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Report

Self-enhancement and theory-based correction processes

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ABSTRACT

Two studies examined bias correction by manipulating a perceived chronic judgmental bias (i.e., overestimator/underestimator) using a modified dot estimation task. In Experiment 1, participants corrected for this perceived estimation bias by making adjustments away from the arbitrary feedback about their personal bias tendencies. In Experiment 2, the perceived desirability of the same estimation bias was manipulated. Results indicated that self-enhancement concerns impacted perceivers' motivation to correct, at a cost to accuracy. These studies expand our current understanding of theory-based correction by including self-enhancement motives as causes of correction, demonstrating that such corrections can decrease rather than increase judgment accuracy, and illustrating the usefulness of a new perceived bias manipulation in theory testing.

Introduction

Social perceivers commonly aim to accurately assess the qualities of the people, places, and objects in their environment. However, a variety of factors within and beyond the social perceiver can produce biases in social perceptions. According to models of theory-based correction (Petty & Wegener, 1993; Strack, 1992; Wegener & Petty, 1997; Wilson & Brekke, 1994), if judges infer that some factor has biased their perception of the target, and they feel this bias is unwanted, they can use their lay beliefs about how a biasing factor has affected their judgment to determine the direction and degree of correction needed to remove the unwanted influence. However, these models posit that perceivers will only correct their judgments when they are both motivated and able to do so. This is because, until practiced sufficiently to become routinized (e.g., Maddux, Barden, Brewer, & Petty, 2005), theory-driven correction generally requires the use of more processing resources than those necessary for the default perceptions to emerge. Consequently, assessments made by those unwilling or unable to expend the mental resources needed for correction will reflect initial perceptions of the target.

Models of theory-based correction have generally assumed that social perceivers are typically motivated to hold accurate views of their social world (Strack, 1992; Wegener & Petty, 1997; Wilson & Brekke, 1994). However, accuracy is not the only motive that can instigate corrections. In prior studies, corrections have also been driven by motives to avoid being prejudiced (e.g., Dunton & Fazio, 1997; Olson & Fazio, 2004) and to uphold the law or preserve procedural justice (Fleming, Wegener, & Petty, 1999; Wegener, Kerr, Fleming, & Petty, 2000). In the latter, attaining a perfectly accurate judgment is not necessarily paramount (e.g., one might set a guilty man free if the evidence was collected improperly). One important social motive that has not been examined previously as a basis of judgmental correction is self-enhancement. It is well-established that individuals generally want to see themselves and be seen by others in a positive light, and people employ many strategies to encourage or protect a positive self-image, such as self-handicapping (e.g., Arkin & Oleson, 1998; Jones & Berglas, 1978), basking in reflected glory (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1976), downward social comparison (e.g., Gibbons et al., 2002), and the use of self-serving cognitions (e.g., Schlenker, Weigold, & Hallam, 1990). Indeed, self-enhancement behaviors of one form or another might be universal (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005). Thus, it seems plausible that self-enhancement concerns could also impact how people respond to perceived biases in their judgments.

For instance, if a bias is believed to reflect negatively on the perceiver, he or she might view the bias as especially unwanted and be even more motivated to remove its influence than expected by accuracy concerns alone. In contrast, a perceiver who believes a particular bias reflects positively on him- or herself might not be motivated to reduce or remove the bias – even if it is clear the bias will lead to objectively inaccurate judgments. Prior research has clearly shown that a lack of cognitive ability or insight can lead people to hold a number of self-serving biases, such as a belief that one is better than the average person on various positive dimensions (see Alicke and Govorun (2005), for

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a review) and that one is less susceptible to bias than others (Pronin, 2008; Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). Most typically, making people aware of the truth by enhancing their cognitive skills (Kruger & Dunning, 1999) and helping them identify factors that can lead to bias (Pronin & Kugler, 2007) have been shown to diminish these errors. The reduction in these biases presumably occurs because people are convinced the biases are maladaptive in some way. But what would happen if a person was led to believe that a bias reflected positively on the self? We hypothesize that if people believe a bias makes them look good, they might not correct for it – even if the bias would lead to objectively inaccurate judgments. For example, an individual might not correct for an identified bias toward his or her native country because such obvious favoritism is considered being "patriotic," a trait considered positive for a citizen to hold. In the current research, we provide an experimental test of the idea that people will correct for biases that make their judgments inaccurate under normal (default) conditions, and especially if the bias casts them in a negative light. However, we argue that if a bias is thought to make them look good, self-enhancement concerns could lead them to cling to the bias despite the implications for judgmental accuracy.

In two experiments, we induced participants to believe they possessed a general over/underestimation bias. This bias was selected because there was an objective standard against which the participants believed their bias could be assessed. Thus, this permits a clear test of self-enhancement motives in a setting where accuracy can also be assessed. The perception of bias was manipulated using a modified dot estimation task (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Originally designed to create minimal groups for research in intergroup behavior, the dot estimation task used in the current research contained key features that emphasized over/underestimation as a chronic bias rather than a basis for group categorization. This focus on judgmental bias instead of group membership was achieved by including two items not present in the original Tajfel procedure. First, when participants finished the dot estimation task, they were provided with an explicit assessment of how much they had over/underestimated during the task. It was expected that this information would lead participants to perceive the feedback label as an indication of an individual trait (judgment bias) rather than as a group with which to identify. Second, after being labeled as an over/underestimator, participants were asked to relate a recent occurrence of this estimation bias in their daily life. This exercise encouraged participants to actively think about the feedback in terms of its implications as a judgment bias, not a group category.

In Experiment 1, this procedure was used to manipulate participants' theory of bias, and correction was observed on a second dot estimation task. This experiment was conducted primarily to demonstrate the effectiveness of the dot estimation task in creating perceptions of a bias and eliciting theory-guided correction. That is, we aimed to show that people would spontaneously correct for this bias in an attempt to restore accuracy to their judgments. As described in more detail later, in Experiment 2, the perceived desirability of the estimation bias was manipulated by associating it with either positive or negative consequences. We predicted that participants would see the "positive" bias as a desirable influence that did not need to be corrected, whereas the "negative" bias would be deemed undesirable and worthy of correction. The estimation bias we instantiated in Experiment 2 provided a clear test of self-enhancement motives because it blatantly indicated an objective inaccuracy in participants' judgment abilities that was predicted to be left more or less intact only when the bias was viewed as having desirable consequences for the person.

Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, the perception of bias was manipulated by having participants complete a dot estimation task modified from Tajfel et al. (1971). Half the participants were led to believe they were overestimators, and half were informed they were underestimators. Participants then completed a second dot estimation task. Correction was measured by examining how the difference in the average proportion of dots estimated by overestimators and underestimators changed from the first dot estimation task to the second. Specifically, we predicted that there would be no difference between overestimators and underestimators in the average proportion of dots estimated on the first (pre-bias-awareness) estimation task, but participants were expected to correct in the direction opposite to their perceived bias on the second (post-bias-awareness) estimation task, such that underestimators would report seeing a larger proportion of dots (on average) than overestimators. The blatancy of the estimation bias feedback was expected to make participants spontaneously correct (without explicit prompting) in an effort to be more accurate.

Participants and design

Ninety-nine introductory psychology students at Ohio State University participated in a 2 (Perceived bias label: overestimator vs. underestimator) $\times$ 2 (Estimation task: pre- vs. post-bias-awareness) mixed-design.

Procedure

All materials were presented with MediaLab Software (Jarvis, 2000). Participants were randomly assigned to one of several personal computers visually isolated by partitions. To construct the cover story, participants first read that the purpose of the experiment was to examine individuals' judgment styles on various tasks. Next, they were informed that they would be asked to estimate the number of dots shown on a series of slides in order to determine whether they were an overestimator or underestimator. Participants also read that the tendency to over/underestimate is neither positive nor negative. Instructions noted that the researchers were interested in their responses, nevertheless, because estimation tendencies have been linked to certain personality characteristics. Following the task, participants were informed they were either an overestimator or an underestimator and were asked to think of a recent instance from their daily life in which they exhibited the same bias.

Next, participants completed an anagram filler task, where they had to unscramble four strings of letters to make words. A maximum of 2 min was allotted to solve each anagram. The final phase of the experiment involved the completion of a second dot estimation task. Participants were informed they would again be asked to estimate the number of dots shown on a series of slides. After providing their estimates on each of the 10 trials, the participants were debriefed and dismissed.

Independent variables

Over- or underestimator bias

In order to manipulate the perception of bias, participants were exposed to 10 slides on the computer showing between 26 and 90 colored dots. Each slide remained on screen for 2 s, after which, participants estimated the number of dots they had just seen. Following the final estimation trial, they were informed they had either over/underestimated "on 9 of 10 trials by 10% or more." To strengthen the perception of bias, participants were asked to think

of a recent instance where they had over/underestimated in their daily life. They were then given several minutes to type a description of this event on the computer. All participants were able to generate such an instance (e.g., "I thought it would only take me 15 min to get to campus, but it actually took about 20 or 25 min.").

Estimation task

In addition to the first (pre-bias-awareness) task described above, participants also completed a second (post-bias-awareness) dot estimation task composed of 10 estimation trials featuring small, black dots in numbers (26–78) and patterns of dispersion that differed from the original.

Dependent variable

The responses from all 10 trials of each dot estimation task were divided by the actual number of dots that appeared on the screen to acquire proportional scores, where 1.00 equals accuracy. These scores were then averaged to create mean proportional estimates for both the pre-bias-awareness and post-bias-awareness dot estimation tasks. Bias correction was measured by examining the average proportion of dots estimated by overestimators and underestimators across both estimation tasks.

Results

A 2 (Perceived bias label: overestimator vs. underestimator) × 2 (Estimation task: pre- vs. post-bias awareness) mixed-design ANOVA on mean proportion scores for each dot estimation task revealed a significant Bias label × Estimation task interaction, $F(1, 97) = 27.39$, $p < .001$. To decompose this interaction, we examined the difference between the average proportion scores of participants labeled as overestimators and underestimators within each of the dot estimation tasks. As predicted, no significant difference was found between the proportion of dots estimated by overestimators ($M = .97$) and underestimators ($M = 1.04$) on the first estimation task ($F < 1$). This finding was anticipated because the task was completed before the randomly assigned bias label had been applied. Prior to the induction, participants appeared to be fairly accurate in their estimates, as the mean for each bias label group was not significantly different from 1.00.

In contrast, a significant main effect of bias label emerged on the second estimation task, $F(1, 97) = 11.67$, $p = .001$, such that underestimators estimated a *larger* proportion of dots ($M = 1.20$) than did overestimators ($M = 0.82$). The shift in proportion scores from the first to second estimation task was significant for both overestimators, $F(1, 49) = 32.59$, $p < .001$, and underestimators, $F(1, 48) = 8.80$, $p = .005$.

Discussion

In Experiment 1, perceived bias was manipulated using a modified dot estimation task, and correction effects were observed on a second dot estimation task. The results confirm the prediction that participants would spontaneously shift their estimates (from where they had been on the first dot task) in the direction opposite to their perceived estimation bias on the second estimation task. Interestingly, because people were generally accurate in their estimates, correction led them to have a bias opposite to the one they thought they had. That is, participants labeled as underestimators corrected by overestimating the proportion of dots shown, whereas those labeled as overestimators corrected by underestimating the proportion of dots shown. Thus, although people presumably corrected in a manner to achieve greater accuracy, they actually became less accurate, which is consistent with the idea that corrections proceed to remove perceived rather than actual bias (Petty, Wegener, & White, 1998; Wegener & Petty, 1997). Most importantly, given that the initial dot estimation task and feedback manipulation used in this experiment were successful in creating the perception of a bias and eliciting correction, it seemed appropriate to use this procedure in Experiment 2 to test our key theoretical question regarding what can happen when accuracy motives compete with self-enhancement motives in driving correction for bias.

Experiment 2

An important factor believed to influence people's motivation to correct is the perceived desirability of the bias (Wegener & Petty, 1997; Wilson & Brekke, 1994). In some cases, people are aware they have a bias or that some information might influence their judgment, but the bias is considered desirable (e.g., because it helps them make an appropriate assessment). For instance, in a criminal case, people could believe they would be biased by a defendant's criminal history but also believe it is appropriate to use this bias (despite a judge's demands) because they feel it would lead to a more accurate verdict (see Wegener et al., 2000). In this type of situation, the accuracy motive trumps the motive to follow the letter of the law. In contrast, people will often consider a bias *undesirable* if they believe it will result in *less* accurate judgments (Petty & Wegener, 1993; Wegener & Petty, 1995). In either situation, an accuracy goal can have a strong influence on one's motivation to correct.

However, attempts to correct for a perceived bias have been shown to be influenced by motives other than accuracy, such as the motivation to control one's prejudiced reactions (e.g., Dunton & Fazio, 1997; Olson & Fazio, 2004). Because such individuals could be motivated to avoid being negative toward a group rather than to be accurate, they might not be bothered by being overly positive toward a particular group. In the domain of jury verdicts, research shows that people sometimes follow their desire to obey the rules of evidence, such as discarding information collected in violation of due process, even if ignoring that evidence would lead to less accurate verdicts (Fleming et al., 1999). In Experiment 2, we investigated whether *self-enhancement* motives could also influence correction even if the seeking of self-enhancement leads to judgments that are less accurate. The extant literature shows that the desire to view oneself positively and to be viewed positively by others can be pursued through a number of different strategies, and it seems plausible that self-enhancement concerns could also be served either by correcting for bias or by refraining from correction. For example, if a bias is believed to reflect negatively on the perceiver, as would often be the case, he or she should see the bias as unwanted and be even more likely to try to remove its influence than dictated by accuracy concerns alone. On the other hand, if a perceiver believes that a particular bias says something positive about him- or herself, this bias is likely to be viewed as a desired influence that does not need to be corrected, even if it means that one's judgments will be less objectively accurate. The purpose of Experiment 2 was to investigate whether self-enhancement motives could influence efforts to correct for perceived biases even when the motive is in conflict with the accuracy-based corrections from Experiment 1.

In Experiment 1, the estimation bias was described as neither positive nor negative for the person. Even so, it was clear that the over/underestimation bias made perceptions inaccurate, and an accuracy motivation appeared to instigate corrections (Wegener & Petty, 1995, 1997; Wilson & Brekke, 1994). In order to examine the potential for self-enhancement to influence corrections, in Experiment 2 we manipulated both the direction of the perceived bias and its perceived desirability for the person. Specifically, this

experiment employed a replication of Experiment 1 along with conditions where the bias was described as tending to have positive or negative consequences for the self.

We hypothesized that framing the estimation bias as having positive consequences for the self should make it seem unnecessary (maybe even undesirable) to correct for that bias – even if it leads to less accurate judgments. Therefore, we expected participants in the positive framing condition to show diminished or no overall correction compared to those in a control condition. On the other hand, when the bias is framed as having negative consequences for the self, participants should be especially motivated to correct. Because Experiment 1 suggested that people naturally consider the estimation bias to be an unwanted influence to be corrected, we predicted that those in the negative framing condition (when corrections would serve self-enhancement) would show at least equal and perhaps even greater overall correction than those in the control condition.

Method

Participants and design

One hundred sixteen introductory psychology students at Ohio State University participated in a 2 (Perceived bias label: overestimator vs. underestimator) × 3 (Bias framing: positive vs. negative vs. control) × 2 (Estimation task: pre- vs. post-bias-awareness) mixed-design.

Procedure

Experiment 2 replicated the procedure used in Experiment 1 with a few modifications. As before, participants learned that they systematically overestimated or underestimated the number of dots on screens in the initial task, but this time, only those in the control condition read that these overestimator or underestimator labels held no inherent positivity or negativity for the person. Participants in the remaining conditions were merely instructed to proceed with the judgment task. After completing the task, participants received false feedback that they had either over/underestimated the actual number of dots shown and then were given positive or negative feedback about this bias. As in Experiment 1, participants next completed an anagram filler task and then a second dot estimation task. After providing their estimates on each of the 10 trials of the second dot estimation task, the participants were debriefed and dismissed.

Independent variables

Over/underestimator bias

Bias was manipulated with the same modified dot estimation task used in Experiments 1. Participants were asked to estimate the number of dots shown on a series of slides and then were provided false feedback indicating they had over/underestimated the actual number of dots on nine out of 10 trials by 10% or more.

Bias framing

After receiving the over/underestimator feedback, some participants received additional information. Those in the positive bias condition read that psychologists have found that individuals with their bias "tend to be better problem solvers, take better care of themselves, and get along better with others." Those in the negative bias condition read that psychologists have found that individuals with their bias "tend to be less-skilled problem solvers, have more health problems, and struggle more to make and maintain friendships." As in the previous studies, participants were also asked to provide an example of an event where they over/underestimated in their daily life. However, those in the positive condition were asked to relate an instance where their bias resulted in a positive consequence (e.g., "I gave myself plenty of extra time going to work the other day, and it turned out to be useful because I ran into traffic and other delays."), whereas those in the negative condition were asked to describe a moment when their bias resulted in negative consequence (e.g., "I underestimated how long it would take me to read an article for English class and was almost late to class because of it."). Those in the control condition responded to the same version of the question used in Experiment 1.

Estimation task

Participants completed the same pre- and post-bias-awareness dot estimation tasks used in Experiment 1.

Dependent variable

As in Experiment 1, the responses from all 10 trials of both the first and second estimation tasks were divided by the actual number of dots that appeared on the screen to acquire proportional scores, where 1.00 equals accuracy. These scores were then averaged to create mean proportional estimates for both the pre-bias-awareness and post-bias-awareness dot estimation tasks, and bias correction was measured by examining the average proportion of dots estimated by overestimators and underestimators across both estimation tasks.

Results

A 2 (Perceived bias label: overestimator vs. underestimator) × 3 (Bias framing: positive vs. negative vs. control) × 2 (Estimation task: pre- vs. post-bias awareness) mixed-design ANOVA on mean proportion scores for each dot estimation task revealed a significant three-way interaction, $F(2, 108) = 6.97$, $p = .001$. To decompose this interaction, the average proportion scores for overestimators and underestimators in the two estimation tasks were examined within each of the bias framing conditions (see Table 1 for all means).

Control conditions replicated the findings from Experiment 1 with a significant Bias label × Estimation task interaction, $F(1, 38) = 6.71$, $p = .01$. No differences occurred between overestimators and underestimators on the pre-bias-awareness estimation task. But underestimators reported a significantly larger proportion of dots on the post-bias awareness estimation task than did overestimators, $F(1, 38) = 6.03$, $p = .02$. In the positive bias framing condition, no significant Bias label × Estimation task interaction was found ($F < 1$). No significant differences between overestimators' and underestimators' proportion scores were found on either the first or the second dot estimation task (estimates were close to accurate for overestimators and underestimators on both tasks, $Fs < 1$). Thus, when the estimation bias was framed positively, participants did not attempt to correct for the perceived bias even though failure to do so would, in their view, render their judgments less accurate.

In the negative bias framing condition, analyses revealed the predicted Bias label × Estimation task interaction, $F(1, 35) = 19.08$, $p < .001$. As in all the other conditions, no effect of bias label was shown on participants' proportion scores in the first estimation task ($F < 1$). However, underestimators reported a significantly larger proportion of dots than overestimators on the second estimation task, $F(1, 35) = 14.35$, $p = .001$.

Next, the overall three-way interaction was further decomposed to examine whether the positive bias framing, the negative bias framing, or both created differences in corrections when compared with the control condition. We first compared the positive bias framing condition with the control condition. A 2 (Perceived bias label: overestimator vs. underestimator) × 2 (Bias framing:

Table 1
Mean proportions of the number of dots estimated on the pre- and post-bias awareness dot estimation tasks as a function of perceived bias label and bias framing.

Bias label	Bias framing					
	Control		Positive		Negative	
	Pre-bias	Post-bias	Pre-bias	Post-bias	Pre-bias	Post-bias
Overestimator	0.95	0.80	1.03	1.01	0.97	0.71
Underestimator	0.97	1.05	0.98	0.95	1.05	1.28

Notes: A score of 1.00 equals accuracy.

positive vs. control) × 2 (Estimation task: pre- vs. post-bias awareness) mixed-design ANOVA produced a significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 73) = 3.87$, $p = .05$. This interaction suggested that a positive framing of the bias significantly reduced corrections when compared with the control condition. Comparing the negative bias framing condition with the control condition, a 2 (Perceived bias label: overestimator vs. underestimator) × 2 (Bias framing: negative vs. control) × 2 (Estimation task: pre- vs. post-bias awareness) ANOVA produced a marginally significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 73) = 3.60$, $p = .06$. This suggested that framing the bias negatively tended to enhance corrections above and beyond the significant corrections observed in the control condition.

Discussion

The results from Experiment 2 suggest that self-enhancement concerns can influence the likelihood of correction for perceived biases. Participants in the control groups engaged in the same kind of theory-based corrections observed in Experiment 1. Presumably in an effort to be accurate, they attempted to correct for their perceived bias by adjusting their judgments away from their bias.

In the positive bias framing conditions, the extent of correction was significantly reduced compared to the control condition. In fact, there was no significant difference between the proportion of dots estimated by underestimators and overestimators on either of the estimation tasks. These findings suggest that framing the bias as positive for the person (in ways unrelated to accuracy) led participants to believe that the bias they possessed was desirable and thus not worthy of correction efforts, even though the lack of correction would presumably lead to less accurate judgments. This finding is anticipated by models of theory-based correction, which state that the mere perception of a bias is insufficient to elicit correction – the perceiver must also be motivated to correct for changes in judgment to occur. In the positive framing condition, motivation to correct was presumably low because the bias reflected positively on the person.

In contrast, when the bias reflected poorly on the person (i.e., negative bias framing), corrections tended to be even more extreme than those observed in the control (accuracy-motivated) condition. Informed that they possessed a bias that leads to negative consequences for the self, it is likely participants were even more concerned about removing the bias. The extreme degree of correction observed in this condition indicates that the bias was perceived to be less desirable and that correction was considered all the more necessary.

Conclusion

Much of the previous work on attempts to debias judgments has focused on accuracy-motivated correction of perceived biases. In contrast, the current research shows for the first time that self-enhancement concerns can impact people's motivation to correct for perceived biases. In Experiment 1, perceived bias was manipulated using a modified dot estimation task, and participants corrected in the direction opposite to their perceived bias on a second estimation task. In Experiment 2, when the bias was associated with either positive or negative implications for the self, corrections tended to be enhanced when the bias reflected negatively on the self, but were significantly reduced when the bias reflected positively on the self. These results suggest that people are sometimes willing to maintain a perceived inaccuracy in their judgments as long as they believe there are benefits for the self in having that bias.

Although the results of our studies are clear, one can wonder if the observed phenomena are likely to occur in everyday life. It may be that in the real world, people often do not have access to clear evidence of their biases (unlike the participants in our studies), and as a result, it may be easy for them to reject the notion that their judgments are inaccurate (Pronin, 2008; Pronin et al., 2002). On the other hand, similar to the current results, it is easy to think of situations in which people might acknowledge a bias but believe that it is something positive to possess. For example, a bias towards one's children, country, or favorite sports team can make one feel good about oneself. In such situations, people may be more inclined to accept the idea that they are biased and yet fail to correct their judgments. In addition, thinking of instances of the bias in their everyday lives (as participants did in the current research) might enhance the likelihood of people accepting bias-related feedback. Thus, whether in reaction to external feedback or in introspection about one's chronic tendencies, people might become aware of biases in ways that are readily accepted and then try to correct for those biases they are viewed as unwanted.

Finally, it is important to note that there are undoubtedly situations in which the motivation to be accurate will supersede self-enhancement concerns. The large literature on goal activation (see Moskowitz & Grant, 2009) suggests that the relative strength of each motive in a particular context will depend on a variety of personal and environmental factors. For example, individuals high (vs. low) in the fear of making invalid or inaccurate judgments (Thompson, Naccarato, Parker, & Moskowitz, 2001) may be more likely to attempt to correct their biased judgments, even if having the bias reflects positively on the self. Future research will explore such possibilities and help identify when each motive is likely to dominate in the domain of judgment correction. For now, we have demonstrated that it is at least possible for self-enhancement motives to influence correction attempts even if self-enhancement runs counter to accuracy considerations.

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