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ABSTRACT

A self-esteem maintenance model was tested using 52 friendship pairs. Undergraduates (N=52) participated in a word identification task described as an indirect measure of important skills (high relevance) or as a game of password (low relevance). Participants presented clues to both a friend and a stranger. As predicted by the model, subjects gave harder clues under high relevance than under low relevance. Also, friends received significantly harder clues than strangers under the high relevance than under low relevance task conditions. (Author)

SELF -ESTEEM MAINTENANCE: YOU SOMETIMES HURT THE ONE YOU LOVE

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This study was designed to test a recently formulated self-esteem maintenance model of social behavior (Tesser, Note 1). Being in a psychologically close relationship with someone who performs well at a particular thing can bolster self-esteem through a process of "basking-in-reflected-glory" (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976). On the other hand, being close to a high performing Other (O) can reduce self-esteem through a comparison process. Thus to the extent that reflection is important, Self (S) would want to increase psychological closeness with a high performing O or facilitate the performance of a close O; to the extent that comparison is important, S should want to decrease closeness with a high performing O or interfere with the performance of a close O.

The relevance of O's performance for S's self-definition is hypothesized to increase the relative importance of comparison and decrease the relative importance of reflection process. S can recognize and value performance on any number of dimensions, e.g., tight-rope walking, lawyering, etc. However, S strives for excellence on and is personally invested in only a very small subset of these dimensions. O's performance is relevant to S's self-definition to the extent that O's performance is on one of those self-defining dimensions and to the extent that O's performance is not so much better or worse than S's performance that comparisons are rendered difficult (cf. Festinger, 1954).

It is assumed that S behaves so as to maintain self-esteem by changing relationships to affect closeness, by changing his/her own self-definition

to affect relevance, and by helping or hindering O to affect performance. If two of these variables are fixed it is possible to make predictions about the third. In this study we are concerned with performance, i.e., helping or hurting O as a function of closeness and relevance. The specific predictions are that: (a) Since relevance increases the importance of comparison (relative to reflection), S is less likely to help O as relevance increases; (b) Closeness and relevance should interact in determining helping: Under low relevance (where reflection is relatively important), S should help a psychologically close O more than a psychologically distant O; under high relevance (where comparison is relatively important), the advantage of the close O over the distant O in receiving help should decrease, perhaps to the point where the distant O received more help than the close O.

Method

Subjects. Fifty-two male participants were recruited from introductory psychology classes. Two subjects were scheduled for each session and each subject was asked to bring a good friend.

Procedure. When the two pairs of friends arrived for the experimental session they were individually seated in booths. The booths were arranged around the experimenter so that the experimenter could give and receive materials and speak to the participants, but the participants could not see into one another's booth.

Low Relevance. The groups that were randomly assigned to this condition were told that they were to play the game password; that being a good player doesn't tell anything about the person; that we are interested in seeing if knowledge of a person makes a difference in performance.

High Relevance. Groups in this condition were told about the importance of verbal skills as a measure of ability in school; that verbal skills tasks are used in industry; and that the exercise they were participating in is a variant of one of the verbal skills tasks that big companies use; and that we are interested in seeing if knowledge of a person makes a difference in performance.

The following procedure was the same for both groups. Participants were instructed in the task as follows: Each participant will be given an opportunity to identify four words on the basis of clues. For each word, the other three participants will have a list of 10 clues graded in difficulty and will choose a clue for each trial and give it to the experimenter. The experimenter will randomly choose a clue from those given to him and present it to the "player." Clues would contirue to be given until the word is identified or there were five unsuccessful tries to identify the word. Each participant would be given four words to identify and then another participant would be given an opportunity to be the "player."

After the relevance manipulation was reinstated, the subjects began the task. The first two players consisted of one member of each of the two friendship pairs. The experimenter surreptitiously selected clues so as to make their performance seem relatively low and he announced to each that their performance was "a little below average."

The third player was a friend of one of the previous players and a stranger to the other. This time the experimenter surreptitiously selected clues to make the player appear to be doing slightly better than the previous two players - similarly for the fourth player.

After all four subjects had an opportunity to serve as player, they were given a post-experimental questionnaire to validate the fact that the

friends were really friends and the strangers were really strangers. It also served to check on the relevance manipulation. Subjects were thoroughly debriefed and sworn to secrecy concerning the experimental procedures.

Dependent Variable. Recall that subjects were led to believe that the clues given to the player are selected by them. The clues from which they were to make their selections had "known" difficulties. We assumed that if a subject wanted to help a player he would select easy clues and if he wanted to hinder a player he would select hard clues. The first two players knew their own performance and thus had a benchmark for judging the performance of the last two players. Thus, the dependent variable was the difficulty of the clues the first two players selected for the last two players.

Results and Discussion

Closeness was manipulated by having participants provide clues for a friend (high closeness) or a stranger (low closeness). In order to make sure that persons purported to be friends were actually friends, they had to answer a series of questions about one another concerning hometown, usual topics of conversation and names of recent dates. Pairs who didn't have at least one member get at least 2 our of 3 right were not included in the study. (There were 4 such pairs.)

Since subjects within groups are not independent, all the remaining analyses were carred out using the group as the unit of analysis. To check on the relevance manipulation subjects were asked a series of 7 questions to which they responded on 7-point scales (e.g., It was important to me personally to do well on this exercise). Responses were summed across questions and across the two subjects within each group. The difference in

means between high and low relevance groups was in the right direction but not statistically significant. However, an examination of the distributions revealed the expected difference as well as the presence of several outliers in each condition. Seventy percent of the high relevance group were above the median on this measure, while 70 percent of the low relevance group were below the median ($\chi^2 = 3.84$, $p = .05$).

Our first hypothesis predicted that since relevance increases the importance of comparison processes, subjects should give "players" more difficult clues in the high relevance condition than the low relevance condition. Clues were scaled in difficulty from 1-10. All the clues each subject provided for each player were averaged. These averages were then summed over the two subjects providing clues for the two "players," i.e., 4 averages for each group. As can be seen clearly in the modified stem and leaf display (Tukey, 1977) in Table 1, this hypothesis was supported.

Insert Table 1 about here

The mean difficulty for the high relevance group was 20.9; the corresponding mean for the low relevance group was 16.2 ($t = 2.57$, $df=24$, $p < .05$).

Our second hypothesis was that friends would receive easier clues than strangers under low relevance and that this difference would become attenuated, perhaps even reversing, under high relevance. Both subjects in each group provided clues to a friend and a stranger. To test the hypothesis, the average difficulty of the clues given to the stranger was subtracted from that given to the friend, and this difference was summed for both subjects in each group. (A negative score means that the friend was given easier

clues than the stranger.) The stem and leaf display in Table 2 reveals clear support for the hypothesis. Of the 13 groups in the low relevance

Insert Table 2 about here

condition, 9 gave easier clues to the friend than the stranger; of the 13 groups in the high relevance condition, 10 gave easier clues to the stranger than the friend ($\chi^2 = 5.6$, $p < .02$).

There is another interesting aspect of the display in Table 2. One of the groups in the high relevance condition is a clear outlier. Usual parametric statistics are strongly influenced by the tails of a distribution. Thus, a t-test comparing the high relevance mean (.36) with the low relevance mean (-1.29) yields a t of marginal significance ($t = 1.66$, $p < .15$, $df = 24$) in spite of the fact that the distributions are clearly different. It makes sense to Winsorize the distribution, i.e., drop the extreme case(s) on both ends of each distribution and substitute for them the most extreme values of the remaining cases. When the single most extreme case is dropped in the present instance, the Winsorized mean for the high relevance condition is .88, the mean for the low relevance condition is -1.305, and the difference is highly significant: Winsorized $t = 3.10$, $p < .01$; $df = 20$ (Wainer, 1976).

The data clearly supported both predictions of the model. While we often expect people to help those they are close to more than a stranger, "we sometimes hurt the one we love." How are we to understand this? The present hypothesis suggests that self-esteem maintenance may play a role. That is, we can take joy in the accomplishments of those that are close to

us and even bask in their reflected glory when their good performance is not relevant to the way in which we define our own selves. We will provide help and encouragement to our close associates if their performance does not threaten the relative evaluation of our self-defining attributes.

On the other hand, when another's performance does threaten our relative standing on self-defining attributes, i.e., when comparison processes are important, we are more likely to hinder the performance of someone close to us than someone more distant. Obviously, this is not the only resolution. The model suggests that other strategies are possible. For example, if we can redefine ourselves so as to make the other's performance less relevant or if we can reduce the closeness of the relationship, the threat to self-esteem will also be reduced.

Reference Notes

1. Tesser, A. Self-esteem maintenance processes in interpersonal behavior. Unpublished research proposal. University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, 1978.

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Footnotes

We are grateful to the following persons for serving as experimenters: Rob LaMott, David Martin, Mark McGoldrick, Tom Stark.

Table 1

Modified Stem and Leaf Display
of Clue Difficulty as a Function of Relevance

Difficulty of Clues*	Condition	
	High Relevance	Low Relevance
26-29	26, 28, 28	
22-25	25, 25	22, 23
18-21	19, 19, 19, 21	18, 19, 21
14-17	16, 16, 16	14, 16, 16, 17
10-13	13	10, 11, 12, 13

* Higher members indicate more difficult clues.

Table 2

Stem and Leaf Display of Differences in Difficulty of Clues Given to Friend and Stranger as a Function of Relevance

Difference in Difficulty of Clues Given to Friend and Stranger		Conditions	
		High Relevance	Low Relevance
Friend Given Easier Clues Than Stranger	-8.	.14	
	-7.		
	-6.		
	-5.		.30, .20
	-4.		
	-3.		
	-2.		.90, .20
	-1.	.20	.60, .50
.000	-0.	.80	.90, .80, .56
Stranger Given Easier Clues Than Friend	+0.	.20, .20, .90, .93	.50, .80
	+1.	.63, .90	.30, .60
	+2.	.00, .20, .32, .50	