

## **Excessive Self-Enhancement and Interpersonal Functioning in Roommate Relationships: Her Virtue is His Vice?**

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*The current paper assesses gender differences in the effects of excessive self-enhancement on interpersonal perceptions. Based on gender-related differences in interpersonal functioning, we predicted that overly favorable self-enhancement would differentially affect interpersonal relationships among women versus men. This possibility was assessed in a study of 105 undergraduates and their same-sex roommates. Target participants completed a measure of excessive self-enhancement; roommates provided measures of evaluation of the target participant at baseline and again three weeks later. Results were consistent with predictions: An excessive self-enhancing style among men predicted less favorable evaluations from roommates. In contrast, an excessive self-enhancing style among women predicted more favorable evaluations from roommates. Results are discussed with respect to gender and self-enhancement within the context of ongoing relationships.*

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A host of internal, self-motivated behaviors have interpersonal consequences (e.g., Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Heatherton & Vohs, 2000; Joiner, Alfano, & Metalsky, 1992, 1993; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). Moreover, certain self-motivated behaviors are displayed with the goal of directly influencing interpersonal perceptions or interactions; these behaviors are typically referred to as self-presentations. The current paper focuses on the interpersonal effects of overly favorable self-presentations in the context of an ongoing, dyadic relationship.

The goal of the present study was to provide an empirical test of the effects of overly favorable self-presentations on the social relationships of undergraduate students and their roommates. We were interested in the following questions: First, does excessive self-enhancement affect ongoing, dyadic interpersonal relationships? Second, are there gender differences in the effects of excessive self-enhancement on others? Based on previous research, we predicted that both questions would be answered in the affirmative. Specifically, we argue that overly favorable self-enhancement may be adaptive among female dyads, but detrimental among male dyads.

### **Self-Enhancement in Interpersonal Relationships**

Although there are a host of benefits to viewing oneself positively and being viewed positively by others, the costs of actively orchestrating others' evaluations through overly favorable self-presentations may overpower potential advancements. Several lines of existing research support such a hypothesis.

In a study of previously-unacquainted male dyads, Heatherton and Vohs (2000) found that men who were unlikable were those seen as arrogant, fake, uncooperative, rude, and unfriendly (traits that were collectively labeled Antagonistic). Men especially likely to have been viewed as arrogant and unlikable were those who had high self-esteem and who had received a performance-related threat to the self, suggesting that their excessively favorable self-presentations may have been the result of their attempts to reaffirm their own abilities and competencies. A naturalistic study replicated the pattern of decreased likability and increased Antagonism among men—but not women—who were threatened and who had high self-esteem (Vohs & Heatherton, 2002).

Colvin et al. (1995) also found that self-enhancement can engender unfavorable interpersonal perceptions. In their studies, male participants who were self-enhancing were described as condescending, hostile, and unable to delay gratification. Female participants who were self-enhancing were described as hostile and self-defeating. Furthermore, defensive self-enhancement was observable within social interaction. During a debate with an unacquainted partner, men with overly positive self-evaluations spoke quickly, interrupted their partner, seemed braggadocios, and exhibited hostility. Women with overly positive self-evaluations tended to seek reassurance and were seen as interpersonally "awkward."

It may be that men and women may have different motivations for engaging in defensive self-enhancement. Colvin et al. (1995) speculated that women who self-enhance try to look better to themselves, whereas men who self-enhance try to look better to others. Men and women also may differ in their presentation of self-enhancement within different relational contexts, such as same-sex dyads. For women, favorable self-presentations may be viewed as self-confidence and may appear to others as motivated by wanting the relationship partner to like them. For

men, favorable self-presentations may be viewed as arrogance or conceit, or a sign of wanting the relationship partner to think well of them (as opposed to liking).

The interpersonal consequences of wanting to be viewed in a positive light is likely to be a function of the style of self-enhancement. Two primary styles of self-presentation in which the goal is to be seen favorably by another are ingratiation and self-promotion, which represent a desire to be seen as likable versus competent, respectively. Godfrey, Jones, and Lord (1986) found that self-promotion and ingratiation do not achieve their goals equally well: although ingratiators are indeed seen as more likable over time (but not more competent), self-promoters are not seen as more competent over time but in fact only succeed in being seen as less likable. Thus, self-enhancement that takes a self-promoting form may elicit negative interpersonal perceptions, whereas self-enhancement that takes an ingratiating form may elicit positive interpersonal perceptions.

### **Gender, Styles of Self-Enhancement, and Interpersonal Correlates**

Mechanisms relating to the social consequences of presenting oneself favorably are suggested by data indicating that men present themselves more positively than women with regard to attributes related to competence, whereas women present themselves more positively on interpersonal socioemotional attributes (Leary, Robertson, Barnes, & Miller, 1986). More broadly, it has been argued that men and women differentially conceptualize the self in relation to others. In their review of the literature, Cross and Madson (1997) concluded that men are oriented toward independence, whereas women are oriented toward interdependence. An independent self-construal can be described as awareness of personal traits, states, and behaviors, and emphasizes self-reliance, and distinctiveness from others (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). In contrast, interdependent self-construals can be described as self-representations that are intertwined with representations of others, with relatively porous interpersonal boundaries that promote perspective-taking (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995).

If men generally present themselves as competent and self-reliant and women generally present themselves as likable and socially-oriented, then the desire to project an extremely favorable self-image may exacerbate these tendencies. Moreover, these different styles of self-enhancement may have differential interpersonal consequences. In support of the latter postulate, there is evidence that independent and interdependent self-construals are differentially related to interpersonal likability. Vohs and Heatherton (2001) showed that people oriented toward independence—which characterizes men's modal way of thinking of the self (Cross & Madson, 1997)—are seen as less likable and more Antagonistic by an interaction partner. Conversely, those with an interdependent orientation—which characterizes women's modal way of thinking of the self (Cross & Madson, 1997)—are seen as more likable and were viewed highly on a personality factor called Composed (which is comprised of the traits calm, honest, congenial, intelligent, reasonable, refined, and unassuming).

In support of the notion that self-enhancement tendencies may manifest themselves differently within men and women, Kline, Allen, and Schwartz (1998) found gender differences in neural correlates of self-enhancement. Excessive self-enhancement, which was represented by scores on the Lie scale of the Eysenck Personality Inventory, was related to greater activation in the left frontal cortex among women and greater right frontal activation among men. Greater activation in

the right frontal cortex is related to withdrawal behaviors, general feelings of negative affect, and predisposition to experience depressive symptoms—and the converse (e.g., more positive affect, behavioral engagement) for greater left frontal activation (for a review, see Davidson, 2000).

In summary, past research suggests that men and women may engage in different forms of self-enhancement, such as men promoting their competence or autonomy and women stressing their likability and sociability (e.g., Colvin et al., 1995; Cross & Madson, 1997; Heatherton & Vohs, 2000; Leary et al., 1986; Vohs & Heatherton, 2002). These distinct forms of self-enhancement may then translate into different interpersonal perceptions (Kline et al., 1998; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001).

### **The Current Study**

We predicted that participants' gender and overly favorable self-enhancement would interact to predict changes in their same-sex roommates' esteem for them. Specifically, we expected that tendencies toward self-enhancement by female target participants at Time 1 would elicit greater levels of roommate liking for target participants at Time 2. In contrast, we expected that tendencies toward self-enhancement by male target participants at Time 1 would elicit lower levels of liking for target participants.

### **Method**

One hundred five participants (64 women, 41 men) were drawn from Introductory Psychology classes at a large state university, as part of a larger project on the psychosocial aspects of depression. All participants who completed relevant measures were included in the present study. From the larger project, this study is the only one to address self-enhancement and its interpersonal impact.

All participants brought a same-sex, non-relative roommate to both experimental sessions. The sample included roommate pairs who chose to room together, as well as those assigned to each other through the university housing agency. Such assignments are random, except that smokers and non-smokers are matched. Participants received class credit for their participation.

Upon arrival at Session 1, target participants and their roommates were informed that they would be filling out questionnaires about their personal views, feelings, and attitudes. They also were asked to return for a second session three weeks later. At this time, they completed similar questionnaire packets, after which they were debriefed and thanked. Questionnaire sessions included approximately 20 target participants and their roommates.

### **Materials**

#### ***Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory–Lie Scale (MMPI-Lie)***

Participants completed the MMPI-Lie (Hathaway & McKinley, 1943) to assess tendencies toward presenting oneself in an excessively favorable light (for discussions of MMPI reliability, see Graham, 1987, pp. 75–77; for MMPI validity, see Graham, 1987, pp. 79–81; Joiner, Schmidt, & Metalsky, 1994). The L scale consists of 15 items selected to identify individuals who are denying minor personal weaknesses (Baer, Wetter, & Berry, 1992). For instance, the response “False” to the item “I get angry

sometimes" would increase the L scale score. A raw score of 4 or greater is considered to be high in a college-educated individual (Groth-Marnat, 1997, p. 233).

The L scale was developed to identify individuals attempting to describe themselves in an unrealistically positive manner (Baer et al., 1992; Groth-Marnat, 1997). There is ample evidence to indicate that the L scale is a valid measure of overly favorable self-presentation or enhancement. Private versus public conditions, the latter of which involves the participant labeling his or her scale with their full name, address, and phone number with the understanding that others would be reviewing their responses, elicits significantly higher Lie scores (Paulhus, 1984). Indeed, when individuals are motivated to present themselves in the best possible light, higher L scale scores are obtained. A meta-analysis of 25 studies of the L scale found an effect size of .94 when participants were asked to purposefully underreport their symptomatology (Baer et al., 1992). Thus, very favorable self-enhancement tendencies are associated with higher L scale scores.

#### *Evaluation of Target on Revision of Rosenberg Self-Esteem Questionnaire (R-SEQ)*

This inventory, developed by Swann et al. (1992), includes the 10 items of Rosenberg's (1965) original scale reworded such that roommates completed it with regard to the esteem in which they hold the targets (e.g., "I see my roommate as a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others"). It is therefore best viewed as a measure of that aspect of rejection involving negative evaluation of the targets' global worth as a person. Each item is rated on a 1 to 5 scale; full scale scores can thus range from 10 to 50. The scale was scored such that higher scores reflected a more positive view of targets by their roommates. This measure is referred to here as R-SEQ. Joiner et al. (1992, 1993) and Swann et al. (1992) have provided reliability and construct validity data. In an earlier study of undergraduates and their roommates, Joiner (1994b) found that roommates' R-SEQ scores were significantly correlated with observer-raters' impressions of target students' likability,  $r(38) = .39, p < .05$ .

## Results

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations are presented in Table 1. As can be seen, overly favorable self-enhancement, gender, and the roommate rejection

**TABLE 1** Means, Standard Deviations of, and Intercorrelations among Measures

	1	2	3	4
1. Lie scale	2.89 (1.87)			
2. Gender	-.07	—		
3. T1 R-SEQ	-.05	.09	44.41 (6.91)	
4. T2 R-SEQ	-.04	.14	.54*	44.03 (6.78)

*Note.* Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) on diagonal. Gender coded such that 1 = Men; 2 = Women. R-SEQ = Evaluation of Target by Roommate on Revision of Rosenberg Self-Esteem Questionnaire; higher numbers indicate more acceptance of the target.

\* $p < .001$ .

measure were not concurrently correlated with each other. There is no relationship between target self-enhancement and roommates' esteem for the target, which is consistent with the possibility, tested later, that the correlation differs considerably for men versus women. Consistent with the lack of correlation between gender and other variables, there were no mean differences between men and women on the Lie scale or R-SEQ scores.

*Overly Favorable Self-Enhancement, Gender, and Interaction as Predictors of Roommate Rejection*

To assess whether Target Self-Enhancement and Gender interacted to predict changes in roommate rejection, a stepwise, hierarchical multiple regression/correlation approach was used, consistent with the recommendations of Cohen and Cohen (1983). First, it is important to note that the assumption of homogeneity of covariance was fully satisfied (i.e., T1 R-SEQ did not interact with gender or Target Self-Enhancement scores to predict T2 R-SEQ; see Cohen & Cohen, 1983, pp. 125–129, 319–320; see Joiner, 1994a for a treatment of this issue).

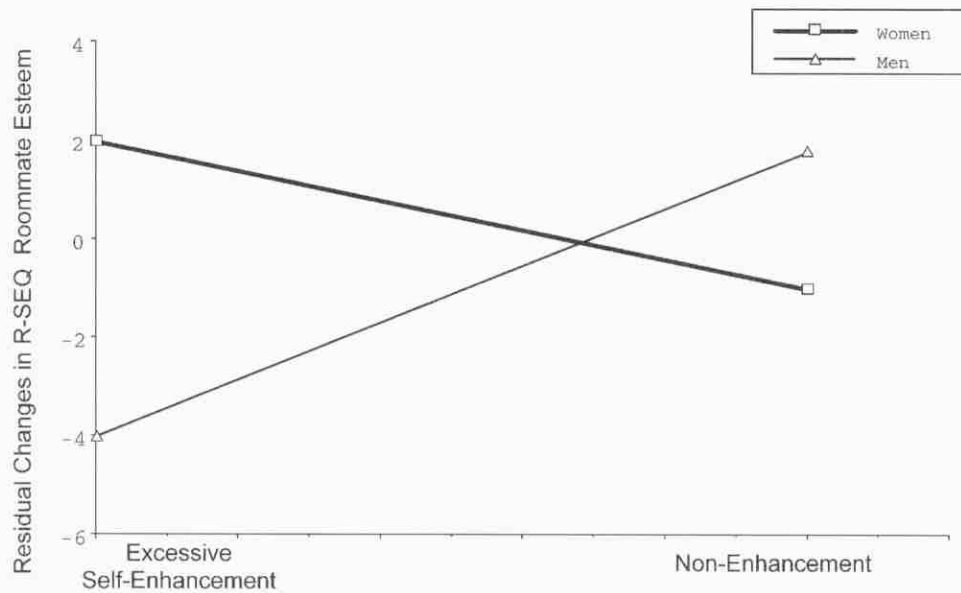
A regression equation was constructed with Roommate T2 R-SEQ as the dependent variable. At Step 1 of the equation, the T1 Roommate Rejection score (i.e., R-SEQ) was entered into the regression equation, thereby creating residual change scores in Roommate Rejection from T1 to T2. Next, Target Self-Enhancement scores and Gender were entered as a set into the regression equation. At Step 3, the Enhancement  $\times$  Gender two-way interaction was entered into the equation. If, as predicted, overly favorable self-enhancement has a different interpersonal effect for men versus women, the Enhancement  $\times$  Gender interaction will emerge as a significant predictor of changes in Roommate Rejection. Consistent with prediction, and as can be seen in Table 2, the Self-Enhancement  $\times$  Gender interaction served as a significant predictor of Roommate R-SEQ changes from T1 to T2 (see Table 2;  $pr = .33$ ,  $t(100) = 3.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ).<sup>1</sup>

To graphically demonstrate the form of the two-way interaction, following Cohen and Cohen (1983, pp. 323, 419), residual R-SEQ change scores were computed by inserting specific values for Self-Enhancement and Gender (i.e., 1 standard deviation above and below the Lie scale mean; for gender,  $men = 1$ ;  $women = 2$ ) into

**TABLE 2** Excessive Self-Enhancement, Gender, and the Two-Way Interaction, Predicting Changes in Roommate R-SEQ Rejection Scores from T1 to T2

Order of entry of set	Predictors in set	F for set	t for within set predictors	df	Partial correlation (PR/pr)	Model R <sup>2</sup>
1.	Baseline R-SEQ	41.40*	6.43*	1,103	.54	0.29
2.	Main Effects	0.61		2,101	.01	.30
	Self-Enhancement		-0.21	101	-.02	
	Gender		1.01	101	.11	
3.	Two-Way Interaction	12.32*	3.51*	1,100	.33	.37

*Note.* R-SEQ = Evaluation of Target by Roommate on Revision of Rosenberg Self-Esteem Questionnaire. PR = Multiple partial correlation for a set of predictors; pr = partial correlation for within-set predictors. For gender,  $Men = 1$ ;  $Women = 2$ . \* $p < .001$ .



**FIGURE 1** Residual change scores on roommate rejection (R-SEQ) as a function of the excessive self-enhancement  $\times$  gender interaction. Note that higher scores reflect a more positive view of targets by their roommates.

the regression equation predicting R-SEQ changes (see, e.g., Hilsman & Garber, 1995). The results for R-SEQ are depicted in Figure 1. It should be noted that the specific value selected for high enhancement is 4.76 (T-score of 55), which is interpretable as a high score (Graham, 1993, p. 26), particularly for college-educated individuals (Groth-Marnat, 1997, p. 233).

As can be seen in Figure 1, overly favorable self-enhancement had a quite different interpersonal impact among men versus women. Men who exhibited tendencies toward very positive self-enhancement were increasingly disliked by roommates (magnitude of change was approximately two-thirds of a standard deviation), whereas men low in self-enhancement were increasingly liked. Among women, an opposite pattern emerged: Women who exhibited tendencies toward very positive self-enhancement were increasingly liked by roommates (magnitude of change was approximately one-third of a standard deviation), whereas women low in self-enhancement were slightly less liked.

## Discussion

We hypothesized that tendencies toward overly favorable self-enhancement would differentially influence ongoing social relationships as a function of gender. Our results indicated that overly favorable self-enhancement was correlated with social functioning among same-sex roommates. Further, consistent with our hypothesis about differential impact for the sexes, women who engaged in self-enhancement were liked increasingly more over the course of the study, whereas men who engaged in self-enhancement were increasingly disliked.

These findings extend previous work on excessive self-enhancement effects (e.g., Colvin et al., 1995) in several ways. We found that excessive self-enhancement does not have uniformly negative effects on relationships. Consideration of the gender of

the target participant, as well as the gender of the observer, appears consequential for understanding the influence of overly favorable self-enhancement on interpersonal acceptance.

Previous research shows that excessive self-enhancement behaviors may manifest differently among men and women in mixed sex dyads (Colvin et al., 1995). Moreover, gender of the observer may also be important in understanding the effects of overly favorable self-enhancement. Based on the theory that men's self-concepts are autonomously derived, whereas women's self-concepts emphasize interpersonal relationships (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997), men may be more likely than women to interpret others' enhancing self-presentations as personally threatening. It may also be that self-enhancement as exhibited by a man involves an implication of downward social comparisons that makes another man feel as if he is being looked down upon. In either case, excessive self-enhancement could spark competitive responses among men with ensuing negative implications for their relationships. In contrast, women witnessing self-enhancement by her roommate may vicariously bask in her apparent favorable characteristics, promoting liking and interest in further interaction. Validation of this possibility by future research is eagerly awaited.

Another avenue for future research involves the interrelations among excessive self-enhancement, interpersonal relationships, and frontal lobe activation in men and women. Given that Kline et al. (1998) found that excessive self-enhancement is differentially correlated with lateralization patterns as a function of gender, it may be that an enhancing woman is viewed by others as engaging and approachable, whereas an enhancing man may be viewed by others as arrogant and concerned with self-promotion (Godfrey et al., 1986; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). Indeed, it is possible that self-enhancement determines asymmetrical frontal lobe activity as a function of interpersonal impact (in contrast to the idea that asymmetry in frontal lobe activity determines the interpersonal impact of enhancement). That is, self-enhancement among women may lead to positive interpersonal experiences, which in turn would produce positive emotionality and left frontal activation, whereas self-enhancement among men may lead to negative interpersonal experiences, which in turn would produce negative emotionality and right frontal activation.

A few cautions and considerations are important to consider. An important limitation of this study is the sole reliance on the MMPI-Lie scale as an index of overly favorable self-enhancement. On the one hand, the scale's psychometric properties have been reasonably well supported (e.g., Joiner et al., 1994) and the findings using this scale were quite consistent with a priori expectations, as well as with the results of research using different measures and methods (Kline, Blackhart, & Schwartz, 1999). Other researchers have used this measure as an index of self-enhancement (e.g., Paulhus, 1984). Nonetheless, future researchers are encouraged to use a more multimodal assessment approach to examine the nature of self-enhancement (cf. Shedler, Mayman, & Manis, 1993). Additionally, the present study did not measure targets' behaviors and thus caution must be exercised in interpreting the relation between excessively-enhancing behaviors by the target and accepting/rejecting behaviors of their roommates. Similarly, the present study focused on non-romantic roommates and thus, extension of these results to other relationship contexts, such as romantic pairs, awaits future work. We encourage future researchers to address these considerations in assessing the claim, articulated and empirically supported in this paper, that overly favorable self-enhancement may represent a differential interpersonal stimulus among men and women.



## Note

1. We tested our hypotheses on a second measure of roommate evaluation, desire to engage in future interactions. Scores on the Willingness-To-Interact Scale (WILL; Coyne, 1976) showed a pattern of results highly consistent with the pattern obtained for change in R-SEQ scores. Specifically, we found that changes in Roommate WILL scores from T1 to T2 were significantly predicted by the two-way interaction of gender and self-enhancement scores above and beyond the two main effects,  $pr = -.25$ ,  $t(100) = -2.60$ ,  $p < .05$ . Further breakdowns indicated that roommates of men who tended to present themselves very positively were less likely to want to spend time with them, whereas roommates of men who did not tend to present themselves positively were more likely to want to spend time with them. Roommates of women who exhibited tendencies toward very positive self-enhancement expressed more desire to interact with them, whereas roommates of women who did not exhibit tendencies toward positive self-enhancement expressed less desire to interact with them. The convergence of results across two measures of roommates evaluation bolsters our arguments regarding the differential effects of self-enhancement for men and women.

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