

SELF-ESTEEM AND ATTRACTION¹

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Is a person more receptive to love and affection when his self-esteem is high or when it is low? Learning theorists, clinicians, and dissonance theorists provide conflicting answers. This paper proposes and tests an explanation for these contradictory research findings. This explanation is based on the assumption that low-self-esteem individuals are unusually receptive to affection when they realize that it is being offered, but that it is most difficult for them to recognize affectionate overtures. A laboratory experiment provides support for this integration.

Are people more receptive to love and affection if their self-esteem is high than if it is low? Does rejection generate more hostility in low-self-esteem than in high-self-esteem individuals? Theorists provide conflicting answers to these questions.

Drive-Reduction Hypotheses

Cartwright and Zander (1960) and Dittes (1959) have proposed that a person's attraction to another may be considered a function of two interacting determinants: (a) the extent to which his particular needs are satisfied by the other and (b) the strength of his needs. Dittes derived two predictions from this formulation. He assumed that people with low self-esteem need social approval more than do high-self-esteem individuals. Dittes' predictions were as follows: (a) Because a rejecting other should thwart a greater need in low-self-esteem individuals than in high-self-esteem individuals, rejecting persons should be disliked more by low- than by high-self-esteem persons; (b) because an accepting other should satisfy a greater need in low-self-esteem individuals, an affectionate other

should be liked more by individuals low in self-esteem than by those with high self-esteem.

Dittes found significant support for the first proposition and suggestive, although nonsignificant, evidence in favor of the second proposition. Walster (1965) provided support for the second hypothesis.

Clinical Hypotheses

Clinical theorists have predicted a simple positive relationship between self-esteem and attraction. Rogers (1951), for example, stated that the person who accepts himself will have better interpersonal relations with others. Horney (1936, 1967) viewed love as a capacity, and pointed out that love of self and love of others will be positively related. Fromm (1939) agreed with this notion.

Thus (in opposition to Dittes), clinicians have proposed that high- rather than low-self-esteem persons will be more receptive to an affectionate other. They agree with the drive-reduction theorists, however, that rejection is more likely to generate hostility in the low-self-esteem person than in the high. For example, Horney (1967), in discussing the intense need for love felt by low-self-esteem individuals, stated that a symptom of this excessive need for the approval of others is extreme sensitivity to rejection: "They perceive all kinds of things as rejection and react with intense hate [p. 248]."

Evidence that self-esteem and liking for others are positively correlated comes from

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Berger (1952), Maslow (1942), Omwake (1954), and Stock (1949).³

The preceding theoretical formulations and accompanying research led us to speculate that perhaps in order to predict how people of varying levels of self-esteem will react to expressions of approval or rejection from others, it is necessary to consider two factors which may operate in opposition to each other: (a) Low-self-esteem individuals may well have a greater need for affection than high-self-esteem people; (b) at the same time, low-self-esteem individuals may be more likely to question expressions of affection and less likely to accept these expressions at face value. (Since an expression of affection is incongruent with the low-self-esteem person's own evaluations, he may tend to discount it.)

Both of these factors were taken into consideration in an attempt by Walster (1965) to reconcile data from previous studies which seemed to support *both* the drive-reduction position and the clinical position. She proposed that the degree of ambiguity present in the evaluations one receives from others is a crucial variable in determining how subjects at various self-esteem levels will respond to accepting or rejecting others.

She reasoned that laboratory experiments such as Dittes (1959) and Walster (1965) have dealt with situations in which the evaluator expresses clear and unequivocal approval or rejection of the subject. In such situations, a subject is most likely to accept the relatively unambiguous evaluation at face value, and thus the operation of the varying levels

of need for approval in low- and high-self-esteem individuals may be observed.

Clinicians, on the other hand, deal with clients engaged in real-life situations. In such situations, unambiguous expressions of esteem or rejection are probably rather infrequent. In the course of social interaction, we rarely know for certain whether or not someone likes or dislikes us. We merely have evidence, of varying degrees of credibility, which points in one direction or another. Expressions of approval especially seem to be suspect in social interaction, since social courtesy, as well as a variety of ulterior motives on the part of others, make such expressions more frequent than expressions of disapproval (cf. Jones, 1964). Given such ambiguity, it can be argued that low-self-esteem individuals appear to like others less (whether objectively accepting or rejecting) than do high-esteem individuals, simply because low-self-esteem individuals generally perceive others as more rejecting than do those with high self-esteem.

Walster (1965) found correlational evidence which tended to support the notion that under conditions of ambiguity, high-self-esteem persons will generally assume that others like them, while low-self-esteem individuals will tend to assume that the others do not like them.

The present experiment was designed to investigate the hypothesis that the degree of liking generated by an evaluation depends not only upon the self-esteem of the recipient but also upon the amount of ambiguity present in the evaluation.

It was predicted that (a) when another's evaluation *clearly rejects* the subject, there will be a positive relationship between self-esteem and liking; when the other *clearly accepts* the subject, there will be a less strong, or even a negative relationship between self-esteem and liking; (b) when another expresses *ambiguous acceptance* for the subject, there will be a positive relationship between self-esteem and liking similar to that observed under conditions of *clear rejection*. (See Figure 1 for a diagram of these predictions.)

The last prediction assumes that low-self-esteem individuals will distort the ambiguous evaluation in such a way that it is consistent

³ Cognitive consistency theorists would make a third prediction. Consistency theorists, such as Heider (1958), have argued that when another's evaluation is congruent with one's own evaluation of himself, the other should be liked. When the other's evaluation produces imbalance, he should be disliked. Thus, consistency theorists have argued that high-self-esteem individuals should like accepting individuals *more* and rejecting individuals *less* than do individuals lower in self-esteem. These predictions are explicated in Berscheid and Walster (1969), Bramel (1969), and Glass (1968). There is, however, only the barest support, and much of it tangential, for the proposition that an individual who holds an unfavorable opinion of himself will like a rejecting other more than he will like an approving other (e.g., Berscheid & Walster, 1969; Deutsch & Solomon, 1959; Dickhoff, 1961).

with their view of themselves, or in such a way that it appears more negative than it objectively is.⁴

METHOD⁵

Procedure

Subjects were 72 male freshmen from the University of Rochester and 79 male freshmen from Temple University. All subjects were volunteers.

Several weeks before the first experimental session, subjects were given the following rationale for participating in the experiment: The experimenter claimed to be interested in evaluating and increasing the effectiveness of computer-matching programs. The experimenter noted that although these programs were fairly successful, occasionally mismatches occurred. Psychologists had concluded that perhaps mismatches could be eliminated if they collected additional information on couples. Generally, the experimenter elaborated, computer companies match primarily on the basis of objective data, such as age, origin, interests, and physical attractiveness. Psychologists felt they would be more effective if they matched on various subjective traits, such as tests of personality. The experimenter explained that they would collect three kinds of information about the subjects: (a) a computerized evaluation of the subject's traits, (b) a psychiatrist's evaluation based on several personality tests, and (c) an evaluation of the subject's dating skills by a girl his own age. Subjects were instructed that if they participated in the experiment, they would further important research and might gain information about their own personality and dating potential. Everyone contacted agreed to participate.

⁴ Horney (1967) would not wholly agree with this assumption. She pointed out that while low-self-esteem individuals may sometimes distort an evaluation into a rejection due to their preestablished assumption that they cannot be liked, they also "protect themselves against disappointment by overcompensating. They distort the actual rejection into an expression of esteem [p. 249]." It could be argued, then, that low-self-esteem individuals, having a greater need for approval, will distort ambiguous evaluation in a wish-fulfilling direction. If such is the case, the relationship between self-esteem and liking in the ambiguous acceptance condition should resemble the relationship observed in the clear acceptance condition more than it will be in that observed in the clear rejection condition.

⁵ Copies of all the materials used in this experiment are available from the National Auxiliary Publication Service. Order Document No. 01232 from the National Auxiliary Publication Service of the American Society for Information Science, c/o CCM Information Sciences, Inc., 909 3rd Avenue, New York, New York 10022. Remit in advance \$5.00 for photocopies or \$2.00 for microfiche and make checks payable to: Research and Microfilm Publications, Inc.

Experimental Session I

Personality Test

Subjects were given a 174-question true-false personality questionnaire. This questionnaire was composed of items from the MMPI and items from Murray et al. (1938). Items were selected on the basis of face validity. Subjects were told that their performance on this test would be evaluated by computer and that they would receive the results in the second experimental session. Subjects also believed that a New York psychiatrist would be providing a second assessment of their personalities. This assessment was to be based both on the results of the personality questionnaire and, in the case of University of Rochester subjects, upon information about subjects in university files. The University of Rochester maintains an extensive file on each student. Subjects were reminded that these files contained the MMPI and Strong Vocational Interest Blank scores, high school and college grades, teacher evaluations and observations, and other information. Temple does not keep such extensive files on students. Thus, one additional personality test was administered to Temple subjects. Subjects wrote stories about three Rorschach cards and two TAT cards. This procedure was designed to make it evident to all subjects that the clinician had a great deal of information on which to base his evaluation of them.

Test of Social Skills

Subjects were told that they were to conduct five telephone conversations with a hypothetical girl. The context of the five telephone conversations was then

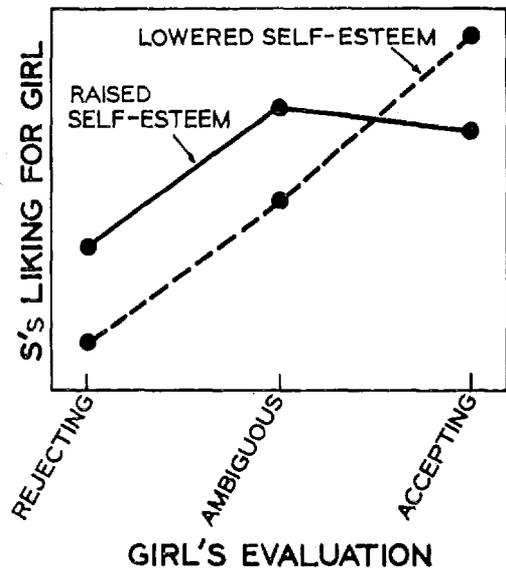


FIG. 1. The predicted relationship between self-esteem, the girl's evaluation, and subject's liking for her.

described. (The situation in which the calls took place was designed to be difficult and embarrassing.) Subjects were told to (a) call and persuade a friend of a friend to attend a "beer blast"; (b) break a date because a free ride home to visit his parents had turned up; (c) try to persuade a date to go to a drive-in, fail, and then agree to go to a dance with her instead; (d) explain to a date that he had simply forgotten about a date they had had the previous evening; (e) call a steady date and discuss the fact that she had seen another man "on the sly," arrange a reconciliation date. Subjects were told that their responses would test their social skills and grace. The experimenter explained that among college students a good deal of their social interaction required facile verbal skills.

Subjects' performance on the telephone conversations was taped. Subjects were told that tapes would be sent of a girl at a neighboring college for evaluation.

At the end of the Experimental Session I, each subject was informed that he would receive the results of the computer questionnaire, the psychiatrist's report, and the girl's evaluation during Session II. Two to 4 weeks later, the subject participated in the second session.

Experimental Session II

Self-Esteem Manipulation

Subjects were given the results of the personality tests they had taken during the previous session. First, the subjects were given a "Psychogram Rating Sheet," which was a computer print-out of their scores on 20 personality traits. Subjects were informed that these 20 traits, which included such characteristics as extroversion, self-assurance, and maturity, had been found to be important determinants of one's success at dating. Next, subjects were given the assessment of their personality, ostensibly made by the New York therapist who was cooperating on the project.

Both the Psychogram Rating Sheet and the psychiatrist's assessment were bogus reports which were designed to raise or to lower the subject's self-esteem. Half of the subjects had been randomly assigned to the lowered-self-esteem condition; half to the raised-self-esteem condition.

If the subject had been assigned to the raised-self-esteem condition, his Psychogram Rating Sheet indicated that he had received high scores on all 20 personality traits. His scores ranged from 7 to 10. The psychiatrist praised the subject; for example,

In order to adjust to life's situations, you undoubtedly have developed various social skills which enable you to maintain personal integrity, while achieving social approval. Often your achievements may have been so matter of fact that you may even tend to underestimate your own capabilities.

He praised his strong personality, his open and imaginative mind, his leadership abilities, and his unusual

empathy and sensitivity for peers. He concluded that the subject's potential for a successful dating career was high. If the subject had been assigned to the lowered-self-esteem condition, his Psychogram Rating Sheet indicated that he had received low scores—ranging from 2 to 5—on the personality traits. The psychiatrist criticized the subject's personality; for example, "It is readily apparent that this subject attempts to present an image which is incompatible with his actual self, and this disparity is readily perceived." He criticized his lack of imagination, his limited social skills, and his physical appearance, and indicated that the subject's dating potential was low. Previous research by Bramel (1962) and Walster (1965, 1970) found such self-esteem manipulations to be extremely effective.

Assessing the Effectiveness of the Self-Esteem Manipulation

The experimenter busied himself with paperwork for several minutes while the subject read and considered his bogus personality reports. Then the experimenter noted,

It is very important to know what *you* think of yourself; this information enables us to assess the accuracy of the Psychogram ratings and the psychiatrist's report. Thus, I would like you to answer a few questions about the way *you* feel about yourself.

Subjects were then asked to rate themselves on 20 traits. Subjects used a 7-point scale in assessing themselves. The end of each scale was labeled with a polar-opposite description. Subjects were asked to indicate how "creative, mature, independent, competent, strong-willed, friendly, open-minded, likable, sincere, accomplished, tolerant, receptive, warm, thoughtful, good-natured, energetic, attractive, optimistic, and interesting" they judged themselves to be. Subjects' ratings on these 20 items were summed to form an index of self-esteem. Each subject was also asked if he thought the evaluators were able to form an accurate impression of his personality.

Manipulation of Acceptance

Next, the experimenter reminded the subject that a girl had evaluated the adequacy of his telephone performance which had been taped during Session I. The experimenter then played a tape of the girl's assessment. Three bogus reports had been previously prepared. Which tape the subject heard was randomly determined. One-third of the subjects heard an evaluation designed to be clearly rejecting; one-third heard an ambiguous acceptance evaluation; and one-third heard a clearly accepting evaluation.

To subjects assigned to the clear rejection condition, the girl indicated that she judged the subject to be an artificial person who was not really responsive to the date's problem in most of the conversations. She also criticized the subject for being somewhat blunt and aggressive, and noted that the subject's comments lacked any trace of humor or

imagination. She ended her evaluation with, "I hope that I was accurate, and I'm sorry we didn't seem to get along very well and that you weren't the type of person that I would want to meet."

In the ambiguous acceptance condition, the girl's comments, which were generally slightly favorable, were made in a tentative fashion (e.g., "I guess this means that you are able to adapt quickly to changing situations"). She pointed out repeatedly in the evaluation that it was almost impossible to tell very much about another person from a taped conversation, but ended her evaluation with, "All in all I think we might hit it off if we ever were to meet."

In the clear acceptance condition, the girl indicated that she felt she had a good indication of the subject's personality and social abilities and that he was a very likable fellow. She noted that he had a friendly manner, seemed straightforward, sincere, and considerate. She stated that his approach was imaginative and showed a quick wit. She ended her praiseful commentary with, "After listening to the conversations, I think that if we ever met we'd probably get along real well."

Assessment of the Subject's Liking for the Evaluator

Immediately after the subject heard the girl's evaluation of him, he was asked to evaluate the girl. The experimenter claimed to be interested in "how the girls came across."

The subject rated the girl on a 20-item questionnaire, identical to that on which he had rated himself previously. An index of liking for the girl was constructed by summing the subject's 20 evaluations. The subject was also asked if he would be interested in taking the girl out on a date and how much he would expect to like her.

Second Self-Esteem Assessment

For Rochester subjects, the experiment was concluded at this point. An additional measure of self-esteem was collected from Temple University subjects. This second measure of self-esteem was introduced in order to enable us to determine what impact the manipulation of our second variable (approval) had had on the manipulation of the first variable (self-esteem). Temple subjects were told that it was very important to determine how subjects viewed themselves. The experimenter explained that by measuring subjects' self-evaluations twice, and by averaging the two measures, a much more accurate measure of subjects' self-evaluation could be secured. The subjects were then debriefed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Manipulation Checks

When we look at the data, it appears that the self-esteem manipulation was effective. Two self-esteem manipulation checks were made. All subjects rated themselves immedi-

ately after receiving the bogus personality assessments. Raised-self-esteem-condition subjects evaluated themselves more positively than did lowered-self-esteem-condition subjects ($F = 107.09$, $df = 1/138$). It will be recalled that Temple subjects rated themselves a second time, at the end of the experiment. Once again, the self-esteem manipulation appears to have been effective ($F = 33.31$, $df = 1/72$).

There is also evidence that when the evaluator gave the clear acceptance evaluation she was, in fact, perceived to be more accepting than when she gave the ambiguous acceptance evaluation. When she gave the ambiguous evaluation, she was seen as more accepting than when she gave the rejection evaluation. Two questions (how "critical-good-natured" and how "intolerant-tolerant" was the girl?) served as indirect manipulation checks on how accepting the girl was perceived to be. Acceptance subjects did see the girl as more accepting than did ambiguous acceptance subjects, who in turn saw the girl as more accepting than did clear rejection subjects (main effect $F_s = 42.69$ on the "tolerance" question and 60.31 on the "good-natured" question, $df = 2/138$).

Results

It will be recalled that we predicted that when the evaluator rejected the subject, or when her evaluation of the subject was ambiguous, the relationship between self-esteem and liking should be positive. When the evaluator was accepting, however, we expected a negative relationship between self-esteem and liking for her. Essentially, then, we expected self-esteem and type of evaluation to interact, in the manner diagrammed in Figure 1, in determining the subject's liking for the evaluator.

The appropriate statistical test for our prediction is an interaction contrast:

$$\begin{aligned} \Gamma_1 = & +1(\mu_{\text{LowSE-Rej}}) + 1(\mu_{\text{LowSE-Amb}}) \\ & - 2(\mu_{\text{LowSE-Acc}}) - 1(\mu_{\text{HiSE-Rej}}) \\ & - 1(\mu_{\text{HiSE-Amb}}) + 2(\mu_{\text{HiSE-Acc}}). \end{aligned}$$

We tested the hypothesis $H_0: \Gamma_1 = 0$ against the alternative $H_a: \Gamma_1 \neq 0$. An explanation of this procedure is available in Hays (1963).

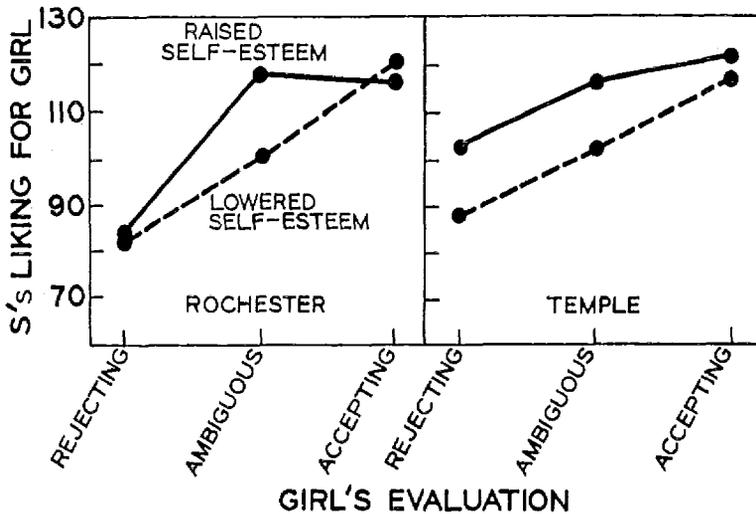


FIG. 2. The actual relationship between self-esteem, the girl's evaluation, and the subject's liking for her.

When we examined our data (see Figure 2 and Table 1), we saw that self-esteem and type of evaluation did significantly interact in determining liking, as predicted (interaction $F = 5.11$, $df = 1/138$, $p = .03$).

Portions of this experiment replicated two previous experiments: Walster (1965) found that men with lowered self-esteem liked an accepting girl more than did men with raised self-esteem. Dittes (1959) ran conditions theoretically similar to both the clear acceptance and clear rejection conditions. He found that self-esteem and acceptance interacted in determining liking for another. Our findings replicated this interaction.⁶

⁶ It is, of course, desirable to incorporate all of one's predictions into a single statistical test, whenever possible. (This enables one to have proper control over his experiment-wise error rate.) The following t tests may interest the reader, however: When subjects were rejected, lowered-self-esteem individuals disliked the girl more than did raised-self-esteem subjects ($t = 1.73$, $df = 48$, $p < .10$, two-tailed). When subjects were ambiguously accepted, raised-self-esteem subjects liked the girl more than did lowered-self-esteem subjects ($t = 4.42$, $p < .001$). (The appropriate contrast indicates that these two t s, although the first only approaches significance and the second is clearly significant, are *not* significantly different, however; interaction $F = 2.91$, $df = 1/138$, $p < .09$.) When subjects were accepted, lowered-self-esteem subjects liked the girl more than did raised-self-esteem subjects ($t = .16$, ns).

Two of our cells, the ambiguous acceptance conditions, have not been included in previous research. From the data, it is evident that our expectations are supported. Lowered-self-esteem and raised-self-esteem individuals do respond differently when offered ambiguous acceptance. Raised-self-esteem subjects liked the ambiguous evaluator more than did lowered-self-esteem subjects ($t = 4.42$, $df = 48$, $p < .001$).

Between-School Differences

As the reader will recall, subjects from two different universities participated in this experiment. Thus, we blocked our schools, and statistical tests were conducted to determine whether the curves depicted in Figure 2 varied between Rochester subjects and Temple

TABLE 1
SUBJECTS' LIKING FOR THE GIRL IN VARIOUS CONDITIONS

Self-esteem condition	Girl's evaluation	<i>n</i>	Ss' self-evaluation ^a	Liking for girl
Raised	Rejecting	25	112.56	92.00
Raised	Ambiguous	21	115.92	117.53
Raised	Accepting	25	113.28	119.60
Lowered	Rejecting	25	97.84	85.84
Lowered	Ambiguous	24	92.50	101.79
Lowered	Accepting	25	99.80	119.04

^a The higher the number, the higher the subject evaluates himself and the more he likes the girl.

subjects. They did not. The Self-Esteem \times Acceptance \times School interaction was nonsignificant ($F = 1.28$, $df = 2/139$).

In spite of the fact that there were no significant between-school differences, the reader may note that for Rochester subjects the curves actually crossed (as they did in Walster, 1965), while for Temple subjects, the curves approached one another, but did not cross. While it is somewhat contradictory to attempt to interpret a "difference" between schools which does not exist, one might comment briefly on this for the reader's benefit. One possible interpretation of the fact that the curves did not cross for Temple subjects is to conclude that the acceptance manipulation must have been somewhat more intense at Rochester than it was at Temple. Since, to insure credibility, a Rochester girl made the Rochester tape and a Temple girl made the Temple tape, such variations could exist. There are no data, however, to support this notion. The Acceptance \times School interaction was nonsignificant on the items assessing the effectiveness of the clear acceptance manipulation, and an examination of the means for the clear acceptance cells provides no support for this interpretation.

Future Research Directions

In our research, which was designed to test a suggested reconciliation between clinical findings and findings supporting drive-reduction predictions, a strong attempt was made to minimize the possibility that acceptance or rejection would be perceived by subjects as congruous or incongruous with the subject's own self-regard. We tried to dissociate the two manipulations by making it clear to the subjects that the psychogram and the psychiatrist's report were based on one set of data, while the acceptance manipulation was based solely on the subject's telephone speaking ability. Obviously, no attempt to dissociate two aspects of personality can be totally effective.⁷ One can attempt to dis-

courage the subject from generalization, however.

Why did we attempt to minimize the confrontation between drive-reduction and cognitive consistency theories, rather than encouraging such a confrontation? This research strategy was followed for two reasons: (a) Previous research has provided only the most tenuous support for the notion that low-self-esteem individuals are discomforted by good evaluations of themselves (cf. Berscheid & Walster, 1968); (b) at our present stage of knowledge, it is incredibly difficult to determine how a low-self-esteem person will resolve the inconsistency he experiences when he is told another likes him. Any one of three responses should be equally effective in reducing his inconsistency (see Heider, 1958): (a) The low-self-esteem person may accept the affection and increase his self-regard. (If so, he should like the accepting evaluator.) (b) He may *misinterpret* the evaluator's response and assume she really dislikes him. (This would be especially likely when the evaluation is ambiguous.) In such a case, he would also like the evaluator, since the evaluation, as finally perceived, should produce balance. (c) He may not be able to distort the evaluator's feelings and may correctly perceive that the evaluator likes him. If so, he would be expected to dislike the evaluator. (The reader will note that these last two predictions are inconsistent with our data, which indicate that the low-self-esteem subject likes the ambiguous evaluator *less* than the accepting evaluator, rather than more.)

Obviously, the next step in research is to attempt to pinpoint variables which facilitate a drive-reduction or a cognitive consistency response in subjects, and further, to pinpoint which mode of resolution one will use when responding according to cognitive consistency principles. This is obviously a long and difficult program of research, but is one that should be undertaken—by someone else.

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⁷ Indeed, when we look at changes in subjects' assessments of themselves, we find that acceptance manipulation does significantly alter subjects' self-evaluation ($F = 3.51$, $df = 2/72$, $p < .05$). It would affect our interpretation of our data if the two manipulations interacted with one another. They did not ($F = .08$, $df = 1/72$).

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