Trait Importance and Modifiability as Factors Influencing Self-Assessment and Self-Enhancement Motives

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What is This?
Trait Importance and Modifiability as Factors Influencing Self-Assessment and Self-Enhancement Motives

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People's search for information about the self is governed by motives of self-enhancement (seeking feedback to the extent that it will be favorable) and self-assessment (seeking accurate feedback regardless of its favorability). Which motive predominates as an ability under consideration becomes more important? An experiment suggested that both motives are evoked, depending on whether people believe the ability reflects a stable or malleable aspect of personality. When an ability was described as stable, subjects displayed a self-enhancing pattern, showing greater enthusiasm for feedback after success than after failure on an initial test for the trait, but only when the ability was deemed important. In contrast, when the ability was described as malleable, subjects followed a self-assessment pattern, being more solicitous of feedback when the trait was described as important as opposed to inconsequential, regardless of initial success or failure.

Heider (1958) best articulated the fundamental tension that characterizes people's search for information about the self. On one hand, people seek to arrive at the most accurate impression of their own abilities and capacities. Doing so lends predictability to their world. It permits them to apply their personal resources efficiently, avoiding situations or actions that would lead them to failure while taking advantage of circumstances that may lead to success. On the other hand, people also wish to maintain a favorable image of the self. They desire to view themselves as effective individuals, imbued with mastery over their world, even though maintaining such an image often means censoring diagnostic data that are threatening to the self.

Over the decades in personality and social psychology, researchers have found evidence that people pursue both motives in attaining information about the self. In work in the self-assessment tradition, researchers find that people often seek the most valid, diagnostic test of their abilities, regardless of whether that test is likely to lead to a success or failure experience and whether it is likely to reveal positive or negative information about the self (Strube, Lott, Le-Xuan-Hy, Oxenberg, & Deichmann, 1986; Trope, 1975, 1979, 1980; Trope & Ben-Yair, 1982; Trope & Brickman, 1975). In the self-enhancement tradition, other researchers have found evidence for biased gathering and interpretation of information to maintain self-esteem (see Kunda, 1990; Taylor & Brown, 1988, for reviews). In their causal attributions, people take credit for their successes while laying blame for failures on external circumstances (Arkin, Cooper, & Kolditz, 1980; Greenwald, 1980). They differ in self-serving ways concerning which behaviors best indicate socially desirable skills and proficiencies (Dunning, 1993; Dunning & Cohen, 1992; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989).

Most important, people tend to hold unrealistically favorable views of self (Alicke, 1985; Dunning et al., 1989; Weinstein, 1980).

Although evidence for both the motive for accuracy (self-assessment) and the one for aggrandizement (self-enhancement) is substantial, few researchers have at-
tempted to find circumstances that would prompt people to fulfill one motive over the other. This article describes one initial attempt to do so. In particular, it asks which motive will predominate as the importance of the skill in question becomes greater. As the skill becomes more consequential, as future outcomes grow more dependent on whether the individual exhibits the ability, will people become driven to attain the most accurate impression of themselves, or will they become motivated to protect their self-esteem? Arguments can be made for either hypothesis.

In addition, the research described in this report examined the impact of the modifiability of the trait in question. As people become more convinced that they can control whether they express the relevant trait, will they desire accurate impressions of their ability, or will they be more disposed toward achieving favorable ones?

The point of departure for this article is the work of Brown (1990), who found that people’s search for feedback is influenced by the need to maintain self-esteem. Brown discovered that subjects were more enthusiastic about receiving further feedback about an ability after they had achieved initial success as opposed to failure on a test of that ability, a finding consistent with the view that people wish to maintain favorable impressions of the self (see Butler, 1993; Sedikides, 1993, for similar findings). In the present study, we examined whether this effect—and the degree of self-enhancement motive it reveals—was strengthened or weakened by what subjects believed about the trait in question. Would initial success or failure have a greater impact on desire for further feedback when subjects believed the trait was consequential? Or would subjects want accurate feedback in this circumstance regardless of the likely positive or negative nature of that feedback? And how would beliefs about trait modifiability interact with initial success or failure?

TRAIT IMPORTANCE

Would increasing the importance of an ability promote self-assessment motives or self-enhancement ones? Past research provides supportive evidence for either answer.

Increasing the importance of an ability, it can be argued, will promote self-assessment over self-enhancement motives. For important traits, people will become more interested in feedback, regardless of their expectations of success or failure, thus reducing the impact of initial performance on interest in subsequent feedback. This would occur because important traits, by definition, are instrumental to achieving long-term desired outcomes and avoiding aversive ones (Trope, 1986). For these traits, achieving accurate self-impressions allows individuals to engage in adaptive behavior. They can also sort themselves into circumstances that would bring about the greatest benefit, while avoiding actions for which an inflated impression of self would place them at risk. No such degree of self-assessment motivation should occur for inconsequential traits. For these characteristics, the fallout from inaccurate views of the self is not so severe. It is therefore not adaptive to expend a great deal of effort gaining information about one’s ability in these domains.

Although there is virtually no work that looks at the impact of trait importance on self-assessment motives, research on attitudes and persuasion provides some related evidence that people examine evidence more carefully when the issue is one of consequence to them, regardless of outcome. Specifically, Petty and Cacioppo (1979) examined how people consider evidence on an issue (e.g., should dormitory visiting hours be changed) when it is of consequence to the person (the subject’s own college is considering the change) as opposed to inconsequential (some distant university is considering the new policy). Subjects more systematically processed the arguments presented to them when the issue was important and personally consequential, giving greater weight to the strength of the arguments presented. Of key interest, they tended to be more persuaded by strong arguments regardless of whether those arguments favored a position consistent or inconsistent with their own.

It can just as easily be argued, however, that increasing the importance of a trait will promote self-enhancement concerns over self-assessment motives. When a trait is important, people will wish to protect their self-esteem, and consequently expectations of success or failure will have a greater, not lesser, impact on their desire for feedback. In past research, people have demonstrated more self-aggrandizing bias to the extent that a trait is important or desirable. They are more likely to engage in self-serving attributions (Kunda, 1987; Miller, 1976) and are more likely to articulate self-appraisals that appear “too good to be true” (Alicke, 1985; Weinstein, 1980). The reason for this increased self-enhancement is clear. People wish to maintain positive images of self, beliefs that they are good and effective individuals who are able to bring about success and avoid failure. Admitting to possible shortcomings for important traits undermines this view. It suggests that the self is vulnerable to failure. From this line of reasoning, when the trait is important, people should be motivated to believe that they are effective individuals regardless of what the data say.

TRAIT MODIFIABILITY

The potential role of trait modifiability in self-assessment and enhancement is clearer than that of trait impor-
tance. When people believe a trait is malleable (i.e., they believe they can influence whether they possess the ability in question), they should be more likely to engage in self-assessment behavior, seeking out information about the self regardless of its potential fallout for self-esteem. This should occur for two reasons.

First, when the trait is modifiable, mastery or self-improvement motives should become more salient to the individual. People should become interested in learning techniques, testing strategies, and gaining practice that would allow them to express the trait. As Butler (1993; see also Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Ruble & Frey, 1991) has shown, self-improvement concerns usually motivate people toward gaining the most accurate feedback possible. However, such concerns for mastery should not be evident when people deal with nonmodifiable traits. Feedback about such traits would not lead to information that could improve a person's competence. Other motivations, such as self-enhancement, should therefore become relatively more influential.

Second, when a trait is perceived as modifiable, self-assessment motives should come to predominate, paradoxically, because of self-enhancement mechanisms. Previous research has shown that people reveal self-agrandizing biases to the extent that the trait in question is modifiable or controllable (Alicke, 1985; Weinstein, 1980). When the ability is considered controllable, people can minimize or explain away any negative information about their abilities, perhaps arguing that any failure or shortcoming is temporary, and thus continue to seek information about the self. When the trait is not modifiable, and negative information means the person might never possess the ability in question regardless of his or her efforts, people may be more likely to engage in censorship of feedback.

OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT STUDY

In sum, the present study was designed to examine the prevalence of self-assessment and enhancement motives by manipulating three factors that could potentially influence people's enthusiasm for feedback about the self. In an experiment patterned after Brown (1990), subjects were presented with a situation in which they could receive information about their "integrative orientation" ability. Subjects were asked about their desire for feedback after achieving initial success or failure in the domain. Would these subjects, like Brown's, be influenced by this esteem-relevant experience, being more enthusiastic about receiving feedback after success than after failure?

Of key interest, what would happen when subjects were told that possessing the ability was important, that it held potentially serious consequences for them? Would such instructions lead subjects toward gaining accurate feedback regardless of initial success or failure (thus fulfilling self-assessment motives), or would it prompt them to seek information about success but censor it after failure (thus fulfilling self-enhancement concerns)? To test this, we told some subjects that tests of integrative orientation ability were soon to appear on standardized tests linked to postgraduate schools (e.g., GRE, LSAT, MCAT, GMAT). Because almost all our subjects planned to continue in school, we assumed that this information would lead subjects to view integrative orientation as a consequential ability. Other subjects were told that they were likely never to see the test again in their lives. Given the discussion above, we made no firm predictions concerning whether trait importance would prompt subjects more toward self-assessment or self-enhancement behavior.

The third factor under consideration was the modifiability of the trait. Some subjects were told that integrative orientation was a modifiable trait; others were told it was not. Would subjects be more likely to engage in self-assessment behavior when the trait was deemed controllable? Would they be more likely to engage in self-enhancement when told the trait was not modifiable? Given the discussion above, we predicted that the impact of initial success or failure would be lessened when subjects believed the trait was modifiable.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 70 Cornell University undergraduates (53 women, 17 men) enrolled in psychology or design and environmental analysis classes. Subjects could earn extra credit toward their course grades for participation in the experiment.1

Procedure

On entering the lab, subjects were greeted and told that the experiment centered on "integrative orientation" ability, defined as "the individual's capacity to integrate data, that is, to see interconnections among different kinds of information in order to solve intellectual problems." Subjects were to complete some tests of integrative ability following well-validated methods designed by University of Michigan psychologists in the 1960s. Subjects were told that the focus of the study had to do with comparing certain types of tests (e.g., multiple-choice, open-ended, interviews, verbal, nonverbal).

At this point, subjects were instructed as to the modifiability of integrative orientation ability. Subjects in the modifiable condition were told that the researchers were interested in integrative orientation ability because it was "one of the most changeable, least stable, intellectual
abilities around." People could "increase dramatically by practicing" or "let it drop by ignoring it." Subjects in the nonmodifiable condition were told that the researchers were interested in the ability because it was "one of the most stable, least changeable, intellectual abilities around," that "either you have it or you don't."

The experimenter then went on to instruct subjects about the importance of the trait. Subjects in the high importance condition were asked whether they were interested in going to law school, medical school, or graduate school (all subjects said they were at least considering it). The experimenter then went on to say that "being tested on the ability might be of interest to you. . . . Tests like the ones you'll be doing today are scheduled to become part of the standardized tests used in the GREs, MCATs, and LSATs starting next year . . . and you're likely to see tests of integrative ability make up part of those tests." Subjects in the low importance condition were told that "integrative orientation is important in some fields . . . but it's almost certain that you'll never see tests like the one I'll give you today ever again."

Subjects were next told that they would be taking two different versions of tests for integrative orientation. The first test would be a verbal one. Subjects were told that each test item consisted of a series of three words (e.g., vivid-lapse-elephant) and that they would be asked to identify the fourth word commonly associated with each word in the triad (e.g., memory). They would be given 10 triads of this sort. After subjects were given 5 examples of items and indicated they understood the task, they filled out a consent form and answered some preliminary questions. Subjects reported their expectations concerning how many of the 10 items they would get right, their relative percentile standing on the ability compared with other Cornell students, and, on a 9-point scale, how important they believed the ability to be.

Subjects were then given 5 min to complete the test. Subjects in the success condition were given an easy version of the test, whereas subjects in the failure condition were given a far more difficult version. After the test was completed, the experimenter scored the test and told the subject how many items he or she had correctly completed. In the success condition, subjects were further instructed that their performance fell "within the top 15% of people who took this test in a national sample." In the failure condition, subjects were told that their performance fell "within the bottom 30%." Subjects in both success and failure conditions then completed questions centering on their reaction to the test. They were asked to rate, on 9-point scales, their satisfaction in their performance, their overall level of integrative orientation ability, and their certainty in that last assessment. They also completed demographic questions (e.g., year in school, age, major).

Of key interest, subjects were next given a choice about receiving further feedback on their integrative orientation ability. They were told they would be given a second, nonverbal version of an integrative orientation test that consisted of "a series of line drawings, such as landscapes and objects" that they would have to compare and contrast. They were told that the experimenter had four different versions of the test, and they had some choice in which test they were to take, because "previous research has established that some subjects prefer to work on one type of problem or the other." Two versions of the test centered on similarities and required subjects to "identify the common characteristic or theme underlying the drawings." Two other versions of the test focused on contrasts, in which subjects identified the characteristic that made the drawings different. For each kind of test, there were two forms. Form A had been "fully released" by the University of Michigan, and the experimenter could score the test and give the subject feedback on his or her performance. Form B was newer, and legal constraints prevented the experimenter from telling subjects how well they had done on the test.

After subjects indicated that they understood, the experimenter presented them with a questionnaire about their preferences. Subjects completed two separate preference measures. First, on 10-point scales, they rated their preference for each of the four versions of the test from 0, very low preference, to 9, very high preference. Second, they rank-ordered their preferences for the tests from 1, test I most prefer, to 4, test I least prefer.

After completing this scale, subjects filled out written probes for suspicion. They were then fully debriefed concerning the aims and rationales of the study.

Design
The design of the study was a 2 (success vs. failure) × 2 (Trait Importance: high vs. low) × 2 (Trait Modifiability: modifiable vs. not) factorial. Each cell of the design contained 8 to 10 subjects.

RESULTS
Gender failed to influence any of the results described below and receives no further mention.

Manipulation Checks
Instructions concerning the importance of integrative orientation ability had a significant impact on subjects' perceptions. Responses to pretask questions were submitted to 2 (Trait Importance) × 2 (Trait Modifiability) analyses of variance (ANOVA), which revealed that subjects in the high-importance condition rated integrative orientation ability as more consequential (M = 6.9) than participants receiving low-importance instructions.
(M = 5.1), F(1, 66) = 22.22, p < .0001. This occurred even though subjects in the high-importance condition expected to obtain the same scores on the test as their low-importance counterparts (Ms = 5.8 and 5.4, respectively), F < 1.2

Other analyses demonstrated that initial success and failure influenced subjects’ beliefs about whether they possessed integrative orientation ability. A 2 (success vs. failure) × 2 (Trait Importance) × 2 (Trait Modifiability) ANOVA revealed that subjects correctly solved a greater number of items in the success conditions (M = 7.7) than in the failure conditions (M = 2.1), F(1, 62) = 252.1, p < .0001. Subjects in the success conditions were more satisfied with their performances than those in the failure groups (Ms = 7.5 and 1.9, respectively), F(1, 61) = 409.1, p < .0001.3 Success subjects also rated their integrative orientation ability more favorably than participants in the failure condition (Ms = 6.9 and 3.1, respectively), F(1, 61) = 116.9, p < .0001. Success subjects were also more certain in their assessment of their level of ability than participants in the failure condition, although their ratings tended to hover around the midpoint of the scale (Ms = 5.3 and 3.9 for success and failure subjects, respectively), F(1, 61) = 8.75, p < .005.

Trait importance and modifiability manipulations failed to have an impact on these posttask measures, save one exception. After completing the verbal test, subjects tended to rate their integrative orientation ability more favorably in the high-modifiability conditions (M = 5.4) than in the low-modifiability groups (M = 4.5), F(1, 61) = 4.26, p < .05.

General Preferences for Feedback-Accessible Versus Not-Accessible Tests

Overall, how much did subjects desire additional feedback on their integrative orientation ability? We collected two measures that can address this issue.

The first measure centers on preference ratings for the four nonverbal tests offered to subjects. Following the precedent of Brown (1990), we assessed each subject’s interest in feedback by subtracting the average preference rating given the two tests not offering feedback from the average rating given the two feedback-available tests. Examination of the resulting difference scores, displayed in Table 1, revealed that subjects strongly preferred the feedback-available tests over the no-feedback alternatives (M difference = 2.56), t(69) = 7.54, p < .0001. This preference for the feedback-available tests was significant in high-importance conditions, t(35) = 5.97, p < .0001, and in low-importance conditions, t(33) = 4.73, p < .0001.

The second measure of desire for feedback, direct preference rankings of the four tests offered, also gave evidence of subjects’ enthusiasm for more information about their integrative orientation ability. Subjects’ rankings of the two feedback-available tests were averaged (see Table 2), as were their rankings for tests not offering feedback. Subjects in general ranked the feedback-available tests (M rank = 1.87) more highly than the not-available alternatives (M rank = 3.13), t(68) = -9.58, p < .0001. Again, this preference for feedback was observed whether or not subjects were led to believe that the ability possessed future consequences for them (t = -5.51 and -8.06 for high- and low-importance conditions, respectively).

**TABLE 1: Preference Ratings for Feedback-Accessible and Feedback-Not-Accessible Tests**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Performance and Test Type</th>
<th>Trait Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback available</td>
<td>6.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback not available</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>3.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback available</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback not available</td>
<td>4.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Ratings can vary from 0 (least preference) to 9 (greatest preference). Difference scores may differ from discrepancy between scores associated with feedback-available and not-available tests because of rounding.

**Impact of Trait Importance, Modifiability, and Initial Performance**

However, is this overall pattern of desire for feedback significantly influenced by beliefs concerning the importance and modifiability of the trait in question and by performance on the initial test of the ability? To gauge how these factors influenced the desire for additional feedback about the self, we first submitted subjects’ difference scores in preference ratings (ratings of feedback-available minus feedback-not-available tests) to a 2 (Initial Performance: success vs. failure) × 2 (Trait Importance) × 2 (Trait Modifiability) ANOVA. This analysis revealed that the desire for feedback was moderated by
two interactions (see Table 1). First, there was a significant two-way interaction between initial performance and trait importance, $F(1, 62) = 4.55, p < .04$. However, and of key importance, this two-way interaction was qualified by a three-way interaction that also involved trait modifiability, $F(1, 62) = 5.36, p < .03$.

An analysis of direct rankings of preference revealed the same general interactions. Subjects’ average ranking of the two feedback-available tests were submitted to a $2 \times 2$ (Initial Performance) ANOVA. This analysis revealed three effects of interest (see Table 2). First, subjects gave the feedback-available tests higher rankings in high-modifiability conditions ($M_{rank} = 1.73$) than in low-modifiability ones ($M_{rank} = 2.01$), $F(1, 61) = 5.48, p < .03$. Second, subjects’ rankings were influenced, again, by an Initial Performance $\times$ Involvement interaction, $F(1, 61) = 6.50, p < .02$. These two effects, however, were qualified by a three-way interaction between initial performance, trait importance, and trait modifiability, $F(1, 61) = 7.77, p < .01$.

The appearance of these two- and three-way interactions suggests, perhaps, that the impact of beliefs and expectations on the desire for feedback is beyond human ken. However, these interactions are explicable when we examine the trait modifiable and not-modifiable conditions separately. Recall that the key question is whether preferences would be influenced more by self-assessment or self-enhancement motives as the trait became more consequential. We found that both motives were evoked, depending on whether the trait was described as stable or modifiable.

### Preference Ratings

When subjects were told the skill was a stable entity, increasing the importance of the trait induced self-enhancement motives (see the top panel of Table 1). That is, when the trait was described as consequential, subjects were more enthusiastic about receiving feedback after success as opposed to failure. In contrast, when told the trait was unimportant, subjects failed to be more solicitous of feedback after success than after failure. This became apparent when we focused on the difference in preference ratings that subjects gave to feedback-available tests over tests not offering feedback. When these difference scores were submitted to a $2 \times 2$ (Initial Performance) ANOVA, an interaction appeared, $F(1, 30) = 7.01, p < .02$. In high-importance conditions, subjects preferred feedback-available tests over no-feedback alternatives to a greater degree after success ($M_{diff} = 4.13$) than after failure ($M = 0.56$), $t(15) = 2.20, p < .05$. However, this self-enhancing pattern did not appear in the low-importance conditions. Indeed, subjects in these conditions displayed more interest in feedback after failure ($M_{diff} = 3.06$) than after success ($M = 0.94$), albeit to a nonsignificant degree, $t(15) = 1.51$.

Additional analyses buttressed a self-enhancement interpretation of responses in the high-importance conditions, in that subjects’ expectations about further good or bad news underlay their preferences for feedback. Although we did not ask subjects directly about the performance they expected to achieve on the second test, we did ask them to evaluate their integrative orientation ability. When we controlled for these ratings in an analysis of covariance, the greater enthusiasm for feedback by success than by failure subjects in high-importance conditions became nonsignificant, $t = 0.58$. The same pattern emerged when we controlled for how satisfied subjects were with their initial performance, $t = 0.39$.

However, when subjects had been instructed that the trait was modifiable, their preferences followed a self-assessment pattern. They wanted feedback to a greater degree when the trait was described as important as opposed to inconsequential, regardless of initial success or failure. The bottom panel of Table 1 reveals this trend in preference ratings. Subjects in the high-importance condition displayed a greater preference for feedback-available over feedback-not-available tests ($M_{diff} = 3.82$) than those in the low-importance condition ($M_{diff} = 2.00$). When submitted to a $2 \times 2$ ANOVA, this pattern produced a main effect for trait importance, $F(1, 32) = 6.14, p < .02$.

Additional analyses indicated that the different reactions of high- and low-importance subjects were due to other factors.
divergent perceptions of the importance of the trait. In an analysis of covariance, controlling for ratings of importance before conducting the ANOVA above, we found that the main effect of the trait importance manipulation became nonsignificant, \( F(1, 31) = 1.35 \).

As well, subjects’ preferences in the high-modifiability conditions showed no evidence of self-enhancement motives. Initial success or failure failed to influence desire for further feedback on either the rating or the ranking measure. Indeed, and counter to a self-enhancement view, subjects tended to prefer the feedback-available tests over the alternatives to a higher degree after failure than after success (see Table 1), although this tendency was far from statistically significant, \( F < 1 \).

**Rank-Order Measure**

As can be seen in Table 2, subjects’ rankings of the four tests mirrored the pattern of responses described above.

When the trait was described as stable, subjects displayed a stronger self-enhancing pattern in their rankings of the four tests when the trait was important as opposed to unimportant (see top panel of Table 2), giving rise to a significant interaction between initial performance and trait importance in these conditions, \( F(1, 30) = 8.49, p < .01 \). In the high-importance groups, subjects were more enthusiastic about feedback after success than after failure, \( t(15) = -2.57, p < .03 \). In contrast, subjects in the low-importance condition were more solicitous of feedback after failure as opposed to success, albeit to a nonsignificant degree, \( t(15) = 1.56 \).

Also mirroring results reported above, the greater enthusiasm for feedback after success as opposed to failure in the high-importance conditions was reduced when we accounted statistically for subjects’ reactions to their initial performance. When we controlled for subjects’ assessments of their integrative orientation ability or their satisfaction with their performance, the differences in feedback preferences between the high-importance success and failure subjects were eliminated (both \( t = -1.02 \) and \( t = -0.75 \) after accounting for ratings of ability and satisfaction, respectively).

However, when the trait was described as modifiable, imbuing the trait with importance prompted subjects to exhibit a self-assessment pattern. As can be seen in Table 2 (bottom half), a 2 (Initial Performance) × 2 (Trait Importance) ANOVA revealed that subjects gave higher rankings to feedback-available tests under high-importance conditions (\( M_r = 1.58 \)) than in low-importance groups (\( M_r = 1.88 \)), \( F(1, 31) = 8.20, p < .01 \). Initial success or failure had no impact on preferences for feedback, \( F = 2.58 \). One note, however, is necessary about these findings. When we conducted an analysis of covariance, partialing out subjects’ perceptions of the importance of the test, to see whether the impact of the importance manipulation was eliminated, we found that the effect of the manipulation remained significant, though reduced in magnitude, \( F(1, 30) = 5.50, p < .05 \).

**DISCUSSION**

When do people want to gain information about their abilities and proficiencies, and when do they wish to avoid it? In this article, we examined several factors that could contribute to people’s desire to garner feedback about the self.

In general, we found a strong tendency for subjects to desire information about themselves. Subjects were not indifferent between tests offering feedback and those not offering it. They preferred to take tests from which they could learn something about themselves. This was true when the ability under consideration was said to be consequential, but it was also true when subjects were told the ability was unimportant. Even when instructed that they would never be assessed on the trait of integrative orientation again and that having the ability was of no consequence, subjects still preferred tests that would provide feedback on their ability over tests that would not. In a sense, this pattern of responses speaks to a general motive for self-assessment: People desire to gain information about their abilities.

However, we wanted to examine how people’s motives might change as the trait under consideration became more consequential. Would the operation of self-enhancement motives or self-assessment motives be more predominant in such situations? The results described above revealed that both motives were evoked, within their proper sphere of influence, as the importance of the trait increased.

When subjects were told the trait was a fixed, unchangeable quality, their preferences were influenced by motives for self-enhancement as the trait became more important. When told integrative orientation was consequential, they were more enthusiastic about receiving further feedback after success as opposed to failure. No such pattern emerged for subjects told the ability was inconsequential.

These results replicate and reinforce the arguments of Brown (1990) concerning the impact of self-esteem motives on self-evaluation. Most important, the results suggest that it was, indeed, self-esteem motives that were the primary force producing differential reactions to initial success or failure in Brown’s studies. Self-esteem motives should be most evident when the domain is of consequence to the individual. It is under these conditions that initial success should inform the individual that he or she can attain favorable outcomes and maintain mastery over the world. It is under these circum-
stances that failure undermines such beliefs and is the most threatening. In contrast, when the domain is inconsequential, the individual's beliefs about his or her future well-being are not influenced by success or failure. Consequently, according to a self-enhancement model, expectations about success and failure should have little impact on people's desire for feedback about the self.

Nonetheless, while replicating and clarifying Brown's (1990) findings, the present experiment also revealed some limiting conditions. Subjects who were told the trait of integrative orientation was malleable showed no sign of self-protective biases. Instead, their preferences for further information about their ability were governed by instructions about the importance of the trait, as predicted by a self-assessment perspective. Subjects were more motivated to gain a more accurate impression of the self in the high-importance conditions, regardless of the potential favorability of that image, than in low-importance conditions.

Avenues for Future Research

The current findings present many issues for future research. One potentially profitable avenue focuses more closely on potential mediators and moderators of the effects discovered in this study. One possible mediator is test validity or diagnosticity. According to a self-assessment perspective, people desire to take tests that provide diagnostic feedback, not just any information (Strube et al., 1986; Trope, 1975, 1979, 1980; Trope & Brickman, 1975). Could task difficulty and instructions about trait importance, as well as information about trait modifiability, have influenced subjects' perceptions concerning the diagnosticity of the tests they were considering? And could those altered perceptions have influenced the desire for feedback? For example, we could speculate that subjects in the high-modifiability conditions may have viewed the tests we provided as less diagnostic than participants in the low-modifiability groups, for how can a single test accurately evaluate an ability that is said to fluctuate? We have no direct information regarding this question and others that could arise, and so they are worthy of future study.

However, one note is necessary about test validity and its possible role as an alternative explanation for some of the findings discussed above. One could argue that subjects, after failing in the high-importance, trait-not-modifiable conditions, may have viewed the test as relatively invalid and hence become less enthusiastic about receiving further feedback. Although this interpretation of that specific result is plausible, two points tend to undermine it. First, failure in the high-modifiability conditions and in the not-modifiable, low-importance conditions tended to make subjects desire more feedback, albeit to a nonsignificant degree. If failure led subjects to doubt the validity of the test in general, then these other subjects should also have been relatively uninterested in feedback. Second, in a study that closely resembles the present experiment, Brown (1990, Study 2) directly tested whether beliefs about test validity produced results similar to those found in our not-modifiable, high-importance condition. He found no evidence that the impact of success versus failure was due to differential beliefs about test validity.

A second avenue for future research focuses on why self-assessment motives may predominate over self-enhancement ones when people believe the trait to be malleable. As noted earlier, one possibility is that self-improvement or mastery concerns may override other motives, making people more interested in further feedback about their abilities. Another is that people can discount failures for malleable traits with greater ease than those for stable qualities, thus attenuating the impact of negative information. Future research could profitably focus on the relative contributions of these processes for the differential reactions of subjects when told that a trait is stable or changeable.

However, on reflection, another reason becomes clear that may explain why self-assessment motives may predominate over self-enhancement ones when the trait is modifiable. According to self-assessment theorists, people are interested in accurate impressions of the self to the extent that such knowledge leads to adaptive behavior—that is, leads them to make accurate choices about which actions to take to achieve positive outcomes (Trope, 1986). People want accurate self-knowledge to the extent that it can guide their behaviors and decisions, not only their outcomes, and that desire becomes stronger as the decision becomes an immediate one (see Festinger, 1954). Such concerns may have driven subjects' reactions in the present experiment. When the trait is malleable, accurate information can lead to immediate, transparent choices and decisions. Subjects in the current experiment, for example, could have been considering whether they should expend further effort to improve their integrative orientation ability. Further feedback in the high-modifiability conditions could have been valuable in making that decision, leading them to desire further feedback regardless of initial success or failure. However, when a trait is rather fixed, accurate self-knowledge may not educate the individual concerning what choices or decisions to make, at least not in a transparent, immediate sense. One either possesses or does not possess the trait, and there are no behavioral choices that can change that. Future research could examine whether the presence of immediate, salient decisions arouses self-assessment motives.

For another avenue of research, the present experiment also suggests a way to examine individual differ-
ences in self-assessment and self-enhancement motives. People differ in their tendency to engage in information seeking after success and failure, and that behavior may be governed by factors much like those discussed above. People differ in the importance they attach to any given trait (Marsh, 1993; Pelham & Swann, 1989). They also tend to differ in whether they believe that trait to be stable or modifiable, as is revealed in work on the distinction between mastery and helplessness orientations (Dweck, Hong, & Chiu, 1993; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Perhaps researchers could assess where individuals stand on their beliefs concerning trait importance and modifiability and then examine how self-esteem concerns and self-assessment motives govern their desire for feedback.

Accounting for such beliefs may go a long way toward explaining the diverse reactions people have when they are given opportunities to evaluate their competencies and proficiencies.

These thoughts about individual differences bring to mind another factor that may play an important role in self-enhancement and assessment motives. In the present experiment, we dealt with students who, largely, had positive views of themselves and their academic skills (in fact, a full 71% of subjects—50 out of 70—rated themselves as above the 50th percentile among Cornell students in integrative orientation skill before taking the verbal test). Although such favorable views of self are the rule in the general population (Alicke, 1985; Dunning et al., 1989; Weinstein, 1980), they are not shared by all. Some people in any domain have negative views of their skills, and some individuals possess unfavorable views about their worth in general. How might these people respond to opportunities to garner feedback about themselves?

Such a question comes into sharp focus when we consider the motive toward self-verification, the desire to confirm one’s view of oneself regardless of its favorability (Swann, Hixon, & De La Ronde, 1992; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992). Such self-verifying tendencies would prompt people with low self-regard to show signs of self-denigration, censoring feedback when expecting success and desiring feedback after failure. The role played by such self-views deserves further study, though we should note that Brown (1990) looked at the impact of positive versus negative self-evaluations in a study similar to the present one and found none.

**Concluding Remarks**

In sum, this experiment was just an initial step, attempting to sort out when people would act as self-assessors and when they would act as self-enhancers. The study focused on just two factors, trait importance and modifiability, but there are many other plausible factors to consider. It is hoped that researchers will begin to examine those factors more carefully, with an eye for the inevitably complicated picture that will emerge concerning the processes by which people examine their own abilities and come to some sort of self-understanding.

**NOTES**

1. Additional subjects were run whose responses were not included in the data analysis. By a priori decision, all data from seniors (n = 22) were excluded because the high-involvement manipulation was irrelevant to them (they had already taken or had begun preparing for postgraduate school exams). As well, the responses of subjects who were not native English speakers (n = 8) were excluded on an a priori basis. We allowed both groups of subjects to participate in the study to give them opportunities for extra credit. An additional 5 subjects were excluded because of their responses on suspiciousness probes, and 1 additional subject failed to complete the feedback preference questionnaire.

2. We did not collect data on the effectiveness of our modifiability manipulation in the present study, because we felt asking too many direct questions about our instructions might arouse suspiciousness. To gauge whether our modifiability instructions were effective, we ran an additional 28 subjects through the exact procedure of this study, up to the point when subjects begin taking the integrative orientation test. These subjects were asked, at the same point when they answered the other preliminary questions listed in the Method section, whether they believed the trait of integrative orientation was modifiable (i.e., “People can increase or decrease their ability . . . by practicing or not practicing”) or stable (i.e., “A person cannot increase or decrease their proficiency”). Subjects provided their perceptions on 9-point scales where higher numbers indicated that subjects believed the trait to be stable. A 2 (Trait Importance) x 2 (Trait Modifiability) ANOVA revealed that subjects receiving high-modifiability instructions perceived the trait to be less stable (M = 3.4) than those confronted with low-modifiability instructions (M = 6.3), F(1, 24) = 19.37, p < .001.

3. One subject failed to complete these posttest measures.

4. The rankings of one subject, whose data lay over 4 SDs away from the relevant group mean, are not included in this analysis. Preference rankings of feedback-not-available tests are not included in this analysis, because they are perfectly correlated with rankings of the feedback-available choices.

5. According to a self-assessment perspective, people will desire feedback about their abilities to the extent that they are uncertain about them (Sedikides, 1993; Trope, 1979; Trope & Ben-Yair, 1982). We therefore correlated subjects’ certainty in their self-evaluations on the ability with their desire for further feedback but found no significant association. Certainty in self-evaluations was not significantly correlated with preference ratings (ratings for feedback-available minus not available tests), r = .05, or direct rankings of the tests, r = .01. No significant correlations emerged in any individual cell of the design or in any concatenation of cells. As well, all the results reported in the text remain unchanged when we control for certainty in self-evaluation. Related to this issue, we also examined whether preferences for further feedback were influenced by the extent to which subjects’ performances “surprised” them (i.e., the score they obtained on the verbal test was far different from what they expected). This variable had no relationship to any measure of feedback desire.

**REFERENCES**


