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ABSTRACT

The apparent external validity of the finding that self-perceptions of ability persevere after the basis for such impressions has been totally discredited was examined. In this study, subjects persevered in their perceptions of personal persuasiveness even after it was revealed that the initial success or failure upon which their impressions were based had been predetermined. Specifically, they formed perceptions of their ability to convince another student to donate blood, then learned that the "persuaded" person was actually responding not to the subject's arguments but to a prearranged script. But even after learning that their self-perceptions were based on false feedback, they continued to act according to them. Contrary to predictions and previous findings, however, instructions to explicitly explain an initial outcome did not increase its subjective likelihood. This finding may be explained in terms of the "sufficient" conditions which normally prompt individuals to explain social events. (Author)

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Perseverance of Discredited Self-Perceptions:

Beyond the Debriefing Paradigm <sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The present experiment extends the apparent external validity of the finding that self-perceptions of ability persevere after the basis for such impressions has been totally discredited. Specifically, subjects persevered in their perceptions of personal persuasiveness after it was revealed that the initial success or failure upon which their impressions were based had been predetermined. Contrary to predictions and previous findings, however, instructions to explicitly explain an initial outcome did not increase its subjective likelihood. This finding is discussed in terms of the "sufficient" conditions which normally prompt individuals to explain social events.

## Perseverance of Discredited Self-Perceptions:

## Beyond the Debriefing Paradigm

Frequently, in everyday experience, an actor is given reason to doubt the validity, reliability, or relevance of information that has previously provided the basis for his self impressions. Thus, John is heartened by the Famous Artist Correspondence School's assessment of his potential as a commercial artist and then later discovers that three of his peers answered the same advertisement and received equally glowing assessments. Mary decides on the basis of her failure to grasp elementary concepts in a high school chemistry class that she lacks the academic abilities to pursue a career in medicine, only to learn that her chemistry teacher has been fired because of his pedagogic deficiencies.

Logically, the actor in each case should revise or perhaps even totally abandon the initially-formed impression. Recently, however, Ross, Lepper, and Hubbard (1975) have suggested that such initial impressions may persevere to an unwarranted and inappropriate degree. Briefly, they demonstrated that false feedback concerning performance in a novel discrimination task (i.e., distinguishing fictitious from authentic suicide notes) continued to influence both the self-perceptions of the actors and the social perceptions of observers even after the initial feedback had been totally discredited through standard "debriefing" procedure.

Such a demonstration has potentially profound implications regarding impression perseverance and change in the face of logical or evidential challenges that occur outside the laboratory and the mechanisms that mediate

these phenomena. Before exploring these implications, however, it seems prudent to explore first the range and the robustness of the perseverance phenomenon. Specifically, two types of questions may be raised concerning the external validity of the Ross et al. findings. First, there may be unique aspects of the standard debriefing procedure that are responsible for perseverance effects but are unlikely to occur in more commonplace circumstances involving evidential discrediting. For example, subjects, having been deceived once by the experimenter, may simply remain wary of his subsequent claims; or the fact that the experimenter in debriefing specifically focuses attention on his prior intent to manipulate the subject's self impression may be critical. Many such "narrow" interpretations of the Ross, Lepper and Hubbard results and other demonstrations of debriefing failure (c.f., Walster, et al.; 1967 Valins, 1974) are possible. Second, the task and ability in the Ross, et al. demonstration were highly novel and largely irrelevant to any of the subjects' past experiences or preconceptions about the self. Again, issues of external validity arise. The need for extending the domain and demonstrating the robustness of impression perseverance in the face of discrediting thus seems apparent.

With this objective in mind, a further test of the "perseverance hypothesis" was undertaken using a rather different "discrediting" procedure and an ability both ego-involving and likely to be based on prior experience. Specifically, the present study examined the role of perseverance processes in students' judgments of their ability to persuade their peers. In the experiment, subjects first experienced either success or failure in convincing another student to donate blood in a phone call, only to learn later that the "persuaded" person actually had been a confederate responding in accordance with a prearranged script. These procedures were justified to subjects simply as a "practice" session and were explained in a manner that precluded

any impression that the experimenter had attempted to manipulate the subject's self impressions. Finally, the subjects were asked to rate their likely success at the task in the future.

In addition to determining the applicability of the perseverance phenomenon to real world experiences, the present study sought to investigate one mechanism postulated to underlie belief perseverance. In discussing the mechanisms of perseverance, Ross et al. (1975) speculated that once an impression has been formed on the basis of some initial information, the perceiver's subsequent consideration of potentially relevant information may be biased such that the original impression seems to gain more support, or suffer less disconfirmation, than would result from an impartial consideration of such input. Furthermore, the perceiver's attempts to account for the evidence which led to the formulation of that impression may result in the discovery or postulation of antecedent conditions to which the relevant evidence seem an obvious and highly probable consequence. These processes that increase the apparent support for, and plausibility of, a given belief or impression might thus be capable of sustaining that impression even when the authenticity or relevance of the information upon which it was originally based is challenged or negated.

The role of causal explanation in promoting perseverance of impressions about others has recently been demonstrated in an experiment by Ross, Lepper, Strack, & Steinmetz (1977). Reasoning that any conditions which induce a subject to explain an event should increase the subjective likelihood of that event, Ross et al. induced subjects to explain particular events (e.g., suicide) in the later lives of clinical patients whose previous case histories they had read. Results indicated that after "debriefing" concerning the authenticity of the explained event--indeed even when subjects knew the event to be purely hypothetical at the time of their explanation--subjects consistently attached

greater subjective likelihood to the events they had explained.

The present experiment pursued the possible role of explanation in enhancing perseverance of impressions about the self. Thus some subjects were asked to explain their ability levels before discrediting while other subjects were not asked to do so.

In summary, to test the effect of both discrediting and explanation on the perseverance of positive or negative self-perceptions of ability, three factors were manipulated orthogonally in a 2(success-failure) x 2(explanation-no explanation) x 2(discrediting-no discrediting) design.

#### METHOD

##### Subjects

Subjects were 80 undergraduate students who received either \$2.00 or credit toward a class requirement for their participation.

##### Procedure

Upon arriving, the subject was presented with a brief introduction to a study on "persuasion techniques" supposedly being conducted by the Red Cross in preparation for an upcoming blood drive on campus. Subjects were told their task would be to phone other students and persuade them to donate blood at a bloodmobile on campus, while the experimenter listened and took notes on their technique. The subject was then given further details to be conveyed to potential donors and asked to prepare their telephone "pitch."

Success-failure manipulation. After a brief preparatory period, subjects were each instructed to make two preliminary calls "for practice." To choose the targets for these first calls subjects were requested to indicate both a page number in the student directory and the position (e.g., tenth) of a name on that page. The experimenter then pretended to write down the name and number of the person the subject had "selected." On the first of these

calls, subjects succeeded in reaching the party whom they wished to persuade (actually a confederate in the experiment) and were given the experience of either successfully persuading an individual who had initially sounded uninterested (success condition) or of failing to "sell" a prospect who had initially seemed mildly positive (failure condition). Following this success or failure experience, subjects attempted to reach the other party. This other line, however, remained busy until, in apparent exasperation, the experimenter decided to "go on with the remainder of the experiment."

Explanation manipulation. At this point, subjects in the explanation conditions were given a form asking them to explain their successes and/or failures in the practice calls, while non-explanation subjects received a "filler task" (i.e., writing a description of the speaking style of a famous personality).

Discrediting manipulation. Subsequently, within each condition, the basis for initial impressions of success or failure was discredited for half the subjects. Specifically, the experimenter revealed that the person subjects had reached had been a confederate who had responded to their call in accordance with a prearranged script. It was further explained that, in fact, the practice procedure originally called for each subject to make two calls, one preprogrammed to provide a success experience and the other to provide a failure experience, but that one of the confederates had "somehow missed his assignment and failed to keep his line free." (This procedural detail was included so that subjects could be certain that their initial exposure to success or failure reflected neither their particular persuasive ability nor the experimenter's expectations about the outcomes of subjects in general. It also served to disavow any intent on the part of the experimenter to manipulate the subjects self impressions).

Dependent measures. Subsequently, as subjects prepared to make a

series of ten calls that supposedly were to comprise the "real experiment," they were asked to complete a series of measures ostensibly to assess their initial attitudes concerning the telephone blood drive campaign. Thus subjects were asked to estimate (a) how many successes s/he would have in the upcoming 10 calls in the experiment (immediate success prediction), (b) how many successes an "average student" would have on the 10 calls, (c) what percentage of successes s/he would have in the later blood donor drive to be conducted on campus (generalized success prediction), and (d) what percentage of successes an average student would have in the drive. The subjects were also asked to rate their ability on several related general skills and their willingness to participate in the upcoming blood drive on campus.

Final debriefing. When the subject had finished the questionnaire, the experimenter explained the true purpose and hypothesis of the experiment and emphasized the potential destructive consequences of persistent self-impressions and encouraged subjects to recognize the personal relevance of the perseverance phenomenon (cf. Ross, Lepper, and Hubbard, 1975).

## RESULTS

### No discrediting conditions

The impact of the success-failure manipulation was evident on several (but not all) measures. As shown in the left-hand columns of Table 1, subjects showed large and significant effects of the outcome manipulation in their predictions of their own initial and future success. Their own willingness to participate in an upcoming blood drive on campus was also affected in a corresponding manner. Subjects predictions of the initial and future success of an "average" student were also influenced by the outcome manipulation, although these effects were somewhat smaller than the corresponding self-prediction effects.

-- INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE --

The above measures permit a test of the perseverance hypothesis that initial impressions based upon success or failure in the "practice" calls persist after the success or failure they were based upon is discredited. (Other measures, such as those dealing with "related abilities", showed no initial impact of the success/failure manipulation and are omitted from further consideration in this report).

#### Discrediting conditions

Following the success-failure manipulation, it will be recalled, half the subjects were told that the person they had "persuaded", or "failed to persuade" had actually been a confederate who responded according to a predetermined script. What was the effect of this thorough discrediting of the basis for self assessments and predictions? The relevant data, presented in the right-hand columns of Table 1, indicate that--although obviously reduced in magnitude--the same effects observed in the no-discrediting conditions persisted subsequent to discrediting. In fact, the difference in means between success and failure subjects' predictions of their own initial success was reduced by only 37% and the difference in means of subjects' predictions of their future success was reduced by only 50%. Both of these post-discrediting effects moreover, were statistically significant (see Table 1). A similar pattern of results emerged for predictions of the initial and future success of an "average" student, although only the effect for immediate success reached an accepted level of significance.

In contrast to the above pattern of results, there was no simple perseverance effect shown in subjects' willingness to participate in the upcoming blood drive. There was, however, an interesting unpredicted difference in the responses of success and failure condition subjects to debriefing. Specifically, success subjects' willingness to participate remained virtually unchanged following discrediting, while failure

subjects' willingness to participate appeared to increase quite markedly following the discrediting ( $t_{38} = 3.4$ ,  $p < .01$ ). It is interesting to note that subjects' predictions of future success showed a similar pattern. These results receive further attention in the discussion that follows.

#### Explanation conditions

Contrary to our prediction, the interpolation of an explanation task prior to discrediting procedures did not enhance levels of post-debriefing perseverance. That is, subjects who had succeeded and then explained their success did not make higher predictions of success for themselves or others than did subjects who had not explained success. None of the interaction effects relevant to our predictions or potential concerns involving explanation effects approached accepted significance levels, and the non-significant differences did not even tend to be in the predicted direction.

#### DISCUSSION

The results of the experiment help to extend the apparent range and robustness of the post-discrediting perseverance phenomena. Using a discrediting procedure quite different from standard debriefing and using a task and ability which were likely to be ego-involving, and relevant to past experience, the basic perseverance effect reported by Ross, Lepper, and Hubbard (1975) was replicated.

Several particular findings merit further consideration. It is interesting, for example, to note that subjects' perceptions of the persuasive ability of the average student and their perceptions of their own persuasive ability were quite similarly affected by the various manipulations employed in our study. There are two possible interpretations for this finding. On the one hand, it is possible that subjects' perceptions of their own ability were affected by the experimental manipulations and that they then inferred

that their peers would have similar abilities and outcomes. On the other hand, it is possible that primarily subjects' perceptions of task difficulty rather than their self-perceptions of ability were affected by the experimental manipulations. It was thus these perceptions of task difficulty in turn which mediated their predictions of success for themselves and for an "average" person. On the basis of this experiment, it is impossible to determine which interpretation is more correct. Both effects, past evidence indicates (cf. Ross, et al., 1975), can be demonstrated depending upon whether perceptions of average ability and performances are held constant or left free to vary.

Another interesting result was the absence of any simple perseverance effect for the measure assessing subjects' willingness to participate in a future blood donor drive. Instead, while success subjects' willingness remained high after discrediting, failure subjects' willingness increased after discrediting.

One explanation of this is that once subjects learned that their initial failure was not a result of their own lack of ability, they simply were eager to prove their ability. Of course, any interpretation of this finding is highly speculative. What may be important, however, is the clue that some asymmetries between discrediting of success and of failure may occur in domains that are ego involving and the object of prior experience.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this experiment was the complete absence of support for our hypotheses concerning the perseverance-enhancing effects of explanation. There are various possible interpretations of this failure. One possibility is that instructions to explain did have an effect on perseverance but such an effect was obscured by a ceiling effect; that is, the amount of perseverance was so high in the no-explanation conditions that there was lit

room for any additional effect of explanation. The failure to obtain even a trend in the predicted direction, however, casts some doubt on such an interpretation. A related possibility, one that the present authors favor, is that even without any instructions to do so, subjects formulated explanations to themselves for their initial success or failure, thus making any explanation induction superfluous.

The attribution theorists (cf., Heider, 1944; Kelley, 1967) have long contended that the occurrence of a significant and/or unanticipated event is likely to evoke a search for some explanatory framework that will allow the individual to make sense of the event. The current results, coupled with the explanation effects reported by Ross, Lepper, Strack, & Steinmetz (1977), suggest that in the absence of a specific induction to do so such causal explanations--and the effects they exert upon impression perseverance--may be more likely in the case of self-perception than social perception. This likelihood, furthermore, may approach inevitability when the object of the actor's attribution are personally relevant actions or outcomes.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The present experiment demonstrates the range and robustness of the basic finding of belief perseverance in the realm of self-perceptions of ability. The experiment also raises important issues regarding the limitations of the perseverance hypothesis and the "sufficient" conditions that trigger the "explanation mechanism" postulated to underlie perseverance phenomena.

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Table 1

Effects of Discrediting on Subjects' Impressions, Predictions, and Related Responses

Item	No-discrediting			Discrediting		
	Success	Failure	F	Success	Failure	F
Immediate success prediction for self	4.75	2.85	16.32 ****	4.40	3.20	4.95 **
Immediate success prediction for "average" student	4.65	3.40	12.11 ***	4.40	3.35	4.78 **
Generalized success prediction for self	45.00	25.95	10.92 ***	43.90	34.40	2.96 *
Generalized success prediction for "average" student	43.05	28.60	7.61 ***	43.00	35.15	2.33
Willingness to participate in a future blood donor drive	2.85	1.58	20.71 ****	2.92	2.74	<1

\*  $p < .10$ , two-tailed\*\*  $p < .05$ , two-tailed\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , two-tailed\*\*\*\*  $p < .001$ , two-tailed