On the Perceived Intentionality of Self-Enhancement

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On the Perceived Intentionality of Self-Enhancement

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ABSTRACT. Two experiments examined the inferential consequences of perceived intentionality in self-enhancement (enhancing self-presentation). Participants evaluated a fictitious target who self-enhanced either intentionally or unintentionally. They perceived the target as more immoral and unintelligent, but as equally unfriendly, when the target self-enhanced intentionally (vs. unintentionally). They also perceived the target as more immoral, unintelligent, and unfriendly when the target self-enhanced (either intentionally or unintentionally) rather than self-presented accurately. Intentionality of self-enhancement elicits negative interpersonal evaluations.

Keywords: impressions, intentionality, modesty, self-enhancement, self-presentation

SELF-PRESENTATION, A KEY INTERPERSONAL PROCESS (Goffman, 1959), is influenced by a variety of factors such as audience characteristics (Vorauer & Miller, 1997), the presenter’s personality (Snyder, 1974), the relationship of the presenter to the audience (Leary et al., 1994), social norms (Pataki & Clark, 2004), and the presenter’s motives (Jones & Pittman, 1982). One such presenter motive is to self-enhance (Schlenker, 2003). Individuals self-enhance when they present themselves more positively than other persons view them or than objective standards warrant (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). But how are self-enhancers perceived? What kind of impressions do they convey?

The relevant literature is seemingly contradictory (Hoorens, 2011; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 2012; Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007; Sedikides, Hoorens, & Dufner, in press). Some
studies have found that individuals have favorable perceptions of self-enhancers. For example, individuals reported complimentary perceptions of self-enhancers, especially those who engaged simultaneously in ingratiation (Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986). Also, when self-enhancement was operationalized as discrepancies between self-perceptions and perceptions of friends, individuals regarded self-enhancers as healthier and friendlier (Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003). Similarly, in research using round-robin designs, fellow students reported liking self-enhancers (Dufner & al., 2012, Study 2). In particular, students liked self-enhancers when they were long-term acquaintances (close friends; Study 1), and they viewed self-enhancers more positively over time (self-enhancers became increasingly popular; Study 2). These findings were qualified by judgmental dimension and whether self-enhancement was high versus moderate-to-low. Individuals perceived high self-enhancers as socially influential, and perceived moderate-to-low self-enhancers as emotionally stable and socially attractive (Dufner et al., 2013).

Other studies have found that individuals have less favorable perceptions of self-enhancers than of modest self-presenters (Holgraves & Srull, 1989; Wosinska, Dabul, Whetstone-Dion, & Cialdini, 1996). Individuals judged self-enhancers (vs. modest self-presenters) as lacking in social skills and sympathy for their partners (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995), as socially unattractive (Powers & Zuroff, 1988; Sadalla, Kenrick, & Vershure, 1987), and as undesirable dating partners (Van Tongeren, Davis, & Hook, 2014).

These seemingly contradictory bodies of evidence can be conceptually reconciled. Individuals may perceive self-enhancers less favorably because the latter are often unable to substantiate their claims (Schlenker, 1975; Vonk, 1999). Consistent with this notion, individuals liked self-enhancers less compared to those who made make accurate performance claims (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Also, they liked self-enhancers less and considered them to be less authentic compared to those who made balanced claims (by referring both to virtues and liabilities or admitting that their strengths depended on the situation; Bonanno, Rennicke, & Dekel, 2005; Robinson, Johnson, & Shields, 1995). Arguably, balanced (and, by implication, accurate) claims exude plausibility and credibility. Indeed, individuals evaluated self-enhancers favorably when their competence claims were subject to verification (Bond, Kwan, & Li, 2000) or their publicly stated expectations were subject to scrutiny via actual performance (Brickman & Seligman, 1974).

Let us consider, though, the case of unsubstantiated self-enhancing claims. How would individuals view such self-enhancers? We argue that social impressions would depend largely on perceivers’ attributions of intentionality. Intentionality refers to acts that are viewed as planful, foreseeable, and desirable on the part of the agent (Bratman, 1987; Malle & Knobe, 1997). Below, we provide a rationale for our argument and overview research designed to test it.

Perceivers routinely or spontaneously make inferences about the traits or motives of self-presenters (Brandt, Vonk, & Van Knippenberg, 2011; Ham & Vonk, 2011; Reeder, Vonk, Ronk, Ham, & Lawrence, 2004) and, further, make intentionality inferences (Hughes & Trafimow, 2010; Reeder & Coover, 1986; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). It is possible that perceivers will judge intentional self-enhancers more unfavorably than unintentional self-enhancers. Intentionality may raise suspicion about the presenter’s motives and lead perceivers to attribute to the self-enhancer a deceptive or immoral intent (Baja, 2010). Additionally, intentionality may be regarded as a mark of unintelligence, given that it risks slighting or alienating the audience (Hoorens, Pandelaere, Oldersma, & Sedikides, 2012) and can thus bear negative social consequences (e.g., exclusion) for the presenter (Dufner et al., 2013). Finally, intentionality may be viewed as unfriendly (Cislak & Wojciszke, 2008): perceivers may attribute hostile intent to the self-enhancer.
It is also plausible, however, that perceivers will be more disapproving of unintentional self-enhancement. The self-presenter may be seen as too genuine to be true, as faking incompetence in hopes of gaining favor (as deceptive or immoral; Alicke, Gordon, & Rose, 2013; Vonk, 1999). Also, the self-presenter may be deemed as lacking in self-insight (foolish or unintelligent) or as unaware of the impression that he or she conveys to others (again, unintelligent; Oppenheimer, 2005). Finally, the self-presenter may be viewed as callous or indifferent to the implications of the impressions that she or he conveys (as unfriendly; Clausell & Fiske, 2005).

These traits—immoral, unintelligent, unfriendly—represent the three major dimensions of person perception and evaluation. Agency or competence (e.g., unintelligence-intelligence) and communion or warmth (e.g., unfriendliness-friendliness) are well-established dimensions of human judgment (Bakan, 1966; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). Morality, or moral character, is defined as people’s “normal pattern of thought and action, especially in matters relating to the happiness of others and of . . . [themselves], most especially in relation to moral choice” (Kupperman, 1991, p. 13). A target’s morality has vital implication for the perceiver, not only because morality is a uniquely human attribute that is fundamental to one’s identity (Haslam, 2006; Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, & Bastian, 2005), but also because relative lack of morality alerts the perceiver of possible or impending harm (Cottrell, Neuberg, & Li, 2007; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). Indeed, the target’s morality is relevant to person perception (Cottrell et al., 2007; Leach et al., 2007), constitutes a more important dimension than agency (competence; Leach et al., 2007; Wojciszke et al., 1998) or communion (sociability; Brambilla, Ruscioni, Sacchi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012; Leach et al., 2007), and is empirically distinguishable from agency and communion (Brambilla, Ruscioni, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014).

We engaged in competitive hypothesis testing (Platt, 1964): We tested two competing hypotheses—intentional self-enhancers are judged more unfavorably versus unintentional self-enhancers are judged more unfavorably—in two experiments. We asked the following questions: Do perceivers disapprove of self-enhancement when it is high versus low in intentionality (Experiment 1), and, if so, on what trait dimensions (Experiments 1-2)? Do perceivers disapprove of intentional (high vs. low) self-enhancement compared to accurate (and intentional) self-presentation, and, if so, on what trait dimensions (Experiment 2)?

**EXPERIMENT 1**

Experiment 1 served as a preliminary test of the two competing hypotheses. Participants were exposed to a fictitious person who self-enhanced either intentionally or unintentionally. Subsequently, they evaluated this person on two interpersonally valued dimensions: morality and intelligence (Bakan, 1966; Goodwin et al., 2014).

**METHOD**

Participants and Design

We recruited 116 introductory psychology students (66 females). Due to an error, we failed to record age information. We used a single-factor design (condition: high intentionality, low
We randomly assigned participants to conditions and omitted sex from the reported analyses, because it did not qualify the results.

Procedure and Measures

Participants viewed information about a target person’s behaviors ostensibly collected as part of a study conducted at another university. They received written instructions describing the seemingly two-stage procedure as follows:

In the first stage of the research project, researchers approached classmates, coworkers, employers, and friends of every target. Each of the four different contacts (classmates, coworkers, employers, and friends) made a list of every behavior that each target performed over the course of several weeks. Then, the researchers compiled a new list, which only included behaviors that all four contacts agreed upon. Because of this strict criterion, the researchers accepted the list of behaviors as objective reality, or the truth. So, at this point, the researchers had an objective, impartial, accurate, and truthful list of behaviors that each target performed.

The next stage of the research project involved telephoning each target and scheduling a meeting with him or her in the Psychology Department Laboratory. The meeting was scheduled during the semester after the data were collected. As part of this experimental session, each target was given the actual list of behaviors that she or he performed. Of course, targets were not told that this list of behaviors was real and accurate – they didn’t realize they were looking at an accurate list of their own behaviors. Instead, targets were told that it was a list of behaviors that typical college students might perform, and were asked to check off those behaviors that they had performed. The researchers wanted to be able to compare the objective list of behaviors to the behaviors that each target checked off.

Participants then viewed behavioral lists from the first and second stages of the research project for a single supposed participant, the androgynously named Pat. The experimenter told participants that the list of behaviors from the first stage included actual behaviors that Pat had enacted. This list comprised 20 positive and 10 negative behaviors (Appendix A). Further, the experimenter told participants that the list of behaviors from the second stage included only the subset of behaviors that Pat claimed to have enacted. Pat supposedly had claimed (checked-off) 14 positive and 3 negative behaviors. The claimed set of 17 behaviors, being overwhelmingly positive, was intended to portray Pat as self-enhancing. A pilot study (N = 36) indicated that Pat was perceived as such (M = 7.31, SD = 1.26), with the mean differing significantly from the scale midpoint of 5 (1 = not at all positively-biased, 9 = very much positively-biased), t(35) = 10.97, p = .001.

To manipulate intentionality, the experimenter offered differing explanations for the discrepancy between the actual and claimed lists of behaviors. Participants in the high intentionality (n = 57) condition read:

Even when Pat’s memory is faulty, the omissions are intentional. Any behaviors that Pat did not check-off were purposefully omitted. When you examine the Checked-off Behaviors list, please work from the assumption that Pat intentionally did not check-off certain behaviors that he/she actually remembered performing.

Participants in the low intentionality (n = 59) condition read:
Even when Pat’s memory is faulty, the mistakes are *unintentional*. Any behaviors that Pat did not check-off were behaviors that Pat did not remember. When you examine the Checked-off Behaviors list, please work from the assumption that Pat unintentionally excluded some behaviors that he/she did not remember performing.

Participants then rated the target on morality and intelligence ($1 = \text{not at all}$, $9 = \text{very much}$). The morality adjectives were: moral, fair, honest ($\alpha = .88$). The intelligence adjectives were: intelligent, competent, smart ($\alpha = .84$). An exploratory factor analysis with an oblimin rotation produced a two-factor solution referring to morality and intelligence. This solution accounted for 77.1% of the variance. The two dimensions were positively correlated, $r = .30$, $p = .001$.

Finally, participants responded to a 2-item manipulation check pertaining to the target’s self-enhancement intentionality. The items were: “The student tried his or her best to remember every single behavior (reverse-coded)”, “The student did not check off every behavior that he or she actually remembered performing” ($1 = \text{not at all likely}$, $9 = \text{very likely}$). Responses to the two items were correlated, $r = .62$, $p = .001$, and we thus aggregated them.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Preliminary Analyses and Manipulation Check

There were no missing values, and skewness indices for all variables were normal (values ranged from -0.11 to 0.08). The manipulation was effective: Participants perceived greater intentionality in the high ($M = 6.55$, $SD = 1.71$) than low ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.86$) intentionality condition, $t(114) = 5.63$, $p = .001$.

### Main Analyses

We conducted a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) for condition on immorality and unintelligence. The MANOVA yielded a main effect, $F(2, 113) = 12.30$, $p = .001$. We display univariate statistics in Table 1. Participants rated the target as more immoral and unintelligent in the high compared to low intentionality condition. Perceivers evaluated intentional (vs. unintentional) self-enhancers more unfavorably on both judgmental dimensions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Multivariate Analysis of Variance for Self-Enhancement Intentionality on Immorality and Unintelligence in Experiment 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High intentionality condition</strong></td>
<td><strong>Low intentionality condition</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immorality</td>
<td>5.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unintelligence</td>
<td>4.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXPERIMENT 2

Experiment 2 aimed to replicate and extend these findings. The experiment entailed three new features. These were (1) a different manipulation of intentionality, (2) the inclusion of a control group (accurate, yet intentional, self-presentation), and (3) the addition of a trait dimension.

In the two self-enhancement conditions, participants were presented with allegedly subjective and objective assessments of the target’s personality and learned that the discrepancy—always in favor of self-positivity—was either intentional or unintentional. In the control condition, participants encountered essentially no discrepancy between the two personality assessments and further learned that the target’s accurate self-presentation was intentional. In all three conditions, participants rated the target on morality and intelligence (as in Experiment 1), along with another interpersonally valued dimension: friendliness (Bakan, 1966; Clausell & Fiske, 2005).

We wondered whether participants would perceive intentional self-enhancers more unfavorably (as immoral and unintelligent) than unintentional ones, in replication of Experiment 1. More importantly, we wondered whether participants would perceive intentional (vs. unintentional) self-enhancers as unfriendlier, and whether they would perceive self-enhancers—intentional or unintentional—as more immoral, unintelligent, and unfriendly than intentionally accurate self-presenters.

METHOD

Participants and Design

We recruited 92 individuals (57 females; \( M_{\text{age}} = 31.00, SD_{\text{age}} = 8.13 \)) via Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk online survey program. Most participants (58%) were in gainful employment; the remaining were students (22%) or unemployed/retired (20%). Most participants (81%) were from English-speaking Western countries (Australia, Canada, UK, USA). We used a one-factor design (high intentionality, low intentionality, control). We randomly assigned participants to conditions and omitted age and sex from the reported analyses, as they did not qualify the results.

Procedure and Measures

Participants were instructed to form an impression of a target based on ostensible subjective (target-conducted) and objective (psychologist-conducted) personality assessments (Appendix B, Panel A). They viewed one of two subjective personality assessments: positively-biased (Appendix B, Panel B) or accurate (Appendix B, Panel C). We summarized all personality assessments as average scores on each Big Five trait. We randomized target sex and age (ranging from 18-25) separately for each participant.

In the high intentionality condition \((N = 29)\), we portrayed the target as self-enhancing. Participants could compare the objective personality assessment with the subjective personality assessment—positively-biased (Panels A vs. B, Appendix B), and thus perceive their discrepancy. We told participants that “individuals in general tend to present themselves in a positive light, and the target had undoubtedly deliberately reported an embellished personality profile.” In the low intentionality condition \((N = 31)\), we also portrayed the target as self-enhancing. Again,
participants could compare the objective personality assessment with the subjective personality assessment—positively-biased (Panels A vs. B, Appendix B). We told participants that “it is extremely difficult for individuals to have an objective perspective of themselves, and the target might have accidentally reported an embellished personality profile.” Finally, in the control condition (N = 32), we portrayed the target as accurate, and intentionally so. Participants could compare the objective personality assessment with the accurate personality assessment (Panels A vs. C, Appendix B), and thus perceive their similarity. We told participants that “individuals tend to be truthful when they evaluate themselves, and the target reported an accurate personality profile with every intention to do so.”

Afterward, participants rated the target on immorality (α = .91) and unintelligence (α = .95), as in Experiment 1, but also on unfriendliness. The unfriendliness items (reverse-coded) were: friendly, warm, pleasant (α = .92). An exploratory factor analysis with an oblimin rotation produced a three-factor solution referring to immorality, unintelligence, and unfriendliness. The solution accounted for 87.5% of the variance. The dimensions were positively correlated. Immorality was positively related to unintelligence, r = .73, p = .0001, and unfriendliness, r = .50, p = .0001. Unintelligence and unfriendliness were also positively related, r = .52, p = .0001.

Finally, participants responded to two manipulation checks. They rated the target’s self-enhancement and accuracy. The perceived self-enhancement items were: positive-biased, inflated, exaggerated (1 = not at all, 9 = very much; α = .82). The perceived accuracy items were: accurate, precise, unbiased (α = .90). Then, participants responded to the 2-item intentionality manipulation check, as in Experiment 1. Responses were correlated, r = .72, p = .001, and we aggregated them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Preliminary Analyses and Manipulation Check

There were no missing values. Skewness indices for all variables were normal: values ranged from -0.40 to -0.20. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for condition on perceived self-enhancement yielded a main effect, F(2, 89) = 68.86, p = .001. Planned contrasts revealed that participants perceived the target as more self-enhancing in the high (M = 7.38, SD = 1.24) and low (M = 7.11, SD = 1.57) self-enhancement intentionality conditions combined than in the control (M = 3.57, SD = 1.48) condition, t(90) = 11.40, p = .001. Perceived self-enhancement did not differ significantly in the high and low self-enhancement intentionality conditions, t(58) = 0.72, p = .47. Also, an ANOVA for condition on perceived accuracy produced a main effect, F(2, 89) = 92.66, p = .001. Planned contrasts revealed that participants perceived the target as less accurate in the high (M = 3.30, SD = 1.46) and low (M = 3.74, SD = 1.75) self-enhancement intentionality conditions combined than in the control (M = 6.46, SD = 1.62) condition, t(90) = 8.34, p = .001. Perceived accuracy did not differ significantly in the high and low self-enhancement intentionality conditions, t(58) = 1.05, p = .29. The self-enhancement manipulation was effective.

An ANOVA for condition on perceived intentionality also yielded a main effect, F(2, 89) = 112.39, p = .001. Planned contrasts indicated that participants perceived greater intentionality in the high self-enhancement intentionality (M = 6.20, SD = 1.42) and control (M = 3.19, SD = 1.20) conditions combined than in the low self-enhancement intentionality (M = 1.80, SD =
**TABLE 2**
Multivariate Analysis of Variance for Condition on Immorality, Unintelligence, and Unfriendliness in Experiment 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High intentionality condition</th>
<th>Low intentionality condition</th>
<th>Control condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immorality</td>
<td>5.58&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>4.85&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unintelligence</td>
<td>5.37&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>3.98&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfriendliness</td>
<td>4.32&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>4.21&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Means that do not share a common subscript differ at p < .05 across dimensions.

0.86) condition, t(90) = 11.13, p = .001. Further, they perceived greater intentionality in the high self-enhancement intentionality condition than in the control condition, t(59) = 8.97, p = .001. The intentionality manipulation was effective.

**Main Analyses**

A MANOVA for condition on immorality, unintelligence, and unfriendliness yielded a main effect, F(6, 176) = 15.10, p = .001. We display univariate statistics in Table 2. Consistent with Experiment 1, planned contrasts revealed that participants perceived the target as more immoral, t(58) = 2.69, p = .01, and unintelligent, t(58) = 5.33, p = .001, in the high than low self-enhancement intentionality condition. In an extension of Experiment 1, participants perceived the target as similarly unfriendly, t(58) = 0.37, p = .72, in the two self-enhancement conditions. Also, they perceived the target as more immoral, t(90) = 7.90, p = .001, unintelligent, t(90) = 7.89, p = .001, and unfriendly, t(90) = 2.60, p = .02, in the two self-enhancement conditions combined than in the control condition. Self-enhancement (intentional or unintentional) elicited more negative evaluations compared to accurate self-presentation.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Self-presentation, in the form of social talk (i.e., biographical narratives, social anecdotes, gossip), may occupy up to 70% of conversation (Dayter, 2014; Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997; Emler, 1994). Self-presentation can be strategic (Brandt, Vonk, & Van Knippenberg, 2009; Pontari & Schlenker, 2006; Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995) and, in particular, self-enhancing (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 2003; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Further, self-enhancing self-presentation may vary on intentionality.

The literature has been somewhat mixed on whether self-enhancing presenters are met with audience approval (e.g., Dufner et al., 2012, 2013; Taylor et al., 2003) or audience disapproval (e.g., Colvin et al., 1995; Holtgraves & Srull, 1989; Wosinska et al., 1996). In an attempt to reconcile apparent inconsistencies in the literature, we focused on self-enhancement intentionality. Are intentional self-enhancers viewed more favorably or less favorably than unintentional ones?
In the absence of a strong, guiding rationale, we adopted a competitive hypothesis-testing approach (Platt, 1964; for similar approaches, see: Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides, Gaertner, Luke, O’Mara, & Gebauer, 2013). Specifically, we pitted two hypotheses (i.e., intentional self-enhancers will be judged more unfavorably vs. unintentional self-enhancers will be judged more unfavorably) against one another on three key dimensions of person perception and evaluation: immorality, unintelligence, unfriendliness (Experiments 1–2). Additionally, we included an accurate, but intentional, self-presentation control condition (Experiment 2). The results indicated that intentional self-enhancers were perceived as more immoral and unintelligent than unintentional ones, but as similarly unfriendly. Also, self-enhancers—intentional or unintentional—were perceived as more immoral, unintelligent, and unfriendly than accurate self-presenters.

Compared to accurate self-presenters, self-enhancers (intentional or not) were viewed unfavorably on all three judgmental dimensions. Intentional self-enhancers were looked upon more unfavorably on morality and intelligence than unintentional ones. A reason for this denunciation may be that perceivers consider intentional self-enhancement as an indirect affront to their own self. For example, intentional self-enhancers may constitute an unreachably upward comparison referent for perceivers, and thus may be experienced by them as self-esteem threat (Wood, 1989). Relevant to this account is work by Hoorens and colleagues (2012). These authors were not interested in intentional versus unintentional self-enhancement, but rather in comparative versus noncomparative self-enhancement. (This dimension is, of course, independent of intentional-unintentional.) Self-enhancers who snubbed their audience with comparative self-superiority claims (“I am better than many others”) versus a noncomparative self-superiority claim (“I am good”) were strongly disliked, mainly because they were seen as holding a negative view of the perceivers (Hoorens et al., 2012, Experiment 7). It may be that perceivers view intentional and comparative self-enhancers in a similar manner. An alternative explanation for the denunciation of intentional self-enhancers is that perceivers regard intentional self-enhancement as an insult to others (Hoorens et al., 2012, Experiments 4-6). Intentional self-enhancers may be seen as likely to cause group discord and hinder project completion due to their relational inadequacies (Davis et al., 2013; Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2002; Schoel, Stahlberg, & Sedikides, 2015).

Based on the mindlessness hypothesis (i.e., that individuals rely on norms to understand social interactions and only pay attention to interactions when norms are violated), Tal-Or (2010) found that self-enhancers are judged unfavorably when their self-presentation takes place in the absence of an audience question (thus violating norms), but favorably when their self-presentation occurs in response to an audience question (thus upholding norms). Such results may be partially due to attributions of intentionality. It is possible that perceivers attributed higher intentionality to an audience non-contingent self-presentation than an audience contingent self-presentation. Similarly, unfavorable perceptions of unsubstantiated self-enhancement claims (Schlenker, 1975; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Vonk, 1999) may be due, at least in part, to attributions of intentionality.

Our findings can be enriched in several ways. For starters, level of intentionality might influence perceiver inferences. How would perceivers evaluate targets who engaged in self-enhancement that was demonstrably high, medium, or low in intentionality? Also, in our research, participants evaluated a fictional target rather than a person in an ongoing interaction. A dyadic methodological approach (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) could address this problem by allowing the concurrent examination of actor and partner effects (Davis et al., 2013). Moreover, participants had direct access to subjective and objective perceptions of a target. It is an empirical question whether the results generalize to contexts in which perceivers have no access to clear-cut
target information and need to rely on potentially ambiguous cues. Here, perceiver characteristics (self-esteem; Wood, 1989) and target characteristics (gender; Rudman, 1998) may be relevant. For example, low-esteem persons may be more tolerant to intentional self-enhancement than their high self-esteem counterparts, and female intentional self-enhancers may be judged more harshly than male ones. Furthermore, it is worth exploring implications for dynamic self-presentational settings, such as when targets’ behavior implicates multiple self-presentational motives (Leary & Allen, 2011) and when targets self-enhance intentionally toward superiors but unintentionally toward inferiors (Vonk, 1998). Finally, it remains to be seen whether our results generalize to community samples and additional cultures. These issues represent promising directions for research on the perceived intentionality of self-enhancement.

AUTHOR NOTES

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REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: LIST OF BEHAVIORS USED IN EXPERIMENT 1

Positive Behaviors

1. Complimented people on their clothing and appearance
2. Completed a difficult homework assignment
3. Saw a good movie
4. Read a new book – not required for class
5. Won an intramural game
6. Paid for a friend’s dinner
7. Stopped to let another car into the line of traffic
8. Offered a stick of gum to someone in class
9. Got accepted into a new organization
10. Went home for the weekend to visit parents
11. Went out with a group of friends
12. Participated in class discussion
13. Kept the music down for his/her roommates
14. Went on a trip
15. Lent money to a friend in financial crisis
16. **Gave someone directions**
17. **Received a gift**
18. **Gave notes to someone who missed class**
19. Kept physically fit by jogging
20. **Threw a party**

**Negative Behaviors**

1. Didn’t leave a tip at a restaurant
2. Used drugs
3. Skipped class
4. **Lied to a dating partner about not having other dates**
5. **Rudely turned away someone collecting for a charity**
6. Parked in a permit-only space and got towed
7. Gained weight
8. Cheated on a test
9. Bounced a check
10. **Did badly on a pop quiz because he/she didn’t do the reading**

*Note.* Behaviors checked by the fictitious students are in bold.
APPENDIX B: PERSONALITY ASSESSMENTS IN EXPERIMENT 2

Panel A: Objective Personality Assessment

Panel B: Subjective Personality Assessment – Positive-Biased

Panel C: Subjective Personality Assessment – Accurate