

Self perception and others' perceptions of us

Finding

An active area of research in behavioural science looks at our capacity to influence how we are perceived both by others and ourselves:

- People who cheat in exams overestimate how they will perform in subsequent tests, even if they know they won't be able to cheat.

When some people are given the chance to cheat on their exam (by having answers at the back of their exam book), they perform better than people not given that opportunity (suggesting that they are cheating). When asked to predict their subsequent performance (when they can't cheat), they overestimate their ability (not taking account of their cheating, instead acting as though their higher scores were due to ability). Their self deception is so strong that even when given financial incentives to guess their future scores correctly, their predictions do not change.¹

- Leikas et al find that people can convincingly impersonate different personality types in photographs by facial expressions alone. Photographs were taken of people pulling a facial expression to depict a personality trait. Uninformed observers were then able to identify the personality type (extrovert, neurotic, etc.) being portrayed by looking at the photo.²
- Interestingly, despite a tendency to deceive in online dating

profiles (men typically lie about height and women about their weight³), the matches that those people eventually end up with have the same characteristics as those had they not used the dating site (based on matched samples), suggesting that the deception was ultimately short-lived.⁴

- Ariely et al (2012) find that people who attempt to signal desirable properties by wearing counterfeit brands think themselves dishonest, and are also less likely to trust others.⁵

Implications

Although it is possible to pretend to be something you're not, the effects of doing so appear to be short lived.

In the long run, this research suggests that portraying an accurate picture of yourself, and feeling better about yourself, will be more beneficial than trying to deceive both yourself and others⁶ (and may even make others feel better about themselves⁷).

Creating opportunities to be creative

Finding

British business is known for its innovation the world over. Although startups play an important part in innovation, recent research suggests ways in which established businesses might take better advantage of their employees' creativity:

- Weith and Zacks (2011) find that people are most creative in the morning and when they are groggy. In their experiment, subjects were asked to solve a

series of analytical and creative problems. Half were asked to solve the problems first thing in the morning, while others did so in the afternoon. The researchers found that participants fared better on the 'creative' problems in the morning than in the afternoon (solving 42.3% vs 35.6%), but that there was no difference in their performance on the more analytical, maths based questions (43.3% vs 46.6%).⁸

- Research from Dijksterhuis finds that switching tasks, or being distracted, can help boost creativity, as this allows the problem to be processed by the unconscious mind.⁹
- More recent research, by Gilhooly et al (2012), finds that the effect of taking a break is strongest when the break is spent doing a task or activity which requires different skills to the first.¹⁰ Participants were asked to list potential uses for a brick. Those who worked on a spatial reasoning task in their break named 20% more uses than those who completed a more similar task to the one in hand.
- When people are primed with an image perceived to represent creativity, such as the Apple logo, they were able to think of more uses for a brick than if they were primed with a logo not perceived to represent creativity (7.2 vs 6.1 uses). This effect was found to be persistent even when a non-creative task was performed first¹¹ (8.1 vs 6.2 uses).
- Furnham finds that people are most creative by themselves.¹² Summarizing previous work in

this area, the paper theorises that brainstorming is a poor means of developing ideas: people may 'block' each-other (only one person can speak at a time), or may be hesitant to offer a novel or radical idea.

- Kohn & Smith¹³ find that in group brainstorming sessions, fewer ideas are generated than when people are asked to think about the same problem independently. They also find that ideas tend to be narrower, as individuals become 'fixated' on the ideas already suggested by others and conform to them.

Implications

These findings suggest a few ways by which firms might encourage their staff to be more creative.

Staff could be encouraged to come up with good ideas by being rewarded with time off for good ideas (evidence suggests that having a lottery in which all sensible suggestions are eligible for a day's paid leave might be more effective than giving everyone a single incentive). Companies could create more opportunities for staff to capture their ideas and signal the value of their ideas: 'ideas notebooks' could be given to staff to capture thoughts when they're away from their desks; an ideas board could be set up in a quiet part of the office where staff can enjoy more privacy.

If people are more creative by themselves than in groups, people could be encouraged to think of ideas by themselves, which could then be submitted anonymously to a group discussion. This could help

overcome fear of rejection, while at the same time helping avoid the 'overconfidence' issues we might expect to arise when people's ideas are unscrutinised, and 'groupthink', which can occur when ideas are shared openly, particularly in hierarchical groups.¹⁴ Variations on traditional brainstorms, such as 'electronic brainstorms' (over an instant messaging client), or 'brainwriting', where ideas are written down, may increase creativity by reducing cognitive fixation on others' ideas.¹⁵

Finally, encouraging staff to take regular breaks, or having specific times allocated for team conversations about topics other than work could improve both team cohesion and creativity. Google's '20% time', where staff are encouraged to spend around a fifth of their time working on projects of personal interest, may be seen as an example of this kind of technique in use, while the famously novel design of their workplaces may prime their workers to be more creative. Creativity may also be encouraged by disrupting existing social contexts, for example, by collaboration with colleagues who are dissimilar.¹⁶

References

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