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# Misunderstanding the Affective Consequences of Everyday Social Interactions: The Hidden Benefits of Putting One's Best Face Forward

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Abstract

Engaging in positive self-presentation may have beneficial consequences for mood that are typically overlooked. Across a series of studies, participants underestimated how good they would feel in situations that required them to put their best face forward. In Studies 1 and 2a, participants underestimated the emotional benefits of interacting with an opposite sex stranger versus a romantic partner. In Study 2b, participants who were instructed to engage in self-presentation felt happier after interacting with their romantic partner than participants not given this instruction, although other participants serving as forecasters did not anticipate such benefits. Increasing generalizability, we demonstrated that participants also underestimated how good they would feel before and after being evaluated by another person (Studies 3 & 4). This failure to recognize the affective benefits of putting one's best face forward may underlie forecasting errors regarding the emotional consequences of the most common forms of social interactions.

KEYWORDS: Affective forecasting, self-presentation, romantic relationships, emotions

Would you rather spend the next few minutes having a casual interaction with your romantic partner or having your personality evaluated by a stranger? Which interaction would make you feel better? Although most people probably assume that the former would be much more enjoyable than the latter, they may be underestimating the positive affective consequences of self-presentation. When people interact with someone who they do not know well or who they need to impress, they are likely to engage in positive self-presentation, displaying pleasant affect in order to be seen as warm and likable (Jones & Wortman, 1973). Whereas interacting with an unfamiliar person is likely to elicit self-presentation, particularly if that other person has higher power or status, the demand to put one's best face forward should be relatively low when one interacts with close friends, family, and romantic partners; close relationship partners are expected to like us even when we act unpleasant or fail to provide them with immediate benefits (Mills & Clark, 1994). Ironically, then, we may try harder to act cheerful and pleasant with less familiar others than with close relationship partners. To the extent that trying to seem pleasant makes people actually *feel* pleasant, putting one's best face forward should have beneficial consequences for mood. Yet, people may be relatively blind to the positive affective consequences of such self-presentation. As a result, individuals may underestimate how good they would feel in situations that demand high levels of self-presentation (e.g., interactions with strangers) relative to situations that demand little self-presentation (e.g., interactions with significant others).

*Self-presentation*

Self-presentation is a fundamental aspect of social behavior. According to Jones and Pittman (1982), "most of our social behavior is shaped by a concern that others like us and attribute to us such characteristics as warmth, humor, reliability, charm, and physical

attractiveness," with the ultimate goal of others making an *attribution of likability* regarding us (p. 235). Whereas Jones and colleagues depicted the ingratiator as engaging in illicit tactics to secure social power and affirm his own self-conception (Jones, 1964; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Jones & Wortman, 1973), Baumeister (1998) argues that people may often engage in ingratiatory behavior because of the simple desire to be liked. Due to this potent desire to be liked, ingratiatory motives should operate across a vast range of social situations, as Jones and Pittman (1982) acknowledge. Indeed, there are only a handful of settings in which the ingratiation motive is likely to be absent. One such setting occurs when people are primarily motivated to behave authentically, sharing their truest beliefs and feelings with a partner, as in the context of intimate relationships (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Thus, people should be motivated to engage in positive self-presentation in order to be liked across a wide variety of social situations, with the context of close relationships representing a notable exception.

*Emotional Experiences*

Existing research implies that engaging in positive self-presentation should have beneficial consequences for mood both before and after social interactions. Prior to interacting with others, people routinely adjust their moods to meet the anticipated demands of the situation (Erber & Erber, 2001; Erber, Wegner, & Therriault, 1996). For example, Erber et al. (1996) found that people chose to think about topics that would induce an appropriate affective state before entering a social situation. Although some social situations demand a completely neutral or even negative affective state, adopting a positive affective demeanor may represent the default self-presentation strategy within North American culture; in this cultural context, happiness and good cheer are highly valued (Erber & Erber, 2001) and happy people are typically liked better by others (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Because normal, non-depressed individuals are

generally capable of effectively regulating their moods in the short-term (Joormann & Siemer, 2004), engaging in upward mood regulation prior to social interactions should have genuine positive effects on mood. Thus, because expecting to interact with another person triggers affective self-regulation, people should begin to exhibit elevated mood before entering social interactions that demand positive self-presentation.

During the social interaction itself, people may not only attempt to regulate their mood internally, but may also exhibit appropriate affective behavior; even young children smile to meet others' social expectations (Saarni, 1984). Given that simply contracting facial muscles into a smile can facilitate corresponding emotional experience (e.g., Laird, 1974; Strack, Martin, & Stepper, 1988; Zajonc, Murphy, & Inglehart, 1989), such positive emotional displays may lead to improved mood. Social demands to exhibit positive affect should also influence the way people interpret their physiological experiences. Indeed, particularly in the absence of clear physiological signals, people may discern their feelings partly by observing their own cheerful behavior, underestimating the extent to which it is driven by the demands of the social situation (Bem, 1972; Olson, 1990). Due to the tandem processes of upward mood regulation, physiological feedback and self-perception, then, trying to exhibit a cheerful, pleasant demeanor in the service of self-presentation during an interaction should often give rise to the experience of a corresponding affective state. In sum, the demand to engage in positive self-presentation should produce affective benefits both before and after social interactions, due to the operation of well-documented psychological processes.

*Affective Forecasting*

We have argued that people are motivated to make a favorable impression on others across a wide variety of social situations, and that this demand for positive emotional self-

presentation has affective benefits. Considering the ubiquity of the demand to exhibit positive affect, one might expect people to learn that they would feel good in situations that require emotional self-presentation. Yet, people often make errors in predicting their own responses to emotional events (e.g., Dunn, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2003; Gilbert & Ebert, 2002; Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998; Hsee & Zhang, 2004; Loewenstein & Schkade, 1999; Schkade & Kahneman, 1998; Wilson, Wheatley, Kurtz, Dunn, & Gilbert, 2004). In particular, when people imagine a threat to self-esteem (e.g., failing an exam), they tend to underestimate their own ability to engage in a variety of psychological defenses (e.g., convincing themselves the exam was unfair) that restore their sense of well-being. Because people appear unaware of the arsenal of defenses in their "psychological immune system," Gilbert et al. (1998) termed this blindness *immune neglect* (p. 617).

Whereas rationalization and the other weapons of the psychological immune system serve to protect self-esteem, Baumeister (1998) argued that much of our behavior is driven less by the goal of maintaining self-esteem and more by the goal of maintaining interpersonal (rather than intrapsychic) harmony. Just as humans possess the capability to engage in rationalization and related processes to maintain intrapsychic harmony, a variety of processes assist individuals in maintaining interpersonal harmony. Self-presentation represents one particularly important ability that allows us to ensure that social interactions go smoothly. And in the same way that rationalization and other defenses are likely to fail when they are recognized as such (e.g., "I'm only saying the exam was unfair because I failed it"), successful self-presentation may fall short when the ingratiatory motive is obvious (e. g., "I'm only showing interest in his stamp collection because he's my girlfriend's father"). Indeed, "the very success of ingratiation usually depends on the actor's concealment…of his stake in being judged attractive" (Jones & Pittman, 1982, p.

236). Both the actor and his partner want to believe that the actor's attractive behavior is genuine. Thus, just as people neglect the workings of the psychological immune system and its emotional ramifications, people may commonly overlook self-presentation and its affective consequences. If, as discussed above, self-presentation positively influences mood, then people are likely to make systematic affective forecasting errors regarding situations that require self-presentation.

*Overview of Present Research*

In a series of studies, we tested the hypothesis that people underestimate the affective benefits of engaging in positive self-presentation. This general hypothesis was tested with couples in long-term romantic relationships in Experiments 1 and 2. Specifically, participants were told that they would interact with either their romantic partner or an opposite sex stranger and they were asked to imagine how they would feel or report their actual feelings right before the interaction (Experiment 1) or right after the interaction (Experiment 2a). Given that interactions with strangers should elicit greater self-presentation than interactions with romantic partners, we hypothesized that people would underestimate how good they would feel before and after interacting with a stranger relative to a romantic partner. This provided a particularly interesting test of the broader self-presentation hypothesis, in that blindness to the affective benefits of self-presentation may sometimes underlie people's decision to seek out their romantic partners rather than less familiar others. Indeed, while love entails exaggerating the difference between the benefits provided by one's romantic partner versus other individuals (Murray & Holmes, 1997), the emotional boost provided by self-presentation may level the affective playing field, such that interactions with strangers can enhance mood as much or more than interactions with romantic partners. This suggests that encouraging people to treat their romantic partner to

the positive self-presentational behavior normally reserved for strangers should magnify the benefits of interactions between romantic partners, a hypothesis we tested in Experiment 2b.

To increase generalizabilty, we tested the basic self-presentation hypothesis in a different context in Experiments 3 and 4, by examining people's forecasted and actual feelings before and after they assumed the role of interviewer (low self-presentation condition) versus interviewee (high self-presentation condition). In sum, the primary goal of the present studies was to show that people underestimate the affective benefits of positive self-presentation, leading to consistent biases of emotional prediction across a range of everyday social interactions. Based on previous research showing that people engage in substantial mood regulation prior to a social interaction in order to meet its affective demands (Erber et al., 1996), we expected that participants would report feeling relatively cheerful right before an interaction requiring self-presentation, as well as following the interaction; therefore, we examined how participants expected to feel and how they actually felt immediately before social interactions (Experiments 1 and 3), as well as immediately afterward (Experiments 2 and 4).

## Experiment 1

### *Method*

#### *Overview*

One dating couple participated in each experimental session. All participants were told that another couple would be taking part in the session, and that they would be assigned to interact with either their romantic partner or the opposite sex member of the other couple.[1] Each participant was randomly assigned to the role of "forecaster" or "experiencer." Forecasters, but not experiencers, were asked to predict how they would feel before and after interacting with their romantic partner and with the opposite sex stranger. All participants were informed either

that they would interact with their romantic partner or the opposite sex stranger, and then they reported how they were feeling immediately before the interaction was supposed to begin. We predicted that participants would experience greater unexpected well-being, relative to forecasts, immediately before interacting with a stranger versus their romantic partner.

*Design*

We used a between-within hybrid design, in which forecasters both predicted how they would feel and reported their actual feelings before the interaction, whereas experiencers only reported their actual feelings; according to Loewenstein and Schkade (1999), this hybrid design represents the gold standard for forecasting studies because (1) between-subjects analyses can be conducted, eliminating the problems of assimilation and contrast that often occur when the same individuals report both forecasts and experiences, and (2) within-subjects analyses can be conducted, allowing researchers to examine correlates of prediction errors. Throughout the paper, therefore, we report between-subjects analyses to test our main hypotheses, although we also examined correlates of prediction errors using a within-subjects approach (as described in footnote 4). Thus, this study had a 2 (expected partner: stranger vs. romantic partner) X 2 (role: forecaster vs. experiencer) design, with the second factor treated as a between-subjects variable. To prevent both members of a romantic couple from being in the same cell of our design, which could artificially deflate within-cell variability, we assigned each member of the couple to opposite roles (i.e., forecaster vs. experiencer) within the same anticipated interaction condition (i.e., both members were told that they would interact with each other or both were told that they would interact with opposite sex strangers[2]).

*Participants*

Thirty-one heterosexual couples who had been dating for at least three months ($M_{length}$ = 13 months) participated in return for $6 or partial course credit. At least one member of each couple was an undergraduate at the University of Virginia.

*Procedure*

*Forecasts*. Participants in the forecaster condition predicted how they would feel right before interacting with their romantic partner, as well as before interacting with the opposite sex stranger from the other couple. Half the participants made forecasts regarding their romantic partner first, and half made forecasts regarding the stranger first; these questions were on separate pages of the survey, reducing the likelihood that participants would directly compare the romantic partner and stranger interactions in making their initial affective forecast. Participants were asked to rate how they would feel on three separate 33-point dot scales anchored on either end with the words "*pleasant/unpleasant*," "*cheerful/grumpy*" and "*happy/sad*." Forecasters were also asked whether they would prefer to interact with their romantic partner or with the stranger. Question order was counterbalanced using a 2 (question type: affective forecasts first vs. interaction preference first) X 2 (target of affective forecasts: romantic partner first vs. stranger first) design. To reduce social desirability concerns, all participants completed their surveys in private lab rooms, wrote code numbers rather than names on the surveys, dropped their surveys in sealed boxes, and were assured that their partners would never see any of their responses.

*Experiences*. In the next stage of the study, all participants opened an envelope that contained their interaction assignment (romantic partner or opposite sex stranger) and instructed them to wait for their interaction partner to join them in the lab room. Participants waited

approximately three minutes, and then heard a knock on the door. Instead of their interaction partner, the experimenter appeared and announced that she had forgotten to give them a pre-interaction questionnaire. This questionnaire asked participants to rate how they were feeling at that moment on the same scales used by forecasters to predict their feelings. Participants placed the survey in the sealed box, and the experimenter informed participants that no interaction would take place. After completing a brief survey that included a manipulation check asking participants to recall their interaction assignment, participants were fully debriefed; as part of the debriefing procedure, participants were provided with an oral and written summary of the research and were given the opportunity to ask any questions (this standard debriefing procedure was followed in all of the present studies, unless otherwise noted).

## *Results and Discussion*

### *Preliminary Analyses*

Two participants were eliminated from the analyses because they were confused about their interaction assignment and failed to answer the manipulation check correctly; the inclusion or exclusion of these two participants did not substantively affect the results. Because people commonly date similar others (e.g., Han, Weed, & Butcher, 2003), we examined whether participants' responses were correlated with the responses given by their romantic partners, but found no evidence of this; within each couple, there was no significant zero-order correlation between the forecaster's forecasts and the experiencer's experiences, $r(26) = -.17$, $p = .39$, and this correlation was near zero controlling for the pair's condition (romantic partner vs. stranger), $r(25) = .03$, $p = .86$. Because the assumption of independence was met, standard individual-level ANOVA's were used to analyze the data, in line with Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger's (1998) recommendations.

*Forecasts vs. Experiences*

We expected that participants would underestimate how good they would feel right before interacting with an opposite sex stranger versus a romantic partner. To test this hypothesis, we averaged the three mood valence items (*pleasant/unpleasant*, *happy/sad* and *cheerful/grumpy*) to create a composite measure of forecasted and experienced well-being ($\alpha$ = .93). Initial analyses revealed no main effects or interaction effects of gender or question order[3] on people's mood reports (all *p*'s > .16), therefore, we dropped these variables from the analyses. A 2 (partner: stranger vs. romantic partner) X 2 (role: forecaster vs. experiencer) between-subjects ANOVA revealed a marginally significant effect of partner condition, $F(1, 54) = 3.24$, $p < .08$, that was qualified by a significant Partner X Role interaction, $F(1, 54) = 13.99$, $p < .0005$ (see Figure 1). Simple effects analyses showed that experiencers felt significantly better immediately before interacting with the opposite sex stranger ($M = 25.38$, $SD = 4.87$) than forecasters had predicted ($M = 20.61$, $SD = 4.70$), $F(1, 54) = 3.95$, $p < .05$. In contrast, experiencers felt significantly worse immediately before interacting with their romantic partner ($M = 22.33$, $SD = 8.41$) than forecasters had anticipated ($M = 29.3$, $SD = 4.2$), $F(1, 54) = 11.90$, $p < .001$. Thus, whereas experiencers felt nonsignificantly better before interacting with a stranger versus a romantic partner, $F(1, 54) = 1.84$, $p = .18$, forecasters expected to feel far better before interacting with their romantic partner versus a stranger, $F(1, 54) = 15.73$, $p < .0005$. Moreover, 31 out of 32 forecasters reported that they would prefer to interact with their romantic partner than the opposite sex stranger, $X^2(1) = 28.13$, $p < .0005$.

*Summary*

The present results provide initial support for the hypotheses. Experiencers felt significantly better immediately before interacting with a stranger than forecasters expected. In

contrast, experiencers felt significantly worse immediately before interacting with their romantic partner than forecasters anticipated.[4] Notably, these effects emerged even though no actual interaction took place, consistent with the idea that self-regulation in the service of impression management begins prior to an impending social interaction. Of course, as an interaction unfolds, the demand for self-presentation should provoke additional mood-lifting processes. Therefore, we conducted a second experiment in which participants actually interacted with their romantic partner or an opposite sex stranger. We predicted that participants would experience greater unanticipated well-being, relative to forecasts, after interacting with a stranger versus their romantic partner. This design also allowed us to obtain direct behavioral data regarding the extent to which participants engaged in affective self-presentation while interacting with a stranger versus a romantic partner, permitting mediation analysis.

## Experiment 2a

### *Method*

#### *Overview*

Two dating couples participated in each experimental session. Forecasters predicted how they would feel after interacting with their romantic partner versus the opposite-sex stranger from the other couple. All participants then interacted with either their romantic partner or the opposite-sex stranger for approximately 4 minutes. Finally, participants rated their actual emotions. The interactions were covertly audiotaped and coded by a team of research assistants. We expected that participants would underestimate the affective benefits of interacting with a stranger relative to a romantic partner.

*Participants*

Thirty-eight heterosexual couples who had been dating for at least 3 months ($M_{length}$ = 14.4 months) participated in return for $8 or partial course credit.

*Procedure*

*Forecasts*. Forecasters predicted how they would feel immediately after interacting with their romantic partner and with the stranger using the same scales as in Experiment 1. Forecasters were also asked whether they would prefer to interact with their romantic partner or the opposite sex stranger. Question order was counterbalanced as in Experiment 1. In each experimental session, one male and one female acted as forecasters and the other male and female acted as experiencers; within each interaction pair, only one person provided forecasts. We took great care to assure participants of the confidentially of all their responses, using the same methods as in Experiment 1.

*Interactions*. As in Experiment 1, all participants opened an envelope containing their interaction assignment. Males were instructed to crack their door open and wait for their interaction partner. Females were instructed to go to the lab room occupied by their assigned interaction partner and enter once the male participant had cracked his door open. A second experimenter, who did not know which participants were dating each other and was therefore blind to condition, oversaw this process.[5] All participants were told to talk with their interaction partner for a few minutes about whatever they wanted (aside from their questionnaire responses), as though waiting for a class to begin. All interactions were covertly audiotaped.

*Experiences*. After 4 minutes, the second experimenter interrupted each pair and asked the females to return to their individual experiment rooms. All participants were asked to rate their current feelings on the same scales used by forecasters to predict their feelings.

*Debriefing*. In addition to following our standard full debrief procedure, the experimenter informed participants that their interaction had been covertly audiotaped, and participants were given the opportunity to have their tape erased. All participants gave permission for their tapes to be kept for coding purposes.

*Behavioral coding*. Five undergraduate research assistants who were unaware of the hypotheses coded the taped interactions. Coders were told that interaction partners had different types of existing relationships with each other, but were instructed to rate all interactions on the same scales regardless of partners' pre-existing relationships. Coders rated how hard participants were trying to self-present and put their best face forward, on two scales ranging from 1 (*not trying at all*) to 5 (*trying hard*). These two items were averaged and combined across coders to form a composite self-presentation score for each participant ($\alpha$ = .76). In addition, coders rated how individual participants seemed to be feeling on 7-point scales anchored with the same three emotion words used on the self-report questionnaires; these three items were averaged and combined across coders to form an index of affective behavior ($\alpha$ = .87; supporting the validity of this index, coders' positive affect ratings strongly correlated with experiencers' self-reported affect, $r(32) = .53$, $p < .001$).

## *Results and Discussion*

### *Preliminary Analyses*

There are two potential sources of non-independence in this data set. First, participants' responses in the study might be correlated with the responses given by their romantic partners. Using the same tests as in Experiment 1, however, we found no evidence of such nonindependence, *r*'s < .08. Second, participants' responses might be correlated with the responses of their interaction partners due to the shared experience of the interaction.

Participants' questionnaire responses were not significantly correlated with the responses of their interaction partners, but participants' behavior during the interaction, as coded by the team of raters, was highly correlated with that of their interaction partners; this is unsurprising given the strong motivation to mimic one's partner (e.g., Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). Therefore, we analyzed the behavioral data using an approach designed to account for the problem of non-independence.

*Forecasts vs. Experiences*

*Well-being*. Consistent with Experiment 1, we averaged the three mood valence items (*pleasant/unpleasant*, *happy/sad* and *cheerful/grumpy*) to create a composite measure of forecasted and experienced well-being ($\alpha$ = .88); again, there were no significant effects of gender or question order and these variables were dropped from the main analysis. The well-being measure was subjected to a 2 (partner: stranger vs. romantic partner) X 2 (role: forecaster vs. experiencer) between-subjects ANOVA. This analysis revealed the expected Partner X Role interaction, $F(1, 72) = 4.49$, $p < .04$. After interacting with the stranger, experiencers reported feeling significantly better ($M = 25.83$, $SD = 4.75$) than forecasters had expected to feel following this interaction ($M = 22.16$, $SD = 5.21$), $F(1, 72) = 4.72$, $p < .03$. In contrast, after interacting with their romantic partner, experiencers reported feeling slightly worse ($M = 25.82$, $SD = 5.40$) than forecasters had predicted ($M = 27.09$, $SD = 4.87$), although this difference was non-significant, $F < 1$. Thus, whereas experiencers felt just as good after interacting with a stranger as after interacting with their romantic partner, $F < 1$, forecasters expected to feel much better after interacting with their romantic partner versus a stranger, $F(1, 72) = 8.72$, $p < .004$. Similar to Experiment 1, the vast majority of forecasters (32/37) reported that they would prefer

to interact with their romantic partner rather than the opposite sex stranger, $X^2(1) = 19.70$, $p < .0005$.

*Mediational Analyses*

According to our hypotheses, people should engage in greater self-presentation when they interact with a stranger versus a romantic partner, leading experiencers to reap mood benefits from the stranger interaction that forecasters fail to anticipate ahead of time. To examine the hypothesized mediational role that self-presentation plays in shaping experienced versus forecasted well-being, we analyzed path models separately for experiencers and forecasters; because each interaction pair consisted of one forecaster and one experiencer, conducting separate path analyses removes the problem of non-independence identified above.

As Figure 2 shows, interacting with a stranger led experiencers to exhibit greater self-presentation during the interaction ($\beta = .68$, 95% CI [.43, .83], $p < .001$; $M_{stranger} = 3.20$, $SD_{stranger} = .55$; $M_{partner} = 2.20$, $SD_{partner} = .57$) which in turn led them to feel better following the interaction ($\beta = .73$, 95%CI [.45, .97], $p < .001$); thus, interacting with a stranger had a significant positive mediated effect on experiencers' well-being by increasing self-presentation, indirect effect $\beta = .48$, 95%CI [.24, .76], $p < .05$. At the same time, controlling for self-presentation, interacting with a stranger versus a romantic partner had a direct negative effect on experiencers' well-being ($\beta = -.43$, 95%CI [-.79, -.09], $p < .03$), as would be expected given the many obvious benefits of interacting with a loved one. This overall pattern of results may at first appear surprising given that partner condition was not significantly associated with experiencers' positive affect. Figure 3 presents the relationship between self-presentation and experienced positive affect for both romantic partners and strangers. Although the mean level of positive affect is essentially equivalent in both groups, it is clear that levels of self-presentation are

substantially higher in the stranger condition compared to the romantic partner condition. In addition, within each condition there is a strong relationship, as predicted, between self-presentation and positive affect. However, there is also a substantial effect for romantic partner; holding the level of self-presentation constant, interacting with a romantic partner was associated with higher levels of positive affect compared to interacting with a stranger. For experiencers, then, there was no net effect of partner condition because the effects of self-presentation and romantic partner were almost identical and in opposite directions.

As shown in Figure 2, examining the path model for forecasters revealed a direct negative effect of expecting to interact with a stranger versus a romantic partner on anticipated well-being, ($\beta$ = -.62, 95%CI [-.99, -.10], $p < .005$); thus, forecasters accurately anticipated the direct negative effect of interacting with a stranger observed in experiencers' emotional reports. Similar to experiencers, forecasters also exhibited greater self-presentation in the stranger condition than the romantic partner condition ($\beta$ = .73, 95%CI [.57, .86], $p < .001$; $M_{stranger}$ =3.25, $SD_{stranger}$ = .34; $M_{partner}$ = 2.27, $SD_{partner}$ = .56). Yet, self-presentation was unrelated to forecasters' predicted well-being ($\beta$ = .16, 95%CI [-.44, .56], $p$ = .48), suggesting that they either failed to anticipate the extent to which they would engage in self-presentation or the extent to which doing so would positively influence their mood.

Simply "eyeballing" the path models in Figure 2 suggests that path b differs for forecasters versus experiencers, while paths a and c do not vary with Role. Directly comparing the path models confirmed that only path b was significantly different for forecasters versus experiencers, $\chi^2(1) = 9.73$, $p < .002$, while paths a and c were not, $\chi^2(2) = .58$, $p$ =.75.

Taken together, the path analyses shed considerable light on the ANOVA results, illuminating the processes responsible for the observed differences between experiences and

forecasts. For experiencers, the size of the positive indirect effect (of partner condition on well-being via self-presentation) is comparable to the negative direct effect (of partner condition on well-being). Thus, the null effect of partner condition on experierencers' well-being is masking two different and opposite effects. Moreover, controlling for self-presentation, the magnitude of the direct effect of partner condition on experienced well-being is comparable to the total effect of partner condition on forecasted well-being. These results suggest that the forecasters are partly correct – there is indeed a direct benefit of interacting with a romantic partner vs. a stranger. However, the forecasters fail to account for the substantial effect that self-presentation has on experienced well-being, leading to their inaccurate forecasts regarding interactions with strangers. Thus, in line with our theoretical model, the source of forecasters' inaccuracy lies specifically in their blindness to the affective benefits of self-presentation.

*Distinguishing Self-Presentation from Affective Behavior*

We have argued that the motivation to engage in self-presentation spurs a variety of mood-lifting processes, including both gearing oneself up before the interaction and acting happy during the interaction itself. Indeed, examining coders' ratings of participants' affective behavior revealed that participants exhibited significantly more positive affective behavior in the stranger condition ($M$ = 5.19, $SD$ = .63) than the romantic partner condition ($M$ = 4.76, $SD$ = .59), $F(1, 32) = 4.09$, $p < .05$ (due to non-independence, interaction partners' scores were averaged and analyzed at the dyadic level).

Positive affective behavior was highly related to self-presentation, $\beta = .71$, 95%CI [.54, .84], $p < .001$, suggesting the possibility that affective behavior, not self-presentation, is the principle mediator in determining well-being. However, including affective behavior as an additional mediator in the path model illustrated in Figure 2 for experiencers resulted in a

significant mediated relationship through self-presentation after controlling for displayed affect, specific indirect effect $\beta = .36$, 95%CI [.04, .75], $p < .05$.[6] These results suggest that self-presentation exerts its unforeseen positive effects in part, but not solely, by leading people to emit positive emotional behavior. This conclusion is consistent with our findings from Study 1, in which similar discrepancies between forecasts and experiences emerged when people simply expected to engage in self-presentation, without actually having the opportunity to behave positively.

*Summary*

Supporting the hypotheses, experiencers reported greater unexpected well-being, relative to forecasters' predictions, after interacting with a stranger versus their romantic partner. As shown by our path analyses, interacting with a stranger prompted participants to try harder to make a positive impression during the interaction, which provided a source of emotional well-being that forecasters failed to foresee. The mediation analyses support our argument that self-presentation provides unexpected mood benefits, while also highlighting the complexity of comparing interactions between romantic partners and strangers; interacting with a stranger versus a romantic partner had an indirect positive effect on emotional experience due to self-presentation, but also had a direct negative effect. Although we believe the observed results are consistent with our hypotheses, alternative explanations remain viable, due to the inherently correlational nature of our internal analyses. Indeed, while partner condition influenced self-presentation, which was positively correlated with experiencers' well-being, experiencers reported equivalent mean levels of well-being across conditions. Convincingly demonstrating the hedonic benefits of self-presentation for experiencers would therefore require holding partner

condition constant and directly manipulating self-presentation; this was the goal of Experiment 2b.

## Experiment 2b

### Method

*Overview*

Participants serving as experiencers were asked to interact with their romantic partner for several minutes. Half the couples were instructed to engage in self-presentation during the interaction, and then all participants rated their actual emotions following the interaction. Although the primary purpose of this study was to examine whether self-presentation had hedonic benefits for experiencers, we also asked a separate group of participants to make affective forecasts.

*Experiencers*

Twenty-three heterosexual couples who had been dating for at least 3 months ($M_{length}$ = 16.9 months) participated in return for $10 or partial course credit. Each couple was randomly assigned to the control or the self-presentation condition. In separate lab rooms, each member of the couple first completed a demographic survey and then received interaction instructions corresponding to condition. Participants in the control condition were instructed to "just have a regular conversation with your partner, talking about whatever you want." Participants in the self-presentation condition were told:

> Just have a regular conversation with your partner, talking about whatever you want, but try to make a good impression on him (her), the way you would with a person you just met or had just started dating. Don't role-play, or pretend you are somewhere

> where you are not, but simply try to put your best face forward so your partner leaves the interaction with a positive impression of you.

After receiving the same set of instructions and having a chance to ask questions individually, the two members of the couple were re-united and interacted for approximately 5 minutes. Next, in individual lab rooms, participants rated their current feelings on the same three emotion dimensions used in the previous studies, but we used 7-point scales rather than 33-point scales.

*Forecasters*

We asked a separate group of 50 forecasters (35 females and 15 males) to predict how they would feel in the situations actually encountered by experiencers; all forecasters were in romantic relationships of at least 3 months ($M$ = 21.7 months), although they were not required to complete the study with their partner. On the same scales used by experiencers, half the forecasters were asked to predict how they would feel after interacting with their romantic partner for five minutes in the lab, if they and their partner were given the exact instructions received by control participants. Next, these forecasters were asked to predict how they would feel after interacting with their romantic partner, given the exact instructions received by participants in the self-presentation condition. The other half of forecasters completed the questionnaire in the opposite order, first predicting how they would feel in the self-presentation condition followed by the control condition. Finally, all forecasters reported which of the two described interactions they would prefer. They were thanked and provided with a chocolate bar; due to the minimal risk nature of their participation, forecasters were not provided with full debriefing.

*Results*

*Experiencers*. As in the previous studies, participants' composite well-being scores ($\alpha$ = .52)[7] were not correlated with those of their romantic partner, $r(21) = .01$, *ns*, allowing us to conduct an independent-samples t-test. This analysis revealed that experiencers in the self-presentation condition felt significantly better ($M = 5.97$, $SD = .72$) following the interaction than those in the control condition ($M = 5.44$, $SD = .68$), $t(44) = 2.55$, $p < .01$.[8] Consistent with the previous studies, this effect was not moderated by gender, $F < 1$.

*Forecasters*. Using only participants' first set of forecasts in a between-subjects comparison, we found that forecasters predicted feeling about the same in the control condition ($M = 5.49$, $SD = .74$) and self-presentation condition ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.04$), $t < 1$. Comparing both sets of forecasts on a within-subjects basis suggested that participants expected, if anything, to feel better in the control condition ($M = 5.61$, $SD = .84$) than the self-presentation condition ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.07$), although this difference was not significant, $t(48) = 1.6$, $p < .12$. Given the choice between the two interactions, a significant majority of forecasters reported a preference for the control condition (n = 38) over the self-presentation condition, (n = 12), $X^2(1) = 13.52$, $p < .0005$. Although directly comparing forecasters and experiencers requires caution given that participants were not randomly assigned to role, it is worth noting that experiencers in the self-presentation condition felt significantly better than forecasters predicted, $F(1, 45) = 4.2$, $p < .05$, while no discrepancy emerged in the control condition, $F < 1$. Consistent with the previous studies then, forecasters did not appear to recognize the demonstrable affective benefits associated with high self-presentation interactions.

### *Discussion*

Complementing the internal analyses in Study 2a, Study 2b provided more direct experimental evidence that experiencers reap emotional benefits from engaging in positive self-presentation—which forecasters again failed to recognize. Thus, holding partner condition constant by asking all participants to interact with their romantic partner, we observed significant hedonic benefits stemming from self-presentation. Building on this, in Studies 3 and 4, we held partner condition constant by asking all participants to interact with a stranger, again directly manipulating the demand to self-present; we randomly assigned participants to the role of interviewer or interviewee and examined forecasted and experienced well-being prior to the interactions (Study 3) and afterward (Study 4). Because the role of interviewee demands self-presentation, we hypothesized that participants would underestimate how good they would feel before and after being interviewed. This paradigm therefore provided us with a different context in which to test our core hypothesis that affective benefits stemming from self-presentation are largely invisible to forecasters, leading to systematic affective forecasting errors.

## Experiment 3

### *Method*

#### *Overview*

Participants were told that they would interact with a stranger of the same sex and that they would be assigned to act as an interviewer or interviewee; the interviewer would ask the other participant a series of questions and evaluate his/her personality, while the interviewee would answer the questions and be evaluated. Before learning their status assignment, half the participants (forecasters) predicted how they would feel right before the interview if they were assigned the status of interviewer versus interviewee. All participants then received their status

assignment, and they were asked to report their actual feelings immediately before they expected the interview to begin.

*Participants*

A total of 38 male and 50 female undergraduates completed the study in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. As explained below, four outliers were removed from the primary analyses, leaving a total of 84 participants.

*Procedure*

*Status manipulation*. After signing consent forms, participants were told that the study was concerned with first impressions in same sex interactions and that they would be assigned to act as an interviewer or interviewee. Interviewers would interview the other participant and evaluate his/her personality, while interviewees would be evaluated. Participants were told that interviewees would not see the interviewer's evaluation. All participants were provided with a list of interview questions (regarding use of free time, favorite and least favorite classes, etc.) that they would either ask or answer.

*Forecasts*. Participants were randomly assigned to the role of forecaster or experiencer. Before receiving their interaction assignment, forecasters predicted how they would feel immediately before the interview if they were assigned the status of interviewer and interviewee, on the same three 33-point scales used in the previous studies. Participants also reported which role they would prefer. Question order was counterbalanced and the privacy of responses ensured as in the previous experiments.

*Experiences*. All participants received their interaction assignment and were instructed to crack the door open and wait for the other participant to join them. Three minutes later, the

experimenter appeared and said that she had forgotten to give the participant one of the questionnaires. The experimenter added that the other participant would be right in after the questionnaire had been completed. This questionnaire asked participants to rate their current feelings on the same scales used at the forecasting stage; although forecasters also completed these items, only experiencers' ratings were used, as in the previous studies. Participants also completed a post-experimental questionnaire that included a manipulation check and items designed to tap suspicion about the experimental procedures. No actual interactions took place; rather, participants were fully debriefed after completing the post-experimental questionnaire.

## *Results and Discussion*

### *Forecasts vs. Experiences*

As in the previous studies, the three positive mood scales were averaged to create a composite measure of forecasted and experienced well-being ($\alpha = .77$). Two participants (including a forecaster in the interviewer condition and an experiencer in the interviewee condition) scored more than two standard deviations below the overall mean on this variable, and two other participants (a forecaster and an experiencer both in the interviewee condition) scored two standard deviations above the overall mean. Because these outliers substantially increased the variance, they were eliminated from the main analysis.[9] Initial analyses revealed no effects of question order on affective forecasts, $F$'s < 1. The well-being composite was submitted to a 2 (status: interviewer vs. interviewee) X 2 (role: forecaster vs. experiencer) ANOVA that revealed a significant main effect of role, $F(1, 80) = 11.26$, $p < .001$, qualified by a significant Status X Role interaction, $F(1, 80) = 7.19$, $p < .009$. Interviewees felt significantly better right before the interview was supposed to begin ($M = 25.71$, $SD = 3.82$) than forecasters had anticipated ($M = 19.7$, $SD = 3.87$), $F(1, 80) = 15.49$, $p < .0005$. Interviewers, however, felt about the same right

before the interview ($M$ = 22.48, $SD$ = 4.82) as forecasters expected to feel ($M$ = 21.8, $SD$ = 4.77), $F < 1$. Thus, whereas forecasters expected to feel marginally better before playing the role of interviewer versus interviewee, $F(1, 80) = 2.71$, $p < .10$, interviewees actually felt significantly better than did interviewers right before the interview was supposed to get started, $F(1, 80) = 4.49$, $p < .04$. This is notable given that a significant majority of forecasters reported that they would prefer to act as the interviewer ($n$ = 34) rather than the interviewee ($n$ = 15), $X^2(1) = 7.37$, $p < .007$. At the conclusion of the experiment, all participants were able to recall their status assignment (interviewee vs. interviewer) correctly on the manipulation check.

*Summary*

Supporting the hypotheses, experiencers in the interviewee condition reported more positive mood than anticipated by forecasters, whereas this discrepancy between forecast and experience was eliminated in the interviewer condition. In fact, while most forecasters expressed a preference to act as the interviewer rather than the interviewee, experiencers felt better immediately before the interaction if they expected to serve as an interviewee rather than interviewer. Taken together, Study 2b and Study 3 provide experimental confirmation of the correlational effect observed in Study 2a; holding interaction partner constant, engaging in self-presentation significantly increased well-being. Study 3 also complements Study 1 in suggesting that affective impression management begins prior to social interaction.

## Experiment 4

Although the foregoing results lend support to our argument regarding the invisible benefits of self-presentation, it is possible that these results could be explained by previous research on immune neglect. As this existing research demonstrates, a more negative situation is more likely to activate the psychological immune system, such that people may actually exhibit

greater unexpected well-being following objectively more negative or threatening situations (Gilbert, Lieberman, Morewedge, & Wilson, 2004). An evaluative interaction with a stranger may represent a relatively negative situation, triggering the psychological immune system. This should be the case particularly for people high in social anxiety; these individuals are especially susceptible to experiencing negative affect in response to impending social evaluations (Watson & Friend, 1969). Thus, according to the immune neglect account, participants who are high in social anxiety should show a particularly strong forecasting bias with regard to an interaction in which they expect to be evaluated (because the initial negative affect associated with this situation triggers the operation of the psychological immune system).

In contrast, our theoretical account suggests that the observed forecasting bias should be moderated not by social anxiety but by the extent to which individuals engage in positive self-presentation. Individuals who are high in self-monitoring are particularly prone to exhibit impression management in response to situational cues (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Snyder, 1974; Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). The Self-Monitoring scale includes items such as, "I often put on a show to impress or entertain people" and "I would probably make a good actor," suggesting that high self-monitors are likely to go to greater lengths to make a positive impression in the interviewee condition than low self-monitors. If self-presentation is the key variable underlying our observed forecasting bias, then high self-monitors should be especially prone to this bias. Thus, in Study 4, we included measures of both social anxiety and self-monitoring in order to disentangle the immune neglect account from our self-presentation account. In addition, we extended Study 3 by having participants go through with an interaction in which they played the role of interviewer or interviewee.

## *Method*

### *Overview*

Two opposite sex undergraduates who did not know each other took part in each experimental session. One was randomly assigned to act as an interviewer, while the other acted as an interviewee. In each session, one participant was assigned the role of forecaster while the other was assigned the role of experiencer. Forecasters were asked to predict how they would feel after playing the role of interviewer versus interviewee. Participants were given 4 minutes to complete the interaction, and then all participants reported how they actually felt following the interaction, as well as completing personality scales.

### *Participants*

Forty-two females and 45 males completed the study in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Only one participant showed up for 5 of the experimental sessions. These singleton participants were led to believe that another participant was present, and they completed the forecasting survey before the experiment was terminated. Their responses are included in the main analyses below, although their inclusion or exclusion did not substantively affect the results.

### *Procedure*

The procedure was equivalent to Study 3 except that: (a) participants were not provided with a list of interview questions, (b) interactions occurred between opposite-sex pairs, (c) forecasted and experienced emotion reports were made with regard to post-interaction feelings, and (d) after reporting their post-interaction feelings, participants completed brief personality measures of social anxiety and self-monitoring.

*Personality Measures*

On 5-point scales ranging from 1 (*very inaccurate*) to 5 (*very accurate*), participants rated the accuracy of 8 self-descriptive statements drawn from Watson and Friend's (1969) Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) and Social Avoidance and Distress (SAD) scales (see Table 1 for items and reliabilties). The FNE is designed to measure individual differences in anxiety about receiving negative evaluations from others, while the SAD scale measures the deliberate avoidance of social interactions and the experience of anxiety and distress during social interactions. In addition, on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), participants rated their level of agreement with 5 statements adapted from Snyder and Gangestad's (1986) revised Self-Monitoring Scale (see Table 1); although self-monitoring is a broad construct with rather low internal reliability, Snyder and Gangestad (1986) demonstrated that the 5 selected items were reliably correlated with the latent causal variable of self-monitoring (average $r$ = .43).

## *Results*

*Forecasts vs. Experiences*

Preliminary analyses revealed no effects of question order on affective forecasts, $F$'s < 1, nor was there any evidence of non-independence within interaction pairs. Submitting the well-being composite ($\alpha$ = .86) to a 2 (status: interviewer vs. interviewee) X 2 (role: forecaster vs. experiencer) ANOVA revealed significant main effects of both status, $F(1, 83) = 5.7$, $p < .02$, and role, $F(1, 83) = 27.42$, $p < .0005$, as well as the critical Status X Role interaction, $F(1, 83) = 4.93$, $p < .03$. As hypothesized, interviewees felt significantly better after the interaction ($M$ = 24.97, $SD$ = 4.47) than forecasters predicted ($M$ = 17.82, $SD$ = 4.14), $F(1, 83) = 27.44$, $p < .0005$. A much smaller discrepancy between forecasts and experiences emerged in the interviewer

condition; interviewers felt somewhat better following the interaction ($M$ = 25.13, $SD$ = 5.23) than forecasters predicted ($M$ = 22.23, $SD$ = 3.76), $F(1, 83) = 4.61$, $p < .04$. While experiencers felt about equally good after playing the role of interviewer versus interviewee, $F < 1$, forecasters expected to feel much better after playing the role of interviewer, $F(1, 83) = 11.26$, $p < .001$, and a significant majority of forecasters (32/46) reported that they would prefer to act as the interviewer, $X^2(1) = 7.04$, $p < .008$.

*Individual Differences*

From our theoretical perspective, individuals who are dispositionally prone to self-presentation (i.e., those high in self-monitoring) should show an enhanced forecasting bias in the interviewee condition, expecting to feel much worse than they actually do. If immune neglect is the primary cause of the observed forecasting bias, however, then individuals who are high in social avoidance and distress or who fear negative evaluation should show an enhanced forecasting bias in the interviewee condition.

We examined the potential moderating role of these individual difference variables with a series of regression analyses, following guidelines developed by Aiken and West (1991). To test the moderating role of self-monitoring, we entered Status, Role, Self-Monitoring and their two-way and three-way interactions into a regression predicting well-being reports; the categorical variables of experimental condition (Status and Role) were effect coded, making this analysis parallel to our ANOVA (West, Aiken, & Krull 1996). This analysis revealed the predicted Self-Monitoring X Status X Role interaction, $t(74) = -2.26$, $p < .03$. As shown in Figure 4 (panel A), participants who were high in self-monitoring (i.e. 1 *SD* above the mean) exhibited a magnified forecasting bias, predicting that they would feel much worse in the interviewee versus interviewer condition than justified by experiencers' reports, $t(74) = -3.12$, $p < .003$. In contrast,

the basic Status X Role interaction did not approach significance for those low in self-monitoring, $t < 1$.

Self-monitoring was negatively correlated with social avoidance and distress, $r(80) = -.38$, $p < .001$. Not surprisingly, then, when SAD was substituted for self-monitoring in the regression analysis above, we observed a significant SAD X Status X Role interaction, $t(74) = 1.99$, $p < .05$; the Status X Role interaction was highly significant for participants low in social avoidance and distress, $t(74) = -2.81$, $p < .001$, but not significant for those high in SAD, $t < 1$ (see Figure 3, panel B). When we replaced SAD with fear of negative evaluation (which was strongly related to SAD, $r(80) = .51$, but only weakly related to self-monitoring, $r(80) = -.14$), the three-way interaction was not significant, $t < 1$. Thus, there is no evidence that the observed Status X Role interaction is driven by participants who experience initial fear, anxiety, or distress when faced with the prospect of an evaluative interaction. Rather, consistent with our theoretical perspective, individuals who are responsive to situational demands for self-presentation are particularly prone to exhibit the observed forecasting bias.

### *Discussion*

As in Study 3, participants assigned to the role of interviewee exhibited greater unexpected well-being (relative to forecasters' predictions) than did participants assigned to the role of interviewer. However, even participants in the interviewer condition felt slightly better than forecasters predicted, whereas in Study 3 the forecast-experience discrepancy was eliminated in the interviewer condition. This overall pattern of findings is consistent with our hypothesis that people make larger forecasting errors for situations that require higher levels of self-presentation; although self-presentation demands were higher for interviewees than interviewers across both studies, the role of interviewer should have carried slightly higher self-

presentation demands in Study 4, in which participants interviewed someone of the opposite sex, than in Study 3, in which participants expected to interview someone of the same sex. If the difference in self-presentation demands between the interviewer and interviewee conditions was greater in Study 3 vs. Study 4, then it is also unsurprising that experiencers exhibited a stronger simple effect of condition in Study 3 than Study 4. Going beyond the preceding experiments, Study 4 provided additional support for our argument regarding the mediating role of self-presentation by demonstrating that the previously observed Status X Role interaction was magnified among individuals who were prone to engage in self-presentation.

## General Discussion

The foregoing studies suggest that people fail to appreciate the affective benefits of positive self-presentation, leading to systematic forecasting errors regarding the emotional consequences of everyday social interactions. To further illuminate our main findings, we conducted a meta-analysis, statistically combining our five studies following procedures described by Shadish & Haddock (1994). This meta-analysis confirmed our central finding that experiencers felt much better than forecasters predicted within the high self-presentation conditions, $\bar{d}$ = 1.07, $z$ = 6.53, $p < .0001$. In contrast, there was no reliable discrepancy between forecasters and experiencers within the low self-presentation conditions, combining across studies, $\bar{d}$ = -.05, $z$ = .36, *ns*, highlighting the specificity of the observed forecasting bias (see Figure 5, panel A). Examining forecasters only, we found a fairly large effect whereby participants expected to feel better in the low versus high self-presentation conditions, $\bar{d}$ = -.76, $z$ = 5.06, $p < .0001$. Experiencers, however, exhibited a moderate effect in the opposite direction, reporting significantly more positive affect in the high versus low self-presentation conditions overall, $\bar{d}$ = .37, $z$ = 2.43, $p < .02$ (see Fig 5, panel B).

Taken together, our five studies provide converging evidence for the argument that positive self-presentation produces emotional benefits that people typically fail to recognize, leading to reliable forecasting errors regarding everyday social interactions. In Experiment 2a, path analyses revealed that interacting with a stranger (vs. a romantic partner) prompted greater self-presentation, which in turn provided experiencers with a significant source of well-being that forecasters failed to foresee. Moving beyond internal analyses, we manipulated self-presentation demands more directly in Experiment 2b by instructing half the romantic couples to engage in the self-presentational behavior spontaneously exhibited by strangers in Experiment 2a; this manipulation produced significant gains in well-being for experiencers, which forecasters did not anticipate. In Experiment 3, we used a different manipulation of self-presentation, leading half the participants to believe that they would be evaluated by a stranger; these participants showed a strong forecast-experience discrepancy, which was eliminated for participants who expected to evaluate a stranger and therefore had little reason to self-present. Finally, in Experiment 4, we showed that the observed forecasting bias was moderated by a theoretically-relevant personality variable; high self-monitors, who should be most willing and able to engage in self-presentation in response to situational demands, exhibited a magnified forecasting bias, greatly underestimating how good they would feel after playing the role of interviewee. Thus, evidence drawn from mediation, direct manipulation, moderation, and meta-analysis provides support for our argument that individuals misunderstand the affective consequences of everyday social interactions because of blindness to the benefits of self-presentation.

As already discussed, the demand for positive self-presentation should trigger upward mood regulation prior to social interactions, leading to immediate benefits for mood, which are

subsequently reinforced by facial feedback and self-perception processes during the interaction, producing elevated mood reports afterward. But why do people fail to recognize the affective consequences of self-presentation? As suggested in the introduction, successful self-presentation may rely on people's ability to overlook it; according to Jones and Pittman (1982), the goal of impression management is more likely to be achieved when the goal itself remains beneath the surface. Consistent with this perspective, the extent to which participants exhibited self-presentation in Experiment 2 was unrelated to their forecasted well-being, implying that they were unable to anticipate their own self-presentational behavior, its affective consequences, or both. In addition, people may readily overlook the emotional benefits of self-presentation to the extent that social demands rather than hedonistic concerns typically drive self-presentational behavior. That is, the positive feelings that stem from self-presentation may represent an easily overlooked side effect if people engage in self-presentation because of a desire to get along with other people rather than a desire to feel good.

By highlighting a forecasting bias that arises from interpersonal rather than intrapersonal concerns, the present research diverges from the preponderance of work on affective forecasting (e.g., Buehler & McFarland, 2001; Wilson et al., 2004; Gilbert et al., 1998; Gilbert & Ebert, 2002; Loewenstein, 1996; but see DeWall & Baumeister, 2006). Indeed, Baumeister (1998) argues that by focusing on intrapsychic processes as a point of origin, social psychologists have often overlooked how interpersonal demands shape intrapersonal experiences such as emotions--thereby displaying the same type of oversight exhibited by our participants.

The present research implies that people routinely regulate their mood in the service of social demands, thereby dovetailing with Erber and colleagues' social-constraints model of mood regulation (Erber & Erber, 2001; Erber et al., 1996). Because North American culture places

great value on happiness and good cheer (Erber & Erber, 2001), the desire to make a good impression may often motivate people to assume a pleasant and cheerful demeanor, as in the present studies. Yet, as Erber and Erber (2001) describe, there are also times when adopting a neutral or even sad mood may be required in order to meet social demands. The present research suggests that people may underestimate the extent to which they will adjust their mood—either upward or downward—to fit the social situation. For example, people may find themselves feeling surprisingly sad at the funeral of a disliked acquaintance because the situation demands the display of negative affect. The type of emotional self-regulation people exhibit should depend not only on the situation, but also on personal characteristics, such as cultural background. Indeed, social situations that prompt White Americans to behave in an upbeat, self-enhancing manner may spur Asians to behave in a more subdued, self-effacing manner (Akimoto & Sanbonmatsu, 1999). Although situational, personal, and cultural variables shape the nature of self-presentation, its unexpected affective power may be widespread.

This central point speaks to an intriguing recent finding in pain research: Victims of chronic pain actually show elevated discomfort and reduced tolerance for pain in the presence of a solicitous spouse who exhibits concern for their physical comfort (e.g., Flor, Breitenstein, Bribaumer, & Furst, 1995). This ironic effect may emerge in part because the spouses' solicitous behavior encourages patients to engage in a negative form of self-presentation (emphasizing their feelings of pain), and thereby exacerbates patients' actual pain sensations. Our research implies that patients are unlikely to recognize this causal chain, leading them to seek out their concerned spouse rather than an alternative companion whose presence would demand more positive self-presentation and provide pain relief as a result.

*Are Errors Costly?*

Although overestimating the emotional benefits of interacting with a loved one may be advantageous (see footnote 4), underestimating the benefits of interacting with less familiar others may have important costs. If individuals underestimate how good they would feel in such situations, they may eschew opportunities to meet new people or enter evaluative situations, thereby short-circuiting healthy sources of short-term and (potentially) long-term happiness. Of course, to the extent that self-presentation requires regulatory resources, engaging in self-presentation can lead to subsequent decrements in self-control (Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005). Avoiding interactions that demand self-presentational effort may therefore represent a functional strategy when people need to conserve their limited regulatory resources for other tasks. Seeking out such interactions may be largely beneficial, however, when sufficient resources are available.

Indeed, occasionally re-instating positive self-presentation in the context of social relationships that no longer require it may be worthwhile, potentially helping to stave off declines in relationship satisfaction over time. We would speculate that acts of infidelity may sometimes stem not from the rewarding qualities of the alternative lover *per se*, but rather from the rewarding qualities of engaging in positive self-presentation with a relatively unfamiliar other. Putting one's best face forward with a long-term partner should also be rewarding (as in Study 2b), but our findings strongly suggest that people are unlikely to spontaneously adopt this strategy. Still, in the context of close relationships, institutions such as Valentine's Day or even weekly "date nights" may help to provoke some sporadic self-presentation, thereby delivering emotional benefits.

*Conclusion*

Given the powerful human need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), people should readily adjust their affective demeanor in order to be liked by others. The current research suggests that people may fundamentally misunderstand the emotional consequences of this ubiquitous social demand. This failure to recognize the affective benefits of putting one's best face forward may underlie forecasting errors regarding the emotional consequences of the most common forms of social interactions.

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## Footnotes

[1] In both Studies 1 and 2, participants were asked to complete a brief writing exercise in private cubicles prior to beginning the main study; they were informed that this writing exercise was unrelated to the main study. Half the participants were asked to write about a typical day, and half were asked to write about a negative life event not involving their romantic partner. In Study 1, participants were randomly assigned to write about one topic or the other, and in Study 2, females wrote about a typical day, while males wrote about a negative event. Writing condition had no significant main or interaction effects on any of the dependent measures in either study, and was therefore not included in the main analyses.

[2] This was done to maintain design consistency with Study 2.

[3] Although no effects of question order emerged, the fact that forecasters made predictions regarding both possible interaction partners could conceivably underlie our findings. Hsee & Zhang (2004) found that when people are asked to compare two possible alternatives (in "joint evaluation mode"), they commonly overestimate the difference between the affective benefits of the better and worse alternative, compared to when they experience either one of the alternatives in isolation ("single evaluation mode"). Hsee & Zhang (2004) further specify, however, that this "distinction bias" emerges when two alternatives are *quantitatively* different (e.g., 4-minute interaction with a stranger vs. 10-minute interaction with a stranger), but not when two alternatives are *qualitatively* different (e.g., interaction with a stranger vs. interaction with a romantic partner). Of course, if the distinction bias is not responsible for our findings, then forecasters should exhibit the same pattern of results even under conditions that minimize direct comparison of alternatives. Therefore, we examined only participants who had been asked to make affective forecasts prior to making a choice between interaction partners, and used each

participant's first affective forecast only. This analysis revealed that participants in the stranger-first order condition expected to feel significantly worse before interacting with the stranger than participants in the partner-first condition expected to feel before interacting with their romantic partner, $t(12) = 2.35$, $p < .04$. It is still the case that these forecasters were aware of both interaction alternatives, but experiencers possessed this knowledge as well. Thus, the observed forecasting bias emerges even under conditions in which Hsee and Zhang (2004) argue the distinction bias should not occur.

[4] To examine whether this forecasting error might promote relationship stability, we re-contacted participants from Experiment 1 and two similar studies (including Exp. 2 and a pilot study) approximately one year later, asking whether they were still dating the same partner. Across studies, we obtained relationship status data for 35 of the 50 participants who had reported both forecasts and experiences regarding their romantic partner. We divided participants into those who overestimated how good they would feel (n = 18), those whose forecasts matched their experiences (n = 6), and those who underestimated how good they would feel (n = 11) in the romantic partner condition. The majority of participants who overestimated how good they would feel (61%) and accurately estimated how they would feel (67%) reported that they were still dating their romantic partner, whereas only 27% of participants who underestimated how good they would feel with their romantic partner were still dating this person at follow-up. Entering forecasting style (underestimate vs. overestimate) and initial satisfaction into a logistic regression predicting relationship stability at Time 2 revealed a marginally significant effect of satisfaction ($B = 1.13$, $p < .10$) and a significant effect of forecasting style ($B = .88$, $p < .05$); participants who overestimated how good they would feel with their romantic partner were more likely to be in a lasting relationship with this person at T2 than participants who underestimated

how good they would feel. Consistent with recent work on positive illusions in relationships (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996), overestimating the affective benefits provided by one's partner may promote relationship stability, at least relative to overly pessimistic forecasts.

[5] The experimenter was unable to remain blind to condition for 8 dyads; for 2 of the dyads, only one experimenter was available for the session; for 2 dyads, the experimenter deduced the condition assignment; and for 4 dyads, only one couple showed up, forcing the experimenter to assign these couples to the romantic partner condition. Deleting these 8 dyads has no substantive effects on any of the analyses to be discussed.

[6]All confidence intervals were obtained using bootstrapping techniques, following Shrout and Bolger (2002). To test for specific indirect effects, we used an SPSS macro developed by Preacher and Hayes (2006).

[7] The alpha for this composite was depressed by two participants (one in each condition) who responded quite inconsistently to the three emotion items. Deleting these two participants increases alpha to .75, while the effect of condition remains significant, $p < .01$.

[8] We also conducted the same analysis using HLM v.5.05 (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), thereby accounting for potential dependence in responses within dyads. Overall, there was no significant association of positive affect within dyads, $X^2(18) = 14.71$, *ns*, ICC=0.00. Controlling for potential dyadic dependence in affect, the effect of self-presentation condition on positive affect was significant, $t(18)= 2.61$, $p <.02$, as in our independent-samples t-test.

[9] With the outliers included, the means are very similar, but the Status X Role interaction is marginal, $F(1, 84) = 2.99$, $p < .09$. The outlier issue was also addressed by dichotomizing the dependent variable (assigning scores above the median a 1 and below the median a 0); including all participants, the Status X Role interaction is nearly significant, $F(1, 84) = 3.79$, $p = .055$.

Table 1

*Items and reliabilities for Fear of Negative Evaluation, Social Avoidance and Distress, and Self-Monitoring scales. Items marked (r) were reverse-scored.*

| | |
|---|---|
| *Fear of Negative Evaluation* ($\alpha$=.65) | |
| Item 1 | I rarely worry about seeming foolish to others. (r) |
| Item 2 | I worry about what other people will think of me even when I know it doesn't make any difference. |
| Item 3 | If someone is evaluating me, I tend to expect the worst. |
| Item 4 | When I am talking to someone, I worry about what they may be thinking of me. |
| Item 5 | I am usually confident that others will have a favorable impression of me. (r) |
| *Social Avoidance and Distress* ($\alpha$=.82) | |
| Item 1 | I try to avoid situations which force me to be very sociable. |
| Item 2 | It is easy for me to relax when I am with strangers. (r) |
| Item 3 | I usually feel relaxed when I meet someone for the first time. (r) |
| Item 4 | I don't mind talking to people at parties or social gatherings. (r) |
| Item 5 | Being introduced to people makes me tense and nervous. |
| *Self-Monitoring* ($\alpha$ = .48) | |
| Item 1 | I often put on a show to impress or entertain people. |
| Item 2 | I would probably make a good actor. |
| Item 3 | In different situations and with different people, I often act like very different persons. |
| Item 4 | In a group of people I am rarely the center of attention. (r) |
| Item 5 | I have trouble changing my behavior to suit different people and different situations. (r) |

*Figure 1*. Forecasted versus experienced well-being in the romantic partner and stranger conditions (Experiment 1). The error bars display the standard error around each mean.

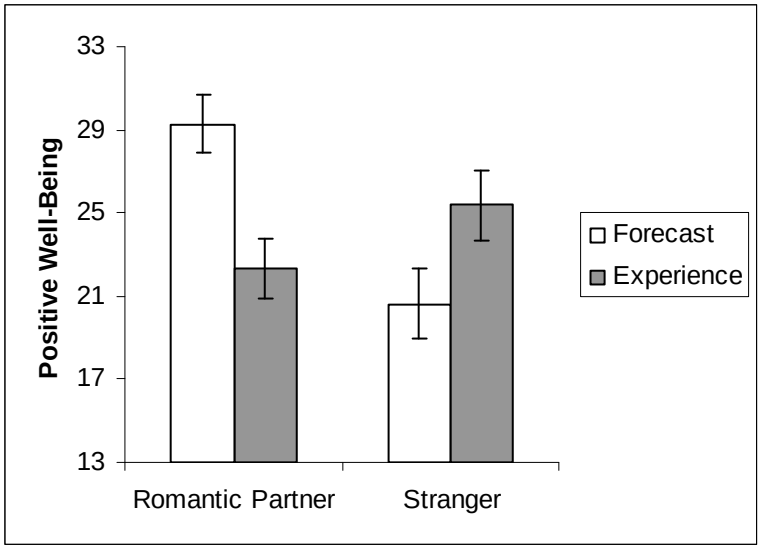


*Figure 2*. Path models for experiencers and forecasters (Experiment 2). Partner condition was dummy-coded such that 0 = romantic partner and 1 = stranger.

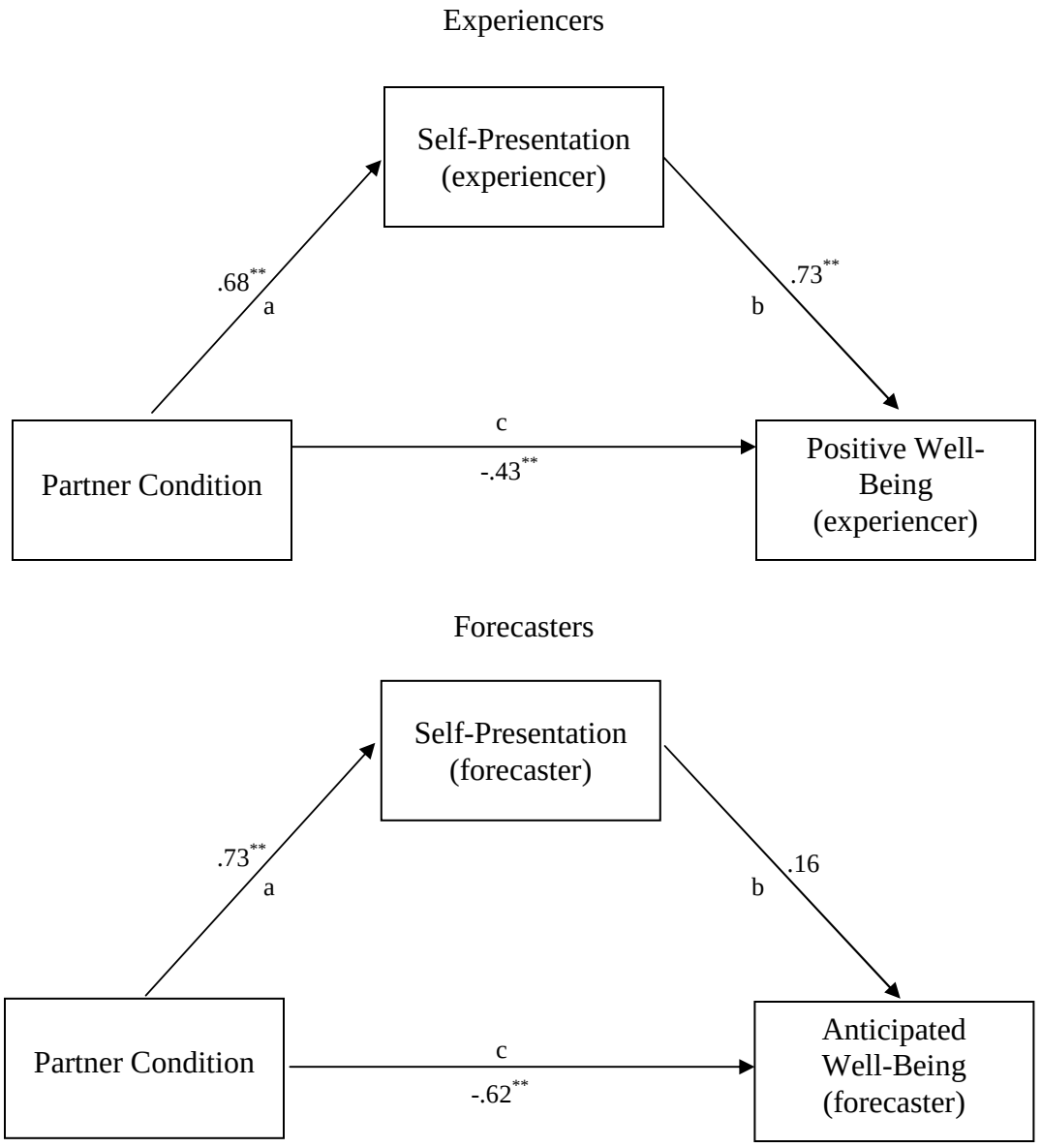


*Figure 3.* Relationship between coded level of self-presentation and reported positive affect for experiencers, estimated separately for romantic partner and stranger conditions. The slope of the lines represent the partial relationship between self-presentation and positive affect controlling for experimental condition ($\beta$ =.73 in Figure 2). The vertical difference between the lines represents the direct effect of interacting with a stranger versus a romantic partner, holding level of self-presentation constant ($\beta$ = -.43 in Fig. 2).

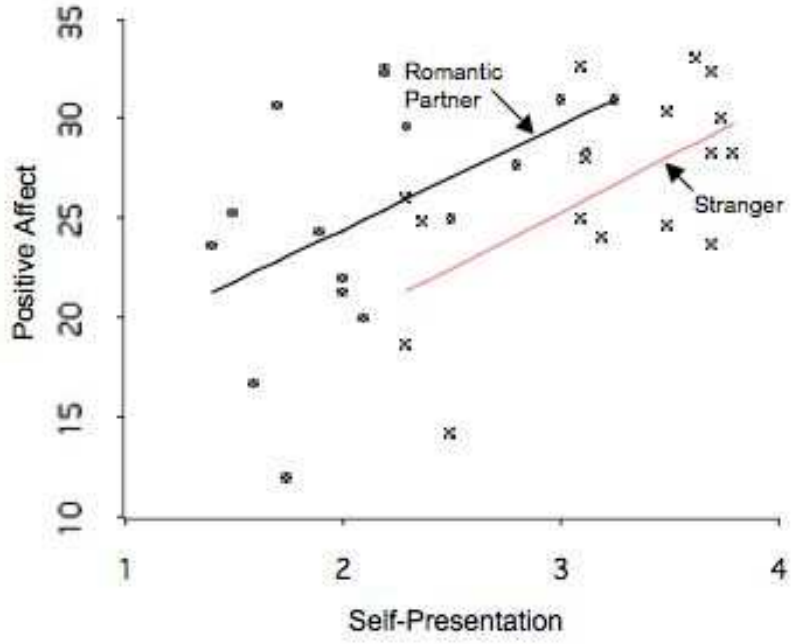


*Figure 4.* Predicted cell means (from regressions) for forecasted and experienced well-being in the interviewer and interviewee conditions for participants 1 *SD* above and below the mean on self-monitoring (Panel A) and social avoidance and distress (Panel B). Error bars represent standard errors around the predicted means.

Panel A


Panel B

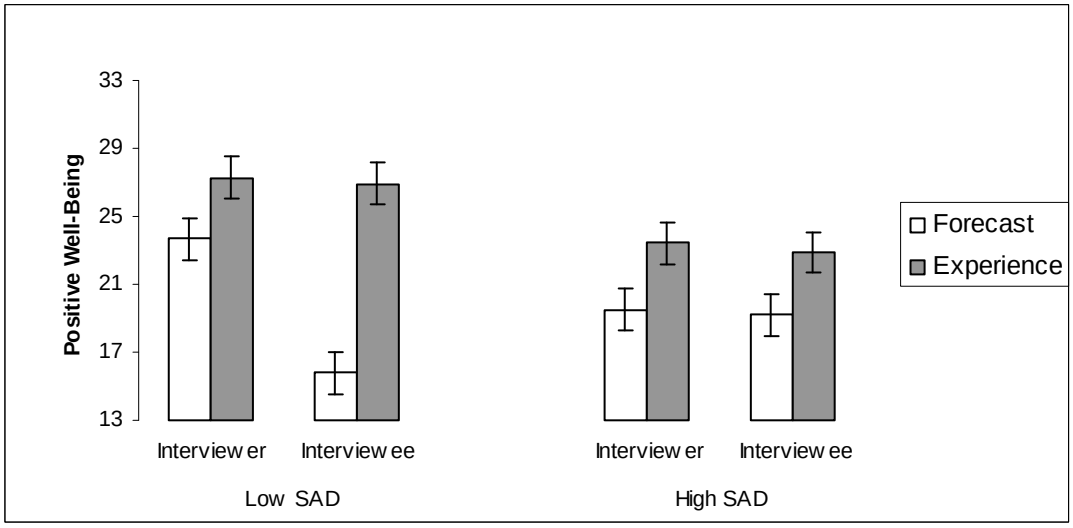
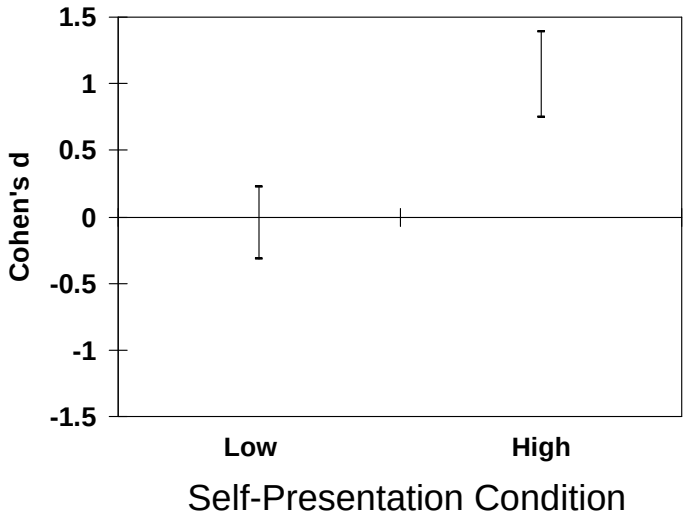


*Figure 5*. 95% confidence intervals of effect size estimates ( $\bar{d}$ ) for each simple effect, combining across studies. Panel A shows the simple effect of role, separately for the low and high self-presentation conditions; positive *d*'s represent higher means for experiencers vs. forecasters. Panel B shows the simple effect of self-presentation separately for forecasters and experiencers; positive *d*'s represent higher means in the high vs. low self-presentation conditions.

Panel A: Simple Effect of Role (i.e. experiencers vs. forecasters) by Self-Presentation Condition




Panel B: Simple Effect of Self-Presentation for Forecasters and Experiencers