

# Do Others Judge Us as Harshly as We Think? Overestimating the Impact of Our Failures, Shortcomings, and Mishaps

Kenneth Savitsky  
Williams College

Nicholas Epley and Thomas Gilovich  
Cornell University

When people suffer an embarrassing blunder, social mishap, or public failure, they often feel that their image has been severely tarnished in the eyes of others. Four studies demonstrate that these fears are commonly exaggerated. Actors who imagined committing one of several social blunders (Study 1), who experienced a public intellectual failure (Studies 2 and 3), or who were described in an embarrassing way (Study 4) anticipated being judged more harshly by others than they actually were. These exaggerated fears were produced, in part, by the actors' tendency to be inordinately focused on their misfortunes and by their resulting failure to consider the wider range of situational factors that tend to moderate onlookers' impressions. Discussion focuses on additional mechanisms that may contribute to overly pessimistic expectations as well as the role of such expectations in producing unnecessary social anxiety.

Most people have experienced the fear of “sticking out like a sore thumb.” One may feel this way when dining alone at a restaurant, when accidentally setting off the security alarm in a library, or as the one guest at a party who failed to notice that the invitation specified formal attire, not sandals and a Hawaiian shirt.

Much of the force behind one's reaction to these situations stems from the conviction that others will notice and attend to one's status as an outlier. But how realistic are such concerns? In previous research we have shown that they tend to be exaggerated—that people often overestimate the extent to which others notice their appearance and behavior, both in their moments of triumph and, perhaps especially, in their moments of chagrin. People commonly believe, in other words, that the “social spotlight” shines more brightly on them than it actually does, a phenomenon we have dubbed the *spotlight effect* (Gilovich, Kruger, & Medvec, 2000; Gilovich, Medvec, & Savitsky, 2000; Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999).

But the concern over sticking out like a sore thumb goes beyond the worry that one will be noticed. There is the attendant fear that,

once spotted, one will be judged harshly—not merely as someone who failed to look closely at a party invitation, for instance, but as someone who is “out of it,” “clueless,” or lacking in social graces.

The present research investigates whether such worries are justified. We suggest that often they are not. Just as people tend to overestimate the extent to which others notice their blunders (Gilovich, Medvec, & Savitsky, 2000), we propose that they also expect to be judged more harshly because of these blunders than is actually the case.

The prediction that individuals will overestimate the extent to which they are judged harshly by others may strike some readers as unlikely, given that people often *are* judged harshly for their shortcomings. Indeed, a large literature in social psychology attests to observers' tendencies to form strong dispositional inferences about others, often on the basis of the flimsiest behavioral evidence. People are notoriously inclined to jump from “acts to dispositions” without giving adequate consideration to mitigating situational constraints (Gilbert & Jones, 1986; Jones & Harris, 1967; Ross, 1977; Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977).

Still, we suggest that observers are less likely to form negative impressions than actors typically suspect. We base this prediction, in part, on recent evidence suggesting that actors anticipate that observers will draw correspondent inferences about them—that individuals are intuitively aware of the correspondence bias (Van Boven, Kamada, & Gilovich, 1999). This research also demonstrates that the judgments actors anticipate go well beyond those that observers actually make. Not only do actors anticipate that observers will exhibit a correspondence bias, they expect them to do so more than they actually do.

Why might individuals overestimate the extent to which others judge them harshly for their blunders? To be sure, one cause of this phenomenon is likely to be the aforementioned tendency to overestimate the salience of one's actions in the eyes of others (Gilovich, Medvec, & Savitsky, 2000). After all, others cannot judge one harshly for an unnoticed transgression, and a tendency to overestimate how often a blunder is noticed will lead inevitably to exaggerated fears of how harshly one is judged.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kenneth Savitsky, Department of Psychology, Bronfman Science Center, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts 01267, or to Nicholas Epley or Thomas Gilovich, Department of Psychology, Uris Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14853-7601. Electronic mail may be sent to ksavitsk@williams.edu, ne12@cornell.edu, or tdg1@cornell.edu.

But we suggest that even when a shortcoming is noticed, observers' judgments may be more charitable than actors expect. One reason for this overestimation derives from recent work on the *focusing illusion* (Gilbert & Wilson, 2000; Loewenstein & Schkade, 1999; Schkade & Kahneman, 1998; Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000). According to this research, when individuals are asked to predict the impact that a certain event or experience will have in the future (say, the effects of being denied tenure on one's future happiness), there is a tendency to focus inordinately on that particular event, underestimating the influence of other, nonfocal events. As Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, and Wheatley (1998) noted, "the fact of the matter is that trauma does not take place in a vacuum: Life goes on, and nonfocal events do happen and do have affective consequences" (p. 619).

We propose that the same illusion may be at work in people's predictions of how others will rate them after a social blunder. Like traumatic experiences, blunders do not take place in a vacuum. Others' judgments of an actor are likely to be influenced by a variety of nonfocal factors, including memories of past interactions with the individual and appraisals of the individual's behavior and appearance before and after the blunder—not to mention a host of unrelated distractions to which observers may be subjected. Although a blunder can seem to occupy center stage, it often shares the limelight with an ensemble of other cues.

Nevertheless, it can be easy to lose sight of the impact of extraneous, nonfocal cues on how one will be judged by others—especially, perhaps, when one has just committed a blunder. An individual who knocks over the podium while delivering a lecture—sending notes and transparencies cascading across the floor—is unlikely to pause and consider the extent to which members of the audience are actually thinking about their own upcoming talks, their own most embarrassing public speaking debacles, or how taken they are with the material presented just before the mishap. To the extent that a blunderer focuses excessively on the blunder itself, and neglects to consider the range of factors that will influence others' judgments, the blunder's impact will be exaggerated.

We report four studies that examine these issues. In the first, we used a scenario methodology to investigate whether individuals do indeed overestimate the extent to which they will be judged harshly after a social faux pas. In Study 2, we examined the phenomenon under more involving laboratory conditions, and extended our analysis to include intellectual failings in addition to social blunders. In Studies 3 and 4, we explored whether the phenomenon is caused, in part, by a focusing illusion.

### Study 1

As an initial investigation, we asked participants to consider one of three hypothetical scenarios. In each case, some participants were asked to imagine that they had committed a faux pas—that they had accidentally triggered the alarm system in a library, were the sole guest at a party who neglected to bring a gift for the host, or had been spotted while carrying a shopping bag from an unfashionable store.

Although each of these situations seemed likely to elicit worries about how one would be judged by others, we suspected that such worries would be exaggerated. In each case, we predicted that those who imagined committing the faux pas would anticipate being judged rather harshly by others. On the other hand, we

predicted that observers who imagined watching someone else commit each blunder would rate the actor less severely than actors expected.

Of course, there can be a big difference between saying that one would not judge others harshly and actually refraining from making harsh judgments. It is possible that observers might indeed judge the targets harshly, but be reluctant, for self-presentational reasons, to admit it. To address this concern, we ran a third condition in which participants again imagined themselves in the role of an observer. In this case, however, participants did not report their own judgments of the blunderer, but rather indicated the impressions they thought others would form. These "third-person" observers were thus free to indicate that the target would be judged harshly without admitting to making harsh judgments themselves.

### Method

**Participants.** Two hundred sixty Cornell University and Williams College students served as participants in exchange for extra credit in their psychology courses. Participants received one of three hypothetical scenarios, which they completed along with a number of other, unrelated items. For each scenario, participants were randomly assigned to one of three roles: actor, observer, or third-person observer.

**Scenario 1: The library alarm ( $n = 90$ ).** Actors were asked to imagine they were in the campus library, working on a research project.

When the time comes to leave, you gather up your materials and place them in your backpack. Just before reaching the exit doors, however, you pass through the security gates and trigger a loud alarm. You had accidentally placed a library book in your backpack and forgot to check it out. Everyone in the area immediately turns to look at you, and the librarian shouts that you must return to the circulation desk. Several library workers are quickly dispatched to make sure you don't exit the building.

The remaining participants—observers and third-person observers, respectively—were asked to imagine having witnessed another student involved in this situation.

Actors estimated the likelihood that observers who saw the incident would entertain the thought that they were attempting to steal library materials and, alternatively, that they had simply forgotten to check out the materials. Actors also estimated the likelihood that observers would "form a negative impression" of them as a result of the incident.

Observers and third-person observers made analogous judgments. Specifically, observers indicated the extent to which they themselves would think the individual was attempting to steal library materials, had simply forgotten to check out his or her materials, and so on. Third-person observers, in contrast, answered the same three questions, but estimated what other people would think (e.g., "How likely are others standing around you to think this person... was actually trying to steal some library materials?"). All judgments were made on 11-point scales ranging from 0 (*not at all likely*) to 10 (*virtually certain*).

**Scenario 2: The empty-handed party guest ( $n = 90$ ).** Actors were asked to imagine that they were attending a dinner party and discovered they were the only guest to arrive empty handed, without a gift to offer the host. Observers, in contrast, imagined that they were hosting a party and that one of their guests had shown up empty handed. Third-person observers imagined attending a party at which one guest showed up without a gift. All three groups then assessed the impact of this potentially awkward oversight.

Actors indicated the extent to which they thought their behavior would bother the host and the extent to which they thought the host would form a negative impression of them. Observers (i.e., party hosts) indicated how much it would bother them that one guest had arrived without a gift, and

the extent to which they would form a negative impression of that guest. Finally, third-person observers indicated the extent to which they thought the host would be bothered and would form a negative impression of the empty-handed guest. These judgments were made on 11-point scales ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*a great deal*).

*Scenario 3: Spotted at the mall* ( $n = 80$ ). Actors were asked to imagine that they were at a shopping mall, carrying a bag with "K-Mart" printed on the side, when they were spotted by a group of their classmates.<sup>1</sup> "They looked at your bag, nodded a quick hello to you, and continued on their way, talking amongst themselves." Observers and third-person observers each imagined having seen one of their classmates at the mall with the K-Mart bag. "You and your friends looked at the bag, nodded a quick hello to your classmate, and continued on your way, talking amongst yourselves."

Actors estimated on 0-to-7-point scales the extent to which their classmates would form a negative impression of them (*not at all* to *very much*), the extent to which the bag would make their classmates want to associate with them less in the future (*there would be no influence on their desire to associate with me* to *they would want to associate with me much less than before*), and the likelihood that their classmates were discussing them and their shopping bag as they walked away (*no chance* to *very likely*).

Observers indicated the extent to which they themselves would form a negative impression of their classmate, would want to associate with their classmate less in the future, and the likelihood that they would discuss their classmate and his or her bag with their friends as they walked away. As before, third-person observers answered these same questions, but for each one estimated what their friends would think. All judgments were made on 0-to-7-point scales.

## Results and Discussion

Because responses to the various measures within each scenario were highly correlated ( $\alpha = .78, .83, \text{ and } .83$  for Scenarios 1, 2, and 3, respectively), we combined the items from each scenario into overall composite measures.

As can be seen in Table 1, the pattern of results in each scenario was consistent with our hypotheses. First, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) revealed a main effect for participants' role in Scenario 1,  $F(2, 87) = 7.28, p < .005$ , Scenario 2,  $F(2, 87) = 14.50, p < .001$ , and Scenario 3,  $F(2, 77) = 14.73, p < .001$ . More pertinent to our hypotheses is that planned contrasts within these ANOVAs revealed that actors expected observers to judge them more harshly than observers actually did. This was true for actors in Scenario 1, who imagined setting off a library security alarm,  $t(87) = 3.81, p < .01$ , for actors in Scenario 2, who imagined arriving at a party without a gift for the host,

$t(87) = 5.31, p < .001$ , and for actors in Scenario 3, who imagined that their classmates had spotted them with an unfashionable brand name on their shopping bag,  $t(77) = 5.35, p < .001$ .

Consistent with the notion that observers might be less than forthcoming about their true assessments of the actors, additional planned contrasts indicated that third-person observers' intuitions were a bit more negative than the judgments observers indicated they would make. This tendency attained marginal significance in all three scenarios: Scenario 1,  $t(87) = 1.91, p < .06$ ; Scenario 2,  $t(87) = 1.61, p = .10$ ; and Scenario 3,  $t(77) = 1.94, p < .06$ . Nevertheless, the intuitions of third-person observers still fell short of the harsh recriminations anticipated by the actors themselves. Although this result attained only marginal significance in the first scenario,  $t(87) = 1.91, p < .06$ , it was highly significant in both Scenario 2,  $t(87) = 3.43, p < .001$ , and Scenario 3,  $t(77) = 3.30, p = .001$ .

In summary, we obtained support for our hypotheses across all three scenarios. Participants who imagined they had committed one of three social blunders expected to be judged more harshly by observers than they actually were. Furthermore, a third group of participants who predicted others' judgments of the actor anticipated more charitable impressions than did the actors themselves, a result that casts doubt on the possibility of a self-presentational artifact.

## Study 2

Study 2 was designed to expand on the previous findings in two ways. First, rather than ask individuals about the judgments they would have made (or expected others to have made) in a hypothetical situation, we examined participants' responses in an actual situation where concerns about public scrutiny were likely to be high. Specifically, we administered a set of challenging anagrams to participants in full view of another individual. *Solvers* were asked to estimate how *observers* would judge them both before and after what we anticipated would be their rather poor performance, whereas observers were asked to state their actual impression of the solver at each time. We expected, once again, that actors would overestimate the extent to which observers judged them harshly after their failure.

Second, to allow for a more precise analysis, solvers estimated how they would be judged on a variety of dimensions, some that were related to their failure (e.g., how intelligent or how incompetent they were) and others that were not (e.g., how fashionable or how dishonest they were). By examining participants' responses on these unrelated dimensions, we could ascertain whether actors overestimate how harshly they will be judged in general or only on dimensions explicitly related to their embarrassing moment.

## Method

*Participants.* Thirty Williams College students were each paid \$5 for their participation. Participants reported to the laboratory in pairs and were

Table 1  
Mean Composite Index Ratings of Respondents  
in Scenarios 1, 2, and 3

Scenario	Actors' prediction	Observers' rating	Third-person prediction
1. Library incident <sup>a</sup>	4.78	3.01	3.89
2. Empty-handed guest <sup>a</sup>	5.26	2.47	3.35
3. Spotted at the mall <sup>b</sup>	3.31	1.13	1.94

*Note.* One item in the first scenario—the estimated likelihood that the individual in question had simply forgotten to check out his or her library materials—was reverse scored. Higher values on all three composite measures thus correspond to harsher (or less charitable) predicted or actual judgments.

<sup>a</sup> Scores could vary from 0 to 10. <sup>b</sup> Scores could vary from 0 to 7.

<sup>1</sup> We chose this brand assuming it would be seen by participants as being of relatively low status. It was a final item on participants' questionnaires asked them to rate the "prestige value" of a number of brand names, including K-Mart, on an 8-point scale ranging from 0 (*very low prestige*) to 7 (*very high prestige*). As expected, K-Mart received a very low rating ( $M = 0.94$ ), significantly below the scale midpoint,  $t(79) = 20.69, p < .0001$ .

randomly assigned to the role of solver or observer.<sup>2</sup> Data from one pair were discarded because one participant had taken part in pilot testing of the procedure.

**Procedure.** Participants were told that the experiment was a study of “interpersonal interaction” and that they were to engage in a variety of different exercises and complete some questionnaires after each one. The first interaction was a “get-acquainted” session in which participants asked each other 10 interview questions that we provided (e.g., “Name a food that you like and a food that you do not like.”).

After both participants had answered all 10 questions aloud, they were escorted to separate cubicles for a first round of questionnaires. The observer in each pair was asked to rate the extent to which each of 12 traits were characteristic of the solver. These judgments were made on 10-point scales from 1 (*not at all characteristic*) to 10 (*extremely characteristic*). Meanwhile, the solver was asked to estimate, as accurately as possible, how he or she would be rated by the observer on the same 12 traits. These judgments were made on 10-point scales from 1 (*[The observer] will think this is not at all characteristic of me*) to 10 (*[The observer] will think this is extremely characteristic of me*). The experimenter made a point of instructing solvers to answer according to how they believed the other participant would judge them, not according to how they would judge themselves. The participants’ responses served as our “preanagram” measure.

Participants then reconvened for the second (and final) interaction. The experimenter explained that the solver would be given a series of 16 anagrams to solve aloud, each with only one solution. The experimenter informed participants that “those who do well on tests such as this one tend to be individuals who are clear thinkers and who are highly intelligent” and that “few people get all of the answers correct, but most people tend to do well.”

In fact, the anagram test was designed to be highly challenging. Following two rather easy items (*cat* [act] and *nails* [snail]), the remaining 14 anagrams were quite difficult (e.g., *roasting* [organist], *senator* [treason], and *cocaine* [oceanic]). The experimenter administered the test by holding up index cards, one by one, on which the anagrams were printed. The solver was given 15 s to state the anagram’s solution or state that he or she did not know the answer. The experimenter responded “correct” or “incorrect” as necessary. At the end of the test, the experimenter announced the number of anagrams solved correctly and escorted both participants to their cubicles for a second round of questionnaires.

The second round of questionnaires was identical to the first: The observer rated the solver on the same 12 trait adjectives and the solver estimated how he or she would be rated. When both were finished, participants completed a third questionnaire (described below) after which they were debriefed, paid, and dismissed.

**Dependent measures.** Six of the 12 traits were selected, a priori, to be of relevance to the anagram task (bright, clear-minded, creative, incompetent, intelligent, and stupid). The other 6 were selected to be less relevant to the anagram task (cold, dishonest, fashionable, loyal, neat, and phony).<sup>3</sup>

As mentioned above, both participants completed a third questionnaire after the second interaction. The solver was asked to rate the degree with which he or she was satisfied with his or her performance on a scale of 0 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*extremely satisfied*). Both participants then rated on 0-to-10-point scales the difficulty of the anagrams (*very easy* to *very difficult*) and the degree to which the solver had surpassed, or failed to surpass, their expectations (*much worse than expected* to *much better than expected*). The solver then rated the extent to which “your performance on the anagram task reflects your true intellectual ability” as well as the extent to which he or she believed “[the observer] *thinks* your performance...reflects your true intellectual ability.” The observer, in turn, rated the extent to which he or she did in fact think the solver’s performance reflected his or her true intellectual ability (endpoints for all three questions were 0 [*not at all*] and 10 [*very much*]).

Finally, the solver indicated the extent to which he or she believed the observer had entertained each of two thoughts during the anagram task, one

harsh and the other more charitable: (a) “Why can’t [the solver] get the right answer? That anagram isn’t so hard.” and (b) “Gosh, I don’t think I could solve these anagrams either.” The observer, in turn, indicated the extent to which he or she had entertained each of these thoughts (endpoints for these questions were 0 [*not at all*] and 10 [*very much*]).

## Results

**Solvers’ performance.** Solvers answered an average of 2.6 (16%) of the 16 anagrams correctly. Not surprisingly, they were rather dissatisfied with their performance ( $M = 2.86$ ), and indicated that they had performed worse than expected ( $M = 2.71$ ). Both of these ratings were significantly below the midpoint of the 0-to-10-point scales,  $t(13) = -3.24$  and  $-3.89$ , respectively, both  $ps < .01$ . Observers likewise indicated that solvers performed more poorly ( $M = 3.71$ ) than they (the observers) had expected, again below the scale midpoint,  $t(13) = -2.39$ ,  $p < .05$ . Observers’ ratings did not differ significantly from those of solvers,  $t(13) = 1.17$ , *ns*. Finally, both solvers and observers rated the anagrams as quite difficult ( $M_s = 8.5$  and  $8.8$ , respectively), both well above the scale midpoint,  $t(13) = 8.69$  and  $11.92$ , respectively, both  $ps < .0001$ . Again, solvers and observers did not differ from each other,  $t < 1$ .

**Trait ratings.** Recall that observers twice rated the extent to which 12 trait adjectives were characteristic of solvers—prior to and then immediately after the failed anagram test. Solvers, on the other hand, predicted how they would be rated by the observer at each time. We predicted that solvers would expect observers’ ratings of them to plummet more precipitously after the failed anagram test than observers’ ratings actually did. We expected this pattern to emerge, however, only for the six adjectives that were relevant to the anagram task.

To test our prediction statistically, we collapsed the six relevant adjectives into an index of intellectual ability (average  $\alpha = .78$ ) and then submitted this index to a 2 (role: solver or observer)  $\times$  2 (time: pre- or postanagram) repeated-measures ANOVA (see left half of Figure 1). This analysis revealed significant main effects for both role,  $F(1, 13) = 23.3$ ,  $p < .0005$ , and time,  $F(1, 13) = 15.8$ ,  $p < .002$ , indicating that solvers expected to be rated more harshly than they actually were and that ratings tended to be more negative following the anagram test than they were before it. These effects were qualified, however, by the predicted interaction,  $F(1, 13) = 7.1$ ,  $p < .02$ . Despite the fact that observers did not, in fact, judge solvers more critically after the anagram test

<sup>2</sup> We use the terms *solver* and *observer* here for convenience; these terms were not used in the experiment itself, during which the two individuals were referred to as “Participant A” and “Participant B,” respectively.

<sup>3</sup> To verify our intuitions regarding the relevance and irrelevance, respectively, of the various traits, we described the procedures of the experiment to a group of 22 Williams College students and had them rate the extent to which performance on the anagram task seemed relevant to each trait. These ratings were made on 11-point scales ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very much*). The six traits we felt were most relevant were indeed rated higher, on average ( $M = 6.4$ ), than were the six irrelevant traits ( $M = 0.8$ ), paired  $t(21) = 14.6$ ,  $p < .0001$ . Moreover, each of the relevant traits was rated more highly than each of the irrelevant traits, all  $ps < .005$ .

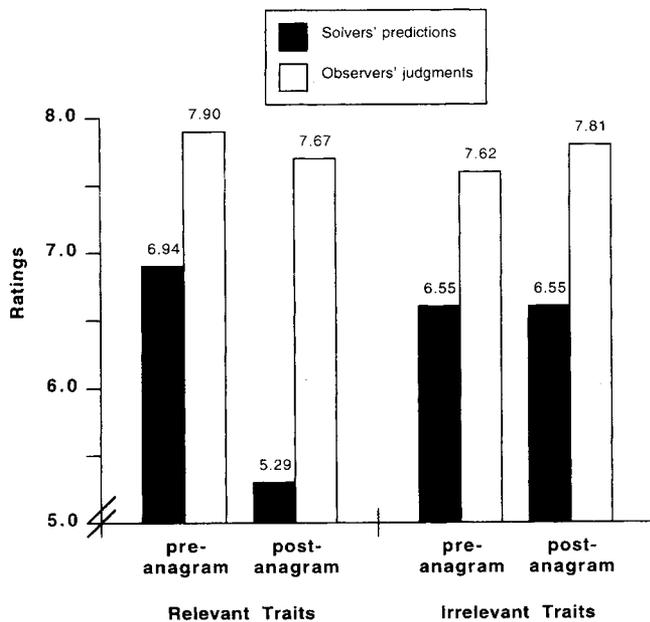


Figure 1. Mean predicted and actual ratings of solvers on traits relevant versus irrelevant to a poor performance at solving anagrams. Study 2. Scores could vary from 1 to 10. Negative traits were reverse scored such that higher numbers refer to more charitable actual or predicted judgments.

than before,  $t < 1$ , solvers expected them to,  $t(13) = 4.39$ ,  $p < .001$ .<sup>4</sup>

We conducted a similar analysis on the average of the six irrelevant traits. A 2 (role: solver or observer)  $\times$  2 (time: pre- or postanagram) repeated-measures ANOVA revealed only a significant main effect for role,  $F(1, 13) = 24.0$ ,  $p < .0005$ , indicating that solvers expected to be judged more harshly on these traits than they actually were, both before and after the anagram test (see right half of Figure 1). There was no significant interaction,  $F < 1$ , however, suggesting that this tendency did not change in magnitude as a consequence of the failed test.<sup>5</sup> Overall, then, participants expected their poor performance on the anagram test to affect observers' ratings only on dimensions relevant to the test itself. This conclusion is reinforced by a significant three-way interaction between role, time, and trait relevance,  $F(1, 13) = 6.80$ ,  $p < .03$ .

**Additional analyses.** Recall that both solvers and observers rated the extent to which the solver's performance reflected his or her "true intellectual ability." As it happened, neither solvers nor observers considered the test to be especially diagnostic of intelligence ( $M_s = 1.93$  and  $1.64$ , respectively). These ratings did not differ from each other,  $t < 1$ , and were both well below the scale midpoint,  $t_s(13) = -6.64$  and  $-5.44$ , respectively,  $p_s < .0001$ . Nevertheless, solvers expected observers to have some faith in the test, expecting observers to consider their performance to be more diagnostic of their intellectual ability ( $M = 4.29$ ) than observers actually did ( $M = 1.64$ , reported above),  $t(13) = 3.65$ ,  $p < .005$ .

Recall also that observers indicated the extent to which they had entertained each of two thoughts during the anagram exercise—one rather harsh and one more charitable—and that solvers estimated the extent to which observers had entertained each. We subjected these ratings to a 2 (role: solver or observer)  $\times$  2 (type of thought: harsh or charitable) repeated-measures ANOVA. This

analysis revealed a main effect for type of thought, indicating that the charitable thought was entertained (and was assumed, by solvers, to have been entertained) more often by observers than the harsh thought,  $F(1, 13) = 152.2$ ,  $p < .0001$ . This effect was qualified, however, by a significant interaction,  $F(1, 13) = 50.4$ ,  $p < .0001$ . As predicted, solvers overestimated the extent to which observers entertained the harsh thought ( $M_s = 3.93$  and  $0.57$ , respectively),  $t(13) = 5.69$ ,  $p < .0001$ , and underestimated the extent to which observers entertained the charitable thought ( $M_s = 6.57$  and  $9.14$ , respectively),  $t(13) = 4.35$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Discussion

These findings reinforce and extend those of the preceding study. Participants induced to perform poorly on what was ostensibly a test of intelligence expected their failure to loom larger in others' ratings than it actually did. This indicates that actors' exaggerated fears of harsh recriminations are neither an artifact of "as-if" judgments made in response to hypothetical scenarios, nor are they limited to social blunders. These data also indicate that overestimation is most pronounced on dimensions directly related to the embarrassing blunder. Solvers expected their blunder to influence how observers viewed them only on those items that were of relevance to the poor test performance.

One unexpected finding to emerge from this experiment was solvers' tendency to assume that they would be judged harshly by observers even before their blunder. This effect was significant both for the relevant traits,  $t(13) = 2.55$ ,  $p < .03$ , and irrelevant traits,  $t(13) = 4.86$ ,  $p < .0005$ . Of course, the two-way interaction for the relevant traits indicates that, as harshly as solvers expected to be judged before the failed anagram test, they expected to be judged even more harshly afterward. Nevertheless, it is curious that solvers expected to be judged so harshly even before they had failed the test—indeed, before they knew there would be a test. We return to this issue in the General Discussion.

### Study 3

Our purpose in Study 3 was two-fold. First, we wished to assess one of the mechanisms potentially responsible for actors' exaggerated judgments: the focusing illusion. As detailed earlier, the focusing illusion occurs when individuals place undue emphasis on specific focal stimuli and give insufficient weight to other, nonfocal factors when making predictions. Research has implicated this illusion in people's tendency to overestimate the extent to which experiences will affect their happiness (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998) and to overestimate the duration of such effects (Wilson et al., 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Solvers' predictions did not correlate significantly with observers' actual judgments on this index, either before the anagram task ( $r = .22$ ,  $ns$ ) or after ( $r = .06$ ,  $ns$ ).

<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, responses to the irrelevant traits tended not to be as highly intercorrelated as responses to the relevant traits, and so there is some question as to the advisability of collapsing them into an overall composite index. We thus computed separate  $2 \times 2$  repeated-measures ANOVAs for each trait. These analyses revealed no significant interactions, and marginal interactions for only two of the six irrelevant traits (both  $p_s = .09$ ). Similar analyses conducted on each of the relevant traits, on the other hand, revealed significant interactions for three of the six traits, and marginal interactions for an additional two.

We believe the focusing illusion can also help to explain people's tendency to overestimate the extent to which they will be judged harshly for their blunders. Because people's mishaps are often highly salient to them, they are likely to focus undue attention on their blunders when attempting to ascertain the impressions of others and neglect to consider a host of additional factors that are likely to moderate those impressions. Because at least some of these nonfocal factors are likely to elicit a more positive appraisal of the blunderer, a tendency to neglect them should give rise to expectations that are more negative than actual impressions.

To the extent that the recriminations individuals expect from others derive in part from a failure to consider the role that nonfocal cues play in how they are judged, making the individuals mindful of such cues ought to create expectations that are less harsh and more in line with how they are actually judged. We thus asked some of the participants to reflect for a moment on some of the factors that might influence how they would be judged by others. Importantly, we did not provide participants with a list of such factors. We merely asked them to list those they could think of. We expected participants to think of at least a few factors besides the blunder itself, and thus expected this "defocusing" manipulation to engender expectations that were less pessimistic than those of participants in a control condition.

Our second purpose in Study 3 was to replicate the findings reported above in a different experimental paradigm to further investigate their generality. For this purpose, we used the "Quiz Show" paradigm from Ross et al. (1977) in which one participant (the *questioner*) poses challenging general knowledge questions to a second participant (the *contestant*), in full view of an *observer*. Ross and colleagues used this procedure to demonstrate the correspondence bias. Because the questioner is afforded the opportunity to write his or her own questions, he or she has a "role-conferred advantage." Ideally, observers should recognize this situational constraint and discount their ratings of the questioners' general knowledge (and the contestants' apparent ignorance) accordingly. Ross and colleagues, however, found that observers did not give adequate consideration to the situational advantage enjoyed by questioners, nor the corresponding disadvantage borne by contestants. Instead, observers typically rated questioners higher in general knowledge than they rated contestants.

Our focus in Study 3 was somewhat different. Instead of comparing ratings made of the contestants with ratings made of the questioners, our interest was in comparing ratings made of the contestants with how those contestants expected to be rated. We predicted that their poor performance would lead contestants to believe that they would be seen by the other participants as less intelligent than they actually were. That is, we expected contestants in the control condition to overestimate the harshness of others' ratings of them, and that this tendency would be attenuated for those in the defocused condition.

## Method

**Participants.** One hundred eleven Cornell University students participated in exchange for extra credit in their psychology courses. All participants completed the experiment in same-sex groups of three.

**Procedure.** Participants were told they would take part in a quiz game in which one of them would serve as questioner, one as contestant, and one as an observer. They drew slips of paper to determine their roles. Questioners were informed that their task would be to create a list of 10 challenging general knowledge questions. They were instructed to make

their questions difficult but not impossible, avoiding questions that were either too easy (e.g., "Who is the President of the United States?") or unfair (e.g., "How many pet turtles do I have?"). Contestants were told that their task would be to answer these questions as best they could, and observers were told that they were to watch the proceedings as if they were watching a game show on television.

Following the instructions, the questioner was led to a separate cubicle to compose his or her challenging questions in private.<sup>6</sup> When the questioner was ready, the quiz game began. The questioners posed each question to the contestant, waited for a response, and supplied the correct answer if the contestant answered incorrectly. After all 10 questions were asked, the experimenter announced the percentage of correct responses and escorted all participants to private cubicles to complete the dependent measures.

**Dependent measures.** All participants rated the contestant and the questioner on five dimensions: level of general knowledge, test-taking ability, memory for isolated facts, ability to answer general knowledge questions, and level of general intelligence. All ratings were made in comparison to the average Cornell University student on 101-point scales ranging from 0 (*much worse than the average Cornell student*) to 100 (*much better than the average Cornell student*).

Recall that our primary hypotheses involve comparisons of how contestants were judged with how they expected to be judged. Accordingly, contestants were next asked to predict how they would be rated, on the same five dimensions, by both the questioner and the observer. At the same time, observers also predicted how the contestant would be rated by the questioner.

**Defocusing manipulation.** Through random assignment, contestants and observers in 20 of the 37 sessions underwent the defocusing manipulation. Before predicting how they would be judged, defocused contestants were instructed to make a list of factors that might influence the other participants' ratings of them. They were given no specific examples or guidance, but were told to record whatever factors came to mind. This was done twice: once prior to anticipating the judgments of the questioner and again prior to anticipating the judgments of the observer. Because this exercise took participants a few minutes to complete, this manipulation confounded defocusing with a brief time delay. We return to this issue in the *Discussion*, where we report the results of a small, follow-up experiment designed to address this shortcoming.

Observers in the defocused condition followed a similar procedure before anticipating how the questioner would rate the contestant. Because we hypothesized that only contestants would be inordinately focused on their poor performance in the first place, we did not expect the defocusing manipulation to have an effect on observers' predictions of questioners' ratings.

## Results

Participants' actual and anticipated ratings on the five dimensions were averaged to form an overall index for each rater (average  $\alpha = .88$ , range = .79 to .95). Because the data within each group are interdependent, all analyses were conducted at the level of the experimental session rather than the individual participant.

**Contestants' performance.** On average, contestants answered only 1.1 (11%) of the 10 questions correctly. Performance did not vary across the defocused and control conditions,  $F < 1$ .

<sup>6</sup> Following the procedure of Ross et al. (1977), contestants and observers were instructed to generate a list of easy general knowledge questions—items that could be answered correctly by approximately 90% of high school students. These questions were not used in the experiment and this activity served merely as a filler task while the questioners composed their lists of challenging questions.

*The correspondence bias.* Participants' perceptions of the questioners' and contestants' intellectual ability replicated the primary findings of Ross et al. (1977). A 2 (condition: defocused or control)  $\times$  3 (role: contestant, questioner, or observer)  $\times$  2 (target of judgment: contestant or questioner) ANOVA, with repeated measures on the last two factors, revealed a significant main effect for the target of judgment,  $F(1, 34) = 22.42, p < .001$ . As can be seen in Table 2, observers, questioners, and contestants alike all rated the questioners more favorably than they rated contestants. This analysis also revealed an unexpected main effect of role, indicating that observers tended to make harsher ratings overall than did questioners or contestants,  $F(2, 68) = 3.41, p < .05$ . No other main effects or interactions were significant.

*Contestants' anticipated ratings.* Despite the fact that contestants were rated more harshly than questioners were, we predicted that control contestants would not be rated as harshly as they expected. But we expected "defocused" contestants, who were made aware of the many nonfocal factors that could mitigate a harsh judgment of them, to anticipate—accurately—more charitable judgments.

To investigate these predictions, we conducted a 2 (condition: defocused or control)  $\times$  2 (rater: questioner or observer)  $\times$  2 (type of rating: predicted or actual) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last two factors. The relevant means are presented in Figure 2.

As predicted, this analysis revealed a main effect for type of rating,  $F(1, 35) = 26.96, p < .0001$ , indicating that contestants expected to be judged more harshly overall than they actually were. Additional analyses revealed this to be true of contestants' estimates of how harshly they would be judged by both questioners and observers alike, paired  $t(36) = 5.60$  and  $2.46$ , respectively, both  $p$ s  $< .05$ .

Of key importance, however, is that this tendency was qualified by a significant interaction between type of rating (predicted vs. actual) and condition (defocused vs. control),  $F(1, 35) = 4.82, p < .05$ . Defocused contestants thought they would be rated more favorably by the questioners than control contestants did,  $t(35) = 2.27, p < .05$ . Defocused contestants also thought they would be rated more favorably by observers than did control contestants, but this difference was not statistically significant,  $t(35) = 1.46, p = .15$ .<sup>7</sup> Of course, because defocusing was manipulated only among contestants at this point, the actual judgments made by the questioners and observers did not vary by condition, both  $t$ s  $< 1$ . Thus, although contestants overestimated the extent to which they would be judged harshly in both conditions, this effect was stronger in the control condition than in the

Table 2  
*Mean Ratings of Contestants' and Questioners' Intellectual Ability by Contestants, Questioners, and Observers: Study 3*

Role	Rating of contestants	Rating of questioners	Difference
Contestant	56.05	62.16	-6.11**
Questioner	54.11	59.95	-5.84†
Observer	48.70	59.17	-10.47**
Average	52.96	60.43	-7.47**

Note. Scores could vary from 0 to 100. Higher numbers refer to more favorable ratings of the participants.

†  $p < .10$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

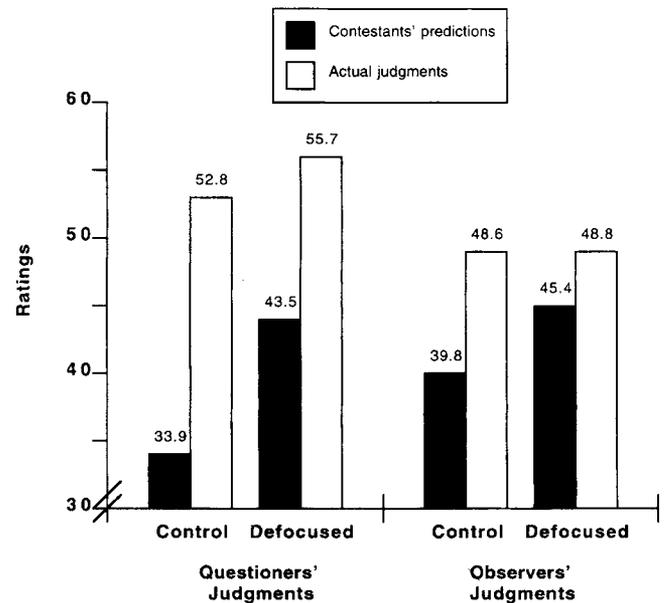


Figure 2. Mean predicted and actual ratings of contestants by questioners and observers, respectively, Study 3. Scores could vary from 0 to 100. Higher numbers refer to more charitable actual or predicted ratings of the contestants.

defocused condition, suggesting that the defocusing manipulation helped contestants gain insight into how others would rate them.

This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that contestants' anticipated ratings were significantly correlated with the questioners' actual ratings in the defocused condition ( $r = .65, p < .001$ ), but not in the control condition ( $r = -.01, ns$ ). Participants in the control condition thus appeared to be so focused on their performance that they were blind to other cues about how the questioner was likely to view them (e.g., the difficulty of the questions, the quality of the contestant's responses, and the questioner's demeanor). Defocused participants, on the other hand, had their perspective widened and were therefore more likely to pick up those cues. Note, however, that the same pattern of correlations was not obtained between contestants' estimates and observers' ratings ( $r$ s =  $.12$  and  $.11$ , respectively,  $ns$ ), and so caution should be exercised in interpreting these results.

*Analyses of factors listed by contestants.* Did the defocusing manipulation moderate contestants' estimates because it led them to reflect on factors other than their poor performance that might influence others' impressions of them? To answer this question, we examined the frequency with which contestants mentioned (a) their poor performance (the focal factor), and (b) the difficulty of the questions (a relevant, but nonfocal factor). Two judges unaware of the present hypotheses examined participants' questionnaires and noted whether or not they had mentioned each. The

<sup>7</sup> Unexpectedly, this analysis revealed that the extent to which contestants overestimated the harshness of others' judgments depended on whose judgments they were predicting. Contestants expected to be rated more charitably by observers than by questioners. In fact, the opposite was true. This led to a significant interaction between rater (questioner or contestant) and type of rating (predicted or actual),  $F(1, 35) = 13.2, p < .001$ .

judges agreed in 92% of the cases and disagreements were settled by a third judge who was also unaware of our hypotheses.

We made two predictions. First, if contestants' poor performance did indeed occupy center stage for them, then one would expect that factor to be mentioned quite frequently. It was. Of the 20 contestants in the defocused condition, 18 (90%) mentioned their poor performance when predicting how they would be judged by either the questioner or observer (18 when predicting the questioner, and 17 when predicting the observer). Moreover, contestants tended to mention their poor performance with greater frequency than they mentioned the difficulty of the questions, as one might expect if the former was indeed focal. Overall, 10 (50%) mentioned the latter factor when predicting how they would be judged by either the questioner or observer (6 when predicting the questioner, and 10 when predicting the observer).

Our second prediction was that those who had listed the difficulty of the questions would expect to be judged more charitably than would those who had not. They did. Contestants who listed the difficulty of the questions as a relevant factor for either the questioner or observer expected to be judged somewhat less harshly ( $M = 48.8$ ) than did those who did not list this factor ( $M = 40.1$ ), a result that was marginally significant,  $t(18) = 1.87$ ,  $p = .08$ . Although this result is correlational, it is in keeping with our position that the defocusing manipulation allowed participants to escape the "tunnel vision" they would otherwise experience when predicting how they would be seen by others.

*Observers' anticipated ratings.* Our contention that contestants were more likely to be focused on their own poor performance than were the other participants is augmented by a final set of analyses. Recall that observers predicted how the contestant would be rated by the questioner and that half of them did so following a defocusing manipulation. We examined these data in a 2 (condition: defocused or control)  $\times$  2 (type of rating: predicted or actual) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor. This analysis revealed a main effect for type of rating, indicating that observers, like contestants, overestimated the harshness of questioners' judgments,  $F(1, 35) = 10.61$ ,  $p < .01$ . Reminiscent of the results from the third-person observers in Study 1, however, observers' misestimates were less extreme than contestants' were. Contestants in the control condition expected questioners to rate them well below the average Cornell student ( $M = 33.9$ ), significantly lower than the equivalent prediction offered by observers ( $M = 45.1$ ),  $t(17) = 2.19$ ,  $p < .05$ . Even though observers overestimated the harshness of questioners' judgments, contestants did so even more.

We believe this result occurred because observers were not as focused on the contestants' poor performance as the contestants were themselves—that observers were naturally more "defocused." This conclusion is supported by three additional findings. First, the predictions made by observers in the control condition were almost identical to those made by contestants in the defocused condition ( $M_s = 45.1$  and 43.5, respectively), paired  $t < 1$ . Second, although the defocusing manipulation affected contestants' predictions (reported above), it had no discernable effect on observer's predictions ( $M_s = 45.1$  and 42.9 for the control and defocused conditions, respectively),  $t < 1$ . Finally, observers in the defocused condition were more likely than were contestants to mention the difficulty of the questions as a factor that might influence questioners' judgments. Fully 17 of the 20 observers

(85%) mentioned the difficulty of the questions, significantly more than the 6 contestants who did so,  $z = 4.23$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

The results of Study 3 replicate and extend those of Studies 1 and 2. As before, participants induced to experience a public failure—in this case, to perform poorly on a series of general knowledge questions—expected to be judged more harshly than they actually were. Moreover, these results implicate the role of the focusing illusion in this misprediction: Individuals who exhibit a public shortcoming appear to focus inordinately on the shortcoming itself when attempting to determine how they will be judged by others. Participants in this experiment who were defocused by being asked to consider some of the factors that might influence how others would judge them expected others to be more charitable in their judgments.

There is, however, an alternative interpretation of the effectiveness of our defocusing manipulation. The defocusing exercise necessarily caused contestants to make their predictions after a short delay (about 2 min, on average). Thus, the defocusing manipulation may have affected contestants' predictions not by defocusing them, but by giving them an opportunity to "cool off" after their poor performance. Thus, any exercise that allowed for the same distraction and delay might produce a similar effect.

To investigate this possibility, we collected data from an additional 24 participants who were recruited from the same population as the original participants. The procedure for these individuals was the same as in the earlier defocused condition. This time, however, contestants were asked to perform a task irrelevant to the procedures—to record the features they most liked about either their favorite restaurant or favorite grocery store. This task, like the original defocusing manipulation, took approximately 2 min.

As before, we replicated the results of Ross et al. (1977): On average, participants rated the contestant more harshly than the questioner ( $M_s = 53.46$  and 60.79, respectively),  $F(1, 7) = 11.00$ ,  $p < .05$ . More important, however, contestants again overestimated how harshly they would be judged. Contestants thought that they would be judged more harshly than they actually were,  $F(1, 7) = 9.06$ ,  $p < .05$ , by both questioners ( $M$  for anticipated = 32.5;  $M$  for actual = 56.5),  $t(7) = 3.32$ ,  $p < .05$ , and observers ( $M$  for anticipated = 40.0;  $M$  for actual = 49.0),  $t(7) = 1.85$ ,  $p = .10$ . Indeed, contestants in this condition expected to be judged every bit as harshly by the questioners and observers as had the contestants in the original "focused" control condition, both  $t_s < 1$ .

These findings allow us to reject the notion that the defocusing manipulation had its effect by allowing participants to cool off before making their predictions. A simple delay and a bit of distraction appear insufficient to disabuse individuals of the fear that they will be judged more harshly for a public failure than is actually the case. Instead, it seems that individuals need to give some consideration to the range of factors besides the failure itself that are likely to influence others' perceptions of them.

Also note that the results of this study allow us to address the self-presentational artifact we considered in Study 1. We showed in Study 1 that our findings could not be explained by a reluctance on the part of participants, for self-presentational reasons, to admit to judging others harshly. Third-person observers, who were free to indicate that targets would be judged harshly by others, nevertheless predicted that targets would be judged more charitably than

did targets themselves. We observed the same result in Study 3: Observers did not think questioners would judge the contestant as harshly as contestants did themselves.

#### Study 4

We conducted a final experiment to provide additional evidence for the focusing illusion in people's tendency to overestimate how harshly they are judged by others. We contend that the defocusing manipulation used in Study 3 moderated contestants' expectations of how they would be rated because it broadened their focus of attention beyond the single focal event and that this tended to "dilute" the recriminations they expected from observers (Wilson et al., 2000). It could be argued, however, that instead of simply diluting the focal event, the manipulation may have changed the very meaning of the event itself. To consider the difficulty of the questions is to recognize that poor performance is not diagnostic of one's true intellectual ability, or lack thereof. Contestants, in other words, may have reconstrued their failure as an inability to answer difficult questions rather than an intellectual shortcoming—and may have assumed that others would make the same inference. We conducted Study 4 to address whether defocusing can dilute the impact of an embarrassing event without altering its essential nature.

Study 4 was also designed to investigate the focusing illusion in a second way as well. We reasoned that if actors who have committed a blunder tend to focus exclusively on the blunder itself when anticipating how they will be judged by others, then their expectations will be insensitive to varying amounts of nonfocal information available to observers. In contrast, the addition of more nonfocal information will increasingly diminish the impact of a faux pas in an observer's eyes. A stumble in a 50-min dance recital will affect audience members' appraisals far less than it would in a 5-min performance. To the extent that the dancer focuses only on the blunder, however, he or she may not realize this fact.

In this study we chose to investigate the focusing illusion by returning to the type of embarrassing moment examined in Study 1. Specifically, we asked participants to anticipate how they would be rated by an observer to whom they had just been introduced in an unflattering way. Half of the participants made these predictions after experiencing a defocusing manipulation, whereas the other half did so after completing a filler task. In addition, we varied the amount of nonfocal information contained in the introduction; the introduction contained either a large amount of nonfocal information or virtually none.

We made two predictions. First, we expected observers' judgments to be affected by variations in the amount of nonfocal information included in the introduction. We did not expect the same to be true of targets' anticipated judgments, and so we expected a greater mismatch between actual and anticipated ratings when there was a great deal of nonfocal information. Second, we expected the defocusing manipulation to cause targets to anticipate being judged more charitably than they did in the control condition. We expected this effect to be strongest, moreover, when there was a large amount of nonfocal information at targets' disposal. Instructions to consider nonfocal information should affect targets' expectations, after all, only if there is nonfocal information to consider.

#### Method

**Participants.** One hundred twenty Cornell University students participated in exchange for extra credit in their psychology courses.

**Procedure.** Participants arrived in groups of up to six and were escorted to separate cubicles for the duration of the study. They were told they would take part in an experiment on "the psychology of introductions" that was investigating how "different kinds of introductions influence people's impressions." Participants were randomly paired with an anonymous partner and randomly assigned to the roles of target and observer.<sup>8</sup> If there was an uneven number of participants, one was paired with a participant from another session.

Targets were sent to a cubicle equipped with a Macintosh computer and asked to complete a brief computerized survey. The computer, they were told, would then generate an "introduction" of them based on a random selection of their responses, one that would be given to another participant in the experiment.

When targets indicated that they understood the procedure, the experimenter activated the survey program and left the room. Targets were asked a variety of questions, including their age, gender, major, and other demographic information, how they would rate themselves on a series of bipolar scales (e.g., interesting–boring, moral–selfish), and whether, at any point in their lives, they had engaged in a number of activities, such as whether they had ever ridden a unicycle, played a musical instrument, or visited a foreign country. Of key interest, targets were asked if they had ever wet their bed while sleeping. To remind participants that this referred to any time in their lives, the bedwetting item was preceded by several that pertained to childhood (e.g., "Have you ever ridden a tricycle?"). As a result, most subjects (74%) admitted that they had indeed wet their bed at some point in their lives.<sup>9</sup>

When the target had finished the questionnaire, the experimenter returned and asked him or her to wait in the hall while the computer generated the introduction. The introduction was ostensibly generated by selecting randomly from their responses, but in reality it was prepared by inserting targets' responses to a few preselected items (e.g., their age, gender, and hometown) into a preexisting template. This template included the following sentence for all participants: "Although Participant A is not without faults, occasionally having some difficulties with bedwetting . . . [she/he] has continued to excel as a student at Cornell, and considers [herself/himself] to be a friendly, outgoing, and caring person."

After printing two copies of the introduction, the experimenter gave one to the target and explained that the observer would be using the introduction to form an impression of him or her. "We understand that this introduction may not be a representative or comprehensive description of you," the experimenter explained. "Nevertheless, this is the only information the other participant has received about you." Targets were asked to indicate the impression they thought observers would form of them on the basis of the introduction.

Observers, meanwhile, had been escorted to a different cubicle and were given some filler questionnaires to complete while waiting for the experiment to begin. When an introduction of the target was ready, observers were told that it was "based on a random selection of responses by another participant." Observers were asked to read the introduction and indicate their impression of the target.

<sup>8</sup> As in Study 2, we use the terms *target* and *observer* here for convenience. During the experiment, the participants were referred to as "Participant A" and "Participant B," respectively.

<sup>9</sup> Whether or not targets answered "yes" to the bedwetting question did not vary by condition, nor did it affect any of the analyses reported in this experiment. This is not particularly surprising because, in the end, all participants were introduced as someone who had experienced bouts of bedwetting. Thus, the actors' task, anticipating how they would be judged on the basis of the introduction, was the same whether they had admitted to this potential embarrassment or not. As a result, all participants are retained in the analysis.

**Dependent measures.** Observers indicated their general evaluation of the targets (and targets predicted observers' ratings of them) on a 101-point scale marked, in intervals of 10, from 0 (*much more negative than [my/his/her] impression of the average student*) to 100 (*much more positive than [my/his/her] impression of the average student*), with 50 labeled average.

**Amount of nonfocal information.** We assumed that the mention of bedwetting would stand out and alarm most targets. Alongside this focal information, however, we manipulated the amount of nonfocal information that was included in the introduction. Half of the pairs of participants were randomly assigned to receive a short version of the introduction. This introduction consisted of only three sentences, one of which was the bedwetting reference quoted above. The remaining pairs received a long version, which contained all of the information from the short version plus eight additional sentences covering a number of the target's hobbies and interests.

**Defocusing manipulation.** Before anticipating how they would be rated by an observer, half of the targets completed a defocusing manipulation similar to the one used in Study 3. As before, they were given no specific examples, but were asked to list any details about the experiment or their introduction they felt might influence an observer's impression of them. The remaining targets completed a filler task of roughly equivalent length that asked them to list the best and worst features of their favorite restaurant.

## Results

This study consisted of a 2 (amount of nonfocal information: short version vs. long version)  $\times$  2 (focus: control vs. defocused)  $\times$  2 (role: target vs. observer) design with the last factor a repeated measure.

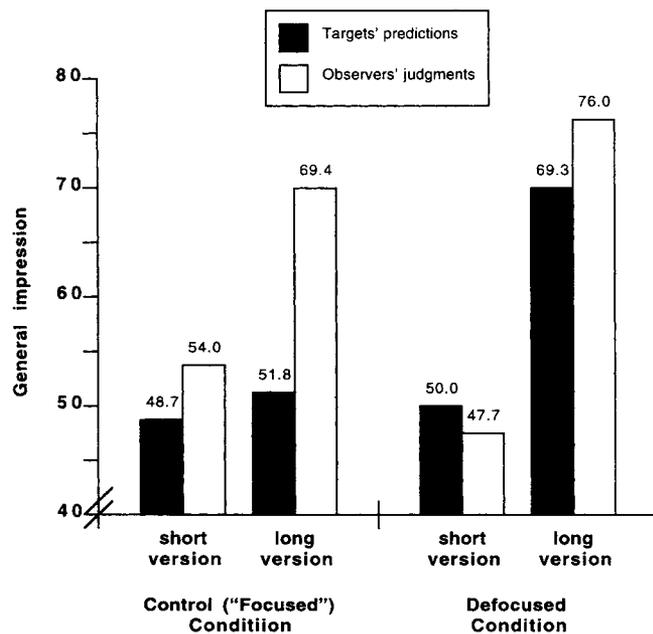
Figure 3 depicts the general impressions that targets expected observers to form of them as well as observers' actual impressions. As expected, a 2 (amount of nonfocal information)  $\times$  2 (fo-

cus)  $\times$  2 (role) mixed-model ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for participants' role, indicating that targets expected to be judged more harshly ( $M = 55.0$ ) than they actually were ( $M = 62.5$ ),  $F(1, 56) = 8.00, p < .01$ . Note that this effect was particularly strong in the condition most similar to our previous studies—the control (i.e., “focused”) condition in which the introduction contained a large amount of nonfocal information ( $M_s = 51.8$  vs. 69.4, respectively), paired  $t(16) = 4.34, p < .001$ .

Recall that we expected two kinds of support for the role of the focusing illusion in the present phenomenon. First, we expected observers to be more responsive to the amount of nonfocal information than targets would anticipate. Specifically, we expected observers to judge targets harshly when bedwetting was considered in relative isolation (the short version), but to be more charitable when there was additional information that could diminish its impact (the long version). Nevertheless, we expected targets who had not been defocused to be relatively insensitive to the amount of nonfocal information available, expecting to be judged harshly regardless of the length of the introduction.

Consistent with these expectations, observers formed more positive impressions of the targets when they read the long version of the introduction ( $M = 72.5$ ) than when they read the short version ( $M = 51.1$ ),  $t(58) = 6.22, p < .0001$ .<sup>10</sup> Targets in the control condition (who had not been defocused), however, expected to be judged relatively harshly, whether they were introduced with a large amount of nonfocal information ( $M = 51.8$ ) or a small amount ( $M = 48.7$ ),  $t < 1$ . A 2 (amount of nonfocal information)  $\times$  2 (role) mixed-model ANOVA containing only data from the control condition (i.e., the left side of Figure 3) thus revealed main effects for both amount of nonfocal information,  $F(1, 30) = 6.57, p < .02$ , and role,  $F(1, 30) = 10.81, p < .005$ . As expected, these main effects were qualified by a two-way interaction,  $F(1, 30) = 3.10, p = .08$ . Although this interaction was not as reliable as expected, a contrast more in line with our predictions was highly significant. The judgments of observers who received the long version of the introduction were more charitable than were those in the other three cells (the judgments of observers who read the short version and the predictions of targets in both conditions),  $F(1, 60) = 19.92, p < .001$ . These results demonstrate that targets were inordinately focused on the embarrassing information, causing them to be relatively oblivious to the impact of nonfocal information on observers' impressions.

As further support for the role of the focusing illusion, we expected that targets in the defocused condition would anticipate being judged more charitably than would those in the control condition. Because a consideration of nonfocal information can



**Figure 3.** Mean predicted and actual impressions of targets as a function of condition (control vs. defocused) and amount of nonfocal information, Study 4. Scores could vary from 0 to 100. Higher numbers refer to more charitable actual or predicted impressions of the targets.

<sup>10</sup> One might wonder whether this effect is simply the result of a failure to notice the bedwetting information on the part of those who read the long version of the introduction. To investigate this possibility, we recruited an additional 60 participants and asked each to read one of the introductions used in this experiment and to write down everything they could recall when finished. Notice that this is a conservative test of whether or not participants noticed the bedwetting information because some may have noted the critical information but failed, for any of a number of reasons, to write it down. Nevertheless, the vast majority of participants (53 out of 60) reported the bedwetting problem. More important, participants' responses did not vary between conditions, with 5 who read the long introduction failing to report the bedwetting information and 2 who read the short failing to do so,  $\chi^2(1) < 1$ .

only be effective when there is some nonfocal information to consider, however, we expected this difference to be most pronounced for targets who read the long version of their introduction.

A 2 (amount of nonfocal information)  $\times$  2 (focus: control vs. defocused) ANOVA conducted on targets' predictions revealed strong support for our hypotheses. This analysis yielded significant main effects for both amount of nonfocal information,  $F(1, 56) = 9.10, p < .005$ , and focus,  $F(1, 56) = 6.46, p < .02$ , as well as the predicted two-way interaction,  $F(1, 56) = 4.76, p < .05$ . As can be seen in Figure 3, targets in the defocused condition who were described with the long version of the introduction (i.e., the one that contained a large amount of nonfocal information) expected to be judged significantly more charitably ( $M = 69.3$ ) than did their counterparts in the control condition ( $M = 51.8$ ),  $t(56) = 3.46, p < .05$ . No such difference emerged for the short version of the introduction ( $M_s = 50.0$  and  $48.7$ , respectively). As expected, defocusing produced more charitable expectations only when there was nonfocal information to be considered.

As in Study 3, the results of a correlational analysis further underscore our position that the defocusing manipulation increased accuracy by inducing targets to adopt a broader perspective more akin to that taken by the observers themselves. Although targets' predictions of how they would be rated by observers were uncorrelated with observers' actual ratings in the control condition ( $r = .08, ns$ ), these two measures were significantly correlated in the defocused condition ( $r = .52, p < .001$ ). Targets in the control condition appeared to be too focused on the unflattering information to think about the other elements of their introduction that were bound to influence the observers' impressions of them. Those in the defocused condition, on the other hand, were more attuned to the significance of these other cues. Thus, not only did contestants' predictions generally become more optimistic in the defocused condition, they became more realistic as well.

## Discussion

Study 4 provides strong support for our contention that one reason people overestimate the extent to which others will judge them harshly after a blunder is that they focus undue attention on the blunder itself. We demonstrated this in two ways. First, targets who had been described in an embarrassing way were insensitive to the impact that varying amounts of nonfocal information had on observers' judgments. Second, a defocusing manipulation like the one used in Study 3 increased the accuracy of targets' expectations. These effects occurred even though the nonfocal information considered by participants in the defocused conditions merely diluted the effects of the embarrassing information and did not alter its meaning, as might have been the case in Study 3.

Note also that this study allows us to examine, once again, the possibility that self-presentational concerns may have produced these results artifactually. Contrary to any concern that participants might be unwilling to admit to judging others harshly, observers in this experiment were perfectly willing to rate the targets as harshly as the targets expected when the embarrassing blunder occurred in relative isolation.

What is more, this experiment casts doubt on a second self-presentational concern, one that focuses on the targets rather than the observers: false modesty. Actors may be reluctant to report favorable expectations following an embarrassing event, even if they do indeed hold them, because they fear they might look

presumptuous or arrogant. Notice, however, that if this were responsible for the reported effects, then defocusing would have had little influence on target's stated expectations. That we found significant effects of defocusing in both Studies 3 and 4 suggests that the focusing illusion, rather than false modesty, is what was responsible for our results.

## General Discussion

When people experience a potentially embarrassing event, they often expect to be judged harshly by others—significantly more harshly than they actually are. In three scenarios (Study 1), we demonstrated that individuals expect to be judged more harshly for a social faux pas than is actually the case, a finding that cannot be attributed to self-presentational concerns. In two laboratory experiments, we demonstrated the same phenomenon with regard to an intellectual shortcoming. After performing poorly at a test (solving anagrams in Study 2 or answering general knowledge questions in Study 3), participants expected to be judged more harshly by observers than they actually were. In a final laboratory experiment, we showed that participants who experienced a public embarrassment (being described in an unflattering way to an observer) overestimated the impact the unflattering information would have on observers' impressions of them. Across all studies, observers' judgments were consistently more charitable than actors expected.

The results of Studies 3 and 4 provide evidence for one important determinant of this tendency—the focusing illusion. Because blunderers often neglect to consider the role that nonfocal factors play in others' judgments of them, they overestimate how harshly they will be judged. We demonstrated that even a cursory attempt to contemplate some of these additional factors—that is, to defocus—can produce more accurate expectations.

As important as the focusing illusion is, however, we doubt that it is the sole mechanism at work here. We suspect that a variety of factors operate to create overly pessimistic expectations of others' assessments. One such mechanism we have investigated elsewhere involves people's failure to anticipate a particular type of judgmental charity on the part of observers—the charity that accompanies empathy (Regan & Totten, 1975). Observers often commiserate with those they spot dining alone or who are unable to recall the name of an acquaintance either because they themselves have suffered similar embarrassments or can easily imagine doing so. One reason that observers in Study 3 did not judge contestants more harshly than they did, then, may be because they were in fundamentally the same position as the contestants—they too were unable to answer many of the questions. And yet, people may commonly fail to appreciate the extent to which those who have "been there, done that" are likely to empathize with their misfortune and withhold harsh judgment (Epley, Savitsky, & Gilovich, 2000).

But there may be a more general mechanism at work here as well. Recent evidence suggests that people commonly hold overly cynical beliefs about the behavior and judgments of others, believing that others are primarily motivated by self-interest and a desire to think well of themselves (Epley & Dunning, 2000; Kruger & Gilovich, 1999; Miller & Ratner, 1998). When it comes to assessing how one will be judged following an embarrassing mishap, this cynicism may reveal itself as an a priori assumption that others are inclined to see the worst in people. After all, one

strategy that people can use to think well of themselves is to think poorly of others (e.g., Fein & Spencer, 1997; Tesser, 1988).

As a simple demonstration that people do indeed hold such pessimistic expectations about others' judgmental tendencies, we distributed a short questionnaire to 18 Cornell students. The questionnaire began by noting that people's judgments of others are not always calibrated—that people sometimes judge others a bit more harshly than the "truth" would warrant, and other times a bit more charitably (order was counterbalanced). We then asked respondents a simple question: "When people judge you, which of these two alternatives is more common?" As expected, the vast majority (all but 2) indicated that others tend to judge them more harshly than the truth warrants. Moreover, such expectations are not confined to thoughts about the self. When we asked an additional group of 19 students to complete the same questionnaire, but with regard to how people judge others, the results were identical. The vast majority (again, all but 2) indicated that, when in error, people tend to judge others more harshly than the truth warrants.

The existence of such an intuitive theory fits well with several of the results reported here. First, recall that solvers in Study 2 expected observers to judge them harshly—more harshly than was actually the case—not only after they failed the anagram task, but before the task as well. It appears that these participants may have invoked their intuitive theory of how people make judgments of others and concluded that they would be judged harshly.

Second, the existence of such an intuitive theory is consistent with the finding from all three scenarios used in Study 1 that third-person observers, like actors, overestimated the harshness of observers' judgments. Of course, actors themselves did so by a greater margin, suggesting that additional mechanisms, such as the focusing illusion, were at work. Nevertheless, the fact that third-person observers made overly harsh estimates is consistent with the notion that they invoked an overly cynical theory of human judgment.

Is the tendency to overestimate the extremity of observers' judgments limited only to those actions that people wish they could disown? Might there be a complementary tendency in the positive direction—do people overestimate the extent to which others judge them positively after some meritorious success? We cannot say for sure, although we note that one of the mechanisms we have discussed—the focusing illusion—implies a comparable effect in the positive direction. Just as people who commit a blunder may focus on that event and fail to consider nonfocal factors that will affect how others view them, so too might people who perform successfully. A superbly delivered presentation, a skillfully told joke, or a spontaneous act of kindness may all prompt less adulation than one expects, simply because one's audience will consider them against a backdrop of miscellaneous nonfocal factors.

At the same time, however, note that another mechanism we have discussed—people's intuitive theory of how individuals judge others—implies that complementary instances of overestimating the positivity of others' judgments may be relatively rare. If people entertain a theory that observers tend to err on the side of judging others too harshly, then that theory would presumably be applied to one's successes as well as one's failures.

Consistent with the rather mixed picture that emerges from a consideration of these two different mechanisms, the preliminary data we have collected on this issue are, similarly, mixed. Participants who perform exceedingly well at an anagram task do not

overestimate the favorability of observers' impressions, but shoppers who imagine carrying a Calvin Klein bag (a prestigious brand name to many) around a shopping mall anticipate being rated more positively than they actually are by fellow shoppers who imagine seeing someone carrying such a bag. An examination of this issue is thus an interesting topic for future research.

It seems likely that there are several factors that contribute to the tendency to overestimate the negativity of others' judgments and that there is much left to be understood about the processes that produce these inaccurate perceptions. But beyond this mix of proximal mechanisms, the more distal and functional causes may be easier to specify. There is doubtless considerable adaptive value in a pronounced sensitivity to the reactions we elicit in others. One who is not alert to the possibility of unfavorable judgments by others runs the risk of disapproval and, in its extreme form, ostracism. As many theorists have noted, there are few punishments as painful as banishment from one's social network (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Williams, 1999). Indeed, during much of our evolutionary past, exclusion from the group was tantamount to a death sentence as survival without the help of others was a challenge few could meet. One might imagine, then, that we would have inherited a set of sensibilities such that we are more inclined to overestimate than underestimate the harshness of others' judgments. Although clearly speculative, this notion is consistent with recent thinking on the adaptive significance of judgmental biases (Haselton & Buss, 2000).

Of course, in today's world, the consequences of disapproval by others are rarely as great as they once were. Ostracism is no longer a death sentence. If one is shunned by one's group, one can seek out another. The vast, anonymous social environments we now inhabit lower the costs of disapproval. Although a tendency to overestimate rather than underestimate the harshness of others' judgments might still be an effective "strategy" or stance toward everyday life, it is a strategy that works less well than it once did. Its benefits do not as clearly outweigh its considerable costs. The costs, of course, are the needless worry and anxiety that result from an unwarranted fear of others' judgments. In extreme cases, an excessive concern over how we are seen by others can give rise to a host of debilitating social disorders such as speech anxiety (Savitsky & Gilovich, 2000; Stein, Walker, & Forde, 1996), shyness (Zimbardo, 1990), social phobia (Clark & Arkowitz, 1975; McEwan & Devins, 1983), and paranoia (Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992).

More commonly, exaggerated estimates of the harshness of others' judgments can lead people to refrain from engaging in certain behaviors out of a misplaced concern over what others might think of them. One may refrain from speaking in public, from expressing one's true feelings, or from hosting a party—all because of an unnecessarily strong fear of how others would react if things did not go as well as one hoped. People's excessive fear of social censure often comes back to haunt them, as research has documented that with hindsight the biggest regrets in people's lives tend to involve things they had not done but wished they had, rather than things they had done and wish they had not (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). Our message, then, in its simplest form, is one of liberation: People can put aside some of their concern about others' reactions when deciding what choices to make in life because the audience they are so concerned about is seldom as judgmental and attentive as they believe (Gilovich, Medvec, & Savitsky, 2000).

Some readers may question our liberationist message. After all, the world has more than enough people who appear all too oblivious or inured to what others think of them. Why encourage them or, worse yet, create more? Fair enough. Such bothersome types do exist. But for most people, social life is an attempt to strike just the right balance between our more adventurous and more reticent impulses. What we have shown here is that part of the input into this delicate balancing act—our estimates of the extent to which others will judge us harshly for our failures—is off the mark. It may be important to redress the balance.

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