Gender Differences in Self-Perception and Negative Recall Biases

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This study investigated gender differences in the accuracy of self-perceptions and whether self-perception biases are related to negative recall biases. Participants were 275 female and 213 male college students. Approximately 10% of the participants were minorities (mostly African American and Asian). On a masculine task, gender differences in self-perceptions were found for three measures of accuracy: The accuracy of self-evaluations, calibration, and response bias. Females underestimated their performance, were less well calibrated, and showed a more conservative response bias than did males. As hypothesized, no gender differences in the accuracy of self-evaluations were found for feminine and neutral tasks. Participants’ expectancies mediated the gender differences in post task self-evaluations of performance. In addition, evidence for a negative recall bias was found. Females were more likely than males to recall their mistakes even with performance and accuracy of self-evaluations controlled. The implications of females’ greater self-perception biases on masculine tasks are discussed and suggestions for future research are made.

Self-perceptions are an integral part of our lives. In fact, self-evaluation “is a fundamental task of self-regulation. Without feedback on where one stands and how one is doing with respect to one’s goals, effective self-regulation is virtually impossible” (Taylor, Neter, & Wayment, 1995, p. 1278).

1This study is based in part on a dissertation submitted to the University of Oregon in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree. Parts of this research were presented at the 1992 meeting of the American Psychological Association in Washington, DC.

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However, such feedback is rarely unambiguous. For example, one reviewer of a manuscript may convey to the author that the methodology represents an advance over previous work, whereas another reviewer may reject the same manuscript because the methodology is considered lacking. This may create a quandary for the author regarding whom or what (e.g., own past publication success) to believe. In addition, even if all available feedback is relatively consistent, a person may still misperceive that feedback. For example, an author receiving an extensive enumeration of the problems with the manuscript may not realize that the problems are relatively minor and easily remedied. Furthermore, at times feedback is either unavailable or delayed. Add to that the existence of self-serving biases (e.g., Dunning, 1995) and it would be no surprise if self-perceptions were at least somewhat inaccurate for many people.

Indeed, research indicates that individuals are far from accurate self-evaluators. For example, the correlation between medical students’ self-ratings of medical knowledge and grades is −.01 (Arnold, Willoughby, & Calkins, 1985), between self-perceptions of physical attractiveness and judges’ ratings of attractiveness .22 (Gurman & Balban, 1990), between self-perceptions of intelligence and actual IQ scores .32 (Borkenau & Liebler, 1993), and between performance on a test of managerial skill and experts’ ratings of performance .32 (John & Robins, 1994). Interestingly, outside evaluators seem to be better assessors of a target’s performance than the target her/himself. For example, while peer and supervisor ratings of surgical residents’ performance correlated between .66 and .86, self-ratings of performance did not correlate with either peer or supervisor assessments (Risucci, Tortolani, & Ward, 1989). These studies reveal a substantial amount of disagreement between self-views and external criteria. Furthermore, correlation coefficients address relative but not absolute correspondence between self-perceptions and reality. Even high correlation coefficients can mask large discrepancies between self-ratings and external criteria.

One variable which affects the accuracy of individuals’ self-perceptions is gender. Significant gender differences have been found in the accuracy with which participants estimate their IQs (Reilly & Mulhern, 1995), evaluate their productivity at cyclical graphs (Roberts & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1989), evaluate their performance on tests of sports trivia and knowledge of politics (Beyer, 1990; Beyer & Bowden, 1997), report prior grades (Kurman & Sriram, 1997), judge their performance in a wayfinding task (Lawton, Charleston, & Zieles, 1996), and judge their own attractiveness (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994). This paper will examine gender differences in the accuracy of self-perceptions in more detail.

Although the accuracy of self-perceptions has important ramifications for psychological health (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988) and motivation (e.g.,