On the Road to Self-Perception: Interpretation of Self-Behaviors Can Be Altered by Priming

John J. Skowronski,[1] Constantine Sedikides,[2] Jeremy D. Heider,[3] Sarah E. Wood,[4] and Cory R. Scherer[5]

[1]Northern Illinois University
[2]University of Southampton
[3]Stephen F. Austin State University
[4]University of Wisconsin–Stout
[5]Penn State University–Schuylkill

ABSTRACT   In 3 experiments, some participants read a story describing ambiguously mean behaviors performed by another person. Other participants read the story and imagined that they performed the behaviors. Results showed that (a) exposure to a conceptual priming manipulation caused assimilation effects in actor meanness judgments, regardless of whether the actor was self or other, (b) tasks designed neither to heighten self-concept accessibility nor to threaten the self moderated the effects of conceptual meanness primes on self-meanness judgments, and (c) this lack of moderation occurred despite considerable evidence of self–enhancement effects elsewhere in self-judgments. A fourth experiment examined the extent to which priming affected interpretations of real self or other behavior. Results were consistent with the idea that priming altered event interpretation and subsequent judgments but also suggested that judgments were influenced by self-enhancement motivation. Implications of the results for theorizing in personality and self-knowledge acquisition are discussed.

Research suggests that people can gain self-knowledge by making self-inferences from observations of their behavior (Schoeneman,

1981; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1995). One especially interesting perspective on self-inference comes from the study of behavior-induced attitude change. Theorists in this area (e.g., see Stone & Cooper, 2001) have proposed that actors sometimes do not know why they do what they do before they do it. Instead, actors may sometimes infer a behavior's meaning and make consequent self-inferences after the behavior's execution. For example, consider attempts at attitude change via induced compliance (e.g., Burger & Caldwell, 2003). A homeowner might be subtly induced to place a sign endorsing a politician in her front yard. If the induction is, indeed, subtle, the behavior's implication might only be deduced later, when the homeowner attempts to understand that behavior. One possibility is that the homeowner may realize that placing a sign in one's yard can mean that one supports a politician. Hence, she may conclude that she is a supporter

However, behaviors often can be indicative of any one of a number of attitudes, traits, goals, and motives. For example, being induced to install a yard sign could indicate that the homeowner is a conformist, one who gives in to pressure from persistent politicos. Alternatively, such behavior could indicate that the homeowner is too nice to say no to anyone, even pushy political hacks. The present article explores variables that might cause a self-inferencer to use one behavior meaning over another.

Priming and Self-Perception: A Brief Primer

Insight into this issue comes from studies of how perceivers construe others' behavior. One variable affecting perceivers' interpretations of others' ambiguous behaviors, and consequent inferences about those others, is construct accessibility (DeCoster & Claypool, 2004; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991). For example, imagine that a perceiver is exposed to a priming manipulation that heightens the accessibility of the trait construct *hostile*. Then, the perceiver reads a story in which a protagonist behaves in an ambiguous manner that could be construed as hostile. Results of studies investigating this exact situation show that perceivers treated in this manner rate the story's protagonist as especially hostile (Srull & Wyer, 1979). Similarly, individuals in whom the hostility construct is chronically accessible interpret others' ambiguous behaviors as especially threatening (Farc, Crouch, Skowronski, & Milner, 2008).

Surprisingly, there seems to be almost no comparable research examining interpretive ambiguity in trait self-perception. Although such ambiguity has been the focus of a few self-inference studies (Carpenter, 1988; Green & Sedikides, 2001; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1993), we are not aware of research that has used a priming manipulation to examine whether accessible constructs can influence peoples' construal of their own behaviors and alter subsequent self-judgments.

One of the reasons underlying this surprise is that prior research has already linked the technique of priming to the self. For example, research has often examined how priming alters self-behavior (e.g., Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2007; Wheeler, Morrison, DeMarree, & Petty, 2008). A typical result was produced by Marx and Stapel (2006). These researchers showed that primes designed to activate gender stereotypes sometimes reduced mathematics test performance in some females. However, that work was primarily concerned with how activation of constructs alters behavior, not with how activation of the self affects interpretation of self-behavior and subsequent self-inferences (the primary concern of the present article).

Another reason underlying the surprise is that priming techniques have already been used to influence self-judgments. For example, Stapel and his colleagues (Stapel & Koomen, 2001; Stapel & Suls, 2004) have manipulated self-judgments by using priming to alter the standards against which the self is judged. Other research has focused on how the activated construct itself might alter self-perceptions. Schubert and Häfner (2003) primed the construct *self* or *other*, examining how such priming altered self-evaluations that were made after also priming stereotypes of others. In a related finding, DeMarree, Wheeler, and Petty (2005) found that priming constructs can induce some to make self-judgments that reflect the construct activated by the prime. However, while showing that priming can be used to affect self-judgments, these studies have not shown that such effects can be accomplished by altering interpretations of self-behavior.

Nonetheless, two implications of these prior results are especially important for the present article. The first is that self-perceptions may exhibit temporal and cross-situational flexibility (DeSteno & Salovey, 1997): People do not think the same things about themselves all the time. Results from priming studies suggest that the memories, constructs, and categories that are momentarily accessible

can influence subsequent mental processes. Such influences can explain how short-term variations in the state of a judge's cognitive system ultimately impact judgments made about the self.

The second important implication of priming research for the present article is that activated constructs can, indeed, alter subsequent self-relevant processing and self-relevant judgments. For example, in DeMarree et al.'s (2005, Study 3) research, some participants exposed to a professor stereotype were especially influenced by a persuasive message. Analyses revealed that this influence occurred because the stereotype prompted enhanced consideration of message arguments. Such data provide indirect support for the idea that construct priming could alter the manner in which people process their own observations of self-behavior, which could ultimately affect self-judgments.

Accordingly, extrapolating from results reported in the other-perception literature, one might guess that priming manipulations should be especially likely to affect interpretations of self-behavior when both a behavior's trait implications and the motives prompting the behavior can be construed in a number of ways. Such construals should be consistent with the implication of the primed construct and should affect later self-judgments so that those judgments are especially trait congruent. For example, when the concept of *meanness* is cognitively accessible, one might be more likely to interpret an ambiguous self-behavior (e.g., telling a friend her haircut was ugly) as reflecting meanness rather than honesty (a viable alternative interpretation). Accordingly, self-judgments may reflect heightened meanness. Our research addresses this exact notion.

Will Self-Enhancement Tendencies Complicate Matters?

However, this idea, despite its compelling nature, may be overly simplistic. For example, there is a long history of research comparing self-perception to other-perception (e.g., Alicke & Govorun, 2005). One lesson from this literature is that, for both cognitive and motivational reasons, self-judgments and other-judgments made from the same objective data often differ (for an overview, see Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004; Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). One can use such results to argue that the construct activation effects so easily produced in the other-perception domain may not be so easily produced in the self-perception domain, especially when the judgments

to be made are negative. That is, one might suspect that, although it might be relatively easy to induce a perceiver to interpret another's ambiguous behavior as mean, similarly swaying interpretation of one's own ambiguous behavior might not be so easily accomplished.

One reason that it might be harder to prompt negative self-inferences than negative other-inferences is that people have more knowledge about themselves than about others (Kihlstrom, Beer, & Klein, 2003; Prentice, 1990). If one assumes that when making person judgments new information is integrated with old information, it should be harder for new information to alter an existing judgment when this judgment is based on a large corpus of information (as it is with the self) than when it is based on a small amount of information (as is the case with others; see Van Overwalle & Labiouse, 2004). Hence, any newly perceived behavior may have less impact on self- than other-judgments because the behavior's implications may be implicitly averaged with the implications of other stored judgment-applicable behaviors.

Of course, recent research has also demonstrated that it is often folly to focus solely on cognition without consideration of motivation (e.g., von Hippel, Lakin, & Shakarchi, 2005). Certainly, motives have often been invoked to account for differences in self-perception and other-perception. One of these motives may be the desire to self-enhance.[1] This desire is thought to be especially fundamental to self-perception (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003, 2008). Given the demonstrated strength of the tendency to enhance the self, the ability of priming manipulations to influence negative behavior interpretations and negative self-inferences may seem especially unlikely.

Existing studies relevant to this idea suggest that inducing a focus on the trait implications of negative self-behavior produces maximal attitude change, presumably as a consequence of heightened arousal caused by such a focus (Blanton, Cooper, Skurnik, & Aronson, 1997). These data imply that people may be particularly reluctant to alter self-views in the face of contradictory information, especially when those self-views are a focus of their attention. Indeed, in the present article, the potential importance of self-enhancement motivation to self-perception processes prompted empirical consider-

---

[1]We recognize the distinction between self-enhancement and self-protection motivation (Elliot & Mapes, 2005). However, for the sake of brevity, we will use the term *self-enhancement motivation* to refer to both.

ation of whether such motives could affect the emergence of differences in self-judgment and other-judgment in the context of our experiments.[2]

Research Overview

We report four experiments that explore these issues. All participants were students enrolled in psychology classes. They received course credit as compensation for participation and were fully debriefed at each experiment's conclusion.

These experiments explored whether (a) interpretations of ambiguous self-behaviors could be influenced by priming constructs that could affect interpretations of those behaviors, (b) these self-perception effects were similar in magnitude to the effects evinced in other-perception research, and (c) self-perception versus other-perception differences were consistent with the tendency to self-enhance.

Methodological Considerations

Given the goal to compare self-perception and other-perception, one difficult decision concerned how to equate self-perception and other-perception conditions. Our decision in Experiments 1 through 3 was to have participants read a hypothetical story describing actor behaviors. In one condition, participants were told that the actor was another person (*Terry*); in another condition, participants were told to imagine that *they* were the actor. This decision allowed us to use a well-explored methodology (the ambiguously hostile paragraph) in both other-perception (results from which are well established) and self-perception conditions.

However, one disadvantage, especially in the self-perception conditions, is the hypothetical nature of the scenarios. In this regard, we note that this decision was supported by the fact that self-enhancement evidence has emerged from a variety of self–other comparison experiments that have similarly implemented imaginary scenarios (Green, Pinter, & Sedikides, 2005; Green & Sedikides, 2004; Green,

---

[2]Our intent in the research depicted in the present article was not to disentangle motivational and cognitive explanations for self–other differences. Indeed, history shows that both may contribute to such differences. Instead, we mention both to suggest that there are good theoretical reasons to expect self-other differences in judgment to emerge.

Sedikides, & Gregg, 2008; Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Green, 2000, 2004). Nonetheless, we responded to these qualms by conducting Experiment 4, which looked at the extent to which self-perceptions might be altered in the context of behaviors prompted by experimenters in a variant of an induced compliance paradigm.

EXPERIMENT 1

Overview

Some participants completed a sentence-unscrambling task (adapted from Srull & Wyer, 1979) designed to heighten the accessibility of the construct *mean*. Others engaged in a task that was not expected to activate that construct. Later, participants read a paragraph depicting an actor whose behaviors were ambiguously mean. Some were told that the behaviors described a hypothetical target (Terry); others were told to imagine that these were behaviors they had performed themselves. Subsequently, participants provided trait judgments of the target; one of the traits assessed was meanness.

Plausible Alternative Patterns of Results

Either of two sets of results seemed plausible. The first is that hostility priming effects may operate relatively autonomously, so that both self-perception and other-perception conditions would show evidence of priming effects and would do so equally. However, the tradition of self-other differences in judgment suggests that such equality may not emerge. If self-enhancing tendencies intervene in the self-judgment process, then hostility priming effects may be especially strong in other-perceptions relative to self-perceptions.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and nineteen students participated in groups of up to four. Assignment to condition was random, with the exception that all participants within a given session were assigned to the same condition.

Procedure

Priming task. On arrival at the laboratory, participants were handed several packets of "verbal skills tasks" to be completed sequentially. The

tasks were completed at individual stations separated by partitions. The first packet contained a sentence unscrambling task. Participants were given 8 min to rearrange each of 60 scrambled word sequences into a grammatical sentence containing at least 3 words. All sequences were between four and six words in length, and each had at least one possible solution.

In the *high meanness priming* condition, 50 of the 60 word sequences were intended, when unscrambled, to prime *meanness* (e.g., "cat the kick his" could be rearranged to "kick the cat" or "kick his cat"). In *the low meanness priming* condition, only 20 word sequences could be unscrambled to form sentences that implied meanness. The noncritical word sequences in these two conditions, when unscrambled, did not yield sentences that implied meanness. Finally, in the *neutral priming* conditions, none of the word sequences could be unscrambled to form sentences reflecting meanness.

Word find task.   The second packet, a word find task, gave credibility to the cover story and provided a 6-min time lag between the priming task and the person judgment task. In a 15×15 letter grid, participants tried to find as many of 36 hidden (and meanness-neutral) words as possible. The words were placed across, down, diagonally, and backwards in the matrix. No participant found all the words.

Descriptive paragraph.   The next packet contained a paragraph (adapted from Srull & Wyer, 1979) that described the behaviors of an actor. Some behaviors in the paragraph were ambiguously mean. Each behavior was accompanied by qualifying situational information designed to further weaken the trait implications of the behavior (e.g., yelled at a referee for making a bad call, but everyone else yelled at the referee, too). Participants read the paragraph at their own pace.

In the *self* condition, participants imagined that they were meeting someone new and that this new person wanted to know, before meeting, what the participant was like. Participants imagined that, in response to this request, they generated the paragraph as a description of a recent day spent with a friend. Accordingly, the paragraph in this condition described the behaviors of an actor who was referred to by the pronouns *I*, *me*, or *my*. Instructions stressed that these pronouns were to be interpreted as a reference to the self. Participants read the vignette and were told to use the information in the story to think about the kinds of personality characteristics they might have *based on the story*.

Participants in the *Terry* condition imagined they were to meet someone named *Terry* and the paragraph described Terry's recent day with a

friend. All behaviors described Terry; otherwise, the paragraph was the same one used in the self condition. Participants were told to consider the paragraph's implications for Terry's personality.

Trait rating task.   Next, participants provided trait ratings of themselves (in the *self* conditions) or of Terry (in the *Terry* conditions) on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*). Eight traits were semantically related to meanness (*aggressive, closed-minded, cold, hostile, ill-tempered, mean, rude, unfriendly*). Six traits were semantically unrelated to meanness, but were affectively positive (*creative, honest, intelligent, interesting, reliable, spiritual*). Two traits were semantically unrelated to meanness and were affectively negative (*disorganized, undependable*).

Results

Target Meanness

The eight meanness-related items exhibited excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$). The items were averaged to form a single meanness index, which was submitted to a 3 (Prime Type: high meanness priming, low meanness priming, neutral priming) $\times$ 2 (Paragraph Target: self, Terry) between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Results revealed that participants who had been frequently primed with meanness rated the target as meaner ($M = 5.78$) than those who had been infrequently primed ($M = 5.34$) or those who were not primed ($M = 4.99$), $F(2, 213) = 3.71$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .033$. Subsidiary Tukey tests ($\alpha = .05$) revealed that only the frequent priming condition mean differed from the control condition mean. Importantly, this prime type main effect was not qualified by an interaction with paragraph target, $F(2, 213) < 1$: The primes increased meanness ratings of both the self and Terry and did so to an equal extent.[3]

Target Traits Semantically Unrelated to Meanness

Two outcomes were expected from analysis of the nonmeanness trait ratings. One, derived from results of prior studies, was that the priming manipulation should have a relatively small effect on such trait ratings (see DeCoster & Claypool, 2004). The second expected

[3]If the *F* value for an effect is not reported, it was not statistically significant.

outcome, derived from expectations about the action of the self-enhancement motive (Sedikides & Strube, 1997), was that people should be more positive about themselves than about others

To explore this idea, after the two affectively negative trait ratings were reverse scored, correlations among the eight items were examined. The items exhibited moderate internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .55$). They were averaged to form a single positivity index, which was submitted to a 3 (Prime Type: high meanness priming, low meanness priming, neutral priming) × 2 (Paragraph Target: self, Terry) between-subjects ANOVA.

Results showed that the priming manipulation did not affect these ratings, $F(2, 213) < 1$. Moreover, ratings on these traits were only minimally more positive when the target was the self ($M = 5.25$) than Terry ($M = 5.10$), $F(1, 213) = 1.44$, $p = .23$, $\eta^2 = .007$. The interaction between these two variables was not significant, $F(2, 213) < 1$.

Discussion

The results of Experiment 1 show that (a) the priming manipulation increased meanness ratings for targets who behaved in an ambiguously mean manner, but the manipulation did not affect nonmeanness trait ratings and (b) these effects emerged regardless of whether the target was the self or another (Terry). Hence, the data support the notion that people's self-construals can be altered by priming, even when those construals prompt people to make negative self-inferences. The operation of the self-enhancement motive would have predicted alternative results. If this motive were operational, the effects of the priming manipulation should have been moderated by target type, and judgments should have been more positive for the self than for Terry.

However, the failure to obtain such effects may have been caused by the fact that experimental paradigm did not strongly activate the self or did not strongly prompt the self-enhancement motive. People may not have felt threatened by the negative behavior interpretations, or they may have not been threatened by assigning negative trait ratings to themselves based on those behaviors. This interpretation is consistent not only with the meanness judgment data but with the observation that judgments on the nonmeanness traits were not significantly more positive for the self than for Terry.

EXPERIMENT 2

Accordingly, we reasoned that self-enhancement tendencies might be especially likely to emerge if the self-concept was made more accessible prior to reading the story. Such a possibility is suggested by Stapel and Koomen's (2001) research, in which heightened self-activation increased self-serving social comparisons, and by Blanton et al.'s (1997) data suggesting heightened dissonance under high self-focus.

Accordingly, in Experiment 2 some participants completed the Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) prior to engaging in the priming task. Although the test is often used to assess the self-concept (Jackson & Smith, 1999; Rees & Nicholson, 1994), we reasoned that it could be used as a priming manipulation. The test repeatedly presents the pronoun *I*, which should increase the accessibility of the self-concept (for a similar technique, see Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Similarly, in a manner comparable to manipulations used in studies of attitude accessibility (Powell & Fazio, 1984), the answers provided by participants should increase the accessibility of specific self-content areas, which are most likely positive (e.g., "*I am kind*"). Other participants (*no self-priming* conditions) completed statements about 20 inanimate objects (e.g. "*A rock is . . .*"). These participants should experience minimal increases in the activation of self-related constructs.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 247$) experienced a procedure closely resembling that used in Experiment 1. Deviations from the Experiment 1 procedure are detailed below.

Priming Task

The sentence unscrambling task embodied only two levels of the meanness priming manipulation: *meanness prime* and *no meanness prime*. The word sequences used in the meanness prime condition were identical to those used in the *high meanness prime* condition of Experiment 1; the sentences used in the no meanness prime condition were identical to those used in the *neutral* condition of Experiment 1.

Stem Completion Task

Prior to engaging in the sentence unscrambling task, participants worked on a stem completion task for 5 min. They were given a series of sentence stems and completed each stem with whatever words or phrases they felt were appropriate. The stems presented varied by condition. In the *self-priming* conditions, participants described themselves by completing the stem "*I am ...*" 20 times (i.e., they completed the Twenty Statements Test). In the *no self-priming* conditions, participants described 20 everyday objects by completing stems such as "*The sky is ...*" and "*The ocean is ...*"

Results

Meanness Trait Ratings

The eight meanness-related items were averaged to form a single meanness index (Cronbach's α = .91). The index was entered into a 2 (Prime Type: meanness prime, no meanness prime) × 2 (Stem Completion Target: self-priming, no self-priming) × 2 (Paragraph Target: self, Terry) between-subjects ANOVA.

Results showed that participants exposed to the meanness primes rated the target as meaner (M = 5.16) than those who were not primed (M = 4.76), $F(1, 239)$ = 2.92, p = .089, η^2 = .012. This tendency did not interact with paragraph target, $F(1, 239)<1$. The equivalence of effects for self and Terry might lead some to claim that this task (e.g., because of low self-involvement) might be immune to self-enhancement effects. However, this argument is inconsistent with the fact that participants rated the self (M = 4.73) as less mean than Terry (M = 5.20), $F(1, 239)$ = 4.04, $p<.046$, η^2 = .017. Finally, there was no effect of exposure to the task designed to manipulate self-concept accessibility: The main effect of the stem completion target variable was not statistically significant, nor did it interact with other variables, all Fs $(1, 239)<1$.

Traits Semantically Unrelated to Meanness

After the two negative nonmeanness trait ratings were reverse scored, the ratings provided by each participant on all the nonmeanness traits were averaged (Cronbach's α = .58) to form a single positivity index. The index was entered into a 2 (Prime Type: meanness prime, no meanness prime) × 2 (Stem Completion Target:

self-priming, no self-priming) $\times$ 2 (Paragraph Target: self, Terry) between-subjects ANOVA.

Results showed that participants who completed the self version of the stem completion task rated the target more positively ($M = 5.82$) than those who did not ($M = 5.53$), $F(1, 239) = 3.97$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .015$. In addition, ratings of the self ($M = 5.88$) were more positive than ratings of Terry ($M = 5.49$), $F(1, 239) = 7.06$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .028$. This latter effect makes it difficult to claim that the task is immune to self-enhancement effects. These effects, though, were qualified by a triple interaction, $F(1, 239) = 6.25$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .024$. We proceeded by conducting two-way analyses separately for participants who did receive meanness primes and those who did not.

No significant effects emerged for those who received meanness primes, largest $F(1, 120) = 1.51$, $p = .22$. In contrast, for those who did not receive meanness primes, the analysis yielded a Stem Completion Target $\times$ Paragraph Target interaction, $F(1, 119) = 5.30$, $p = .023$, $\eta^2 = .021$. The tendency to rate the self more positively than Terry was restricted to the self-priming condition ($M_{self} = 6.55$, $M_{Terry} = 5.53$), $p < .01$. The paragraph target means in the no self-priming condition did not differ significantly ($M_{self} = 5.53$, $M_{Terry} = 5.44$). A follow-up analysis conducted on data provided by participants who did not receive meanness primes also yielded a stem completion target main effect, $F(1, 119) = 7.57$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2 = .029$: Participants who completed the self-activation version of the task ($M = 6.06$) rated the target more positively than those who did not ($M = 5.49$). The paragraph target main effect in this subsidiary analysis was also significant, $F(1, 119) = 7.73$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .031$: Participants rated the self more positively ($M = 6.06$) than Terry ($M = 5.49$). However, interpretation of these two main effects is obviously qualified by the two-way interaction between them.

Discussion

Priming the concept of meanness exacerbated meanness judgments of an ambiguously behaving actor. This effect applied equally to meanness ratings of Terry and the self. The equivalence of this effect suggests that self-enhancement motivation did not interfere with ability of the priming manipulation to influence construal of self-behaviors as mean and with the corresponding increases in self-judgments of meanness.

Interestingly, this lack of evidence for self-enhancement in re-sponse to the priming manipulation emerged despite evidence for self-enhancement elsewhere. This evidence emerged in two places. First, participants rated the self as less mean than Terry. Second, on traits that were semantically unrelated to meanness, participants rated the self more positively than Terry, especially after heightened activation of the self-concept (i.e., exposure to the stem completion task). This latter result suggests that the self-priming manipulation used in Experiment 2 did, indeed, activate the self. Moreover, this evidence suggests that this self-activation did, indeed, instantiate the self-enhancement motive.

EXPERIMENT 3

Experiment 3 searched again for evidence that self-enhancement tendencies would moderate effects of the meanness primes on self-judgments of meanness. Building on relevant research (Blanton et al., 1997; Campbell & Sedikides, 1999), we reasoned that threat-ening the self would invoke self-protection motives, which would de-crease the likelihood that individuals would rate themselves as mean. Accordingly, in Experiment 3 some participants completed a prob-ability judgment task designed not only to activate the self, but also to threaten the self. Other participants completed a probability judg-ment task designed to both activate and enhance the self. Hence, any effects of the self-threat manipulation should be attributable to the self-threat rather than to the self-activation aspect of the probability judgment task. Two other conditions exposed participants to prob-ability judgment tasks in which *other people* were threatened or enhanced. These were included to ensure that it was self-threat, and not the simple presence of negative stimuli, that were responsible for effects of the self-threat manipulation.

Experiment 3 also introduced additional target trait ratings. These addressed two issues. The first concerns specificity of priming effects on trait judgments. This specificity has indicated that priming effects occur strongly in judgments of primed traits but weakly in judgments of nonprimed traits. This result is consistent with a model suggesting that priming effects occur because primes activate semantically rel-evant trait constructs, which influence interpretation of ambiguous behaviors; those interpretations contribute to extremitized judg-ments of the target on that trait construct. However, trait judgments

can be also characterized by halo effects in which an extreme trait judgment on one trait can influence judgments of a target on other affectively related traits, despite relative semantic unrelatedness among the traits. Given the ubiquitous presence of such halo effects in the trait judgment literature (Wetzel, Wilson, & Kort, 1981), it is surprising that the effects of priming manipulations have exhibited high specificity.

Reasons for this result may lie in psychometrics. The internal consistencies of the positivity indices in both Experiments 1 and 2 were substantially lower than the internal consistencies of the meanness indices. Low internal consistency could cause analyses involving the positivity index to have low power. Moreover, additional analyses suggested that the internal consistency on ratings of traits semantically unrelated to meanness would have been higher if this index had been composed of only the six positive items. Arguably, then, there ought to be two separate scales of items that are semantically unrelated to meanness, one composed primarily of positive items and a second composed primarily of negative items. Accordingly, we added trait judgments that could be used to create these two separate trait-affect indices. These new indices would hopefully exhibit higher reliability than the indices used previously and, hence, would be more sensitive to the halo effects that might accompany priming effects.

There was a second reason to include additional trait ratings. We were interested in whether the meanness primes would alter participants' ability to arrive at a plausible alternative interpretation of the behaviors—that they reflected assertiveness, not meanness. Additional discriminative validity evidence for the process underlying the priming manipulation would show that it did not affect this plausible alternative interpretation of the key story behaviors. Accordingly, we added eight trait ratings probing perceptions of a target's assertiveness.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Five hundred and nineteen participants engaged in a procedure similar to that used in Experiment 2. Deviations from that procedure are noted below.

Computer Administration

Instructions and data collection proceeded via computers controlled by MediaLab experimental software (Jarvis, 2001).

Event Probability Task

Participants completed an event probability judgment task: They estimated the probability of occurrence of 10 events. Each event began with probability information supposedly provided by experts in the area. Next, participants provided their own estimate of the likelihood of event occurrence.

The content of the items varied by condition. In the *self* condition, participants considered their own chances of experiencing the event (e.g., "Some experts have claimed that because of widespread gun availability, 1 out of every 6 people will be the victim of a shooting. What do you think your chances are of being the victim of a shooting?"). In the *other* condition, participants considered other peoples' chances of experiencing each event. Judged events also varied in terms of valence. In the *threat* condition, participants considered the occurrence of negative life events; in the *enhancement* condition, the events were all positive. Participants responded to each item by providing a numerical probability estimate ranging from 0% to 100%.

Task Order Manipulation

Half of the participants completed the event probability task before they completed the word sequence unscrambling task. The remaining half completed the tasks in the reverse order.

Trait Rating Task

After reading the descriptive paragraph, participants rated the actor (either themselves or Terry) on a series of personality traits. Eight of these traits related to meanness (*aggressive*, *closed-minded*, *cold*, *hostile*, *ill-tempered*, *mean*, *rude*, *unfriendly*), eight related to assertiveness (*assertive*, *commanding*, *direct*, *firm*, *forceful*, *insistent*, *outspoken*, *resolute*), eight were positive traits that were semantically unrelated to meanness (*creative*, *fashionable*, *idealistic*, *interesting*, *logical*, *reliable*, *sincere*, *spiritual*), and eight were negative traits that were semantically unrelated to meanness (*disobedient*, *disorganized*, *dull*, *incompetent*, *lazy*, *nosey*, *shallow*, *stupid*). Participants rated each trait on a 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*) scale.

The traits were arranged in eight blocks of four. The scales were presented to participants with two constraints on presentation order. One constraint was that each block contained one of the four trait types described in the passages above. The second constraint was that traits from the same category could not occur consecutively.

Results

Event Probability Estimates

Responses to this task provide insight into the extent to which events were, indeed, threatening. The probability estimates obtained from each participant were submitted to a 2 (Event Probability Task Target: self, other) × 2 (Event Probability Task Valence: threat, enhancement) × 2 (Prime Type: meanness primes, no meanness primes) × 2 (Task Counterbalancing: event probability task first, priming task first) between-subjects ANOVA.[4]

Consistent with the high threat level of the negative events, participants who received the threatening version of the task overwhelmingly assigned a lower probability to an event's occurrence ($M = 22.9\%$) than those who received the flattering version ($M = 55.3\%$), $F(1, 497) = 905.52$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .623$. The analysis also yielded a significant Probability Task Valence × Probability Task Target interaction, $F(1, 497) = 9.85$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .007$. Simple effects analyses (conducted at $p < .05$) indicated that participants assigned lower probabilities to threatening events when the target was the self ($M_{self} = 21.1\%$, $M_{other} = 24.8\%$); similarly, they assigned higher probabilities to flattering events when the target was the self ($M_{self} = 56.9\%$, $M_{other} = 53.8\%$). This pattern is consistent with the self-enhancement perspective.

Trait Ratings

Meanness. Responses to the eight meanness-related items were averaged to form a single meanness index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$). The index was submitted to a 2 (Event Probability Task Target: self, other) × 2 (Event Probability Task Valence: threat, enhancement) × 2 (Prime Type: meanness primes, no meanness primes) × 2 (Paragraph Target: self, Terry) × 2 (Task Counterbalancing: event probability task first, priming task first) between-subjects ANOVA.

Results showed that those who received meanness primes ($M = 5.08$) rated the target as meaner than those who were not

---

[4]Given that the paragraph target manipulation (self or Terry) occurred after the probability task, that manipulation could not produce meaningful effects on the probability estimates. Hence, it was not included in analyses of the probability estimates.

primed ($M = 4.75$), $F(1, 484) = 4.55$, $p = .033$, $\eta^2 = .009$. This tendency did not interact with paragraph target, $F(1, 484) < 1$. Hence, self-enhancement tendencies seemingly did not moderate the impact of the primes on meanness judgments. The absence of such influence occurred despite evidence that self-enhancement motivation did otherwise impact those judgments: Participants rated the self as less mean ($M = 4.76$) than Terry ($M = 5.07$), $F(1, 484) = 4.11$, $p = .043$, $\eta^2 = .008$.

Assertiveness.   Ratings on the eight assertiveness-related items were averaged to form an assertiveness index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). The index was submitted to a 2 (Event Probability Task Target: self, other) × 2 (Event Probability Task Valence: threat, enhancement) × 2 (Prime Type: meanness primes, no meanness primes) × 2 (Paragraph Target: self, Terry) × 2 (Task Counterbalancing: event probability task first, priming task first) between-subjects ANOVA. Results showed that the priming task did not affect assertiveness judgments, $F(1, 486) < 1$.

Positive traits.   Responses to the eight nonmeanness traits characterized as positive were averaged to form a single index of positivity (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). This index was submitted to a 2 (Event Probability Task Target: self, other) × 2 (Event Probability Task Valence: threat, enhancement) × 2 (Prime Type: meanness primes, no meanness primes) × 2 (Paragraph Target: self, Terry) × 2 (Task Counterbalancing: event probability task first, priming task first) between-subjects ANOVA. Consistent with the self-enhancement view,[5] participants rated the self more positively ($M = 5.71$) than Terry ($M = 4.68$), $F(1, 486) = 69.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .113$.

---

[5]This conclusion is tempered by the presence of an unexpected five-way interaction, $F(1,486) = 4.49$, $p = .035$, $\eta^2 = .007$. Past experience suggests skepticism about such interactions until they are replicated. Moreover, examination of the means for the interaction suggested that the mean primes interacted with the other variables in complex ways, sometimes lowering and sometimes increasing the positivity ratings. Thus, even if replicated, the exact theoretical meaning of this interaction is currently unclear. Accordingly, we omit extensive discussion of the interaction. However, the presence of this an interaction is useful in that it stands in contrast to the *absence* of such interactions in the meanness ratings. This discrepancy suggests that the (probably semantic) constructs that drove the meanness ratings differed from the (probably evaluative) constructs that drove the positivity index ratings.

Negative traits.   Ratings to the eight nonhostile negative traits were averaged to form a single negativity index (Cronbach's α = .76). This index was submitted to a 2 (Event Probability Task Target: self, other) × 2 (Event Probability Task Valence: threat, enhancement) × 2 (Prime Type: meanness primes, no meanness primes) × 2 (Paragraph Target: self, Terry) × 2 (Task Counterbalancing: event probability task first, priming task first) between-subjects ANOVA.

Results showed that participants primed with meanness (M = 3.86) rated the target more negatively than those who were not primed (M = 3.68), $F(1, 484)$ = 3.28, p = .071, η^2 = .006. However, consistent with results of the meta-analysis of DeCoster and Claypool (2004), this result is somewhat weaker than the comparable significant result for the meanness index. This differential again suggests that the semantic effects of the priming manipulation (e.g., on meanness) are stronger than the evaluative effects.

Moreover, the relative independence of effects on the two indices is emphasized by the fact that some effects emerged for the negativity index that were not present in the analysis of the meanness index. Participants receiving the flattering version of the probability task (M = 3.91) rated the target of the descriptive paragraph more negatively than those receiving the threatening version (M = 3.63), $F(1, 484)$ = 6.97, p = .009, η^2 = .014. A Paragraph Target × Task Counterbalancing interaction also emerged, $F(1, 484)$ = 5.42, p = .02, η^2 = .011. Participants who completed the priming task first tended to rate the self (M = 3.99) more negatively than Terry (M = 3.67), p = .063; this did not occur (with the difference being nonsignificant) for participants who completed the event probability judgment task first (M_{self} = 3.62, M_{Terry} = 3.80).

Discussion

Priming the *meanness* construct had assimilative effects on meanness judgments. This effect occurred equally for Terry and the self. This lack of self-enhancement moderation of the priming effect occurred despite substantial evidence of self-enhancement tendencies elsewhere in the data: The self was judged to be less mean than Terry and was judged to be more positive than Terry.

Moreover, inducing self-threat also did not moderate the impact of the meanness primes on self-judgments of meanness, despite the fact that exposure to self-threat affected other trait judgments. Of

course, one might argue that the threat manipulation was impotent. Although this claim is not consistent with the low probabilities assigned to threatening events, we did not include a manipulation check to directly assess the manipulation's potency. To remedy this circumstance, we asked a separate group of participants to read the negative items, then to complete ratings of the extent to which the items felt threatening to them ($0 = no\ threat$, $5 = high\ threat$). These ratings were compared to the ratings obtained from a group of probability items that were deemed to be neutral. As expected, the threatening items did, indeed, produce substantially higher threat levels ($M = 1.67$), than the neutral items ($M = .95$), $F(1, 40) = 12.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .191$. Hence, a threat impotency explanation for the inability of the threat manipulation to alter self-judgments of hostility does not seem tenable.

EXPERIMENT 4

Experiments 1 through 3 produced results consistent with the notion that differences in construct accessibility could alter interpretations of self-behaviors, which then altered self-judgments. However, because of the hypothetical scenarios used in Experiments 1–3, it remains to be seen whether similar effects will occur when people engage in real behaviors. Moreover, the use of real behaviors would also seemingly provide more favorable circumstances for investigating whether negative self-inference making tendencies might be altered by self-enhancement motives.

Experiment 4 explored such issues. It did do by (1) priming one of two constructs (*dishonest* or *helpful*), (2) asking people to tell lies about themselves, and (3) assessing whether the lie telling altered self-perceptions. We reasoned that if the lie telling was induced without excessive situational pressure (as in induced compliance attitude-change paradigms), the prime could alter peoples' interpretations of their own behavior: Lie tellers primed with the construct *liar* might perceive themselves to be especially dishonest, but lie tellers primed with *helpful* might perceive themselves to be especially helpful. Of course, if self-enhancement motivation is operative, it might be easier to influence judgments of helpfulness than of dishonesty.

We tried to set up parallel conditions in an informant-perception condition. Participants in this condition were exposed to (1) a

manipulation in which one of two constructs (*dishonest* or *helpful*) was primed and (2) a video of an informant conveying fictional self-stories. Questionnaire responses assessed whether the priming manipulation altered informant perceptions of informants.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and forty students, randomly assigned to condition, participated.

Procedure

On arrival at the laboratory, participants were told that they would engage in several verbal and perceptual tasks. One of these tasks was designed to study the characteristics of the stories that people tell. One element of the study involved comparing characteristics of stories that are true with characteristics of fictional stories.

Self conditions. Participants in the self condition were told that the experimenters would appreciate it if the participant provided some fictitious stories for the experiment, for these were especially hard to get. As in the induced compliance paradigms used in cognitive dissonance experiments, the experimenter avoided the appearance of overly pressuring the participant, attempting to maintain the illusion of free choice.

After agreeing to provide fictional stories (all participants agreed), participants were told that the research team first wanted to collect information about participant attentional abilities. This ruse allowed participants to experience a subliminal priming manipulation. Some participants encountered primes designed to activate the construct *dishonest*; others encountered primes designed to activate the construct *helpful*.

The procedure was similar to that used by Farc et al. (2008). The task was presented using DirectRT software on a Dell-XPS widescreen, high resolution laptop computer. Participants were asked to place their chin in a Lafayette Instruments head-chin rest (model 13402) with the screen display located 60 cm in front of the participant and elevated so that the midpoint of the screen was at eye level. During the vigilance task, participants were asked to keep their eyes focused on an asterisk that appeared in the center of the screen display. Each stimulus word was presented at one of four locations equidistant from the fixation point (i.e., 4.82 cm) for 80 ms, followed by a 100-ms nonsensical masking letter string (e.g., xqfbrmqwgbx). More specifically, words were positioned according

to Bargh and Chartrand's (2000) formula for locating the parafovial visual region ($d = D *$ tan $4.6°$, where d represents the distance from the participant's eyes and the fixation point located at the center of the computer monitor).

The word list for the liar priming condition included the words *liar*, *dishonest*, *deceitful*, *hypocrite*, *false*, *fibber*, *cheater*, and *deceiver*. The word list for the helper priming condition were *helpful*, *aid*, *assist*, *benefit*, *charitable*, *giving*, *collaborate*, and *generous*. The words were repeated so that there was 50% saturation for terms related to the target construct. The neutral stimulus word set was identical to that used by Farc et al. (2008): *water*, *long*, *number*, *people*, *what*, *little*, *many*, *something*, *together*, *different*, *between*, *said*, *every*, *another*, *always*, and *there*. Each word list was presented 12 times (resulting in a total of 96 trials), with the order of word presentation randomized within blocks (a block equals one set of 16 stimulus words).

A recognition memory test followed the priming task. It was designed to determine the degree to which participants were aware of the priming stimuli. The test included 48 items, which consisted of the 12 priming words, 12 conceptually similar words not presented during the vigilance task (prime distracters), 12 neutral priming words, and 12 neutral words not used in the vigilance task (neutral distracters). During the recognition task participants were instructed to read each word and to indicate whether they had seen it during the vigilance task.

After completion of the recognition test, participants were told that they would next be telling five fictional autobiographical stories and that the stories would be recorded. They were given 10 min to prepare those stories and were given paper to compose notes. After the 10 min had elapsed, participants were seated in front of a video camera and were asked to relate each story, one at a time. They were asked to adopt a conversational style, as if they were talking to a friend or family member.

After conveying the stories, participants were told that they would provide information so that experimenters could better understand and interpret the stories that were told. After completing demographic items in the questionnaire packet, participants responded to questions about the personality traits that might be characteristic of them. Among the traits rated were several related to helpfulness (*helpful*, *generous*, *charitable*, *altruistic*, *unselfish*, *compassionate*, *empathetic*, *giving*), and several related to dishonesty (*dishonest*, *untruthful*, *lying*, *deceptive*, *hypocritical*, *insincere*, *treacherous*, *devious*). Responses were made on a 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*) scale.

Participants in the *self-rating control condition* went through this entire procedure, but the personality measure was collected prior to the other tasks. Hence, this condition serves as a baseline for self-personality

judgments; those should be unaffected by the other manipulations used in the experiment.

Informant condition.   Participants in the informant condition were told that other participants had provided stories about themselves and had committed them to video. The experimenter indicated that they were interested in both fictional and true autobiographical stories but that it was especially hard to get fictional stories. They expressed appreciation for those who provided fictional stories and indicated that the participant would see a video of an informant who had done so.

Participants then were exposed to the same priming task described for those in the self condition. After completion of the priming task, participants viewed a video of an informant conveying five autobiographical stories (all participants viewed the same video). Participants were reminded that the stores were fictional, and experimenters again indicated how thankful they were that some participants chose to convey such stories.

After viewing the tape, participants were told that the experimenters wanted to collect some information about how the participants viewed the informant so that they could better understand and interpret the stories that were told. Participants were given a questionnaire packet to complete. In the questionnaire packet, participants responded to questions about the personality traits that they thought were characteristic of the informant. These traits were the same ones rated by those in the self condition.

Participants in the *informant rating control condition* went through this entire procedure, but the trait rating measure was collected prior to the other tasks. Hence, this condition serves as a baseline for informant judgments; those should be unaffected by the other manipulations used in the experiment.

Results

Subliminality Check: Recognition Test

Results from the word recognition test suggested that the words were not consciously recognized: Participants had only a 50% chance of being correct when guessing at whether a given word was presented during the vigilance task. More specifically, correct responses occurred at a chance level for helpful ($M = .51$, $SD = .05$), dishonest ($M = .50$, $SD = .04$), and neutral ($M = .49$, $SD = .04$) word sets.

Helpfulness.   Responses to the eight helpfulness-related items were averaged to form a single helpfulness index (Cronbach's

$\alpha = .86$). It was entered into a 2 (Target: self, other) $\times$ 3 (Priming Condition: dishonest, helpful, control) between-subjects ANOVA.

Participants who received helpfulness primes ($M = 6.02$) rated the target as more helpful than those who were not primed ($M = 5.19$) or who were primed with the dishonest construct ($M = 5.09$), $F(2, 234) = 5.52$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .043$. Moreover, self-judgments of helpfulness ($M = 5.90$) were higher than judgments of informant helpfulness ($M = 4.97$), $F(1, 234) = 5.16$, $p = .025$, $\eta^2 = .020$. However, interpretations of both main effects are qualified by a significant Target $\times$ Priming Condition interaction, $F(2, 234) = 3.87$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .030$. Means for this interaction show that the priming manipulation substantially increased self-judgments of helpfulness ($M = 6.64$) relative to judgments in the other two priming conditions (dishonest prime $M = 5.48$, no prime control $M = 5.58$). The same pattern emerged in the informant condition, but the magnitude of the increase in judged helpfulness in the helpful prime condition was smaller (helpful prime $M = 5.43$; dishonest prime $M = 4.70$; no prime control $M = 4.79$).

Dishonesty.   Responses to the eight dishonesty-related items were averaged to form a single dishonesty index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). It was submitted to a 2 (Target: self, other) $\times$ 3 (Priming Condition: dishonest, helpful, control) between-subjects ANOVA.

Participants who received dishonesty primes ($M = 5.64$) rated the target as more dishonest than those who were not primed ($M = 4.64$) or who were primed with the helpfulness construct ($M = 4.76$), $F(2, 234) = 4.37$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .033$. Moreover, self-judgments of dishonesty ($M = 4.65$) were lower than judgments of informant dishonesty ($M = 5.38$), $F(1, 234) = 9.26$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .035$. However, interpretations of both main effects are qualified by a significant Target $\times$ Priming Condition interaction, $F(2, 234) = 6.35$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .048$. Means for this interaction show that the priming manipulation substantially increased self-judgments of dishonesty ($M = 5.02$) relative to judgments in the other two priming conditions (helpful prime $M = 4.52$, no prime control $M = 4.42$). The same pattern emerged in the informant condition, but the magnitude of the increase in judged dishonesty in the dishonest prime condition was larger (dishonest prime $M = 6.27$; helpful prime $M = 5.00$; no prime control $M = 4.86$).

Discussion

Activating the construct of helpfulness induced participants to provide increased judgments of actor helpfulness; activating the construct of dishonesty induced participants to provide increased judgments of actor dishonesty. These results suggest that priming affects judgments of real behavior, regardless of whether the behavior is performed by the self or by another.

However, one important caveat is necessary. The mental process that we have specified suggests that these effects occur as a result of behavior construal. That is, the theoretical process is that the activated construct alters interpretation of a subsequent behavior (lying or helping), which alters subsequent self-judgments (liar or helper). However, in Experiment 4 we have not ruled out the possibility that the judgment effects observed were a direct consequence of the priming manipulation. In fact, the data provided by DeMarree et al. (2005) showed that such an effect is possible when stereotype categories are primed. Whether such effects will emerge when trait categories are primed is an open question. Thus, we would agree that the exact process by which the primes influence self-judgments in Experiment 4 remains open.

The results of Experiment 4 differed from the results of earlier experiments in one important respect: The results may reflect the action of self-enhancement motivation. Priming the construct of helpfulness produced a larger effect on self-judgments of helpfulness than on judgments of informant helpfulness. Similarly, priming the construct of dishonesty had a larger impact on judgments of informant dishonesty than on judgments of self-dishonesty. Moreover, helpfulness judgments of the self were generally more positive than helpfulness judgments of the informant, and dishonesty judgments of the self were generally lower than dishonesty judgments of the informant.

Some might see such effects as reflecting the greater self-involvement that accompanies real behavior. We caution against easy acceptance of such an idea: Self-enhancement has been observed in a host of other self–other comparison experiments in which imaginary scenarios were involved (Green & Sedikides, 2004; Green et al., 2005; Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Green, 2000, 2004). Moreover, this self-enhancement tendency was quite evident in two of the supposedly uninvolving scenario studies.

When considering this issue, it is worth noting that a number of things changed from the first three experiments to the fourth. These changes included the priming method, the traits primed, and the behaviors that were the focus of interpretation. Additional research should clarify the extent to which these variables contributed to the differing self-enhancement relevant outcomes obtained in Experiment 4. For example, the trait *friendly*, the opposite of the meanness trait used in Experiments 1 through 3, has been consistently found to be central to university students' self-conceptions (Markus, 1977; Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Green, 2000). Judgments on such central traits might be especially difficult to manipulate.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Dispositionally focused personality theorists have sometimes been puzzled by inconsistency in self-perceptions. While playing golf, Brett might hole a chip shot and conclude that his golf was improving. On another occasion, he might hole a similar shot and conclude that it was a lucky stroke. How can psychologists account for such diverse conclusions from the same behavior?

The four experiments described in the present article suggest that peoples' interpretations of their own behaviors can be influenced by variations in the accessibility of constructs used to encode such behaviors. Results of all the experiments showed that trait primes altered self-judgments, causing assimilation of those judgments to the implications of the primes. Such effects occurred both when making inferences after hypothetical behavior (Experiments 1–3) and when making inferences after real behavior (Experiment 4).

That self-judgments can be so easily altered might seem surprising. Some theoretical formulations suggest judgment stability because their conception of the mental representation of the self contains prestored trait judgments. These can be recalled when a self-judgment is required, making it unnecessary to recompute the judgment each time it is needed (Klein & Loftus, 1993; Klein, Rozendal, & Cosmides, 2002).

However, we note that other research similarly illustrates the malleability of the self-concept (Fazio, Effrein, & Falender, 1981; Markus & Kunda, 1986; Schwarz et al., 1991). Moreover, a number of proposals are emerging to accommodate such findings. For example,

parallel distributed processing conceptions of self-representations might suggest that self-concepts are essentially recomputed each time a judgment is required and that such recomputations are affected by those portions of the self-evidentiary base that happen to be rendered accessible by the behavior or by the situation (Van Overwalle & Labiouse, 2004).

Some might argue that a self-enhancement perspective cannot easily accommodate such easy alteration of the self-concept, particularly when primes induce people to interpret behaviors negatively. That is, the tendency to protect and enhance the self should cause participants to be resistant to any increase in the tendency to see the self in a negative fashion. However, the self-enhancement position does not argue that such effects should never occur. Instead, it suggests that such effects may be muted. Indeed, that is what was observed in Experiment 4.

From this perspective, the fact that self-enhancement did not exert the impact that some expected in Experiments 1–3 is especially interesting. Although the absence of such effects might have been caused by elements of methodology, much more exciting is the possibility that such effects sometimes occur naturally. For example, as noted earlier, the impact of self-enhancement motivation on self-judgment may depend on the extent to which a trait is central to the self. Thus, it might be useful to assess the extent to which it is important to each person to avoid being mean; participants who are high in mean-avoidance importance may be especially reluctant to interpret self-behaviors as mean and to judge themselves as mean. This individual-differences approach is something that has been productive in the research examining the priming of social comparison standards for self-judgments (Stapel & Koomen, 2001) as well as in research examining the role of self-monitoring in self-judgments (DeMarree et al., 2005).

When considering our research in the broader context of psychology, other interesting possibilities present themselves. For example, consider how priming the concept of *dishonesty* might affect the typical outcome of the classic Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) insufficient justification research. In this research, participants are subtly induced to behave in a dishonest fashion (i.e., lying to another person about a task's interest value). Participants who tell such a lie for insufficient justification come to view the task as more interesting than they otherwise would have viewed it. Prior exposure to

the concept of priming might cause participants to be *less* likely to evince this attitude shift. Why? Participants exposed to a priming manipulation may be more likely to interpret their actions in dispositional terms (e.g., ''I am dishonest''), which eliminates the need to justify the action via attitude change.

CODA

Our research indicates that interpretations of self-behaviors, and consequent self-judgments, can be influenced by temporary variations in trait construct accessibility. Future empirical pursuits would do well to examine the moderators of such effects, the cognitive processes that underlie such moderation, and the various implications of possible shifts in self-perception.

REFERENCES

Alicke, M. D., & Govorun, O. (2005). The better-than-average effect. In M. D. Alicke, D. A. Dunning, & J. I. Krueger (Eds.), *The self in social judgment* (pp. 85–106). New York: Psychology Press.

Bargh, J. A., & Chartrand, T. L. (2000). The mind in the middle: A practical guide to priming and automaticity research. In H. T. Reis & C. M. Judd (Eds.), *Handbook of research methods in social and personality psychology* (pp. 253–285). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Blanton, H., Cooper, J., Skurnik, I., & Aronson, J. (1997). When bad things happen to good feedback: Exacerbating the need for self-justification with self-affirmations. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **23**, 684–692.

Brewer, M. B., & Gardner, W. (1996). Who is this ''We''? Levels of collective identity and self representations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **71**, 83–93.

Burger, J. M., & Caldwell, D. F. (2003). The effects of monetary incentives and labeling on the foot-in-the-door effect: Evidence for a self-perception process. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, **25**, 235–241.

Campbell, K. W., & Sedikides, C. (1999). Self-threat magnifies the self-serving bias: A meta-analytic integration. *Review of General Psychology*, **3**, 23–43.

Carpenter, S. L. (1988). Self-relevance and goal-directed processing in the recall and weighting of information about others. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **24**, 310–332.

DeCoster, J., & Claypool, H. M. (2004). A meta-analysis of priming effects on impression formation supporting a general model of informational biases. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, **8**, 2–27.

DeMarree, K. G., Wheeler, S. C., & Petty, R. E. (2005). Priming a new identity: Self-monitoring moderates the effects of nonself primes on self-judgments and behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **89**, 657–671.

DeSteno, D., & Salovey, P. (1997). Structural dynamism in the concept of self: A flexible model for a malleable concept. *Review of General Psychology*, **1**, 389–489.

Elliot, A. J., & Mapes, R. R. (2005). Approach-avoidance motivation and self-concept evaluation. In A. Tesser, J. V. Wood, & D. Stapel (Eds.), *On building, defending, and regulating the self: A psychological perspective* (pp. 171–196). Philadelphia: Psychology Press.

Farc, M. M., Crouch, J. L., Skowronski, J. J., & Milner, J. S. (2008). Hostility ratings by parents at risk for child physical abuse: Impact of chronic and temporary schema activation. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, **32**, 177–193.

Fazio, R. H., Effrein, E. A., & Falender, V. J. (1981). Self-perceptions following social interaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **41**, 232–242.

Festinger, L., & Carlsmith, J. M. (1959). Cognitive consequences of forced compliance. *Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology*, **58**, 203–210.

Green, J. D., Pinter, B., & Sedikides, C. (2005). Mnemic neglect and self-threat: Trait modifiability moderates self-protection. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, **35**, 225–235.

Green, J. D., & Sedikides, C. (2001). When do self-schemas shape social perception? The role of descriptive ambiguity. *Motivation and Emotion*, **25**, 67–83.

Green, J. D., & Sedikides, C. (2004). Retrieval selectivity in the processing of self-referent information: Testing the boundaries of self-protection. *Self and Identity*, **3**, 69–80.

Green, J. D., Sedikides, C., & Gregg, A. P. (2008). Forgotten but not gone: The recall and recognition of self-threatening memories. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **44**, 547–561.

Jackson, J. W., & Smith, E. R. (1999). Conceptualizing social identity: A new framework and evidence for the impact of different dimensions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **25**, 120–135.

Jarvis, B. (2001). *MediaLab2001* (Version 2002.1.4) [Computer software]. New York: Empirisoft Corporation.

Kihlstrom, J. F., Beer, J. S., & Klein, S. B. (2003). Self and identity as memory. In M. R. Leary & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (pp. 68–90). New York: Guilford Press.

Klein, S. B., & Loftus, J. (1993). The mental representation of trait and autobiographical knowledge about the self. In T. K. Srull & R. S. Wyer (Eds.), *Advances in social cognition* (Vol. 5, pp. 1–49). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Klein, S. B., Rozendal, K., & Cosmides, L. (2002). A social-cognitive neuroscience analysis of the self. *Social Cognition*, **20**, 105–135.

Kuhn, M. H., & McPartland, T. S. (1954). An empirical investigation of self-attitudes. *American Sociological Review*, **19**, 68–76.

Markus, H. (1977). Self-schemata and processing information about the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **35**, 63–78.

Markus, H., & Kunda, Z. (1986). Stability and malleability of the self concept. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **51**, 858–866.

Marx, D. M., & Stapel, D. A. (2006). Distinguishing stereotype threat from priming effects: On the role of the social self and threat-based concerns. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **91**, 243–254.

Powell, M. C., & Fazio, R. H. (1984). Attitude accessibility as a function of repeated attitudinal expression. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **10**, 139–148.

Prentice, D. A. (1990). Familiarity and differences in self- and other-representation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **59**, 369–383.

Pronin, E., Gilovich, T., & Ross, L. (2004). Objectivity in the eye of the beholder: Divergent perceptions of bias in self versus others. *Psychological Review*, **111**, 781–799.

Pronin, E., Lin, D. Y., & Ross, L. (2002). The bias blind spot: Perceptions of bias in self versus others. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **28**, 369–381.

Rees, A., & Nicholson, N. (1994). The Twenty Statements Test. In C. Cassell & G. Symon (Eds.), *Qualitative methods in organizational research: A practical guide* (pp. 37–54). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Schoeneman, T. J. (1981). Reports of the sources of self-knowledge. *Journal of Personality*, **49**, 284–294.

Schubert, T. W., & Häfner, M. (2003). Contrast from social stereotypes in automatic behavior. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **39**, 577–584.

Schwarz, N., Bless, H., Strack, F., Klumpp, G., Rittenauer-Schatka, H., & Simmons, A. (1991). Ease of retrieval as information: Another look at the availability heuristic. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **61**, 195–202.

Sedikides, C. (1993). Assessment, enhancement, and verification determinants of the self-evaluation process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **65**, 317–338.

Sedikides, C., & Green, J. D. (2000). On the self-protective nature of inconsistency-negativity management: Using the person memory paradigm to examine self-referent memory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **79**, 906–922.

Sedikides, C., & Green, J. D. (2004). What I don't recall can't hurt me: Information negativity versus information inconsistency as determinants of memorial self-defense. *Social Cognition*, **22**, 44–29.

Sedikides, C., & Gregg, A. P. (2003). Portraits of the self. In M. A. Hogg & J. Cooper (Eds.), *Sage handbook of social psychology* (pp. 110–138). London: Sage.

Sedikides, C., & Gregg, A. P. (2008). Self-enhancement: Food for thought. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, **3**, 102–116.

Sedikides, C., & Skowronski, J. J. (1991). The law of cognitive structure activation. *Psychological Inquiry*, **2**, 169–184.

Sedikides, C., & Skowronski, J. J. (1993). The self in impression formation: Trait centrality and social perception. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **29**, 347–357.

Sedikides, C., & Skowronski, J. J. (1995). On the sources of self-knowledge: The perceived primacy of self-reflection. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, **14**, 244–270.

Sedikides, C., & Strube, M. J. (1997). Self evaluation: To thine own self be good, to thine own self be sure, to thine own self be true, and to thine own self be better. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 29, pp. 209–269). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Srull, T. K., & Wyer, R. S. (1979). The role of category accessibility in the interpretation of information about persons: Some determinants and implications. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **37**, 1660–1672.

Stapel, D., and Suls, J. (2004). Method matters: Effects of explicit versus implicit social comparisons on activation, behavior, and self-views. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **87**, 860–875.

Stapel, D. A., & Koomen, W. (2001). I, we, and the effects of others on me: How self-construal level moderates social comparison effects. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **80**, 766–781.

Stone, J., & Cooper, J. (2001). A self-standards model of cognitive dissonance. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **37**, 228–243.

Van Overwalle, F., & Labiouse, C. (2004). A recurrent connectionist model of person impression formation. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, **8**, 28–61.

von Hippel, W., Lakin, J. L., & Shakarchi, R. J. (2005). Individual differences in motivated social cognition: The case of self-serving information processing. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **31**, 1347–1357.

Wetzel, C. G., Wilson, T. D., & Kort, J. (1981). The halo effect revisited: Forewarned is not forearmed. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **17**, 427–439.

Wheeler, S. C., DeMarree, K. G., & Petty, R. E. (2007). Understanding the role of the self in prime-to-behavior effects: The active-self account. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, **11**, 234–261.

Wheeler, S. C., Morrison, K. R., DeMarree, K. G., & Petty, R. E. (2008). Does self-consciousness increase or decrease priming effects? It depends. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **44**, 882–889.