The Spotlight Effect in Social Judgment: A Multigroup Replication of Gilovich, Medvec, & Savitsky (2000)

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ABSTRACT

The current project represents eight replications of study 1 from Gilovich, Medvec, and Savitsky (2000) designed to test the hypothesis that individuals wearing a potentially embarrassing article of clothing (i.e., food-stained t-shirt) would overestimate the degree to which their actions or appearance are noticed by others.

In short, the spotlight effect refers to a tendency for people to grossly overestimate the degree to which their actions or appearance are noticed by others. For example, in the original study, when asked to predict the percentage of observers who would recall the image of singer Barry Manilow on a target participant's t-shirt, a mean discrepancy of 27% [95% CI: 11%, 43%] was observed (Gilovich et al., 2000). In other words, target participants wearing a potentially embarrassing article of clothing appeared to fixate on their appearance, thus distorting their own estimates of the amount of attention paid to them by others.

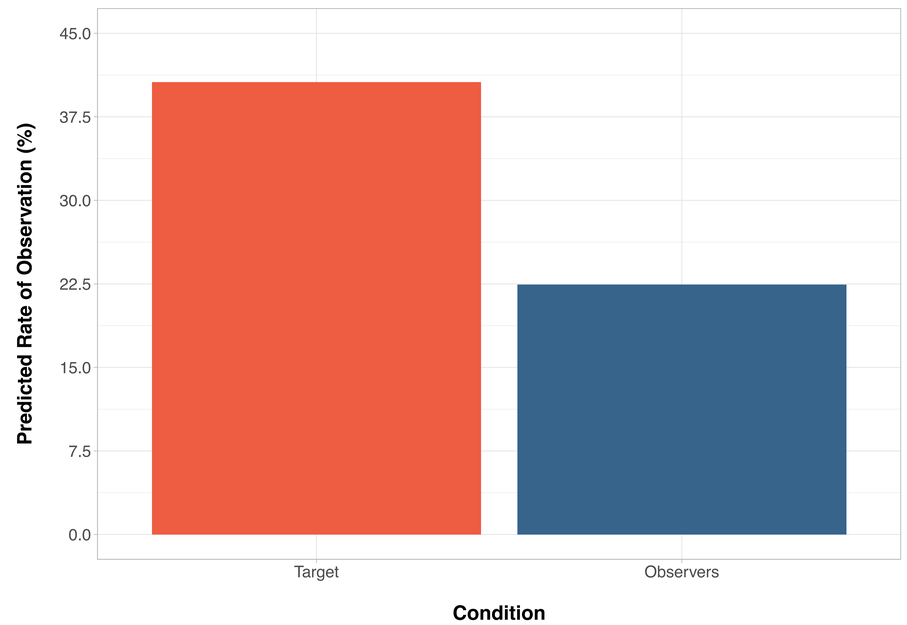

Figure 1. Predicted rate of observation by Target vs. actual rate by Observers.

METHOD

The current study utilized two groups of research participants: a) observers (*n* = 214) and b) target subjects (*n* = 8). Additionally, we utilized two control groups: a) A (*n* = 16) and B (*n* = 7). Observer participants were told the study was an investigation of incidental memory, or, a person's awareness of things they are not told to pay attention to.

To that end, observers completed a series of mental rotation tasks. While observers were completing the mental rotation tasks, a target subject was asked to don a t-shirt with an obvious food stain on the upper center portion approximately 2.5 in. in diameter. Once wearing the t-shirt, target subjects were told to knock and enter the experimental room. Upon entering the room, the experimenter paused briefly as if pondering a thought before asking the target subject to instead wait outside the room. Following the target participant's exit, observer participants were asked whether or not they could recall certain aspects of the target's appearance (e.g., height, sex, hair color, t-shirt).

Control group participants were asked to watch a contrived, video recorded, version of the experiment within an online survey platform. Following the video, control group 1 participants were asked to estimate the number of observers in the video who would recall what was on the target subject's t-shirt. Control group 2 participants were asked to estimate the number of observers in the video who would recall that there was a food stain on the target subject's t-shirt.

Table 1.

Summary of Observation Rates by Experimental Condition

Condition	Observation Rate (%)	*SE*	95% CI
Target	40.63	11.60	[13.25, 68.00]
Observers	22.43	2.86	[16.80, 28.06]
Control 1	55.38	6.82	[41.95, 68.82]
Control 2	91.43	68.60	[-43.71, 226.57]

Note. SE = standard error. CI = confidence interval.

RESULTS

A simple one-sample t-test with 95% confidence intervals was used to test the alternative hypothesis. A mean difference of -18.19 percentage points was observed between the target participant's estimate of the number of observers who recalled the food stain and the actual observation rate, $t(213) = -6.36$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI = [-16.79, -28.06].

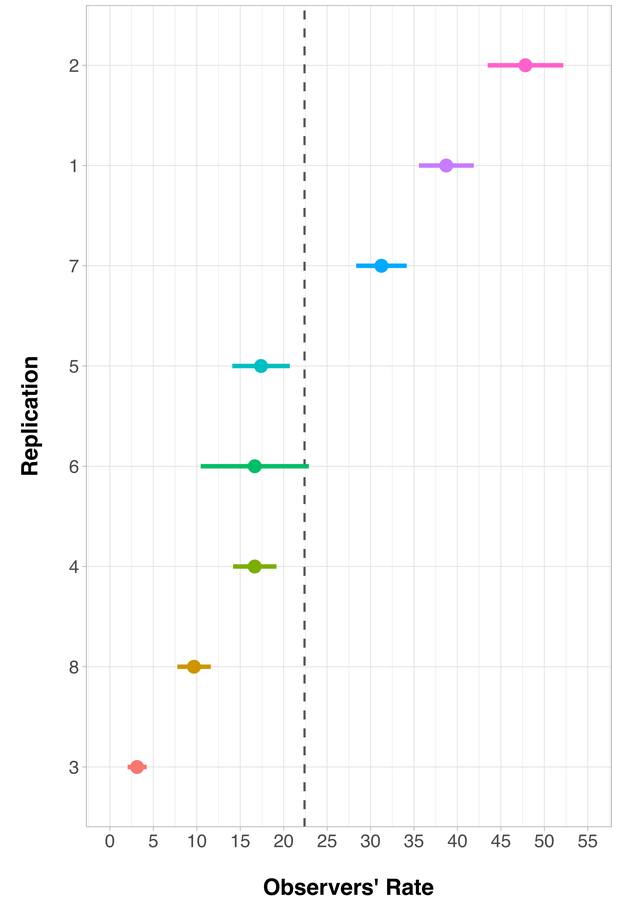

Figure 2. Confidence intervals and rates of observation by replication number.