Complex Social Consequences of Self-Knowledge

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Abstract
Psychology theories disagree on the most effective self-presentation strategies—some claim possessing positive illusions is best, whereas others claim accuracy is best. The current experiments suggest that the role of perceivers and what perceivers believe has been underappreciated in this debate. Participants acted as recruiters for either a swim team (Experiment 1) or a company (Experiment 2) and evaluated hypothetical applicants who made claims about their own abilities and personalities. Overly positive statements about oneself were beneficial only when perceivers had no reason to believe they were unfounded. In addition, conveying self-knowledge was more beneficial than being modest. The results are consistent with the presumption of calibration hypothesis, which states that confidence is compelling because, barring evidence to the contrary, perceivers assume others have good self-insight. Therefore, to make the best impression, people should be as positive as is plausible to perceivers.

Keywords
impression formation, person perception, self-presentation, social judgment, social influence

Confidence is extremely compelling to perceivers. People who convey poise, control, and confidence through language or stature will appear more credible (Erickson, Lind, Johnson, & O’Barr, 1978), be more influential in groups (Zarnoth & Sniezek, 1997), and seem more knowledgeable (Price & Stone, 2004) than those who do not. Not surprisingly, confidence is a huge theme in the job coaching literature. For example, job applicants are advised to show confidence in an interview by having a firm handshake, a confident smile, and no hesitation before responding to questions (Agnew, Green, Johnstone, Stilson, & Wade, 2003).

Fortunately, confidence is a valid cue to accuracy in many domains (e.g., Carlson, Furr, & Vazire, 2010; Fazio & Zanna, 1978). After predicting their own future behavior for the next few months, participants actually did more of the behaviors they believed they were likely to do (e.g., exercise, argue with friends, etc.) than behaviors they were less sure about, independent of what the behaviors were (Osberg & Shrauger, 1986). The same has been shown for attitudes; the more certain participants were about their attitudes (e.g., liking mazes), the more likely they were to act in accordance with those attitudes (e.g., choosing to complete a maze—Fazio & Zanna, 1978; also see Sherman, Skov, Hervitz, & Stock, 1981). Although imperfect, people’s certainty in what they believe about themselves can be meaningful, and its diagnostic value probably contributes to its pervasive use as a cue to accuracy and credibility. In fact, there may be a “presumption of calibration,” in that the default is to assume that a person’s confidence is a good indicator of accuracy (Tenney, Spellman, & MacCoun, 2008).

But confidence is not always a valid cue to accuracy. In particular, laboratory studies show that many people are overconfident in a variety of tasks, such as their ability to answer general knowledge or logic questions correctly (Einhorn & Hogarth, 1978; Fischhoff, Slovic, & Lichtenstein, 1977), to evaluate others (Dunning, Griffin, Milojkovic, & Ross, 1990), to drive (Greening & Chandler, 1997), to run a successful business (Larwood & Whittaker, 1977), to make eyewitness identifications (Sporer, Penrod, Read, & Cutler, 1995), and to achieve their goals (Goodman-Delahunty, Granhag, Hartwig, & Loftus, 2010). Given the pervasiveness of overconfidence, is confidence compelling and viewed as a positive characteristic even when it is false and not diagnostic? Psychology literature offers competing answers to these questions.

Positive Illusions Hypothesis
According to the positive illusions hypothesis, even when confidence is objectively unwarranted, it can have a positive effect on subjective well-being and be advantageous interpersonally (Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003). The hypothesis predicts that positive

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illusions are characteristic of happy, creative individuals and, through making people feel good about themselves, facilitate positive social outcomes (e.g., bonding and caring for others). However, the vast majority of empirical research investigates how positive illusions affect intrapersonal variables like a person’s mental health, physical health, and academic success; little research investigates how overly positive self-perceptions actually affect interpersonal relations (as noted by von Hippel & Trivers, in press) or explores what happens when the illusive nature of positive illusions is revealed.1

Despite the dearth of empirical research on interpersonal outcomes of positive illusions, some predictions follow from the research on intrapersonal outcomes. People with higher positive affect tend to be more enjoyable to interact with (Berry & Hansen, 1996). If holding positive illusions gives people higher positive affect, then holding positive illusions might also make people more pleasant to be around. Having high confidence has also been associated with being influential in groups independent of accuracy (Zarnoth & Sneijzek, 1997), and people who bragged about themselves were seen as competent, albeit manipulative (Tal-Or, 2010). Research also shows that narcissists, who by definition have positive illusions, make good first impressions (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010; Oltmanns, Friedman, Fiedler, & Turkheimer, 2004).

Self-Knowledge Hypothesis

A competing hypothesis about the effect of overly positive self-evaluations on psychological well-being endorses the more traditional idea that accurate portrayal of the self is best (e.g., Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Jahoda, 1958). According to this hypothesis, people who know themselves well and present themselves accurately to others are happier and have better relationships than people who have a distorted self-view. There are insular empirical examples of how accurately recognizing one’s fallibilities can improve one’s esteem in the eyes of others. For instance, people who do not easily recognize their own propensity for making mistakes or being offensive might miss out on opportunities to forgive and repair damaged relationships (Exline, Baumeister, Zell, Kraft, & Witvliet, 2008). In group settings, participants who hold accurate perceptions of their group status are liked more than participants who do not (Anderson, Ames, & Gosling, 2008). In addition, accurately pointing out one’s own shortcomings decreases how detrimental the shortcomings seem and bolsters liking (Ward & Brenner, 2006). In important ways, self-knowledge is necessary for utilizing effective self-presentation strategies.

Synthesis

Why are positive illusions beneficial sometimes whereas self-knowledge is beneficial other times? Explanations of the discrepant findings have centered on definitional issues and operationalizations of the main constructs. Important distinctions include whether self-esteem is included in or partialed out of the operationalization of narcissism (Rosenthal & Hooley, 2010). If included, narcissism is associated with good mental health indicators such as less depression and less loneliness; if not included, these benefits dissipate (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). Another definitional issue is whether positive illusions are defined as self-comparison (the extent to which a person rates herself or himself as better than she or he rates others) or self-insight (the extent to which a person rates herself or himself more favorably than others rate her or him), with the former showing that holding positive illusions is more adaptive than accuracy and the latter showing the opposite (Kurt & Paulhus, 2008; Kwan, John, Kenny, Bond, & Robins, 2004).

Although definitional issues explain some discrepant findings, many researchers have concluded that the effects of positive illusions and self-knowledge on psychological well-being are quite complex (Bonanno, Rennicke, & Dekel, 2005; Paulhus, 1998; Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003). For example, both positive illusions and accuracy may be adaptive in close relationships (Gagné & Lydon, 2004; Luo & Snider, 2009). In a study on newlyweds, having overly positive global views about a spouse but accurate views about a spouse’s specific traits predicted happy relationships (Neff & Karney, 2005). In fact, positive illusions may fare better at different times in any acquaintanceship, with evidence suggesting that narcissists initially make good impressions (e.g., Back et al., 2010) but are rejected later (Paulhus, 1998). And, generally, self-aggrandizing positive illusions are more adaptive in some cultures (especially Western cultures) than others (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). Research has yet to fully explain what processes and circumstances lead to different outcomes for overconfidence.

We propose that the role of perceivers and what perceivers believe has largely been ignored and can help untangle some of the discrepant findings. Self-enhancers (i.e., people prone to positive illusions) may be liked and trusted at first but rejected after perceivers have enough exposure to them to discern the illusory nature of their beliefs. Initial evidence in support of this view is provided by a study exploring impression formation over time. Undergraduate participants in a personality class met for 20 minutes in groups of 4 or 5 and discussed topics in personality. After the first and last of seven meetings, participants rated each other on several personality dimensions. At first, self-enhancers were seen positively, for example, as entertaining, warm, and intelligent. However, after Week 7, those same people were evaluated negatively, as hostile, arrogant, and cold (Paulhus, 1998). What made perceivers change their original opinions?

Calibration

We suggest that perceivers revise their original opinions when new information reveals that someone is overconfident. Possessing positive illusions might be beneficial only if perceivers believe that the illusions are true. Perhaps the participants in Paulhus’s (1998) study initially believed the positive things self-enhancers said about themselves and, as a result, liked the
self-enhancers a lot. Then, when participants discovered that the self-enhancers were overconfident in their claims, participants liked them less. The relationship between confidence and accuracy (or calibration) may shed light on when confidence is, and is not, compelling to perceivers.

According to the presumption of calibration hypothesis (Tenney et al., 2008), people assume that others have insight into their own knowledge and abilities and therefore believe that others’ statements of confidence provide valuable information. More broadly, perceivers may default to the belief that the people they interact with know themselves well. However, when real, verifiable information about calibration (i.e., a person’s confidence–accuracy correlation and, thus, a form of self-knowledge) is available, people will use that information. Therefore, when evaluating others, all else being equal, people are inclined to feel positive about someone who has shown good calibration.

The presumption of calibration hypothesis has not been tested outside of an eyewitness paradigm, in which eyewitnesses were well or poorly calibrated about their own memory and participants acted as jurors. Those participants did not have to like the witnesses; they just had to decide whether to believe them. There was no reason to worry about future interactions with the witnesses.

Current Experiments

In two experiments, we investigate whether positive illusions or self-knowledge is more beneficial in the context of interviews for an athletic team (Experiment 1) or a job (Experiment 2), where people who make recruitment decisions try to anticipate applicants’ future performance across situations and their ability to mesh well with others.

In these experiments, two applicants initially make claims about their abilities or personalities with varying degrees of confidence, and participants, acting as recruiters, choose which applicant to accept. Later, participants learn that the applicants are actually equally skilled, but they have different degrees of insight into their abilities. The question becomes whether participants prefer an applicant who portrayed positive illusions by being overconfident (thus, poorly calibrated) or an applicant who was less self-assured but accurate (thus, well calibrated)?

We propose a synthesis of competing hypotheses about whether positive illusions or self-knowledge will make the best impression on others. Extending the presumption of calibration hypothesis to this longstanding debate, we predict that, initially, barring other information, being highly confident will make a better impression than being cautious. However, when perceivers have information that enables them to assess calibration, people who demonstrated a lack of self-knowledge by being overconfident will lose more social credit than those who demonstrated self-knowledge by conveying the appropriate amount of confidence. Whether confidence is beneficial may depend largely on what perceivers know about a person’s calibration. It might be advantageous to self-enhance unless perceivers suspect or learn that someone’s confident statements about the self are unfounded.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants. For course credit, 76 undergraduates (53 women; age $Mdn = 18$) at the University of Virginia participated.

Materials and design. We asked participants to act as the head coach of a swim team and make a recruitment decision. Two applicants were applying for one available spot on the team. Participants read excerpts from applicants’ interviews and were informed that although they wanted to recruit the best swimmer for the individual medley (which uses four strokes), to save time the applicants had been asked to speak only about their backstroke and freestyle abilities.

One applicant (the “confident applicant”) was highly confident about all aspects of his or her swimming and stated, “I’m confident in my backstroke because my times have been extremely fast in that category. I am also a very strong freestyle swimmer. I have good technique and form.” A second applicant (the “cautious applicant”) was confident about some aspects of his or her swimming ability more than others. The cautious applicant stated, “I am confident in my backstroke, and my times consistently have been excellent in backstroke when I compete. But I am not as confident in my freestyle stroke. I think I am good, but it’s possible I’m wrong.” In all versions, the applicants were equally enthusiastic about joining the team and confident they would help the team’s competition record.

Participants then (Time 1) rated how good each applicant was at swimming overall and how much of an asset to the team each swimmer would be from (1) not at all to (6) a lot. These items were averaged into one “value to the team” index (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .82$). Participants also chose one applicant to join the team. The order of applicants and any extra information they provided were counterbalanced across participants.

Next, participants learned that based on results from previous swim meets and calls to previous swim coaches, both applicants had been right about one aspect of their swimming ability but wrong about another aspect. They both were, in fact, good at backstroke, but they were equally mediocre at freestyle. Participants were told that the applicants had not lied, they had just been incorrect. Note that the cautious applicant showed good calibration: uncertain when wrong and confident when right. The confident applicant showed poor calibration: confident regardless of whether right or wrong. With this new information, participants reanswered (Time 2) the same questions.

Therefore, we had a 2 (confident vs. cautious applicant) x 2 (Time 1 [before verification] vs. Time 2 [after verification]) within-subjects design.

Results and Discussion

Results were consistent with the presumption of calibration hypothesis. At Time 1, when participants did not have information to verify what was said, being extremely confident was more effective than being somewhat cautious. However, at Time 2, after the applicants’ accuracy was verified and participants had information about calibration (confidence–accuracy correlation...
Experiment 2

Experiment 1 supported the presumption of calibration hypothesis and suggested that positive illusions are beneficial interpersonally only when perceivers believe they are true. However, one possible alternative explanation is that demonstrating some modesty about one’s abilities, rather than demonstrating self-knowledge, is what protected people’s reputation when the truth was revealed (Tenney et al., 2008). The cautious applicant was both modest (cautious about one ability) and well calibrated. Although the predominant view is that generally confidence is more effective than modesty, some research has demonstrated that expressing cautiousness or modesty in one’s opinions can facilitate positive interpersonal outcomes. For instance, downplaying one’s performance after the fact can be a successful self-presentation strategy (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Thus, it is important to tease apart the benefits of being modest from being well calibrated.

To do so, in Experiment 2, we pit a job applicant who was confident in all of his or her desirable personality traits against a job applicant who was confident in one trait but cautious about another (i.e., modest). In one condition, when the truth about the applicants’ personalities is revealed, the cautious applicant is well calibrated, as in Experiment 1. In a second condition, the cautious applicant is poorly calibrated. In both conditions, the confident applicant is there for comparison and is poorly calibrated. If self-knowledge matters, then after what the applicants say is verified, the confident applicant should lose his or her advantage when the cautious applicant is well calibrated, but not when the cautious applicant is poorly calibrated. If modesty matters rather than calibration, then there should be no difference across conditions because the cautious applicants were equally modest. Thus, Experiment 2 contrasts positive illusions and self-knowledge using a different interview setting and teases apart the effects of modesty from self-knowledge.

Method

Participants. For course credit, 93 undergraduates (56 women; age Mdn = 19) at the University of Virginia participated.

Materials and design. The materials were similar to Experiment 1, except instead of acting as a head swimming coach, participants made a hiring decision for a day care provider company based on applicants’ personalities. We added a condition (between subjects) in which the cautious applicant was poorly calibrated rather than well calibrated.

Participants read excerpts of applicants’ interviews. The cautious applicant was both modest (cautious about one ability) and well calibrated. Although the predominant view is that generally confidence is more effective than modesty, some research has demonstrated that expressing cautiousness or modesty in one’s opinions can facilitate positive interpersonal outcomes. For instance, downplaying one’s performance after the fact can be a successful self-presentation strategy (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Thus, it is important to tease apart the benefits of being modest from being well calibrated.

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averaged to form one “strength of applicant” index (Cronbach’s α = .71). Then they chose which applicant to hire. The order of applicants and any extra information they provided were counterbalanced across participants.

Next, participants learned that, based on results from personality tests and calls to references, both applicants had been right about one of their personality traits but had been wrong about another trait.

For some participants (n = 45), the cautious applicant showed good calibration: cautious when wrong and confident when right. For other participants (n = 48), this applicant showed poor calibration: cautious when right and confident when wrong. In both versions, the confident applicant also showed poor calibration: confident regardless of whether right or wrong. With this new information, participants reanswered (Time 2) the same questions.

Therefore, we had a 2 (between-subject: cautious applicant is either well or poorly calibrated) × 2 (within-subject: confident vs. cautious applicant) × 2 (within-subject: Time 1 [before verification] vs. Time 2 [after verification]) mixed factorial design.

Results and Discussion

The results were again consistent with the presumption of calibration hypothesis. At Time 1, more participants hired the confident applicant over the cautious one. However, at Time 2, when evidence suggested that the confident applicant was poorly calibrated (confident irrespective of accuracy), the confident applicant lost the advantage when the cautious applicant was well calibrated but not when the cautious applicant was poorly calibrated. Thus, how well applicants knew themselves, and not just whether they were modest, affected perceptions of applicants’ desirability. See Figure 2.

Strength of applicant. At Time 1, summarizing across conditions, participants rated the confident applicant (M = 4.9, SD = 1.0) as much stronger than the cautious applicant (M = 3.2, SD = 1.0), t(92) = 11.71, p < .001, d = 1.56. As expected, this pattern was the same in each condition (i.e., there was no interaction of confidence and condition), F(1, 91) = 0.075, p = .78.

At Time 2, when the cautious applicant was well calibrated (top panel), participants rated the confident applicant as no different from the cautious applicant, t(44) = −0.80, p = .43, d = −0.17. When the cautious applicant was poorly calibrated (bottom panel), the confident applicant continued to be rated as stronger than the cautious applicant, t(47) = 4.43, p < .001, d = 0.70. A three-way interaction was significant, indicating that the pattern of responses was different across calibration conditions, F(1, 91) = 5.37, p = .023.

Hiring decision. The pattern of results for hiring decisions was the same as for ratings of the applicants’ strength. At Time 1, when the conditions were identical, participants preferred the confident over the cautious applicant (87% to 13%). As expected, this pattern did not differ across calibration conditions (well calibrated was 90% to 10%; poorly calibrated was 84% to 16%), χ²(N = 93) = 0.55 , p = .46.

However, at Time 2, after the truth was revealed, the confident applicant lost the advantage when the cautious applicant was well calibrated (47% to 53%), but not when the cautious applicant was poorly calibrated (79% to 21%). The Time 2 responses were different across calibration conditions, χ²(1, N = 93) = 10.58, p = .001.

These results suggest that good calibration—knowing when to be confident and when to be cautious—can affect interpersonal judgments about hiring decisions. Initially, participants preferred the applicant who was the most confident. However, when misplaced confidence was revealed, modesty in and of itself did not make a good impression; rather, having insight about how confident to be in one’s personality appears to be what made applicants competitive.

General Discussion

Exuding confidence, regardless of whether confidence is warranted, and being accurate about one’s abilities and personality are each viable self-presentation strategies. Both are persistent themes in the practical worlds of job coaching and witness preparation, and each has been shown to be beneficial in empirical studies. Yet there are instances when a person cannot be both confident and accurate at the same time, and psychology theories do not agree on the most effective self-presentation strategy when a trade-off is necessary.
The current experiments suggest that the role of perceivers and what perceivers believe has been underappreciated in the debate. In these experiments, it was beneficial to be confident and have positive illusions unless perceivers learned that the confidence was unwarranted. Applicants applying for a spot on a swim team (Experiment 1) or for a job at a day care company (Experiment 2) who were confident about their good qualities were initially more successful. Therefore, positive illusions about oneself can be adaptive in an interpersonal setting. However, once perceivers learned that a confident applicant was overconfident, and a more cautious applicant was equally good but more accurate, high confidence was no longer desirable.

The most obvious effect—that the confident applicant loses desirability from Time 1 to Time 2—is easily explained: Initially people believe that the confident applicant is likely to be objectively better than the cautious applicant, but the new information reveals that they are equally good. Although that explains the decrease for the confident applicant, it does not explain (a) why the cautious applicant is then preferred over the confident applicant in Experiment 1 (rather than them being equal), (b) why the ratings of the cautious applicant go up from Time 1 to Time 2, and (c) why these two findings hold only when the cautious applicant is well calibrated (i.e., not in the poorly calibrated condition of Experiment 2).

We believe that this pattern of results is better explained by the presumption of calibration hypothesis (Tenney et al., 2008), which states that initially people give others the benefit of the doubt and believe they are good judges of themselves (i.e., well calibrated); however, if evidence suggests someone is not a good judge of when to be confident (i.e., poorly calibrated), this person will lose clout. In previous studies, in the context of eyewitness testimony, a witness who was confident but wrong about memory for a past event then lost credibility when testifying about other confident memories (Tenney, MacCoun, Spellman, & Hastie, 2007). Applied to the current experiments, participants may have initially believed all of the statements that applicants made about themselves. However, once it was established that these applicants were confident indiscriminately, without regard for accuracy, participants might not have readily believed other confident things these applicants said (e.g., about really wanting the position or being an asset).

But in the social contexts of sports teams and jobs, the explanation probably goes deeper than merely learning that someone might be overconfident in other (verifiable) claims. Another possible explanation is that if perceivers learn that a confident applicant is overconfident, they will question the applicant’s social competence or likeability. According to popular press, a major determinant of hiring decisions is how pleasant and likeable interviewers find interviewees (Drake, 1997). When perceivers learn that someone lacks self-knowledge, they may worry that the person lacks practical understanding or social shrewdness more generally, or they may simply like the person less.

Although one way to think about the current experiments regards the circumstances surrounding a confident applicants’ loss of ground in an interview, another consideration is that the cautious applicant gains ground. The cautious applicant did not have better skills on paper than the confident applicant at any point. However, the cautious applicant gained respect from Time 1 to Time 2 when perceivers learned that the cautious applicant was well calibrated (but not poorly calibrated). Perhaps initially participants believed the cautious applicant exhibited too much self-doubt and they increased respect for the applicant only once they learned there was good reason for the applicant’s uncertainty. Being able to demonstrate self-knowledge might increase respect for seemingly cautious people because, regardless of context, self-knowledge might be valued for its own sake.

Of course, reading vignettes about hypothetical applicants differs from actual interview settings in notable ways. In our studies, the applicants claimed to possess skills and traits that were highly important to the positions. In real life, interviewers may learn about those qualities but also see applicants’ appearance and nonverbal behavior, and interviewers learn about aspects of the applicants that are unrelated to the job. Elsewhere we have shown that participants will believe a well calibrated witness over a poorly calibrated one even when (a) calibration was gleaned from details of the witnesses’ testimony that were tangential to the case (Tenney et al., 2007) and (b) participants watched videotapes of actors as witnesses rather than reading vignettes (Tenney, Small, Konrad, Jaswal, & Spellman, 2010). Thus, peripheral information may be useful when assessing calibration. Note that another difference between the current experiments and real-life interviews is that the experiment participants immediately and conclusively learned that the applicants were incorrect about one trait or ability. During interviews, interviewers often do not check the facts that applicants provide (Wolfe, 2004), or they may learn about an error or misrepresentation after much time has passed. Acquiring useful information about calibration from others may not always be easy; and in richer contexts, calibration per se may play a lesser role than it does in our slim vignettes and videos.

Yet the current experiments may help shed light on the mystery of why positive illusions are beneficial at first or in small doses but are detrimental later on (Baumeister, 1989; Paulhus, 1998; Robins & Beer, 2001). We found that perceivers will dramatically revise their opinions and retract their favorable regard if they suspect that someone lacks self-knowledge. Therefore, if people exaggerate only a little bit, or infrequently, perceivers are more likely to believe them because there are fewer opportunities to detect a lack of self-knowledge or contradict an initial presumption of calibration. In the end, what other people believe about you, not just what you believe about yourself, determines outcomes in important social settings.

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3. We pretested personality traits related to various jobs; being patient and being alert were both seen as highly important and relevant for day care providers.

4. Ratings of the cautious applicant went up in Experiment 1, t(75) = 4.98, p < .001, d = 0.46, and in Experiment 2 when that applicant was well calibrated, t(44) = 2.14, p = .038, d = 0.35, but not poorly calibrated, t(47) = 0.17.

**Notes**


2. This prediction is consistent with research suggesting that people generally believe what other people say (Gilbert, 1991; Zuckerman, Koestner, & Alton, 1984) but also that people assume that their own insight into their own knowledge and abilities is better (Pronin & Kugler, 2007; Spellman, Tenney, & Scalia, 2010).

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**References**


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