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## The Importance of Being Modest

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“Be modest! It is the kind of pride least likely to offend.” (Jules Renard, 1864–1910)

**I**n this chapter, we consider modesty and its importance. We begin by defining modesty, proceed to argue that being modest is hard work, and then lay out some reasons why this is so. Next, we make the case that modesty correlates with, and may even cause, several desirable outcomes—intrapersonal, interpersonal, and group. We conclude by attempting to reconcile the discrepancies between two empirical literatures, one suggesting that modesty entails social and mental health benefits, the other suggesting that self-enhancement does.

### WHAT IS MODESTY?

Modesty is a highly-valued attribute in Western Society (Eagly & Acksen, 1971; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Leary, 2005; Schlenker, 1980). *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* defines *modesty* principally as “the quality or state of being unassuming or moderate in the estimation of one’s abilities” (Pearsall, 2001). *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* defines *modesty* principally as “freedom from conceit or vanity” and *modest* as “placing a moderate estimate on one’s abilities or worth; neither bold nor self-assertive” (Mish, 1991). Finally, *Webster’s New World Dictionary* defines *modest* principally as “not vain or boastful, decorous, not extreme, unpretentious” (Guralnik, 1984). Moreover, synonyms for, or close associates of, the term modesty feature prominently in the English lexicon. For example, in a factor analysis of the self-ratings across 1710 trait adjectives ( $N = 310$ ), an *unpretentious-sly* dimension emerged over and above the standard “Big Five” dimensions (Ashton, Lee, & Goldberg, 2004). Terms loading positively on this “extra” dimension included *unpretentious*, *unfeigning*, and *undeceptive*, whereas terms loading negatively on it included *posed*, *cunning*, and *pompous*. The same dimension has consistently emerged in comparable factor analyses

conducted on Dutch, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Korean, and Polish samples (Ashton, Lee, Perugini et al., 2004).

Modesty, then, denotes a *moderate self-view*—seeing oneself as intermediate, rather than as very positive or very negative, on key personal attributes such as personality traits, abilities and skills, physical appearance, and social behavior. A moderate self-view may be entertained privately or expressed publicly. Hence, modesty does not, as we formulate it, exist only as a social phenomenon: rather, it possesses intrapsychic reality. Our formulation can be defended on multiple grounds. First, definitions of modesty that refer to perceptible propriety in dress, conduct, and behavior consistently come second, not first, in dictionaries (Mish, 1991; Pearsall, 2001). Second, surveys of what people typically understand by the term *modesty*, in which the frequency and priority of associates are used to gauge their prototypicality, confirm that modesty is as centrally defined by intrapsychic attributes (*doesn't take credit, humble, thoughtful, not big-headed*) as it is by social attributes (*plain/not flashy, unpretentious, avoids attention*) (Gregg, Hart, Sedikides, & Kumashiro, 2007). Indeed, modest behavior is perceived as helpful, prosocial, and agreeable (Bond, Kwan, & Li, 2000). Relatedly, according to the Modesty facet of the Agreeableness dimension of the NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992), a modest individual is humbling and self-effacing without necessarily lacking in self-esteem. Finally, people are perceived as more modest when they, defying the typical self-serving bias, attribute their successes to external events and their failures to internal events (Hareli & Weiner, 2000; Tetlock, 1980).

Modesty, then, is about seeing oneself neither too positively nor too negatively. As such, it differs *both* from self-enhancement (the proclivity to aggrandize the self by *overestimating* achievements, merits, and worth) *and* from self-effacement (the proclivity to diminish the self by *underestimating* achievements, merits, or worth). Thus, modesty resembles, in a manner of speaking, Baby Bear's porridge in the Goldilocks' fable: a self-view that is neither too hot (excessively aggrandized: cf. Daddy Bear's porridge) nor too cold (excessively diminished: cf. Mommy Bear's porridge), but "just right."

Moreover, modesty has an interesting property. Given that most psychological characteristics are roughly normally distributed, most people will generally appraise themselves accurately if they regard themselves as lying closer to the center of a distribution (where most people are) than to its extremes (where most people are not). That is, modest self-views should tend, in the main, to be *accurate* self-views—an epistemological advantage. Moreover, given that accurate self-views are conducive to making of prudent decisions in such crucial domains as health, education, and the workplace, the advantages of modesty would appear to be practical as well as epistemological (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004). In addition, the idea that modesty and accuracy are intertwined suggests yet another potential index of modesty: the extent that people's self-ratings converge with those of unbiased observers (Tangney, 2000).

Our definition of modesty also implies that there are two ways to cultivate it: either by reducing self-effacement if self-views happen to be too negative, or by reducing self-enhancement if self-views happen to be too positive. Given that

normal adults generally have an inflated view of themselves (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Baumeister, 1998), we will concentrate on the latter dynamic in this chapter. We do so in full awareness that, in so doing, we are swimming against the stream of Western culture, where pop psychological gurus are forever exhorting people to cultivate ever *higher* self-esteem (Branden, 1994; California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, 1990; Mruk, 1995), and where even academic researchers pioneer subtle techniques to bring about this goal (Baccus, Baldwin, & Packer, 2004; Dijksterhuis, 2004; Riketta & Dauenheimer, 2003).

## REDUCING SELF-ENHANCEMENT AND INDUCING MODESTY

### *The Pervasiveness and Potency of Self-Enhancement*

Self-enhancement is pervasive (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Individuals consider themselves to be better than others on a variety of traits (*better-than-average effect*; Alicke, 1985), regard skills they possess as diagnostic of valued abilities and skills they lack as nondiagnostic (*strategic construal*; Wentura & Greve, 2005), claim credit for their successes but reject responsibility for their failures (*self-serving bias*; Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004), selectively forget feedback pertaining to their shortcoming (*mnemonic neglect*; Sedikides, Green, & Pinter, 2004), see their own future, but not that of their peers, as unrealistically bright (*overoptimism*; Weinstein, 1980), and go to great lengths to appear moral without necessarily being so (*moral hypocrisy*; Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999). Furthermore, strategic self-enhancement—that is, rating the self above-average on personally important traits—is found both in individualistic and in collectivistic cultures (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005), although members of Eastern cultures rate themselves less positively overall (Farh, Dobbins, & Cheng, 1991) and self-present more diffidently (Chen, 1993). Relatedly, self-esteem is a universal sentiment: a study on almost 17,000 individuals from 53 cultures found that the structure of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (the most widely used self-esteem inventory) is practically identical across nations, with all nations scoring above the theoretical scale midpoint and thus manifesting positive self-evaluations (Schmitt & Allik, 2005).

Not only is self-enhancement pervasive, it can also take bizarre forms. For example, people regard themselves as superior even to their own doppelgangers! That is, people rate themselves more favorably than they rate their peers even when their ratings of peers are based on behavioral estimates that they previously provided for themselves (Alicke, Vredenburg, Hiatt, & Govorun, 2001). It is ironic, then, that people generally regard themselves as less susceptible to motivational and cognitive biases than others (Pronin, Yin, & Ross, 2002).

Self-enhancement is also potent. The case for its potency is bolstered by findings pointing to its automatic role in social responding. In a study by Paulhus,

Graff, and van Selst (1989), participants rated themselves on several personality traits under conditions of either high or low attentional load. Overall, participants rated themselves positively; under high load, however, they did so more quickly. This suggests that self-enhancement is the default tendency and that keeping it in check requires effortful regulation—regulation undermined when the mind is kept busy. In addition, self-views are deeply entrenched, as evidenced by implicit phenomena such as a preference for own name letters (Nuttin, 1985) as well as for persons, places, and objects that resemble one's own name (Pelham, Carvallo, & Jones, 2005).

### *Can Self-Enhancement be Curtailed or Modesty Induced?*

Can normatively pervasive self-enhancement be kept at bay? Stated otherwise, can modesty be effectively cultivated and sustained? A few academic authors have called for “interventions” along these lines, recommending that inflated self-evaluations be saliently juxtaposed with either more realistic evaluations of those who know them well (Paulhus, 1998; Robins & John, 1997) or objective performance standards such as grade-point averages (Krueger & Mueller, 2002). Still, inducing modesty would appear to be a daunting proposition. Individuals hold more favorable opinions of themselves than their objective behavior implies (Sherman, 1980), than objective standards warrant (Gosling, John, Craik, & Robins, 1998), and than external observers deem appropriate (Epley & Dunning, 2000). As T. S. Eliot (1927) put it, “nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself” (p. 8).

So, can the potent and pervasive proclivity to self-enhance be contained? The short answer is yes—but only to an extent. Research indicates that self-enhancement is partly malleable and controllable, varying as a function of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social-contextual influences. *Intrapersonal* factors that moderate self-enhancement include mood and introspection. Being in a melancholy mood (Sedikides, 1992) and enquiring into one's own personality traits (Sedikides, Horton, & Gregg, in press) both curtail the positivity of self-views. However, the effectiveness of these factors is limited. First, a melancholy mood is typically short-lived (Sedikides, 1994) and only moderates self-views weakly tethered to one's identity (Sedikides, 1995). Second, introspection works only when it is causal in character (i.e., involves thinking about the *reasons why* one might or might not possess a particular trait), not when it is descriptive (i.e., involves thinking about the *extent to which* one possesses a particular trait), and even then only when the contents of introspection are written down (Sedikides et al., in press).

*Interpersonal* factors that moderate self-enhancement involve input from others in the context of close dyadic or intragroup relationships. People self-present modestly to friends (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995) and to prospective interaction partners (Heatherington, Burns, & Gustafson, 1998). Moreover, they do not exhibit the self-serving bias when collaborating on an interdependent-outcomes task with a friend (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998) nor do they manifest overoptimism when they rate an outgroup member before they rate an ingroup member (presumably because this rating order

decreases the self-other distance; Harris, Middleton, & Joiner, 2000). However, such factors are unlikely to turn the tide of self-enhancement. People will revert to self-presenting positively to strangers and others with whom they do not anticipate interacting. Moreover, they will still exhibit the self-serving bias when collaborating on an interdependent-outcomes task with a stranger, and will still manifest overoptimism when they rate an ingroup member before they rate an outgroup member. In addition, men's self-enhancing appraisals will be curtailed less than women's by the prospect of an interaction partner (Heatherington et al., 1998; Stephan, Rosenfield, & Stephan, 1976).

One *social contextual* factor that moderates self-enhancement is a public evaluative setting. In public, people acknowledge others' contributions to a group project (Miller & Schlenker, 1985) and to their personal success (Baumeister & Ilko, 1995). They also publicly tone down the positivity of their self-descriptions (Schuetz, 1997) and the merit of their accomplishments (Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002). In private, however, people revert to emphasizing their own contributions to a group project and to their personal successes. In addition, they privately play up the positivity of their self-descriptions and the merit of their accomplishments. This private-public distinction is also prevalent in Eastern culture: although modesty prevails in public transactions, self-enhancement still lurks in private settings (Kobayashi & Greenwald, 2003; Kurman, 2001; Muramoto, 2003). But publicity does not always mask self-enhancement; indeed, sometimes, it brings it out. For example, when people are portrayed negatively in public on particular attributes, they compensate by rating themselves more favorably on alternative attributes (i.e., self-enhance). However, when people are portrayed negatively in private, no such compensatory response occurs (Baumeister & Jones, 1978).

In sum, self-enhancement can be reduced, and modesty can be induced, via intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social-contextual factors. However, the effectiveness of these factors is likely to be limited and short-lived. Why does self-enhancement only reluctantly give way to modesty? In the next section, we discuss some proximal psychological mechanisms that make attaining modesty difficult.

## WHAT HOLDS MODESTY BACK?

One mechanism holding modesty back is simply *unawareness* of one's immodesty. In an early demonstration of this phenomenon (Stebbins, 1976), small groups of football players in high school and college discussed their own athletic achievements alongside those of one or more absent teammates. In particular, they answered questions such as: "If there were an award for the most valuable player on your team, to whom would you give it and why?" They also discussed their own strengths and weaknesses as football players alongside those of teammates. Finally, they rated themselves and teammates on various traits, including *modest* and *conceited*. The results were revealing: football players rated themselves as modest, whereas teammates rated them as conceited.

Findings like the above stimulated a backlash against the symbolic-interactionism perspective. According to this perspective, self-perceptions should be readily shaped by—indeed should passively mirror—public perceptions. However, it turns out that self-perceptions are only partly influenced by social feedback and are barely (if at all) congruent with other's perceptions of the self (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). Subsequent research has confirmed and clarified these findings. Individuals overestimate the consistency of others' appraisals of them, and, although they are somewhat clued in to how groups perceive them, they are relatively clueless about how specific others perceive them (Felson, 1993; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993). In general, people rely on their own self-views, rather than on social feedback, in coming to understand how others perceive them (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1995). Incidentally, this ignorance is specific to the self: individuals do know how much other people like each other (Kenny, Bond, Mohr, & Horn, 1996).

Why are people in the dark when it comes to knowing how others view them? Owing to normative rules of conduct, people are reluctant to openly reveal their true impressions of others, especially when those impressions are negative; and, for their part, people are also understandably reluctant to discover others' (possibly negative) impressions of them. Hence, the spontaneous or requested provision of direct feedback is rare. In its absence, people typically fail to recognize their intellectual and social incompetence, lacking the requisite metacognitive expertise (Dunning, Johnson, Ehrlinger, & Kruger, 2003; Wilson & Dunn, 2004).

Moreover, when feedback is given, it is often in institutionalized form (e.g., exam results) and can be either too general or too specific to improve the accuracy of self-knowledge. The failure to self-assess accurately is further impeded by self-defensive responses to critical feedback, including external attributions for failure, derogation of the evaluator, and motivated forgetting of uncongenial information (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Sedikides, Green, & Pinter, 2004; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). The fact that individuals actively seek out positive feedback, and interpret ambiguous feedback as positive, further impedes accurate self-assessment (Felson, 1993; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003).

Thus, two cognitive blindspots—(a) impaired self-knowledge, and (b) impaired knowledge of others' impressions of self—partially explain why cultivating modesty is difficult. However, there is also a motivational factor at play: the direct self-esteem costs of modesty. In an early demonstration of this effect (Jones, Rhodewalt, Berglas, & Skelton, 1981), experimental participants either (a) mimicked the modest behavior of an interviewee while they were being interviewed, (b) role-played the modest self-presentational tactics of a job candidate, or (c) interviewed under direct experimental instructions to be modest. Compared to controls, participants in all conditions experienced a marked drop in self-esteem. Evidently, being modest does not feel good (for conceptual replications, see Kowalski & Leary, 1990; Rhodewalt & Agustsdottir, 1986).

Nonetheless, we still argue below that it is important to be modest, because being modest confers countervailing benefits, both social and intrapsychic.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO BE MODEST?

It is important to be modest for several reasons. Although evidence for modesty as a cause of positive outcomes is sparse, modesty correlates with many of them. In particular, modest people (a) receive positive evaluation in both interpersonal and group settings, (b) display a constructive interpersonal orientation (i.e., beneficial both to self and others), and (c) are likely to reap some self-regulatory benefits.

### *Positive Interpersonal Evaluation*

Modest individuals make favorable impressions. In a study by Schlenker and Leary (1982), observers evaluated the performance of actors in a tennis tournament or in a class final examination. Actors either succeeded or failed, and then made performance claims that were accurate, self-deprecating, or self-enhancing. Actors who made accurate claims (rather than self-deprecating or self-enhancing ones) were liked the best.

Robinson, Johnson, and Shields (1995) investigated whether balanced self-presentations are perceived more favorably than either self-deprecating or self-enhancing ones. Balanced (i.e., modest) self-presentations made reference to weaknesses as well as strengths, and contained the admission that virtues depended on the demands of the situation. As predicted, balanced self-presenters were regarded to be more likeable, honest, and authentic (see also Bonanno, Rennieke, & Dekel, 2005). Perhaps one reason why balanced (i.e., modest) self-presenters are perceived as relatively authentic is that they are seen as likely to follow through on their public claims. Support for this proposition was obtained in a study by Brickman and Seligman (1974). Participants were evaluated more favorably when their performance matched their publicly stated performance expectancies.

In a study by Colvin, Block, and Funder (1995), coders judged videotapes of getting-acquainted conversations between two partners. Partners regarded as modest (as opposed to self-enhancing) were seen as having good social skills, as sympathizing with and liking their partners, and as having those sentiments reciprocated. Moreover, other studies have shown that (a) participants judge university applicants who write simply and use standard font styles (e.g., Times New Roman) as more intelligent than university applicants who use elongated verbal expressions and unusual font styles (e.g., italicized Juice) (Oppenheimer, 2005); (b) that participants whose conversational scripts exude modesty are liked better than their counterparts (Holtgraves & Srull, 1989); and (c) that participants whose face-to-face interaction style are relatively modest (if not self-critical) are regarded as socially attractive (Powers & Zuroff, 1988; Sadalla, Kenrick, & Vershure, 1987). It is worth noting that modest people are evaluated favorably, not only along the communal dimension, but also on the agentic one (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005).

Furthermore, an investigation into the development of modesty (Banerjee, 2000) showed that children as young as 8 years old actually prefer to respond modestly than to respond self-enhancingly, and appreciate that the former is a superior strategy to the latter in terms of deterring negative evaluations by peers.

Indeed, modesty as an ingratiation tactic (Schuetz, 1997; Stires & Jones, 1969) has been found to elicit favorable interpersonal evaluations both in self-presentational (Michener, Plazewski, & Vaske, 1980) and social comparison (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) settings. Although modesty is universally linked to scripts of politeness, this is particularly true of Eastern cultures (Gao, Ting-Toomey, & Gudykunst, 1996; Wierzbicka, 1996) and especially in response to compliments (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Spencer-Oatey & Ng, 2000). The rules of minimization of self-praise, self-denigration, and generosity are highlighted both by Leech's (1983) modesty maxim and Gu's (1990) politeness principle.

In general, modest persons are regarded as better adjusted socially (Bonanno et al., 2005). However, gender differences in interpersonal evaluation have also been reported. In particular, modesty in women is preferred to modesty in men (Heatherington, Crown, Wagner, & Rigby, 1989; Rudman, 1998; Wosinska, Dabul, Whetstone-Dion, & Cialdini, 1996).

Why are modest individuals thought of positively by observers? There are, we suggest, two complementary possibilities. First, they provide a downward, or at least egalitarian, comparison target for observers. This reduces potential threats to observers' self-esteem—a form of self-protection (Wood, 1989). Second, modest individuals allow observers, perhaps unwittingly, to flatter themselves by comparison. This puts observers in a good mood (Vonk, 2002) and may raise their self-esteem—a form of self-enhancement. These possibilities, which recall Jules Renard's opening quote, remain to be put to the empirical test.

### *Positive Intragroup Evaluation*

People are liked better when they make internal rather than external attributions for failure (Carlston & Shovar, 1983). This pattern generalizes to intragroup (i.e., team) contexts. In an illustrative study by Forsyth, Berger, and Mitchell (1981), group members assessed fellow members' attributions of responsibility for task performance. These attributions were manipulated to be egalitarian (positive contribution of self equal to that of others), self-serving (positive contribution of self greater than that of others), or group-serving (positive contribution of self minimal, and the cause of group failure). When groups performed successfully, egalitarian members were liked better, and when groups performed unsuccessfully, both egalitarian and group-serving members were liked better. It is not clear who were seen as more modest, egalitarian members or group-serving members; however, both were evaluated more positively than self-enhancing members. These findings have been conceptually replicated both in Western (Cialdini & de Nicholas, 1989) and Eastern (Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982) culture.

In another study (Wosinska et al., 1996), participants read the ostensible reactions of a company employee to a productivity award. These reactions were either very modest ("Thanks, but I think I was mostly lucky."), intermediately modest ("Thanks, I heard about it unofficially this morning."), or very immodest ("Thanks, I am. I just knew I would win."). Intermediately modest and very modest employees were preferred to immodest ones.

Modest team members may be preferred because they do not pose a threat



to the self, a fact confirmed by observational data in organizational settings (Tannen, 1994). Alternatively, they may be preferred because they promote group harmony and facilitate the completion of group projects. That is, modest group members contribute to the advancement of group goals through their capacity for interpersonal relatedness (Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2002).

One factor that may inhibit self-enhancement in organizations (and thereby push for modesty) is that group members seem to be aware of the social costs of outperformance in general (Exline & Lobel, 1999) and public recognition in particular (Exline, Single, Lobel, & Geyer, 2004). In two studies, undergraduates learned that their input was needed on how exceptional performance ought to be recognized. Students preferred private (i.e., confidential) over public recognition, even when they imagined themselves as being the superior performers (Exline, Single et al., 2004, Studies 1–2). In addition, undergraduates reported that they anticipated mixed evaluations from their peers regarding their superior performance. Moreover, the more they anticipated negative evaluations, the more likely they were to recommend private recognition (Exline, Single et al., 2004, Study 2).

### *Constructive Social Orientation*

Modesty is associated with a constructive social orientation. Compared to those with highly inflated self-views (i.e., narcissists), people with relatively moderate self-views are less competitive, exploitative, angry, hostile, and aggressive toward others (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002). Modest people also score higher on measures of agreeableness, empathy, affiliation, intimacy, and gratitude (Sedikides, Campbell et al., 2002) and have more stable interpersonal relationships (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002). Furthermore, modest people are less likely to perceive themselves unrealistically as victims of other people's interpersonal transgressions (McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Mooney, 2003), and are less likely to behave aggressively toward others when feeling threatened (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998).

A study on parenting agreements following divorce (Ehrenberg, Hunter, & Elterman, 1996) provides a compelling real-life illustration of how modesty plays out in the interpersonal domain. The authors sampled couples who adopted a cooperative shared-parenting plan (agreeing ex-couples) and couples who adopted an antagonistic shared-parenting plan (disagreeing ex-couples). The former were more modest, and held more humble attitudes towards parenting; they were also more child-oriented, more interpersonally robust, more concerned about others' needs and feelings, and better able to take the perspectives of others. Moreover, these divergent orientations had implications for children. Children of disagreeing ex-couples were more likely to be exposed to destructive parental conflict, the main predictor of the untoward effects of divorce on children (Amato & Keith, 1991). One reason for this is that children tend to become involved in parental disputes, which creates conflicting loyalties and leads to behavioral problems (Cherlin et al., 1991). In contrast, children of agreeing ex-couples were more likely to be exposed to constructive parental cooperation. Such children are likely to manifest fewer behavioral difficulties (Hess & Camara, 1979), have better

sibling relationships (MacKinnon, 1989), and date more successfully in adolescence (Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984).

Equally importantly, a constructive interpersonal orientation carries psychological health benefits for the individual. As mentioned above, modest individuals are more likely to feel grateful toward others. Gratitude, in turn, is related to a variety of positive outcomes, such as optimism (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000), positive emotionality, life satisfaction, greater vitality, and lower depression (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002), as well as increased longevity (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001). Likewise, appreciation—a construct homologous to gratitude—is related to higher life satisfaction and more positive feelings of well-being (Adler & Fagley, 2005).

In addition, modest (as opposed to self-enhancing) individuals are also relatively nonvengeful (Brown, 2004) and forgiving (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004). Forgiveness in turn is associated with a host of positive mental health outcomes, such as higher agreeableness (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002), and lower anxiety, depression, and neuroticism (Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). Moreover, forgiveness is associated with higher cognitive flexibility, positive affect, and satisfaction with life, and also with lower rumination and hostility (Thompson et al., 2005). Finally, forgiveness is associated, in close relationships, with both personal well-being (Karremans, van Lange, Ouwkerk, & Kluwer, 2003) and partner well-being (Karremans & van Lange, 2004).

### *Self-Regulatory Benefits*

There is some evidence that modesty affords self-regulatory benefits. Modest (as opposed to self-enhancing) individuals are more prudent risk-takers (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993) and may be more likely to pursue long-term objectives (e.g., develop competency on a domain) rather than fulfil short-term emotional needs (e.g., feeling good about themselves) (cf. Crocker & Park, 2004). If so, this long-term orientation may reduce the risk of future bouts of subjective ill-being or low self-esteem (Robins & Beer, 2001). This risk will be reduced, because competency is more likely to lead to success on a domain than positive self-feelings. In addition, modest people may be less likely to misperceive having control over their environment, and thus avoid making ill-judged decisions and the self-blame they later prompt (Sherman & McConnell, 1995). It is worth pointing out, however, that direct evidence for the self-regulatory benefits of modesty still needs to be gathered, and that this topic constitutes a promising research direction.

There is somewhat stronger support for the claim that modesty is associated with behavioral health regulation. Modest (as opposed to self-enhancing) people are more likely to behave in ways that reduce the risk of illness and injury. Specifically, they are less likely to do all of the following: drink from a stranger's water bottle (Martin & Leary, 1999), engage in unprotected sex, spend long hours sunbathing, obsess over their weight, and consume both licit and illicit intoxicating drugs (Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994; Martin & Leary, 1999).

## BENEFITS OF MODESTY VERSUS SELF-ENHANCEMENT: AN ATTEMPT AT RECONCILIATION

The empirical record is generally consistent with modesty fostering (a) positive interpersonal evaluations, (b) positive intragroup evaluations, and (c) a constructive social orientation. However, the argument that modesty affords self-regulatory benefits—and ultimately psychological adjustment—is controversial. Indeed, another body of literature suggests that high rather than intermediate self-enhancement is conducive to psychological adjustment (cf. Joiner, Kistner, Stellrecht, & Merrill, 2006).

Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, and McDowell (2003) operationalized self-enhancement in terms of superiority ratings. In particular, they used the *How I See Myself* measure (Taylor & Golwitzer, 1995), the *Self-Deceptive Enhancement* measure (Paulhus, 1998), and a modified version of the *Personal Desirability of Traits* measure (Krueger, 1998). Regardless of operationalization, self-enhancement linearly predicted psychological adjustment. Specifically, self-enhancement was positively related to mental health (e.g., personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, self-acceptance), positively related to psychological resources (e.g., optimism, self-esteem, mastery, extraversion, positive reframing, planning, family support, active coping), and negatively related to mental distress (e.g., depression, anxiety, hostility). Relatedly, Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, and Rusbult (2004) showed that high levels of self-enhancement (operationalized as narcissism) positively predicted adjustment (e.g., subjective well-being) and negatively predicted maladjustment (e.g., depression, anxiety, neuroticism), with the link being entirely mediated by self-esteem. Gregg, Hepper, and Sedikides (2007) also found that the self-reported desire for self-enhancing feedback (“In general, I like to hear that I am great”), but not accuracy feedback (“In general, I like to hear the truth about myself”), predicted subjective well-being.

Furthermore, in an applied study, Bonanno, Field, Kovacevic, and Kaltman (2002) reported that self-enhancement (operationalized as *Self-Deceptive Enhancement*) was positively related to ratings of psychological adjustment among Bosnian civilians exposed to urban combat at wartime. Here, adjustment ratings were made by mental health experts on the basis of structured interviews. In addition, in a sample of individuals whose spouses had died, Bonanno et al. (2002) found that self-enhancement predicted positive adjustment 2 years afterwards. Moreover, in a study of high-exposure survivors of the September 11 terrorist attacks (i.e., exposure to others’ death and injury), Bonanno et al. (2005) reported that self-enhancement (again operationalized as *Self-Deceptive Enhancement*) was associated not only with positive affect (among persons who experienced low physical danger) but also with resilience (i.e., a stable and low-symptom pattern following traumatic events) and reduced social constraints (i.e., perceived freedom to disclose one’s concerns and worries). Note that, in this connection, the psychological adjustment benefits of self-enhancement are universal. Self-serving attributions, overoptimism, and perceptions of self-efficacy are positively related with

well-being or self-esteem and negatively related with depression not only in individualistic cultures (e.g., the US; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003; Taylor et al., 2003) but also in such collectivistic cultures as China (Anderson, 1999), Hong Kong (Stewart et al., 2003), Japan (Kobayashi & Brown, 2003), Korea (Chang, Sanna, & Yang, 2003), and Singapore (Kurman & Sriram, 1997).

As for the proposition that self-enhancement entails social costs, the evidence here is not particularly supportive. Taylor et al. (2003) found that self-enhancement was positively associated with peer ratings of participants' mental health, judged on the basis of videotaped interviews of the participants. In addition, participants who rated themselves as better than their peers (i.e., self-enhancers) were better adjusted than those who rated themselves as the same as their peers (i.e., modest). Tellingly, the more they self-enhanced, the more favorably their friends viewed them. Moreover, Bonanno et al. (2005) reported that, in general, self-enhancers were liked by relatives and friends. Finally, Sedikides et al. (2005) found that narcissism was negatively related to loneliness and positively related to well-being in a relationship. However, Bonanno et al. (2002) did report that untrained observers rated self-enhancers less favorably than they rated their modest counterparts when the topic of the videotaped interview concerned a sensitive and aversive event (e.g., the recent death of a spouse).

How can these contradictory findings be reconciled? To begin with, there is little disagreement that individuals who present themselves to others in an arrogant or grandiose fashion invite dislike and derision. How do these boasters cope with their disapproving social milieu? It is possible they are unaware of others' disapproval (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993), and/or immune to it (Robins & Beer, 2001). Boasters may be resilient enough to chart their own course and follow it relentlessly, despite the presence of social obstacles (Campbell & Foster, chapter 6, this volume).

Nevertheless, private and public self-enhancement is correlated (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002), a grandiose self-presentational style may not always reflect an overinflated ego, nor may a modest self-presentational style always mask one (Taylor et al., 2003). Regardless of self-presentational style, then, do self-enhancers suffer long-term relational liabilities? Bonanno et al. (2005) obtained observer ratings of participants before and after the September 11 attacks. These longitudinal data provided evidence for deteriorating social relationships: relatives and friends rated self-enhancers as decreasing in social adjustment a year and half after the attacks. They also rated high-exposure self-enhancers as becoming increasingly dishonest. Robins and Beer (2001, Study 2) found a decline in self-esteem and well-being among self-enhancers. This pattern, however, may be restricted to narcissists. Their boastful, uncooperative, and disruptive behavior breeds unpopularity, which may lead to ostracism from the social groups they join. Ostracism, in turn, is associated with psychological maladjustment (Abrams, Marques, & Hogg, 2005; Twenge, chapter 14, this volume; Williams, Forgas, & von Hippel, 2005). Such findings invite further longitudinal studies that track perceptions of self-enhancers in both socially innocuous and socially delicate situations, and in both low-stress and high-stress situations.

Are self-enhancers capable of forming enduring relationships? Research

indicates that they can and do form friendships and close relationships. However, it is possible that, via assortative social processes, chronic self-enhancers manage to attract friends or romantic partners who both admire and care for them (Campbell, 1999; Campbell & Foster, chapter 6, this volume). Indeed, in Taylor et al.'s (2003) study, self-enhancers were rated favorably by relatively long-lasting friends (i.e., of 4 years). Chronic self-enhancers are liable to use their relationships with other to maintain their sense of inflated self-importance (Sedikides, Campbell et al., 2002), to perceive their social environment as supportive and feel comfortable when self-disclosing (Bonanno et al., 2005), and enjoy the accompanying adjustment benefits of such an orientation, without necessarily putting the well-being of their relations at risk (Sedikides, Rudich et al., 2004).

Is the long-term psychological adjustment provided by self-enhancement offset by social costs? The evidence suggests not. In Bonanno et al.'s (2002) study, the relatively negative impressions that interviewees formed of participants were unrelated to participants' levels of adjustment. Future research, however, may explore some interesting possibilities. First, chronic self-enhancers, to the extent that they are relatively ungrateful and unforgiving toward others, may be deprived of important health gains (e.g., optimism, positive emotionality, life satisfaction, vitality) and thereby endanger their psychological health (e.g., depression, anxiety, neuroticism). Second, chronic self-enhancers, to the extent that they exploit their social relationships for private psychological ends, will not have full access to the many benefits of enduring relationship, such as protection against stress, anxiety, depression, trauma, and daily hassles (Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005; Vohs & Finkel, 2006).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

We began this chapter by defining modesty. We then argued that, despite the difficulties involved in cultivating and sustaining modesty, it entails intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intragroup benefits. We concluded with an attempt to reconcile the discrepancies between two empirical literatures, one suggesting that modesty entails social and mental health benefits, the other suggesting that self-enhancement does (without prohibitive social costs).

Modesty may bestow minimal mental health gains in the short run, but intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits in the long run. Alternatively, modesty and self-enhancement may be associated with different types of mental health gains. For example, self-enhancement may be linked most strongly with resilience, and modesty with life satisfaction. Likewise, modesty and self-enhancement may be associated with different types of social benefits. For example, self-enhancement may promote advancement to glamorous and high-status social positions (e.g., actor, politician), whereas modesty may promote advancement to useful and moderate-status positions (e.g., civil servant, nurse). Future research would do well to focus on untangling this complex interplay of factors. Both modesty and self-enhancement may be critical to attaining different aspects of optimal human functioning (Passmore, 2000; Sheldon, 2004; Sedikides & Luke, in press).

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