The social world is rife with opportunities for feedback. People are surrounded with evalutative information from the moment they awake, through a day that may include any number of social interactions and displays of mastery (or lack of), to the moment they hit the pillow to sleep (Sutton, Hornsey, & Douglas, this volume). However, despite this wealth of available personal data, most healthy adults do not possess commendably accurate or objective views of themselves (Dunning, 2005). Moreover, this inaccuracy is not random: it is systematically biased in a self-flattering manner. Put another way, people usually see themselves through rose-colored glasses (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

At least three key questions are raised by this observation. First, why do people possess a positivity bias? Second, how do they maintain this bias despite the seemingly contradictory feedback available to them? And third, why does it matter: what consequences does this bias have for psychological and behavioral functioning? In this chapter, we will address all three questions, but will dedicate most of our attention to the second one. In so doing, we hope to illustrate the inventive ways that people use (and sometimes abuse) feedback for the sake of self-positivity.
Self-enhancement and self-protection motivation

First, then, the why. It has long been recognized that people are motivated to secure, maintain, and maximize positive self-views (self-enhancement) and to avoid, repair, and minimize negative self-views (self-protection). These two sister motives originate from the basic hedonic principles to seek pleasure and avoid pain. The two motives often function in tandem. Self-enhancement, though, operates more routinely (i.e., being alertly on the lookout for self-advancement opportunities), whereas self-protection operates more situationally (i.e., quickly jumping into action in response to self-threat) (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009).

Together, self-enhancement and self-protection are prevalent and pervasive. Taylor and Brown (1988) described an array of “positive illusions” that had been empirically documented, including the tendency for unrealistically positive self-evaluations (e.g., to believe that one is better-than-average on a given domain despite evidence to the contrary), perceptions of control (e.g., to believe that one can influence the throw of a die), and over-optimism (e.g., to believe that one is less likely than others to be involved in a road traffic accident). In the ensuing decades, researchers have identified a whole host of further patterns of affect, cognition, and behavior that serve to satiate the self-enhancement and self-protection motives. Indeed, so plentiful and varied are these patterns that Tesser, Crepaz, Collins, Cornell, and Beach (2000) were compelled to label them a “self-zoo.”

People, then, do not always seek out, welcome, and act on starkly objective feedback that is available to them. Such objective (in terms of external standards) behavior would likely result in taking on board unflattering, negative, or destructive information about the self (Vangelisti, this volume). Of course, people sometimes lean toward a preference for accurate feedback, for example after a bolstering of their mood, self-esteem, control, or social connectedness (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). Nevertheless, patterns reflecting the self-enhancement and self-protection motives emerge across a variety of domains and situations.
that involve feedback, and they often seem to override competing motives (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). So, how do people maintain positive illusions despite all the feedback available to them in everyday life? An answer is that they use feedback strategically, in the service of self-enhancement and self-protection.

**How do people use feedback to self-enhance and self-protect?**

As highlighted above, people self-enhance or self-protect in many ways. Most researchers have dedicated attention to examining one or two such manifestations at a time. This approach means that scholars now understand much about each individual pattern, but less about their interrelations and underlying structure. Thus, there has been no common and accepted framework within which to review how people use feedback to self-enhance and self-protect.

Recently, we (Hepper, Gramzow, & Sedikides, 2010) sought to clarify the structure that underlies these self-enhancement/self-protection patterns or “strategies.” To do so, we used a self-report approach to measure the tendency to engage in each of the previously documented strategies. We identified such strategies through an extensive and comprehensive review of the literature. Then, we created at least one questionnaire item to represent each strategy. In particular, each item consisted of a brief description of the strategy, was worded in the second person, and would be understood readily by laypeople (as pilot testing indicated). We created a total of 60 items. We then informed participants that they would be presented with various patterns of thought, feelings, and behaviors—patterns in which people engage during the course of daily life. The participants’ task was to judge how characteristic or typical each strategy was of them. For example, to operationalize the better-than-average strategy, participants imagined “thinking of yourself as generally possessing positive traits or abilities to a greater extent than most people do,” and then rated how characteristic this strategy was of them.
We proceeded to subject the ratings of the 60 items to factor analyses. In one study we used exploratory factor analysis to reveal four underlying factors of self-enhancement or self-protection, and in a second study we used confirmatory factor analysis to validate this four-factor structure. The four factors include various patterns of thought and behavior but each involves feedback in a different way. They were positive embracement, favorable construals, defensiveness, and self-affirming reflections. We will next discuss each factor in turn.

**Positivity embracement**

We labeled the first factor *positivity embracement*. It comprised 10 strategies primarily relevant to the acquisition or retention of positive (i.e., self-enhancing) feedback or the maximization of anticipated success. Examples of such strategies are self-advancing self-presentations and social interactions, remembering positive feedback, and making self-serving attributions for success. We elaborate on this factor below.

Perhaps the most obvious role for feedback in self-enhancement comes from seeking out positive feedback (e.g., praise) and making the most of it when it arrives. People seek positive feedback directly by asking friends, partners, or work colleagues questions to which the answers are liable to be flattering (Ashford & Stobbeleir, this volume). For example, one might be particularly inclined to ask a friend’s opinion of one’s looks when wearing a new carefully put-together outfit and feeling rather fabulous about it. Thus, when offered the opportunity to ask questions pertinent to one’s own possession of various personality traits, participants select more diagnostic and confirmatory questions to find out if they possess important positive traits than important negative traits (Sedikides, 1993).

People are also adept at obtaining positive feedback more subtly via strategic behavioral choices. For example, they prefer to interact with individuals who view them positively and thus are likely to provide positive feedback. Also, in the agentic domain,
people prefer to take on tasks that are likely to provide success compared to failure (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). These strategies, direct and indirect, illustrate the way the self-enhancement motive can sometimes prevail over the self-assessment (i.e., accuracy) motive in guiding feedback-seeking behavior. People strive to ensure that the feedback they receive is more often flattering than critical. This behavior has both favorable and unfavorable consequences: although seeking positive feedback renders one more likely to receive it, repeated and blatant manifestations of such behavior are disliked by observers (Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007).

Once positive feedback is obtained, people employ cognitive processes to maximize its benefits and consequences. For example, people are inclined to attribute success and praise to internal causes (“it was all down to me”) and to dispositional causes (“this ability is a stable part of my personality”), but are inclined to deflect failures and criticism to external or situational causes (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Moreover, people play up the importance or relevance of the domain in which they have achieved success. For example, participants who receive success feedback on a fictitious trait (“cognitive perceptual integration”) subsequently believe that trait to be more relevant to their self-definition than those who receive failure feedback (Tesser & Paulhus, 1983).

To illustrate these tendencies for positivity embracement, imagine that Emily is going out shopping with two friends. If Emily knows that one friend has a more favorable opinion of Emily’s style and taste than the other, she is liable to enter a store changing room to try on clothes more readily with this friend than the other. Emily is also likely to ask her friend’s opinion of an outfit that she personally thinks is flattering, but to stay in the cubicle and quickly change out of an outfit in which she feels frumpy. If her friend comments on how fabulous Emily looks in one particular dress, Emily may conclude that it is herself (not the lighting) that looks great, and that she has a good figure (not that she simply suits this style).
She may also be inclined to think that it is very important to look good (not that appearance isn’t everything). In sum, people create opportunities to receive positive feedback, and make the most of any that is forthcoming. Cognition and behavior work together to maximize and embrace positivity.

**Favorable construals**

As seen above, cognitive appraisal plays an important role in self-enhancement. The second group of strategies demonstrates how, given one piece of information, advice or evaluation, it is possible to interpret it creatively in ways that maximize self-enhancement and self-protection strivings. We labeled this second factor *favorable construals*. It comprised six strategies used to make flattering construals of the self in the social world. Examples of such strategies are positive illusions, comparative optimism, and construals of ambiguous or negative feedback. We elaborate on this factor below.

People use routinely favorable construals in dealing with social feedback and placing the self in the social world. For example, on receiving an ambiguous message, people may self-enhance by interpreting that message as positive and then concluding that they are better-than-average on the relevant dimension (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). On receiving unambiguously negative feedback, people may self-protect by interpreting that feedback as relevant to only a specific attribute rather than to their global perception of themselves (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). This interpretation serves to maintain high self-esteem while simultaneously enabling people to engage in constructive self-criticism (i.e., identify a problem and understand how it can be addressed) and thus have the chance to improve their performance (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). Finally, following the experience and immediate interpretation of negative feedback, people are prone to re-construing the experience as less negative with the passage of time and experiencing less negative affect associated with it. This re-construal and fading affect is smaller for positive than negative feedback (Walker,
Self-enhancing feedback

Skowronski, & Thompson, 2003).

To illustrate, imagine that Carlos is undergoing an appraisal at work. His boss, trying to be tactful, says “You always seem to get involved with everybody’s projects.” Carlos is liable to construe favorably this statement as praise of his high motivation and involvement and thus conclude that he is an exceptional employee, even if his boss actually meant that Carlos often interferes with his colleagues’ work. Once clarified, Carlos is likely to attribute the feedback to a specific behavior (e.g., the fact that he made an unsolicited suggestion at a team meeting last week) and not to his overall attitude. If, nevertheless, Carlos feels somewhat uncomfortable or resentful of the feedback, he is unlikely to rehearse or mentally repeat the message and soon will no longer feel those negative emotions. In sum, people display self-enhancing and self-protecting strivings at each stage of feedback processing, thus maintaining positive self-views and high self-esteem.

Defensiveness

We labeled the third factor defensiveness. It comprised 18 strategies primarily relevant to the protection of the self from threat. Examples of such strategies are self-handicapping, defensive pessimism, outgroup derogation, moral hypocrisy, selective friendship, and self-serving attributions for failure. We elaborate on this factor below.

Sometimes people are faced with potential, impending, or real negative feedback that poses a threat to the positivity of the self-concept. In this case, people may employ defensive cognitive and behavioral strategies to protect the self from this threat (Leary & Terry, this volume). This third family of strategies best exemplifies the case with which we opened: when people maintain positive illusions despite a less-than-flattering reality surrounding them.

People are vigilant to the possibility of future evaluation and often engage in behaviors that prepare them for potential success or (in this case) failure. Before evaluative
situations, people self-handicap: they pursue behavior that is liable to hinder their performance, such as drug use or procrastination. Through this strategy, if one does receive negative feedback, one can protect self-esteem by blaming the apparently external cause (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Imagine that Darren, a defensive self-protective student, has an exam approaching. Darren will be liable to put off revising for the test, or have one drink too many on the night before it. Darren is then prepared for the possibility of failure with the ready-made excuse that he had not revised enough (a situational attribution) or that a hangover prevented him from performing well (an external attribution).

This family of strategies also includes the tendency to dedicate time and effort to examining critically, and questioning skeptically, negative feedback to a far greater extent than positive feedback. That is, given an undesired (as opposed to a desired) message, people require more time and information in order to accept it as true, and they are more liable to claim that the message is inaccurate (Ditto & Boardman, 1995). Overall, there is evidence that self-threat is more salient in information-processing than self-enhancement is, and also that people are more motivated to avoid negative self-views than to pursue positive self-views (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Thus, it is hardly surprising that self-protective strategies are many and varied. People go to great lengths to avoid, minimize, and get over negative feedback. This tendency has crucial consequences. As well as protecting self-esteem from painful dents, it can harm actual performance and long-term motivation (Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005) and can prevent one from learning from criticism and thus improving (Sedikides & Luke, 2007).

**Self-affirming reflections**

We labeled the fourth and final factor *self-affirming reflections*. It consisted of six strategies primarily oriented toward securing positive outcomes or self-views (i.e., downward counterfactual thinking, temporal comparison, focusing on strengths, values, and
relationships) when faced with the potential for negative outcomes. We elaborate on this factor below.

Despite the wealth of self-protective processes just described, approaches to negative feedback do not have to be defensive. A wealth of literature on self-affirmation (Sherman & Cohen, 2006) shows that, given the right approach, people can take on board negative or constructive feedback in order to act on it. The approach in question involves affirming or boosting the self indirectly as a resource to cushion negativity, and is represented by this fourth family of self-enhancement and self-protection strategies.

When faced with the threat or presence of negative feedback in one domain, people may bring to mind their personal strengths in a different domain, their important values, or their close relationships. This bolsters their sense of self-integrity indirectly without the need for defensive processes, and enables them to process the feedback without distorting, downplaying, or re-construing it in a biased way because it no longer threatens their whole sense of self. In turn, they are better able to approach feedback open-mindedly, learn from it, and use it to improve (Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005). Although most studies have induced self-affirmation experimentally (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), research shows that participants do report using self-affirming strategies naturally (Hepper et al., 2010). Other indirect responses to negative feedback include reassuring oneself by examining how the situation could have been worse, or recalling negative feedback from one’s past in order to show oneself how much one has improved (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). Both alleviate the negative affect associated with the negative event or message without distorting the actual content of the message.

Imagine that Claire is training to achieve her black belt in kick-boxing, but knows that her instructor is generally critical of her kicking technique. In response to this threat, Claire might boost her sense of self-esteem before or during the session by reminding herself how
well she is doing at work at the moment, focusing on her relationship with her romantic partner, or bringing to mind how important the charity work is that she is doing this weekend. On receiving the expected criticism, Claire might also note that at least the instructor did not criticize her overall posture (i.e., counterfactual thinking) or that a few weeks ago he had reprimanded her many more times than today (i.e., perceived improvement). Any of these self-protective or self-esteem repair mechanisms would allow Claire to listen to the instructor’s comments carefully and to adjust her kicking technique accordingly. In sum, repairing self-esteem by indirectly using other domains of the self, counterfactual thinking, or perceptions of progress provide one with a more open-minded approach to negative feedback and allow one to benefit from it.

Summary

The four clusters of strategies employ self-relevant feedback to self-enhance or self-protect in different ways. These ways can be described along three dimensions. To begin with, when are the strategy clusters invoked? Positivity embracement is triggered by the opportunity for positive feedback; favorable construals are triggered chronically and by the receipt of various feedback; and defensiveness and self-affirming reflections are triggered by the threat or presence of negative feedback. In addition, what is the motivational focus of the strategy clusters? Positivity embracement and self-affirming reflections primarily involve self-enhancement (using feedback to maximize positive self-views), whereas defensiveness primarily involves self-protection (minimizing the negative impact of feedback on self-views) and favorable construals are mixed. Finally, how are the strategy clusters manifested? Favorable construals and self-affirming reflections are cognitive, whereas positivity embracement and defensiveness also involve behavior.

Individual differences

Are the self-enhancement and self-protection strategies equally common or characteristic for
Self-enhancing feedback

all individuals? People differ in their overall levels of self-enhancement/self-protection motivation. Indeed, self-enhancement has been described as a personality trait (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). In this view, our four above-mentioned hypothetical individuals all exhibit high self-enhancement motivation. However, people also differ in the types of strategy they pursue. That is, there may be systematic differences between Emily, Carlos, Darren, and Claire. So, what type of person is likely to use each strategy? We (Hepper et al., 2010) did not find any age or gender differences, but linked three key personality variables to the relative use of the four strategy clusters. These variables are regulatory focus, self-esteem, and narcissism.

Regulatory focus refers to a dispositional orientation toward either promotion or prevention (Higgins, 1998). Promotion focus describes a person’s tendency to be concerned with and motivated toward attaining aspirations and successes. Promotion focus fosters eagerness, advancement, and hopes. Prevention focus, on the other hand, describes a person’s tendency to be concerned with and motivated toward avoiding negative outcomes and failures. It fosters vigilance, care, and responsibility. The two foci are theoretically orthogonal: an individual can be high in one, both, or neither. It seems reasonable to expect that promotion focus would relate positively to the use of self-enhancement oriented strategies, and prevention focus to the use of self-protection oriented strategies. Consistent with this thesis, Hepper et al. (2010) found that dispositional promotion focus correlated positively with self-reported use of positivity embracement, self-affirming reflections, and favorable construals. Moreover, dispositional prevention focus correlated positively with self-reported use of defensiveness and (surprisingly) positivity embracement, but negatively with self-affirming reflections and favorable construals. Given that regulatory focus can also vary situationally (Higgins, 1998), it would be valuable in future research to examine whether priming promotion or prevention focus leads to a preference for different self-enhancement
Self-enhancing feedback

Self-esteem refers to one’s overall evaluation of oneself as more or less worthy and competent. Research has related higher self-esteem consistently to higher self-enhancement (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008), and in particular has shown that people with higher self-esteem are more prone to self-enhance whereas those with lower self-esteem or depression are more prone to self-protect (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). Narcissism is a personality trait that involves inflated views of oneself and a high emphasis on agentic (e.g., performance, competence) goals, accompanied by a lack of concern for other people or communal (e.g., social, relational) goals. Narcissism involves a persistent, if not addictive, need to self-enhance. Research shows that people with high levels of narcissism engage in many self-enhancing behaviors and have no qualms in self-enhancing at the expense of others (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002).

In the Hepper et al. (2010) study, we entered self-esteem and narcissism into one structural model predicting the four self-enhancement/protection strategy clusters, to account for their interrelation. Self-esteem (controlling for narcissism) related positively to self-affirming reflections and favorable construals but related negatively to defensiveness. Narcissism (controlling for self-esteem) related positively to positivity embracement, favorable construals, and defensiveness. Thus, people with high self-esteem and people with high narcissism share a tendency to create flattering cognitive construals of the world and the feedback that comes their way. They differ, however, in their use of other strategies. Narcissists alone report actively seeking out and capitalizing on positive feedback from others (positivity embracement). Also, when faced with potential or real negative feedback, narcissists engage in defensiveness, whereas people with high self-esteem engage in self-affirming reflections. These findings support prior research, in demonstrating positive links between self-enhancement on the one hand and self-esteem and narcissism on the other. The
findings also extend prior research in that they are uniquely linked to different strategies of dealing with self-relevant feedback.

In summary, the four major ways that feedback can be used in the service of self-enhancement and self-protection are generally employed by people with different traits. Emily, our positivity-embracer who seeks out and maximizes opportunities for positive feedback, is likely to be high in promotion focus and narcissism, and moderately high on prevention focus. Carlos, our champion of favorable construals of feedback, is likely high in self-esteem, narcissism, and promotion focus, but low in prevention focus. Defensive Darren, who does anything to avoid and protect himself from negative feedback, is likely high in prevention focus and narcissism but low in self-esteem. Finally, Claire, our self-affirmer, is likely high in promotion focus and self-esteem but low in prevention focus.

**Implications of feedback-based self-enhancement**

Why is it important to understand the structure of the various self-enhancement and self-protection strategies and to identify which types of person utilize each one? One reason is the relative adaptiveness or consequences of each strategy. All of the strategies aim to enhance and protect positive self-views, and thus have favorable consequences for short-term or intrapersonal emotionality (e.g., mood, self-esteem). There is also evidence that self-enhancement (albeit on a chronic level rather than in response to feedback) can be adaptive for mental health and adjustment when coping with trauma (Sedikides et al., 2007). Although more research is needed in this area, self-enhancement can confer intrapersonal benefits.

However, feedback is (more often than not) intended to alter understanding, behavior, or performance. For example, in educational settings, feedback is often used to aid learning, by showing a student the areas in which they are currently performing poorly or well (Hattie, this volume). In sports, feedback is useful for managing expectations and goals for
competitive events. In organizations, feedback is provided to help employees to improve their performance, and in close relationships one partner may provide the other with feedback to guide how they will behave in the future (Farr, Baytalskaya, & Johnson, this volume; Latham, Macpherson, & Cheng, this volume). Thus, there is potential for self-enhancement strivings to interfere with the social or long-term usefulness of the feedback.

Some consequences may be interpersonal. For example, positivity embracement, though successful in pursuing pleasurable information, may lead other people to form a less-than-favorable impression: boasting, “sucking-up,” and taking all the credit for a success are socially undesirable traits (Tourish & Tourish, this volume). It is notable, then, that highly narcissistic people are prone to using such strategies. Although narcissists come across as charming and confident at first acquaintance, they are disliked after several meetings (Sedikides et al., 2002). Their excessive use of behavioral self-enhancement may contribute to this social failure.

Some consequences concern performance—both short-term and long-term. In the short-term, the defensive behaviors of self-handicapping and procrastination are self-defeating and hinder performance on a task (Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005). In the long-term much criticism or other negative feedback is intended to aid improvement (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). However, again, defensive responses to negative feedback preclude this process. Attributing negative feedback to external or temporary causes, or dismissing it as fallible, means that one does not have to take that feedback seriously or consider its implications carefully. Individuals who rely on defensiveness will not adjust self-views to incorporate the feedback and thus, when faced with a similar situation in the future, will not change or improve their behavior. The treatment of negative feedback by those who engage in favorable construals is less problematic. When negative feedback is construed as relevant to a specific aspect of oneself, individuals view it as self-relevant but less threatening, and
thus are able to learn from it (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). Finally, a self-affirming approach to
negative feedback is probably the most adaptive and advisable for promoting
improvement. By indirectly enhancing other aspects of one’s self-concept, a self-affirmer
does not need to apply biased processing to the feedback at hand and is able to fully take it on
board (Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005). Self-improvement is then facilitated. This suggests
that people with high self-esteem and promotion focus, who engage in self-affirming
reflections but not defensiveness, are best equipped to benefit from negative feedback in
terms of improvement. However, people with low self-esteem, high narcissism, or
prevention focus, who display the opposite pattern, may self-improve with difficulty

Those who are concerned with providing feedback in their professional lives may find it helpful to consider the prevalence of self-enhancement and self-protection among the students, employees, team members, or colleagues whom they are charged to evaluate. Whereas the coach, teacher, or organization’s priority is improving understanding or performance, as we have seen often the individual’s priority (though she or he may not fully realize it) is to maintain, elevate, or protect self-esteem. Similar principles apply when people wish to convey an unwelcome message to a friend, partner, or family member. It may be that, by fostering self-affirming reflections among feedback recipients, both self-concept and performance can be optimized.

Finally, some authors argue that self-enhancing feedback may have undesirable consequences for the self-concept, if it conflicts with one’s current strongly held self-views (Chang-Schneider & Swann, this volume). Proponents of self-verification strivings claim that individuals selectively seek out self-verifying feedback even if this happens to be negative, and that if one receives positive non-verifying feedback one would act to dismiss and counter-argue it (possibly using cognitive strategies equivalent to those we review
above). Theoretically, self-verification serves to maintain a sense of coherence and predictability. Thus, it is possible that, when concerns of coherence or certainty are activated, people will be more likely to self-verify, but when concerns of self-evaluation are activated, people will be more likely to self-enhance.

**Conclusion**

In an effort to explain why people wear rose-colored glasses in the presence of daily negativity, we have tried to address three issues in this chapter. We asked why do people have a positivity bias? The answer, we argued, lies in the potency and pervasiveness of the self-enhancement and self-protection motive. We then asked how people maintain self-positivity while surrounded by contradictory feedback. The answer, we argued, lies in the clever strategies people use to cope with feedback that threatens or questions the positivity of the self-concept. These broad clusters of strategies include positivity embracement, favorable construals, defensiveness, and self-affirming reflections. These strategies are exacerbated among individuals with a promotion focus, with high self-esteem, and with high levels of narcissism. Finally, we argued that these strategies persist because they are associated with psychological and behavioral benefits. Despite (or because of) a sometimes cruel social world, more often than not “still a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.”
References


