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The Self Presenter’S Paradox: Motivated Reasoning in Impression Formation

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - One of the most robust findings in impression formation is weighted averaging (Anderson, 1968; see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, for a review). Although adding mildly favorable to highly favorable information increases the absolute amount of positive information, it produces lower evaluations via the weighted averaging mechanism. Past work, for instance, shows that participants give less favorable evaluations to targets possessing six positive traits, three of which are highly positive and three of which are mildly positive, than they give to targets described with only the three highly positive traits (Anderson, 1968). Mildly favorable information similarly waters down consumers' judgments of household products. Expectant parents, for instance, gave lower ratings to car seats described as AHigh@ in Design Quality and AAbove Average@ in Convenience than they gave to car seats described only as AHigh@ in Design Quality (e.g., Troutman & Shanteau, 1976).

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The Self Presenter's Paradox: Motivated Reasoning in Impression Formation

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

One of the most robust findings in impression formation is weighted averaging (Anderson, 1968; see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, for a review). Although adding mildly favorable to highly favorable information increases the absolute amount of positive information, it produces lower evaluations via the weighted averaging mechanism. Past work, for instance, shows that participants give less favorable evaluations to targets possessing six positive traits, three of which are highly positive and three of which are mildly positive, than they give to targets described with only the three highly positive traits (Anderson, 1968). Mildly favorable information similarly waters down consumers' judgments of household products. Expectant parents, for instance, gave lower ratings to car seats described as "High" in Design Quality and "Above Average" in Convenience than they gave to car seats described only as "High" in Design Quality (e.g., Troutman & Shanteau, 1976).

In the studies reported here, we address the question of whether self-presenters anticipate how evaluators form impressions. In other words, do self-presenters who are trying to present themselves in the best possible light really understand the impressions they are making? Across three studies, we examined the possibility that there are important judgmental asymmetries between evaluators and self-presenters. Based on previous work on impression formation, we predicted that evaluators would use weighted averaging strategies when forming evaluations of targets. In contrast, we hypothesized that psychological factors such as loss aversion would lead individuals in self-presentational roles to fail to intuit evaluators' information processing mind set when designing portfolios. We hypothesized that this inferential failure would lead self-presenters, to their detriment, to include mildly favorable information in their portfolios.

Results across three studies were consistent with predictions. While participants in evaluative roles used averaging strategies to judge manuscripts, job candidates, and consumer products, participants taking the perspective of manuscript authors, job applicants, and marketers made their presentational decisions using "additive" models, leading them to expect to be evaluated more highly after presenting both mildly and highly favorable information.

For instance, in one demonstration participants (N=102) in a between-subjects design adopted either the evaluative viewpoint of a selection committee member or the self-presentational role of a job applicant. "Evaluators" judged resumes and "applicants" created resumes. We predicted that evaluators would make favorability judgments that reflected use of weighted averaging. In contrast, we hypothesized that individuals in the applicant's role would make inclusion choices consistent with an "additive" decision rule.

Evaluators read a scenario asking them to take the perspective of a selection committee member judging applicants for a new junior faculty position at a Law School. Evaluators were informed that applicants had submitted portfolios consisting of selected articles they had published in the past. Evaluators then rated portfolios that varied in the quality and quantity of Law Review publications. Those in the one publication condition saw a portfolio with one article published in the Georgetown Law Review that was ranked "7." Those in the two publications condition saw a portfolio with two publications—one in the Georgetown Law Review (ranked "7") and one in the Arkansas State Law Review (ranked "25"). Those in the three publications condition saw a portfolio with three articles, a Georgetown Law Review ("7"), an Arkansas State Law

Review ("25"), and a Ball State Law Review ("32"). Evaluators then judged the overall favorability and intellectual sophistication of the candidates (1=not very; 9=very). Ratings were highly correlated and thus were combined to form a Favorability index.

Applicants read a similar scenario that referenced the applicant's mind set. They were told they had published the three law review articles used in the evaluator/three publications condition and were given ranking information (Georgetown 7; Arkansas State 25; Ball State 32). Applicants were told that they needed to design a portfolio for the position. They were further told that portfolios consisted of selected articles along with the ranking information. "Applicants" then indicated which articles they would include in the portfolio.

Consistent with an averaging prediction, results showed that adding second tier to top tier publications lowered evaluators' favorability ratings. Participants gave the highest ratings to the candidate with only one top tier publication (Georgetown rank 7) (M=6.68; SD=1.55), gave intermediate ratings to the candidate with one top tier and one second tier publication (Georgetown rank 7; Arkansas State ranked 25) (M=6.33; SD=1.32), and gave the lowest ratings to the candidate with one top tier and two second tier publications (Georgetown, rank 7; Arkansas State, rank 25; Ball State, rank 32) (M=5.83, SD=1.50). A regression analysis showed a significant negative linear relationship between the number of publications included and the Favorability index, $b = -.43, p < .05$.

In stark contrast, self-role participants failed to anticipate averaging and, to their detriment, overwhelmingly chose to include mildly favorable information (second tier publications) in their portfolios. Out of the 26 people in the applicant condition, a sizeable majority, 69.23%, included all three publications in their portfolio, 19.23% included the top two publications, and only 11.54% included only the top publication, $\chi^2 = 15.31, p < .01$. To uncover the psychological processes underlying evaluators' judgments and applicants' inclusion decisions, participants also explained in a few sentences how they made evaluations/choices. These explanations portrayed an interesting dynamic that was consistent with hypotheses. Evaluators' descriptions suggested a concern with constructing coherent and internally consistent impressions. While the evaluators focused on parsimony, self-presenters tended to explain their choices by focusing on proximity. Most seemed unaware that the lower ranked articles could possibly detract from their portfolios. Results showed that the majority of applicants did not anticipate the impression formation strategies used by those taking an evaluative role, and begin to address the psychological mechanisms that underlie these asymmetries.

Additional studies extend these results to evaluation and presentation of consumer products while also including process measures that begin to uncover the psychological processes that underlie evaluators' and self-presenters' impression formation processes. Implications of these results for the study of consumer behavior, motivated reasoning, and impression management are also considered.

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