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Reducing memory distortions in egoistic self-enhancers: Effects of indirect social facilitation

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Abstract

An experiment examined the impact of indirect social monitoring on memory distortions found in ‘egoistic self-enhancers’, that is, individuals prone to self-reporting enhanced traits related to social status and dominance (Paulhus & John, 1998). One-hundred-and-sixty-six students from a large urban university (117 women and 49 men, mean age = 23.0 years) were randomly assigned to two conditions. Those in the ‘Video-Camera’ condition completed a bogus personality feedback task designed to index self-enhancing memory biases (Djikic, Peterson, & Zelazo, 2005) in presence of a video-camera aimed in their direction, while participants in the ‘Control’ condition completed the same task, but without the video-camera. The results show that high egoists in the ‘Video-Camera’ condition experienced significantly less positive memory distortion than high egoists in the ‘Control’ condition, suggesting that indirect social monitoring can interfere with early information processing biases found in egoistic self-enhancers.

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Keywords: Memory distortion; Egoistic biases; Social facilitation

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1. Introduction

The human tendency to think of the self as being better than others, described by psychologists as the ‘better-than-average effect’, is pervasive (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Heine & Lehman, 1999; Guerin, 1994; Tadahiro, 1999). This self-favoring bias is amplified when individuals compare themselves with an abstract ‘average’ individual, as opposed to an individuated target (Alicke et al., 1995). Self-enhancement is also augmented when the behaviors and qualities rated are subjective and abstract, rather than objective and observable. As Van Lange and Sedikides (1998) have shown, individuals are more likely to ascribe to themselves characteristics that are more desirable, more controllable, and less verifiable.

Having a ‘good personality’ is certainly among the most socially-desirable qualities (Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998). Individuals provided with the opportunity to assess their own personality traits therefore appear in a prime position to self-enhance. Analysis of this tendency is complicated by the fact that different individuals appear motivated to self-enhance for different reasons. Paulhus and John (1998) have carefully differentiated two particular kinds of self-enhancement. An ‘egoistic bias’ is a self-deceptive tendency to self-report enhanced traits related to social status and dominance. A ‘moralistic bias’, by contrast, is a self-deceptive tendency to deny socially inappropriate or deviant impulses in order to appear more ‘saint-like’. Instead of self-enhancing on traits reflecting agency and personal power, moralistic self-enhancers respond to be seen as exemplifying societally-admired traits and qualities (Paulhus & John, 1998).

Paulhus and John (1998) suggest that the motive force impelling egoistic self-enhancers is a need for agency, while the motive force impelling moralistic self-enhancers is a need for communion. Paulhus (2002) noted that in addition to the self-deceptive tendencies related to agency and communion that egoists and moralists (respectively) exhibit, individuals can deliberately exaggerate their attainment of agency and communion values. Paulhus (2002) calls this type of departure from reality impression management, and subdivides it into two types: agency management and communion management. In this paper, we are specifically interested in examining the unconscious self-enhancing tendencies of egoists and moralists, and their cognitive processing of self-relevant information. Paulhus (2002) determined that unconscious egoistic biases are best measured by normal narcissism scales such as the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI, Raskin & Hall, 1981) or the Self-Deceptive Enhancement subscale of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR, Paulhus, 1991), while the best measure of moralistic biases is the Self-Deceptive Denial subscale of the BIDR.

Differences between individuals with egoistic and moralistic biases appear to transcend the demonstrated differences in motivation. Djikic et al. (2005) found, for example, that egoistic and moralistic self-enhancers employ different cognitive strategies to maintain an enhanced view of their traits. When participants were presented with bogus feedback about their personality, only egoistic self-enhancers manifested memory distortions toward positive personality characteristics, as measured by a recognition memory task (Djikic et al., 2005). The results of this study suggest that egoistic self-enhancers begin distorting information earlier in the processing chain than moralistic self-enhancers, who recognized both positive and negative characteristics equally well. This led us to believe that by manipulating the most salient difference between the moralists and egoists – namely, the extent to which they are driven to comply with socially-appropriate

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