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The Self-Serving Bias in Relationships:

Case Study of the Evolution of a Research Program

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The origins of a research program can be traced to a variety of sources. A researcher may idly ponder the meaning of it all and arrive at a eureka experience through the magical workings of the creative process. He or she may stimulated by a television program, a newspaper article, or a book, and then rush to the accumulated wisdom for a literature review and conceptual refinement. Or, horror of horrors, our friendly researcher may find inspiration in reading a journal article, participating at a laboratory meeting, or attending a conference. More often than not, though, the origins of a research program can be traced to informal conversation with colleagues over fine food (whose importance in the scientific process is not to be underestimated). My collaborative line of research on the self-serving bias (SSB), the phenomenon where people take credit for their successes but deny responsibility for their failures, is a case in point (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 2002).

When I was on the faculty at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, USA (1988-1993), we were visited by Professor Glenn Reeder of Illinois State University. Glenn gave a colloquium on his pioneering research on attribution theory. This theory aspires to understand how people explain the causes of their behavior and also of others’ behavior (e.g., why X did Y). My research interests had been in self-motives, and in particular in self-enhancement and self-protection motivation. The former refers to pursuing self-positivity, the latter to avoiding self-negativity. I listened attentively and wanted to chat with Glenn about his research following the conclusion of his colloquium, but we ran out of time as Glenn regrettably had other commitments. He told me he was leaving next morning. I invited him to breakfast. I told him I liked pancakes and knew of a place that was irresistible to pancake lovers (*The Original Pancake House*; http://www.originalpancakehouse.com/). A smile engulfed his face, and he replied that he would never say no to pancakes and waffles. We met the next day at 8am (yes, too early, but one has to make sacrifices for science) at the pancake restaurant. Also present were two talented PhD students (and avid pancake lovers), Keith Campbell and Andy Elliot, who went on to successful careers at the University of Georgia (USA) and University of Rochester (USA), respectively.

In between apple pancakes and strawberry waffles (punctuated with innumerable coffee refills), and after trading pleasantries about life and the endlessly frozen winter, I started telling Glenn about my fascination with (others’, surely, and never mine) self-enhancement tendencies. Why do people feel the need to brag and boast, to tout their strengths and conceal their weaknesses, to present themselves favorably to others, to flaunt their wealth, to tell others how special and superior they are? I told him that, coming from a different culture (Greece), I found this behavior nothing short of embarrassing. As a high school and undergraduate student in my native land, for example, I’d think twice before raising my hand, let alone rush, to answer a teacher’s question out of concern for offending my classmates – and they did the same for me. We would certainly respond to the teacher when picked out by name, but not typically on our own accord. Perhaps my Greek classmates also felt special deep down inside (and I am sure they did), but at least they desisted it. However, my American classmates (their many virtues notwithstanding) were less reticent. They seemed to elbow each other to go ahead, do their best to get noticed by the teacher, and have little problem in hawkering their presumed talents. In fact, they seemed overeager to claim personal responsibility for their accomplishments, and equally overeager to blame their misfortunes on others (SSB). What could be done to prevent or curtail such behavior?

At the time, Keith and I were starting a project on close relationships, and in particular on what close relationships mean to the self (Campbell, Sedikides, & Bosson, 1994; Sedikides, Oliver, & Campbell, 1994). Might relationships do the trick, I wondered loudly (while others were getting visibly uneasy at my rant)? My American classmates valued relationships as much as did people anywhere in the world. Would they dare self-enhance, then, when their behavior put their relationships at risk? Would they show the SSB at the expense of a friend or a partner? What do you think, Glenn? And what does attribution theory have to say about this?

Relieved that he finally got the opportunity to speak (and relieved that I finally got the opportunity to turn to my apple pancake), Glenn began by acknowledging that the SSB is an attribution. People *attribute* positive outcomes to themselves, and *attribute* negative outcomes to others. Glenn pointed out that all research on the SSB was about personal outcomes. All studies had manipulated whether an outcome (e.g., creativity test, IQ test, exam result) was positive or negative. Participants, for example, would be randomly assigned to the positive outcomes condition (where they received bogus feedback about their success in the creativity, IQ, or exam test) or the negative outcomes condition (where they received bogus feedback about their failure on the creativity, IQ, or exam test). Then participants would be asked to attribute the causes of their positive or negative outcome. The standard empirical findings what that participants attributed the causes of their successes to their own strengths (e.g., creativity, intelligence, knowledge), but attributed the causes of their failures to factors having nothing to do with themselves personally (e.g., invalid creativity test, tough IQ test, unfair exam, having been unable to study because of a party the night before).

This is where Glenn’s and my interests met. I had asked whether self-enhancement tendencies are put in check by close relationships. Glenn was saying that the SSB literature had not been concerned with close relationships. There was no research on the SSB in dyads. Keith and Andy chipped in, as they were now getting excited. What happens in situations where couples or friends make attributions for joint outcomes? For example, what would happen if my wife and I spent a lot of time preparing a meal, but it ended up being inedible? Would I attribute the failed gastronomic product to my wife’s ineptitude as a cook? What if the meal was delicious? Would I proudly announce to our guests that my keen eye for culinary detail finally paid off?

Glenn took over. Would he tell his wife that he is a better driver than her (as I am sure Glenn believed) on a long car trip? Would he show the SSB? Would he take greater responsibility for the successful and *communal* task of driving? He (and the rest of us) thought not, as his kind wife would not appreciate that remark (believing, no doubt, that she was a better driver than Glenn), thus casting a gloomy spell on the rest of their car trip. And so, we collectively reasoned, close relationships may put the break on the SSB. People in relationships will restrain themselves from showing the SSB for the sake of their relationship.

We decided to take this idea to the lab (Campbell, Sedikides, Reeder, & Elliot, 2000) at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, USA, where Keith and I had escaped in 1993 in search of a warmer climate. But before we did so, we wanted to make sure that the SSB is a signature of self-enhancement. That is, we wanted to show that the SSB reflects motivation, especially given that some researchers had argued that the SSB is “cognitive,” meaning it has little do with motivation (Miller & Ross, 1975). Do people show the SSB in an effort to protect or enhance their self-concept and self-esteem? If so, the SSB is motivational. To find out, we conducted a meta-analysis, where we synthesized statistically all available articles on the topic (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Our meta-analysis was conclusive. The SSB is indeed motivational, as people deploy it for self-protective and self-enhancing purposes.

Confident that the SSB reflects self-motives, we proceeded to kick-start our experimental quest. We tested participants not individually, but in dyads. Half of the dyads consisted of closely related participants (i.e., friends) and half of distantly related participants (e.g., strangers). Do friends (but not strangers) bound each other’s self-enhancement tendencies? Do friends (but not strangers) censor the SSB? To recruit participants, we posted announcements at the Psychology Building inviting undergraduate students to sign up for an experiment and report to the lab with a same-sex friend. We also posted announcement inviting students to sign up on a list with other same-sex persons but not a friend.

The dyads (again, comprising either friends or strangers) engaged in an interdependent-outcomes creativity test, the “Lange-Elliot Creativity Test” (named partly in honor of Andy Elliot). The test was purportedly a brainstorming exercise in dyads. It asked each dyad member to generate as many uses for a brick as possible within 5 minutes. Dyad members listed each use on a separate piece of paper. After 5 min, the experimenter entered each room carrying a box, emptied each participant’s responses into the box, and asked participants to repeat the procedure by listing as many uses as possible for a candle.

Afterwards, each participant received performance feedback. It was based on the sum of the total number of unique uses listed by the dyad. This combined score, then, reflected dyadic, not individual performance. In fact, individual members of the dyad had no way of knowing how well they had done. This combined score represented dyadic success or failure feedback, and was randomly determined. Participants were presented with a feedback page. On the top of the page was a bell-shaped histogram. Participants in the success feedback condition were shown a mark at the 93rd percentile, whereas participants in the failure feedback condition were shown a mark at the 31st percentile. This written feedback was also accompanied by a verbal statement that the dyad did “well” or did “poorly.” Finally, participants made responsibility attributions for the joint test performance. The experimental results were revealing. Strangers displayed the SSB: they attributed dyadic task success to themselves, and they attributed dyadic task failure to their co-worker. Friends, in contrast, refrained from the SSB: they attributed responsibility for the dyadic success equally to themselves and their partner, and they also attributed responsibility for the dyadic failure equally to themselves and their partner. Friendship bounded what seemed, up to then, to be a boundless self-enhancement motive.

This was good, we reasoned (through email communication now). It was good that relationships can restrict behavior that betrays inflated views of one’s self. But why so? Is it for purely pragmatic reasons, that is, because individuals care about their relationships and strive to nourish them rather than destruct them? Or, to ask a more outrageous question, is it because closeness itself tames self-enhancement? And so, the argument goes, could relational closeness, *in the absence of a relationship*, decrease the SSB? We embarked on laboratory experimentation to find out (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998).

Our challenge was to develop a procedure to incite relational closeness. We invented an escalated self-disclosure technique, called the Relationship Closeness Induction Task (RCIT; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1999). This technique entails three lists of questions that become increasingly personal; the first list has 7 questions, the second list has 12 questions, and the third list has 10 questions. Participants spend 9 minutes (in private) mutually self-disclosing while engaging in a natural conversation. They spend 1 minute on the first list (e.g., “what is your first name?”, “how old are you?”, “where are you from?”, “what year are you in at the university?”), 3 minutes on the second list (e.g., “what are your hobbies?”, “what would you like to do after graduating from this university?”, “what would be the perfect lifestyle for you?”, “what is something you always wanted to do but probably never be able to do?”), and 5 minutes on the third list (e.g., “is it difficult or easy for you to meet people?”, “what is one emotional experience you’ve had with a good friend?”, “what is one of your biggest fears?”, “tell me one thing about yourself that most people who already know you don’t know”). The technique is very effective. At the end of the 9-minute period, participants report remarkably high levels of closeness (Sedikides et al., 1998; Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005; Vohs & Heatherton, 2004).

All participants completed the RCIT (Sedikides et al., 1998, Experiment 1). Then, we assigned them randomly into the close or distant relationship condition. In the close relationship condition, participants stayed with the person with whom they had just completed the RCIT. In the distant relationship condition, participants were matched with a different person than the one with whom they had just completed the RCIT. From then on, the experimental procedure was similar to that described above (Campbell, Sedikides, Reeder, & Elliot, 2000). Participants worked on an interdependent-outcomes test (the “Lange-Elliot Creativity Test”), were given false feedback, and were asked to make attributions of responsibility for the joint test performance. The results, once again, were edifying. Relationally distant participants manifested the SSB: they assumed credit for the dyadic success and blamed the partner for the dyadic failure. However, relationally close participants refrained from the SSB: they did not assume disproportionate credit for the dyadic success, and they did not ascribe disproportionate blame to their partner for the dyadic failure. Relational closeness *per se* eliminated the SSB. And it did so, as a subsequent experiment illustrated (Sedikides et al., 1998, Experiment 2), because participants in relationally close dyads form a favourable impression of each other—they like and trust their partner.

Keith Campbell came from a psychodynamic background. He was (and still is) deeply interested in Freud’s ideas. One of Freud’s most generative ideas pertained to narcissism. Narcissists are self-centered and big-headed, with little concern about the welfare of others. They feel entitled and are exploitative. Keith hypothesized that narcissists would show the SSB even in close relationships, thus reversing the findings of our previous experiments (Campbell, Sedikides, Reeder, & Elliot, 2000; Sedikides et al., 1998). This was indeed the case. Narcissists did not care whether their partner at the interdependent-outcomes task was close to them (i.e., a friend) or distant to them (i.e., a stranger). In both cases, they showed the SSB: they credited their super-sized self for the dyadic success and deflected blame on their partner for the dyadic failure (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000). Keith and I celebrated this reversal of prior findings with a fine lunch at a Southern this time establishment *The Original Mama Dip’s Traditional Country Cooking* (<http://www.mamadips.com/>) featuring fried okra and chicken and dumplings.

Our research program had come full circle. From our breakfast, where a collaboration was forged over pancakes and waffles, to our lunch, where our collaboration was rejoiced with Southern American cuisine, we managed to maintain the lines of communication open, to share our intuitions about how the world works, to listen to each other and disagree with each other, and to arrive at consensus that we translated into experimental practice. The scholarly practice is fundamentally social and the sociality of science is what makes this profession so enjoyable and stimulating. That and good food.

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