

Inattentive Listening Undermines Self-Verification in Personal Storytelling

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ABSTRACT Two studies explore the narrative construction of self-perceptions in conversational storytelling among pairs of same-sex friends. Specifically, the studies examined how listener behavior can support or undermine attempts to self-verify in personal storytelling. In two studies ($n = 100$ dyads), speakers told attentive, distracted, or disagreeable (Study 1 only) friends about a recent experience. Distracted, but not disagreeable, friends tended to undermine participants' attempts to verify their self-perception of being interested in an activity (Study 1) or their self-perception that an event was typical for them (Study 2). These results support the notion that friends can be an important source of influence on self-perceptions and, perhaps surprisingly, suggest that responsiveness from friends, rather than agreement per se, may be crucial for supporting self-verification processes.

Conceptualizing identity as a life story and narrative as a nexus of identity construction (McAdams, 1996) brings to the fore issues of stability

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and change in our identities because storytelling is a socially situated, contextualized activity that is necessarily dynamic and fluid, while identity connotes stability and coherence across time and space (Pasupathi, 2001). One challenge for narrative approaches to identity development, then, is to find ways of considering storytelling as a force for both stability and change. In the studies presented below, we consider how individuals may tell stories aimed at confirming their perceptions of themselves and how the storytelling situation opens that confirmation attempt up for social construction. Thus, our focus is on how the prior beliefs individuals have about their sense of self are a force for stability in the process of identity construction through storytelling and on how the social world can disrupt such stabilizing processes. We focus not on life stories but on less significant, everyday experiences of the sort that form topics for everyday conversations. The story we would like to tell is that storytelling can foster stability in our views about ourselves and our worlds because we attempt to tell our stories in ways that construct such stability. However, every story opens up possibilities for change, as well, because our audiences may support or dispute that construction.

Attempting to Narrate Stability: Self-Verification Theory

Self-verification theory (Swann, 1987, 1996) argues that people actively construct their social worlds to seek support for their beliefs about themselves and that the process of self-verification aids people in perceiving the world as predictable and controllable. The tendency to verify existing self-perceptions can outweigh the desire to enhance self-perceptions, as shown when individuals with low self-esteem select social partners who view them negatively, rather than partners with a positive view of them (Swann, 1987). This effect is not only evident in laboratory contexts but also in long-term relationships (Swann, Hixon, & De La Ronde, 1992). Similarly, relationships in which partners agree with each others' self-perceptions are happier and last longer. Moreover, short-term longitudinal studies of self- and other-perceptions, over a period of a year, suggest that people are successful in getting others to share and validate their self-perceptions and that this self-verification effect outweighs the impact of others' beliefs on individuals' self-perceptions. In other words, a college freshman typically succeeds in making her roommate come to see her as she sees herself more than the roommate succeeds in changing that freshman's self-views. Self-verification theory stems from an

experimental, social psychological tradition but is consistent, as well, with a wide array of findings in personality development and may represent a way to understand how individuals are active agents in constructing stable identities across time (Roberts & Caspi, in press).

Existing evidence on self-verification has been less concerned with the communicative processes by which self-verification is accomplished. However, in one study (Swann & Predmore, 1985), participants who received self-discrepant feedback were then allowed to interact with either a romantic partner or a stranger. Romantic partners who shared participants' self-view helped to "inoculate" participants against the impact of the self-discrepant feedback. Further, the more participants discussed the feedback, regardless of their partner, the less they changed their self-views in response to the feedback.

Several points regarding self-verification are important for the present purposes. First, although the more compelling demonstrations of self-verification processes have resulted from pitting self-verification against self-enhancement in the case of negative self-views, self-verification is expected to involve negative, positive, and even neutral beliefs. Second, self-verification depends on agreement from important others in the social world—friends, family, and romantic partners. Third, existing research on self-verification shows that social discussion is important in supporting self-verification processes. The present studies bring self-verification theory into the realm of narrative theories of self-development, focusing on self-verification in the specific context of storytelling about personal experiences. Next, we outline why this social context is an important one to examine with respect to self-verification as well as the particular variations on this social context that we focused on in the two studies we report.

Why Personal Storytelling?

Personal storytelling, more broadly, is one aspect of autobiographical remembering. Autobiographical remembering is argued to fulfill many different functions, but it is certainly related to self- and identity needs (Bluck, 2003; Cohen, 1998; Pillemer, 1998). In fact, many theorists propose that personal storytelling is an important process for the development of self and identity across the lifespan (Fivush, 1995; McAdams, 1993; Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne, 2000). This includes both the construction of self-conceptions and identities and the

maintenance of those views. There is increasing evidence to support this function of remembering in general and storytelling in particular.

Storytelling is related to judgments of many kinds (McGregor & Holmes, 1999; Pennington & Hastie, 1993; Tversky & Marsh, 2000). This includes relationships between self-perceptions and the types of events people are most likely to recall (Barclay & Subramaniam, 1987), as well as between self-views and the way people tell stories about the events of their lives (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996). For example, individuals who view themselves as independent are more likely to recall events from a previous week that are consistent with this self-view (Barclay & Subramaniam, 1987). Individuals who are achievement oriented tell personal stories with achievement themes, while those who are interpersonally oriented are apt to tell stories with interpersonal themes (McAdams et al., 1996). Such findings support the idea that existing self-perceptions are verified in the contents of personal stories. Other work has experimentally manipulated the trait that individuals are seeking to verify. In such cases, individuals remain better able to recall experiences consistent with that trait (Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990). Thus, people are motivated to confirm desired and existing self-perceptions during autobiographical remembering, and personal storytelling may serve as a vehicle for self-verification processes.

That said, evidence on self-verification in personal storytelling has not examined the impact of audiences on self-verification attempts. In other words, when there are no constraints on self-verification, people will self-verify in remembering. However, the social context is quite likely to play a role in this process by influencing what is remembered, the way it is recalled, and by providing agreement or disagreement with the proffered version of the story. For example, people are better able to recall self-consistent experiences given no cues; when provided with cues to support recall, people are able to recall experiences that were not consistent with their self-views (Barclay & Subramaniam, 1987). The social context may provide such cues, soliciting stories that could, theoretically, undermine self-verification. Further, most personal storytelling in social contexts is highly collaborative, with the line between “speakers” and “listeners” quite blurred, and with listeners offering interpretations, asking for elaboration, and otherwise influencing the content of a personal

story (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000; Dixon & Gould, 1996; Manier, Pinner, & Hirst, 1996; Norrick, 1997; Pasupathi, 2001; Pasupathi, Lucas, & Coombs, 2002). Finally, listeners express agreement or disagree with an interpretation, as when a defensive husband refuses to concede to his jealous wife that contacting an old flame indicates his untrustworthiness. The latter case is most akin to self-verification theories in its emphasis on the support (or lack thereof) that conversational partners provide for a storyteller's interpretation of a personal experience.

The present studies thus view self-verification as a process by which people's stories support stability in their self-perceptions across time. Our general approach, across studies, was to operationalize self-verification by assessing a person's experience-relevant self-perceptions prior to and following a conversation about that experience. We viewed stability in self-perceptions as a primary indicator of successful self-verification in the conversation. Second, in both studies, we experimentally manipulated the way that an important social partner, listening to a person's story, responded to that story. This approach allowed us to test experimentally how different listener responses influenced self-verification in the context of storytelling. Across both studies, we chose to examine established friend pairs in order to enhance ecological validity; moreover, both self-verification theory and more comprehensive models of self and personality development assume that important others are more likely to influence our views of ourselves than strangers or acquaintances. Our focus on friendships, in particular, was motivated primarily by the desire to restrict our examination to a single type of relationship, and prior descriptive work suggests that friendship is a very frequent context within which autobiographical recounting occurs, particular for young adults (Pasupathi, 2000).

The two studies had slightly different goals, as well. In the first study, we focused on disagreeing and unresponsive listening in comparison to supportive listening and sought to have control over the content of storytelling. To do so, we provided participants with an experience in the laboratory and assessed self-perceptions related to that experience prior to talking about it with a friend and afterwards. In the second study, we focused on unresponsive versus supportive listening and addressed a more heterogeneous set of experiences in order to explore the replicability and generalizability of our initial findings.

STUDY 1: SELF-VERIFYING PERCEPTIONS OF INTEREST IN PERSONAL STORYTELLING

We chose in Study 1 to examine self-verifications of interest in a computer game. Perceptions of personal interest and enjoyment may be especially important in the early phases of experiencing an activity and certainly play a role in the decision to continue an activity (Ruble & Frey, 1991). As such, these are important self-perceptions to examine in a general sense. Such perceptions may be initially constructed during a first-time experience and revised over subsequent time. In this study, we specifically explored whether the evaluation constructed immediately following a first-time experience was maintained following a conversation about the experience with a good friend. The conversation was an opportunity for the friend to support or undermine participants' attempts to self-verify their view of themselves as interested (or not interested) in the activity. Importantly, research on self-verification (Swann & Ely, 1984) suggests that beliefs held with less certainty are more likely to be influenced by social interactions. This study, then, can be viewed as a study of a situation in which audiences have greater capacity to support or undermine attempts at self-verification in contrast to situations involving more established self-perceptions. We return to this issue below.

We chose to contrast three different types of listener responses to participants' stories about their activity. The first two can be derived directly from self-verification theory as a general framework with attentive and supportive listeners and with attentive but disagreeable listeners. These two conditions reflect the notion of a friend supporting self-verification in personal storytelling and a friend actively disputing self-verification in storytelling. The third type of listener we chose to examine was a distracted listener. This latter choice was motivated by a different literature, namely, one on the social construction of memories.

What is Wrong with a Distracted Listener?

Attentiveness is a central, basic facet of social interaction. From infancy on, people are aware of the attention of others in their social worlds, inferring attention from cues like eye contact, facial movements, and emotional expressions (Fogel & Thelen, 1987; Moore, Cohn, & Campbell, 2001). Attentive cues from listeners communi-

cate to speakers on multiple levels (Bavelas et al., 2000; Clark, 1996). Speakers are aware of eye contact, emotional facial expressions, backchannels (“mm-mmms”), and more content-laden responses like comments or questions (Bavelas et al., 2000). Such signals indicate, “I am listening to your speech sounds, I am processing those into language, I agree that we should continue to talk about this topic, and I understand and agree with your meaning.”

In adult conversation, attentional cues from listeners play a crucial role in ensuring the smooth flow of conversation (Clark, 1996; Krauss, 1987) as well as in providing speakers with a sense that their listeners support their expressed meaning (Bavelas et al., 2000; Chovil, 1991; Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Distracted listeners are unable to provide such signals. Not surprisingly, people who tell stories to attentive listeners tell longer, more elaborative, more fluent, and better-ended stories, in comparison to those who tell stories to distracted listeners (Bavelas et al., 2000; Dickinson & Givon, 1995; Pasupathi, Stallworth, & Murdoch, 1998; Tatar, 1998). Thus, distracted listeners clearly undermine the quantity and quality of storytelling.

It is less clear whether distracted listeners also undermine the self-views that storytellers present and endorse in relation to their personal stories. Theoretically, however, both psycholinguistic work (Bavelas et al., 2000) and symbolic self-completion theory (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985) suggest that when listeners do not respond to the *meanings* inherent in a story, problems may arise both in completing the story and in getting those meanings to be socially endorsed. Thus, from these views, distracted listeners should be just as problematic for self-verification as disagreeing listeners.

Method

Participants

Subjects were 60 pairs of males ($n = 30$) and females ($n = 30$)¹ recruited from the undergraduate psychology pool and randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions (see below). Speakers were predominantly European American (89%). On average, they were 20 years old ($SD = 2.1$), and the friendship averaged 5.6 years in length

1. There were no gender differences or interactions of gender with condition on any of our dependent variables, and gender is not considered further.

($SD = 5.6$).² Participants assigned to the different conditions did not differ in length of friendship, attachment style, relationship quality, prior computer game experience, or self-esteem (F 's < 2 , p 's $> .15$). Participants received extra credit or \$10 per hour as compensation.³

Procedure

Following their arrival, participants were assigned to speaker or listener roles. The speaker and listener completed background measures of relationship quality, personality, and a computer-game experience measure, which asked them to rate their ability, interest, and frequency of game play across various types of computer games, including the SIMS[®] game used in the present study. Only six participants reported any previous familiarity with the game—one in the attentive, two in the distracted, and three in the disagreeable condition; their results did not differ from those of the “naïve” participants.

The experimenter explained the SIMS[®] game to the speaker. In this game, players attempt to keep a simulated person happy and successful. This involves fulfilling the person's basic needs (hygiene, energy, social life) in the short term, and over the long term, enhancing the person's economic and social success. For the present study, participants were given brief instructions focused on basic needs. We created two identical characters, Jane Dough and John Doe, so that all participants played a sex-matched character and began the game with identical starting conditions in terms of housing, friends, job, skills, and money. Participants then played the game for 15 minutes. The experimenter left the room after the first 2 minutes of play. Afterwards, each participant completed a questionnaire assessing his/her interest in the game, providing a baseline measure of interest and permitting the experimenter to arrange the disagreeable condition.

Meanwhile, the listener received instructions in a separate room. Attentive listeners were told, “We'd like you to just listen to your friend the

2. This is a relatively long time frame for a collegiate sample. The University of Utah, the flagship campus for the state of Utah's higher education system, is a commuter campus located in the population center of the state. For these reasons, it attracts a large proportion of local students, who maintain friendships from earlier in life during their university years. The length of the friendship did not influence any of the analyses reported in this manuscript.

3. It is worth noting that the many of our participants are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS), more commonly known as Mormons. However, we also compared LDS ($n = 32$) and non-LDS ($n = 26$) participants, and found no effect of LDS membership on self-verification outcomes as a function of listener condition ($F < 1$).

way you typically do when you're being a good listener." Listeners in pilot testing never expressed disagreement with the speaker's assessment of the game; thus, listeners were not expressly told to agree. Those that were assigned to be disagreeable listeners were told the following, depending on their friend's initial rating of interest: "We want you to try and convince them that they liked/disliked the experience they tell you. Try to change their mind how you normally would." Distracted listeners were told, "We are interested in how conversations go when one person is distracted." They were then asked to count all "th" words the speaker uttered while talking. Distracted listeners received practice in the task, consisting of counting "th" words in 10 prepared stories as the experimenter read them aloud; feedback about accuracy was provided after each story. Listeners were offered an additional \$5 if they were accurate within a 4-th-word margin of error; the incentive was deemed necessary when preliminary testing revealed that listeners were likely to simply drop the "th" task in favor of listening.

Listener and speaker were then reunited, and the speaker told the listener about the experience of playing SIMS[©]. Conversations were videotaped. On two occasions (one attentive/agreeable pair, and one attentive/disagreeable pair), the experimenter ended the conversation after 15 minutes because participants had finished talking about SIMS[©] but had not signaled the experimenter. In one case, this occurred because of an attempt to get additional experimental credit. Following conversations, pairs were separated, and they completed additional questionnaires; speakers rated the listener's responsiveness and rerated their perceived interest in the SIMS[©] game.

Measures

Self-perceptions of interest in SIMS[©]. Speaker interest was reflected by the average of three self-report ratings of interest prior to the conversation and post-conversation. Ratings were on 6-point, Likert-type scales, where 1 indicated *low interest* and 6 *high interest*, to ensure that participants must express at least some level of interest or disinterest. Reliability was good (preconversation $\alpha = .91$, postconversation $\alpha = .95$).

Length of conversations. The total conversation time in minutes was recorded. Although it can be argued that time is not necessarily equivalent to how much content participants communicated, the correlations between the time of the conversation and more content-based indicators of length such as word counts or verb phrases were quite high ($> .9$).

Self-verification in the conversations. Although our main measure of the success of self-verification involved stability and change in participants'

ratings of interest in the SIMS[©] game, we also wanted to explore whether participants did, in fact, attempt to self-verify during conversations, and, if so, what responses their listeners provided. A team of three coders, including the second author and two additional coders blind to condition, first identified (by consensus) every statement made by each speaker that reflected self-perceptions of interest in the game. Importantly, because such self-perceptions may be expressed in precise ways, such as “I thought the game was really fun” and general ways, such as “The game was very cool,” both types of statements were examined. In fact, the majority of statements were general, that is, taking the form, “This game is really cool.” Each identified utterance was classified as positive, negative, or neutral in valence (coders were blind to the participants’ preconversation ratings of interest). If the valence of the statement was consistent with the participants’ preconversation rating of interest in the SIMS[©] game, that statement was classified as self-verifying. For example, if participants viewed themselves as being at least moderately interested in the game prior to conversation and made a positive statement about the game during the conversation, that statement was viewed as self-verifying.

The listener’s response to each such utterance was classified as either explicit agreement, “Sounds cool/stupid”; implicit agreement, “Mmm, yeah”; disagreement, “Really? I think it sounds dumb”; an invitation to elaborate, “Why was it fun?”; or “No opportunity” or uncodeable. “No opportunity” referred to occasions when the storyteller made a statement evaluating the game but continued to talk for some time thereafter, thus denying the listener a response opportunity. Agreement between two independent coders across 15 transcripts and 62 statements was 90% for both statement valence ($\kappa = .81$) and response category ($\kappa = .83$).

Manipulation checks. As a manipulation check, we examined speakers’ ratings of perceived listener agreement and perceived listener responsiveness immediately following the conversation. Agreement was an average of three 7-point, Likert-type ratings, with 1 indicating *little agreement* and 7 indicating *absolute agreement* ($\alpha = .86$). Listener responsiveness was an average of five items on the same 7-point, Likert-type scale ($\alpha = .79$). In addition, coders reviewed all transcripts, identifying first whether listeners expressed verbal disagreement at all, and, if so, classifying speakers’ overall response to the disagreements as either a *concession*, or *continued opposition* to what the listener had to say. Coder agreement across 24 pairs was 96% ($K = .86$, $p < .01$). Note that this is a conservative evaluation because listeners also expressed their disagreement in nonverbal ways such as smirking, raised eyebrows, or frowns. These were not captured by this transcript-based approach.

Assessments of speaker and listener characteristics. To ensure that random assignment was successful in equating our groups on some potentially important background characteristics, we assessed the speaker's attachment style (Adult Attachment Questionnaire; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), self-esteem (Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; Rosenberg, 1965), report of the age of the friendship, and perception of the relationship (Quality of Relationships Inventory; Pierce, Sarason, Sarason, Soky-Butzel, & Nagle, 1997). Participants assigned to the three conditions did not differ on these dimensions.

Results

Evaluating the Manipulation of Listener Behavior

A general linear model examining the effects of experimental condition on perceived listener attentiveness and agreeableness revealed an overall effect of condition, $F(4, 114) = 16.5, p < .01, \eta^2 = .37$. Univariate tests showed that condition effects were evident for perceptions of listener attentiveness, $F(2, 57) = 30.7, p < .01, \eta^2 = .52$, and for perceptions of listener agreeableness, $F(2, 57) = 6.3, p < .01, \eta^2 = .18$. For agreeableness, Helmert contrasts suggested that (1) listeners in the attentive condition were perceived as significantly more agreeable, $M(SD) = 5.1(1.1)$ than listeners in the distracted, $M(SD) = 3.8(1.3)$ and disagreeable, $M(SD) = 3.8(1.7)$ conditions ($p < .01$); and (2) the latter conditions did not differ from one another ($p = .88$). For attentiveness, special contrasts compared: (1) attentive and disagreeable listeners combined with distracted listeners; and (2) attentive listeners with disagreeable listeners. Distracted listeners were less responsive, $M(SD) = 3.4(.7)$ than attentive $M(SD) = 5.0(1.1)$ and disagreeable listeners $M(SD) = 5.5(.8), p < .01$. However, disagreeable listeners were perceived as *more* responsive than attentive listeners ($p < .05$). Finally, a chi-squared test of transcript-coded disagreement (present/absent) by condition (attentive/distracted/disagreeable) revealed a significant effect of condition ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 28.8, p < .01$). In the attentive and distracted conditions, 2 of the 40 pairs were coded as expressing disagreement. In the disagree condition, the majority of transcripts reflected disagreement (14 of 20). Thus, our manipulation successfully created conditions varying in the level of listener attentiveness and agreement as perceived by speakers, and the majority of the listeners in the disagree condition expressed explicit verbal disagreement.

Effects of Listeners on Speaker's Self-Perceived Interest

To examine effects of listeners on interest, we employed Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance with condition as a between-subjects factor and occasion (pre- and postconversation) as a within-subjects factor. The results showed a main effect of measurement occasion, $F(1, 57) = 5.5$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .09$, complicated by a significant interaction between occasion and experimental condition, $F(2, 57) = 4.5$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .14$. To evaluate the interaction effect, we computed simple effects tests of occasion within each experimental condition. There were no significant differences between preconversation and postconversation interest in the game for the attentive and disagreeable conditions ($F_s < 1$). In the distracted condition, preconversation ratings of interest, $M(SD) = 3.8(1.0)$ were significantly higher than postconversation ratings, $M(SD) = 3.4(1.3)$, $F(1, 57) = 14.4$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .20$. Importantly, the direction of listener effects in the disagreeable condition potentially operated in two directions, resulting in an overall zero effect. Approximately 75% of participants in all three conditions initially perceived the game as at least somewhat interesting. Repeating the above analysis with only those participants who initially found the game interesting ($n = 44$, 14 attentive, 15 distracted, 15 disagreeable) reveals an identical pattern of effects. This finding is shown in Figure 1; means and standard deviations for interest ratings are shown in Table 1.

To elucidate further the noneffects of the disagreeable listeners, we first examined whether excluding the six pairs in which no verbal disagreement was expressed changed the findings reported above. The findings remained the same. We then examined the speaker's responses to disagreement in that condition. Of the 14 speakers we examined, 9 continued to express an opposing viewpoint throughout the conversation and 5 made concessions within the conversation. The amount of change in interest, however, did not differ significantly across these groups, $F_s < 1$. Examination of pre- and postconversation mean interest ratings suggested that for the "continued opposition" speakers, postconversation interest ratings were, on average, about .10 higher than preconversation interest ratings. For those speakers who conceded, postconversation ratings were about .26 lower than preconversation ratings. At best, this latter difference is half the size of the difference for participants in the distracted listener condition.

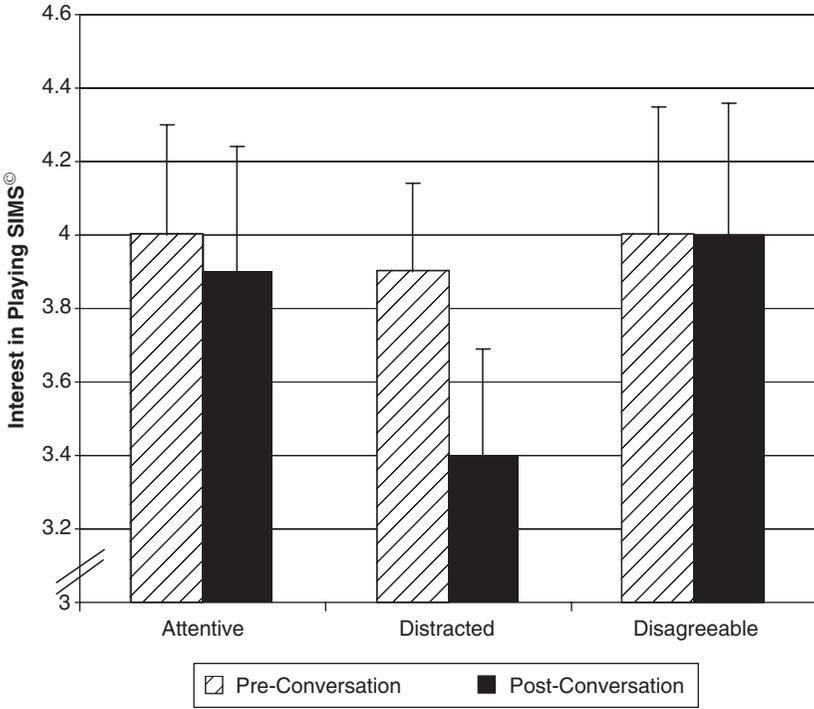


Figure 1
 Self-reported interest in further SIMS® play as a function of time and listener condition, Study 1.

Self-Verification and the Storytelling Process: Possible Mediators of the Effect of Listeners

There are several potential ways in which distracted listeners may exert their influence. Here, we focus on three. First, distracted listeners may induce negative emotion, thus resulting in lower ratings of interest following the conversation. Second, something about listener behavior may change the extent to which stories are self-verifying. Third—and this is related—distracted listeners are known to elicit shorter stories. Below, we examine each of these possible mediators, following accepted guidelines for mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Emotional impact. Distracted listeners may induce a negative mood, which in turn reduces interest in the SIMS® game. A repeated measures MANOVA of positive and negative emotion with va-

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Dependent Variables by
Condition, Study 1

Variable	Attentive (<i>n</i> = 20)		Distracted (<i>n</i> = 20)		Disagreeable (<i>n</i> = 20)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Conversation Length (minutes)	4.1	3.4	2.3	1.1	5.1	3.2
Preconversation interest	4.0	1.4	3.9	1.1	4.0	1.3
Postconversation interest	3.9	1.5	3.4	1.3	4.0	1.5

lence (positive or negative) and occasion (pre- or postconversation) as within-subjects factors and listener condition as a between-subjects factor revealed no significant changes in mood or differences in mood by condition, $F_s < 2$. Thus, emotional changes do not explain the changes in interest induced by distracted listeners.

Was storytelling less self-verifying in response to distracted listeners? We employed binomial tests to examine whether evaluative statements were more likely than chance to reflect self-verifying evaluations, and this proved true. Of the 251 evaluative statements made by participants, 158, or 63 percent, were self-verifying, $p < .001$. Note that this is a relatively conservative test, as neutral or ambivalent statements were classified as not self-verifying. Listener condition did not influence the *proportion* of evaluative utterances that were self-verifying in nature, $F(2, 48) < 1$. The overall number of self-verifying statements did differ significantly by condition, $F(2, 57) = 5.2$, $p < .01$. This variable, however, did not correlate significantly with changes in interest, $r = -.14$, $p > .25$. Thus, we did not proceed further with mediation analyses.

Conversation length. From a self-perception theory perspective (Bem, 1967), participants may judge their own interest based on the length of time that they devote to a particular story; thus, if a

person talks for a longer time about SIMS[®], he or she infers higher interest than a person who speaks for less time. Moreover, earlier work on self-verification (Swann & Predmore, 1985) suggests that the more someone talks following self-discrepant feedback, the less they are likely to incorporate that feedback into their own self-views. Distracted listeners elicit shorter conversations (Pasupathi et al., 1998); thus, conversation length may mediate the effect of listeners on self-verification processes.

As shown in Table 1, conversations elicited by distracted listeners were clearly shorter than those elicited by the other two conditions, overall $F(2, 57) = 4.5, p < .02$, contrast of distracted listeners with the other two conditions, $p < .01$. Moreover, the shorter the conversation, the larger the reductions in interest following the conversation, $r = -.26, p < .05$. Thus, we proceeded with mediation analyses by recoding condition to a bivariate dummy variable reflecting attentive or nonattentive listeners and performing a hierarchical regression analyses to predict postconversation interest after controlling for preconversation interest on a first step. We entered condition effects first, followed by length of conversation; length of conversation did not significantly predict postconversation interest after controlling for experimental condition. Because this fails one of the necessary criteria for demonstrating mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986), we did not proceed further with mediation analyses, and we concluded that this particular self-perception explanation does not receive support.⁴

Discussion

Study 1 results suggest that, in personal storytelling, self-verification processes can be undermined by distracted listening but not by disagreeable listening. In terms of self-verification theory, such results provide both an expansion in identifying attentiveness as a dimension of social response that is important for facilitating self-verification and, more speculatively, a qualification in understanding the circumstances under which agreement is one of the crucial dimensions. In what follows, we first spend some time considering why we

4. In fact, experimental condition very nearly continues to predict post-conversation interest even when entering the length of the conversation first ($p < .06$), suggesting that if there is a mediation effect here, it is the reverse direction—namely, length of conversation effects on interest are mediated by condition.

did not find any impact of disagreement on the stability of participants' self-perceived interest in SIMS[©].

Both theoretically in terms of self-verification theory and intuitively, it is perhaps puzzling that a disagreeable listener, charged with explicitly attempting to persuade speakers to change their opinion of the game, was so ineffective. One explanation is that the majority of speakers engaged in continued opposition—reaffirming and elaborating their viewpoints. The data suggest that for the minority of participants who did concede, disagreement may have decreased their interest in the game (given sufficient experimental power to detect the decrease), but at only half the magnitude achieved by unresponsiveness. This is consistent with the idea that requiring people to think through and elaborate their perspective can strengthen their viewpoint, analogous to the effects of counterarguments and inoculation in persuasion research (Killeya & Johnson, 1998; McGuire, 1964). Thus, one interpretation of this null effect is that, in this case, the disagreement served as a kind of inoculation manipulation. Expressed in the terms of narrative identity research, disagreeable listeners may, through their attentiveness, provide speakers with opportunities to tell their story largely in their own terms.

Another interpretation, however, would be that self-verification processes are differentially subject to the impact of disagreement depending on the type of characteristic participants seek to verify. People may perceive interest as a very personal, individually varying judgment and may feel that it is perfectly acceptable to like an activity that their friends dislike. In fact, within the disagree condition only, evaluative statements uttered earlier in the conversation were more likely to take a “general” form, and those uttered later were more likely to involve a “first person” form. That is, participants in that condition shifted their language from a general evaluation of the game as an object toward a specific, first-person evaluation about their own interest. This shift did not occur in the other conditions and may have permitted those participants to maintain their self-views in the face of disagreement.

Finally, we did not systematically train our disagreeable listeners, and they were not offered an incentive for good performance.⁵ Thus,

5. The use of the incentive resulted from pilot testing, which indicated that participants quickly lost interest in the ‘th’ task, and tended to prioritize (appropriately) listening to the friend over the more difficult, tedious, and uninteresting ‘th’

the disagreeable condition potentially involved more variability in the strength of the manipulation or simply was a weaker manipulation. In terms of success at the task, six pairs in this condition did not meet the conservative criterion of explicit verbal disagreement. However, at the “th” task, where success was defined as coming within a margin of 4 to the actual number, 30% of the sample were off by a more lenient margin of 10. Finally, both the distracted and the disagreeable condition created equivalent perceived disagreement as rated by the speaker but clear differences in perceived responsiveness. We return to this issue later in the article.

In contrast to speakers faced with disagreeable listeners, participants faced by distracted listeners subsequently reported reduced interest in playing the SIMS[©] game. On its face, this result may seem quite surprising, as participants could easily have perceived themselves as having told a boring story or their friends as uninterested in the game without necessarily reducing their own interest in playing SIMS[©]. However, this finding is consistent with theories about the many functions served by signals of listener attentiveness, including, ultimately, an acknowledgement of the meaning being communicated by a speaker (Bavelas et al., 2000). In the present study, distracted listeners were unable to acknowledge the speaker’s view of the SIMS[©] game as interesting. In fact, the attentiveness of listeners in this specific case is particularly important. As participants talked about the game, and presumably attempted to verify their view that the game was interesting, the attentiveness of listeners served as a kind of implicit test of the validity of that perception. If the game is not interesting enough to hear about, how can playing be interesting? This brings us to some of the limitations of Study 1.

task. Thus, the incentive was employed primarily to encourage participants to prioritize the distractor task such that they did, in fact, represent distracted listeners. We examined differences in the accuracy of listeners’ guess about the number of ‘th’ words as a function of experimental condition. Participants did adhere—that is, people were more accurate in the distracted condition than in the other conditions ($F_s(1, 46) = 4.2, p < .05$). However, the effect size of the difference between conditions in accuracy at the ‘th’ counting task ($\eta^2 = .16$) was smaller than the effect size of the difference in expressed disagreement for the disagree condition versus the other two conditions ($\eta^2 = .50$). Further, other research using similar distraction manipulations has employed unacquainted pairs or confederate listeners without additional incentives (Bavelas et al., 2000; Pasupathi et al., 1998) and has found similar effects on storytelling.

The use of a computer game provides both possibilities (e.g., to examine somewhat standardized, novel experiences across all participants and to create a disagreeable listener condition) and constraints (e.g., the relative unimportance of the experience for participants, the somewhat close correspondence between listener behavior and the self-perceptions to be verified in storytelling). Possibly, people may be less responsive to listener feedback regarding more important experiences or, at least, experiences that they sought out themselves. Further, the impact of distracted listening may be less likely when the to-be-verified self-perceptions are not closely tied to listener interest. Finally, the choice of relatively uncertain self-views perhaps makes it easier for distracted listeners to undermine those views. These are the possibilities that we address in Study 2.

STUDY 2: SELF-VERIFYING PERCEPTIONS OF AN EVENT AS TYPICAL OF ME

The major goal of Study 2 was to provide a conceptual replication of Study 1 results regarding distracted listening. In Study 2, we focused on whether individuals perceived themselves as having behaved typically or atypically during an event in relation to their self-concept (Libby & Eibach, 2002). For negative events like failure to maintain a diet, viewing the event as “atypical” may maintain optimism (Libby & Eibach, 2002), but for positive events, perceiving the events as atypical may undermine the value of those events for bolstering self-esteem. Because people tend to be mildly self-enhancing, positive events are more likely to be viewed as highly typical of the self (Greenwald, 1980), and negative events may be negative because they challenge self-perceptions (Tschanz & Rhodewalt, 2001). As a consequence, in Study 2, we examined positive experiences and whether people were able to verify their perceptions of those events as typical for themselves.

Our choice of positive experiences was motivated by the desire to ensure that most participants would see those experiences as typical of their usual self (given the above work) and that participants would be motivated to verify that perception. We chose to focus on perceptions of an event as typical for two reasons. First, autobiographical experiences involve more heterogeneous self-perceptions; thus, a focus on typicality for the self rather than verification of a specific

self-conception allowed us to ask consistent questions of all participants. Second, perceiving events as typical has consequences for the memorableness of those events (Barclay & Subramaniam, 1987) as well as for related motivations and efficacy beliefs (Libby & Eibach, 2002). Thus, typicality is, in and of itself, an important kind of perception to examine. Also, it is likely that the typicality judgments in this study ranged widely in certainty, as compared to the relatively novel and therefore uncertain judgments examined in Study 1.

As in Study 1, we focused on friend pairs. We expected all participants to initially view their experiences as typical of themselves and to tell the story of the experience in that way. In storytelling, we expected attentive listeners to support self-verification and we expected distracted listeners to undermine self-verification, and, consequently, to reduce perceptions of the events as self-typical. In contrast to Study 1, the heterogeneity of the stories told by participants in this study precluded a detailed analysis of self-verification attempts (see also Pasupathi, in press, for a more detailed treatment of the various ways self is presented in personal storytelling). Thus, we have chosen to use examples to illustrate how self-verification can be undermined by inattentive listeners.

Method

Participants

Forty pairs of same-sex friends (20 male, 20 female)⁶ from the introductory subject pool were randomly assigned to an attentive or distracted listener condition. Participants were predominantly European American (90%). Speakers averaged 21.6 years in age ($SD = 3.2$), and had known their listeners an average of 3.2 years ($SD = 3.8$). Pairs assigned to the two conditions did not differ in the length of time they knew one another, the quality of their relationships, self-esteem, or attachment style ($F(3, 34)s < 1$, $ps = n.s.$). Video and audiotaping failed in two cases. Thus, sample sizes in the analyses reported below vary. Participants were compensated with extra credit or \$10 per hour for their time.

Procedure

Following their arrival, participants were assigned to speaker or listener roles. The speaker and listener completed background measures of rela-

6. Gender had no significant effect in any analysis and is not discussed further.

tionship quality, personality, and recent (within the past week) positive and previously undisclosed life events in separate rooms. Afterwards, the speaker chose one of the life events for a subsequent conversation. The speaker then completed an additional questionnaire in which he or she rated three items assessing the typicality of that life event (e.g., "To what extent were your reactions typical of your usual way of responding?"). Meanwhile, the listener received instructions in a separate room. Attentive listeners were told, "We'd like you to just listen to your friend the way you typically do when you're being a good listener." Distracted listeners were told, "We are interested in how conversations go when one person is distracted." They were then provided with the same instructions as in Study 1. The pair was reunited in the taping room and videotaped as the speaker told the listener about the experience. Following the conversation, the pair was separated and completed additional questionnaires; speakers rated the listener's responsiveness and rerated the typicality of the event.

Measures

Length of conversations in minutes. We measured the time spent talking in minutes. Two participants' data were missing due to video and audio equipment failures.

Manipulation checks. As manipulation checks, we obtained speaker ratings of the extent to which the listener agreed with their version of events (a single item), and of the listener's responsiveness (an average across five items, $\alpha = .84$). We also coded whether the listener gave clear signs of understanding the speakers' meaning (laughing at correct points, making pertinent remarks; interrater agreement on 15 stories = 87%, $K = .67$, $p < .01$).

Speaker perceptions of the event as typical. Speakers made pre- and postconversation ratings of the extent to which the talked-about event was typical for them along three Likert-scale items ("How typical is this event for how you usually are?" "How consistent were your thoughts/reactions with how you usually think/react?" "How consistent were your actions with how you usually think/react?"). These variables were averaged to create preconversation ($\alpha = .95$) and postconversation ($\alpha = .94$) "typicality" scores.

Assessments of speaker and listener personality and relationship characteristics. As in Study 1, we assessed the speaker's attachment style (Adult Attachment Questionnaire; Brennan et al., 1998), self-esteem (Rosenberg

Self-Esteem Scale; Rosenberg, 1965), report of the age of the friendship, and perception of the relationship (Quality of Relationships Inventory; Pierce et al., 1997). Participants assigned to the two conditions did not differ on these dimensions.

Results

Evaluating the Manipulation of Listener Behavior

A general linear model examining the effects of experimental condition on perceived listener attentiveness and agreeableness revealed an overall effect of condition, $F(2, 37) = 26.8, p < .01, \eta^2 = .59$. Univariate tests showed that condition effects were evident for perceptions of listener attentiveness, $F(1, 38) = 6.3, p < .02, \eta^2 = .14$, and for perceptions of listener agreeableness, $F(1, 38) = 54.9, p < .01, \eta^2 = .59$. Speakers perceived distracted listeners to be less responsive, $M(SD)$ attentive = 5.4 (1.0); $M(SD)$ distracted = 3.1(1.0), and less agreeable, $F(1, 38) = 6.3, p < .02$; $M(SD)$ attentive = 6.1 (1.4); $M(SD)$ distracted = 4.9 (1.7). A chi-squared test demonstrated significant differences in the likelihood that listeners provided signals of understanding the speaker's meaning during the conversation as a function of listener condition, $\chi^2 = 15.5, p < .001$. All attentive listeners, but only 42% of distracted listeners, were able to do so.

Effects of Listeners on Judgments of the Typicality of Events

We conducted a repeated measures analysis of variance with participants' typicality judgments as dependent variables, rating occasion (pre- or postconversation) as a within-subjects factor and listener condition (attentive or distracted) as a between-subjects factor. We had a very specific hypothesis, namely, that we would only see differences in typicality ratings by occasion within the distracted condition. Thus, rather than test a general design and report omnibus F-tests, we tested simple effects of rating occasion within listener condition (Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 2000). Consistent with our hypotheses, the results revealed a significant simple effect of rating occasion for the distracted condition, $F(1, 34) = 4.2, p < .05, \eta^2 = .11$, and no simple effect of rating occasion within the attentive condition, $F(1, 34) < 1$. As seen in Figure 2 and Table 2, participants with distracted listeners reported higher estimates of typicality pre-conversation than postconversation. In contrast, those with attentive

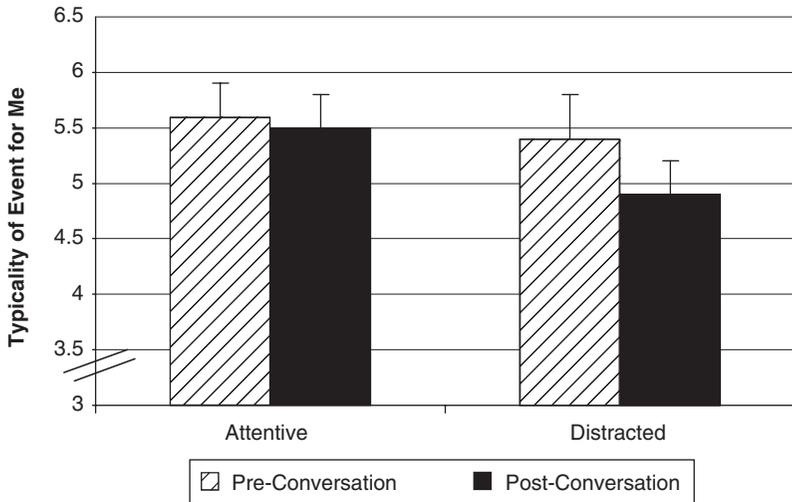


Figure 2
Perceived typicality of event for the self as a function of time and listener condition, Study 2.

listeners reported similar levels of typicality prior to and following the conversation.

Testing Possible Mediators of the Distracted Listener Effect

Study 1 suggested that neither emotional impact nor conversation length in minutes could adequately explain the impact of distracted listeners. This lack of evidence for mediation was demonstrated a second time in Study 2. A repeated measures analysis of variance with emotions as the dependent variable, valence (positive and negative) and occasion (preconversation and postconversation) as within-subjects factors, and listener condition (attentive versus distracted) as a between-subjects condition revealed only an effect of valence, $F(1, 37) = 190.8, p < .01$, due to the fact that participants reported more positive than negative emotion, $M(SD)$ positive = 4.0 (1.1), $M(SD)$ negative = 1.7 (0.5).

An analysis of variance with length of conversation as the dependent variable and listener condition as the independent variable revealed a significant effect of listener condition on the length of the conversations in minutes, $F(1, 36) = 6.4, p < .02, \eta^2 = .15, M(SD)$ attentive = 3.9 (2.9); $M(SD)$ distracted = 2.0 (1.3); see Table 2 for

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations for All Variables in Study 2, by
Listener Condition

Variable	Attentive <i>n</i> = 20*		Distracted <i>n</i> = 20*	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Conversation Length (minutes)	3.9	2.9	2.0	1.3
Preconversation Typicality	5.6	1.4	5.4	1.6
Postconversation Typicality	5.4	1.1	4.9	1.4

*Videotaping failed for one pair in each condition, thus, the sample size for conversation length is 19 in each condition. In addition, 2 participants in the attentive condition and 1 in the distracted condition did not complete preconversation typicality ratings.

means and standard deviations. The length of the conversation in minutes was correlated with differences in perceptions of the event's typicality from pre- to postconversation, $r = -.32$, $p < .07$. However, further analyses revealed no evidence that conversation length mediates the impact of distracted listeners.

Self-Verification in the Conversations: Some Examples

In this study, the events and the associated self-perceptions were quite variable. Thus, here we present two examples from the conversations to illustrate the ways that distracted listeners failed to provide support for the meanings in speakers' stories. Looking at the conversations in Study 2 yielded many examples of dismissive responding that did not encourage elaboration of the story. For example, one exchange in a distracted pair with a fairly sizeable drop in the speakers' pre- and postconversation perceptions of the event as typical went as follows:

S: Yeah. Yeah, so I did good on this math test, and uh, that's about it.

L: That's great. We're done?

Other distracted listeners showed problematic responding; that is, responses that failed to validate the meaning that participants intended to convey:

S: . . . actually, he wanted me to bartender. I'm gonna pay for server manager, he said, yeah, well, once you do that a couple times, just start picking up shifts, and stuff, so (inaudible). Bartender, you know, for Christmas. That's my experience that day.

L: (laugh)

S: What?

This kind of responding, at worst, resulted in quickly ended stories. At best, it forced speakers to repeat themselves in an attempt to establish that their story had been understood. We would contend that such responding potentially explains drops in the extent to which participants can perceive their experience as typical. However, one problem is that this type of responding might be special to the distracted condition we created in the laboratory. Thus, it is worth noting that inappropriate and dismissive responding *also characterized pairs in the attentive condition who showed drops in typicality ratings more characteristic of the distracted condition*. For example, in one pair, the speaker recounts praise from a former girlfriend as support for his view of himself as a terrific guy. His friend is apparently not listening in the beginning (despite the instruction to "be a good listener"), and then, when he does comment, undermines the speaker's interpretation of the compliment by attributing it to the girlfriend's lack of current options in her new place:

S: . . . You can talk, dude. Kay?

L: Sure. Okay, where was I at. Oh yeah dude, it's cause, am I mental, um, she's in a new place. You know what I mean?

Discussion

Study 2 confirmed that distracted listeners undermine self-verification in personal storytelling, extending the findings of Study 1 to more heterogeneous events. The impact of distracted listeners was confirmed even when we expanded our focus to self-perceptions other than interest in a game, and when the events being retold were personal, autobiographical experiences presumed to be of some importance to participants. Study 2 also replicated some of the null findings of Study 1, including the fact that conversation length and

negative emotion did not mediate the observed findings. One limitation of Study 2 was that the heterogeneity of experiences retold by participants made it impossible to replicate the disagree condition employed in Study 1. However, the results of Study 2 were consistent with those of Study 1. Next, we consider the joint results of both studies together and return to the larger issue of how the social construction of the self can be integrated within contemporary approaches to self and personality development.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We suggested above that storytelling about personal experiences provides a process and forum for self-verification processes. In addition, we argued that this context permits researchers to examine how responses from listeners may affect self-verification attempts—that is, how self-verification is a joint or collaborative endeavor. In an initial study, we showed that distracted, but not disagreeable, listening undermined participants' attempts to verify their self-perceptions of interest. This finding was confirmed in a second study, which expanded the results to include a heterogeneous set of self-perceptions and positive experiences. Below, we first consider two of the possible reasons why distracted listeners may undermine self-verification. We then examine some of the implications of the findings for social perspectives on self-development, including self-verification theory but also narrative approaches.

Why Are Distracted Listeners So Problematic for Self-Verification in Storytelling?

Two straightforward explanations for why distracted listeners undermine self-verification are that (a) distracted listeners elicit shorter stories and (b) distracted listeners induce negative emotion. Across both of our studies, these explanations were tested using mediational analyses and were found wanting. One of the major questions, then, is why and how distracted listeners are problematic for self-verification? One explanation would be that decreases in an event's typicality may result from a speakers' desire to distance him or herself from that event in the face of an unresponsive listener, both by curtailing the retelling of it and by no longer viewing that event as represent-

ative of the “usual” self (Libby & Eibach, 2002; Ross & Wilson, 2002). From this view, speakers respond to the information inherent in a listener’s behavior, but the resulting judgment is a product of intraperson processing rather than an outcome of the collaborative narration of the event. Interestingly, we also asked participants to rate the degree to which their experience revealed something important about themselves prior to and following the experience. In neither study did this rating decline significantly following storytelling, suggesting that distancing per se is not the best explanation of the findings.

The alternative view that we propose is based on the idea that the undermining of self-verification processes results directly from the joint construction of the experience in the storytelling context, by both speaker and listener—a view consistent with shared reality theory (Hardin & Higgins, 1996) and with discursive perspectives on self-construction (Bamberg, *in press*). Inattentive listeners communicate little support for the joint project of talking about an event. Thus, speakers faced with such listeners must curtail their stories or risk violating rules of cooperative discourse (Bavelas et al., 2000; Clark, 1996; Grice, 1957). Such listeners also fail to acknowledge a speaker’s meaning (Bavelas et al., 2000). Distracted listeners thus communicate little support for story-related judgments, and, to the extent that stories involve attempts at self-verification, such attempts fail with distracted listeners. At least one other investigation of storytelling and judgments (McGregor & Holmes, 1999) found that memory per se did not predict judgment biases and proposed that storytelling effects on judgments resulted from a kind of “heuristic” process; these are findings quite similar to those in the present study.

Responsive listeners communicate agreement with the joint project of conversing about speakers’ experiences, as well as comprehension of the meaning that speakers attempt to communicate (Bavelas et al., 2000; Clark, 1996). This is the case even when those listeners also communicate disagreement with that meaning. Attentive and disagreeable listeners provide ambivalent signals—that the experience is worthy of attention and comprehensible—even though they also disagree with the speaker’s overall conclusion. Thus, while the speaker may be aware that the listener disagrees, the speaker is also given ample opportunity to elaborate and present his or her own view.

Of course, in these studies, distracted listeners were not simply unresponsive—they were perceived as unresponsive *and* disagreeable. Whether unresponsiveness is always coupled with disagreement is an important question, both for understanding the collaborative construction of stories and for considering the limitations of our findings. In everyday life, unresponsiveness may not lead to perceptions of rejection, but it sometimes will. When unresponsiveness has obvious situational causes, it is likely that it is not coupled with rejection. For example, when passengers tell drivers a story, the driver will occasionally be distracted or unresponsive based on the ongoing traffic dynamics (Drews, Pasupathi, & Strayer, 2004). Because these moments of distraction have an obvious cause, passengers are unlikely to see those moments as also involving rejection of their stories. In contrast, when a parent comes home preoccupied by troubles at work and is unresponsive to his or her child's stories, the child, without access to the internal mental activity of the parent, may well feel rejected and ignored. The situation we examined in the above studies is far more analogous to the latter situation than to the former, particularly because the incentive employed across both studies rendered the distracted listeners truly preoccupied by a goal (getting the money) that was incompatible with listening to meaning. Of course, it is also worth pointing out that agreement may be delivered in ways that also communicate unresponsiveness and that engaged listeners can become controlling if they are too involved in storytelling (Fivush, 2000). Researchers interested in further exploring responsiveness as it affects storytelling and story-related judgments will need to deal with these issues.

These findings provide both support and, we believe, an expansion of self-verification theory. They suggest that, in general, people do seek to verify their self-perceptions in telling personal stories and that personal storytelling is an important context within which self-verification processes unfold. They also, however, expand the theory to consider that people are focused on more than simply receiving affirmation from important others. That is, in the conversational context of self-verification, people are seeking responsiveness, and the opportunity to tell that self-verifying story, rather than just agreement. However, the findings also fit into a broader set of considerations on the ways in which self and personality are constructed in storytelling contexts with input from the social world.

Implications of the Findings for Social Construction of Self/Personality

The notion that the social world influences self-development has a long, venerable history (James, 1890; Mead, 1934). Recent social psychological perspectives on social aspects of the self have focused on how macrocultural contexts influence the structure and content of people's self-conceptions (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) as well as how other people are involved in the processes by which people construct and maintain self-conceptions (e.g., Donahue, 1994; Manian, Strauman, & Denney, 1998). The latter work includes self-verification theory, which formed a backdrop for the studies presented above.

Much (but not all) of the empirical work in these areas is individual centered in methodology. That is, this work suggests that other people influence our sense of self but often does not examine the communicative processes by which that influence is taking place. To the extent that communicative processes have been addressed, the metaphor has been one in which important others articulate their perspectives or express agreement or disagreement with an individual's self-conceptions, and this information is then integrated into the individuals' sense of self in some kind of internal mental process. In fact, this kind of metaphor is made explicit in Leary's sociometer theory of self-esteem, in which general self-esteem results from an internal monitoring process that tracks social rejection (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). The present data are consistent with the idea that we also monitor rejection and acceptance of more particular self-views in the specific context of storytelling.

A still more radical view of these data would be that the very act of communicating simultaneously constructs the self-perceptions that we then carry forward with us into other social contexts. Stories that garner little responsiveness require us either to adjust the story, the audience (by seeking out different listeners), or ourselves (by rejecting the sorts of experiences that create that kind of story), not because of an internal monitoring process, but simply because the lack of responsiveness doesn't permit us to *create* those self-perceptions in a social world. This view is somewhat more in line with symbolic self-completion theory (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985), which suggests that we cannot fully hold a desired self-perception until it has achieved an existence within the shared realities of our social groups.

Developmental psychologists have also long focused on the way that social influences affect the development of self-perceptions, but with a greater focus on co-narration. Both style of parental storytelling and, in some cases, the content of that storytelling, affect what and how children later remember and, consequently, children's autobiographical sense of self (Bauer & Wewerka, 1997; Fivush, 1998; Han, Leichtman, & Wang, 1998; Nelson, 1991; Tessler & Nelson, 1994). The present studies expand this work by examining memory and personal storytelling in young adulthood. Existing work on adulthood has tended to have a more descriptive and individual-centered approach (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Baumeister, Stilman, & Wotman, 1990; McAdams, 1993; McAdams et al., 1996; McGregor & Holmes, 1999; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999), examining how personality, goals, and well-being relate to storytelling. Features of storytelling reflect individual differences and also influence subsequent health, well-being, and story-related judgments (King & Patterson, 2000; McGregor & Holmes, 1999; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). The present studies bring the child-developmental focus on co-narration into the adult literature (see also Bavelas et al., 2000; James, 1890; Manier & Hirst, 1996; Thorne & McLean, in press). They show that the behavior of listeners or co-narrators contributes to the construction of a sense of self in the context of personal stories. We believe these findings are among the first (see also Bavelas et al., 2000; Thorne & McLean, in press) that directly examine co-narrator effects on self-perceptions. Thus, it may be that listening to others appears to have little impact on our views of ourselves (Roberts & Caspi, in press), but, clearly, how others listen to us may matter quite a bit.

Limitations and Remaining Issues

Among the central limitations of the present data is the absence of longitudinal data. Will the effects of listeners persist? One-time fluctuations in storytelling, or in perceptions of self and events, clearly demonstrate something about conversational dynamics and situated identities, but they only suggest a role for listeners in shaping our biographical selves. At least five investigations examining the impacts of listeners and/or goals on storytelling and on subsequent memory have demonstrated longer-term effects of storytelling (Dickinson & Givon, 1995; Dudukovic, Marsh, & Tversky, in press;

McGregor & Little, 1998; Pasupathi et al., 1998; Tversky & Marsh, 2000). Taken together, these studies show that “what we tell” may become “what we know” and “how we judge” on later occasions. However, such studies do not establish that this occurs with personal memories and self-conceptions, an issue for future research.

Of course, as already hinted, we did not explore the full spectrum of possible listener behavior. For example, even our disagreeable listeners typically stuck to their role as listener; they didn't attempt to “take over” the participants' stories. In contrast, everyday life contains many collaborative remembering occasions during which it is not self-evident who shall be “speaker” and who “listener.” Finally, these experiments required people to talk about a selected experience with the friend they brought with them. In reality, people have great flexibility about the audiences and stories they choose to tell. Because self-verification processes appear quite robust (McNulty & Swann, 1994), people may seek out audiences that will be responsive for particular stories. Given negative feedback from a specific encounter, people may be especially likely to seek an audience who will support their self-verification attempts. The hang-gliding husband whose wife is unresponsive to his hang-gliding stories may seek out e-mail contacts with other hang-gliders, who provide a more enthusiastic and responsive group of co-narrators. Thus, an additional direction for future work involves examining the relationships between what is told and to whom it is told.

Narrowly, these studies suggest that unresponsive listeners can undermine the identity-related benefits of positive experiences and can reduce interest in undertaking novel activities. More broadly, they reveal how everyday personal storytelling is a vehicle by which we and our social worlds often conspire to tell stories about a stable self in order to verify our self-perceptions. They also suggest that storytelling occasions are fraught with the potential for change in the ways that they recruit other people to help with the job of constructing our sense of self.

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