3-way interaction,  $F(1, 264) = 8.72, p < .01$  (see Figure 2 for the means). To facilitate interpretation, we conducted separate 2 x 2 (Gender x Verification) ANOVAs for each self-view condition. For relationship-specific self-views, this analysis yielded only a significant 2-way interaction,  $F(1, 140) = 6.17, p < .05$ . As depicted on the left side of Figure 2, women had more positive reactions to verifying than to non-verifying feedback about their relationship-specific self-view, whereas men showed the opposite pattern. Follow-up comparisons showed that the Verification effect was indeed significant among women,  $F(1, 176) = 6.95, p < .01$ , but not men,  $F(1, 88) = 1.38, ns$ . Turning to global self-views, the 2 x 2 analysis yielded a significant Verification effect,  $F(1, 124) = 12.12, p < .01$ , suggesting that both men and women reacted more positively to verifying over non-verifying feedback regarding a global self-view, replicating past self-verification findings. Although the pattern of the means suggest that men showed somewhat stronger global self-verification tendencies, the interaction was only marginal,  $F(1, 124) = 2.92, p = .09$ .

#### Ancillary Analysis

Meta-analytic research suggests that women have lower self-esteem than men (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999), raising the possibility that self-esteem differences played a role in the present results. In our sample, however, men ( $M = 2.99$ ) and women ( $M = 3.11$ ) did not differ in their Rosenberg self-esteem scores ( $\alpha = .91$ ),  $t(269) = 1.50, ns$ .<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, we included self-esteem and the 2- and 3-way interactions between self-esteem and our Verification and Self-View factors as covariates in the omnibus 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVA. The critical 3-way interaction remained essentially unchanged,  $F(1, 260) = 8.40, p < .01$ . Thus, self-esteem does not account for our results.

In terms of the other measures included in the purported personality test, women scored higher than men on the agreeableness dimension of the BFI ( $r = .13, p < .05$ ), and were more likely to hold entity theories of personality ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ). Including each of these scores and their 2- and 3-way interactions with the Verification and Self-View factors as covariates in our original 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVA left the original results virtually unchanged; the crucial Gender x Verification x Self-View interaction remained significant ( $ps < .01$ ).

In sum, extending Study 1, Study 2 assessed self-verification with regard to self-views in particular relationships rather than situations. Overall, the results support the hypothesis that people who tend to define themselves in highly relational terms are especially likely to seek verification of their relationship-specific self-views. That is, women but not men reacted more positively to verifying than non-verifying feedback about a relationship-specific self-view. This gender

difference did not hold for all types of self-views. For global self-views, both men and women responded more positively in the Verifying relative to Non-Verifying condition, in line with a large literature on self-verification of global self-views. However, there was a marginal interaction hinting that men desire global self-verification more than women. Although replication of this finding is needed, to the extent that global self-views reflect the individual level of self-definition, this finding makes sense given research showing that individual self-aspects are especially high in self-definitional importance for men (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997; Josephs et al., 1992).

#### General Discussion

The vast majority of self-verification research has focused on people's desire to verify their global self-conceptions (for a review, see Swann et al., 2003), leaving questions as to whether and how self-verification strivings extend to contextualized self-views under-explored. These are important questions in light of growing emphasis on the contextualized nature of people's perceptions of both themselves and others (e.g., Gill & Swann, 2004; Shoda & Mischel, 1993).

Across two studies, we found evidence in line with the hypothesis that individuals whose core self-conceptions include context-specific self-views are especially inclined to seek verification of them. In Study 1, higher naïve dialecticism was linked to more positive reactions to verifying than non-verifying feedback about a negative, situation-specific self-view. These results cohere with research suggesting that highly-dialectical individuals are likely to possess situation-specific self-views (e.g., Choi & Choi, 2002), but go further in showing that such individuals are especially apt to seek verifying appraisals of such self-views. Building on evidence for gender differences in the importance of relationships to the self-concept, Study 2 showed that only women exhibited a desire for verification of their relationship-specific self-views, in that they reacted more positively to feedback that verified such a self-view than to non-verifying feedback. These results fit our argument that highly relational people are particularly inclined to seek verification of their relationship-specific self-views.

The current studies are the first to document individual differences (beyond ones associated with self-views themselves) in self-verification strivings. We hasten to note, though, that we do not view our findings as challenging the status of self-verification as a fundamental self-evaluative motive. Rather, our data suggest that individual differences determine the nature of the self-views that people seek to verify. Whereas most people may desire verification of their global self-conceptions, certain individuals may also seek verifying appraisals of their contextualized ones. Conceivably, some may even show stronger self-verification strivings for their contextualized than

global self-views, if their core sense of self is comprised mainly of context-specific self-views. In the broadest of terms, then, our findings are consistent with the overriding hypothesis that self-verification strivings may be directed at whatever form or forms people's core self-views take.

We underscore that the present results speak to chronic, individual differences in the desire for contextualized self-verification. On a more temporary basis, most people may seek to verify at least some contextualized self-views. In the current studies, participants were forced to identify self-views based on a limited set of attributes, as well as situations (Study 1) or relationships (Study 2). Had more leeway been given, the impact of individual differences may have been lessened. In other words, although highly-dialectical individuals and women may exhibit more chronic and less discriminating tendencies to seek verification of contextualized self-views, their counterparts may also seek contextualized self-verification, but on a more temporary and selective basis.

Additionally, it is worth pointing out that although theory and research indicate that all people show some degree of malleability and cross-situational variability in the self (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987), we suggest that the contextualized self-views that people desire to verify are not merely trivial, ephemeral self-conceptions. People seek self-verification in an effort to attain and maintain a sense of coherence and continuity in the self (Swann, 1990; Swann et al., 2003). Thus, the contextualized self-views that are the target of self-verification strivings should be core to self-understanding, not peripheral, superficial, or insignificant self-elements. In this respect, we adhere closely to recent interactionist views of the self and personality (e.g., Mischel & Shoda, 1995). That is, coherence and continuity in the self can be derived from verifying conceptions of the self that vary *across* different situations and relationships, but that are nonetheless stable *within* each.

On a related note, self-verification strivings have often been characterized in authenticity terms (Swann et al., 1994; Swann & Pelham, 2002b). Though conceptions vary (for a review, see Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, in press), there is wide agreement that authenticity involves acting in accord with one's "true" self. From a self-verification standpoint, when others verify one's self-views, feelings of authenticity are bolstered. The present results suggest that at least for some people and some contextualized self-views, being authentic hinges in part on being true to the self one is in particular situations and relationships. In line with this, research suggests that cross-situational consistency in the self is less linked to feelings of authenticity among highly relational people (Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003; see also Kanagawa, Cross, &

Markus, 2001). Other work suggests that whereas the “true self” is defined by cross-situational consistency among people who construe the self in primarily global terms, this same notion is linked to contextual variation in the self among those who view the self largely in contextualized terms (Kashima et al., 2004).

Regarding authenticity, the present data cohere with Swann et al. (2002)’s work on the ways people negotiate their relationship-specific selves. As noted, these researchers found that on dimensions uniquely important to their relationships, people want their relationship partners to view them more favorably than they generally view themselves. However, within the specific context of their relationships, people act in ways that merit the overly favorable appraisals that they end up receiving from their partners on these critical dimensions. In other words, despite the inflated nature of their partners’ appraisals on these dimensions, people are ultimately verified on them, resulting in feelings of authenticity within the bounds of their relationships. The present studies echo this notion of contextualized authenticity, and extend this earlier work both by examining situation-specific as well as relationship-specific self-views regardless of their unique relationship importance, and by integrating a role for individual differences in self-verification strivings.

On a broader level, our findings add to a growing call for incorporating contextualized self-views in theorizing and research on the self. Beyond self-verification, contextualized self-views may have very distinct psychological consequences among different individuals. For example, research suggests that whereas contextual variability in the self is associated with a lower sense of clarity, consistency, and stability in the self among people who tend to construe the self in global terms, such variability does not lower such self-perceptions among people whose core sense of self includes contextualized self-views (Kashima et al., 2004; see also Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavallee, & Lehman, 1996). Other work has shown that psychological well-being hinges less on cross-situational consistency in the self for people who define the self in relationship-specific terms compared to those who do not (Cross et al., 2003).

In terms of limitations, Study 1 lacked a global self-view condition, which would have allowed more definitive interpretations of this study’s results as evidence for contextualized rather than global self-verification. However, research indicates that global and contextualized self-views are not one and the same, thus implying that global and contextualized self-verification are distinct. For example, among Koreans and Americans, Suh (2002) reported correlations between global and contextualized self-views that were as low as .32 and never higher than .66. Among Koreans, the correlations ranged from .29 to .37.

Coupled with research suggesting that Koreans are relatively high on naïve dialecticism (Choi & Choi, 2002), the relatively small-to-moderate size of the Korean correlations support the view that the self-verification evidence we obtained among Study 1’s high-DSS scorers pertained distinctly to contextualized self-views. Still, future research should include both global and contextualized self-views, and ensure that these self-views are indeed distinct (e.g., by recruiting participants who hold opposing global and contextualized self-views).

Interpretation of Study 2’s findings is limited by the use of gender as a proxy for individual differences in the importance of relationships to the self-concept. Thus, Study 2’s results are most safely viewed as consistent with, rather than direct evidence for, the hypothesis that people who define themselves in highly relational terms are especially apt to seek verifying appraisals of their relationship-specific self-views. Future work might assess individual differences in defining the self in relational terms with the Relational Interdependent Self-Construal scale (Cross et al., 2000). On another note, both studies used the same measure of self-verification—namely, selectively positive cognitive reactions to verifying over non-verifying feedback. Thus, it would be useful to replicate the present findings using other self-verification indices, such as preferences for interaction partners who verify one’s contextualized self-views over those who do not.

Finally, it would be intriguing to assess whether contextualized self-verification has positive relationship consequences, as has been shown for global self-verification (e.g., Swann & Pelham, 2002a). Research on person perception hints at this possibility (Gill & Swann, 2004). For example, correspondence between people’s appraisals of their romantic partner and that partner’s own self-views was more likely on dimensions relevant (vs. irrelevant) to the relationship, and these accurate relationship-relevant appraisals predicted higher relationship quality. Although the degree to which people perceived that their relationship-relevant self-views were verified was not assessed in this work, these results still suggest that contextualized self-verification may have stronger relationship implications than global self-verification does. Of course, this possibility needs to be directly tested.

To conclude, having one’s core self-views verified is thought to confer a crucial sense of coherence and continuity in the self. Thus, the desire for self-verification is considered to be a fundamental self-evaluative motive. We agree. However, most research has assessed people’s tendency to seek verification of their global self-conceptions. In two studies we found evidence in line with the overriding hypothesis that people whose core sense of self

includes context-specific conceptions of the self are likely to desire verification of these contextualized self-views. These findings introduce a new role for individual differences in the self-verification literature and, in line with other perspectives acknowledging contextual variation in the self, underscore the serious need to incorporate contextualized self-views in conceptions of selfhood and authenticity.

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#### Footnotes

1. Positive and negative attributes were chosen based on Anderson's (1968) desirability rankings. We also chose attributes that seemed potentially relevant to each of the contexts investigated across studies. We had a pilot sample of undergraduates ( $n = 115$ ) rate the positivity of the attributes using a 1 (*extremely negative*) to 7 (*extremely positive*) scale. We obtained these evaluations for each of the possible situations used in Study 1, as well as for the attributes in general and for each of the relationships used in Study 2. Overall, the results from this pilot testing mirrored Anderson's rankings.
2. Average self-descriptiveness and centrality ratings for the attribute for which participants were recruited did not differ as a function of DSS scores in Study 1 ( $r_s < .09$ , *ns*), or self-view condition or gender in Study 2 ( $t_s < 1.31$ , *ns*).
3. One participant was missing a self-esteem score and thus was not included in this analysis.

#### Figure Captions

- Figure 1.* Overall cognitive reactions to the feedback as a function of DSS and Verification Condition (Study 1). Higher values indicate more positive reactions.
- Figure 2.* Overall cognitive reactions to the feedback as a function of Gender, Verification, and Self-View Condition (Study 2). Higher values indicate more positive reactions.



