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REPLY



## The Homeostatic Model of Identity Protection: Lingering Issues

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### ABSTRACT

I clarify issues surrounding the homeostatic model of identity protection. These issues include the dynamic interplay between psychological homeostasis and environmental control; the relevance of interoception and nature of self-threat; the value of a single psychological immune system (rather than multiple ones); and the model's applicability and implications. Various other observations the commentators made enrich aspects of the model.

### KEYWORDS

Homeostasis; self; identity; self-protection; self-enhancement

The commentators poked, challenged, disputed, extended—and occasionally petted—the homeostatic model of identity protection. Their thinking clarified and enriched my inquiries without (I hope) activating my psychological immune system. I thank them for their thorough and constructive feedback. I will address lingering issues.

### Psychological Homeostasis Versus Environmental Control

According to the model, the effective regulation of one's internal or affective states (i.e., homeostasis) facilitates environmental control. O'Mara Kunz and Gaertner (this issue) illustrate the point with examples from their work. They manipulated self-enhancement and measured creativity. Participants who self-enhanced on the domain of creativity (vs. an irrelevant domain, or who self-effaced, or who neither self-enhanced nor self-effaced, on creativity) generated a greater number of creative solutions (O'Mara & Gaertner, 2017). In related research, participants who received self-enhancing (vs. self-improving) task feedback—either sequentially (i.e., at each testing juncture) or cumulatively (i.e., at the conclusion of the testing session)—not only reported greater satisfaction, usefulness, optimism, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (i.e., homeostasis), but also intended to persist longer and performed better (i.e., environmental control; Sedikides, Green, Saunders, Skowronski, & Zengel, 2016). More generally, self-enhancement and self-protection conduce both to psychological health (i.e., homeostasis; Dufner, Gebauer, Sedikides, & Denissen, 2019; Zell, Strickhouser, Sedikides, & Alicke, 2020) and to goal pursuit/attainment, leadership election, and sexual selection (i.e., environmental control; Ferris, Johnson, & Sedikides, 2018; Sedikides, 2020). This literature addresses the doubts expressed by Beer (this issue) that self-enhancement/self-protection can aid environmental control. In doing so, the literature bypasses earlier

methodological problems (Heck & Krueger, 2015; Krueger & Wright, 2011; Kwan, John, Kenny, Bond, & Robins, 2004) to which O'Mara Kunz and Gaertner (this issue) alluded.

Yet, despite emphasizing homeostasis, the model also acknowledges the dynamic interplay between attaining homeostasis and maximizing environmental control. Often environmental control is compromised—as manifested by the enfeebled pursuit of accuracy or deviations from standards of accuracy in an effort to achieve homeostasis (Brown & Dutton, 1995; Sedikides, 2020). Alternatively, homeostasis can bend to accommodate situational demands for environmental control. Research on mnemonic neglect offers an example of the latter. The psychological immune system is triggered upon reception of unfavorable feedback that contradicts one's central or important self-conceptions (e.g., “You would make a rude gesture at an old lady”  $\neq$  “I am kind”) resulting in relatively poor recall (Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000). Here, homeostasis is realized. However, for feedback which may help the individual accomplish future goals that are performative (e.g., do well, on forthcoming tasks) or social (e.g., preserve a valued relationship; Green et al., 2009), homeostasis is compromised: in such instances, unfavorable feedback gets recalled relatively well. Environmental control gains precedence. Relatedly, I am not sure I would agree with the assertion by Vaz et al.'s (this issue, p. 233) that “the psychological immune system works best when its efforts at emotional homeostasis do not require ignoring, misremembering, or distorting concrete information ... *that can be used to pursue one's future goals.*” Consider the case of persons who are generally dysphoric, generally anxious, or socially anxious. They suffer from a malfunctioning homeostasis. By implication, as per the Vaz et al. argument, they would ignore, misremember, or distort unfavorable feedback on their central self-conceptions to a greater extent than their healthy counterparts. In fact, the opposite is true. Such troubled individuals fail to

show mnemonic neglect (Saunders, 2011, 2013; Zengel, Skowronski, Valentiner, & Sedikides, 2015), seemingly for the sake of environmental control (e.g., to detect threat). So, the psychological immune system works well even when future goal pursuit becomes imperative: it flexibly trades short-term homeostasis disturbance for immediate environmental control. This exchange is likely to pay off with rewards (i.e., goal attainment) that will contribute to the system's longer-term homeostasis (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Cai, 2015; Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

The relation between homeostasis and environmental control has evolutionary undertones. Is the self an adaptation or is it a byproduct of other adaptations (e.g., cognitive abstraction, consciousness, language)? Skowronski and I addressed this issue in 1997 (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1997), speculating that the self itself is likely an adaptation. We speculated similarly for self-enhancement and self-protection (Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000), following up at regular intervals as more archeological evidence was unearthed (Sedikides, Skowronski, & Dunbar, 2006, 2009, 2019). The evidence we presented backs up an adaptationist stance (see also: Johnson & Fowler, 2011; van Veelen & Nowak, 2011). In that regard, I would object to de Brigard and Stanley's (this issue, p. 240) admonition:

“... some of the evidence Sedikides adduces in support of his view comes from the fact that certain psychological tendencies and biases are conducive to beneficial behaviors for the organism. Since such individual benefits are taken to be adaptive, then the conclusion that the system that brought them about must have evolved for said purpose—i.e., psychological homeostasis—seems ineluctable. Unfortunately, the jump from “beneficial to me” to ‘selected for’ or ‘having the function of’ is often an unwarranted line of reasoning ...”

de Brigard and Stanley refer to, but do not name, the naturalistic fallacy. In our foray into the evolutionary origins of the self, Skowronski and I (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1997, p. 84) explicitly draw attention to this fallacy, further stating:

... we do not wish to be misconstrued as advocating circular and logically flawed positions—such as the notion that, because the symbolic self is adaptive at present, human cognition must have evolved so that the symbolic self was adaptive. Nonetheless, the fact that a trait is widely held in a population and is currently adaptive constitutes a legitimate basis for exploring the possibility that the trait evolved in response to environmental pressures. Furthermore, it is undeniable that the symbolic self is a widespread human trait, and we argue that the symbolic self serves adaptive functions.

I hold the same position in regard to the role of the self, and self-enhancement/self-protection, within the homeostatic model of identity protection.

### On Interoception and Threat

What is being regulated, according to the model, is internal states. These include interoceptive cues. Beer (this issue) challenge the relevance of interoceptive cues for emotional experience, citing articles published 20–30 years ago. My reading of recent advances in this area is different. Researchers have concluded in their literature reviews that

interoception is fundamental to: emotion and affective experience (Critchley & Garfinke, 2017;; Tsakiris & Critchley, 2016); the psychological sense of self (Bonaz et al., 2021; Quigley, Kanoski, Grill, Feldman Barrett, & Tsakiris, 2021); the “regulation of behavioral, cognitive, and affective processes across conscious and nonconscious levels of processing” (Berntson & Khalsa, 2021, p. 17); and mental health generally (Khalsa et al., 2018). Some researchers have even derived a cartography of body sensations mapping different types of threats (i.e., death, freedom isolation, identity, meaning; Koole, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2006) to different bodily sensations, including self-reported emotions (Reiss, Leen-Thomele, Klackl, & Jonas, 2021), as Jonas and Stollberg (this issue) pointed out.

What is the nature of threat? Negativity directed at the hinterlands of the self may unsettle homeostasis (e.g., “you are complaining,” “you are unpredictable”), but it is negativity directed at one's primary self-conceptions (e.g., “you are untrustworthy,” “you are unkind”) that will cause a major perturbation (Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides, Green, et al., 2016). Indeed, it is central (rather than peripheral) self-conceptions that people strive to shore up through self-protection or puff up via self-enhancement (Gebauer, Wagner, Sedikides, & Neberich, 2013; Sedikides & Alicke, 2019). Central self-threat stings, upsetting one's equanimity, and motivating a response.

And this is a key point of the model: if they want to understand the self, researchers will need to take serious account of emotion and motivation. More than any other social object—even “best friend,” “romantic partner,” or “child” (Gebauer, Göritz, Hofmann, & Sedikides, 2012; Sedikides & Alicke, 2012)—the self is a source of sentiment and striving. de Brigard and Stanley (this issue) argue that people process information about others the same way they process information about the self, given that the cognitive system is one and the same. One could likewise argue for the equivalence of partners making love and autoerotic self-stimulation. Of course the cognitive apparatus is the same. Their argument reeks of the unproductive cognition-motivation debate of yore (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009, 2011). I simply contend that cognitive processes diverge depending on whether the target is the self or another, because the self is disproportionately freighted with emotion and motivation. As an aside, the studies that Brigard and Stanley cite as contradicting the model (e.g., Bell, Schain, & Echterhoff, 2014; Reczek, Irwin, Zane, & Ehrich, 2018; Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011) are actually consistent with it. These studies may lack the necessary controls (i.e., self-referent vs. other-reference processing; judgmental or memorial domain that is central vs. peripheral to one's self-conceptions) but their results showcase the operation of the psychological immune system, and so does research on the fading affect bias (Ritchie, Sedikides, & Skowronski, 2017)—again contrary to de Brigard and Stanley's claims.

### One Versus Multiple Psychological Immune Systems

Some commentators proposed multiple immune systems. In particular, Jonas and Stollberg (this issue) argue for a social

immune system, and Stinson et al. (this issue, p. 253) wonder whether a different system is needed “... for people who possess one or more intersecting identities that are subject to social devaluation, or *stigma* ...”. Lastly, Tice and Baumeister (this issue) postulate different immune systems for relationships and groups.

My coauthors and I have introduced the tripartite self a useful heuristic framework (Sedikides, Gaertner, Luke, O’Mara, & Gebauer, 2013). This framework differentiates between three self-representations: the individual, the relational, and the collective (i.e., group). The individual self, reflecting one’s subjective uniqueness, consists of characteristics (e.g., traits, goals) that differentiate oneself from others. The relational self, reflecting dyadic attachments (e.g., romantic bonds, friendships), consists of characteristics—including roles—that differentiate one’s relationship from others’ relationships. The collective self, reflecting membership in and identification with valued social groups, consists of characteristics—including within-group roles—that differentiate one’s group from relevant outgroups.

The homeostatic model of identity protection adopts the following different perspective. It posits an inclusive immune system, identity, which receives internal and external input relevant to all three selves. This input, then, can be failures or successes associated with one’s strivings, one’s relationships, or one’s group memberships. For example, the inclusive immune system copes with threats to a person’s integrity (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Sherman & Cohen, 2006), romantic relationships (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000), or ingroup identifications (Rotella & Richeson, 2013; Zengel, Skowronski, Wildschut, & Sedikides, 2021). It is more economical to propose a single immune system—identity—rather than multiple ones (Occam’s razor). The latter route invites additional complexity with little appreciable gain. This route is also consistent with the established notion of intersubstitutability of self-enhancement/self-protection processes (Steele, 1988; Tesser, 2000). In this connection, I concur with Zeigler-Hill’s (this issue) attempts to extend the unitary model to encompass narcissism, highlighting the relevance of status, as well as Jonas and Stollberg’s (this issue) attempts to expand the range of affective cues relevant to the unitary model.

### On the Model’s Applicability and Implications

Stinson et al. (this issue) provide an authoritative account of the internal world of chronically traumatized individuals, questioning the homeostatic model’s applicability to it. However, the model’s account of identity protection does justice to the deleterious consequences of trauma. It would characterize it as a chronically disturbed homeostasis and a crippled psychological immune system—one that requires therapeutic intervention to be restored. There is no reason why the model, applicable to individuals who are anxious or dysphoric (Saunders, 2011, 2013; Zengel et al., 2015), should not extend to individuals who are more severely disturbed.

Tice and Baumeister (this issue) draw attention to college students’ fragility in tending to regard new or challenging ideas as threatening (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Indeed, in terms of the homeostatic model, this pattern would signify deficient inoculation due to overprotective parenting. A short-term solution would be to boost the robustness of the psychological immune system via self-affirmation (Cohen & Sherman, 2014), self-esteem building (Niveau, New, & Beaudoin, 2021), or relationship-oriented interventions (Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005; Walton et al., 2021). A long-term solution would be the abandonment of undue sheltering by permitting students to encounter problems and strive to solve them on their own, including through a process of painful trial-and error.

Koole (this issue) considers the proposal that the self, along with self-enhancement and self-protection, are evolutionary adaptations in light of recent movements to deconstruct the self (e.g., mindfulness). Koole ponders the potential futility of such movements. After all, self-deconstruction may have serious mental health consequences (Kaufmann, Rosing, & Baumann, 2021), especially among vulnerable populations who need their psychological immunity boosted not busted. Advocating the deconstruction of the self is similar to legislating alcohol prohibition or encouraging sexual abstinence. The cure may be worse than the disease. I agree with Koole’s (p. 272) view that a more realistic and productive route would be to endorse the self but “channel the self-enhancement motive in ways that are edifying for both the person and the social environment” (Sedikides, 2020; Sedikides & Campbell, 2017).

### What Does the Future Hold?

The commentators raised other issues that warrant empirical attention. For example, some commentators (Beer, this issue; Jonas and Stollberg, this issue; Vaz et al., this issue) called for greater specificity in detailing how the biological and psychological immune systems feed into each other. Koole (this issue) even provocatively suggested that the digestive system might constitute a more plausible analogy for the homeostatic model than the biological immune system, a proposal some may find hard to swallow.

Commentators also offered additional constructive suggestions for future research. For instance, Costabile and Boytos (this issue) refine the potential role of narratives in homeostasis. Beer (this issue), along with Jonas and Stollberg (this issue), elaborate on the nature of self-threat. Lastly, Vaz et al. (this issue) ask how much self-enhancement/self-protection would be regarded as adequate—that is, where the optimal balance between homeostasis and external control lies, in a given context.

Ultimately, the homeostatic model of identity protection aimed to address the question: “What are self-enhancement and self-protection *for*?” Its answer is that these fundamental and universal human motives serve to maintain mental homeostasis while optimizing environmental control. The psychological immune system has the same utility for one’s



psychological health at the biological immune system does for one's physical health.

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