CONFIRMATORY SEARCH STRATEGIES IN SOCIAL INTERACTION: HOW, WHEN, WHY, AND WITH WHAT CONSEQUENCES

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Recent research has suggested that people test their beliefs about other individuals by behaviorally searching for evidence that confirms these beliefs. This report focuses on the nature and generalizability of this confirmatory search strategy. Experiment 1 supported the generality of the confirmatory search strategy by showing that people generated confirmatory search strategies spontaneously, and did so whether probing for evidence pertaining to dominance–submissiveness or extraversion–introversion. Experiment 2 indicated that perceivers who were highly uncertain of their beliefs tended to search for a mixture of confirmatory and disconfirmatory evidence, using search strategies that were unlikely to constrain the responses of targets. In contrast, perceivers who were certain of their beliefs displayed a clear preference for belief-confirmatory evidence and solicited such evidence utilizing highly constraining search strategies. Finally, Experiment 3 indicated that simply entertaining a belief raised the perceived diagnosticity of evidence that promised to support that belief. This questions the utility of contending that people prefer diagnostic information over confirmatory information, since they are often one and the same in the eyes of perceivers. We conclude that there is a fairly pervasive, cognitively based tendency for people to solicit support for their social beliefs, but that the character and interpersonal consequences of such efforts vary as a function of several identifiable parameters.

> The moment one has formed a belief that seems satisfactory, that moment affection for his intellectual child springs into existence, and as the explanation grows into a definite theory his parental affections cluster about his offspring and it grows more and more dear to him.   There springs also unwittingly a pressing   . of the facts to make them fit the theory.   (Chamberlain, 1897; cited in Platt, 1964, p. 350)

There can be little doubt that people sometimes fight like tigers to preserve their theories and beliefs. For many years, observers attributed this preference for evidence that confirms one's beliefs to various motivational processes. Although they may try to be objective, the argument went, people are more concerned with looking good or appearing knowledgeable than with developing beliefs that correspond to the objective evidence.

Research conducted during the 1950s suggested that cognitive as well as motivational factors may account for people's tendency to work to confirm their beliefs. In their classic work on concept attainment, Bruner, Goodnow, and Austin (1956) found that people learned concepts more easily on the basis of positive instances (i.e., instances that exemplified the concept) than on the basis of negative instances. Subsequent research on hypothesis testing provided direct evidence of a cognitive preference for belief-confirmatory evidence. Wason and Johnson-Laird (1972), for example, demonstrated that in testing hypotheses about physical objects (e.g., "All chairs have four legs"), people preferentially searched for evidence that would tend to confirm rather than disconfirm the hypothesis they were testing—even though they had no particular investment in the hypothesis they were asked to test.

Snyder and Swann (1978) illustrated the significance for social interaction of this cognitively based preference for confirmatory information. In this research, some perceivers were asked to test the hypothesis that a target person was an extravert, and others were asked to test the hypothesis that the target was an introvert. Perceivers then selected 12 questions from a list of 26 questions. Some of the questions probed for evidence of extraversion (e.g., "What would you do if you wanted to liven things up at a party?"). Other questions probed for evidence of introversion (e.g., "In what situations do you wish you could be more outgoing?"). Still other questions were neutral with respect to extraversion–introversion (e.g., "What do you think the good and bad points of acting friendly and open are?"). The major dependent variable was whether perceivers chose questions that probed for evidence of extraversion, introversion, or both.

Snyder and Swann (1978) discovered a consistent tendency for people to search preferentially for evidence that would tend to con-

firm the hypothesis under scrutiny. Whereas perceivers who were testing for extraversion selectively probed for evidence of extraversion, those testing for introversion selectively probed for evidence of introversion. Furthermore, in one study these researchers found that perceivers' search strategies constrained the behaviors of targets so that targets' behaviors confirmed perceivers' initial hypotheses. They concluded that perceivers' preference for belief-confirmatory evidence may prompt them unwittingly to adopt information-seeking strategies that lead to the specious confirmation of their initial beliefs.

Although there may be nothing inherently unreasonable or flawed in utilizing a confirmatory search strategy (e.g., Klayman & Ha, 1987), Snyder and Swann's (1978) findings suggest that such a strategy may nevertheless have undesirable social consequences. One implication, for example, is that even the best-intentioned therapist, teacher, or layperson may unwittingly adopt a confirmatory search strategy and thereby may constrain the response options of targets in ways that cause targets to behaviorally confirm erroneous expectancies. The potential for error may be especially great in such instances, since perceivers appear to be generally unaware of the constraining impact of their own actions on the reactions of targets (e.g., Gilbert and Jones, in press; Swann, Pelham, & Roberts, 1987). In light of this, it is important to learn more about the conditions under which people are likely to employ the confirmatory search strategy.

The first issue that we address here concerns the generality of the preference for confirmatory information documented by Snyder and Swann (1978). In their investigations and follow-ups (see Snyder, 1984), participants tested hypotheses about the extraversion–introversion of targets by selecting questions from a list that was created prior to the research. Some critics (Trope, Bassok, & Alon, 1984) have noted that this evidence does not indicate that people will generate confirmatory search strategies spontaneously. Others have suggested that the effect may not generalize to other trait dimensions. In the present research, Experiment 1 addressed both of these criticisms by examining the search strategies perceivers developed *spontaneously* when they tested beliefs concerning a target's dominance–submissiveness as well as extraversion–introversion.

Our second experiment was based on the observation that some questions (e.g., "How often do you beat your wife?") are more constraining than others (e.g., "Have you ever beaten your wife?"). This distinction is important, since highly constraining questions may limit the response options of targets more than nonconstraining ones. That is, when targets are asked highly constraining questions, rules of discourse (e.g., Grice, 1975) enjoin them to supply evidence that verifies the premises inherent in the questions. As a result, targets in

Snyder and Swann's (1978) research nearly always accepted the premises inherent in the questions, even when by doing so they supplied answers that were nonrepresentative of their true personalities (see Swann, Giuliano, and Wegner, 1982). In contrast, it is much easier for targets to disconfirm the premises inherent in nonconstraining questions. In light of the potential importance of this distinction, we sought to specify the conditions under which people would ask constraining versus nonconstraining questions.

A final issue concerned recent claims that people prefer diagnostic information rather than confirmatory information (Trope & Bassok, 1983). Snyder and Swann assumed that people believe that confirmatory information is more diagnostic than disconfirmatory information (cf. Swann & Read, 1981). If they were correct, then it hardly seems useful to suggest that they prefer diagnostic information over confirmatory information, since perceivers construe them as one and the same. Experiment 3 tested the proposition that confirmatory information would be construed as more diagnostic than disconfirmatory information.

EXPERIMENT 1: PERCEIVERS' SPONTANEOUS BELIEF-TESTING STRATEGIES

METHOD

Participants

A total of 26 male and 23 female undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin participated in this experiment for credit in their introductory psychology course. Participants were run in one large group session.

Procedure

All participants learned that their task would be to prepare a series of questions to determine whether a hypothetical respondent possessed the characteristics described in a trait profile. Participants read the profile and then wrote five questions to determine whether the respondent seemed like the person described in that profile. They then received a second profile and wrote five questions to determine whether a hypothetical respondent possessed the attributes described in that profile. The first profile described either dominance or submissiveness; the second profile described either extraversion or introversion.

The extravert and introvert profiles were identical to those used by Snyder and Swann (1978). The dominant profile described a person who was commanding, forceful, and domineering, and had other associated characteristics. The submissive profile described the opposite set of characteristics (e.g., gentle, passive, etc.).

After the initial phase of the study, two judges coded the questions. So that judges could remain blind to condition, they rated the characteristics of a person who would respond "yes" to a question (e.g., extraverted, submissive, etc.). This allowed us to place questions in four categories. "Confirmatory" questions were ones to which a "yes" answer would indicate presence of the trait under scrutiny (e.g., a confirmatory-dominant question was "Do you usually take the lead in a group of people?"). "Disconfirmatory" questions were ones to which a "yes" answer would indicate presence of the trait opposite to the trait under scrutiny (e.g., a disconfirmatory-dominant question was "Are you wishy-washy?").

"Equal-opportunity" questions were ones that would give respondents the opportunity to describe themselves in terms that would exemplify either the trait under scrutiny or its opposite. Some of these questions probed for evidence of a given trait and its opposite as well. For example, a person testing for introversion wrote, "Would you prefer to spend a nice quiet evening at home or would you rather go to a club or party?" "Do you talk about your problems or do you keep them to yourself?" Other questions in this category were open-ended: "What kind of first impressions do you think you give strangers?"

"Irrelevant" questions were ones judged to have no obvious relationship to the hypothesis or its opposite. For example, a person testing for dominance wrote "What does the best family look like?"

The judges were in agreement 93% of the time. Disagreements were resolved by a third judge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We expected that participants would tend to generate questions seeking evidence that would confirm rather than disconfirm the belief they were testing. Since preliminary analyses revealed that confirmatory and disconfirmatory questions were asked far more often (i.e., over 70% of the time) than equal-opportunity and irrelevant questions, we focused directly on the number of confirmatory and disconfirmatory questions written. Analysis of the dominance–submissiveness questions revealed an interaction between belief and question type such

that participants were more inclined to solicit evidence of a trait when they were testing for that trait than when they were testing for its opposite, F (1, 47) = 4.161, $p < .05$. The means shown in Table 1 indicated marginally reliable tendencies for participants to be more likely to probe for evidence of dominance when they were testing for dominance, F (1, 47) = 3.16, $p < .09$, and more inclined to probe for evidence of submissiveness when they were testing for submissiveness, F (1, 47) = 3.91, $p < .06$. A similar interaction between belief and question type emerged from the analysis of extraverted–introverted questions, F (1, 47) = 7.148, $p < .02$. In this case, participants were more apt to probe for evidence of extraversion when they were testing for extraversion, F (1, 47) = 19.59, $p < .001$, and more inclined (although not reliably so), F (1, 47) = 1.19, n.s., to probe for evidence of introversion when they were testing for introversion.

The analyses also showed that within the confirmatory–disconfirmatory questions, there was a consistent tendency for participants to ask more questions pertaining to one pole of the trait dimension. Specifically, collapsing over perceivers' beliefs, there was an overall preference for questions probing for evidence of dominance rather than submissiveness, F (1, 47) = 47.70, $p < .001$, and extraversion rather than introversion, F (1, 47) = 55.62, $p < .001$. One reason for this could be that participants assumed that questions pertaining to dominance and extraversion were especially diagnostic. That is, perceivers may

TABLE 1

Experiment 1: Type of Confirmatory–Disconfirmatory Questions Generated

PERCEIVERS' BELIEF	QUESTION TYPE	
	PROBING FOR DOMINANCE	PROBING FOR SUBMISSIVENESS
Dominance	3.00	0.50
Submissiveness	2.40	1.04
	PROBING FOR EXTRAVERSION	PROBING FOR INTROVERSION
Extraversion	3.52	0.52
Introversion	2.25	0.83

Note. Higher numbers indicate more questions.

have reasoned that whereas dominant or extraverted people may occasionally display evidence of submissiveness or introversion, submissive or introverted people may find it difficult to behave in a dominant or extraverted manner. This reasoning would have led them to conclude that dominant and extraverted questions were especially informative (cf. Reeder & Brewer, 1979). Alternatively, it may be that people are more confortable probing for evidence related to dominance and extraversion because they believe that characteristics related to these traits are more socially desirable and hence easier for respondents to discuss.

Our findings support those of Snyder and Swann (1978), in that simply forming a belief about a target individual made perceivers more likely to solicit evidence that would tend to confirm that belief. They extend the results of this earlier research by showing that subjects tended to *generate* questions probing for evidence that confirmed their beliefs, thereby laying to rest the concern that people may only *choose* such questions from an existing list. In addition, we found that subjects employed the confirmatory search strategy to test for evidence of dominance–submissiveness as well as extraversion–introversion.

Nevertheless, there is an important difference between the questions that Snyder and Swann's (1978) participants chose and the questions that our participants generated in Experiment 1. Although our participants did preferentially search for evidence to support their beliefs, none of their questions were as constraining as those selected by Snyder and Swann's participants. For example, whereas Snyder and Swann's participants chose queries such as "What would you do to liven things up at a party?", our participants wrote questions such as "Would you be inclined to liven things up at a party?" This leads one to ask whether people *ever* ask highly constraining questions such as those developed by Snyder and Swann. We suspect so, but only when they are relatively certain that the belief is accurate. Swann and Ely (1984), for example, found that increments in belief certainty increased the extent to which people sought evidence to confirm their beliefs. Insofar as belief certainty increases the *amount* of confirmatory information seeking, it may also influence the *quality* of such activity. Specifically, once perceivers are relatively certain of a belief, they may no longer feel compelled to "leave the door open" for evidence that may undermine their expectancies. Instead, they may strive to build upon the information they already have by simply assuming that the expectancy is valid, and enacting highly constraining confirmatory search strategies.

EXPERIMENT 2: BELIEF CERTAINTY
AND INFORMATION SEEKING

Experiment 2 was designed to test the hypothesis that the certainty of people's expectations might influence the nature of their information-seeking strategies. We reasoned that when perceivers were uncertain of their expectancies, they would not only be less inclined to adopt confirmatory search strategies, as were Swann and Ely's (1984) participants, but they would also favor nonconstraining questions over constraining ones. When perceivers were certain of their expectancies, however, we expected that they would solicit expectancy-confirmatory information utilizing highly constraining search strategies.

To test these predictions, we first induced participants to develop uncertain or certain expectancies about targets. We then gave them access to mildly constraining and highly constraining questions and instructed them to use these questions to discover what a target individual was like.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 30 male and 38 female undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin participated in this experiment for credit in their introductory psychology class. Participants completed the study in a large group session.

Procedure

The experimenter informed participants that their task would be to discover what a target person was like by choosing a series of questions to ask of that person. Participants read that the target had taken a recently developed personality test that was designed to test extraversion (introversion). Participants then read either the extravert or introvert profile developed by Snyder and Swann (1978).

Orthogonal to this manipulation of belief, participants in the high-belief-certainty conditions learned that the evidence supporting the belief was extremely good. Specifically, these participants discovered that the personality test that the target took had been shown to be extremely accurate and that there was converging evidence that it was valid. In contrast, participants in the low-belief-certainty conditions learned that the evidence supporting the test was weak. In par-

ticular, they discovered that research had shown that the personality test was "extremely inaccurate" and "wrong almost as often as it is right."

Participants then received a list of 20 questions. Ten of the questions probed for evidence of extraversion, 5 in a highly constraining manner (e.g., "What kind of situations do you seek out if you want to meet new people?") and 5 in a mildly constraining manner (e.g., "Do you like to entertain people?"). The other 10 questions probed for evidence of introversion, 5 in a highly constraining manner (e.g., What factors make it hard for you to really open up to people?") and 5 in a mildly constraining manner (e.g., "Do you feel uncomfortable when a teacher calls on you to answer a question in class, even when you know the answer?"). Participants read the list of questions and selected the 8 questions that they believed would tell them most about what the target was like.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We anticipated that participants high in belief certainty would employ highly constraining search strategies in learning about the target, but that participants low in belief certainty would employ relatively non-constraining search strategies in learning about the target. The results generally supported these predictions. An analysis of variance of the questions participants selected indicated an overall preference for belief-confirmatory questions, $F\ (1,\ 64) = 3.69$, $p < .059$. However, as can be seen in Table 2, this overall preference for confirmatory questions was qualified by an interaction with belief certainty, $F\ (1,\ 64) = 5.93$,

TABLE 2

Experiment 2: The Impact of Belief Certainty on Information-Seeking Strategy

	BELIEF CERTAINTY	
QUESTION TYPE	LOW	HIGH
Mildly constraining		
Confirmatory	2.12	2.03
Disconfirmatory	2.00	1.26
Highly constraining		
Confirmatory	1.79	2.69
Disconfirmatory	2.09	2.03

Note. Higher numbers indicate more questions.

$p < .02$, such that participants who were highly certain of their beliefs displayed a preference for confirmatory questions, $F (1, 64) = 35.71$, $p < .01$, but those who were uncertain of their beliefs displayed no such preference, $F < 1$. Furthermore, belief certainty had a reliable impact on the *type* of confirmatory questions participants chose, $F (1, 66) = 4.03$, $p < .05$. Just as participants displayed a very slight, nonreliable preference for mildly constraining questions when certainty was low, $F < 1$, they clearly preferred highly constraining questions when certainty was high, $F (1, 66) = 15.33$, $p < .05$. Overall, these data support the notion that belief certainty is an important determinant of the nature of the search strategy perceivers utilize.

EXPERIMENT 3: WHY PEOPLE SEARCH FOR BELIEF-CONFIRMATORY EVIDENCE

Our third experiment asked why people search for confirmatory evidence. Snyder and Swann (1978) proposed that people preferentially search for belief-confirmatory evidence because their thought processes are structured so that confirmatory information seems especially diagnostic. This implies that perceivers who are motivated to evoke highly diagnostic information about targets will attempt to elicit information that will confirm their beliefs. In the eyes of perceivers, then, a confirmatory strategy and a "diagnostic" strategy may be one and the same. Experiment 3 addressed this issue by testing the hypothesis that merely entertaining a belief would raise the perceived diagnosticity of evidence appearing likely to support that belief.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 56 undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin participated in this experiment for credit in their introductory psychology course. Participants completed the study in one large group session.

Procedure

Upon arrival, all participants engaged in a preliminary task in which they wrote several questions that were designed to test for the characteristics described in either an extravert or an introvert profile. The experimenter then read a series of six questions taken from Snyder and Swann (1978). Two of these questions probed for evidence of

extraversion, two questions probed for evidence of introversion, and two questions were neutral with respect to extraversion–introversion. Participants then estimated how much they could learn about a respondent from listening to him or her answer each of the six questions. The experimenter emphasized that participants should base their ratings on their estimates of the probable informativeness of the respondent's answers, rather than whether the answers seemed likely to prove consistent with the description in the profile. These ratings were completed on a scale ranging from 1 ("could learn very little") to 5 ("could learn very much").

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Did the belief that participants were testing influence their perceptions of the potential informativeness of questions? Yes. A planned comparison indicated that within the extravert-belief conditions, participants viewed the extravert questions as more informative than the introvert and neutral questions (M's = 4.18 vs. 3.72 and 3.72, respectively), F (1, 54) = 6.20, $p < .05$. In contrast, within the introvert-belief condition, participants rated the introvert questions as more informative than the extravert and neutral questions (M's = 4.13 vs. 3.63 and 3.56, respectively), F (1, 54) = 9.01, $p < .01$.

The results of Experiment 3 suggest that once people form a hypothesis or belief about a person, their perceptions of the diagnosticity of information about that person undergo a radical shift. Just as evidence that would tend to confirm their beliefs comes to be viewed as relatively diagnostic, evidence that would tend to disconfirm their beliefs comes to be viewed as relatively nondiagnostic. Given that people's beliefs skew their perceptions of diagnosticity in this manner, it would seem perfectly reasonable for them to preferentially search for belief-confirmatory information, as they did in previous research (e.g., Snyder & Swann, 1978) and in the research reported in this paper.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our findings generally support the notion that once people form a belief about a given individual, they will be inclined to search for evidence that will tend to confirm that belief. As such, our data argue against recent contentions that the confirmatory search strategy is of limited generality. Experiment 1, for example, countered Sackett's

(1982) suggestion that perceivers only employ the confirmatory search strategy to test beliefs concerning extraversion–introversion; we now know that the effect generalizes to dominance–submissiveness as well.

The first experiment also showed that perceivers generate confirmatory search strategies spontaneously. This is the third study in which people have spontaneously generated confirmatory search strategies (see also Jerome, 1983; Trope & Bassok, 1983). The remainder have shown either a nonreliable preference for expectancy-confirmatory information (Wyer, Strack, & Fuhrman, 1982) or no preference whatsoever (Trope et al., 1984). (A study by Dallas and Baron, 1985, is not comparable to these studies because they defined a question as confirmatory only if it probed for evidence in a highly constraining fashion.)

Experiment 3 provided direct support for the notion that simply entertaining a belief elevates the perceived informativeness of evidence that may confirm that belief. These data bolster the view that people search for belief-confirmatory evidence because they regard such evidence as exceptionally diagnostic. Apparently, from the perspective of perceivers, searching for confirmatory evidence is often the same thing as searching for diagnostic evidence. In light of this, Trope and Bassok's (1982) recent proposal that there exists a psychologically distinct tendency for people to prefer diagnostic information over confirmatory information seems rather incongruous.

But if our findings suggest that perceivers employ the confirmatory search strategy with some regularity, they also imply that perceivers do not utilize this strategy indiscriminately. Most important, our data clearly indicate that belief certainty influences both when and how people apply the confirmatory search strategy. As Swann and Ely (1984) found, people who were certain of their beliefs were inclined to search for confirmatory evidence; those who were uncertain of their beliefs searched for a mixture of confirmatory and disconfirmatory evidence. Our research shows that belief certainty can also influence the *nature* of the confirmatory search strategy people employ. That is, it appears that as people grow more certain of their beliefs, they are more inclined to abandon relatively nonconstraining confirmatory search strategies in favor of constraining ones.

Evidence indicating that people vary their strategies of information seeking as a function of belief certainty should be reassuring for those concerned with the diagnosticity or reasonableness of people's belief-testing strategies. Apparently, people who are uncertain of their beliefs behave in ways that indicate an openness to information that may undermine their beliefs. At the same time, those

who are certain of their beliefs assume that it is pointless and ineffi-
cient to "beat around the bush" by utilizing nonconstraining confir-
matory search strategies. Instead, they simply assume that the belief
is correct and probe for confirmatory evidence using constraining
search strategies.

Although we believe that nonconstraining search strategies are
certainly preferable to constraining ones when belief certainty is low,
we are not suggesting that they are foolproof. Even "nonconstrain-
ing" confirmatory search strategies may systematically channel the
responses of targets. Wyer *et al.* (1982), for example, found that targets
who were asked nonconstraining questions that probed for evidence
of extraversion (e.g., "Do you think you are popular with people?")
answered "yes" 82% of the time; those asked questions that probed
for introversion (e.g., "Do you ever feel ill at ease and awkward?")
answered "yes" an average of 74% of the time. To the extent that this
tendency of targets to provide "yes" answers is a general one, even a
nonconstraining confirmatory search strategy may cause targets to
provide answers that misrepresent their actual personalities.

Of course, just as it would be naive to assume that perceivers
always search for confirmatory evidence, so too would it be mistaken
to assume that targets *always* provide perceivers with evidence that
confirms perceivers' beliefs. One reason why targets may fail to be-
haviorally confirm the beliefs of perceivers is that they prefer others to
see them as they see themselves (e.g., Swann, 1983). Consequently,
targets who sense that perceivers have developed erroneous impres-
sions of them may behave in ways that cause perceivers to correct
their misconceptions (e.g., Swann, in press).

CONCLUSIONS

There is now considerable evidence that people are inclined to test
their expectancies about others by searching for evidence that is likely
to confirm those expectations. The use of such confirmatory search
strategies deserves attention, because they may constrain the re-
sponse options of targets so as to elicit expectancy-consistent evi-
dence, even if the expectancy was wrong in the beginning. Under
certain conditions, then, confirmatory search strategies may under-
mine people's efforts to formulate accurate impressions of others (for a
discussion, see Swann, 1984). The research reported in this paper has
identified some of the cognitive and social situational factors that
encourage people to search for confirmatory information about their
interaction partners.

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