

Spotlight effect

The **spotlight effect** is the phenomenon in which people tend to believe they are being noticed more than they really are. Being that one is constantly in the center of one's own world, an *accurate* evaluation of how much one is noticed by others is uncommon. The reason behind the spotlight effect comes from the innate tendency to forget that although one is the center of one's own world, one is not the center of everyone else's. This tendency is especially prominent when one does something atypical.^[1]

Research has empirically shown that such drastic over-estimation of one's effect on others is widely common. Many professionals in social psychology encourage people to be conscious of the spotlight effect and to allow this phenomenon to moderate the extent to which one believes one is in a social spotlight.^[2]

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History

The term "spotlight effect" was coined by Thomas Gilovich and Kenneth Savitsky.^[3] The phenomenon made its first appearance in the world of psychology in the journal *Current Directions in Psychological Science* in 1999. Although this was the first time the effect was termed, it was not the first time it had been described. There were other studies done before 1999 that had looked at phenomena similar to the spotlight effect that Gilovich and Savitsky described. Thomas Gilovich had been studying this phenomenon for many years and wrote other research papers in the years leading up to his work with Savitsky. In his study with Savitsky, he combined the different effects he had observed previously to describe the spotlight.^[3] Gilovich was not the only one who had noticed this occurrence of the spotlight effect. David Kenny and Bella DePaulo conducted a study that looked at whether or not people knew how others view them. Kenny and DePaulo thought that individuals would base what others thought of them using their own self-perceptions rather than other feedback given to them. The study found that individuals' views of what others think of them is variable compared to what is actually thought of them.^[4]

Ties to other psychological concepts

The spotlight effect is an extension of several psychological phenomena. Among these is the phenomenon known as *anchoring and adjustment*, which suggests that individuals will use their own internal feelings of anxiety and the accompanying self-representation as an anchor, then insufficiently correct for the fact that others are less privy to those feelings than they are themselves. Consequently, they overestimate the extent

to which their anxiety is obvious to onlookers. In fact, Clark and Wells (1995) suggest that socially phobic people enter social situations in a heightened self-focused state, namely, from a raised emotional anchor. This self-focused state makes it difficult for individuals to set aside public and private self-knowledge to focus on the task.^[5]

Another related phenomenon is called the *false-consensus effect*. The false-consensus effect occurs when individuals overestimate the extent to which other people share their opinions, attitudes, and behavior. This leads to a false conclusion which will increase someone's self-esteem. The false-consensus effect is the opposing theory to the *false uniqueness effect*, which is the tendency of one to underestimate the extent to which others share the same positive attitudes and behavior. Either of these effects can be applied to the spotlight effect.^[5]

The *self-as-target bias* is another closely linked phenomenon with the spotlight effect. This concept describes when someone believes that events are disproportionately directed towards him or herself. For example, if a student had an assignment due in class and did not prepare as well as they should have, the student may start to panic and think that simply because they did not prepare well, the teacher will know and call on them for answers.^{[6][7]}

Also relevant to the spotlight effect is the *illusion of transparency* (sometimes called the *observer's illusion of transparency*), which is people's tendency to overestimate the degree to which their personal mental state is known by others. Another manifestation of the illusion of transparency is a tendency for people to overestimate how well they understand others' personal mental states. This cognitive bias is similar to the *illusion of asymmetric insight*, in which people perceive their knowledge of others to surpass other people's knowledge of themselves.^[5]

Other related concepts are egocentric bias, self-referential encoding, self-reference effect and Ideas of reference and delusions of reference.

Research

The spotlight effect plays a significant role in many different aspects of psychology and society. Primarily, research on this phenomenon has been pioneered by four individuals: Thomas Gilovich, Kenneth Savitsky, Victoria Medvec, and Thomas Kruger. The main focuses of their research center around social judgments, salience of individual contributions, actions of individuals, and how individuals believe others perceive them.

Social judgment and salience

In social judgment, embarrassment plays a considerable role in the degree to which the spotlight effect is manifested. Research by Gilovich, Kruger, and Medvec indicated that certain situations in which perceivably embarrassing items are factors, such as an embarrassing t-shirt, increase the extent to which the spotlight effect is experienced by an individual. The timing of the exposure during a perceivably embarrassing situation also plays a role in the severity of the spotlight effect. If the exposure is immediate, the spotlight effect significantly increases in decision making scenarios. Delayed exposure, however, decreases spotlight effect intensity.^[3]

Salience of ideas and important contributions within a group are additional aspects of social judgment that are affected by the spotlight effect. Individuals tend to overestimate the extent to which their contributions make an impact on those around them. In a group setting, those contributions are thought of by the

individual as being more significant than the contributions of their group members and that the other members believe the same about that individual's contributions.^[3]

Actions and perceptions

Actions of individuals and how they believe others perceive their performance also plays an important part of spotlight effect research. Gilovich, Medvec, and Savitsky further explored this idea. In situations that involve large, interacting groups, a common detail identifies the reason attention of others is not solely focused on the individual. In these settings, like a class lecture or athletic competition, attention is divided between focusing on the individual and on the actions of the group. The inability to identify the split attention leads individuals to overestimate the likelihood that their peers will perceive them poorly.^[8]

Similarly, Gilovich, Medvec, and Savitsky further elaborated upon their research and concluded that in situations involving an audience member whose sole purpose is to observe, the severity of the spotlight effect is not overestimated because the focus of an audience's attention is centered upon the individual performing.^[8]

See also

- [Self-consciousness](#)

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