Abstract and Concrete Self-Evaluative Goals

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Assuming that people often hold the abstract goal of acquiring accurate feedback but recognize that acquiring favorable feedback can make the self-evaluative process more comfortable, the authors posited that low-level construals (of how action is performed) would elicit greater self-enhancement motivation than would high-level construals (of why action is performed). Individuals chronically using low-level construals had greater interest in downward social comparison (DSC) and less interest in negative feedback (NF; Studies 1 and 3). Decreases in temporal distance (which foster low-level construals) also elicited greater interest in DSC and less interest in NF (Studies 2 and 4). The latter effect was explained by participants' aversion to inconvenience (Study 5) and not by approach–avoidance conflict (Study 6). These results suggest that the level of abstraction at which people construe self-evaluative situations can influence their feedback preferences.

When pursuing goals such as obtaining employment or finding a romantic partner, we presumably use knowledge about ourselves to guide our choices and inform our goal-attainment strategies. We can gather this information in various ways, including by comparing ourselves with others (e.g., Collins, 1996; Kruglanski & Mayseless, 1990; Wood, 1989), by consolidating others' opinions of us (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Krosnick & Sedikides, 1990; Kulik & Taylor, 1981), and by reviewing autobiographical memories (e.g., Higgins, 1996; Ross & Newby-Clark, 1998; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1995; Singer & Salovey, 1993). Whichever strategy we pursue, however, we must select from among feedback that varies in how informative it is and in how it affects our moods (cf. Heider, 1958). Absorbing every adjective of a disenchanted romantic partner's long list of reasons for leaving, for example, is not likely to boost one's self-esteem, yet such feedback could help one avoid similarly negative future outcomes.

To understand how people negotiate such situations, most theorists assume that self-evaluation is driven by various motives (reviewed in Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). These include motives to enhance one's self-image (e.g., Greenwald, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994; Tesser, 1988), to

self-assess realistically (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Trope, 1975, 1986), and to verify a previously held self-view (e.g., Frey, 1986; Swann, 1983, 1997). Inferring motives from behaviors, however, is famously difficult (e.g., Tetlock & Levi, 1982). In light of evidence that people generally rate themselves above average on evaluative attributes (for review, see Baumeister, 1998), for example, a reasonable inference is that people rarely seek the truth about themselves regarding such attributes (J. D. Brown & Dutton, 1995). However, the fact that people's positively biased self-ratings correlate modestly but nontrivially with objective measures (such as IQ; Borkenau & Liebler, 1993) and with others' ratings of them (Funder, 1999) suggests that people do obtain some realistic feedback. Accordingly, an enduring challenge for self-evaluation research is to establish whether people strive for realistic self-assessment and, if they do, to account for how this aim for realism yields positively biased but not completely distorted self-views.

Level of Abstraction and Self-Evaluation

We propose that people often hold the abstract goal of self-assessing realistically, which we define as a preference for maximizing feedback accuracy and an interest in receiving potentially negative self-relevant information (for similar operationalizations, see J. D. Brown, 1990; Dunning, 1995; Strube & Roemmele, 1985; Trope & Neter, 1994). We further propose, however, that, in response to the immediate self-evaluative situation, people often pursue self-enhancement goals, which we define as a preference to maximize self-esteem and an interest in receiving particularly positive feedback (for similar operationalizations, see J. D. Brown, 1990; Dunning, 1995; Strube & Roemmele, 1985; Trope & Neter, 1994). Two assumptions underlie these proposals. First, we assume that, consistent with societal maxims (e.g., Martin, 1985, 1986), laypeople regard acquiring accurate, realistic feedback to be the general aim of self-evaluation. This assumption is consistent with evidence that people attribute unknown others' self-evaluative behavior more to realistic self-assessment motivation than to any other motivation (Helgeson & Mickelson, 1995).

Second, however, we assume that people generally recognize that protecting their self-confidence by avoiding negative information and approaching positive information can help them navigate most comfortably the self-evaluative process (e.g., Mischel, Ebbesen, & Zeiss, 1973). As we elaborate below, then, we hypothesize that the self-evaluative goal people adopt depends partly on whether they think about the process they must go through to self-evaluate or about the abstract aim of self-evaluation.

Although it has not previously investigated self-evaluative motivation, research examining how people construe actions and goals is consistent with our reasoning. A distinction important for any action or goal is that between the means by which it is performed or attained and the ends that it serves (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1999; Emmons, 1996; Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996; Kruglanski, 1996; Lewin, Dembo, Festinger, & Sears, 1944; Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1960). Vallacher and Wegner (1985, 1987), for example, differentiated low-level, concrete action identities describing how one performs an action from high-level, abstract action identities describing why one performs an action. Reading a book, for example, could be construed as acquiring knowledge (i.e., why one reads) or as turning pages (i.e., how one reads). Most germane to our analysis, Vallacher (1993) suggested that by focusing one's attention on an action's goal, high-level construals (relative to low-level construals) may foster greater goal directedness and less reactivity to situational factors that may potentially impede the realization of one's central aim (cf. Zirkel, 1992). Indeed, relative to people who adopt low-level construals (as a result of decreasing temporal distance), people who adopt high-level construals (as a result of increasing temporal distance) prefer maximizing the desirability of an action rather than the feasibility with which it can it can be implemented (Liberman & Trope, 1998; cf. Karniol & Ross, 1996). When considering whether or not to accept furniture, for example, participants rated furniture delivery as more important in the proximal than in the distal future but furniture design as more important in the distal than in the proximal future (Liberman & Trope, 1998). These findings are broadly consistent with evidence that children who adopt abstract representations of rewards can forgo the pleasure of immediate consumption and wait longer for the rewards (for review, see Mischel, 1996). Converging theory and evidence, then, suggest that adopting a high-level construal increases one's preference for maximizing an action's central aim or its desirability, whereas adopting a low-level construal increases one's preference for maximizing the ease of the action's process or its feasibility.

We suggest that these different construals can influence people's feedback preferences. Consistent with our assumption that people typically consider realistic assessment the central aim of feedback seeking, we expect people who construe self-evaluation in high-level terms to be especially interested in receiving accurate, even potentially negative, feedback. When one is getting feedback from a colleague about one's conference presentation,[1] for example, thinking about why the interaction would unfold should lead one to consider and weight heavily how informative the feedback would be, thus prompting preferences for a colleague expected to offer particularly honest views. On the other hand, consistent with our assumption that people typically recognize that receiving favorable feedback can make feedback seeking more feasible, we expect people who construe self-evaluation in low-level terms to be especially interested in receiving positive feed-

back. Returning again to the example of getting feedback from a colleague, thinking about how the interaction would unfold should lead one to consider and weight heavily how comfortable one would be during the interaction, thus prompting preferences for a colleague expected to offer particularly favorable views. In sum, we expect people generally to adopt self-enhancement goals when they consider the process they must go through to self-evaluate but realistic assessment goals when they consider the central utility of self-evaluation.

Examining these hypothesized effects of level of abstraction on people's self-evaluative preferences may help reconcile the possibility that people seek realistic feedback with evidence that they often obtain unrealistically positive (but not completely biased) feedback. Moving closer in time to any action requires paying increasing attention to how one will perform the action (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Accordingly, our theorizing suggests that people generally may adopt more realistic assessment goals for temporally distal feedback opportunities but more self-enhancing goals as the moment of feedback acquisition draws nearer. This hypothesized effect of temporal distance on self-evaluative motivation could help explain how people's aims for realism often yield unrealistically positive self-views. Independent of temporal distance, however, individual differences and situational features also can influence the level of abstraction at which people construe actions (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987, 1989). Our theorizing further suggests, then, that even at the very moment of acquiring feedback, higher level construals should be associated with greater interest in obtaining realistic feedback, which could help explain why people's self-views are not completely divorced from reality.

Moreover, research examining potential links between level of abstraction and self-evaluation may help elucidate how self-enhancement and realistic-assessment goals influence feedback preferences. If goals to obtain informative versus favorable feedback are activated differentially when people think about how versus why they will self-evaluate, then people's pursuit of these goals should reflect their overall weighting of feasibility versus desirability considerations rather than the expression of more specialized underlying motives (cf. Tesser & Cornell, 1991). Another implication of our theorizing, then, is that people's efforts to receive favorable feedback should be explained partially by their more general preferences for comfort and convenience.

Somewhat consistent with these hypotheses, Taylor and Gollwitzer (1995; see also Gollwitzer & Kinney, 1989) showed that participants induced to adopt an *implemental* mind-set (by planning how to implement action on a previously decided matter) rated themselves more positively on evaluative traits than did participants induced to adopt a *deliberative* mind-set (by deliberating the utility of taking versus not taking action on a previously undecided matter). Somewhat consistent with our analysis, then, adopting a low level of abstraction (i.e., planning how to enact action) may have fostered greater self-enhancing tendencies than did adopting a high level of construal (i.e., considering why one would enact action). However, the study's aim and theoretical underpinning (see Heckhausen, 1986) required combining level of abstraction and decisional status into a single manipulation. As mentioned, participants either planned a previously decided action

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[1] We thank an anonymous reviewer for this self-evaluation example.

or deliberated an undecided action. Apart from participants' levels of thinking, then, their pre- versus postdecisional states also could have affected their motivation, as research on postdecisional dissonance implies (e.g., Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Harris, 1969; Svenson, 1992). Because people often may be in predecisional states when deciding whether or not to seek self-relevant feedback, research testing whether level of abstraction alone can influence people's self-evaluative behaviors may provide practical as well as theoretical benefits.

Present Experiments

Toward this end, we gauged participants' chronic tendencies to construe action in low- versus high-level terms. We also differentially facilitated these construals by manipulating temporal distance. Vallacher and Wegner (1989) showed that people differ reliably in their tendencies to identify action in high- versus low-level terms, and Liberman and Trope (1998) showed that people construe near future events in lower level terms than they do distant future events. Eating dinner, then, would be described more often as using a fork than as getting nourishment either by someone who chronically identifies actions in low-level (rather than high-level) terms or by someone who anticipates action in the immediate (rather than distal) future.

We examined whether adopting these different levels of abstraction would affect participants' preferences for feedback that potentially bears positive or negative implications for the self (Studies 1–5) and indications of the value of accuracy and self-esteem protection in self-evaluation (Study 6). More specifically, we tested whether individual differences in action identification would relate to participants' preferences for downward versus upward social comparison (Study 1) and for favorable versus unfavorable personality feedback (Study 3). We also tested whether temporal distance would affect participants' preferences for downward versus upward social comparison (Study 2) and for favorable versus unfavorable career feedback (Study 4). We hypothesized that participants' weighting of feasibility versus desirability concerns would help explain the relation between their levels of abstraction and their self-evaluative preferences. However, numerous alternative explanations also need to be considered. Level of abstraction plausibly could affect people's success expectancies, the importance they place on particular attributes, their moods, and their approach versus avoidance motivation. Study 5 tested whether participants' weighting of feasibility versus desirability considerations, beyond the former three alternative variables, could help explain our effect. Study 6 explored the viability of the latter alternative explanation, differential approach versus avoidance motivation.

Study 1

Researchers long have recognized social comparison as a primary means of gathering self-relevant information (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989) that people often use even when more objective information is available (Klein, 1997). Comparing oneself with others of inferior ability (downward social comparison) can boost one's self-esteem yet is not especially informative (e.g., Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Wills, 1981). Comparing oneself with others of superior ability (upward social comparison) can damage

one's self-esteem but also help one get a better sense of one's skills and of how to improve them (e.g., Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wheeler, 1991; Wood, 1989).

In Study 1, we tested whether participants' chronic tendencies to identify actions in high-level terms (specifying why actions are performed) versus in low-level terms (specifying how actions are performed) would help explain their preferences for upward and downward social comparison. We expected that when considering an interaction that potentially portends social comparison, people who generally view their actions in relatively low-level terms would focus more on the process of the interaction, whereas people who generally view their actions in relatively high-level terms would focus more on the abstract utility of the interaction. We hypothesized previously that focusing on the process of self-evaluation often may activate self-enhancement goals but that focusing on the central utility of self-evaluation often may activate realistic-assessment goals. Accordingly, we expected participants using low-level action identities to favor downward over upward social comparison to a greater extent than would participants using high-level action identities.

Rather than asking participants to indicate explicitly the degree to which they would favor downward or upward social comparison, we gauged their interest in participating in an activity with mates of varying caliber (either worse or better at the activity than the participant). This approach does not require participants to infer their underlying motivation by asking themselves the sometimes hard-to-answer question, "Why would I engage in this behavior?" (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wilson, Dunn, Kraft, & Lisle, 1989). Evidence that people spontaneously compare themselves with others (Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995) suggests that people's willingness to interact with more- versus less-skilled mates should reflect social comparison concerns.

Finally, because action identification theory predicts that people often adopt low-level construals in response to task difficulty or deficits in action competency (e.g., Vallacher & Wegner, 1987, 1989), people using low-level action identities could shy away from difficult tasks (e.g., those involving highly skilled task mates) simply because they do not expect to be good at them. Hence, we also assessed and controlled for participants' self-esteem and expected task competency.

Method

Participants. One hundred twelve introductory psychology students (69 women, 43 men), ranging in age from 17 to 35 years ($M = 18.59$), at the State University of New York at Stony Brook participated in exchange for course credit.

Overview. In individual laboratory cubicles, participants completed the Behavior Identification Form (BIF; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989), Rosenberg's (1979) Self-Esteem (SE) Scale, and the Bowling Night Questionnaire reproduced below. These three questionnaires were divided among a larger battery of unrelated materials, and their order of presentation was varied randomly across participants.

Materials. The BIF is a 25-item, dichotomous-response questionnaire that assesses individual differences in the level of action identification. For each item, participants read about an action (e.g., "voting") and circle which of two identifications more appropriately describes it. The choices correspond to high-level identifications (e.g., "influencing the election") and low-level identifications (e.g., "marking a ballot"). Low-level identifications were scored as 0, high-level identifications were scored as 1, and

each participant's responses were summed and averaged to provide a BIF score ($M = 0.68$, $SD = 0.23$, $\alpha = .89$).

Rosenberg's (1979) SE Scale contains 10 items (e.g., "I take a positive attitude toward myself"). Participants used a 4-point scale ranging from 1(*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) to indicate agreement with each item. Participants' responses were summed and averaged to provide an SE score ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.53$, $\alpha = .90$).

The Bowling Night Questionnaire asked participants to imagine an opportunity for a free night of bowling. Half of the participants were assigned randomly to read that they could bowl only with people better than themselves (thus facilitating upward social comparison), whereas the remainder read that they could bowl only with people worse than themselves (thus facilitating downward social comparison). The downward scenario is provided below:

Imagine that the university will sponsor a bowling event. Excited by the prospect of a free night's bowling, you decide to sign up. To sign up, each interested student selects a skill level and then is randomly assigned to bowl with people of similar skill levels. You learn, however, that the skill level you wanted to sign up for is already full. In fact, the only remaining slots are with players worse than you are.

In the upward condition, the word *worse* was replaced with the word *better*. Using a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*extremely*), participants next answered the question, "In making your reservations, how interested would you be in playing with people who bowl worse [better] than you do?" Participants next indicated how well they would expect to bowl on 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*terribly*) to 9 (*excellently*). After answering a filler question querying their interest in different types of bowling amenities, participants lastly were asked to imagine bowling mates of an opposite caliber to those originally imagined. Thus, participants in the downward condition now were asked to "imagine that the only remaining slots are with players better than you are," and participants in the upward condition now were asked to "imagine that the only remaining slots are with players worse than you are." Participants then used a 9-point scale to indicate their interest in bowling with this new caliber of bowling mate (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*). In randomly varying orders, then, each participant indicated his or her interest in bowling with better and worse players. We subtracted each participant's interest in bowling with worse players from his or her interest in bowling with better players, providing each participant with a difference score (i.e., *differential interest*) reflecting interest in bowling with better versus less-skilled mates.

Results

As predicted, participants' BIF scores related positively to their differential interest scores, $B = 3.12$, $\beta = .23$, $F(1, 111) = 5.95$, $p < .02$.[2] This relationship remained significant when controlling for SE and bowling expectancies, $B = 2.60$, $\beta = .19$, $F(1, 109) = 4.43$, $p < .05$. In Figure 1, we plotted the predicted values of interest in bowling with better and worse bowling mates for participants one standard deviation above and below the BIF mean, controlling for SE and bowling expectancies. As shown, higher BIF scores were associated with less interest in bowling with less-skilled mates, $B = -1.78$, $\beta = -.19$, $F(1, 111) = 3.87$, $p = .05$, but with nonsignificantly greater interest in bowling with better skilled mates, $\beta = .09$, *ns*. Participants' BIF scores were unrelated to their overall interest in bowling ($F < 1$).

Discussion

Participants' degree of identifying actions in low- versus high-level terms was related differentially to their interest in engaging in
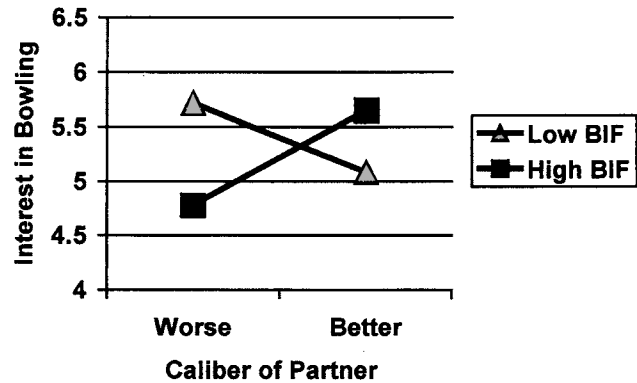

Figure 1. Predicted values of interest in bowling with better- and less-skilled mates for participants scoring one standard deviation above and below the Behavior Identification Form (BIF; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989) mean, controlling for self-esteem and bowling skill expectancies (Study 1).

activities facilitating downward and upward social comparison. Independent of self-esteem and expected task competency, action identification level was associated negatively with interest in undertaking action facilitating downward social comparison but nonsignificantly positively associated with interest in undertaking action facilitating upward social comparison. These data suggest that thinking about how behaviors unfold fosters self-enhancing behaviors to a greater extent than does thinking about why behaviors unfold.

Study 2

To build on Study 1's correlational finding and test whether level of abstraction causes people to adopt distinct social comparison goals, in Study 2 we experimentally manipulated participants' levels of abstraction. We did so by focusing their attention on temporally proximal versus distal outcomes. Liberman and Trope (1998) showed that people construe distant future events in higher level terms than they construe near-future events, much as people scoring high on the BIF construe actions in higher level terms than do people scoring low on the BIF. Indeed, these authors used the BIF as a dependent variable and showed that people thinking of distant-future events provided greater numbers of high-level responses to the BIF than did people thinking of near-future events. Consistent with findings from Study 1, then, we expected participants anticipating a proximal-future interaction to favor conditions facilitating downward rather than upward social comparison to a greater extent than participants anticipating a distal-future interaction.

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[2] An alternative data-analytic method for testing whether BIF (a continuous predictor variable) is related differentially to interest in bowling with less- versus better-skilled mates (an outcome variable with two levels nested within subjects) is to use multilevel or hierarchical linear modeling to examine whether BIF interacts with level of bowling partner to predict bowling interest (cf. Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). The regression coefficient of this BIF × Partner Level interaction (yielded by PROC MIXED; SAS Institute, 2000), was identical (to six decimal places) to that reported in the text as the regression of participants' differential interest scores on their BIF scores.

Method

Participants. One hundred Yale University undergraduates (51 women, 49 men), ranging in age from 17 to 22 years ($M = 19.36$), participated in exchange for $2 compensation.

Procedure. The procedure was identical to that described in Study 1, except for two important differences: (a) Individual difference measures (of BIF and SE) were not administered, and (b) half of the participants were assigned randomly to imagine that the bowling would take place on the same night as the experiment (proximal condition), whereas the remainder imagined that the bowling would take place the following semester (distal condition). In the proximal condition, the bowling scenario provided in Study 1 was titled "Bowling Tonight," and it began with the phrase, "Imagine that tonight the university will sponsor a free night of bowling." In the distal condition, the word *tonight* was replaced with the words *next semester*, both in the title and in the text. The dependent variables were the same as in Study 1, except that the words *tonight* or *next semester* were inserted into each item to strengthen the manipulation. Thus, the questions gauging participants' interest in bowling began with the words "In making your reservations for tonight's [next semester's] game ... ," and the question gauging participants' expected bowling success was appended to "How well would you expect to bowl tonight [next semester]?"

Results

Participants' interest in bowling was analyzed in a 2 (temporal distance) × 2 (bowling partners) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor. As predicted and shown in Figure 2, preferences for better versus worse bowling partners were moderated by temporal distance, $F(1, 98) = 13.06, p < .001$. Lesser skilled bowling mates were preferred more by proximal participants ($M = 6.42$) than by distal participants ($M = 5.33$), $t(98) = 2.82, p < .01$, Cohen's $d = .56$. In contrast, better skilled bowling mates were preferred nonsignificantly more by distal participants ($M = 5.67$) than by proximal participants ($M = 4.96$), $t(98) = 1.79, p < .08$, Cohen's $d = .36$. Temporal distance had no significant effect on participants' general interest in bowling ($F < 1$) or on their expected success in bowling ($F < 1$).

Discussion

Previous work showed that people's preferences for temporally proximal (rather than distal) events largely reflect concerns with the processes the events require rather than with the outcomes the
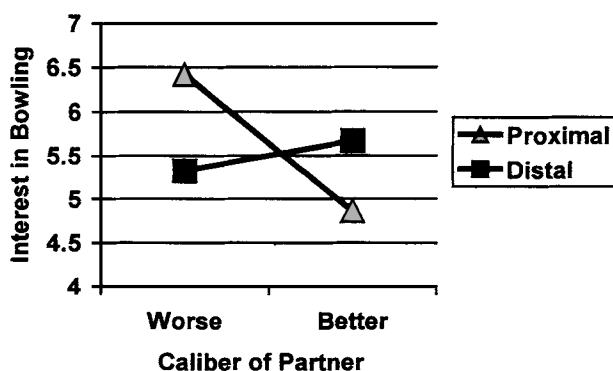

Figure 2. Interest in bowling with less- and better-skilled mates in the proximal and distal future (Study 2).

events can produce (Liberman & Trope, 1998). We hypothesized that these differing levels of abstraction would foster distinct self-evaluative goals. We found that relative to participants anticipating a distal-future event, participants anticipating a proximal-future event favored conditions allowing downward social comparison. Consistent with results from Study 1, the current data suggest that self-enhancement goals are more likely to become activated when people consider self-evaluative processes (e.g., how they might feel as the worst among bowling aficionados) rather than self-evaluative outcomes (e.g., how they might learn how to improve their bowling). Because bowling skill probably is not vital to most people's self-image, we next tested whether these results would generalize to other, more highly valued domains.

Study 3

Just as upward social comparison can damage one's self-esteem but be informative, other feedback sources highlighting one's weaknesses also can bear esteem-related costs but informational utility. Whereas both strengths-focused and liabilities-focused feedback can help people choose appropriate tasks and plan appropriate effort expenditure, for example, liabilities-focused feedback also can help people identify skills they need to improve or develop (e.g., Dweck, 1998; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Trope & Neter, 1994). In some cases, then, people may expect feedback focusing on what they are doing wrong to be quite useful but also emotionally upsetting. Consistent with this reasoning, participants in (laboratory-induced) positive moods requested greater amounts of liabilities- than strengths-focused feedback, whereas participants in bad and neutral moods demonstrated either no preference or the opposite tendency (Trope & Neter, 1994, Studies 1 and 2). These findings imply that people recognize the utility of liabilities-focused feedback but are reluctant to seek it unless they feel emotionally capable of handling it. When confronted with an opportunity to acquire emotionally costly but informative feedback, one tactic people seem to use is to first build up a positive mood to better equip themselves to acquire the information (Trope & Neter, 1994, Study 3).

Can differing levels of abstraction also differentially equip people to acquire liabilities-focused feedback? To address this question, Study 3 tests whether individual differences in action identification help explain participants' interest in receiving differentially valenced feedback. After completing numerous personality inventories, participants learned that the questionnaires actually were measures of an important competency, social intelligence, and that they could receive their results if they so desired. Half of the participants were told that the results would focus on their weaknesses; half were told that the results would focus on their strengths. We expected participants who typically used low-level action identities to construe this feedback opportunity in terms of the process of getting feedback (which should include concerns with how comfortable they would feel while getting their feedback). In contrast, we expected participants who typically used high-level action identities to construe the feedback opportunity in terms of the utility of getting feedback (which should include concerns with how useful the feedback would be). Consistent with the results of Studies 1 and 2, then, we expected participants' action-identification levels to be related more posi-

tively to interest in receiving liabilities-related than strengths-related feedback.

Method

Participants. One hundred eighty-two introductory psychology students (93 women, 89 men) at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, ranging in age from 18 to 40 years ($M = 18.64$), participated in exchange for course credit. We removed the data from 3 additional participants who did not follow directions. Including these participants' data did not affect the significance of any results reported herein.

Procedure. On arrival at the laboratory, participants sat in individual cubicles and received questionnaire booklets containing many personality inventories. Mixed in randomly varying orders toward the beginning of the booklets were the BIF (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989; in current sample: $M = 0.70$, $SD = 0.22$, $\alpha = .88$) and Rosenberg's (1979) SE scale (in current sample: $M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.50$, $\alpha = .86$), which are described in Study 1. Participants required about 50 min to complete this booklet, which also contained published measures of beliefs about social groups (Davis, 1983; Katz & Hass, 1988; Phillips & Ziller, 1997; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Rubin & Peplau, 1973) and other items constructed as part of an unrelated investigation of group perception. Together, this amalgam seemed a plausible measure of "social intelligence," which we verified with a small sample of undergraduates naive to our hypotheses. After completing this booklet, participants received a questionnaire entitled "Social Intelligence Assessment Feedback," which explained that the first booklet was an assessment of social intelligence. Social intelligence was described as a highly desirable competency:

> Social intelligence refers to people's ability to get along well with others. People who are highly socially intelligent usually know the right things to say and do in social, professional, and educational settings. Because they get along well with others, people with high social intelligence tend to earn higher salaries and report greater life satisfaction. In contrast, people with low social intelligence tend to insult or offend other people (often without even knowing it), so they have a hard time cultivating truly meaningful relationships with other people or performing up to their full potential at work and at school.

Participants next learned that they could receive their feedback if they wished. The feedback was described as elucidating either their strengths or their liabilities. The liabilities condition continued:

> Most of the questionnaires that you completed in the first packet measure different aspects of social intelligence. These questionnaires are designed to point out areas where your social intelligence is low and in need of improvement. The results can help you pinpoint your weaknesses and show how they could be damaging your life. If you want, we can provide your results right now (you will have to wait a few minutes while we print them up). Because we usually find that about half of our participants request feedback, we always make sure people want the feedback before we give it to them.

In the strengths condition, the phrase "is low and in need of improvement" was replaced with the phrase "is high so that you can take further advantage of it," the word *weaknesses* was replaced with the word *strengths*, and the word *damaging* was replaced with the word *benefiting*.

Participants next responded to the questions "How interested are you in receiving your feedback?" ($1 = not\ at\ all$; $9 = extremely$) and "What type of score do you expect to receive on social intelligence?" ($1 = extremely\ low$; $9 = extremely\ high$). Participants lastly listed, in a free response, any other thoughts they had about the entire experiment. This question was intended to probe for potential suspicions about whether or not the feedback actually would be provided (no participant raised this suspicion). Each participant then was thanked and debriefed.

Results

To test whether participants' action-identification levels were associated differentially with their interest in receiving liabilities- and strengths-related feedback, we regressed interest in receiving feedback on variables representing BIF scores, assignment to strengths versus liabilities condition, and the interaction between the two. Supporting our hypothesis, the interaction term was significant, $F(1, 178) = 7.95$, $p < .01$, and remained so when controlling for participants' SE and expectancies of successful test results, $F(1, 176) = 7.90$, $p < .01$. In Figure 3, we plotted the predicted values of interest in receiving liabilities- and strengths-related feedback for participants scoring one standard deviation above and below the BIF mean, controlling for SE and test expectancies. In the liabilities-focused condition, participants' BIF scores related positively to their interest in receiving feedback, $B = 3.54$, $\beta = .34$, $F(1, 85) = 10.68$, $p < .002$, whereas in the strengths-focused condition, this relationship was reversed in sign and nonsignificant ($\beta = -.06$, ns).

Discussion

The process of receiving feedback elucidating one's shortcomings can be upsetting, but its outcome can be informative and valuable by identifying skills one should improve. Accordingly, relative to people who tend to identify action in high-level, outcome-oriented terms, we expected people who tend to identify action in low-level, process-oriented terms to be less willing to acquire this feedback than nonupsetting, strengths-related feedback. Supporting this prediction, participants' chronic action-identification tendencies were related differentially to their interest in obtaining strengths-related and liabilities-related feedback. When the feedback was described as highlighting liabilities, higher levels of action identification were associated with greater interest in acquiring the feedback. When the feedback was described as highlighting strengths, this relationship was reversed in sign and nonsignificant.

Study 4

In Study 4, we tested whether experimental manipulations of level of abstraction (through temporal distance) would affect par-
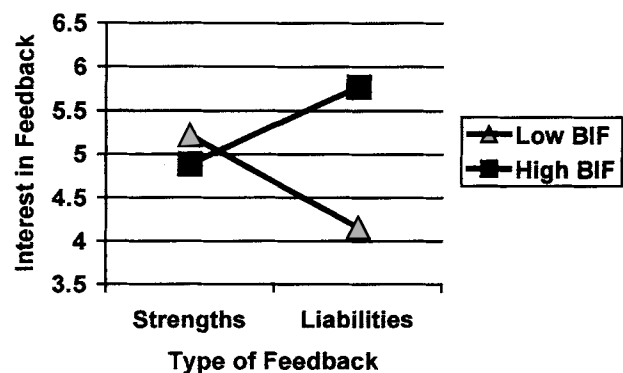
Figure 3. Predicted values of interest in receiving liabilities- and strengths-focused social intelligence feedback for participants scoring one standard deviation above and below the Behavior Identification Form (BIF; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989) mean, controlling for self-esteem and social intelligence skill expectancies (Study 3).

ticipants' willingness to receive differentially valenced feedback. As in Study 3, participants expected to receive feedback highlighting either their strengths or their weaknesses. In this study, however, the feedback was described as available either immediately or 1 year later. Consistent with the reasoning and results of Study 3, we expected participants anticipating a proximal-future feedback opportunity (relative to those anticipating a distal-future feedback opportunity) to be less interested in acquiring liabilities-related feedback than strengths-related feedback. To further test the generality of our effects, rather than examining a social domain (i.e., bowling, social intelligence), in this study we examined participants' feedback preferences in a more straightforwardly achievement domain: career aptitude.

Method

Participants. Eighty-seven Columbia University undergraduates (47 women, 40 men), ranging in age from 18 to 43 ($M = 20.48$), received $3 for participating in the study.

Procedure. Seated in separate cubicles, participants read that their university, in accord with several others, was implementing a new career service. The ostensible purpose of the study was to gauge student interest in using the service, so that providers of the service could best meet the needs of the undergraduate community. In a 2 (feedback valence) × 2 (temporal distance) design, the career service was described as identifying careers in which students would be likely either to fail or to succeed and as available either immediately or the following year. The strengths-feedback description was as follows:

> Vastly improving upon older 'vocational placement' tests, in our research we interview and observe professionals from a range of fields (arts, sciences, businesses). With this information, we devise profiles of the personal qualities (aptitudes, proficiencies, likes, and dislikes) that lead to success and job satisfaction within particular careers. We then assess undergraduates on these same qualities and identify the careers likely to lead to each particular student's later vocational success and job satisfaction.

In the liabilities-feedback conditions, the words *success and job satisfaction* were replaced with the words *failure and job dissatisfaction* in the two sentences in which the phrase appears. Participants next read either that the service was "now available. Look for our posters; we will run practice trials at your university within the next few days" (proximal conditions) or that it would become available "late in the next academic year" (distal conditions).

Using 9-point scales, participants indicated their interest in using the career service (1 = *not at all interested*, 9 = *extremely interested*), their expectancies of career success versus failure (1 = *fail*, 9 = *succeed*), and whether they were most concerned with the "details and particulars" or with the "more global aspects" of their careers (1 = *details*, 9 = *global aspects*). The last question was intended as a check of whether, as intended, the temporal distance manipulation focused proximal participants' attention on more peripheral details and distal participants' attention on more central phenomena (see Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, in press). Participants next listed, in a free response, any other thoughts they had about the career program. This question was intended to probe for potential suspicions about whether or not the program actually existed (no participant raised this suspicion). Each participant then was thanked and debriefed.

Results

Manipulation check. Participants' concerns with the details versus global aspects of their careers were analyzed in a 2 (feed-

back valence) × 2 (temporal distance) ANOVA. Indicating that the level-of-abstraction manipulation was successful, participants expecting to receive career-relevant information in the distal future reported greater concern with the global aspects of their careers ($M = 6.72$) than did participants expecting to receive career-relevant information in the proximal future ($M = 5.14$), $F(1, 83) = 10.69, p < .005$. There was no significant effect of feedback valence ($F < 1$) or of the Valence × Temporal Distance interaction, $F(1, 83) = 1.57, ns$.

Interest in using the career service. Participants' degree of interest in using the career service was analyzed in a 2 (feedback valence) × 2 (temporal distance) ANOVA. As shown in Figure 4, the impact of feedback valence on interest was moderated by temporal distance, $F(1, 83) = 9.66, p < .005$. Liabilities-related information was more popular among participants in the distal condition ($M = 7.05$) than in the proximal condition ($M = 5.00$), $t(41) = 2.77, p < .01$, Cohen's $d = .87$. In contrast, strengths-related information was nonsignificantly more popular among participants in the proximal condition ($M = 6.36$) than in the distal condition ($M = 5.36$), $t(41) = 1.54, ns$, Cohen's $d = .47$. There were no main effects of feedback valence ($F < 1$) or of time, $F(1, 83) = 1.14, ns$. Finally, participants anticipating proximally available feedback expected similar amounts of career success ($M = 8.09$) as did participants anticipating distally available feedback ($M = 7.86, F < 1$).

Discussion

Relative to participants anticipating distally available feedback, those anticipating proximally available feedback were more interested in finding out about their personal strengths than about their personal weaknesses. Along with results from Studies 1–3, these data suggest that the level of abstraction at which people construe self-evaluative opportunities can influence their feedback preferences. The significant Abstraction Level × Feedback Preference interactions obtained across Studies 1–4 consistently supported our prediction that low-level construals elicit greater preferences for favorable over unfavorable feedback than do high-level construals. Either because of temporal immediacy or because of one's characteristic tendency to identify actions in low-level terms, thinking about the process of self-evaluation seems to lead people
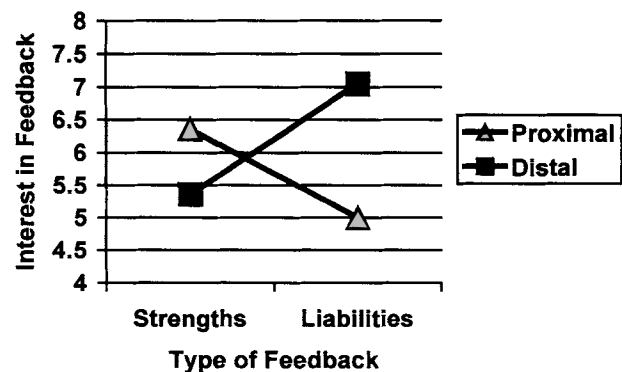
Figure 4. Interest in using a career feedback service as a function of temporal distance (proximal or distal) and type of feedback provided (liabilities- or strengths-focused) in Study 4.

to prefer self-esteem protection to a greater extent than does thinking about the utility of self-evaluation.

In Studies 3 and 4, shifts in participants' interest in receiving negative feedback, as a function of level of construal, were somewhat stronger than were shifts in their interest in receiving positive feedback (meta-analysis of absolute differences in slopes, $z = 1.71, p < .10$). This tendency toward asymmetry is consistent with research showing that negatively valenced stimuli often affect behavior more strongly than do equally extreme, positively valenced stimuli (e.g., Fiske, 1980; Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; Taylor, 1991). In Studies 1 and 2, though, shifts in participants' interest in upward social comparison, a form of negative feedback, were no stronger (and were even slightly weaker) than were shifts in their interest in downward social comparison, a form of positive feedback ($z = 1.02, p > .31$). Studies 1 and 2 examined a domain (bowling skill) that is probably less vital to participants' self-views than are those examined in Studies 3 and 4 (social intelligence and career aptitude, respectively). Perhaps, then, the often-observed greater potency of negative information was not observed in Studies 1 and 2 because the negative valence of upward social comparison is less apparent for unimportant than for important domains (cf. Dunning, 1995; Wood, 1989). We leave this question for future investigation.

Study 5

We hypothesized that participants' desire for self-enhancing versus realistic feedback often reflects sensitivity to factors determining the feasibility versus the utility of acquiring feedback. Thus, we suggested that striving to maximize the self-enhancement (rather than realistic assessment) potential of a feedback opportunity often reflects the more general aim of undergoing pleasant, feasible processes. If this account is correct, then we should expect participants' willingness to endure potentially esteem-threatening aspects of self-assessment to be related to their willingness to endure other aspects of self-evaluation that affect its feasibility or how convenient it is to acquire but that are not directly related to self-esteem maintenance.

For Study 5, we created a measure of convenience-versus-utility weighting by asking participants how willing they would be to spend an additional hour in assessment to obtain 10% better accuracy. We reasoned that participants would perceive the amount of time spent in assessment to affect the assessment's convenience and the amount of accuracy provided by the assessment to affect the assessment's utility. Relative to participants adopting low levels of abstraction, participants adopting high levels of abstraction thus should place relatively greater weight on the feedback's accuracy than on its convenience. Accordingly, we predicted that participants expecting a career service to become available the following year would express greater interest in spending the extra hour than would participants expecting the service to become available immediately. A pilot study confirmed this prediction, $t(222) = 4.37, p < .001$. Thus, although the inconvenience of a lengthy assessment and the discomfort of receiving liabilities-focused feedback may not, on the surface, appear directly related, both affect the feasibility of the process of acquiring feedback. If participants' aversion to receiving liabilities-focused feedback reflects a more general tendency to

favor convenience in the immediate future, then controlling for participants' interest in spending extra time in assessment should help eliminate the relation between temporal distance and interest in receiving liabilities-focused feedback. Study 5 tests this mediational hypothesis.

We also examined whether other potential mediators, which provide alternatives to our hypothesis, could help explain our results. Gilovich, Kerr, and Medvec (1993), for example, showed that people often hold higher performance expectancies for distant than for near future events. In Study 4, participants' expectancies of career success did not vary as a function of temporal distance. However, general self-appraisals (e.g., of career success) and specific self-appraisals (e.g., of performance on a career aptitude test) can differ in important ways (e.g., Dutton & Brown, 1997). Thus, participants may have expected more favorable feedback results in the distal than in the proximal future, which could have helped explain their feedback preferences (cf. J. D. Brown, 1990; Dunning, 1995). Another alternative explanation is that participants' moods were affected by the proximity of the feedback. Perhaps expecting immediate access to feedback suggesting one's likelihood of failure causes more uneasiness than does expecting the feedback 1 year later. If so, then participants' moods during the study may have affected their interest in receiving the negative feedback, as shown in prior research (Trope & Neter, 1994). Finally, perhaps when college students think of events 1 year in the future, they place greater importance on their careers than they normally would, because careers are more future than current events for college students. Thus, a college student might be more willing to receive liabilities-focused feedback in the more distal future because his or her career seems more important when considered in a future context (cf. Dunning, 1995).

In Study 5, therefore, we partially replicated the procedure of Study 4 to test whether the relationship between temporal distance and interest in receiving liabilities-focused feedback could be explained by four potential mediators, willingness to forgo convenience, expectancies of successful test results, mood, and importance of the attribute being tested. As mentioned above, the previously observed increase in interest in liabilities-focused feedback, as a function of level of construal, was steeper than was the decrease in interest in strengths-focused feedback. To elucidate processes underlying this result, then, in the present study we attempted to explain the increase in interest in liabilities-focused feedback.

Method

Participants. One hundred twenty-seven Columbia University introductory psychology students (71 women, 56 men), ranging in age from 17 to 26 ($M = 19.47$), participated in exchange for course credit. We removed the data of 1 additional participant who provided incomplete responses. Including this participant's data does not alter the significance of any reported results. Prior to completing the career service questionnaire, 18 participants assigned to the proximal condition and 17 participants assigned to the distal condition completed questionnaires that were not relevant to the current investigation. Excluding these participants' data does not alter the significance of any reported results.

Procedure. The materials were identical to those described in Study 4, with the notable exceptions that only the liabilities-focused career service was described and that some different dependent variables were assessed. As in Study 4, participants indicated their interest in using the career

service (1 = *not at all interested*, 9 = *extremely interested*). Participants also responded to the questions, "Our assessment usually takes 30 minutes. How likely would you be to use an extended 90 minute version (if your schedule permitted it) in order to obtain 10% better accuracy?" (1 = *not at all likely*, 9 = *extremely likely*); "How important is it to you to succeed in your career?" (1 = *not at all important*, 9 = *extremely important*); and "If you used our career service this week [next year], would you expect the assessment results to indicate a successful or unsuccessful career for you?" (1 = *extremely unsuccessful*, 9 = *extremely successful*). These four items were presented in four different orders across participants. Each item appeared as the first question with approximately equal probability. There were no order effects.

Each participant lastly rated his or her current mood on a 5-point scale (1 = *very bad*, 5 = *very good*) and circled one of five faces (extreme smile, smile, neutral, frown, and extreme frown) that best expressed how he or she felt during the study session (i.e., "right now"). These two items were given in varying orders and were presented in counterbalanced scales. Participants' responses to these items correlated at $r = -.86$ and were averaged (after reversing one) to form a current mood index. This index is based on one Trope and Neter (1994, Study 2) used as a manipulation check in a study in which participants induced into positive moods requested more liabilities-focused feedback than participants induced into negative moods did. These mood measures always followed the four items mentioned above. We chose this ordering to avoid compromising our cover story (that we were soliciting interest in an actual career service) by beginning with noncareer-related mood items that might have caused participants to suspect that the career service description was intended to alter their moods and, thus, was fictional. The brief interlude of answering four questions is unlikely to have influenced any mood changes that might have been caused by learning of the career service. Indeed, some research shows that slight time delays can increase the effects of manipulations on feelings such as self-esteem (McGuire & McGuire, 1996). At the study's conclusion, each participant was thanked and debriefed.

Results

Table 1 presents the correlations among the five dependent variables. As indicated, each of the four proposed mediators related significantly to participants' interest in using the service. Moreover, with the exception of mood, all potential mediators were intercorrelated significantly.

To test our mediational hypotheses, we computed a series of regression analyses predicting participants' interest in using the service. We first entered a variable dummy coding temporal distance (0 = *proximal*, 1 = *distal*). Replicating Study 4, an increase in temporal distance elicited significantly increased interest in receiving liabilities-based feedback (see Table 2, Step 1). We next entered the first block of proposed mediators: current mood, expectancies of successful assessment, and importance of career success. With all four variables entered, temporal distance continued to account for unique variance in interest in receiving liabilities-focused feedback (see Table 2, Step 2). Because the total effect of temporal distance on interest was 1.43, these three variables together explained less than 12.5% (1 − 1.26 / 1.43) of the effect. Keeping all four predictors in the model, we next added participants' willingness to endure inconvenience to improve accuracy. With the addition of this variable, temporal distance no longer accounted for a statistically significant amount of variance in interest in using the liabilities-focused career service, whereas the proposed mediator did account for significant variance (see Table 2, Step 3). Because the temporal distance effect dropped to 0.38, willingness to endure inconvenience explained over 69%

Table 1
Correlations Among Dependent Variables, Study 5

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Interest	—	.34***	.18*	.24**	.61***
2. Importance		—	.00	.26**	.18*
3. Mood			—	.13	.00
4. Expectancies				—	.22*
5. Convenience/accuracy					—

Note. $N = 127$. Interest = interest in using a liabilities-focused career feedback service; Importance = importance of career success; Mood = pleasant versus unpleasant mood during study; Expectancies = expectancies of successful assessment implications; Convenience/accuracy = willingness to spend an additional hour in assessment to obtain 10% more accurate feedback.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

(1 − 0.38 / 1.26) of that portion of the temporal distance effect not explained by the other three potential mediators. Baron and Kenny's (1986; see also Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998) modification of the Sobel (1982) test showed that this reduction is statistically significant, $z = 3.55$, $p < .005$.

As reported in Table 2, participants' moods and the importance they placed on career success, the two alternative mediators assessed in this study that accounted for at least marginally significant, unique amounts of variance in interest in receiving feedback (see Table 2, Step 2), continued to account for significant amounts of variance when controlling for participants' willingness to endure inconvenience (see Table 2, Step 3). Accordingly, the data do not suggest that participants' willingness to endure inconvenience to improve accuracy reflected simply their overall interest in receiving feedback. If that were true, then willingness to endure inconvenience should have explained relations between interest in receiving feedback and these other variables. Instead, and consistent with our goal-abstraction-level analysis, participants' weighting of the convenience versus the accuracy of self-evaluation

Table 2
Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Participants' Interest in Liabilities-Focused Career Feedback, Study 5

Step and variable	B	SE B	β
Step 1			
Temporal distance	1.43	0.41	.30***
Step 2			
Temporal distance	1.26	0.38	.26**
Mood	0.38	0.22	.14†
Career importance	0.65	0.17	.31***
Success expectancies	0.17	0.14	.11a
Step 3			
Temporal distance	0.38	0.34	.08a
Mood	0.47	0.18	.17*
Career importance	0.50	0.15	.24***
Success expectancies	0.05	0.11	.02a
Convenience/accuracy	0.54	0.07	.54***

Note. $R^2 = .09$ for Step 1; $R^2 = .15$ for Step 2 ($p < .001$); $R^2 = .24$ for Step 3 ($p < .001$). $N = 127$.
a $p > .20$.
† $p < .09$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

mediated only the relation between their feedback interest and their temporal distance, the single variable that we had theoretical reason to predict would affect participants' weighting of feasibility versus desirability considerations.

Discussion

We hypothesized that Study 4's finding of a positive relation between temporal distance and interest in receiving liabilities-focused feedback reflected temporally proximal participants' greater concern with the processes required to obtain feedback and temporally distal participants' greater concern with the reasons why they would seek feedback. Study 5's mediational analyses support this explanation. While replicating Study 4's result that participants express greater interest in receiving temporally distal than temporally proximal liabilities-focused feedback, we first showed that this effect was not dependent on several plausible mediators, including participants' expectancies of successful versus unsuccessful assessment results, importance of career success, and moods during the study. Although each of these variables was related to participants' interest in receiving liabilities-focused feedback, the positive relation between temporal distance and interest in feedback remained significant when controlling for all three variables. Controlling for participants' willingness to endure inconvenience to improve accuracy, on the other hand, eliminated the relationship. This finding suggests that participants' aversion to receiving proximally available, negatively valenced feedback can be seen as a manifestation of a more general preference for maximizing the ease of the process of acquiring feedback.

Study 6

Although the previous five studies provided substantial evidence that level of abstraction can influence people's feedback-seeking preferences, at least one additional alternative hypothesis requires further attention. Conflict models theory (e.g., Lewin, 1935; Miller, 1944) asserts that organisms' approach tendencies are relatively stronger at greater distances from goals, whereas their avoidance tendencies are relative stronger at lesser distances from goals. Primary support for these hypotheses came from studies in which harnessed rats were interrupted at various stages of approaching food and avoiding shock (e.g., J. S. Brown, 1948). Despite inconsistent results with animals and humans over the years (e.g., Foerster, Higgins, & Idson, 1998; Heilizer, 1977; Nisan & Minkowich, 1973; Maher, 1966), the model's elegance has won it lasting influence.

Indeed, conflict models theory may seem consistent with some of the data presented in this article. To accommodate the individual-differences findings, the theory would need to be modified to accept level of action identification as distance, with high-level construals corresponding to greater distance. Regarding Studies 1 and 2, one then could argue that participants with low-level construals were averse to upward social comparison because of its avoidance-inspiring costs (not its feasibility considerations) and that participants with high-level construals were more open to upward social comparison because of its approach-inspiring benefits (not its desirability considerations). In Studies 3, 4, and 5, however, some participants expected to receive liabilities-focused feedback. We predicted that this information was high in

desirability but low in feasibility and, hence, would be favored by people with high-level rather than low-level construals. Conflict models theory does not make a clear prediction. Because the liabilities information can help one avoid "damage" (Study 3) and "failure" (Studies 4 and 5) in one's life, its presence should marshal avoidance motivation, leading it to be favored by people with low-level construals, because this feedback can help them avoid negative outcomes. However, receiving this feedback could be upsetting, and that, too, could foster avoidance motivation, but motivation to avoid the feedback itself. Hence, conflict models can make no prediction without additional assumptions about which type of avoidance motivation is stronger.

To examine more clearly how the conflict models and level of abstraction explanations differ, we conducted an experiment in which the two make mutually exclusive predictions. We gauged participants' beliefs about the importance of avoiding inaccuracy or enhancing self-confidence in self-evaluation. Participants believed that their responses would influence either their proximal or their distal futures. We described inaccuracy as a cost to be avoided and self-confidence as a gain to be approached. We make no predictions regarding approach versus avoidance motivation. We expect people generally to consider accuracy to be a central aim of self-evaluation and self-confidence maintenance a way of making self-evaluation more comfortable. We thus expected participants in the distal condition (relative to those in the proximal condition) to rate avoiding inaccuracy as more important than boosting self-confidence. Because conflict models theory makes no predictions regarding the motivational influence of accuracy and self-enhancement in feedback seeking, the theory makes predictions opposite to ours. Conflict models theory thus should expect participants in the distal condition (relative to those in the proximal condition) to rate boosting confidence (a gain) as more important than avoiding inaccuracy (a loss).

Method

Participants. One hundred seventy-seven Yale University undergraduates (87 women, 90 men), aged 17–45 ($M = 19.41$), received $1 for participating. During the lunch and dinner hours of a single day, all students who were seated in a university cafeteria were invited to participate. Approximately 90% of them agreed. Two additional participants returned incomplete questionnaires that could not be coded.

Procedure. Participants completed the one-page questionnaires as they sat at their dining tables. Participants read that the university career service was undergoing change. Half of them read that the changes would happen immediately; half read that the changes would happen the following year. Additionally, half of all participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they supported university expenditures to improve students' career-related confidence; half were asked to indicate the extent to which they supported university expenditures to avoid career-feedback inaccuracy. Thus, there were four randomly assigned conditions. The proximal description was as follows:

> Yale's Undergraduate Career Services are now undergoing changes. For example, we are offering recently developed assessments that can help inform students of their chances of job satisfaction/dissatisfaction and success/failure within particular careers. Several types of assessments are available, and we plan to implement some right away. Your responses to this questionnaire thus can influence the way you experience Career Services in the immediate future. Accordingly, please think about what you would want if you used the Career Services today.

In the distal conditions, the phrase *are now undergoing changes* was replaced with the phrase *are undergoing changes next year*, the phrase *right away* was replaced with the phrase *next year*, the word *immediate* was replace with the word *distant*, and the word *today* was replaced with the phrase *next year*. Next, participants answered either the confidence-boosting or the inaccuracy-avoiding university expenditure questions.

The confidence-boosting question was "Some assessments provide greater benefits to students' confidence in their ability to succeed in a career, but these techniques require considerable resources. What percentage of the total Career Services budget should we devote to improving students' confidence that they can succeed in a career? ___ % (please indicate number from 0% to 100%)." The inaccuracy-avoiding question was "Some assessments vastly eliminate inaccurate feedback, but these techniques require considerable resources. What percentage of the total Career Services budget should we devote to minimizing the inaccuracy of the feedback? ___ % (please indicate number from 0% to 100%)." Lastly, participants were thanked, paid, and debriefed.

Results

Participants' expenditure endorsements were analyzed in a 2 (expenditure purpose) $\times$ 2 (temporal distance) ANOVA. Overall, participants allocated greater expenditures to avoid inaccuracy ($M = 34.90$) than to enhance self-confidence ($M = 27.65$), $F(1, 174) = 4.12, p < .05$. As shown in Figure 5, however, this effect was moderated by temporal distance, $F(1, 174) = 6.95, p < .01$. Participants endorsed greater expenditures for improving students' self-confidence when they expected their responses to influence their immediate futures ($M = 33.98$) than when they expected their responses to influence their distant futures ($M = 21.55$), $t(86) = 3.05, p < .005$, Cohen's $d = .88$. In contrast, participants endorsed nonsignificantly greater expenditures for avoiding inaccuracy when they expected their responses to influence their distant futures ($M = 37.69$) than when they expected their responses to influence their immediate futures ($M = 32.00$), $t(87) = 0.99$, ns, Cohen's $d = .26$. There was no significant main effect of time ($F < 1$).

Discussion

Conflict models theory is silent regarding the specific motivational influences of esteem- and accuracy-related components of feedback seeking. The theory predicts that avoidance gradients are
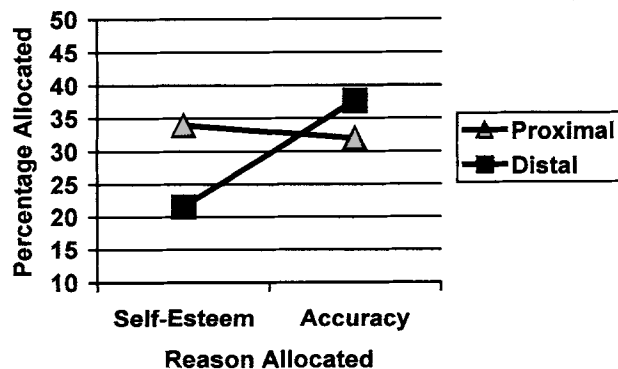

Figure 5. Proximal- and distal-future endorsements of school expenditures to help avoid inaccuracy and improve career-related self-confidence in a career-feedback program (Study 6).

steeper than approach gradients are. Because the goal of maximizing self-confidence should enlist approach motivation, whereas the goal of minimizing inaccuracy should enlist avoidance motivation, conflict models theory should expect stronger maximizing motivation at greater temporal distance and stronger minimizing motivation at lesser temporal distance. Contradicting these predictions, the opposite pattern emerged. Consistent with Studies 1–5, relative to participants' endorsements of inaccuracy avoidance, their endorsements of self-confidence-building components of self-evaluation decreased with increasing temporal distance.

General Discussion

This article tested whether construing actions in low-level terms (specifying how actions are performed) versus in high-level terms (specifying why actions are performed) influences people's self-evaluative preferences. We assumed that people often consider obtaining realistic feedback to be the central aim of self-evaluation but self-esteem maintenance to make the self-evaluative process more feasible. We thus expected high-level construals to foster self-enhancement goals to a lesser extent than low-level construals. Across different domains (i.e., bowling skill, social intelligence, career aptitude), different types of independent variables (i.e., individual differences in action identification and temporal distance manipulations), and different types of dependent variables (i.e., preferences for conditions facilitating upward vs. downward social comparison, preferences for differentially valenced feedback, weighting of accuracy and self-confidence), six studies supported this hypothesis.

Increases in chronic levels of action identification (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989) were associated with less interest in downward social comparison (Study 1) and with greater interest in liabilities-focused feedback (Study 3). Because previous work has shown that people tend to view proximal-future events in lower level terms than distal-future events (Liberman & Trope, 1998), we expected temporal distance manipulations to foster similar results. Indeed, increases in temporal distance elicited less interest in downward social comparison (Study 2) and greater interest in liabilities-focused feedback (Study 4). Participants' willingness to endure an inconvenient assessment procedure to improve accuracy mediated the latter effect, suggesting that participants' general concern with the feasibility versus desirability of self-evaluation may explain these results (Study 5). Finally, participants' heightened interest in preserving their self-esteem in the proximal future was not shown to be dependent on differential approach versus avoidance motivation (Study 6).

The Road From Realism to Bias

These findings suggest that people often may consider acquiring accurate and realistic feedback to be self-evaluation's central purpose (which can serve further superordinate goals, such as to self-improve; Butler, 1993; Ruble & Frey, 1991). When attempting to implement this purpose, however, factors influencing the implementation process are more closely attended to than are factors influencing its more abstract utility (Gollwitzer, Heckhausen, & Ratajczak, 1990; Gollwitzer, Heckhausen, & Steller, 1990). In this manner, "action can become reactive to immediate situational cues and contingencies, including those that hold potential for subvert-

ing the broader concern one originally had in mind" (Vallacher & Kaufman, 1996, p. 262). At the moment of action, then, people's heightened sensitivity to how comfortable they will be with the information they receive may make them especially likely to seek expectedly positive feedback (e.g., J. D. Brown, 1990; Sedikedes, 1993) or to adopt biased information-processing strategies such as discounting negative feedback and selectively accessing self-enhancing memories (e.g., Kunda, 1990). Whereas the current studies tested the effect of level of abstraction on different participants' self-evaluative preferences, future research needs to test whether the same participants' self-evaluative strategies grow increasingly biased as the moment of feedback acquisition grows nearer. Possible issues to address include examining what happens to traces of realistic-assessment goals as self-enhancement goals exert increasing sway (cf. Petty & Jarvis, 1998).

When Enhancement and Consistency Goals Are Central

It is important to note, however, that heightened sensitivity to comfort during the self-evaluative process is not the only cause of people's preferences for self-enhancing feedback. When the informational value of feedback is unclear, for example, people may opt to pursue its mood-improvement value by selecting positive rather than negative feedback (Trope & Gervey, 1998). Moreover, under some adverse circumstances, such as when coping with health problems (Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985), expecting bad news (Trope & Neter, 1994, Study 3), or remembering past challenges (Taylor, Neter, & Wayment, 1995), people seem to seek self-relevant information for the sole purpose of improving their moods. People may use the positive moods they acquire through self-evaluation as resources aiding them through anticipatedly difficult self-regulatory tasks (e.g., Aspinwall, 1998; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Trope, Ferguson, & Raghunathan, 2001). In such cases, when people's central self-evaluative aim is mood improvement, their levels of abstraction may influence their feedback preferences in a direction opposite to that observed in the current set of studies. Consistent with the notion that a high level of abstraction increases goal directedness, we expect that adopting a mood-management goal will increase preferences for positive feedback to a greater extent among people with a high level of abstraction than among those with a low level of abstraction. Future research is needed to test this prediction.

A related point can be made concerning people's consistency strivings, which, although not explicitly examined in the current investigation, bear noteworthy relevance. Because being forced to relinquish a familiar self-view can be quite uncomfortable (e.g., Aronson, 1969, 1992), people concerned with navigating most comfortably the self-evaluative process should favor feedback that is consistent with their self-views. However, because self-consistent feedback can be corroborated by people's extensive stores of self-knowledge, such feedback also may appear to be more accurate than self-inconsistent feedback is. People perceiving themselves as highly emotional, for example, expect greater informativeness of feedback explaining why they are highly emotional than of feedback explaining why they are highly unemotional (Swann & Read, 1981, Study 3). Accordingly, the value of self-consistent feedback could derive from two sources: its anticipated provisions of comfort and of diagnosticity (Swann & Schroeder, 1995). For different reasons, then, adopting either a high or a low

level of abstraction may lead one to favor feedback consistent with one's self view. We generally would expect people adopting a low level of abstraction to favor self-consistent feedback out of a concern for comfort but people adopting a high level of abstraction to favor self-consistent feedback out of a concern for accuracy. Future research testing these hypotheses may help elucidate how people come to desire self-consistent feedback.

Practical Implications

Our findings may bear useful implications for suppliers and seekers of valenced feedback. In some situations, it may be especially important to obtain accurate, maximally diagnostic feedback. Some individuals, for example, are at heightened risk of developing specific health problems that may be treatable but have serious consequences if untreated. For such an individual, accurate medical feedback could be a life-or-death matter, but the person's self-esteem clearly could suffer on receiving bad news. Our findings suggest that descriptions of such feedback that emphasize its abstract aim (e.g., detecting preventable diseases) rather than how it is obtained (e.g., by visiting a health clinic) should elicit most effectively people's interest in receiving such potentially negative feedback. Indeed, by demonstrating that self-enhancement concerns are aroused for temporally proximal feedback opportunities, our results suggest an ironic possibility. Seemingly helpful promises of immediate feedback delivery could arouse self-enhancement concerns, lessening the likelihood that people seek feedback in situations where bad news is possible.

In summary, we suggest that distinguishing between self-evaluative goals activated by thoughts of the feasibility and utility of acquiring feedback can help clarify accounts self-evaluative motivation. The ultimate utility of this distinction, as well the feasibility of applying it to real-world problems, awaits further testing.

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