

Getting Acquainted: The Role of the Self-Concept and Preconceptions

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An experiment was conducted to investigate the role of perceivers' self-concepts and preconceptions about one another on the formation of interpersonal impressions. Pairs of female undergraduates expected to interact in a game-playing situation that demanded coolheadedness and cooperation between partners. One subject (the perceiver) was given bogus information about the other subject (the target), and was then asked to select questions to ask the target in order to facilitate the getting-acquainted process. After the target provided answers to these questions, perceivers' evaluations of targets' anxiety and targets' self-evaluations of anxiety were obtained. In addition, naive judges were asked to evaluate targets, based on the targets' answers to the perceivers' questions. Perceivers' self-concepts (in the anxiety domain) predicted the kind of information sought about targets which, in turn, predicted the way in which judges rated targets. Judges' and perceivers' ratings of targets were also influenced by perceivers' false preconceptions about targets. In addition, perceivers' self-concepts seemed to be indirectly related to targets' final self-evaluations.

One way of viewing the social perceiver is as an active seeker of diagnostic information about others—a social hypothesis tester (see Snyder, 1981). However, intuitive hypothesis-testing strategies have been found to be far from adequate. In particular, a major inadequacy is that the search for diagnostic information is biased in the direction of seeking information that confirms the hypothesis (e.g., Snyder and Swann, 1978).

Recently, Fong and Markus (1982) have used Snyder and Swann's hypothesis-testing paradigm to demonstrate the role of the self-concept in the search for information about others. They reasoned that a person who is schematic on a particular dimension is more knowledgeable about the important features of that dimension. Consequently, that person should be

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more likely to seek information related to that dimension than should an aschematic person. In particular, Fong and Markus found that individuals who were schematic in the domain of extroversion asked more "extroverted questions" of a person they were getting acquainted with than those who were aschematic or were introverted schematic. If those questions had actually been answered by target partners, we might expect that extroverted schematics would have elicited information that suggested that their partners were also extroverted. Introverted schematics, however, would presumably have found evidence suggesting that their target partners were introverted.

The present study was designed to test the hypothesis that a perceiver's self-concept predicts not only the questions asked of a target partner in a getting-acquainted exchange, but also the target's self-disclosures and the subsequent impressions formed of the target. The present study differed from the traditional hypothesis-testing paradigm in several ways. First, the domain used was anxiety-coolheadedness, rather than introversion-extroversion. Second, the getting-acquainted situation was a much more elaborate and, it was hoped, involving situation than that used in the traditional paradigm. In particular, subjects believed that they would be playing a game with their target partners, the outcome of which would determine their monetary earnings. Finally, no specific hypotheses were supplied to subjects to test. Rather, a more natural situation was established, in which subjects could form their own preconceptions based on prior instances of the target's behavior. Specifically, some subjects were given descriptions varied to produce either weak situational or strong dispositional attributions for the target behaving in an anxious manner. The goal was to determine if having this kind of information would lead to the same confirmatory bias in questioning exhibited by Snyder and Swann's subjects.

In general, then, it was hypothesized that both self-concept and preconceptions would predict the way in which perceiver-subjects sought information about their target partners. Consistent with Fong and Markus' findings, we expected subjects who had anxious self-concepts to seek information that would elicit information suggesting that their target-partners were also anxious. Furthermore, we expected that this bias in information-seeking would systematically influence the disclosures made by these targets and the impressions formed of them. Similarly, it was predicted that subjects given dispositionally based preconceptions about their partners would seek information that would confirm these preconceptions. Again, this was expected to influence the targets' disclosures and the impressions formed of them.

Finally, it has been demonstrated that being the target of a selective information-seeking process has an effect upon self-concept (e.g., Fazio, Effrein, & Falender, 1981; Riggs, Monach, Ogburn, & Pahides, 1983). The present study was designed so that such changes in targets' self-concepts could be assessed.

METHOD

Overview

Initial self-ratings of anxiety were obtained from pairs of subjects who expected to interact in a bargaining game. Bogus preconceptions were manipulated by providing for one member of the pair (the perceiver) either no information about the target partner (no information), a profile describing the target as behaving anxiously in situations in which it was normative to be anxious (situational attribution), or a profile describing the target as behaving anxiously in situations in which it was not normative to be anxious (dispositional attribution). The perceiver was then given the opportunity to seek further information from the target by asking her questions relating to the dimension of anxiety, game-playing skills, and other irrelevant personal skills and attributes. Bogus preconceptions were discredited by the experimenter, and the target's answers were given to the perceiver. The perceiver then evaluated the target on the anxiety dimension and the target reevaluated herself. Naive judges also evaluated the targets on the basis of their answers.

Subjects

48 female undergraduate volunteers were paid for participation in a study on bargaining behavior. Subjects participated in pairs, the first subject in each pair being scheduled to arrive approximately fifteen minutes before the second.

Materials

RATING FORMS

Initial self-ratings were gathered from all subjects on the anxiety dimension. For this purpose, ten statements were randomly selected from the twenty anxiety-scale items of the Jackson Personality Inventory. These items are short behavioral statements such as "I seem to worry about things less than other people do." Standardized on a college population, the anxiety-scale scores give a reliable measure of trait anxiety. The ten anxiety-scale items were supplemented by ten other items chosen randomly from the remaining 300 JPI items to form the initial self-rating forms. Subjects were asked to indicate on eleven-point scales the extent to which each of the statements described themselves.

Final evaluation forms consisted of the remaining ten items from the JPI's anxiety scale supplemented by another ten randomly selected items. Two questions assessing anxiety in comparison to others and the degree to which anxiety was determined by personality versus situations were also included. Perceivers' and targets' final rating forms were identical except that the perceivers' forms were phrased in the third person (referring to the target) whereas the targets' forms were phrased in the first person.

TARGET PROFILES

Bogus profiles of the target written by a "friend of hers," describing her behavior in six episodes, were presented to two-thirds of the perceivers in the

experiment. Three of these episodes described the target as behaving in an anxious manner. One-third of the perceivers read about a target who was anxious in situations in which it was normative to be anxious (situational attribution condition), and one-third read about a target who was anxious in situations in which it was not normative to be anxious (dispositional attribution condition). For example, in the situational attribution condition, one episode described the target as being extremely anxious about taking an oral final exam, an exam which the rest of the class was described as being quite worried about also. In the dispositional attribution condition, the episode described the target as being extremely anxious about a nonevaluative class in which an assistant instructor was asking questions orally to see how the class was progressing; other students in the class were described as being not at all anxious about the class. Pretesting revealed that female undergraduates ($N = 12$) rated the target described in the dispositional attribution condition as being more anxious (on the ten JPI anxiety-scale items) than the target described in the situational attribution condition [$t(10) = 3.92, p < .005$]. These judges also rated the dispositional attribution target's anxiety as being determined more by her personality (as opposed to the situations in which she finds herself) than the situational attribution target's anxiety [$t(10) = 2.75, p < .025$].

QUESTION LISTS

The perceiver was provided with a list of twenty questions from which she could select five to ask the target. The format of this list and the questions themselves were modeled after those used by Snyder and Swann (1978). Each of the twenty questions had been previously categorized by a majority of twenty-one judges as being anxiety-related, game-related, or irrelevant; and by a majority of twelve judges as general or specific in nature. The final list of twenty questions was randomly ordered. It contained eight anxiety-related questions, eight game-related questions, and four irrelevant questions. Half of the questions within each category were specific in nature and half were general in nature. Half were phrased in a direction implying presence of an attribute that would facilitate game performance (positive) and half were phrased in a direction implying absence of the performance-facilitating attribute (negative). For example, a specific positive anxiety (coolheaded) question was: "Think about the last time you felt relaxed before taking an important test. What was it that gave you this feeling?" A general, negative game-related question was: "Think about the kinds of games that you often lose. Why do you do so poorly in them?"

Procedure

When the first subject (perceiver) arrived, she was told that the experimenter was interested in bargaining strategies used by individuals who are in disagreement, and that she would be asked to play a game with another female undergraduate (the target) who had not yet arrived. Because background information

was needed about each participant, she was asked to complete an initial self-rating form.

The experimenter then briefly described the game in which subjects believed they would be engaged. Based on the card game of "nines" (Kelley, 1965), the game was described as one that required cooperation between partners, coolheadedness, knowledge of card games and game-playing strategies, and the ability to do rapid arithmetic calculations. To stress dependence upon one's partner, each subject was told that she would be paid extra money for her performance on each hand only if she and her partner could reach agreement with regard to each other's behavior within a one-minute time interval.

In the situational and dispositional attribution conditions the perceiver was told that the experimenter "happened to have" some information that had been collected about her partner in a previous experiment. The experimenter had gained permission to release this information to the perceiver to enable her to get to know her partner before playing the game. The appropriate target profiles were then given to perceivers in the situational and dispositional attribution conditions. In the no information conditions, no booklet of behavioral incidents was given to perceivers.

The perceiver was then told that she would be allowed to choose five questions from a list of twenty to ask her partner before beginning to play the game. She was instructed to select those questions which she felt would "aid in your bargaining strategies" and help reach the goal of "cooperatively earning the highest possible number of points." While the perceiver was working on her question list, the experimenter left the room and went to meet the target. The cover story was repeated, the background information (self-rating form) obtained, and the game described.

When the perceiver had completed her question selection, the experimenter returned to collect them. In the dispositional attribution and situational attribution conditions, she told the perceiver that there had been a mix-up in scheduling, that the person who had arrived was not the person about whom she had received the behavioral episodes, but that they might as well continue with the experiment anyway. (No subjects in the experiment evidenced suspicion when asked after the experiment about this manipulation). Ross and his colleagues (e.g., Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975; Ross & Anderson, 1980) have demonstrated that people's beliefs often survive even in the face of evidence that discredits their basis. The present procedure allowed us both to measure the impact of the preconception upon questioning before the discrediting, and to provide a test of the perceiver's ability to adjust final evaluations of the target given the knowledge that the preconception was falsely based. The experimenter then took the list of questions selected by the perceiver to the target. When the target had answered these questions, her answers were given to the perceiver.

The target was then asked to complete the second self-rating form. The perceiver was also asked to evaluate the target on that same form. Finally, both subjects were asked to complete a series of manipulation checks and questions

about their expectations of the game. At the close of the session, subjects were carefully probed for suspicions and fully debriefed.

Judges' Ratings

The answers provided by targets were rated by a separate group of judges, blind to the purposes of the study. Twelve female undergraduates were each given the game description. They were then presented with twelve sets of actual answers generated by targets. Based on the information provided in the answers, judges were asked to rate each target on a series of five eleven-point scales which assessed the target's anxiety in comparison to others, the degree to which her anxiety is determined by her personality versus the situations in which she finds herself, how good she would be at the game, how cooperative she would be while playing the game, and how anxious she would be while playing the game. These ratings were used as an unbiased assessment of the information actually exchanged in the interactions.

RESULTS

The present experiment was designed to test the hypothesis that impression formation would largely be a function of a perceiver's self-concept. Specifically, it was predicted that perceivers' self-concepts would be systematically related to the kind of information sought about targets. This was expected to be succeeded by a bias in the content of targets' self-disclosures, thereby influencing the impressions formed of targets. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that preconceptions held about targets by perceivers would exert a similar influence upon the impression formation process.

The following analyses are based on perceivers' and targets' initial self-ratings of anxiety on the JPI scales; the number of anxiety questions selected by perceivers to ask targets; factor scores for judges' ratings of targets,¹ perceivers' ratings of targets,² and targets' final self-evaluations.³ Perceivers were characterized as high or low in anxiety according to a median split ($Md = 62.5$) of perceivers' JPI anxiety-scale ratings. The mean scores of those perceivers labelled low and high in anxiety were 49.0 and 76.3, respectively.

Question Selection

First, question selection was quantified by the number of questions indicative of anxiety chosen by the perceiver to ask the target (i.e., "Describe the last time you felt nervous before taking a major exam. Why did you feel this way?"). Thus, perceivers' selection of anxiety questions represented adoption of a strategy that would be very likely to gather information suggesting that the target was anxious. A two-way analysis of variance revealed the predicted main effect for perceiver's self-concept upon question selection, $F(1, 18) = 7.12, p = .02$ (see Table 1). Consistent with this effect, a strong positive correlation between perceivers' self-ratings and number of anxiety questions selected was found, $r = +.61, p = .002$. Thus, perceivers who rated themselves as being relatively

anxious asked their targets more anxiety questions than perceivers who rated themselves as being less anxious. The expected effect of preconceptions upon question selection was not obtained, although there was a tendency for perceivers in the dispositional attribution condition to ask more anxiety questions than perceivers in the situational attribution condition, $F(2, 18) = 1.28$, *n.s.*

Although this analysis of question selection focused on the absolute number of anxiety questions selected by perceivers, it also seemed logical to examine the number of anxiety questions selected relative to the number of coolheaded questions selected. Therefore, analyses were performed on the difference between these two scores (number of anxiety questions minus number of coolheaded questions) for each perceiver. Consistent with the preceding analysis, a strong positive correlation was found between perceivers' self-ratings and this index of question selection, $r = +.43$, $p = .02$. Furthermore, high anxiety perceivers tended to ask more anxiety questions relative to coolheaded questions than did low anxiety perceivers, $F(1, 18) = 3.26$, $p = .09$ (see Table 1). Again, no significant effect was found for preconceptions, $F < 1$.

Judges' Ratings of Targets

It was hypothesized that by influencing question selection, perceivers' self-concepts and preconceptions about the target would predict the content of the target's self-disclosure and, thus, the impressions formed of the target. To test this hypothesis, judges were asked to rate targets based on their answers. As predicted, a nearly significant main effect of perceivers' self-concept upon judges' ratings was found, $F(1, 18) = 4.16$, $p = .06$ (see Table 2). This effect was complemented by a strong positive correlation between perceivers' self-ratings and judges' ratings of targets, $r = +.51$, $p = .01$. Thus, targets who were paired with high anxiety perceivers were judged to be more anxious than those targets paired with low anxiety perceivers. A main effect for preconception on judges' ratings of targets was also found, $F(2, 18) = 3.72$, $p = .04$. Targets in the dispositional attribution condition were rated as being most anxious, whereas those in the situational attribution condition were rated as being least anxious (see Table 2). This effect is consistent with the trend found for the question selection variable. It is likely that the richness of targets' responses and their sensitivity to small changes in question selection allowed this effect to reach significance, even though it did not for number of anxiety questions selected. Overall, it is clear that the relationship between question selection and judges' ratings is a strong one ($r = +.46$, $p = .02$ when number of anxiety questions is used in the analysis; $r = +.36$, $p = .04$ when number of anxiety questions minus number of coolheaded questions is used in the analysis).

Perceivers' Ratings of Targets and Targets' Self-Ratings

Up until this point, we have presented evidence for the role of preconceptions and perceivers' self-concept in question selection and the content of targets'

TABLE 1 Perceivers' Selection of Questions

Questions ^a	Situational Attribution (n = 8)			No Preconception (n = 8)			Dispositional Attribution (n = 8)			Mean		
	A	C	A-C	A	C	A-C	A	C	A-C	A	C	A-C
High Anxiety Perceivers	1.0	.7	.3	1.4	.4	1.0	1.5	1.0	.5	1.3	.7	.7
Low Anxiety Perceivers	.2	1.0	-.8	.7	.7	0	.8	.8	0	.5	.8	-.3
Mean	.5	.9	-.4	1.1	.5	.6	1.1	.9	.3	.9	.8	-.2

a. A = mean number of anxiety questions; C = mean number of coolheadedness questions; A-C = mean of the number of anxiety questions minus coolheadedness questions.

TABLE 2 Mean Anxiety Ratings Made by Judges of Targets

	<i>Preconceptions</i>			<i>Mean</i>
	<i>Situational Attribution</i> (<i>n</i> = 12)	<i>No Preconception</i> (<i>n</i> = 12)	<i>Dispositional Attribution</i> (<i>n</i> = 12)	
High Anxiety Perceivers	-.48	+.22	+1.28	+4.0
Low Anxiety Perceivers	-.57	-.65	0.00	-.40
Mean	-.53	-.11	+ .64	

Note. The more positive the score, the more anxious judges rated targets as being.

self-disclosures. But how were these variables related to the impressions that perceivers formed of targets and targets' own self-concepts? A two-way analysis of variance revealed a nearly significant main effect for preconceptions, $F(2, 18) = 3.35, p = .06$ (see Table 3). Perceivers in the dispositional attribution condition tended to rate their targets as being most anxious, whereas those in the situational attribution condition tended to rate their targets as being least anxious. This effect is especially worth noting given the fact that preconceptions were discredited prior to this rating. Although there was a tendency for high anxiety perceivers to rate their targets as being more anxious than did low anxiety perceivers, this effect did not reach significance, $F < 1$.

Not surprisingly, targets' final self-ratings were found to be significantly related to their initial self-ratings, $r = +.42, p = .04$. A two-way analysis of variance revealed that perceiver's self-concept and preconception had weak effects upon targets' self-ratings. A marginal main effect for perceivers' self-concept, $F(1, 18) = 3.53, p = .08$, and a nearly significant preconception \times self-concept interaction, $F(2, 18) = 3.32, p = .06$, were obtained (see Table 4). These effects indicate the tendency for targets paired with high anxiety perceivers to rate themselves as being less anxious than targets paired with low anxiety perceivers, particularly in the dispositional attribution condition.

These findings cannot be attributed to systematic differences in targets' initial self-ratings as a function of perceivers' self-concept, $F(1, 18) = .87, n.s.$, $F(2, 18) = 1.91, n.s.$, or the interaction of self-concept and preconception, $F(2, 18) < 1$. It may be that targets subjected to a biased line of questioning took notice of the unrepresentativeness of their responses. These targets may have

TABLE 3 Mean Anxiety Evaluations Made by Perceivers of Targets

	<i>Preconceptions</i>			<i>Mean</i>
	<i>Situational Attribution</i> (<i>n</i> = 8)	<i>No Preconception</i> (<i>n</i> = 8)	<i>Dispositional Attribution</i> (<i>n</i> = 8)	
High Anxiety Perceivers	-.37	-.02	+.90	+.20
Low Anxiety Perceivers	-.69	0.00	+.26	-.20
Mean	-.57	-.01	+.58	

Note. The more positive the score, the more anxious perceivers rated targets as being.

compensated for this by adjusting their subsequent self-evaluations in a direction away from the perceivers' line of questioning.

DISCUSSION

The present study was designed to examine the role of self-concept and preconceptions in seeking information and forming impressions about others. Strong support was found for the hypothesis that the self-concept is a good predictor of the way in which individuals seek information about others. In particular, perceivers with anxious self-concepts asked more anxiety questions (i.e., questions designed to elicit information confirming that the target was anxious) than perceivers who were low in anxiety. Furthermore, this bias in the information search process was accompanied by the predicted bias in targets' self-disclosures. That is, targets paired with anxious perceivers came across as being more anxious themselves than targets paired with perceivers who were low in anxiety. Although perceivers' self-concepts were not highly related to perceivers' own impressions of targets, they did predict the content of targets' disclosures, as hypothesized.

Preconceptions were also found to play a role in the impression formation process. Targets paired with perceivers who had dispositionally based preconceptions were seen as being the most anxious by both judges and perceivers; those paired with perceivers who had situationally based preconceptions were seen as being the least anxious by both judges and perceivers. Although this effect did not reach significance for question selection, the predicted pattern of

TABLE 4 Targets' Mean Self-Evaluations of Anxiety

	<i>Preconceptions</i>			<i>Mean</i>
	<i>Situational Attribution</i> (<i>n</i> = 8)	<i>No Preconception</i> (<i>n</i> = 8)	<i>Dispositional Attribution</i> (<i>n</i> = 8)	
High Anxiety Perceivers	-.69	+.27	-.75	-.31
Low Anxiety Perceivers	+.18	-.27	+.92	+.31
Mean	-.15	+.06	+.08	

Note. The more positive the score, the more anxious targets rated themselves as being.

means was obtained. It is likely that the relatively small effect of preconceptions on question selection was exacerbated by the richness of the answers generated to those questions.

Although the effect of these variables upon targets' self-concepts was not strong, there was a tendency for targets paired with anxious perceivers to rate themselves as being less anxious than those paired with perceivers low in anxiety. This finding is not consistent with previous research demonstrating that being the target of a biased information search leads to shifts in the self-concept consistent with the line of questioning (e.g., Fazio et al., 1981; Riggs et al., 1983). As mentioned previously, it is possible that targets in this study were aware that their answers generated an unrepresentative image of themselves. They may have felt the need to compensate for this by adjusting their self-evaluations in the opposite direction. (Consistent with this possibility was a negative correlation between number of anxiety questions and targets' final self-ratings, $r = -.28$; $p < .20$.) Alternatively, targets may have inferred some characteristics of the perceivers based on the questions selected. For example, a target given a list of questions focusing primarily on anxiety may have inferred that the person who generated such a list must have been quite anxious herself. They may have seen their own personal characteristics as contrasting sharply with those of the perceiver, thus leading to the obtained contrast effect.

More importantly, however, the present study demonstrated that the self-concept plays an important role in the impression formation process. Previous research had demonstrated the relationship between the self-concept and person perception (e.g., Dornbusch, Hastorf, Richardson, Muzzy, & Vreeland, 1965;

Lemon & Warren, 1974; Markus & Smith, 1981; Kuiper & Derry, 1981). However, the present research suggests a process underlying this relationship. The self-concept may lead individuals to seek information from others in a way that elicits a biased sample of the others' behavior. This may, in turn, lead to a "false consensus" effect (e.g., Hansen & Donoghue, 1977; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). That is, this biased search for information may lead to the false impression that others are more like the self than is actually the case.

Whether this bias has cognitive or motivational roots is not clear from the present research. Fong and Markus (1982) have suggested that differences in self-concept are accompanied by differences in the ability to understand certain types of information. People may seek information relevant to their self-concepts because they are better able to understand such information. It is also possible that individuals are motivated to verify their self-concepts through social comparison. It may be quite reassuring to find that one's own characteristics are not deviant from the norm. For example, an anxious person may seek to confirm the hypothesis that most other people are also anxious and that there is, therefore, nothing wrong with being anxious.

The present study also extends the external validity of the traditional hypothesis-testing paradigm. In our study, subjects elicited information from their partners that was consistent with their behaviorally based preconceptions of those partners. This suggests the potential impact of hypothesis-confirming biases in everyday getting-acquainted contexts.

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates the importance of the self-concept and interpersonal preconceptions in impression formation. Not only do we elicit information from others that confirms our preconceptions about them; but, through a biased information-seeking process, we also elicit evidence suggesting that others are similar to us. It is not surprising, then, that we can continue to think of our own attitudes, behaviors, and personal characteristics as being more normative than is actually the case.

NOTES

¹A factor analysis was performed on judges' ratings of targets, based on their answers to the sets of questions selected by perceivers. Included in this analysis were rating of targets' anxiety in comparison to others, assessment of the source (situational versus dispositional) of targets' anxiety, and judgment of targets' anxiety while playing the game. The three ratings were indicative of a single anxiety factor with loadings of +1.02, +.52, and +.84, respectively. Because one loading was greater than 1, we were aware of the possibility of misspecification; that is, that one of the assumptions of the model was incorrect. To test whether the large loading was due to specification error or sampling error, we examined the partial correlation between the three variables. Because the only negative correlation was not significantly different from zero, $t(21) = 1.002$, n.s., we were able to conclude that the large loading was merely due to sampling error rather than to the presence of an incorrect assumption in the model (Kenny, 1979).

²A factor analysis was performed on perceivers' evaluations of targets, including overall rating on the JPI anxiety-scale items, rating of anxiety in comparison to others, and assessment of the source (situational versus dispositional) of anxiety. The three measures were found to be indicative of a single anxiety factor with loadings of +.84, +.84, and +.36, respectively.

³As was the case for perceivers' evaluations of targets, a factor analysis was performed on targets' final self-evaluations. Again, the same three measures were found to be indicative of a single underlying factor with loadings of +.94, +.78, and +.64.

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