



## Original article

## Similarity to the self affects memory for impressions of others

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## ABSTRACT

The present studies investigated whether similarity to the self influenced memory for impressions of others. We predicted that similarity to the self would facilitate impression memory for others, paralleling the self-reference effect found when information is processed relative to the self. We were interested in how the initial valence of the impression, whether positive or negative, affected impression memory. Across two experiments, participants formed impressions while viewing faces paired with traits and behaviors. After recognition, participants rated the self-descriptiveness of the studied traits allowing impression memory to be sorted into high-, medium-, and low-self-similarity. For positive impressions, similar others were remembered better than dissimilar others. For negative impressions, similar others were remembered more poorly than dissimilar others. These results illustrate that similarity to the self has multifaceted effects on person memory, leading to memory enhancement in the case of people given positive impressions, but reducing memory for people associated with negative impressions.

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## 1. Introduction

In a complex social world, forming impressions of others has adaptive utility that allows one to distinguish friend from foe. Impressions, however, are useful only to the extent that they are remembered with high degrees of fidelity (e.g., remembering that *this person is honest*). When forming impressions, people rely on a variety of types of information, including others' behaviors, to generate an overall positive or negative impression of a target (Srull & Wyer, 1989). Forming impressions is a subjective process governed by the motivations and biases of the perceiver (Wyer & Srull, 1986), which means that the contents of the *self-schema* affect how we initially evaluate and perceive others (Higgins, King, & Mavin, 1982; Markus & Wurf, 1987). When describing others, for instance, people tend to use traits that are descriptive of the self (Shrauger & Patterson, 1974). Attention to self-descriptive characteristics in other people should be reflected in memory, especially for individuals who are similar to the self, because it is with such similar others that meaningful relationships might develop (Clark & Lemay, 2010; Neimeyer & Mitchell, 1988; Watson et al., 2004). In this investigation, we examined memory for positive or negative impressions of others as a function of similarity to the self.

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When generating impressions, it may be that individuals hold positive impressions of similar others and negative impressions of people dissimilar to the self. Brown (1986) found that when thinking about the self and others, people tend to assign positive attributes to themselves and negative attributes to others, yet the Brown study did not take into account similarity to the self, leaving open the possibility that those similar to the self would be viewed more positively. Thus, one goal of the current study is to look at how similarity to the self affects the initial formation of either positive or negative impressions. Because valence influences memory (Cahill & McGaugh, 1998; Kensinger & Corkin, 2003), the valence of the impression, whether positive or negative, might also influence the subsequent memorability of those impressions. Although some work suggests that individuals associated with negative characteristics are more memorable (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Skowronski & Carlston, 1987), it is unknown how similarity to the self might influence impression memory as a function of valence.

We see two possible outcomes for the effects of valence on impression memory as a function of self-similarity: One possibility is that impression memory would be better for similar relative to dissimilar others, regardless of valence. This would suggest that the influence of the self is an important factor in predicting memory for others, and would be consistent with prior work showing that information related to the self is memorable, regardless of valence (Baumeister et al., 2001; Bower & Gilligan, 1979; Argembeau, Comblain, & Van der Linden, 2005). An alternative

possibility, however, is that similarity to the self would interact with valence. By this account, impression memory would be better for similar than dissimilar others associated with positive impressions, consistent with the idea that positive, self-relevant information is well-remembered (Skowronski, Betz, Thompson, & Shannon, 1991), but that impression memory would be poorer for similar relative to dissimilar others associated with negative impressions. Poor impression memory for those given a negative impression is compatible with prior work showing that negative, self-relevant information is typically poorly remembered (D'Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2008; Leary, 2007; Sedikides & Green, 2000). Furthermore, because memory for others displaying negative trait characteristics (e.g., cheating, selfish) is quite high (Cosmides, Tooby, Fiddick, & Bryant, 2005), it may be that dissimilar others associated with a negative impression may be remembered well, because such individuals could be threatening (Bell & Buchner, 2012). Either of these two possibilities would indicate the importance of similarity to the self on impression memory of others, having implications for how one remembers others encountered in daily life.

Across two experiments, we examined impression memory of others differing in degree of similarity to the self. First, we examined how similarity to the self affects the valence of the initial impression. Consistent with prior work, we predicted that similar others would be associated with more positive impressions and that dissimilar others would be associated more often with negative impressions (Baumeister et al., 2001; Mummendey & Otten, 1998). Second, we examined impression memory as function of valence across trials of high-, medium-, and low-self-similarity, based on self-descriptiveness ratings of traits collected after the memory test. Finding evidence that similarity to the self influences memory for the impressions of others would extend prior work showing that information relevant to oneself affects how memorable that material is subsequently (Leshikar & Duarte, 2012; Leshikar & Duarte, 2014; Leshikar, Dulas, & Duarte, in press; Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977; Serbun, Shih, & Gutchess, 2011; Symons & Johnson, 1997). Third, we evaluated memory for impressions (i.e., positive or negative) separate from other details such as face memory (e.g., have you seen this person before?) and behaviors (e.g., This person wore the same clothes for three days) because spontaneous trait inference studies indicate that people can remember inferences (e.g., honest or kind) even when they cannot remember the precise behavior underlying that inference, implying that some types of person-specific information can be represented somewhat independently in memory (Todorov & Uleman, 2003). Because of this, we examined the extent to which impression memory correlated with memory for faces and behaviors.

## 2. Experiment 1

### 2.1. Methods

#### 2.1.1. Participants

Twenty-nine adults (age: 20.9, *SD*: 1.7, range 18–25, 11 females) recruited from Brandeis University participated. Three additional participants were excluded due to insufficient numbers of trials to allow us to make comparisons across levels of similarity to the self, and one was excluded due to experimenter error. All participants gave informed consent in compliance with the Brandeis Institutional Review Board prior to participation<sup>1</sup>.

#### 2.1.2. Materials

A total of 216 faces (Minear & Park, 2004) as well as 216 behavior-trait pairs served as stimuli. Faces consisted of equal numbers of young (20–39), middle-aged (40–59), and older adult (60–79) images normed for attractiveness and memorability. Behavior-trait pairs were drawn from normed stimuli (Uleman, 1988) that described a behavior (e.g., “This person returned the wallet with all the money in it.”) and a personality trait implied by the behavior (e.g., honesty). Half of the behavior-trait pairs were selected to elicit positive impressions and half negative (as determined by piloting). Across participants, behavior-trait stimuli were counterbalanced to appear equally often with female and male faces and as studied or novel lures at test. Faces were counterbalanced to appear with positive and negative behavior-trait pairs.

#### 2.1.3. Procedure

There were three phases in the experiment: study (i.e., impression formation), memory test, and post-test ratings (which allowed us to back-sort all trials into high-, medium-, or low-self-similarity). After practicing the study and test phases of the experiment, participants formed impressions for 144 trials over three study blocks, each containing 48 trials. On each study trial, a face, behavior, and trait word were displayed for 5750 ms, followed by a 250 ms fixation (see Fig. 1). Participants were instructed to form a positive or a negative impression of that person based on the face, behavior, and trait. Participants pressed “1” (positive) or “2” (negative) to indicate their impression with the first two fingers of the right hand.

The recognition memory test consisted of 216 trials (144 studied and 72 unstudied items). For each recognition trial, participants made two judgments: first, participants were shown a face and given 4750 ms to decide whether they had generated a positive impression or a negative impression for that face, or decide whether the face was new (i.e., not seen during study), by pressing either 1, 2, or 3 with the first three fingers of the right hand (see Fig. 1). This first decision was the basis for calculating both face and impression memory (see Section 2.2). Second, participants were then tested on their memory for the behavior. Participants were shown two behaviors and associated traits. The target consisted of the correct behavior and associated trait that had been paired with the face at study, and the lure consisted of an incorrect behavior and a trait of the same valence that had been paired with a different face at study. Participants also had the option to say that the face was “new”. Participants had 4750 ms to make their response by pressing either the 1, 2, or 3 keys with the first three fingers of the right hand. Trials were pseudo-randomized with no more than 4 novel trials presented in a row.

Following recognition, participants completed a post-test where they made two self-paced judgments for all 144 trait words they saw during the impression formation (study) phase of the experiment: first they rated the self-descriptiveness of the trait (e.g., am I kind?) on a three point scale (1 = describes me a lot, 2 = describes me a little, 3 = does not describe me) and then participants rated the importance of the trait when evaluating others (e.g., is it important to know that a person is kind?) (1 = very important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = not at all important). Post-test judgments to the self-descriptiveness ratings were used to back-sort memory performance into high-, medium-, and low-self-similarity trials. Because there were no memory differences based on the “importance” ratings, this post-test measure will not be discussed further.

## 2.2. Results

At study, participants formed more positive, 56% (*SD*: 7%), than negative impressions 44%,  $t(28)=4.36$ ,  $p<.001$ . To examine whether valence of the impression differed as a function of

<sup>1</sup> A subset of this young adult data has been included in an additional aging study (Leshikar, Park, & Gutchess, 2014) (ePub ahead of print).

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