Attentional biases and memory distortions in self-enhancers ☆

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Abstract

One hundred and fifteen undergraduate students (88 women and 27 men, mean age = 19.9 years) from a large urban university participated in this study for course credit. Individuals with moralistic and egoistic biases in self-perception (Paulhus & John, 1998) were tested for attentional biases and memory distortions following bogus personality feedback. Individuals with a moralistic bias (those scoring high on the Impression Management (IM) and Self-Deceptive Denial (SDD) subscales of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1991)) showed higher overall viewing times for their feedback, and no memory distortions. In contrast, individuals with an egoistic bias (those scoring high on Self-Deceptive Enhancement (SDE) subscale of the BIDR) exhibited a self-enhancing distortion of memory. These findings contribute to our understanding of the different ways individuals may distort information about the self, thus supporting the motivational distinction between egoistic and moralistic biases in self-enhancement.
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1. Introduction

The acquisition of self-knowledge is a process that appears to be both very easy and very difficult. It appears to be easy, because we are constantly available to ourselves for observation and introspection, and difficult, because our dual role of a perceiver and an object of perception is

one wrought with motivational conflicts. Indeed, self-knowledge is often unwelcome. Consideration of the discrepancy between the ideal and real self can be an unpleasant ordeal (Bybee, Luthar, Zigler, & Merisca, 1997) and may motivate attempts to escape from self-awareness (e.g., through spirituality, masochism, over-eating, alcohol and drug abuse, and suicide; Baumeister, 1991). Some have even suggested that our distaste for self-reflection is motivated by more fundamental desires to escape freedom of choice (Fromm, 1941) or the terror of death (Becker, 1973).

Given the large body of research and theory suggesting that individuals are capable of profound acts of self-deception (Baumeister, 1991; Becker, 1973), we might wonder to what extent our perceptions and memory of the feedback we receive about ourselves from our environment are accurate or distorted. If they are distorted, what are the underlying motivational factors that mediate such distortion?

Many researchers have attempted to assess the veracity of the perceptions and memories we retain when given information about ourselves. The factor that seems to mediate its distortion most vigorously is also one of the most potent determinants of social behavior—the desire to maintain a favorable self-view, particularly in the face of disconfirming evidence (Aronson, 1969; Greenwald, 1982). Individuals consistently rate themselves as better than average on multiple positive descriptive dimensions (Guerin, 1994; Heine & Lehman, 1999). Not all researchers agree that such biases are important, however.

According to the proponents of the correspondence view of self-perception (e.g., Bem, 1972; Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979), the theoretically universal tendency to misrepresent oneself in a positive light has been overstated. Correspondence-view theorists maintain, instead, that the acquisition of beliefs about oneself involves the same processes that characterize the perception of others, and that such beliefs are therefore equally accurate.

Both of these apparently conflicting positions appear justifiable, depending on the particularities of the given experimental context. John and Robins (1993), for example, found substantial correspondence between self- and peer-evaluations, as well as powerful convergence among different peers while evaluating a given individual, but also showed that judgments of ego-involving traits and traits with less observable associated behaviors were characterized by lower self-peer correlations. In a separate study, these authors also found that participants evaluated their own performance on a task as being slightly better, on average, than that of others. This general self-enhancement effect was small, however, when compared to the considerable individual differences found in the accuracy of self-perception: About 50% of participants were relatively accurate in their self-evaluation, while approximately 15% underestimated and 35% significantly overestimated their performance (John & Robins, 1994). While a self-enhancing group appeared to be a minority, it was a sizable minority. It was also a group that warranted further examination, in part because it did not seem to be a motivationally homogenous group.

An interesting development in the understanding of self-enhancing biases was the identification of two motivational factors that emerge when various measures of socially desirable responding are factor-analyzed (Paulhus & John, 1998; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991). Paulhus and John (1998) labeled these factors "egoistic bias" and "moralistic bias," the former reflecting the narcissistic need for power and status, and the latter reflecting the need for approval.

An egoistic bias is associated with a self-deceptive tendency to exaggerate one's social and intellectual status (Paulhus & John, 1998). According to Paulhus and John (1998), it is best measured by normal narcissism scales such as the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI, Raskin