

The Character of Self-Enhancers

Implications for Organizations

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J.S. is an employee at a large accounting firm. He was hired on the basis of a college degree and an impressive interview. Relative to initial expectations, however, J.S. has turned out to be a controversial employee. Supervisor reports have been mixed, and J.S. has been the source of complaints from some, although not all, of his coworkers. The promotion committee trying to evaluate J.S. has access to multiple sources of information from a 360-degree performance appraisal, but the inconsistent evaluations are puzzling to committee members. All concerned agree that his cardinal trait is an exceptionally high level of self-confidence.

Positive thinking has been touted as the way to success at least as far back as Norman Vincent Peale (1952). With his series of best-selling books, Peale convinced millions of the benefits of a positive attitude toward oneself. Bookstores—their business sections in particular—continue to offer large numbers of similar books encouraging people to promote their virtues and ignore their self-doubts. The core message of these books—to err on the positive side in evaluating oneself—has become a canon of contemporary American life. Promised benefits range from financial triumphs to personal bliss to successful personal relationships.

But what does the empirical literature have to say about self-enhancement? How widespread are such tendencies? Is self-enhancement as uniformly beneficial as the authors of self-help books would have people believe? Of particular concern in this chapter is the question of whether organizations should be hiring and promoting self-enhancing individuals such as J.S.

A body of research has accumulated to the point that this chapter can offer some answers to these questions. On the whole, it appears that people do tend to hold overly positive views of themselves. This self-enhancing tendency has been empirically established for people's perceptions of their task performance,

their explanations for success and failure, and their general beliefs about their abilities. As this chapter shows, self-enhancement can have benefits, but it also can lead to a variety of negative consequences.

Issues surrounding self-enhancement clearly are relevant to organizations, where skills and abilities are routinely scrutinized and performance has important implications for advancement and compensation. The literature on self-enhancement in organizations covers a wide variety of complex issues, many of which have been reviewed elsewhere (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986; Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995; Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987). However, little attention has been paid to individual differences in self-enhancement (Atwater & Yammarino, 1997). We attempt to remedy this deficit by investigating the underlying character of the self-enhancing individual. We combine recent research from the social–personality literature with the small existing body of research in the organization literature (for a review, see Atwater & Yammarino, 1997). J.S., the hypothetical self-enhancer introduced earlier, appears as an example throughout the chapter.

The chapter is structured around three basic issues concerning self-enhancement bias and its relevance to organizational issues.¹ First, we discuss the nature of the self-enhancement process. We describe several psychological mechanisms presumed to underlie the process and argue that self-enhancement is not a universal phenomenon, as some psychologists have claimed (Taylor, 1989). Second, we review the literature on individual differences in self-enhancement and identify several variants, including impression management and self-deceptive enhancement and denial. We argue that the underlying personality of the self-enhancer (and self-deceptive enhancement in particular) is equivalent to so-called “normal narcissism”—a character syndrome that includes grandiosity, entitlement, defensiveness, and a willingness to manipulate others. Third, we discuss whether it is adaptive to self-enhance, that is, whether self-enhancers make good employees. We argue that self-enhancement is best viewed as a trait with mixed blessings, entailing both costs and benefits to the individual and to the organization.

What Is Self-Enhancement?

Taylor and Brown (1988) organized the self-enhancement literature into three categories: (a) unrealistically positive views of the self, (b) illusions of control, and (c) unrealistic optimism. Related effects include false consensus and biased attributions. In this chapter, we focus on the first category, which has received

¹For more general reviews of research on the self, see Baumeister (1998), Brown (1998), and Robins, Norem, and Cheek (1999).

the greatest attention. We use the term *self-enhancement* to refer to the tendency to describe oneself in overly positive terms.

One source of evidence for self-enhancement is a set of studies that showed that individuals evaluate themselves more positively than they evaluate others. For example, 89% of respondents in a large survey rated themselves more positively than they rated others (Brown, 1998, p. 62). The same pattern appeared in research comparing self-ratings on other evaluative dimensions (e.g., personality, intelligence, ethics, driving ability). A second source of evidence for self-enhancement bias is a set of studies that showed that self-ratings are more positive than a credible criterion (Kenny, 1994; Robins & John, 1997b). Such criteria include objective tests (e.g., IQ tests) and knowledgeable informants (e.g., peers, spouses, expert raters). Regardless of the criterion, people's evaluations of themselves tend to be biased in the positive direction.

In work settings, as in other areas of everyday life, there is ample support for the proposition that people's self-impressions are inflated by a general tendency to self-enhance (Ashford, 1989; Hoffman, 1923; Podsakoff & Organ, 1986; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Not surprisingly, most employees tend to think they are superior to the average employee in their organization and tend to see themselves more positively than appraisals of them from other sources (for reviews, see Mabe & West, 1982; Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Thus, for our hypothetical example, we would expect J.S.'s ratings of his own performance to be more positive than his ratings of others or ratings of his performance by his subordinates, peers, and supervisors.

Mechanisms for Self-Enhancement

Two classes of explanations have been advanced in the social and personality psychology literatures to explain these self-enhancement biases: (a) cognitive explanations, which focus on the information available to the self, prior beliefs and expectancies, and processes of attention, encoding, and retrieval of self-relevant information, and (2) motivational or affective explanations, which focus on the motive to maintain and enhance self-esteem, the desire to reduce negative affect and increase positive affect, and self-presentational concerns such as the need for social approval.

Purely cognitive explanations for self-serving biases have been offered since the cognitive revolution began. One notion is that positive self-relevant information tends to be more available than negative self-relevant information (Miller & Ross, 1975). Another explanation is that self-serving biases are one of a set of mechanisms that act to preserve cognitive structures (Greenwald, 1980). More recently, Paulhus and Levitt (1986) proposed the concept of "automatic egotism." They suggested that self-enhancement is automatized through repetition of positive self-descriptions and accentuated under high cognitive load (Paulhus, 1993).

A variety of motivational theories also have been advanced. These theories typically assume that self-enhancement stems from a general motive to gain and maintain high self-esteem (e.g., Brown, 1998; Tesser, 1988). That is, perceiving oneself positively is one way to increase self-esteem. From this perspective, self-enhancement may be viewed simply as a side effect of the self-esteem maintenance.

Self-presentational theories suggest that self-enhancement involves conscious strategies to impress others, primarily for instrumental purposes (e.g., Jones & Pittman, 1982; Schlenker, 1980; Snyder, 1987). According to these theories, a valued goal such as sex, affection, or financial gain is achieved by tailoring one's behavior to suit the specific situation and audience.

Evolutionary psychologists have argued that, whatever the operative mechanisms, self-enhancement is likely to have been adaptive during some key period of selective advantage (Lockard & Paulhus, 1988). From a traditional evolutionary perspective, to the extent that a mechanism is of central importance to human adaptation (e.g., the capacity to love, to feel fear, and to affiliate with others), it should be a ubiquitous part of human nature. More recent thinking among evolutionary psychologists, however, has suggested that individual differences in personality can be explained in terms of dimorphisms or frequency-dependent selection (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993). This notion of multiple adaptive niches could be used to explain individual differences in self-enhancement (Robins, Norem, & Cheek, 1999).

Is Self-Enhancement Universal?

Self-enhancement undoubtedly is more common than self-effacement. In a meta-analysis of the industrial and organizational (I/O) psychology literature, 15 of 22 studies showed a significant tendency toward self-enhancement (Mabe & West, 1982). However, 3 of those studies showed a significant self-effacement effect, suggesting that self-enhancement is far from universal. The mean self-enhancement effect typically is small to moderate in magnitude (John & Robins, 1994; Mabe & West, 1982). One possible explanation is that extremely distorted self-perceptions are rare and that most people show only mild levels of self-enhancement bias (e.g., Taylor & Armor, 1996). Another possibility is the existence of substantial individual differences in both the magnitude and direction of the effect. That is, some people have self-views that are dramatically exaggerated, some have only mild illusions, and others have accurate or even overly negative self-views. This possibility is difficult to evaluate, however, because most studies report only aggregate statistics about the general tendency within the sample.

Contrary to the assumption of universality, the few studies that have re-

ported the percentages of self-enhancing individuals have suggested that self-enhancers are in the minority. For example, John and Robins (1994) found that only 32% of participants clearly overestimated their performance in a 6-person group-interaction task, whereas 53% were relatively accurate and 15% actually underestimated their performance. Many individuals do not maintain positive illusions about themselves, and a not insignificant number actually see themselves more negatively than others see them. Similar percentages were reported by Paulhus (1998a). In organizational studies, the proportions of self-enhancers have been reported to be even smaller, and self-enhancers may not exceed self-effacers (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992), presumably because employees expect that their self-evaluations will be compared with supervisors' ratings (Mabe & West, 1982). Other factors minimizing the observed degree of self-enhancement include (a) the rater's previous experience with self-evaluation, (b) instructions guaranteeing anonymity of the self-evaluation, and (c) self-evaluation instructions emphasizing comparison with others (Mabe & West, 1982).

Thus, the research literature suggests that some people self-enhance, some people are accurate, and some people self-efface. However, a number of questions remain to be considered: Are these differences systematic and psychologically meaningful? That is, should individual differences in self-enhancement be thought of as traitlike? If so, what is the psychological nature of the trait? That is, how should individual differences in self-enhancement be conceptualized and measured?

Individual Differences in Self-Enhancement

There is consensus among supervisors and coworkers that J.S. is a chronic self-promoter. Although this behavior is consistent across situations, it is difficult to tell whether J.S. actually believes his own inflated self-presentations. One distinct possibility is that his behavior is purposeful, that J.S. strategically exaggerates his accomplishments to make a positive impression on his supervisors. Another possibility is that J.S. actually believes his self-aggrandizing statements—that is, he lacks insight into his actual abilities and achievements.

To the extent that self-enhancing tendencies are internalized and chronic, deeper personality structures are implicated. There are a number of personality traits that may underlie observed individual differences in self-enhancement.

Personality Measures of Self-Enhancement

The two possible interpretations of J.S.'s character are referred to in the assessment literature as *impression management* and *self-deception* (e.g., Paulhus, 1984).

Impression management refers to conscious strategies tailored to make a positive impression on others, whereas *self-deception* refers to unconscious, narcissistic self-promotion. In the latter case, an individual really believes his or her own exaggerations. Note that both tendencies can be construed as personality traits (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964; Paulhus, 1986). Research has shown that trait self-enhancement can take both forms and that observed differences derive, in part, from personality differences.

Impression Management

The conceptualization of impression management as a personality variable has varied from a need for approval (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964) to an ability to monitor demands from the social environment (Snyder, 1974). In either case, the result is habitual self-promotion whenever a situation indicates some advantage to positive self-presentation.

Most research on impression management has used one of two self-report measures of this construct. The Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder, 1974) has been used in numerous studies (see Snyder, 1987, for a review). Scale items involve self-reported tendencies to be aware of and engage in impression management (e.g., "At parties and social gatherings, I attempt to do or say things that others will like."). Although popular, this measure has been seriously criticized (Briggs & Cheek, 1988; John, Cheek, & Klohnen, 1996). The most up-to-date review (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000) retains some aspects of the original construct and discards others. Another measure, the Impression Management (IM) scale, is a subscale of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1991, 1998b). Its rationale is that the items are so overt and clear-cut that exaggeratedly high scores must be due to conscious self-presentation (e.g., "I don't gossip about other people's business."). Its reliability and validity have been well documented (Paulhus, 1984, 1991, 1998b). Of particular interest is the evidence for its usefulness in organizational contexts (e.g., Booth-Kewley, Edwards, & Rosenfeld, 1992; Rosse, Stecher, Miller, & Levin, 1998).

The two measures appear to serve different purposes: The Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder, 1974) is useful for identifying in advance those individuals who are likely to engage in impression management behaviors (e.g., Rowatt, Cunningham, & Druen, 1998). In contrast, the Impression Management scale (Paulhus, 1984, 1991, 1998b) identifies which individuals are engaging in impression management while they are completing a set of self-report questionnaires (Paulhus, Bruce, & Trapnell, 1995).

Assessments of the value of impression management scales in organizational settings clearly depend on the commentator. Encouraging perspectives have been presented by Rosenfeld, Giacalone, and Riordan (1995); Holden and Hibbs

(1995); and Hough (1998). More critical commentaries may be found in Nicholson and Hogan (1990) and Ones, Viswesvaran, and Reiss (1996).

Self-Deception and Narcissism

Given the availability of reviews of the impression management literature, the focus of this chapter is the relatively neglected concept of self-deception (Paulhus, 1984). The concept of self-enhancement bias reflects at least some degree of narcissistic self-deception or lack of self-insight.

Much of the research on self-deception has relied on the Self-Deceptive Enhancement (SDE) scale, which is included (along with the IM scale) in the BIDR (Paulhus, 1991, 1998b). A representative SDE scale item is "My first impressions about people are always right." Studies of the underlying personality syndrome suggest a dogmatic overconfidence. High scores on the SDE scale are predictive of overclaiming, hindsight bias, and overly positive self-perceptions (e.g., Hoorens, 1995; Paulhus, 1991, 1998a, 1998b; Robinson & Ryff, 1999). Of particular interest for this chapter is research showing that high SDE scores are indicative of high expectations but disappointing performance (Johnson, 1995).

A complementary construct, self-deceptive denial, derives from work by Sackeim and Gur (1978). This construct concerns the tendency to exaggerate moral and interpersonal aspects of one's character by denying any socially deviant behavior. Its measure, the Self-Deceptive Denial (SDD) scale, was developed more recently and, therefore, has not been as well-researched as the SDE scale (Paulhus & Reid, 1991). Scale items include "I rarely have sexual fantasies" and "I have never felt like I wanted to kill someone." Extreme scores suggest a sanctimonious character that may have interesting consequences for workplace behaviors.

The enhancement and denial forms of individual differences in self-deception have been compared at length by Paulhus and John (1998). They applied the terms *egoistic bias* and *moralistic bias* and showed that each bias is linked to a corresponding set of values and traits. Thus, the emergence of these particular self-deceptive biases is linked to the fact that human social interactions can be simplified into two fundamental forms of social interaction referred to as *agency* and *communion* (Wiggins, 1991) or "getting ahead" and "getting along" (Hogan, 1983). In short, agentic self-enhancers exaggerate how competent and successful they are, whereas communal self-enhancers exaggerate how dutiful and proper they are (Paulhus & John, 1998).

As a personality construct, self-deceptive enhancement is reminiscent of the construct of narcissism. The history of narcissism as a clinical syndrome stretches back to psychoanalysis (Freud, 1914/1953). Among other things, narcissistic individuals are assumed to hold unrealistically positive beliefs about

their abilities and achievements (e.g., Millon, 1990; Westen, 1990).² This collection of attributes is now placed in the category of personality disorders and is described in the standard psychiatric manual, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Specified diagnostic criteria include a grandiose sense of self-importance; a tendency to exaggerate achievements and talents and an expectation to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements; and fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, and beauty.

More recently, narcissism has been studied as a normal personality dimension. Rather than an all-or-none clinical syndrome, narcissism is now considered to vary in degree among ordinary people. This perspective was first advanced by Leary (1957), but it entered the research literature with work by Raskin and his colleagues (Raskin & Hall, 1979; Raskin & Terry, 1998). The character of normal narcissism has been described as similar although not identical to the clinical version (e.g., Emmons, 1987). Some clarification of its meaning has been obtained by mapping it onto standard measures of personality. Normal narcissism has been found to fall into the high-dominance/low-nurturance quadrant of the interpersonal circumplex (Wiggins & Pincus, 1994). In terms of the Five-Factor Model of personality (John & Srivastava, 1999), narcissism correlates positively with Extraversion and negatively with Agreeableness (Wiggins & Pincus, 1994). As for life goals, narcissistic individuals tend to have long-term aspirations related to being successful and getting ahead in life rather than helping the community and getting along with others (Roberts & Robins, 2000). However, these standard dimensions do not seem to capture the concept completely.

Narcissism has been assessed with a number of instruments. For example, John and Robins (1994) showed convergence across four different measures of narcissism: (a) the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979, 1981); (b) the California Psychological Inventory Narcissism Scale (Wink & Gough, 1990); (c) observer ratings based on the *DSM-IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) diagnostic criteria; and (d) a narcissistic profile scored from consensual observer assessments using the California Adult Q-Set (Wink, 1992). Another set of measures, however, fall on an independent factor of narcissism, possibly one linked more closely to clinical narcissism. These other measures include the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory Narcissism scale (Wink & Gough, 1990), the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (Hendin & Cheek, 1997), and the Morey Narcissism Scale (Morey & Glutting, 1994). However, the bulk of the empirical work on narcissism has been conducted with the NPI.

²In contrast to individuals with high self-esteem, narcissistic individuals feel entitled to manipulate others in a self-serving manner, and they describe themselves as special, extraordinary people who are particularly deserving of attention and rewards.

Over the past 10 years, there has been a surge of interest in narcissistic tendencies, and active research has clarified the nature of normal narcissism. Much of this research has focused on understanding the personality processes associated with narcissistic tendencies and, in particular, the way narcissistic individuals respond to threats to their self-worth. This research has shown that, when threatened, relatively narcissistic individuals perceive themselves more positively than is justified (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994; John & Robins, 1994; Paulhus, 1998a), denigrate others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993), engage in arrogant social behaviors (Paulhus, 1998a), assign self-serving attributions for their behavior (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998), and react with hostility toward others (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). Amazingly, their inflated self-perceptions cannot be altered even when these individuals are confronted with videotaped recordings of their actual performance on a task (Robins & John, 1997a).

Thus, both self-deceptive enhancement and narcissism help provide a psychological portrait of the self-enhancing individual. It is important to note that the primary measure of narcissism—the NPI—and the primary measure of self-deceptive enhancement—the SDE—converge empirically as well as conceptually. When disattenuated for measurement error, correlations between the two measures approach unity (McHoskey, Worzel, & Szyarto, 1998; Paulhus, 1998a). Moreover, they show very similar correlations with relevant external criteria (Paulhus, 1998a). In Paulhus and John's (1998) terminology, *egoistic bias* subsumes the common elements of self-deceptive enhancement, normal narcissism, and agentic bias (Paulhus & John, 1998; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991a, 1991b; Robins & John, 1997a).

Criterion-Based Discrepancy Measures of Self-Enhancement

Measures of self-deception enhancement and narcissism tap into personality constructs that are assumed to reflect distorted self-views, but they are not direct operationalizations of those distortions. An alternative approach compares self-evaluations to some external criterion and thus more directly gauges accuracy. One difficulty with this approach, however, is the question of how to operationalize reality. Unfortunately, there are no absolute, perfectly objective measures of an individual's traits, capabilities, needs, and so on. This "criterion problem," as it is called, is well known in social–personality, and I/O psychology.

Some studies of self-enhancement have attempted to circumvent the criterion problem by inferring bias from apparent intrapsychic inconsistencies in individuals' judgments. For example, several studies have shown that individuals' self-ratings are, on average, more positive than their ratings of a hypothetical "average other" (e.g., Brown, 1986). This finding has been widely interpreted as evidence of self-enhancement bias because, according to

researchers, it is logically impossible for the majority of people to be better than average. However, this approach has been criticized on the grounds that no indicator of external reality is involved (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; John & Robins, 1994). The same criticism applies to Krueger's (1998) measure of self-enhancement bias, which is based on the correlation between an individual's self-ascribed traits and his or her ratings of the desirability of those traits, controlling for the group average desirability of those traits. A more convincing index of self-enhancement should involve an explicit standard for gauging bias.

For the most part, researchers interested in self-enhancement bias have used two types of external criteria: (a) operational criteria and (b) social consensus criteria. In some contexts, clear-cut *operational criteria* are available. For example, the number of words spoken in a conversation provides an unambiguous criterion for self-ratings of talkativeness. Another example is when there is a direct measure of task performance (e.g., Beyer & Bowden, 1997; Gosling, John, Craik, & Robins, 1998; Robins & John, 1997b) or intelligence (e.g., Paulhus & Lysy, 1995; Gabriel et al., 1994). In organizational settings, operational criteria may include the number of units sold as a criterion for sales performance and the numbers of customer complaints and compliments as a criterion for customer service ability. The advantage of operational criteria is that they are objectively measured; the disadvantages are that they may not capture the entire construct of interest and they are not available for many rating dimensions.

For situations in which there are no operational criteria available, *social consensus ratings* may serve as a useful means to gauge the accuracy of self-evaluations. Judgments by informed observers (e.g., friends, spouses, coworkers, psychologists) are widely used to evaluate the validity of self-reports in social-personality, I/O, developmental, and clinical psychology (Funder, 1995; Kenny, 1994; McCrae & Costa, 1989).

Note that any single accuracy criterion can be criticized. For example, observer ratings suffer from the criticism that different types of observers differ in perspective (Campbell & Fehr, 1990). There also is evidence that observers are biased against self-enhancing individuals and therefore give them inappropriately negative ratings (Bass & Yammarino, 1991). This "observer harshness" effect may be partially responsible for the observed self-other discrepancy (John & Robins, 1994). If possible, therefore, we recommend the use of multiple criteria to examine self-enhancement bias in evaluations of performance in a group-discussion task.

An example is the study by Robins and John (1997a). They used a leaderless group-discussion task that often is used in managerial assessment programs (e.g., Chatman, Caldwell, & O'Reilly, 1999). Participants were assigned to a decision-making group in which they presented, debated, and then reached consensus about the relative strengths and weaknesses of six employees nominated for a merit bonus. In this simulated compensation committee meeting,

participants competed for a fixed amount of money to be distributed by group consensus. After the group discussion, participants evaluated their performance relative to other group members. Three criteria were used to examine self-enhancement bias: two social consensus criteria (performance ratings by the other task participants and by psychologists who observed the interaction) and an operational criterion (how much money each participant received for the employee he or she was representing at the compensation committee meeting). The convergence of findings across all three criteria provided more powerful evidence about accuracy and bias than any single criterion.

Two other studies are worth noting because they also demonstrated consistency across discrepancy measures. Paulhus (1998a) found convergence between (a) self-acquaintance discrepancy measures collected on a pretest and (b) self-other discrepancy measures collected after seven meetings with strangers. Colvin et al. (1995) collected discrepancy measures on the same participants before and after a 7-year interval and found substantial stability in scores. In summary, discrepancy scores themselves behave in a traitlike fashion by showing consistency across time and situations.

Once a relevant criterion has been identified and measured, an additional thorny methodological issue remains—how to index the discrepancy between the self-evaluation and the criterion. The most common procedure is to compute a simple difference score; that is, to subtract the criterion measure from the self-evaluation (this procedure, of course, requires that both measures be on the same metric). A second procedure involves computing a residualized difference score (Colvin et al., 1995; John & Robins, 1994; Paulhus, 1998a). Specifically, the self-evaluation is regressed onto the criterion measure (i.e., the criterion measure is used to predict the self-evaluation) and the residual scores are retained. These residuals represent the magnitude and direction of bias in the self-evaluation relative to the criterion. Finally, if the data were collected using a round-robin design (i.e., everyone rates everyone else), Kenny's (1994) Social Relations Model provides a third approach. Specifically, it is possible to identify the unique variance in the self-evaluation that is not related to others' ratings of the self (*target variance* in Kenny's terminology) or to the self's general tendency to see others positively versus negatively (*perceiver variance* in Kenny's terminology; Kwan, Bond, Kenny, John, & Robins, 2001). This "uniqueness" component of self-ratings can be interpreted as a measure of self-enhancement bias that is independent of reality (as defined by others' ratings) and unaffected by an individual's general rating style (e.g., to see everyone, including the self, positively).

Which of these methods is best? Despite decades of debate, no clear consensus has emerged regarding which is the best way to assess discrepancies. Much of the debate has revolved around statistical theory and the results of Monte Carlo simulations. In our view, research that systematically compares the

various methods using real data sets is needed. It may turn out that each method is optimal for a different set of conditions. In fact, in the most comprehensive analysis to date, Zumbo (1999) reached this conclusion. He also provided a useful flowchart for determining, based on a set of sample parameters (e.g., the variances, reliabilities, and intercorrelations of the self and criterion measures), whether a difference score or a residual score is preferable in a particular situation.

Convergence Between Personality and Criterion-Based Discrepancy Approaches

The conclusion that self-enhancement is traitlike requires evidence of convergence across independent measures of self-enhancement, in particular between the two personality scales (i.e., the SDE and NPI) and direct criterion-based measures of bias. However, only a handful of relevant studies have been conducted.

We reviewed the social–personality and I/O psychology literatures and identified relevant studies using the following criteria: (a) the study compared self-evaluations with an explicit external criterion; (b) self-enhancement bias was operationalized by the discrepancy between an individual's self-evaluation and the criterion; (c) self-enhancement bias was correlated with a measure of narcissism; and (d) the study was published in a peer-reviewed journal. Only seven studies met all of these criteria. A summary of these studies is presented in Table 9.1.

In every study (except Colvin et al., 1995), the basic self-enhancement effect was observed at the mean level. More important for the arguments in this chapter, however, the relation between narcissism and self-enhancement bias held across a wide range of observational contexts and for a wide range of dimensions (see the last column of Table 9.1). The highly replicable link with narcissism demonstrates that individual variability in self-enhancement tendencies is not simply due to random fluctuations, but rather is related to a theoretically relevant personality characteristic. The magnitude of the narcissism effect varied somewhat across studies (range = $-.13$ – $.54$), but it tended to be moderate in size (median $r = .27$). Perhaps the most striking finding from this review is the wide range of criteria that have been used to establish self-enhancement and its relation to narcissism, including ratings by other participants in the same interaction as the target, ratings by close friends, ratings by psychologists, codings of videotaped behaviors, objective task outcomes, academic outcomes, and standardized tests. Although each criterion is imperfect and poses its own set of interpretational problems, collectively these studies bolster the contention that narcissistic individuals have inflated views of themselves relative to some standard of what they are really like. This review also

demonstrated that this effect holds in a variety of observational contexts, both in the laboratory and the real world. Finally, the review revealed the wide range of dimensions on which a self-enhancement bias exists: Narcissistic individuals have inflated views of themselves regardless of whether they are evaluating their task performance, personality traits, expected academic performance, behavioral acts, intelligence, or physical attractiveness. The link with narcissism provides clues about the psychological factors underlying self-enhancement bias. Specifically, it adds to the growing evidence that self-enhancement bias provides a mechanism for regulating self-esteem in response to the threat of failure.

The narcissistic interpretation of self-enhancing individuals also suggests that positive illusions about the self may rest on a foundation of fragile self-esteem (e.g., Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; John & Robins, 1994; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991b; Robins & John, 1997b). Self-enhancing individuals may be likely to regularly seek affirmation of their positive self-views (e.g., Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Self-worth may become contingent on each performance, thus making self-enhancers likely to experience greater threats to their self-worth, even with minor tasks (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993). Consistent with this view, self-enhancers tend to show higher levels of ego involvement, that is, they care more about performing well than non-self-enhancers (Robins & Beer, 2001). This suggests that narcissistic self-aggrandizement is particularly likely to occur in organizational contexts, in which performance goals are emphasized and threats to self-worth are likely.

Summary

We have reviewed the literature on the trait aspects of self-enhancement and distinguished its two primary variants: (a) impression management and (b) self-deceptive enhancement. The character underlying self-deceptive enhancement appears equivalent to so-called "normal narcissism." Although not pathological, the character syndrome includes grandiosity, entitlement, defensiveness, and willingness to manipulate others. A review of the research revealed that personality measures of self-enhancement converge with measures of discrepancy between self-ratings and criterion measures (e.g., observer ratings or test scores). On the basis of this research, we conclude that self-enhancement bias is best conceptualized as a stable disposition reflecting the operation of narcissistic personality processes.

To say that self-enhancement is traitlike does not imply that it manifests itself independently of the situational context.³ In fact, self-enhancement bias can be assumed to be particularly pronounced in some contexts and virtually

³We differ in this respect from Taylor and Armor (1996), who argue that self-enhancement cannot be a trait because it is influenced by situational factors.

TABLE 9.1
Studies of Self-Enhancement Bias

STUDY	PARTICIPANTS	OBSERVATIONAL CONTEXT	JUDGMENT DIMENSION	CRITERION	SELF-ENHANCEMENT EFFECT (<i>d</i>)	CORRELATION WITH NARCISSISM (MEASURE)
John & Robins (1994)	102 MBA students	40-min group interaction	Task performance	11 psychologists	.18	.44 (composite)
Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee (1994)	146 college students	Naturalistic	Task performance Intelligence Physical attractiveness	5 task participants Intelligence test 2 people rated photographs of targets	.22 .85 ^a .33 ^a	.48 (composite) .29 ^a (NPI) .30 ^a (NPI)
Colvin, Block, & Funder (1995) Study 1	101 community members	Interviews and other assessment interactions	Personality dimensions	4 psychologists	-.51	.54 (CAQ)
Study 2	101 community members	Interviews and other assessment interactions	Personality dimensions	6 psychologists	.42	.53 (CAQ)
Study 3	140 college students	Naturalistic (peer group)	Personality dimensions	2 close friends	-.06	—
Robins & John (1997a)	124 MBA and college students	40-min group interaction	Task performance	11 psychologists 3-5 task participants	.30 .33	.24 ^b (NPI) .27 ^b (NPI)
Gosling, John, Craik, & Robins (1998)	88 MBA students	40-min group interaction	Task-specific behaviors	Objective outcome 4 coders of videotaped interaction	.23 .43	.29 ^b (NPI) .27 (NPI)

Farwell & Wohlwend- Lloyd (1998)	Study 1	97 college students	Naturalistic (academic)	Predicted grades	Actual grades	.90	.22 (NPI)
	Study 2	97 college students	Naturalistic (academic)	Predicted grades	Actual grades	.08	.32 (8-item NPI)
Paulhus (1998a)	Study 1	124 college students	20-min group interaction (weekly over 7 weeks)	Task performance	3-4 task participants	.55	-.13 Week 1 (NPI) .33 Week 7 (NPI)
	Study 2	89 college students	20-min group interaction (weekly over 7 weeks)	Task performance	4-6 task participants	.39	.00 Week 1 (NPI) .30 Week 7 (NPI)
Robins & Beer (in press)	Study 1	360 college students	20-min group interaction	Task performance	4 task participants	.33	.13 (NPI)
	Study 2	498 college students	Naturalistic (academic)	Academic ability	Standardized tests and academic achievement	—	.30 (NPI)

Note. Self-enhancement effect = discrepancy (in standard score units) between self-ratings on dimension and criterion (Positive values indicate self-enhancement; negative values indicate self-effacement. In some cases, information needed to compute standardized self-enhancement effect was not provided in original article, and authors were contacted to obtain relevant values.); MBA = master of business administration; NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1979); composite = composite of 4 self- and observer measures of narcissism; CAG = Narcissism prototype score from California Adult Q-Set (Wink, 1992). ^aSample weighted average of effect sizes for men and women. ^bAverage effect size across 2 experimental conditions (normal; reversed perspective); — = no data.

absent in others. The question at issue is not whether the general tendency to self-enhance varies across contexts, but whether individual differences in the tendency are systematic and linked to psychologically meaningful constructs and outcomes. Self-enhancers may respond to an evaluative context by engaging in further self-promotion or by expressing hostility toward the evaluator. Those without the trait might respond with anxiety and disengagement or by working harder to maximize their chances of success. It is clear that these different ways of responding to the same situation are likely to have important implications for behavior in organizational contexts.

In summary, individual differences in self-enhancement reflect a deep-seated, albeit complex, facet of personality, not some sort of conditioned response to contextual factors. Nonetheless, we do not consider self-enhancement itself to be the trait, but rather a concrete manifestation of the trait. The source trait is a narcissistic self-evaluation with self-deceptive overtones. This point is particularly important because the underlying trait has other public manifestations (e.g., hostility, manipulation) that shape the choice of self-enhancing behaviors as well as observers' reactions to the self-enhancement.

Is Self-Enhancement Adaptive? Individual and Organizational Perspectives

The promotion committee evaluating J.S. had access to reports from two supervisors after J.S.'s 6-month probation period.

Supervisor 1: So far, J.S. has been a very successful employee. He possesses unwavering self-confidence and undaunted optimism and has unusually ambitious plans for future accomplishments. He showed no sign of the hesitation and dependence on others that typify most new employees. He seems to be at ease with prestigious new clients and engages them as equals. J.S. is highly likely to rise quickly up the corporate ladder.

Supervisor 2: So far, J.S. is a problematic employee. He presents himself as important and successful. Objective data (i.e., productivity figures) do not support these exaggerated claims. Furthermore, J.S. has alienated many of his coworkers, who complain about his unjustified arrogance, grandiosity, and sense of entitlement. Those working with him on a regular basis eventually recognized his manipulative tactics and lack of respect for their opinions. J.S. should be terminated.

Can this be the same J.S. the two supervisors are describing? Which is the real J.S.? According to the research described above, these apparently conflicting perspectives can, in fact, be reconciled within the character of the narcissistic self-enhancer.

The basic premise of this chapter is that individuals vary dramatically in

how accurately they evaluate their abilities: Some have highly inflated views of themselves, others are reasonably accurate, and others self-effacing. Who is likely to be the more successful and productive employee—the individual with overly positive self-perceptions or the one with an accurate self-view? Norman Vincent Peale clearly would say the former. In his book, *The Amazing Results of Positive Thinking*, Peale (1959) posed the following question: “Does positive thinking always work?” His answer was short but clear: “Of course it does.” (p. 28).

It has been only in the past 20 years or so that researchers have presented evidence supporting the value of positive thinking (e.g., Alloy & Abramson, 1979; Lewinsohn, Mischel, Chaplin, & Barton, 1980; Paulhus, 1986; Sackeim & Gur, 1978). This research has indicated that accurate self-appraisals might contribute to depression. In an integration of this literature, Taylor and Brown (1988) argued that positive illusions promote psychological adjustment as well as “higher motivation, greater persistence, more effective performance and ultimately, greater success” (p. 199). So influential was this work that a National Institute of Mental Health report (1995) on the state of behavioral science stated that there was considerable evidence for the psychological benefits of positive illusions.

However, others have warned about the dark side of self-enhancement (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Hogan, Raskin, & Fazzini, 1990). There is a substantial body of evidence supporting this side of the argument as well. In particular, the studies reviewed above have suggested that the personality substrate for trait self-enhancement is normal narcissism, an attribute usually conceptualized as more maladaptive than not (John & Robins, 1994). An extension of that work by Colvin et al. (1995) showed that a discrepancy index of self-enhancement predicted an array of negative traits over a 6-year interval. Paulhus (1998a) found that self-enhancers were rated negatively after a 7-week acquaintance period.

On the basis of the evidence available from the personality literature, we argue that a simple, global characterization of self-enhancers is not justified. Trait self-enhancement can be adaptive, maladaptive, or both, as implied in Paulhus’s (1998a) characterization of the outcome pattern as a mixed blessing. The positivity of the outcome depends on (a) the nature of the position, (b) the outcome measure, (c) the time frame of the outcome measure, and (d) whether the outcome is for the individual or the organization.

Nature of Position

Person–organization fit plays an important role in the success of a hiring decision (Chatman, 1989; Schneider, 1987; Furnham, chapter 10, this volume). Self-enhancers can be placed in a beneficial niche within many organizations. Recall

from Paulhus's (1998a) study that self-enhancers came across rather well in their first meeting with total strangers. They were considered to be interesting and confident and, because they spoke up and joked around, were valued for "breaking the ice." J.S., our hypothetical employee, was valued by Supervisor 1 for his ability to connect with new contacts—even those who might intimidate a nonnarcissist. Many organizations have positions that require such characteristics and behaviors and might benefit from hiring a self-enhancer. Another possible organizational niche for the self-enhancer is one in which a certain degree of self-absorption and a belief in the importance of one's own ideas is adaptive. For example, Feist (1994) found that highly eminent scientists were characterized as arrogant, hostile, and exploitative—all characteristics of the narcissistic personality.

In contrast, a position that requires building sustained relationships with subordinates and coworkers, especially relationships that depend on interpersonal trust, might not be appropriate for a self-enhancer. The self-enhancer's manipulation, intimidation, and entitlement tendencies can cause resentment and lead to breakdowns in cooperation (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993).

Nature of Outcome

An employee can be successful in one sense but unsuccessful in another. If success is defined in terms of subjective well being, then there is reason to believe that self-enhancement is beneficial (Taylor & Armor, 1996). Self-enhancers appear to be self-confident and happy. However, it seems reasonable to question the validity of happiness that is based on lack of insight and redefine this outcome as negative (Bass & Yammarino, 1991; Block & Thomas, 1955). However, it can be argued that a positive outlook sets the stage for positive attitudes and future ambitions (Robinson & Ryff, 1999). If defined in terms of interpersonal relations with coworkers, then self-enhancement is likely to be maladaptive (Atwater & Yammarino, 1997; Colvin et al., 1995; Paulhus, 1998a). More than other workers, self-enhancers are likely to show a divergence between getting ahead and getting along (Hogan, 1983).

Time Frame

Another significant factor is whether the outcome is assessed in the short term or long term. As described earlier, Paulhus (1998a) found that self-enhancers made positive first impressions but were actively disliked after 7 weeks of interactions. Together with other studies, this research suggests that employee evaluations restricted to a single time frame might be misleading. In a longer term study, Robins and Beer (2001) found that self-enhancing individuals experienced a boost in positive affect following a group-interaction task, but over the course of college, they declined in well-being and increasingly disengaged

from the academic context. The explanation may lie in other research that has shown that self-enhancers are unlikely to seek feedback, thus minimizing the possibility of self-improvement (Ashford, 1989; Fedor, Rensvold, & Adams, 1992). Even when clear feedback is provided, self-enhancers may not be capable of benefiting from it (Robins & John, 1997a).⁴ Finally, career derailment may be the ultimate fate of self-enhancers (McCall & Lombardo, 1983). For these reasons, self-enhancers may be successful in the short run but fail in the end.

Mixed Blessings for Organizations

Although they usually dovetail, there may be situations in which individual and organizational outcomes diverge. On the positive side, Paulhus (1998a) found that self-enhancers were appreciated in initial meetings because they initiated conversation and entertained others. In our example, one of J.S.'s supervisors agreed that such qualities were of great benefit to the organization.

Divergences are most likely when the self-enhancer succeeds to the detriment of coworkers and, possibly, to the organization as a whole. For example, in pushing for their self-interests regarding recognition and promotion, self-enhancers may handicap the productivity of other team members through derogation, hostility, and condescension (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Paulhus, 1998a). Supervisors also eventually may become frustrated at the failure of self-enhancers to seek or accept feedback, thus minimizing the possibility of self-improvement (Ashford, 1989). The egoistic concern of self-enhancers will benefit organizations only to the extent that their goals coincide with those of the organization. However, divergence is likely to occur at some point.

The case of Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple computers, is illustrative. During the early stages of the company's development, Jobs's self-promoting, self-aggrandizing style was conducive to launching breakthrough technology that had the potential to revolutionize an entire industry. Jobs's belief in his own genius may have helped to overcome skepticism about the whole enterprise. Despite these advantages, when the organization was up and running, Jobs's personality style created interpersonal problems and became a serious handicap to the organization. Apple employees reported that Jobs was a manipulative, hostile, and condescending manager. Ultimately, Jobs was relieved from his position (Deutschman, 2000). Thus, in the context of an organization, the costs and benefits of having a narcissistic CEO may depend on the stage of development of the organization.

In summary, the research literature on individual differences in self-

⁴Note that self-enhancers are not entirely disconnected from reality. Paulhus (2000) found that self-enhancers respond to accountability demands.

enhancement does not uniformly support either its construal by Taylor (1989) as a “positive illusion” or the traditional clinical construal of it as a maladaptive disorder. Rather, the studies to date suggest that positive illusions have both adaptive and maladaptive consequences: In other words, self-enhancement is best viewed as a mixed blessing (Paulhus, 1998a; Robins & Beer, in press).

Concluding Point

How bad is the prognosis for our hypothetical self-enhancer, J.S.? It is important to note that such individuals are not doomed to failure. In fact, a number of famous, successful narcissists readily come to mind. Pablo Picasso, the iconoclastic painter, has been described as a classic narcissist—arrogant, critical, interpersonally insensitive, defensive in response to criticism—in short, a megalomaniac with an overly grandiose view of himself. And, undoubtedly, a genius. The famous industrialist Armand Hammer is another example. He clearly thought quite highly of himself: “The brilliance of my mind can only be described as dazzling. Even I am impressed by it.” (Blumay & Edwards, 1992, p. 94). But narcissism is hardly limited to the intellectual domain. Supermodel Naomi Campbell became infamous for her arrogant statement, “I don’t get out of bed for less than \$10,000.” And sports icons such as Muhammad Ali seem to be so inspired by their own arrogance (“I am the greatest”) that it facilitates their success.

It is not clear, however, whether others can learn from these exceptionally successful narcissists. For these individuals, narcissism did not preclude success in their respective pursuits, and it may well have contributed to it. Just as compelling is the alternative view that these individuals possessed exceptional talents and that their narcissism developed as a consequence of unremitting praise from an admiring public.

Either way, the costs of narcissism in such prominent cases are not entirely clear. Successful narcissists often are in the spotlight and easily brought to mind, whereas the unsuccessful are not. For every successful narcissist, there likely are numerous “failed” narcissists, wallowing in obscurity and complaining about how their exceptional talents remain unrecognized by their supervisors and coworkers. Given the research cited above, the “rapid-rise-and-fall” trajectory is particularly likely. In fact, in their book on career derailment, McCall and Lombardo (1983) specifically cited excessive self-promotion as a key factor in the downfall of many initially successful executives.

Regardless of whether the self-enhancer proves to be an asset or a liability in the workplace, we believe that it is important that organizations identify and take such individuals into account. For better or for worse, organizations cannot afford to overlook them.

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