Watching Your Troubles Away: Television Viewing as a Stimulus for Subjective Self-Awareness

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Three studies explored the role of television viewing in eliciting subjective self-awareness and positive self-feelings. Study 1 assessed the effects of self-awareness manipulations via exposure to a neutral television program on actual-ideal discrepancies. Those who watched television showed significantly smaller self-discrepancies than those who did not, independent of mood. Study 2 demonstrated the ecological validity of this finding by replicating it with people watching television in their own homes. Study 3 investigated whether manipulations of self-feelings affected television watching. Results indicated that those who received failure feedback watched television longer than those in a control condition who likewise watched television longer than those who received success feedback. Television appears to be an effective stimulus to direct the focus away from oneself and to render people less aware of how they are falling short of their standards.

The history of thought in the psychology of dramatic experience can be traced as far back as Plato. As television and movies have become omnipresent, philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists continue to disagree on the reasons behind the popularity of this form of entertainment. The negative aspects of television viewing easily come to mind: It isolates viewers from other people in their lives, it consumes time that could otherwise have been spent more productively, and it makes the lifestyles of those who watch it more passive. But the reasons behind the enormous amounts of time spent in front of the television set in the average American family largely remain a mystery. The aim of this article is to explore how television viewing serves the important role of escaping the self (cf. Baumeister, 1991). There has been much research indicating that avoiding objective self-awareness is associated with relatively negative self-perceptions (e.g., S. Duval, Duval, & Neely, 1979; Ickes, Wicklund, & Ferris, 1973; Wicklund, 1975). It is the thesis of this article that dramatic experience, in particular, television viewing, is a significant stimulus for the state of subjective self-awareness and leads to positive self-views.

Why Do People Seek Dramatic Experience?

The ancient Romans knew the value of entertainment when they claimed that "bread and circuses" keep people content. It would not be difficult to make a case for this argument today. However, exactly what it is that draws people to Jerry Springer or the World Wrestling Federation is still, at best, a matter of contention among psychologists. Most theories of dramatic appreciation draw on the emotional consequences of viewing experiences, thus confining their conclusions to a set of genres entailing such consequences and ignoring a host of other genres such as news, music video, social gossip, and so forth, that equally occupy viewers' time and yet usually do not produce emotional reactions.

The oldest theory of entertainment value is often attributed to Aristotle's idea of catharsis (see McCauley,

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1998, for a review), which, simply stated, is that watching an emotion-eliciting event should help people purge their own built-up emotion and thus achieve purification. However, this view is challenged by a number of studies demonstrating, for example, that watching aggression increases, not decreases, aggression counter to the catharsis theory predictions (Zillmann & Johnson, 1973).

Another theory of dramatic experience ventures that it provides a socialization function (Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf, & Aust, 1986). Thus, participants viewing a horror film in the company of a member of the opposite sex enjoyed the film more when the companion acted in a stereotypical sex-appropriate manner, that is, women demonstrating distress and men demonstrating mastery (Zillmann et al., 1986). Therefore, this view maintains that dramatic experience may provide us with an opportunity to socialize by expressing the appropriate emotions. However, this view cannot explain why people seek dramatic experience alone.

Zillmann (1988) also maintains that entertainment serves to help manage mood. According to this theory, individuals seek to maintain good moods and alleviate bad moods by seeking appropriate stimuli in the entertainment media available to them. This hedonic theory predicts that individuals in aversive states will seek stimulation to alter their mood and that people in states of gratification will seek the least engaging stimulation so as to perpetuate their current state. However, this model fails to explain why people would seek forms of entertainment that are neither exciting nor alleviating. Indeed, not only do people watch tragedy and drama (which do not satisfy either of these criteria) but they also turn to entertainment without a clear preference for genre, such as when they turn on TV just to watch *something*. The mood management theory provides no account for this tendency.

Mills (1993) contends that people enjoy tragedy because it gives them an opportunity to exercise their belief that to empathize with another's suffering is good. In accordance with this, women who reported stronger attitudes toward the importance of sharing another's sadness also reported enjoying a tragic movie more than did those with weaker attitudes toward empathy (Mills, 1993). More generally, this view suggests that experiencing the entire spectrum of emotions, good or bad, as a part of dramatic experience is pleasant because it is humane; it is as if our "emotional muscles" are exercised in the safety of fiction. Although this view clearly has merit, we would like to point out that very often entertainment is sought out not for its emotion-eliciting value but rather for its ability to attract our attention. We suggest that this mechanism, overlooked by past research and common to all forms of entertainment, independent of the content, taps into the basic appeal of drama: distraction from the self.

We propose that dramatic experience, independent of the genre and content, presents an opportunity for people to take on the role of observer instead of being observed. Indeed, it would seem that a key purpose of dramatic experience is to get the audience to consider events, situations, and lives outside of their own. Thus, dramatic experience should serve as a magnet for our awareness. The more effective the dramatic experience, the more the audience should become gripped by it and forget about their own private concerns, thereby escaping their selves.

The Theory of Self-Awareness

Originally proposed by S. Duval and Wicklund in 1972, the theory of self-awareness suggests that one's attention at a given time can either be directed toward one's self (the state of objective self-awareness) or away from one's self (the state of subjective self-awareness). These two states are said to be mutually exclusive, although one can oscillate between them in short intervals. Furthermore, the theory maintains that focusing one's attention on the self—and thus inducing a state of objective self-awareness (OSA)—leads to an awareness of discrepancies between the ideal self and the actual self. This awareness leads to decreases in positive self-feelings (Davis & Brock, 1975; Ickes et al., 1973; but see Silvia & Duval, 2001, for a more detailed discussion).

Attempts to develop an explicit measure of state self-awareness (vs. trait self-consciousness, see Feningstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975) have not succeeded (Prentice-Dunn, 1991; but see Govern & Marsh, 2001, for a recent measure that appears promising). Research has found that individuals for whom OSA has been enhanced show decreases in positive self-feelings across a wide array of experimental manipulations, including (a) being presented with a video image of themselves (S. Duval et al., 1979; Storms, 1973), (b) hearing an audio recording of their voices (Ickes et al., 1973), (c) being in the presence of a video camera that is pointed at them (T. Duval, Duval, & Mullilis, 1992; Federoff & Harvey, 1976), (d) writing one's autobiography (S. Duval et al., 1979), or (e) being put in front of a mirror (Hass & Eisenstadt, 1990). A recent meta-analysis (Fejfar & Hoyle, 2000) revealed a consistent effect of self-awareness on negative affect across 79 studies that manipulated self-awareness. Dwelling on oneself as an object appears to make people aware of how they fall short of their ideals, thereby leading to more negative self-views (S. Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Self-focus prompts individuals to compare their behaviors and achievements to their internal standards, which often results in a realization of a negative discrepancy between real and desired selves. Because being

reminded of how one falls short of one's ideals is unpleasant, the state of OSA is avoided whenever possible (Csikszentmihalyi & Figurski, 1982), as are the stimuli promoting it (S. Duval & Wicklund, 1972).[1]

To the extent that the aforementioned factors that induce self-focus are absent, people will be more likely to be in a state of subjective self-awareness (SSA). In this state, they are not conscious of themselves or how they might be falling short of their standards; rather, they are contemplating the world as an observer. This state of being an "I," in the position of observing and evaluating others, rather than the state of being a "me," and feeling observed and evaluated, is said to be the preferred state (S. Duval & Wicklund, 1972). People exhibit relatively higher positive feelings when in a state of SSA (Csikszentmihalyi & Figurski, 1982), and when forced out of this state into OSA, they make efforts to return to SSA by attempting to direct their attention outside of themselves (S. Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Thus far, SSA has largely escaped the attention of researchers. Whereas much research has investigated how the presence of stimuli that enhance the proportion of time spent in OSA lead to interesting consequences, little research has explored the consequences that derive from being in the presence of stimuli that enhance the proportion of time spent in SSA.

Our thesis is that because dramatic experience directs people's attention away from themselves, it is in effect putting the audience in a state of SSA. As such, the experience of being an audience should be accompanied by enhanced positive feelings about the self.

Past Research on Television Viewing and Positive Self-Feelings

Television viewing is surely the most ubiquitous form of dramatic experience. According to some sources, on average, people watch between 16 and 26 hours of television per week (Statistics Canada, 2000). Hence, an investigation of the relation between dramatic experience and self-awareness would be best directed at this most commonly used medium.

Some research has investigated the relation between television viewing and positive self-feelings. Finn and Gorr (1988) found that television viewing was reportedly used for mood management: People reported turning on the television to cheer themselves up and, as such, it was positively correlated with increases in positive self-feelings. Other studies have suggested that people who are not satisfied with themselves are more likely to watch television. For example, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) found that people who were unhappy and could not structure their free time tended to watch more television than people who were happy. Similarly, those who reported watching more television also reported that their lives were less happy, dynamic, and satisfactory than those who watched less television (Morgan, 1984; this was true regardless of the choice of the programs by the viewers, Espe & Seiwert, 1987). These studies are consistent with our hypothesis that one reason television is watched is to provide people with an escape from OSA, and the more negatively people view themselves, the more they will be in need of an escape (S. Duval & Wicklund, 1972). However, other research has not found clear evidence for negative relations between television watching and self-esteem (Greenberg, Lewis, & Dodd, 1999; Tan & Tan, 1979). Correlational studies such as these are limited in their explanatory power because there may indeed be other variables associated with both self-esteem and television viewing (e.g., number of friends, amount of free time, or boredom) that confound their assessment. A clear understanding of the relation between television viewing and positive self-feelings requires experimental manipulations of the amount of television that is viewed and of participants' positive self-feelings.

It is important to remember that the content of the television programming can factor into their effect on positive self-feelings. For instance, a group with which one identifies may be depicted favorably and thereby enable one to bask in reflected glory (Cialdini et al., 1976) and reap a boost in positive self-feelings. People are more likely to watch programs that match their own self-concepts in terms of content (Preston & Clair, 1994), for example, those who believe in a just world are more likely to watch crime dramas than those who do not (Gunter & Wober, 1983). To identify the relation between television viewing per se and self-awareness, it is necessary to control the content of the message that is presented.

STUDY 1

Research on self-awareness has consistently revealed that time spent in the presence of OSA-eliciting stimuli is associated with lower positive self-feelings relative to a control group (S. Duval et al., 1979; Federoff & Harvey, 1976; Hass & Eisenstadt, 1990; Ickes et al., 1973). Likewise, the modest amount of research that has been conducted on SSA reveals that SSA-eliciting stimuli appear to enhance positive self-feelings (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Figurski, 1982). To the extent that watching television is a stimulus for SSA, people should evince more positive self-feelings after watching television. To test this prediction, Study 1 presented participants with a neutral television program for several minutes and compared their actual-ideal self-discrepancies before and after their exposure to television with those of participants who completed two measures of self-discrepancies one right after the other. We expected to see significantly smaller

self-discrepancies for those exposed to television compared to those who were not.

To the extent the predicted difference in self-discrepancies emerges between the experimental groups, an alternative explanation that needs to be addressed is the possibility that participants' mood was elevated due to any pleasant scenes or soundtrack from the video, which, in turn, decreased self-discrepancies.[2] Previous research has shown that mood can be successfully manipulated with exposure to classical music (Eich & Metcalfe, 1989; Niedenthal & Setterlund, 1994). To address this alternative explanation, the soundtrack of the video was replaced with Barber's "Adagio for Strings," a piece previously shown to be successful in inducing a sad mood (Halberstadt, Niedenthal, & Kushner, 1995; Niedenthal & Setterlund, 1994). In addition, a mood measure was included to investigate the relation of mood and self-discrepancies.

Method

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 30 undergraduate female students at Bryn Mawr College (Bryn Mawr, PA) and at the University of Pennsylvania. Participants received class credit for their participation.

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

After arriving at the lab, the participants were greeted by a researcher and instructed that they were to participate in a study about self-esteem, which required filling out some anonymous surveys. The participants were randomly assigned to either the control condition or the television-viewing (TV) condition.

Pre-manipulation measure. Participants completed an open-ended, actual-/ideal-self-rating questionnaire that consisted of two parts, each asking for 10 adjectives best describing "the type of person you are" (for the actual-self part) or "you ideally would like to be" (for the ideal-self part). The two parts were always administered separately and in the same order, the actual-self part of the questionnaire presented first followed by the ideal-self part of the questionnaire (Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986).

Post-manipulation measures. The post-manipulation measures included the following items in the order of presentation:

1. A closed-ended, actual-self-rating questionnaire in which participants evaluated themselves on 20 separate positive traits (e.g., "I am extremely attractive"). Participants indicated how accurate they felt each statement was by using a scale from 1 (*not at all accurate*) to 5 (*completely accurate*) (adapted from Heine & Lehman, 1999).
2. A closed-ended, ideal-self-rating questionnaire identical in format to the actual-self measure above, except that participants were asked how accurate the statements were in describing the type of person they *ideally would like to be* (e.g., "I would ideally like to be extremely attractive").
3. A four-item mood measure (Forgas, 1999) scored on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 9 (*completely true*).

MANIPULATION OF SELF-AWARENESS AND MOOD

The video used in the study was "Nature's Symphony" by *Readers Digest, Inc.* We selected this video because it was devoid of any social interaction or storyline. The video depicts various natural spectacles and was accompanied by the sad music of Barber's "Adagio for Strings." (In our preliminary study, reported in Note 1, the video contained the original soundtrack that was a sequence of short pieces from Mozart, Stravinski, and Beethoven.) All participants in the experimental condition watched the same 6-min episode. At no point throughout the duration of the video were there people's images or voices present. This was intended to control for the possibility of positive or negative identification by participants that could result in changes in positive self-feelings unrelated to the mere exposure to television.

In the control condition, the participants were given the open-ended, actual-/ideal-self-discrepancy questionnaire (pre-manipulation self-discrepancy measure) immediately followed by the 20-item Likert scale actual-/ideal-self-discrepancy questionnaire (post-manipulation self-discrepancy measure) and the mood measure. The participants were asked to not flip through the pages or to take a break while filling out the surveys.

Individuals assigned to the TV condition were first administered the open-ended, actual-/ideal-self-discrepancy questionnaire (pre-manipulation self-discrepancy measure). After they completed the questionnaire, the participants were told that the researcher had to get the other questionnaires from a different room. The participants were asked, while they were waiting, to give their opinion on a video for a different experiment. After the 6-min video finished, the researcher returned, asked for their opinion of the video, and administered the post-manipulation measures. After completing the questionnaires, all participants were checked for suspicion, debriefed as to the nature of the experiment, and thanked for their participation.

Results and Discussion

All closed-ended measures had adequate inter-item reliability: actual-self (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$), ideal self (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$), and the four-item mood measure (Cronbach's $\alpha = .60$). The self-discrepancy measured after the experimental manipulation was obtained by calculating the absolute discrepancy between participants' actual-self rating and their ideal-self rating for each of the 20 traits (a larger value indicates a greater dis-

crepancy) as recommended by Hoge and McCarthy (1983). The 20 discrepancy scores were summed to yield one total discrepancy score.

A two-stage process was employed to quantify the discrepancy between the actual and the ideal self in the open-ended questionnaire (the pre-manipulation self-discrepancy measure). First, the adjectives in the actual-self questionnaire were compared to the adjectives in the ideal-self questionnaire to determine which adjectives matched (i.e., both have the same adjectives, including synonyms) and which adjectives mismatched (i.e., an adjective in the actual-self part of the questionnaire was an antonym of an adjective in the ideal-self questionnaire). Synonyms and antonyms were operationally defined by whether they appeared as such in *Roget's Thesaurus* (1996). Second, the self-discrepancy score was calculated by subtracting the total number of matches from twice the total number of mismatches following the procedure employed by Higgins et al. (1986); larger values thus indicated a greater discrepancy (i.e., a greater amount of dissatisfaction with oneself relative to one's ideals).

An ANOVA revealed that the mean score on the pre-manipulation self-discrepancy questionnaire of the control condition was not significantly different compared with that of the TV condition, $F(1, 28) < 1$ (see Table 1). In contrast, participants in the control condition had significantly larger actual-ideal discrepancies in the post-manipulation measure than did those in the TV condition, $F(1, 28) = 6.98$, $p < .02$. The Condition × Measure interaction was marginally significant, $F(1, 28) = 3.14$, $p < .09$.

As expected, the mean score on the mood measure was significantly lower for those in the TV condition than for those in the control condition, $F(1, 28) = 6.61$, $p < .02$. Therefore, the manipulation appeared to be successful in inducing a sad mood in the participants in the TV condition. Moreover, mood was not correlated with post-manipulation self-discrepancy, $r = .05$, *ns*. Thus, the alternative explanation that television viewing leads to smaller discrepancies because it increases mood is not supported here.

TABLE 1: Means and Standard Deviations for the Dependent Variables in Studies 1 and 2

Study 1	*Control Condition*	*Television-Exposure Condition*
Pre-manipulation discrepancy measure	1.67_a (4.30)	1.00_a (4.78)
Post-manipulation discrepancy measure	19.53_a (4.17)	14.53_b (5.30)
Mood	21.37_a (3.84)	18.13_b (3.00)
Study 2	*Prior to Watching TV Condition*	*After Watching TV Condition*
Pre-manipulation discrepancy measure	3.79_a (5.93)	2.49_a (6.15)
Post-manipulation discrepancy measure	22.09_a (7.96)	14.50_b (7.59)
Mood	18.77_a (3.66)	17.91_a (3.55)

NOTE: Larger positive values refer to larger actual-ideal discrepancies. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Columns with different subscripts are significantly different at $p < .05$.

STUDY 2

Study 1 demonstrated that television viewing is associated with heightened episodes of SSA as evidenced by participants' smaller actual-ideal discrepancies in comparison with those in control conditions. This finding is consistent with our thesis that television viewing helps people to avoid thinking about how they fall short of their standards. However, several factors limit the applicability and universality of this finding. First, the laboratory is an unrealistic environment in which to study changes in self-awareness. For example, participants may react differently to a television program presented to them in a lab than they would at home. Second, demand characteristics of the study may lead participants to watch television more attentively and thus amplify the effect that television viewing would have on self-awareness under normal conditions. Finally, the television program we used in Study 1 is an unlikely choice for most people under normal circumstances. To substantiate the general claim about television viewing that this article is trying to convey, a study in a more naturalistic setting, and with more typical television programs, is required. The aim of Study 2, therefore, was to replicate the pattern of results of Study 1 in an ecologically valid setting.

Method

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 43 undergraduate students (29 women, 14 men; *M* age was 19.91, *SD* = .95) at the University of Pennsylvania. Participants volunteered to participate in a study about television viewing.

Materials and Procedure

Students in a social psychology class were asked to participate in a study on television viewing. Those who agreed were given two sets of questionnaires, one to fill out in class and one to take home and turn in later. Participants were randomly assigned to the control and experimental conditions. The first (in-class) set of questionnaires was identical for everybody and contained the open-ended, actual-/ideal-self measures from Study 1 as well as questions regarding the participants' sex and age.

The second (take-home) set was sealed with written instructions not to open until participants were ready to complete it and to fill out the entire questionnaire at one sitting. Participants also were instructed not to flip through the pages ahead of time. The take-home questionnaires were made to look almost identical between conditions so as to promote participants' blindness to the condition. Those assigned to the "prior to watching TV" (PWTV) condition were instructed to "open and fill out the questionnaire right *before* they were going to watch TV for at least 10 minutes." Those assigned into the "after watching TV" (AWTV) condition were instructed to fill out the questionnaire immediately *after* they had watched TV for at least 10 min. Otherwise, the questionnaires were identical and contained the same closed-ended, actual-/ideal-self measures and mood measure from Study 1.

Results and Discussion

Of the 71 volunteers (comprising 79% of the class), 11 people assigned into the PWTV condition and 14 participants assigned into the AWTV condition failed to return the take-home part of the questionnaire, and 3 did not identify their subject number, making it impossible to match their questionnaires. The data from these 28 participants were discarded. Sex was included as a variable in all analyses; however, there were no significant sex effects or Sex × Condition interactions.

All closed-ended measures possessed adequate inter-item reliability: Cronbach's αs were .89 for actual self, .90 for ideal self, and .64 for the four-item mood measure. The two self-discrepancy measures were scored in the same manner as in Study 1. An ANOVA indicated that the mean score on the pre-manipulation self-discrepancy measure of the PWTV condition did not differ from that of the AWTV condition, $F < 1$ (see Table 1). In contrast, those in the AWTV condition showed significantly smaller actual-/ideal-self discrepancies than did participants in the PWTV condition, $F(1, 39) = 8.59$, $p < .01$. The Condition × Measure interaction was marginally significant, $F(1, 39) = 3.86$, $p < .06$. Thus, replicating Study 1, those who watched television showed smaller self-discrepancies than did those who were not watching television, even in a natural setting and following their own choice of television program.

The mood measure revealed no differences between the experimental and the control conditions, $t < 1$. Thus, television viewing did not affect participants' mood. In addition, mood was not correlated with the post-manipulation measure of self-discrepancy, $r = -.22$, *ns*.

STUDY 3

Studies 1 and 2 presented empirical support for the idea that television is associated with smaller actual-ideal discrepancies relative to those in control conditions. These data are consistent with our hypothesis that people are able to escape the discomfort associated with their self-discrepancies through watching television. To the extent that television provides such an escape from one's feelings of inadequacies relative to some standards, it follows that people should be especially likely to seek television-watching opportunities when those inadequacies are made salient.

Past research has found that individuals who experience a threat to their self-esteem via negative feedback on their performance attempted to escape OSA-inducing stimuli, for example, by avoiding mirrors (S. Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Gibbons & Wicklund, 1976). To the extent that television is a stimulus for SSA, a similar tendency to watch television should be evident among those who encounter a situation where they are falling short of their standards. In other words, if given the opportunity to watch television, those who have fallen short of an expected level of performance should have a greater motivation to escape feelings of OSA and should spend more time watching television than those who have not experienced such a failure.

To test this hypothesis, we manipulated participants' positive self-feelings by giving them false feedback regarding their performance on a test. Subsequently, participants were given an opportunity to watch a content-neutral television program. We hypothesized that those receiving positive feedback should have the least to gain by being in a state of SSA and should thus watch television less than a control group, whereas those receiving negative feedback should be most motivated to engage in SSA and should thus increase their viewing time.

Method

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 92 students enrolled in introductory psychology classes at the University of Pennsylvania. They received either class credit or U.S.$8 cash for their participation. The data from two participants were excluded because one discovered the hidden camera and the other did not follow the instructions of the experimenter. This resulted in a sample of 90 participants (21 men, 69 women). Participation was limited to those who had English as their native language.

PROCEDURE

Participants were told they were to take part in a study investigating "pattern recognition" skills and impression formations. They were randomly assigned to receive failure feedback, success feedback, or no feedback (a control condition). The experimenter was aware of which participants were in the control condition but was blind to the kind of feedback that was received by those in the

two experimental conditions. Success and failure feedback were delivered using the procedure developed by Heine et al. (2001).

Those assigned to either the success or failure conditions were first given a version of the Remote Associates Test (RAT) (originally developed by Mednick, 1962), which they were told was a widely used and accurate measure of pattern recognition, an important dimension of IQ. In the RAT, participants are shown three words and are asked to choose the one word that relates to the other three (e.g., *sleep*, *fantasy*, and *day* all relate to the word *dream*). Participants were informed that the experimenter would never see their responses. Participants themselves were to grade their RAT beyond the view of the experimenter and to put their graded test in an envelope when they were finished. Thus, self-feelings were manipulated privately, not publicly.

The items for the RAT used in this study were from Study 3 of Heine et al. (2001). Those who received success feedback received a version that was composed of mostly easy items that most people are able to answer, whereas those in the failure condition received mostly difficult items that few people are able to answer correctly. There were 10 items in each version of the RAT. After 8 min of working on the items, the experimenter stopped the participants and gave them an answer sheet and a bogus distribution of the RAT performance of other students from their university. Participants graded their own tests and discovered that for each item there was indeed a correct answer. They were then asked to look over the percentile distribution sheet and circle the number that they had answered correctly and the corresponding percentile ranking for that score. The percentile distribution was skewed such that the vast majority of participants in the failure condition discovered that they scored well below the 50th percentile, whereas the vast majority of those in the success condition discovered that they had scored well above the 50th percentile. The experimenter remained blind to the assignment of condition: He or she did not know which version of the RAT the participant received.

Those assigned to the control condition spent 8 min completing a filler questionnaire. The items in the questionnaire were chosen such that they did not involve any self-evaluations (e.g. "The immigration laws are too lenient in this country" or "Every cloud has a silver lining"), and thus, participants would not experience heightened OSA. When 8 min had passed, the participants were instructed to put their completed materials into the envelope.

Following this manipulation, the experimenter told them that in the next part of the study they were to watch a video depicting interactions among people and to describe their impressions of the interaction. The experimenter sat the participant in front of a television, turned on the television and VCR, and then walked away to the other side of the lab. However, instead of a video depicting people interacting, the nature scenes video with the sad music from Study 1 started to play. At this point, the experimenter exclaimed, "This is not the right tape! I must have left the tape in the other lab. I'll go get it quickly and will be right back." The experimenter left the room with the tape continuing to play in front of the participant. Participants thus believed the video that was playing was not part of the study and they had received no instructions regarding what to do with the video. The experimenter went to an observation room and watched the participant through a hidden camera. The experimenter made two measurements: (a) the total amount of time that the participant spent looking at the television (the experimenter stopped timing whenever the participants' eyes looked elsewhere) and (b) the time at which the participant first looked away from the screen (this was recorded as 0 if the participant was not looking at the screen when the experimenter first observed him or her). Pretests showed such observational procedure to be straightforward, with perfect agreement between multiple observers as to the direction of a subjects' gaze. After an absence of 6 min, the experimenter returned and said that she or he was unable to find the correct videotape and that the experiment would have to stop there. The participants were then checked for suspicion, thoroughly debriefed, and thanked for their participation.

Results and Discussion

PRELIMINARY ANALYSES

One participant in the negative feedback condition answered too many items correctly and thus received feedback opposite to what she had been assigned. This participant's data were excluded from the final analyses. This left a final sample of 89 participants (35 success, 27 failure, and 27 control).

Those assigned to the success condition answered on average 6.6 ($SD = 1.13$) items out of 10 correctly, corresponding to the 83rd percentile ($SD = 7.9$). Those in the failure condition answered on average 3.6 items correctly out of 10 ($SD = 1.13$), corresponding to the 25th percentile ($SD = 6.44$). The number of correctly answered items was significantly different between the success and failure conditions, $F(1, 60) = 97.22$, $p < .001$, as was the percentile feedback that participants received, $F(1, 60) = 953.30$, $p < .001$. No sex differences emerged in any of the analyses.

TELEVISION VIEWING

To contrast the conditions, we conducted an ANOVA on the two dependent variables with planned comparisons assigning the different conditions the following

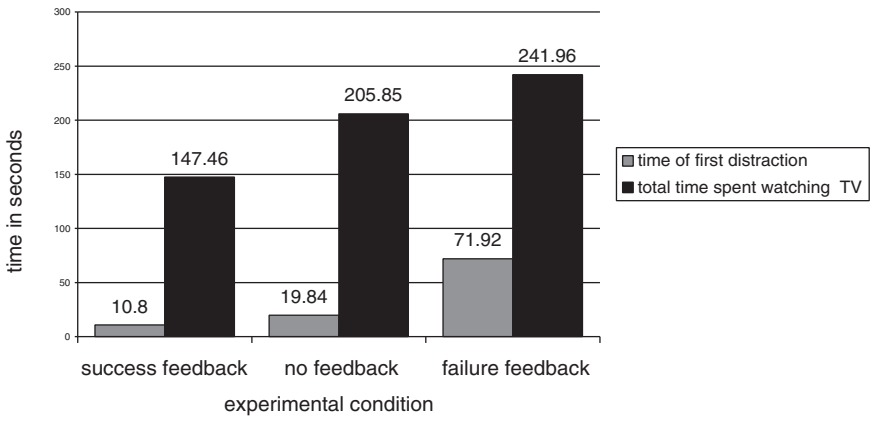

Figure 1 Television viewing of success, failure, and control conditions.

weights: –1 (success), 0 (control), and 1 (failure). This analysis revealed a significant difference in the predicted direction for the total amount of time spent watching television, $F(1, 86) = 15.86$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1); *t* tests also were calculated to compare each of the conditions individually. Those in the success condition watched significantly less television ($M = 147.46$ s, $SD = 99.91$ s) than did either those in the control condition ($M = 205.85$ s, $SD = 82.85$ s), $t(61) = 2.45$, $p < .01$, or the failure condition ($M = 241.96$ s, $SD = 92.01$ s), $t(61) = 3.82$, $p < .001$. Those in the failure condition watched slightly more television than those in the control condition, but this failed to reach significance, $t(53) = 1.52$, *ns*. Those who had succeeded were the least likely to watch television, whereas those who had failed were the most likely to watch it.

Similarly, a planned comparisons ANOVA was conducted on the time of the first distraction from the television. This analysis also revealed a significant effect in the predicted direction, $F(1, 86) = 24.29$, $p < .001$; *t* tests were then calculated to compare each of the individual conditions. Those who received success feedback were quicker to look away from the television ($M = 10.80$ s, $SD = 14.38$ s) than were either those who received no feedback ($M = 19.84$ s, $SD = 16.49$ s), $t(61) = 2.30$, $p < .02$, or those who received failure feedback ($M = 71.92$ s, $SD = 84.91$ s), $t(61) = 4.19$, $p < .001$. Those in the failure condition took longer to first look away than did those in the control condition, $t(53) = 3.13$, $p < .002$. Hence, both measures reveal that people are more likely to watch television after they have failed and are less likely to watch television after they have succeeded. People apparently make efforts to focus their awareness away from their self and to a convenient target like the television when they are made aware of how they fall short of a standard. In contrast, those who have succeeded appear quite content to spend their time contemplating themselves and are more likely to avoid stimuli that might distract them.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In his book *Escaping the Self: Alcoholism, Spirituality, Masochism, and Other Flights From the Burden of Selfhood,"* Baumeister (1991) discusses the devastating effects that contemporary society's emphasis on individuality has on psychological well-being of its members. He argues that devoid of the collectivistic values and the reassuring feelings of belongingness, individuals resort to some extreme measures to flee from the disappointment they feel when they focus their attention on themselves. Drug addictions, sexual masochism, suicide, and other dangerous behaviors, the author claims, can be seen as an overcompensation of the unbearable burden that modern society places on the individual. However, as the present studies indicate, people might not need to resort to such extreme ways of relieving the discomfort associated with OSA when television viewing can provide a convenient escape from the self.

Exposure to Television and Positive Self-Feelings

Study 1 revealed that television viewing was associated with markedly smaller actual-ideal self-discrepancies compared with a control group after only 6 min of television viewing. Of importance, this is not a function of mood enhancement because smaller discrepancies also were evident when participants' mood decreased in the presence of a depressing soundtrack and mood was not correlated with discrepancies. Study 2 presented support for the ecological validity of the effect of television viewing on self-awareness as evidenced by the difference in post-manipulation actual-ideal discrepancies between those who had just watched their choice of television

program in their preferred setting compared with those who were just about to. Moreover, Study 3 found that people were more likely to watch television when they were feeling bad about themselves and were less likely to watch it when they felt good about themselves, indicating that people actively seek situations to manage their current levels of positive self-feelings. The present studies provided the first experimental evidence that television viewing is associated with enhanced positive feelings about the self. This relation is evident both in studies that manipulate the amount of television that is watched (Studies 1 and 2) and the positivity of the self (Study 3). There are surely many reasons why people watch television. We suggest that one important reason is that television serves to focus people's attention away from how they are failing to realize their ideal standards.

Although television appears to be a particularly effective stimulus for SSA, it clearly is not the only one. It would seem that virtually any stimulus that engages the individual should heighten experiences of SSA. Dramatic performance might be the most effective because the individual is relatively passive, but we expect that people experience SSA when they are reading books, listening to music, attending an engaging lecture, or surfing the Web. Future research might be able to shed light on the kinds of experiences that are most likely to draw the attention of individuals away from themselves.

The effects that we observed in our studies were observed with only 6 to 10 min of television viewing. It is unclear how well our findings would generalize to longer durations of television viewing. It would seem that with longer durations, other factors would be present that relate to positive self-feelings. For example, after spending the whole evening watching reruns, it is not unlikely that the viewer might start to feel that his life is rather empty, or he might feel guilty about not being more productive. We do not mean to deny that television viewing is associated with these other self-relevant feelings. However, these kinds of feelings would seem to hinge on processes that are independent of SSA. Such other processes might very well exist in more natural settings; however, they were likely held at bay in the controlled laboratory experience that we provided to our participants. We imagine that in real life these other feelings compete with the benefits of SSA in determining how people feel about themselves while watching television.

NOTES

1. An exception to this tendency is the case when an individual's feeling of self-worth is elevated, such as when one is given positive feedback about his or her performance. In such case, there is an increase in the likelihood of seeking the state of or a stimulus to objective self-awareness (i.e., Ickes, Wicklund, & Ferris, 1973, see also Silvia & Duval, 2001).

2. We earlier had conducted the identical study without a mood manipulation. ANOVAs revealed that the television-exposure group ($M = 17.2$, $SD = 6.67$) demonstrated lower self-discrepancies than the control group ($M = 25.0$, $SD = 3.78$) after the 6-min interval, $F(1, 28) = 15.54$, $p < .001$, but not before, $F(1, 28) = 3.51$, $p < .08$ (Ms = 2.20 and 0.53, SDs = 2.83 and 1.96, for television-exposure and control groups, respectively). The Condition × Measure interaction was highly significant, $F(1, 28) = 16.84$, $p < .001$.

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