

# Exaggeration in memory: Systematic distortion of self-evaluative information under reduced accessibility

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## Abstract

The tendency to exaggerate specific information about oneself can stem from reconstructive memory processes that are distinct from motivated self-enhancement or self-presentation. While exaggerations sometimes reflect these motives, they also result from attempts to reconstruct one's past. Three studies examined test scores as they became less accessible in memory. Study 1 provided a real-world illustration, demonstrating reduced accessibility and increased exaggeration of SAT scores over time. Two experiments utilized test scores randomly assigned in a controlled laboratory setting. Increased exaggeration was observed following distraction (Study 2), and after a one-week delay (Study 3). Distortions in scores reported were consistent with beliefs about the self, rather than uniformly self-serving. Under reduced accessibility, exaggeration was predicted by beliefs about achievement (Study 1) and subjective perceptions of test performance (Study 2). Study 3 manipulated perceived performance. Positive performance feedback caused greater exaggeration under reduced accessibility, whereas negative feedback reduced the tendency to exaggerate.  
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Unlike physical objects, beliefs and memories about the self have a curious tendency to drift upward. Individuals routinely inflate or elevate their current standing when evaluating themselves on important attributes. In part, this upward movement in evaluations of the current self reflects the motive to enhance and maintain the positivity of the self-concept (Greenwald, 1980; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Although it distorts the self, the enhancement motive does appear to help individuals maintain a healthy sense of optimism and persistence in the face of adversity (Taylor & Brown, 1988; cf., Colvin & Block, 1994). Memory for the past self is often similarly distorted. Ross (1989) has identified implicit theories that aid attempts to reconstruct one's past, but that also appear to contribute to distortions in autobiographical memory. When there is doubt about the specifics of one's past, there is a tendency to form lofty recollections of those specifics (Greenwald, 1980).

Research on self-evaluation has tended to focus on relatively abstract traits and attributes. For example, a statistically impossible majority of individuals rate themselves as above average on positive and desirable attributes such as "well-adjusted" and "agreeable" (Alicke, 1985; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Although there is clear merit to this approach, it is difficult or impossible for researchers to verify each participant's responses. Thus, interpretation of such findings is obscured by an inability to distinguish accurate self-evaluations from inaccurate and overly positive ones (Colvin & Block, 1994). Research on autobiographical memory also tends to focus on participants' ratings on abstract terms such as "pleasant" (Walker, Skowronski, & Thompson, 2003). Again, this approach yields intriguing findings, including the tendency for events to be perceived as more pleasant over time (Ritchie, Skowronski, & Wood, 2006). However, the inability to access an objective reality makes it difficult to determine whether the bias rests in the initial ratings or in their recollection.

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## Exaggerating specific performance outcomes

An alternative approach is to focus on specific, objective, and verifiable information about the self. This makes it possible to examine the psychological mechanisms underlying biases in self-evaluation and autobiographical memory, while having direct access to an objectively defined reality. In contrast to ambiguous attribute ratings that are difficult or impossible to verify (e.g., “intelligence,” “generosity”), it is possible to directly examine the accuracy of specific self-reports relevant to the attributes of interest (e.g., IQ scores, charitable contributions). This is the approach that we adopt in the current research, as well as in our previously reported research on exaggeration (Gramzow, Elliot, Asher, & McGregor, 2003; Gramzow & Willard, 2006).

### *Exaggerating current performance*

One primary purpose of our past research was to demonstrate that distinct psychological processes contribute to the tendency to exaggerate specific performance outcomes (Gramzow & Willard, 2006). Specifically, we argued that motivated self-enhancement underlies the tendency to exaggerate attributes that reflect current goal pursuits of emotional and motivational significance. We focused on recent college course grades and current grade point average (GPA) as relevant performance outcomes, and confirmed their self-evaluative, emotional, and motivational significance for students currently in college. Consistent with the motivated self-enhancement account, global measures of dispositional self-enhancement predicted the specific tendency to exaggerate course grades and GPA. In a more direct test of the motivated self-enhancement account, we then demonstrated that a self-affirmation manipulation known to temporarily satisfy the self-enhancement motive (e.g., Fein & Spencer, 1997; Gramzow & Gaertner, 2005) reduced the tendency for students high in dispositional self-enhancement to exaggerate their GPAs. Therefore, the tendency to exaggerate specific performance outcomes can, at times, reflect a motivated self-enhancement process.

In subsequent research, we examined the motivational and performance correlates of GPA exaggeration. Across several studies, exaggerating one’s performance in college was associated with positive emotions, an adaptive motivational orientation, and a pattern of physiological and behavioral responses suggesting greater composure under stress. Moreover, the initial tendency to exaggerate one’s performance predicted better longitudinal performance outcomes across a variety of future college courses (Gramzow, Willard, & Mendes, 2007; Willard & Gramzow, 2007). Therefore, in this specific context, self-enhancement appeared to be coordinated with positive and functional motivational, emotional, and performance correlates (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

## *Exaggerating past performance*

Consistent with the notion that distinct psychological processes contribute to the tendency to exaggerate specific information about the self, not all exaggerations appear to be driven by self-enhancement concerns. Specific information from one’s past reflecting completed or abandoned goal pursuits becomes less relevant over time and comes to have an attenuated motivational and emotional impact. We confirmed that, among students currently in college, scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) represent one such goal pursuit. The tendency to exaggerate past SAT scores was not predicted by dispositional self-enhancement measures, nor was it affected by a self-affirmation manipulation (Gramzow & Willard, 2006).

Nevertheless, students on average did exaggerate their SAT scores. So, what process underlies this tendency? One clue to the underlying mechanism was that the magnitude of SAT exaggeration was greater for upper-level students than for first-year students (an effect that was not influenced by the self-affirmation manipulation). We reasoned that the specific value of the SAT score should be more accessible in memory among first-year students, because they would have received their SAT scores more recently, and were likely to have shared that score value with others and entered it repeatedly on college applications. This would explain why first-year students were able to report the value with a high degree of accuracy. By contrast, the specific value of the SAT score should become less accessible over time for most students (Underwood, 1957). Therefore, upper-level students would be more likely to rely on reconstructive memory when reporting their SAT scores. We speculated that overly positive self-reports of SAT performance may result from biases emerging during this reconstructive memory process.

The psychological process contributing to exaggeration of past performance outcomes, such as the SAT, appears to be largely independent of motivated self-enhancement effects. However, no previous research offers direct evidence for the alternative reconstructive memory account. The purpose of the present research is to examine the influence of reconstructive memory on exaggeration. Thus, while distortions of specific information about the self sometimes reflect motivational processes, we propose that systematic distortions of specific information about the self also commonly result from attempts to faithfully reconstruct one’s past.

## **Autobiographical memory, accessibility, and exaggeration**

### *High accessibility: Accuracy or motivated distortion*

Memory for specific self-relevant information can vary in cognitive accessibility across and within individuals. When the information is high in cognitive accessibility

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