Asymmetries in Mutual Understanding: People With Low Status, Power, and Self-Esteem Understand Better Than They Are Understood

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Abstract

All too often, people who develop exceptionally astute insights into others remain mysterious to these others. Evidence for such asymmetric understanding comes from several independent domains. Striking asymmetries occur among those who differ in status and power, such that individuals with low status and power understand more than they are understood. We show that this effect extends to people who merely perceive that they have low status: individuals with low self-esteem. Whereas people with low self-esteem display insight into people with high self-esteem, people with high self-esteem fail to reciprocate. Conceptual analysis suggests that asymmetries in mutual understanding may be reduced by addressing deficits in information and motivation among perceivers. Nevertheless, several interventions have been unsuccessful, indicating that the path to symmetric understanding is a steep and thorny one. Further research is needed to develop strategies for fostering understanding of those who are most misunderstood: people with low self-esteem, low status, and low power.

Keywords

interpersonal perception, perceiver effects, target effects, self-esteem, accuracy, status, power, self-verification, self-enhancement, false consensus

> It would probably astound each of us beyond measure to be let into his neighbor's mind and to find how different the scenery was there from that of his own.
>
> —William James (1890/2012)

Although William James's fantasy of waltzing into a neighbor's mind remains just that, some individuals are in fact able to glimpse the "scenery" in the minds of others. In fact, these individuals do more than steal fleeting glances into others' minds—they discern fine-grained details, vivid colors, and subtle textures. Unfortunately, their rich insights into others may not be reciprocated. The result is an asymmetry in mutual understanding in which one member of a dyad (the "perceiver") achieves more insight into the partner (the "target") than the target achieves into the perceiver. The most poignant aspect of such asymmetries is that the perceivers who need understanding the most are both the most incisive and the least understood.

This article explores such asymmetries in mutual understanding with an eye toward decreasing them. First, we review prior evidence indicating that asymmetries in mutual understanding are systematically associated with differential status and power. We then ask whether asymmetries in mutual understanding exist in an important yet unexplored domain: self-esteem. In our studies, we showed that people with low self-esteem have keen insights into people with high self-esteem but that people with high self-esteem do not reciprocate. We attempted to bring people to better

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understand people with low self-esteem, although our efforts were largely unsuccessful. Even so, our findings point to future avenues of research for reducing asymmetries in mutual understanding.

Symmetry and Asymmetry in Understanding Others

Understanding others involves attaining accurate insight into their thoughts, emotions, motivations, perspectives, experiences, and behaviors. Whereas some perceivers readily attain such understanding, others do not. This raises the three questions that we address in this article: Who are the most astute perceivers? What are the mechanisms that enable them to understand others? Can we bolster the understanding of less insightful perceivers? To address these questions, we begin by comparing the relative ease with which people recognize similar versus dissimilar others.

Similarity and homophily as sources of accuracy

People will understand others when at least two conditions are met (Funder, 1995). First, perceivers must have access to diagnostic information about targets. Second, they must be motivated to process that information. Both of these variables tend to increase as the similarity of the target to the perceiver increases (Rule, Ambady, Adams, & Macrae, 2007). That is, similarity will increase not only the sheer volume of diagnostic information available to perceivers but also the concern that perceivers have for targets (Stotland, 1969), which may motivate perceivers to obtain and fully process available information about them.

Whether by increasing information or motivation, similarity may also contribute to the accuracy of inferences at the group level. For example, people's judgments of in-group members, who tend to resemble them, are more accurate than their judgments of out-group members (Judd & Park, 1993; Judd, Ryan, & Park, 1991). Likewise, people are better able to decode the emotions of individuals in the in-group than individuals in the out-group (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2003). And the more similar that people perceive out-group members and in-group members to be, the less biased they are when judging the traits of out-group members (Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004; Roccas & Schwartz, 1993).

One variable that may increase both information about and motivation to understand others is homophily, the tendency for people to gravitate toward similar others (Youyou, Stillwell, Schwartz, & Kosinski, 2017). Homophily brings together people who share identities, including race, ethnicity, age, religion, education, occupation, and so on (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Shrum,

Cheek, & Hunter, 1988). Homophily may also connect people who are similar on other identity-related dimensions, such as levels of self-esteem. For example, the self-esteem scores of long-term friends, but not short-term friends, are correlated (Hafen, Laursen, Burk, Kerr, & Stattin, 2011). And one's level of depression—a strong correlate of self-esteem (Sowislo & Orth, 2013)—is related to the depression scores of one's friends (Rosenblatt & Greenberg, 1991).

Homophily can foster understanding directly by increasing the availability of diagnostic information about similar others (e.g., Blackman & Funder, 1998). Such information, in turn, can augment empathic accuracy (Colvin, Vogt, & Ickes, 1997) and mind-reading accuracy (Thomas & Fletcher, 2003). In this way, homophily could explain why perceivers judge similar targets more accurately than dissimilar ones (Fox, Ben-Nahum, Yinon, 1989; Funder, Kolar, & Blackman, 1995; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001).[1]

Homophily may also contribute indirectly to understanding. That is, insofar as people (a) assume that others are similar to them and (b) surround themselves with people who are in fact similar, their assumptions of similarity will allow them to correctly infer the states and preferences of their relationship partners (Cronbach, 1955; Hoch, 1987; Kenny, 2019). Curiously, in such instances, homophily may create "true" consensus in a setting that would otherwise be marked by false consensus (a tendency to overestimate the extent to which others agree with the self; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977).

Whatever the mechanism, the similarity of targets to perceivers tends to foster accuracy. This means that in relationships between similar partners, accuracy will be symmetrical, with both individuals enjoying relatively high levels of accuracy. In contrast, in relationships in which partners are dissimilar, accuracy may be asymmetrical, with one person being more accurate than the other. Next we consider the nature of such asymmetries in mutual understanding.

Asymmetries in mutual understanding: the role of status and power

In most societies, people from lower classes, racial minorities, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals tend to have relatively low status (i.e., subjective perception of one's place in the social hierarchy) and power (i.e., ability to control others' resources/outcomes). Ironically, although people who are low in status and power lack access to opportunities and resources, they share one striking asset: insight into others. For instance, lower class individuals excel at reading emotions (Dietze & Knowles, 2021), empathizing accurately (Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010), and inferring category membership (Bjornsdottir,

Alaei, & Rule, 2017). Lower class individuals also make fewer perspective-taking errors (Dietze & Knowles, 2021) and display greater compassion for suffering others (Stellar, Manzo, Kraus, & Keltner, 2012). Moreover, women have greater interpersonal accuracy than men regardless of age, culture, or content of perceptions (Hall, Gunnery, & Horgan, 2016; Thomas & Fletcher, 2003). And gay men can predict the sexual orientation of others better than straight men (Shelp, 2003).

The relative insightfulness of people from groups historically low in status and power represents one building block of asymmetries in mutual understanding. The other building block is the relative cluelessness of people who possess a high level of status and power. For example, members of minority groups are better at judging the emotions of members of majority groups than the reverse (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002). Likewise, Black Americans and low-income individuals estimate the magnitude of current and past racial economic disparities with more fidelity than high-income White Americans (Kraus, Onyeador, Daumeyer, Rucker, & Richeson, 2019; Kraus, Rucker, & Richeson, 2017). Furthermore, the stereotypes that Black Americans form of White Americans are more accurate than the stereotypes that White Americans form of Black Americans (Ryan, 1996). The common theme here is that those who lack status, power, or both (Mattan, Kubota, & Cloutier, 2017) are especially inclined to display greater insight into others than their high-status counterparts. Furthermore, status and power actually seem to play a causal role in diminishing social perceptiveness. People accorded high power or status tend to display less insight into others in the form of empathic accuracy (Gonzaga, Keltner, & Ward, 2008), accurate detection of emotional tone in speech (Uskul, Paulmann, & Weick, 2016), or concern for others (Woltin, Corneille, Yzerbyt, & Förster, 2011).[2]

In part, people with low status/power develop especially accurate insights because of the greater availability of information about people with high status/power. Consider the long-standing idea that low-power individuals pay attention to those who control their outcomes—high-power individuals (e.g., Fiske, 1993). This effect is amplified by the fact that those who are low in status and power receive less attention because they are often in the numerical minority. Of course, although minority groups typically have less power and status than majority groups, there are exceptions. For example, women have historically held less status and power than men despite making up half the population. And during Apartheid, the Afrikaners held more power despite being the numerical minority in South Africa.

Recent studies conducted in naturally occurring settings have documented the notion that people high in status and power receive more attention. Researchers using wearable technology and eye tracking have learned that people from lower classes look at and pay attention to other people more than do people from upper classes (Dietze & Knowles, 2016). Complementing this pattern, low-status people attract less attention to themselves than do high-status people (Capozzi, Becchio, Willemse, & Bayliss, 2016; Dalmaso, Pavan, Castelli, & Galfano, 2011; Foulsham, Cheng, Tracy, Henrich, & Kingstone, 2010). This tendency makes it easier to overlook members of minority groups, which could explain why members of majority groups judge the emotions of members of minority groups with less fidelity than the reverse (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002).

Just as people low in status and power are overlooked, people high in status and power have a tendency to rush to center stage. People high in status and power exercise more freedom to express themselves in conversation, even conversations that occur in the hallowed halls of the U.S. Supreme Court. There, male justices are three times more likely to interrupt female justices than the reverse. Moreover, female justices accounted for only 4% of all interruptions over the past 12 years, although they made up 24% of the court on average (Jacobi & Schweers, 2017). Given the tendency for individuals with high status/power to amplify their own perspective at the expense of others in interpersonal settings, it is no wonder that these dynamics also play out in the larger culture. Consider the emphasis that popular culture places on historically dominant groups such as White men (Collins, 2011). An analysis of the dialogue in 2,000 films showed that men had more lines than women in three quarters of films (Anderson & Daniels, 2016) and occupied two of the three top roles in 82% of films. And when women are portrayed in the media, they are especially likely to appear in sexualized or subordinated roles (Collins, 2011). Underrepresentation of people of color is also common. In the most viewed U.S. television shows from 1987 to 2009, only 2% of regular primetime characters were of Hispanic origin despite making up 10% to 15% of the population (Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015). In short, it is clear that social norms and power structures place those who are high in status and power in the limelight, whereas their low-status, low-power counterparts remain in the shadows.

Motivational processes also contribute to the asymmetric insights of people who are low versus high in status and power. Because their outcomes often depend on those with high status and power, people with low status/power are motivated to understand people with high status/power (Fiske, 1993). In contrast, because of concerns that they are the beneficiaries of unjust advantages, people with high status/power are motivated to ignore and/or stereotype their counterparts (Knowles, Lowery, Chow, & Unzueta, 2014). In fact, some contend that gender differences in empathic

accuracy are due to differential motivation rather than differential ability (Ickes, Gesn, & Graham, 2000). And asymmetrical motivation is not limited to the differential power and status associated with gender identity. With regard to race, White people are motivated to deny their privilege and distance themselves from their White identity to protect themselves from psychological threats (e.g., Chow & Knowles, 2016; Lowery, Knowles, & Unzeta, 2007; Phillips & Lowery, 2015). The ubiquity of such tactics of denial and distance also means that White people often do not confront or understand the realities that minorities must navigate.

In a similar vein, system-justification theory (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004) and social-dominance-orientation theory (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) suggest that people are motivated to perceive the systems in which they participate as just and natural. A true understanding of the structural inequities and discrimination confronting people with low status would threaten such beliefs. As a result, high-status people (who are more likely to view the system as just; Brandt, 2013) may be motivated to avoid understanding low-status people. Indeed, people with high levels of economic-system justification show blunted physiological responses to people in need (Goudarzi, Pliskin, Jost, & Knowles, 2020). Likewise, belief in a just world is associated with a tendency for people to underestimate the inequality between Blacks and Whites (Kraus et al., 2017).

Simply put, people develop keen insights into those who are high in status and power, whereas the beneficiaries of such insights routinely misunderstand those low in status and power. In the next section we suggest that this phenomenon generalizes to a new domain. Specifically, we suggest that by virtue of their ubiquity and social influence, people with high self-esteem have helped perpetuate the belief that there is a fundamental human tendency to prefer positive over subjectively accurate evaluations. People with low self-esteem are also aware of the allure of positive evaluations, but they uniquely recognize a countervailing desire for subjectively accurate evaluations. The result is an asymmetry in understanding, such that individuals with high self-esteem understand others with high self-esteem but not those with low self-esteem, whereas individuals with low self-esteem understand others with low self-esteem and those with high self-esteem.

People With Low Self-Esteem Understand More Than They Are Understood

We chose to focus on self-esteem in this article because it plays an outsized role in people's lives (Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McClarty, 2007) and is broadly relevant to many areas of psychology (clinical, social, developmental, educational, cognitive). In addition,

self-esteem is related to the foregoing analysis because it is a clear cousin to status. That is, self-esteem reflects the degree to which people have status in their own eyes rather than in the eyes of the larger society. The contention of sociometer theory that self-esteem is an index of "social inclusion/exclusion," for example, implies a link between self-esteem and status (e.g., Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Even more relevant, hierometer theory posits that self-esteem evolved specifically to track status hierarchies (Mahadevan, Gregg, & Sedikides, 2019; Mahadevan, Gregg, Sedikides, & de Waal-Andrews, 2016). From this vantage point, low self-esteem enables individuals to navigate social hierarchies successfully by avoiding the social costs associated with status violations. Accurate insight into the predilections of those higher in the status hierarchy would serve a similar function.

Empirical research also supports the link between self-esteem and status. A large meta-analysis indicated that lower class people have lower self-esteem relative to upper class people (Twenge & Campbell, 2002). Researchers recently replicated this finding in a longitudinal study in which lower socioeconomic status predicted lower self-esteem (von Soest, Wagner, Hansen, & Gerstorf, 2018). Moreover, people with fewer material resources and first-generation students reported more self-related negative emotions than their more privileged peers (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Kraus, Horberg, Goetz, & Keltner, 2011).

Having highlighted the links between status and self-esteem, we hasten to acknowledge that historical and structural forces produce the low status and power of oppressed groups (Salter, Adams, & Perez, 2018), whereas developmental and interpersonal forces produce the low status of people with low self-esteem (Harris et al., 2017; Harris & Orth, 2020; Wagner, Lüdtke, Robitzsch, Göllner, & Trautwein, 2018). In a similar vein, we acknowledge that the experience of having low self-esteem is vastly different from the experience of belonging to a historically marginalized group.

In short, our argument is not that self-esteem and status are the same but that the two constructs produce asymmetric understanding in a parallel manner. More specifically, the same mechanisms that contribute to asymmetric understanding among people with differential status (i.e., asymmetric information and motivation) also contribute to asymmetric understanding among people with different levels of self-esteem.

Are people with low self-esteem misunderstood?

To the best of our knowledge, no studies have directly tested the idea that people with low self-esteem are

misunderstood. Nevertheless, senior author W. B. Swann has encountered firsthand evidence of this phenomena for several decades. In particular, he has been impressed with the degree to which people misunderstand one of the fundamental markers of low self-esteem: the types of feedback people with low self-esteem want. One of the earliest such experiences occurred in 1984 following his colloquium with the psychology department at Columbia University. After listening to an hour's worth of evidence of *negative-feedback seeking* (i.e., people with low self-esteem displayed a preference for negative evaluations over positive evaluations), one member of the audience hastily approached the podium. Swann was delighted when he recognized that it was the widely acclaimed Stanley Schachter. Swann's delight turned to apprehension, however, when he noticed the fire in Schachter's eyes. Schachter opined, "Everyone knows that all people want to be loved and praised. So, you aren't really saying that people with negative self-concepts actually want negative evaluations, are you?" When Swann stood his ground, Schachter shook his head in disbelief and announced, "Nothing in my experience supports this idea. I don't believe it!"[3]

Schachter, it turned out, was the first of many to express doubts about the preference for negative feedback displayed by people with low self-esteem. For the ensuing 35 years, reviewers, editors, and those who attended talks on self-verification repeatedly dismissed the idea that anyone would seek negative evaluations. Nevertheless, more evidence of negative-feedback seeking accumulated. Under certain specifiable conditions, people with negative self-views (e.g., low global self-esteem, negative specific self-concepts) prefer and seek negative evaluations (e.g., Swann, 2012). Researchers reported evidence of this preference for negative evaluations among spouses (Burke & Harrod, 2005; Neff & Karney, 2005; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994), roommates (Swann & Pelham, 2002), dating partners (Katz & Beach, 2000), employees (Wiesenfeld, Swann, Brockner, & Bartel, 2007), and even strangers (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992; Rudich & Vallacher, 1999). Yet skeptics of this phenomenon continue to voice their doubts (see, e.g., Sedikides & Gregg, 2008).

Why have people doubted the notion that people with low self-esteem prefer negative evaluations? Part of the answer is that people with low self-esteem do not always prefer negative evaluations. Instead, people seek self-verification only if the belief is firmly held (Swann & Pelham, 2002) and when they are in fairly stable relationships (e.g., marriages) rather than relatively transitory relationships (e.g., dating relationships; Swann et al., 1994). Moreover, people with low self-esteem have immediate positive affective responses to praise that are later tempered by the more considered reactions (Hixon & Swann, 1993; Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990).

A more important contributor to doubts regarding the existence of negative-feedback seeking, however, is hinted at in Schachter's remark: "Nothing in my experience supports this idea." Schachter was likely among the 71.5% of people in the world who have high self-esteem (Diener & Diener, 1995). Parallel to individuals with high status/power who cannot wrap their heads around the preferences of people who lack status/power, people with high self-esteem may dismiss the notion that anyone would prefer negative evaluations because this phenomenon is so disjunctive with their past experiences. Simply put, they lack the information and motivation required to understand people who have had vastly different life experiences. At the same time, like those who lack status/power, people who lack self-esteem have ample information and motivation to understand their counterparts who possess high self-esteem.

We tested these ideas empirically in two studies. Drawing on several decades of past research (for reviews, see Ashokkumar & Swann, 2020; Swann, 1996), the criterion for understanding was the degree to which participants predicted that people with high self-esteem would desire praise from their interaction partners but that people with low self-esteem would eschew praise in favor of relatively negative appraisals. We thus relied on a form of accuracy that has been widely embraced by accuracy researchers (Funder, 1987): understanding how targets are likely to behave. We tested whether participants would display asymmetric insight—that is, do participants with high self-esteem fail to understand the motives of people with low self-esteem, whereas participants with low self-esteem understand the motives of people with high self-esteem?

The positive versus negative boss and roommate studies

Procedure. We recruited undergraduates (Study 1a: $N =$ 139; Study 1b: $N =$ 119) with varying levels of self-esteem to participate in two vignette studies. In each vignette, participants predicted whether a target randomly assigned to have low or high self-esteem would choose a boss or roommate who perceived the target positively or negatively. We examined evaluations of social self-esteem because this aspect of self-esteem has been the focus of several well-replicated findings in research on self-verification (e.g., Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987).

We included two outcome variables. First, participants indicated whether they believed the target would choose the negative or positive partner (1 = *most likely*

a
Boss Vignette

b
Roommate Vignette
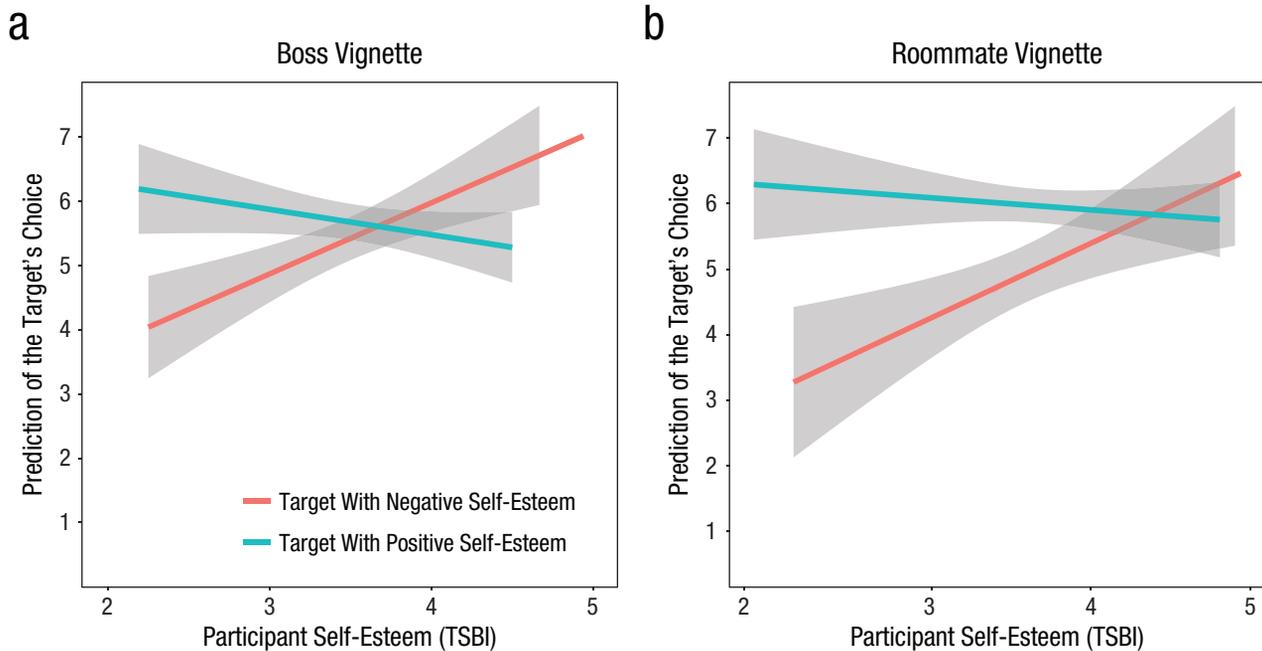
Fig. 1. Prediction of the target's choice as a function of participant self-esteem, separately for targets with negative and positive self-esteem. Higher values along the *y*-axes indicate greater expectation that the target would choose the positive over the negative (a) boss or (b) roommate (1 = *most likely the negative boss/roommate*, 4 = *undecided*, 7 = *most likely the positive boss/roommate*). Shaded regions denote 95% confidence intervals. TSBI = Texas Social Behavior Inventory.

the negative boss/roommate, 4 = *undecided*, 7 = *most likely the positive boss/roommate*). Participants then learned that the target with high self-esteem had chosen the positive-interaction partner and the target with low self-esteem had chosen the negative-interaction partner. Second, participants rated how credible they considered the target's choice; for example, "I find it hard to believe that the target or someone like him would actually choose to work for [the self-verifying boss]" (1 = *strongly agree*, 4 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 7 = *strongly disagree*). Methodological details for this and subsequent studies reported in this article can be found in the auxiliary materials available at https://osf.io/x2bgy.

Results. Analyses of predicted choices revealed an interaction between participants' self-esteem and the low/high self-esteem target condition—boss vignette: $b =$ 1.50, 95% confidence interval (CI) = [0.75, 2.25], $t(135) =$ 3.97, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .13$; roommate vignette: $b = 1.32$, 95% CI = [0.44, 2.20], $t(115) = 2.96$, $p = .004$, $R^2 = .21$.[4] As can be seen in Figures 1a and 1b, the lower the participants' self-esteem, the more they predicted that the target with low self-esteem would choose the self-verifying negative-interaction partner—boss vignette: $b = 1.11$, 95% CI = [0.58, 1.64], $p < .001$; roommate vignette: $b = 1.13$, 95% CI = [0.54, 1.72], $p < .001$. In contrast, low-self-esteem and high-self-esteem participants were equally inclined to predict that the target with high self-esteem would choose the enhancing

boss or roommate—boss vignette: $b = -0.39$, 95% CI = [−0.92, 0.14], $p = .14$; roommate vignette: $b = -0.18$, 95% CI = [−0.83, 0.47], $p = .58$.

As shown in Figures 2a and 2b, analyses of perceived *credibility* of the target's self-verifying choices revealed a similar interaction between participants' self-esteem and target-esteem condition on participants' perceived credibility of the target's roommate choice—boss vignette: $b = -1.02$, 95% CI = [−1.79, −0.25], $t(135) =$ −2.62, $p = .0098$, $R^2 = .46$; roommate vignette: $b = -1.79$, 95% CI = [−2.69, −0.89], $t(115) = -3.94$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .39$. The lower the participants' self-esteem, the more credible they regarded the low-self-esteem target's choice of the negative, self-verifying partner—boss vignette: $b = -0.94$, 95% CI = [−1.49, −0.39], $p < .001$; roommate vignette: $b = -1.38$, 95% CI = [−1.99, −0.77], $p < .001$. In contrast, both low- and high-self-esteem participants were equally inclined to endorse the credibility of the high-self-esteem target's choice of the positive boss or roommate— boss vignette: $b = 0.08$, 95% CI = [−0.45, 0.61], $p = .77$; roommate vignette: $b = 0.41$, 95% CI = [−0.04, 0.86], $p = .23$.

Discussion. Consistent with research on asymmetries involving status and power, the results of these vignette studies showed that when it came to understanding *similar* others, both high self-esteem and low self-esteem participants displayed insight. In contrast, when it came

a

Boss Vignette

b

Roommate Vignette
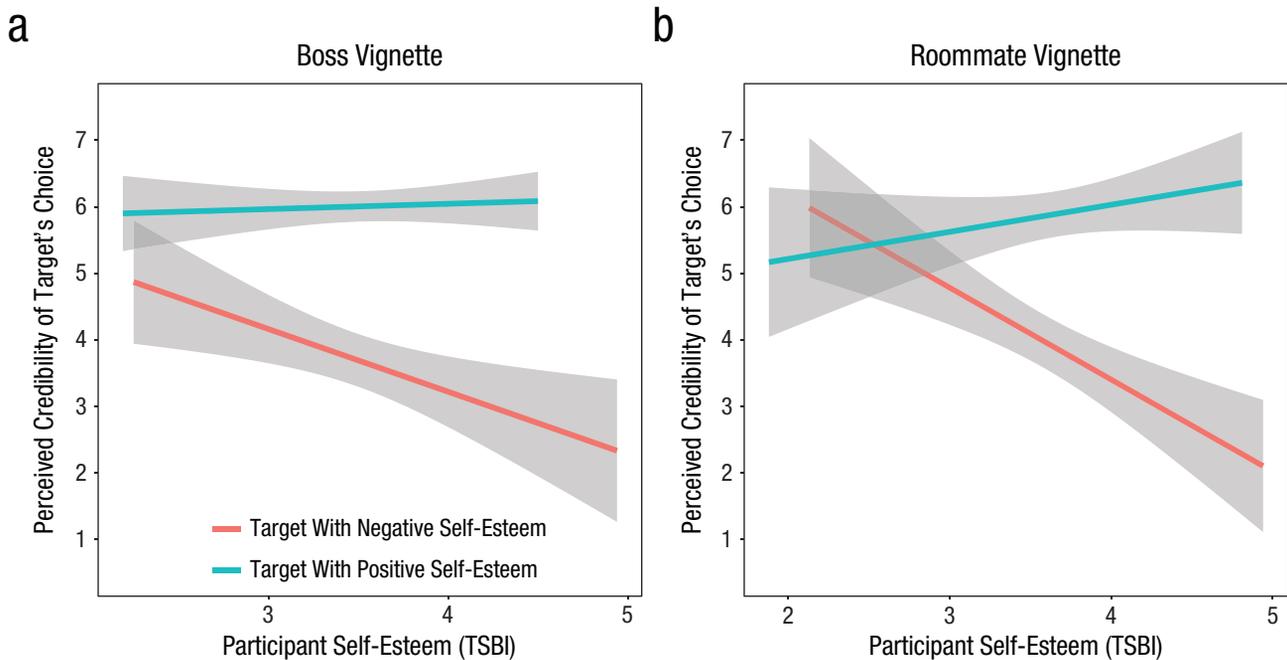
Fig. 2. Perceived credibility of the target's choice as a function of participant self-esteem, separately for targets with negative and positive self-esteem. Higher values along the *y*-axes indicate greater perceived credibility of the target's choice of a self-verifying (a) boss or (b) roommate (i.e., a positive evaluator for the targets with positive self-esteem and a negative evaluator for targets with negative self-esteem; 1 = *strongly agree*, 4 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 7 = *strongly disagree*). Shaded regions denote 95% confidence intervals. TSBI = Texas Social Behavior Inventory.

to understanding *dissimilar* others, participants with low self-esteem outperformed those with high self-esteem: Whereas low-self-esteem participants predicted that the target with high self-esteem wanted praise, high-self-esteem participants failed to predict that the target with low self-esteem desired an interaction partner who provides negative feedback. In fact, even after high-self-esteem individuals learned that the low-self-esteem target preferred the negative-interaction partner, they expressed disbelief. Low-self-esteem participants expressed no such incredulity regarding the choices of high-self-esteem targets. Together, these results illustrate an asymmetry in mutual understanding such that people with low self-esteem understand, but are not understood, by people with high self-esteem.

Participants with low self-esteem predicted more negative self-verification strivings for the target with low self-esteem than did participants with high self-esteem, consistent with the asymmetric-understanding hypothesis. It was also true that there was an overall tendency for participants to predict a preference for positive bosses and roommates. Several factors could have contributed to this tendency. First, this pattern may have reflected the fact that participants live in a society that places enormous value on positivity in all its forms. Second, when people receive self-enhancing evaluations, their initial affective reactions are favorable

(Kwang & Swann, 2010). Although these warm initial reactions are later chilled by incredulity for people with low self-esteem (Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987), the memory of these warm reactions may encourage them to acknowledge the allure of positive evaluations. Finally, truly low self-esteem was rare in our sample: Only a minority of participants (17% in Study 1a and 13% in Study 1b) scored below the midpoint of the scale, let alone at the extreme negative end of the scale. This is important because it means that many participants on the lower end of our self-esteem scale may not have viewed themselves as negatively as the roommate or boss viewed the target and so were not judging a truly similar other.

Can Individuals With High Self-Esteem Be Induced to Understand Individuals With Low Self-Esteem?

Together, the research discussed in the first two sections of this article suggest that people who are high in status, power, and self-esteem achieve a dimmer understanding of their dissimilar counterparts than those who are low in status, power, and self-esteem. There are at least three reasons why the last of these variables—low self-esteem—may be relatively invisible

in contemporary society. First, low self-esteem itself is uncommon (28.5% in Diener & Diener, 1995). This imbalance means that people with low self-esteem will meet people with high self-esteem more often than people with high self-esteem will meet people with low self-esteem. In addition, people with low self-esteem tend to socialize less than people with high self-esteem, thus diminishing opportunities for people with high self-esteem to meet them (Robins, Tracy, Trzesniewski, Potter, & Gosling, 2001). Moreover, when people with low self-esteem do socialize, they do not necessarily gravitate toward people with positive self-views (Rosenblatt & Greenberg, 1991).

Second, both low self-esteem and the associated preference for negative evaluations may be difficult to detect. For example, people often misjudge neuroticism, a correlate of low self-esteem (Vazire, 2010). In addition, preferences for negative evaluations can be automatic and thus outside of conscious awareness (Kraus & Chen, 2009). In such instances, people with low self-esteem could not explain that they enacted a preference for negative evaluations, even if they wanted to.

Third, people with low self-esteem may not want to report their preference for negative evaluations. The value that Western cultures place on high self-esteem and its pursuit may motivate people who suffer from low self-esteem to conceal their preference for negative evaluations from others. Concealment incentives may be especially strong when interacting with individuals with high self-esteem because individuals with low self-esteem will have sound reasons for anticipating that their counterparts will have little understanding of active attempts to maintain low self-esteem.

This relative invisibility of people with low self-esteem may encourage their high-self-esteem counterparts to overlook their goals, needs, and desires. With this in mind, in this section, we explore several strategies designed to correct the tendency for people with high self-esteem to misunderstand the motivational inclinations of people with low self-esteem. Our starting point was the evidence we presented earlier that people with low self-esteem understand what it is like to possess low self-esteem. Their experiences apparently provided them with the information and motivation needed to recognize that others with low self-esteem are drawn to negative-interaction partners for the same reasons that they themselves were. The question, then, is this: How can one inform and motivate individuals with high self-esteem to peer into the realities that individuals with low self-esteem routinely confront?

We generated, on the basis of our collective experience teaching self-verification theory and interacting with individuals with low self-esteem, four distinct strategies for encouraging people with high self-esteem to understand their counterparts. First, in the Tommy study, we provided information about someone with low self-esteem who sought self-verifying evaluations. That is, we had perceivers with high self-esteem read an account of a young boy with low self-esteem who solicited negative evaluations (i.e., displayed a preference for negative evaluations). Second, in a study of overly positive feedback, we focused on motivation. That is, we gave people overly positive evaluations that we believed would motivate a desire for negative feedback. Third, in a study of clinical psychology students, we focused on a group of participants who presumably possessed high levels of information and motivation to understand people with low self-esteem. Finally, in the "gone-but-not-forgotten" study, we examined a group of people whose experiences provided them with an extra dose of information and motivation to understand people with low self-esteem: those who had actually possessed low self-esteem in the past.

The Tommy study: augmenting secondhand information about preferences for negative evaluations

If people with high self-esteem rarely gain insight into people with low self-esteem in the course of their everyday interactions, they may still encounter vivid images of such individuals in books such as *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara (2016). This bestselling novel was nominated for multiple literary awards despite the fact that the author spent over 700 pages chronicling the life of a man whose "self-loathing is shocking from the start and only grows more abject" (Greenwell, 2015, para. 7). Like readers of the book, the protagonist's loving friends were flummoxed by his intense self-loathing. The award-winning memoir *Educated* features similar themes. In reflecting on her college years, author Tara Westover (2018) recalls that "praise was a poison to me; I choked on it. I wanted the professor to shout at me, wanted it so deeply I felt dizzy from the deprivation. The ugliness of me had to be given expression" (p. 277). Both books show how people who suffer from maltreatment as children may develop self-loathing that is so intense that they find praise unbearable.

The popularity of such accounts suggests that the public is intensely curious about people with low self-esteem, perhaps because outsiders rarely glimpse their inner lives. We reasoned that satisfying this natural curiosity would acquaint people with the unique worldviews of people with low self-esteem and the desire for self-verification. Familiarizing participants with such individuals should, in turn, encourage them to recognize the legitimacy of a preference for negative evaluations. To test this reasoning, we had participants read

a story of a young boy named Tommy, a child at a camp for underprivileged children.

Procedure. We randomly assigned participants (N = 111) from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) who had high self-esteem (1 SD above the mean, as determined in a prescreening survey) to an experimental or control condition. In the experimental condition, participants were acquainted with Tommy's story. Tommy had a difficult early childhood. He developed low self-esteem and experienced the consequences of a sustained preference for negative evaluations in the form of repeated rejection (Swann, 2012). Participants were then encouraged to recall and reflect on someone in their own lives who struggled with negative self-views. Participants in the control condition skipped to the dependent measure, which consisted of rating self-enhancement and self-verification articles adapted from Wikipedia (Fig. 3). Participants rated three items concerning whether the articles were relatively convincing, true of human motivation, and scientifically valid, using a scale from 1 to 7. For example, for the human-motivation item, the scale was anchored with *self-verification much more true of human motivation* (1) and *self-enhancement theory much more true of human motivation* (7).

Results. A one-sample t test revealed that relative credibility ratings were above the scale midpoint (M = 5.00), t(110) = 11.45, p < .001, indicating that self-enhancement theory was perceived as more credible than self-verification theory by the participants with high self-esteem, regardless of condition. A second t test revealed no effect of condition on ratings of the relative credibility of the two theories (experimental condition: M = 4.98; control condition: M = 5.02), t(109) = −0.24, p = .81. To quantify support for the null hypothesis, we conducted a Bayesian analysis (Morey, Rouder, & Jamil, 2018). The Bayes factor (BF_{10}) was 0.21, indicating that the null hypothesis is five times more likely than the alternative hypothesis. This is considered substantial evidence for the null hypothesis (Wetzels & Wagenmakers, 2012).

Discussion. Exposing people with high self-esteem to a scenario in which someone with low self-esteem embraced negative evaluations did not foster understanding of the motives of people with low esteem. Why? It is conceivable that the effect of reading a brief story about Tommy was simply too weak; surely the effect of reading Yanagihara's 700-page tome about a man suffused with self-loathing would have been a far stronger test of our hypothesis. Alternatively, experiencing any secondhand evidence of a preference for negative evaluations—even a protracted one—may not be sufficiently compelling to convince a

skeptic. Perhaps firsthand experience with overly positive evaluations is needed to make them realize why people with low self-esteem might welcome negative evaluations. To test this idea, we provided participants with overly positive evaluations. We hypothesized that experiencing such evaluations might make them realize why someone might subsequently compensate by seeking negative evaluations.

The overly positive feedback study: augmenting firsthand information about the preference for negative evaluations

Research on self-verification theory has shown that receiving evaluations that are unexpectedly positive evokes discomfort and intensifies efforts to acquire self-verifying evaluations (Swann & Hill, 1982). We hypothesized that people who receive such evaluations, including those with high self-esteem, would be more inclined to subsequently empathize with the negative-feedback seeking of others who receive overly positive evaluations. That is, both people with high self-esteem and people with low self-esteem possess specific qualities that they perceive as weaknesses (Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989), and self-verification theory predicts that they should experience discomfort when they receive positive evaluations regarding those weaknesses (Swann, 1983, 1996). Such an experience may convince them that overly positive evaluations would make others (e.g., those with global low self-esteem) feel uncomfortable as well. This may open them up to the idea that people with low self-esteem would seek negative evaluations to avoid the discomfort associated with overly positive evaluations. We tested this reasoning in the next study.

Procedure. We randomly assigned a sample of MTurk participants (N = 130) who had high self-esteem (1 SD above the mean, as determined in a prescreening survey) to an experimental or control condition. In the experimental condition, we provided participants with feedback that was markedly more positive than a belief about themselves that they acknowledged to be negative (e.g., unintelligent, unsociable, unattractive). In the control condition, participants received ambiguous feedback. This manipulation was effective in that participants in the experimental condition rated the feedback as less accurate than participants in the control condition (p = .002). We then asked participants to reflect on the feedback and rate the relative credibility of the self-enhancement versus self-verification theory articles using the same measures used in the Tommy study.

Fig. 3. Self-verification (top) and self-enhancement (bottom) articles adapted from Wikipedia. Participants rated the credibility of the articles. Ratings of the self-verification article, which explains why individuals with low self-esteem seek negative evaluations, indicated whether participants had an understanding of such people.

Results. A one-sample *t* test revealed that relative credibility ratings were above the scale midpoint (*M* = 4.61), *t*(129) = 4.81, *p* < .001, indicating that self-enhancement theory was perceived as more credible than self-verification theory by high-self-esteem participants, regardless of condition. A *t* test revealed no effect of condition on credibility ratings (experimental condition: *M* = 4.62; control condition: *M* = 4.59), *t*(128) = 0.13, *p* = .90. More direct support for the null hypothesis was provided by a BF$_{10}$ of 0.19. This finding indicates that the null hypothesis is five times more likely than the alternative hypothesis, substantial evidence for the null hypothesis (Wetzels & Wagenmakers, 2012).

Discussion. Our participants, all of whom possessed high self-esteem, judged self-enhancement theory to be more credible than self-verification theory. Moreover, exposing them to overly positive evaluations did not reduce the incredulity that people with high self-esteem expressed toward the self-verification strivings of people with low self-esteem. It is conceivable that the evaluations we provided were not sufficiently positive. Alternatively, having specific negative self-views disconfirmed does not translate to understanding the need for verification of global self-views. In any event, our findings are consistent with prior research showing that when people are asked to imagine themselves in a target's position, they actually generate more self-related than other-related thoughts (Davis et al., 2004).

The results of the first two studies suggested that our attempts to increase information about people with low self-esteem did not improve high-self-esteem people's understanding of these individuals. Neither indirect exposure (with an example of negative-feedback seeking through the Tommy story) nor direct exposure (with a presumed trigger of negative-feedback seeking) increased perceptions of the credibility of negative-feedback seeking. In the next study, we focused on a group of participants who had both indirect and direct exposure to a preference for negative evaluations, as well as the motivation to understand such a preference: clinical psychology graduate students.

The clinical-psychology-student study: Do information and motivation to understand negative-feedback seeking foster insight into people with low self-esteem?

Clinical psychology graduate students have greater information about people with low self-esteem for several reasons. First, they undergo supervised therapy sessions with actual clients. At least some clients suffer from low self-esteem or depression, thereby directly exposing students to people with low self-esteem who could be seeking verification for their negative self-views. Second, clinical students receive indirect exposure to negative-feedback seeking through coursework that covers the nature and consequences of conditions such as depression and low self-esteem. Such direct and indirect exposure to a preference for negative evaluations should work together to reduce incredulity toward negative-feedback seeking.

An additional reason for us to be confident that clinical graduate students would understand negative-feedback seeking was motivation. That is, the MTurk workers who participated in our two earlier studies had no particular motivation to understand people with low self-esteem. In fact, understanding negative-feedback seeking is not only somewhat irrelevant for most people but also may threaten their rosy, optimistic worldviews and undermine their desire to avoid unpleasant experiences. In contrast, clinical psychology students are likely interested in the self-defeating patterns of people with low self-esteem and should be motivated to fully understand such patterns so they are better positioned to address them in therapy.

Procedure. We invited 80 university students to take part in a study of perceptions of psychological theories. Thirty students were currently enrolled in clinical psychology graduate programs; 50 control participants were undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in nonclinical programs. In response to the question of what degree they were currently seeking, the modal response for clinical psychology graduate students was a PhD, whereas the modal response for nonclinical psychology students was a BS. Clinical psychology students also indicated how long they had been enrolled in their current academic program, number of practice therapy hours logged, and their self-rated level of experience practicing therapy in general and providing therapy to clients with persistent negative self-views. As in the foregoing studies, participants read articles on self-enhancement theory and self-verification theory adapted from Wikipedia in random order and rated the relative credibility of the two theories. In this study, they rated the relative credibility of the two theories on five-point scales and then additionally rated the credibility of each theory.

Results. A repeated-measures analysis of variance with independent ratings of each theory as the within-subjects factor and student status (clinical vs. nonclinical) as a between-subjects factor revealed only an effect of theory, *F* (1, 78) = 7.82, *p* = .007, such that self-enhancement theory (*M* = 3.25) was rated as more credible than self-verification theory (*M* = 2.99). The student status had no

impact on the perceived credibility of either theory, $F(1, 78) = 0.18$, $p = .67$. Furthermore, the BF_{10} for this null effect was 0.25, indicating the null hypothesis is four times more likely than the alternative hypothesis. For the relative credibility-rating outcome, a t test revealed no effect of student status on relative credibility ratings (clinical students: $M = 3.26$; nonclinical students: $M = 3.27$), $t(67) = -0.08$, $p = .93$, $BF_{10} = 0.24$. As in previous experiments, a one-sample t test revealed that mean relative credibility ratings were above the scale midpoint, favoring self-enhancement theory as more credible, $t(79) = 2.67$, $p = .005$. We also examined correlations between credibility ratings and clinical students' (a) amount of time enrolled in current academic program, (b) self-rated level of experience practicing therapy, (c) self-rated experience providing therapy to clients with persistent negative self-views, and (d) number of practicing therapy hours logged. No significant correlations emerged.

Discussion. The results of this study suggest that even therapists in training failed to understand the self-verification strivings of people with low self-esteem. We were especially surprised by converging evidence that there was no relationship between experience in a clinical program and perceptions of self-verification theory.

Of course, it is possible that a larger sample of more experienced clinicians would have revealed that clinical experience does indeed produce insight into preference for negative evaluations. That said, in combination with our earlier unsuccessful attempts to reduce incredulity toward self-verification theory, the results of this study provided further evidence that people fail to understand the preferences of people with low self-esteem. In fact, when considered together with the findings presented earlier, the results presented here suggest that people who suffer from low self-esteem are the only ones who readily recognize the viability of self-verification strivings. We followed this lead by proposing that having a history of negative self-views may enable people with high self-esteem to understand self-verification strivings.

The gone-but-not-forgotten study: those both informed and motivated to understand by a history of negative self-views

Although self-esteem tends to remain stable over people's lifetimes, it can change as people mature (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). This raises the possibility that those who suffer from low self-esteem as children or adolescents may enjoy high self-esteem as adults. Nevertheless, even people who experience improvements in

their self-esteem can remember their earlier selves. This may afford them with insights into two worlds. On the one hand, they may recall what it was like to possess low self-esteem, including ambivalence about praise and motivation to verify their negative self-views. On the other hand, they may become newly appreciative of the allure of praise.

To test these ideas, we asked whether people with current high self-esteem who experienced low self-esteem in the past might display insight into the worlds of people with low self-esteem and those with high self-esteem. That is, they may not only understand that people with high self-esteem would prefer positive evaluations but also that people with low self-esteem would prefer negative evaluations.

Procedure. We invited 171 participants to take part in a study of people's thoughts about themselves and their opinions of various psychological theories. Participants completed a measure of self-esteem. In this study, to adhere to the specificity-matching principle, we measured global self-esteem (the Self-Liking/Self-Competence scale; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001) because the Wikipedia entries for self-enhancement and self-verification theory focused on global self-esteem. They then completed three items that we designed to measure the extent to which they had experienced chronic negative self-views in their past ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.74$); for example, "In my past, there was a significant time in my life where . . . I had persistent, negative views of myself" (1 = *totally untrue of me*, 7 = *totally true of me*). Not surprisingly, responses to measures of present and past self-esteem were moderately correlated, $r(169) = .47$, $p < .001$. Depending on the article condition to which they were assigned, participants read a brief summary of either self-verification theory or self-enhancement theory formatted like a Wikipedia article. Participants then rated the credibility of either theory (e.g., convincing, true, scientifically valid) on seven-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *totally*).

Results. Regression analyses revealed an interaction between past self-esteem and article condition on participants' evaluations of the theories, $b = -0.29$, 95% CI = $[-0.50, -0.09]$, $t(167) = -2.81$, $p = .005$, $R^2 = .15$. As shown in Figure 4 and corroborated by simple-slopes analyses, the lower participants' past self-esteem, the more credible they rated self-verification theory, $b = -0.33$, 95% CI = $[-0.47, -0.19]$, $p < .001$. In contrast, participants imputed high levels of credibility to self-enhancement theory regardless of whether they had experienced high or low self-esteem in the past, $b = -0.04$, 95% CI = $[-0.20, 0.12]$, $p = .65$.

The preceding analysis supports our hypothesis that having had low self-esteem in the past fosters

perceptions of credibility of self-verification theory. Nevertheless, by definition, the gone-but-not-forgotten hypothesis requires that past low self-esteem be "gone"—that is, participants must currently have high self-esteem. To test this idea directly, we repeated the previous analysis including only participants whose current self-esteem was above the mean (n = 86). The effect reported above was replicated. That is, an interaction emerged between past self-esteem and article condition on evaluations of the two theories, b = −0.34, 95% CI = [−0.63, −0.045], $t(82)$ = −2.30, p = .024, R^2 = .17. Simple-slopes analyses of participants with high self-esteem revealed that the lower their past self-esteem, the more credible they rated self-verification theory, b = −0.21, 95% CI = [−0.41, −0.014], p = .04. In contrast, participants with high self-esteem imputed high levels of credibility to self-enhancement theory whether their past self-esteem was high or low, b = 0.12, 95% CI = [−0.10, 0.34], p = .25. In short, participants with high self-esteem who recovered from negative self-views acknowledged the viability of self-verification theory's prediction that people with low self-esteem might actively seek negative feedback.

The foregoing analysis supports the gone-but-not-forgotten hypothesis. That is, participants with high self-esteem who recovered from negative self-views understood that people with low self-esteem might actively seek negative feedback. Nevertheless, the substantial correlation between past self-esteem and current self-esteem (r = .47) raises the possibility that current self-esteem may have contributed to this effect. In a follow-up analysis, we entered the interaction of current self-esteem and article condition, the interaction of past self-esteem and article condition, and the interaction of current and past self-esteem into a model predicting the credibility of self-verification versus self-enhancement theory. Both the Current Self-Esteem × Article Condition interaction and the Current Self-Esteem × Past Self-Esteem interaction predicted credibility ratings—b = −0.65, 95% CI = [−1.25, −0.058], $t(164)$ = −2.17, p = .032, and b = 0.19, 95% CI = [0.04, 0.34], $t(164)$ = 2.56, p = .011, respectively. Simple-slopes analyses for the latter interaction revealed that current self-esteem predicted credibility ratings at high levels (b = 0.56, p = .03) but not low levels (b = −0.10, p = .65) of past self-esteem. Past self-esteem did not interact with article condition to predict credibility ratings once the interaction of current self-esteem with article condition was included in the model (p = .19). Nevertheless, we believe that head-to-head comparisons of measures of current and past self-esteem are unfair given the likely psychometric superiority of the former (a well-validated 16-item measure of current esteem) over the latter (an ad hoc three-item measure of past esteem).
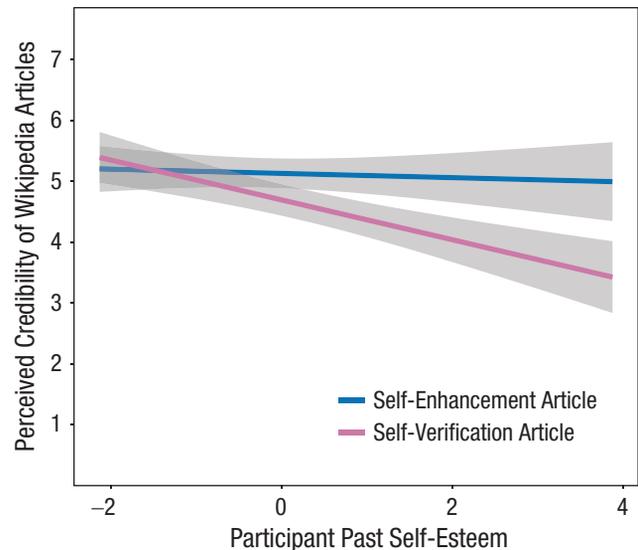
Fig. 4. Results from the gone-but-not-forgotten study. Participants' past self-esteem predicted perceived credibility of self-verification theory but not credibility of self-enhancement theory. Higher values along the *y*-axes indicate higher perceived credibility of the respective Wikipedia article (1 = *not at all [credible]*, 7 = *totally [credible]*). Shaded regions denote 95% confidence intervals.

One unexpected finding displayed in Figure 4 was that even participants who had a history of low self-esteem perceived self-enhancement theory as credible. This finding is reminiscent of the aforementioned evidence in the vignette studies that even participants with low self-esteem indicated an overall preference for positive bosses and roommates. The same factors likely contributed to both sets of findings. For example, all of our participants grew up in a culture that enthusiastically embraced self-enhancement. This gave them ample evidence that self-enhancement strivings are quite common. Moreover, even those who have low self-esteem report feeling good after receiving positive evaluations (Kwang & Swann, 2010). This gave them personal experience with the allure of positive evaluations.

General Discussion

There is a widespread belief that Western nations are meritocracies in which people at the top are there for a reason—they are exceptionally proficient at socially valued activities. Our literature review and new empirical data contribute to an increasing amount of research that suggests that this belief is wrong. It is people at the *bottom*—those low in status, power, and self-esteem—who excel at one crucially important skill: understanding other people. Within this domain, those with high status, power, and self-esteem routinely misunderstand their counterparts. Asymmetric understanding results.

After reviewing extant support for asymmetric understanding, we presented new evidence showing that it extends to people with low self-esteem. More specifically, people with low self-esteem understood correctly that others with low self-esteem would prefer and seek negative evaluators (i.e., display a preference for negative evaluations) and that their counterparts with high self-esteem would prefer and seek positive evaluations (i.e., self-enhancement strivings). In contrast, people with high self-esteem correctly predicted that others with high self-esteem would seek self-enhancement but inaccurately predicted that people with low self-esteem would also seek self-enhancement.

Our findings notwithstanding, some people with high self-esteem are surely aware that people with negative self-views embrace, or at least fail to eschew, negative evaluations. Predators who routinely abuse their partners, for instance, may develop a keen eye for new victims. The aforementioned memoir by Tara Westover (2018) provides a case in point. She reports that her brother subjected her to physical and psychological abuse throughout her childhood. He presumably recognized her feelings of worthlessness and believed that these feelings would undercut her resistance to his attacks.

Coming to terms with asymmetric insight

In the foregoing scenarios and related ones, insight into the worlds of people with low self-esteem could be beneficial. For example, recognizing the existence of a preference for negative evaluations would not only make perceivers more knowledgeable about people with low self-esteem but also might motivate them to be more respectful and empathic toward them. Such respect and empathy may encourage perceivers to make more informed decisions (e.g., clinical diagnoses, teacher evaluations, employee selection) about these individuals. The same could be said of decisions that affect those who lack status and power.

To bring people with high self-esteem to better understand those with low self-esteem, we designed a series of interventions. In each study, we sought to increase information, motivation, or some combination of the two. To our surprise, these efforts were largely unsuccessful. For example, having individuals with high self-esteem read accounts of individuals who struggled with low self-esteem (thereby bolstering information) or providing them with overly positive evaluations (thereby bolstering motivation) did little to increase understanding of the preferences of people with low self-esteem. Even more surprising was that clinical psychology graduate students, who should be trained and highly motivated to understand people with low self-esteem, registered skepticism regarding the tendency

for people with low self-esteem to prefer negative evaluations. Although the results of this study certainly do not rule out the possibility that expertise can foster understanding of people with low self-esteem (or status or power), they raise the possibility that expertise must be substantial (e.g., clinicians with years of experience or who are at the top of in their field) to overcome the challenges of understanding people with low self-esteem.

Amid this flurry of negative findings, the sole ray of hope came from evidence that individuals with high self-esteem who had experienced negative identities earlier in their lives recognized that people with low self-esteem would prefer and seek negative evaluations. This finding is reminiscent of evidence regarding the mechanisms underlying the "endowment effect" (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1990). Whereas early evidence indicated that perceivers struggle to understand the seemingly irrational preference for their own mug over an equivalent mug that belongs to someone else, later research revealed that the endowment effect was diminished by giving participants themselves a coffee mug (Van Boven, Dunning, & Loewenstein, 2000). Leveraging the personal experiences of individuals by having them live the reality of someone else thus seems to hold some promise for designing effective interventions that override strong biases such as those explored in research on the endowment effect and asymmetrical insight.

Although we were surprised that our efforts to improve the understanding of people with high self-esteem bore little fruit, perhaps we should not have been. After all, people tend to have a "belief in a favorable future" (Rogers, Moore, & Norton, 2017) such that they expect future others will share their worldviews. Accordingly, people with high self-esteem may suspect that people with low self-esteem will eventually recognize the virtues of seeking praise and adjust their feedback preferences accordingly. In addition, therapists have noted for decades that people require intensive and sustained psychotherapy to change their long-standing beliefs (but see Schleider, Dobias, Sung, & Mullarkey, 2020). It is conceivable that one-off exposures to a new way of thinking will do little to alter entrenched worldviews. This may be particularly true of people with high self-esteem, given that they appear even less susceptible to influence than people with low self-esteem or depression (Hofheinz, Germar, Schultze, Michalak, & Mojzisch, 2017; Rhodes & Wood, 1992). This parallels evidence from research on status that suggests that people with higher status experience greater distance from others and are thus more resistant to social influence than those with low status (Magee & Smith, 2013). Taken together, these findings suggest that high status, power, and self-esteem may make

people impervious to new information that could provide helpful insights. This is unfortunate because misunderstanding the realities of the disadvantaged may undercut efforts to achieve social justice for them.

Related themes in the psychological literature

Two earlier lines of research foreshadow elements of our idea of asymmetric understanding: the anchor-adjust heuristic (Epley, Morewedge, & Keysar, 2004) and the false-consensus effect (Ross et al., 1977). In taking the perspective of others, for example, people rely on their own responses to a given situation and then adjust their judgments. The result is a tendency to overestimate the degree to which others agree with the self (i.e., false consensus). Our formulation suggests that people who are high in status, power, and self-esteem display these biases to a greater degree than their counterparts. Moreover, our findings show that just as knowledge of oneself can sometimes enhance the accuracy of our judgments (Hodges, Denning, & Lieber, 2018), at other times, self-knowledge can undermine accuracy.

This discussion of the links between negative self-views and accuracy may evoke a sense of déjà vu among those familiar with research on depressive realism. The tag line for this line of research is that depressed persons are "sadder but wiser" (Alloy & Abramson, 1988). Our findings do seem to be superficially consistent with the idea that people with low self-esteem are sadder but wiser. For example, people with low self-esteem do report feeling unhappy when they receive negative feedback, at least initially (Swann et al., 1987). Likewise, the incisiveness of people with low status can be burdensome. For example, the tendency for racial and sexual minorities to code-switch when navigating majority-dominated spaces can reduce feelings of belongingness and authenticity (McCluney, Robotham, Lee, Smith, & Durkee, 2019). Despite these parallels, there are clear differences in the two approaches. For example, we are proposing only that people with low self-esteem and low status/power have a relatively deep understanding of their relationship partners; we are not contending that they are "wiser" in any other way. Even more problematic, the research indicates that that the depressive-realism effect is not robust (Colvin & Block, 1994; Moore & Fresco, 2012), calling its existence into question.

Summary and future directions

In this article, we focused on the consequences of differential status, power, and self-esteem for mutual understanding in social relationships. A major contribution of our work was to integrate relevant research on status and power with research on self-esteem. We are the first to argue explicitly that people with low self-esteem resemble people with low status in that they display similar patterns of understanding and being understood. The literature we reviewed, in conjunction with the new data we reported, suggest that members of each of these low-status/low-power groups will be systematically misunderstood by powerful others. Such misunderstanding likely adds to the hardships imposed by the lack of resources, opportunities, and respect from which individuals with low status/power already suffer (Rucker, Galinsky, & Magee, 2018).

An important limitation of the current research is our focus on asymmetries in understanding along a single dimension (i.e., self-esteem) using a single conceptual definition of understanding (understanding self-verification vs. self-enhancement strivings), limiting the generalizability of our findings (Simons, Shoda, & Lindsay, 2017; Yarkoni, 2019). It is conceivable that people with low self-esteem may understand a high-self-esteem person's desire for praise but not necessarily their racial or sexual identity.

The power and status literature we reviewed is similarly restricted in this regard. Future research should accordingly examine the conditions under which insight associated with a specific characteristic has boundary-crossing properties. It is possible, for example, that people with low status, power, or self-esteem have greater insight into people on other dimensions as well. Indirect support for this possibility comes from evidence indicating that depressed people exhibit less false consensus than nondepressed people, even for attributes irrelevant to depression (Tabachnik, Crocker, & Alloy, 1983). On the other hand, there is no guarantee that understanding in one domain will translate to understanding in other domains. For example, the failure of early feminists to include non-White middle class and lower class women in the feminist cause reduced understanding of the female experience in all of its breadth and diversity (Allen, 2016; hooks, 2001). Modern feminist scholars have responded by emphasizing the importance of understanding how people's various identities intersect to produce unique patterns of experience and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

Further research is clearly needed to examine how people with identities associated with low status/power may understand better than they are understood. This research will not only enrich theory but also could have practical implications. Feeling misunderstood by out-group members, for example, increases mistrust and prejudice and reduces feelings of forgiveness (Livingstone, Fernández, & Rothers, 2020; Vázquez, Gómez, & Swann,

2018). Misunderstanding can have lasting effects when it involves people from different groups. Although time increases the accuracy of people's perceptions of in-group members, it decreases the accuracy of perceptions of out-group members (Ryan & Bogart, 2001).

A tendency to misunderstand people low in power may also shape what is known about WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic) versus non-WEIRD societies (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Because the epicenter of power in psychology is in the West, Western psychologists have accumulated greater understanding of WEIRD people than of non-WEIRD people. Theorists and researchers have responded to this imbalance by devoting considerable attention to the overrepresentation of WEIRD samples in psychology (Nielsen, Haun, Kärtner, & Legare, 2017; Rad, Martingano, & Ginges, 2018). Even so, they have largely overlooked the ways in which the bias toward WEIRD samples contributes to asymmetries in understanding. That is, psychologists in the non-WEIRD world are likely to understand WEIRD populations better than WEIRD scientists understand non-WEIRD populations (Arnett, 2016). To address this disparity, we encourage scientists to acknowledge asymmetries in understanding that occur as a function of geography and nationality. Only then can WEIRD scientists use their resources and institutional power to reduce asymmetrical understanding. They can do so by seeking and valuing research on understudied phenomena prevalent in other cultures; reading, funding, and rewarding the work of scientists from regions of the world underrepresented in psychology; and drawing on the many rich non-Western philosophical traditions and their specific historical legacies of power and subordination (e.g., the caste system in India).

Conclusion

In the quote with which we opened this article, William James noted the difficulty that humans experience in truly understanding their fellow humans. Here we argue that some people experience this difficulty more than others. In particular, people who are high in status, power, and self-esteem tend to misunderstand their counterparts, whereas those who are low in status, power, and self-esteem understand their counterparts rather well. We suspect that asymmetric understanding may generalize to a broad array of groups, including gender and sexual-identity minorities, first-generation college students, immigrants, and other groups that have historically had low status.

As scientists, it is crucial for us to take stock of asymmetric misunderstandings that we can systematically avoid. To this end, it is important to recognize that one of the building blocks of asymmetrical insights—the interpersonal and intergroup blind spots that people experience—are not randomly distributed. Instead, our blind spots track entrenched status and power hierarchies in which the realities of women, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, and people with low self-esteem are overlooked in favor of the realities of White heterosexual males with high self-esteem (Dietze, Gantman, Nam, & Niemi, 2019). One way to avoid this problem is to increase the inclusiveness of the scientific community itself so that the experiences and identities of all people are represented. Only then will psychological science be poised to transcend the asymmetric insights that might otherwise distort its vision of the human condition.

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Notes

1. Although Funder, Kolar, and Blackman (1995) point out that similarity is not required for accurate person perception to occur, the actual similarity between the perceiver and target is a particularly robustly predictor of accuracy.
2. Note, however, that status does not predict less understanding in all domains and contexts. For example, Hall, Mast, and Latu (2015) found that higher status predicted *more* accuracy in decoding nonverbal cues in test settings but not in real-life interactions.
3. The conversation with Schachter was not recorded, so the "quoted" passage here is merely a good-faith approximation of what was actually said.
4. Some analyses in Study 1a and Study 1b violated assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity. When this occurred, we ran robust regressions with Huber weightings to address violations of normality or calculated robust standard errors to address heteroscedasticity. These alternative analyses did not produce results substantively different from those reported in the article and thus do not alter any of our conclusions.

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