

# Truth Aches

People who view themselves poorly may seek the 'truth' and find despair

By BRUCE BOWER

**W**hat do Roman poet Ovid and comedian Groucho Marx have in common? Separated by nearly 2,000 years, each delivered a pungent and seemingly paradoxical one-liner that exemplifies a provocative theory of how people think about and form close relationships. The theory, championed by psychologist William B. Swann Jr. of the University of Texas at Austin, has attracted considerable interest, as well as skepticism, among behavioral investigators.

"I flee who chases me, and chase who flees me," wrote Ovid, who undoubtedly had problems getting dates.

Groucho, a ladies' man more adept at chasing than fleeing (at least in his movies), nonetheless echoed Ovid with this quip: "I'd never join a club that would have me as a member."

Both remarks, says Swann, defy a basic assumption about social conduct: Above all, people love to be loved by others. On this point, folk wisdom converges with several decades of social science research.

But Ovid and Groucho could find solace in the implication, suggested by a number of studies directed by Swann, that people want more than adoration in their close relationships.

"As people mature, they learn that their relationships proceed most smoothly when others see them as they see themselves, even if they see themselves negatively," he maintains.

People who view themselves unfavorably tend to enter a "psychological cross fire" between an initial longing for praise and a subsequent desire to preserve their self-concept with critical assessments, according to Swann. "For such persons, the warmth produced by favorable feedback is chilled by incredulity, and the reassurance produced by negative feedback is tempered by sadness that the 'truth' could not be more kind," he says.

If Swann's proposition, which he dubs "self-verification theory," holds up, it may

prod psychologists to revise their understanding of marriage, friendship, and depression. Common techniques used by psychotherapists to bolster self-esteem and alleviate depression may also undergo reevaluation.

Self-verification theory takes its inspiration from research extending back nearly 100 years. Theorists have argued that each person develops enduring opinions about his or her qualities and abilities—a self-concept—by paying attention to how others react to them. Someone sporting a stable self-concept uses it to predict the responses of others and to seek out consistent views, according to this model.

In the last several decades, an opposing body of research has indicated that people generally pursue praise, whether it matches what they really think about themselves or not. Some investigators now argue that happiness flourishes among those who embrace positive illusions about themselves and unflinchingly seek such opinions from others, while depression more often afflicts those who pursue a relatively balanced mix of kind and critical comments.

In contrast, Swann's research suggests that many depressed people seek out a steady stream of disapproving comments from loved ones and close friends.

"A fundamental need for psychological coherence compels [depressed individuals] to confirm their negative self-concept and seek out information that makes sense in light of their past experiences," Swann argues.

He offers the example of a man who deems himself dull-witted but overhears his wife characterize him as brilliant. An initial glow of pride recedes as the man realizes the laudatory remark challenges a long-standing belief about his intelligence. If his wife is right, what does he really know about himself? To avoid this psychological limbo, he presents his intellectual shortcomings in various ways

so that his wife knows what to expect of him and the relationship can proceed harmoniously. If she fails to pick up on his cues, the relationship may founder.

**S**everal tests of self-verification theory appear in the May *JOURNAL OF ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY*. In one experiment, Swann and his co-workers compared 20 college students who appraised themselves negatively and reported mild levels of depression with 30 nondepressed students who cited positive feelings about themselves. Participants read either positive or negative comments about themselves, ostensibly written by an "evaluator" but actually composed beforehand by the investigators. Students then chose whether to talk with the evaluator or to enter another, unrelated experiment.

Most nondepressed students endorsed an encounter with the positive evaluator but preferred a different experiment when the evaluation was unfavorable. However, most mildly depressed volunteers chose to interact with the negative evaluator and opted for another experiment following a favorable evaluation.

In a second experiment, a researcher interviewed 47 nondepressed and 26 mildly depressed students. As an added twist, all students accepted for the study had completed a questionnaire about their specific abilities and had rated themselves as either artistic but not athletic, or vice versa. Each participant then read two personality evaluations, supposedly written by mental-health clinicians who had listened to the interviews, but again rigged by the investigators. Some people received two positive evaluations, others two negative evaluations.

At that point, students rated how much they wanted feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of their athletic and artistic abilities, ostensibly provided by a

third "clinician" who based his views on their "verbal style."

Most nondepressed students who received unfavorable evaluations wanted to avoid any feedback about their limitations, while the mildly depressed group reported a strong desire to hear about both their athletic and artistic limitations following positive comments.

When evaluations matched self-concepts, students in both groups favored positive over negative feedback, but only to a moderate extent.

The bottom line: Students generally worked to shore up entrenched negative or positive views about themselves when experimenters challenged those views, Swann argues.

A report by Swann and two co-workers in the November 1989 *JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY* further illustrates this point. College students filled out questionnaires on general feelings of self-esteem as well as self-perceived intelligence, physical attractiveness, athletic ability, social skills, and aptitude for art and music. Measures of overall self-esteem closely parallel global measures of self-concept; Swann uses the terms interchangeably.

Whereas people with low overall self-esteem sought an unfavorable analysis of their limitations when given the chance, they sought favorable information about their strengths. The same pattern applied to students with high self-esteem, who of course had far fewer self-reported limitations available for negative feedback.

Instead of exuding masochistic joy when slighted by others, people with negative self-views pursue "the bitter truth" even though it makes them unhappy, Swann notes.

**G**iven time for reflection, the need to confirm one's negative self-concept apparently overrides the yearning for praise, according to another study directed by Swann. When purposely distracted or not given the opportunity to deliberate fully, people with low self-regard reported little desire to meet someone who had appraised them negatively. When allowed to think their decision through, however, the same participants reversed their earlier choices and overwhelmingly endorsed meeting critical evaluators, Swann's group reports in the July 1990 *JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY*.

The desire for self-verification also influences preferences for marriage partners, the Texas psychologist asserts. His research team recruited 95 married couples at a horse ranch and a shopping mall. Participants completed measures of self-concept and commitment to their spouses, and rated the intellect and other attributes of their partners.

People with positive self-concepts re-

ported more commitment to spouses who evaluated them favorably than to spouses who thought poorly of them. For those with negative self-concepts, the more unfavorably their spouses described them, the more commitment they evidenced.

Other researchers have typically examined participants' reactions to the evaluations of strangers in a laboratory, a strategy that usually evokes a broad preference for positive feedback, Swann and his associates conclude in the March *PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE*. But remarks that reverberate pleasantly when served up by a stranger may strike a disturbing chord when delivered by someone who should know the participant well, they maintain.

**S**ome researchers, particularly those who study depression, object to Swann's conclusions.

On close examination, several of Swann's studies show a tendency among people with depression or negative self-concepts to prefer a fairly even mix of favorable and unfavorable appraisals, whereas nondepressed people with positive self-concepts show a clear bias toward favorable feedback, asserts Lauren B. Alloy, a psychologist at Temple University in Philadelphia.

Rather than supporting self-verification theory, Swann's findings seem to buttress evidence suggesting that the absence of a positive bias — not an active seeking out of negative comments — confers vulnerability to depression, contends Alloy. For example, people who optimistically believe they have considerable control over uncontrollable situations become less discouraged and depressed after experiencing stressful events in their lives than do realists, who lack an "illusion of control," conclude Alloy and psychologist Caroline M. Clements of Chicago Medical School in the May *JOURNAL OF ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY*.

Even if people with tattered self-concepts take a liking to negative feedback, there are competing explanations for this tendency, Alloy says. For example, depressed persons may try to reduce the odds of rejection by selecting partners with low expectations of them, or depressed persons may expect negative appraisals and thus court negative feedback in order to understand why others view them poorly.

Cognitive therapists, who seek to change the negative attitudes and behavior associated with depression, often find that depressed clients seek no feedback at all from others, Alloy points out. When depressed individuals learn to pursue social feedback, they often receive unexpectedly positive comments, she says.

A negative view of the self may lead depressed people to behave in socially inappropriate ways that cause rejection

by others, notes psychiatrist Aaron T. Beck of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Beck, who developed cognitive therapy in the 1960s, sees no need to assume that an inner need to certify low self-esteem promotes depression.

Swann's theory radiates a "surface plausibility," but his data neither support nor refute the concept of self-verification, argues psychologist Jill M. Hooley of Harvard University. Further work must test self-verification predictions directly against those of other models of depression, she contends.

**D**epression stems from a mix of biological and psychological influences that eludes any single theory, Swann acknowledges. But self-verification strivings seem to play an important role, he says. In fact, even people with severe depression show a strong tendency to favor negative over positive feedback from others, according to an unpublished study directed by Swann.

Psychotherapists attempting to treat depression and chronically low self-esteem can also benefit from addressing the self-verification needs of such clients, Swann says. Well-intentioned positive feedback of the "I'm okay, you're okay" variety may backfire, he maintains; the client will continually search for new self-perceived flaws to present to the therapist and will probably return home to a spouse who nullifies the therapist's encouraging words.

"For people with low self-esteem, negative feedback in a receptive context may represent a necessary building block in the construction of a better life," Swann asserts. Phrased another way, the bitter truth can sometimes set you free.

Accurate negative feedback from a psychotherapist indeed helps boost the spirits of clients with low self-esteem, report psychologists Stephen Finn and Mary Tonsager, both at the University of Texas at Austin, in an article accepted for publication in the *JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT*. Participants attending a counseling session first filled out an extensive personality inventory. In some cases therapists used this information to provide negative feedback, such as "You're angry and lethargic" or "You have trouble thinking clearly."

Two weeks later, those who received negative feedback reported higher self-esteem and less distress than controls who endured no such comments. Self-verifying insights from a supportive therapist apparently helped clients come to grips with the nature of their problem and develop hope that they could improve their lot, Swann argues.

"Knowing who you are is the first step to psychological health," he remarks, with a nod to Ovid and Groucho. □