

Decades ago psychologists have found that people like to view themselves in a positive light and think of themselves positively – so called self-enhancement motive. William Swann, a professor at University of Texas at Austin has shown, however, that this is not always the case and people are also motivated to view themselves in a realistic manner, that is, they like others to see them as they see themselves – so called self-verification motive (Swann, 1983, 2012). This is a provocative idea in the sense that it assumes that people with negative self-views prefer negative feedback (contrary to the self-enhancing theory). Such a behavior was found in many studies and shown as one of the mechanisms sustaining one's negative self-concept and depressive symptoms (Giesler et al., 1996). Swann (1983, 2012) assumes that people need others to confirm their self-views because firm self-knowledge is necessary to guides one's behavior, help make sense of the world and see it as predictable, controllable, and coherent.

Building on the above, we propose to look at self-verification in terms of epistemic motivation, that is, we assume that people undertake self-verifying behaviors (they select self-congruent feedback or interaction partners) because such behaviors help them attain and preserve certain self-knowledge. So, we treat self-verification as a means to an end, rather as an end in itself. Moreover, we think that people select this way to preserve their certainty because they find self-congruent feedback as more accurate than self-discrepant one (I know myself best, so all who think I am better/worse than I am, are wrong). This notion has been demonstrated in many studies (see Kwang & Swann, 2010, for overview).

Furthermore, we argue that if the end (certainty) can be attained in another, not self-verifying way, self-verification effects should not appear. This can be the case when a discrepant (e.g., a positive – for a person with a negative self-view and negative – for a person with a positive self-view) feedback comes from a source which provides more certainty than a congruent feedback, for instance, because one is led to believe that evaluator might judge them more accurately than they can judge themselves (because evaluator is an expert, e.g., an artist in the field of artistic ability, experienced psychologist – in the context of personality ratings, or someone who is hardly ever wrong judging other people – even if it might seem otherwise at first glance). The certainty “attached” to such a source should make feedback more effective (instrumental) at providing certainty, even if the feedback is discrepant. We plan to test this hypothesis in the first line of the studies.

We also argue that if this is motivation to obtain certainty that underlies the self-verification effects, these effects should be especially strong when attaining certainty is of great importance. That is, preference for self-verifying feedback or interaction partners should be higher when need for certainty is high compared to a situation when it is low. As for the need for certainty, it can either vary across people or situations. There are individuals who desire certainty more than others. These are people high in the need for cognitive closure (closure refers to firm knowledge which gives basis for a judgment or decision). So, we assume that the predicted effects should be stronger for high (compared to low) need for closure individuals. They should also be stronger in some situations wherein certainty is especially needed, for example, when one needs to predict and control a given situation because their self-interest depends on it (e.g., a person needs to play a game together with a partner and the score depends on their cooperation). By contrast, the effects should be weaker when certainty is not so much needed. We plan to test this hypothesis in the first line of the studies.

Further, although people's views of themselves are highly relevant to them, individuals differ in importance of specific self-views. We want to test feedback preference in areas important for people, e.g., artistic skills for art students (vs. other students) or spatial ability skills for architecture students (compared to humanities students). We expect that self-verification strivings will be stronger in groups for whom given self-views are important (compared to other groups). But when other source of certainty is provided (e.g., an expert's opinion), self-verification effect will not occur. This will be tested in the third line of the studies.

The project thus sheds light on the motives that drive human feedback seeking behaviors. The results of the studies can help understand the interplay between motives and the nature of self-verification strivings (we postulate that, rather than a basic motive, it is a means to a more general motive, which is striving for certainty). Such a perspective allows to propose other means which can satisfy the motive and show circumstances under which negative feedback is not sought. This is especially important in case of individuals with negative self-views, e.g., depressed people.