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The
organizational
charlatan scale

The organizational charlatan scale

Developing an instrument to measure false performance

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Abstract *This paper reports on the development of the organizational charlatan scale (OCS). The OCS measures one's emphasis on behaviors associated with perceived performance levels at the expense of those associated with actual performance levels. Data from one company suggests that organizational charlatans receive lower objective technical evaluations but higher subjective management evaluations. The OCS can assist in human resource decisions by providing managers at all levels of the organization with an overall assessment of one's proclivity for employing such behaviors.*

During the last decade, organizations have experienced a greater emphasis on self-managed work teams, increased federal and state personnel legislation, greater work force mobility, and increased management spans resulting from middle management reductions (Strutton and Pelton, 1998). In concert, these factors have placed an ever-increasing premium on effective personnel appraisal. Although most executives and human resource consultants appear to recognize the need to train managers in performance appraisal and sell them on its importance, many managers continue to avoid performance reviews or rush through them in a haphazard manner (Schellhardt, 1996; Wayne and Liden, 1995).

With the recent introduction of a skeptical, less loyal generation X into the work force, opportunities abound like never before for individuals masquerading as high performers in positions where they are poorly managed and appraised (Wayne and Liden, 1995). Now more than ever, managers must learn to identify "organizational charlatans" – individuals who seek to improve their perceived performance at the expense of their actual performance – and remove them from the organization while preventing other charlatans from joining it.

Organizational charlatanism (OC) is related to but not synonymous with impression management and ingratiation. Such distinctions are made in the section below, followed by an outline of the development of the organizational charlatan scale (OCS). A report on a second data collection provides insight into

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the relationship between OC and performance appraisal and provides an agenda for future research on the construct and scale.

Impression managers and organizational charlatans

Impression management, the process of establishing favorable perceptions of oneself or one's ideas in the minds of other individuals (Rao *et al.*, 1995; Schlenker, 1980; Wayne and Liden, 1995) has been systematically studied over the past two decades. Research examined the role of impression management in employee selection processes (Becker and Colquitt, 1992; Fletcher, 1990; Kacmar *et al.*, 1992), decision-making (Elsbach and Sutton, 1992; Mazen, 1990), supervisor-subordinate relationships (Deluga, 1991; Fandt and Ferris, 1990; Wood and Mitchell, 1981; Yukl and Falbe, 1990), feedback (Ashford and Northcraft, 1992; Gardner and Martinko, 1988; Morrison and Bies, 1991; Northcraft and Ashford, 1990), and most recently performance appraisal (Bohra and Pandey, 1984; Ferris *et al.*, 1994; Kipnis and Schmidt, 1988; Porter *et al.*, 1983; Shepperd and Arkin, 1991; Wayne and Ferris, 1990; Wayne and Kacmar, 1991; Wayne and Liden, 1995). For the most part, these investigations appear to center on two main themes. One stream examines impression management as an influence strategy used by subordinates to ingratiate themselves with their supervisors or influential others (Ferris *et al.*, 1994; Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Liden and Mitchell, 1988; Ralston, 1985; Schlenker and Weigold, 1992; Tedeschi and Melburg, 1984; Wayne and Kacmar, 1991). A second stream considers how affect or liking and similarity, influence the process (Cardy and Dobbins, 1986; DeNisi and Williams, 1988; Tsui and Barry, 1986; Wayne and Ferris, 1990; Wayne and Liden, 1995).

From a review of impression management literature, it is readily apparent that workers who effectively manage their images are more likely to be hired, promoted, and receive attractive job assignments than those who do not (Judge and Ferris, 1993). Subordinates who systematically employ impression management and those adept at practicing influence tactics can favorably impact supervisory ratings, whereas those who do not employ these tactics are more likely to receive lower evaluations (Jones, 1964; Kipnis and Schmidt, 1988; Wayne and Ferris, 1990; Wayne and Kacmar, 1991). Liking or disliking appears to significantly influence performance evaluations by fostering halo effects (Tsui and Barry, 1986). Finally, once these impressions have been formulated in the minds of supervisors and translated into performance categories, further evaluations of that individual will be stereotypical and result in similar evaluations (Feldman, 1981). This vicious cycle underscores the importance of identifying charlatan behavior in employees and prospective hires as early as possible.

Although there are shortcomings associated with most early studies which considered the development, use, and improvement of scaling techniques (Ferris *et al.*, 1994), recent investigations have addressed some of these concerns. Wayne and Liden (1995), concerned about the predominance of laboratory investigations, the lack of longitudinal research, and the failure of

most impression management studies to address impacts on performance appraisals, tested a model that examined the effects of subordinate behaviors on performance ratings that engendered feelings of liking and similarity in supervisors. Similarly, Rao *et al.* (1995), listing several deficiencies, among which are a tendency by most researchers to limit their studies to only a few impression management strategies and to conduct studies in laboratory settings using student subjects, empirically tested the relationship between subordinate goals and influence behaviors on the perceptions of their supervisors. Lastly, Ferris *et al.* (1994), citing the lack of comprehensive investigations incorporating multiple components, formulated and tested a model of the appraisal process that incorporated social, situational, affective, and cognitive elements while paying particular attention to the role subordinate influence plays in the process.

Although the foregoing studies have addressed a myriad of interpersonal behaviors that influence performance assessment but are not associated with excellence (Rao *et al.*, 1995), and have eliminated some of the methodological and theoretical problems of earlier investigations, they still fail to address an issue central to organizational evaluation processes. That is, how does an enterprise identify “organizational charlatans”, individuals who are either incompetent performers but skillful in promoting the impression that they perform well as differentiated from employees who ingratiate themselves in an effort to be liked? Whereas, many poor performers are simply perfunctory, organizational charlatans seek to ensure that they are not viewed as such. They may be the office sycophants, adopting promotional behaviors as a means to avoid detection. They may have the ability to obfuscate their actual performance to the extent that even the most trenchant manager is fooled. They progress to higher levels of responsibility and authority in spite of their incompetence. And, they create dissension and ill will among their coworkers, who, unlike the target of impression management, are usually able to separate reality from illusion.

On the surface, it may seem that there is little, if any, difference between the charlatan and the ingratiating employee attempting to effect a feeling of liking. Indeed, empirical research (e.g. Wayne and Liden, 1995), considered the employment of impression management techniques without regard to performance. As such, subjects who achieved a high score may or may not be substituting impression management for strong performance. In fact, however, there appear to be differences between these groups of individuals, particularly regarding the tactics they employ in altering perceptions. Jones and Pittman (1982) classified individuals into categories that include those who use ingratiation tactics for affect, and self-promoters whose goal is to project an impression of competence. Kumar and Beyerlein (1991) developed and tested the measure of ingratiation behaviors in organizational settings (MIBOS) scale, a measure which has received solid support in the literature (Harrison *et al.*, 1998; Kacmar and Valle, 1997). Tedeschi and Melburg (1984) identified several different self-presentation tactics used by individuals for either assertive or

defensive functions. Each of these strategies yields different behaviors. Their classification included assertive behaviors designed to be proactive rather than reactive, and defensive behaviors whose purpose is to extricate the individual from difficulty.

Each of these behaviors may also be strategic or tactical, with the former having long-term goals and the latter aimed at effecting short-term results. Godfrey *et al.* (1986) demonstrated that there appear to be differences in behavioral tactics between employees who use impression management for affect in an attempt to be liked and those who engage in these activities in order to disguise their productivity deficiencies (see Bolino, 1999). They concluded that successful ingratators seem to rely on skills such as leaning forward in conversations, animation, eye contact, and the use of facial expressions, whereas self-promoters are more concerned with impressing others with their accomplishments. Finally, whether impression-management tactics have no effect, positive effects or negative effects on performance evaluations is largely dependent on the specific tactic used (Harrison *et al.*, 1998; Strutton and Pelton, 1998; Wayne and Ferris, 1990).

While nobody seems to question the importance of understanding impression management, little effort has been placed on how to identify individuals who tend to use these tactics. Rather, researchers appear to be concerned with identifying the techniques involved in forming impressions, its impact on liking and disliking, the effects of impression management on employment decisions, and the biases manifested in the performance appraisal process. It seems widely accepted that impression management exists, will continue to be present, and the best that supervisors and managers can hope for is to understand the process, recognize the warning signs, and control its effects. As Wayne and Kacmar (1991) concluded "IM may positively influence supervisor performance ratings and, consequently, is a form of bias that needs to be recognized and controlled" (p. 85).

Recognizing and controlling impression management is no simple task. By its very nature, the successful use of impression management requires that the target be unaware that it is being used (Farmer *et al.*, 1997). Once favorable perceptions have been initiated in the mind of the target it appears highly unlikely that objective evaluations of the individual will be possible. Nor would it seem feasible that the target would be able to accept the fact that their perceptions were induced.

In an effort to assist in the identification and subsequent controlling of impression management, the present investigators sought to develop a scale to identify charlatan behavior. Unlike other attempts at recognizing impression management that largely rely on training individuals in recognizing its signs, it was hoped that the present scale would allow for an objective measure to be employed. Thus, charlatans could be readily identified and appropriate employment decisions made.

Procedure

The procedure used to develop a measure of organizational charlatanism largely follows guidelines recommended by Hinkin (1995), Nunnally (1978) and Churchill (1979). Following the development of a definition of the organizational charlatan construct, an exhaustive set of 92 items believed to reflect attitudinal dimensions of OC were proposed by the researchers. The resulting test instrument utilized a five-point Likert scale. A response of 1 denotes strong agreement (i.e. "strongly agree") with a given statement, while a response of 5 denotes strong disagreement (i.e. "strongly disagree"); responses of 2, 3, and 4 were included to allow the participant to express moderate levels of agreement or disagreement with each item.

The approach employed in the development of the items was primarily deductive. The goal was to develop an exhaustive list of items which appeared to reflect the OC construct as it had been conceptualized. A group of 122 undergraduate business students completed the 92-item question survey, after which a fresh look at content validity was warranted.

An examination of various factor models and a reconsideration of the items suggested that 59 were vague or conceptually inadequate in wording; these items did not justify further consideration. The surviving 33 items were then further scrutinized by an author and two additional management researchers to assess content validity. Nine items were judged to be ambiguous, redundant, or not clearly reflective of the construct[1]. These nine items were eliminated; 24 remained in a second instrument that was administered to a group of 106 undergraduate students[2].

A second survey considering the remaining 24 items was followed by an exploratory factor analysis. The scree test was applied and factor loadings were generated at what appeared to be a "natural cutoff" in eigenvalues (5.81 and 3.86), resulting in two factors accounting for 40 per cent of the variance (Bollen, 1989). Twelve items did not sufficiently load on one of the factors and were eliminated. A final theoretical scrutinization of the remaining items eliminated three others in order to improve both parsimony and construct validity. The resulting instrument consisted of the nine remaining items as well as items for age and gender to ensure a representative sample.

A critical balance between adequate domain sampling and parsimony was sought at this stage. Specifically, a fairly short measure was sought so that response and fatigue bias could be minimized, while maintaining a sufficient number of items to foster high levels of content and construct validity, internal consistency, and test-retest reliability (Kenny, 1979; Schmitt and Stults, 1985; Schriesheim and Eisenbach, 1991)

Measurement properties of the OCS

The nine-item OCS was administered to 155 managers of several firms located in the Southeastern US. This sample was 60 per cent male, with ages ranging from 22 to 61 with a mean of 33, suggesting that a representative sample had been obtained.

Reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity

The principal components (Harman and Jones, 1966) factor extraction technique resulted in each item loading significantly on only one of the two factors. The loadings supported the existence of two dimensions of the OC construct. Table I provides factor loadings for single and two-factor models for the initial (i.e. survey of managers from different organizations) and the single organization samples.

The first dimension, expectations (i.e. items CHAREX1-CHAREX4), encompasses four items that consider one's beliefs concerning one's preference

Variable	Item	Single factor loading*	Two-factor loadings Expect.	Image	Subscale factor loadings**
CHAREX1	It's more important to look busy than to be busy	0.573	0.747	0.313	0.787
CHAREX2	It's better to figure out how the organization will evaluate you and work accordingly than to figure out what the organization needs and do it	0.547	0.782	0.261	0.791
CHAREX3	I am only concerned about what the organization expects from me, not what the organization should be doing	0.506	0.785	0.206	0.750
CHAREX4	It's better to do what your boss tells you than worry about whether it's correct or not	0.510	0.802	0.201	0.801
CHARIM1	I try to dress better when I'm going to be seen by key organizational decision makers	0.885	0.395	0.917	0.927
CHARIM2	You should make a special effort to enhance your appearance when you're going to be seen by those with the most power in your organization	0.845	0.382	0.874	0.884
CHARIM3	In today's competitive world, maintaining a strong positive image is critical to career success	0.793	0.215	0.902	0.896
CHARIM4	It's a good idea to do what will result in strong evaluations even if it's not exactly what the organization needs to be done	0.777	0.370	0.793	0.813
CHARIM5	Problems often arise when you have a confrontation with someone important in your organization	0.556	0.049	0.689	0.657

Table I.
The organizational charlatan scale: initial data collection

Notes: * Coefficient alpha for the single factor scale (i.e. the OCS) was 0.846
** Coefficient alphas were 0.789 and 0.895 for the expectations and image subscales respectively

for meeting organizational expectations. In other words, a high score along the first dimension examines the degree to which an individual is concerned with providing the outward appearances with high performance. The first item addresses the importance of “looking busy”. The second item considers one’s propensity to perform with the specific intention of scoring well on evaluations. The third item considers one’s lack of concern for doing what the organization needs. The final item evaluates the importance of simply doing “what your boss tells you”.

The second dimension, image (i.e. items CHARIM1-CHARIM5), consists of five items and is associated with the degree to which an individual seeks to bolster his or her image. The first two items consider the importance of appearance when being seen by key organizational players. The third item emphasizes the importance of a positive image in career success. The fourth item considers one’s beliefs about the relationship between what one does in an organization and the image he or she possesses. The final item considers one’s propensity to believe that organizational problems tend to arise from personality conflicts with important people in the organization.

Reliability and validity were assessed to ensure the integrity of the OCS. Coefficient alpha (Cronbach, 1951) for the OC scale was 0.85, indicating that the scale has a high level of internal consistency, an important indication of reliability (Kuratko *et al.*, 1990; Peter, 1979). Coefficient alphas for each of the subscales were 0.79 for the expectations scale and 0.89 for image scale (see Table I).

Convergent and discriminant validity were assessed in three ways. First, convergence and discrimination were assessed by correlation matrix (Bagozzi, 1981). The matrix developed represents mean correlations among items from each scale separately and mean correlations between items from different scales. Intra-correlations within the OC scale (items within the same subscales) were moderately high and consistent (0.48 among expectations items and 0.60 among image items), suggesting convergent validity (Campbell and Fiske, 1959). The inter-correlations within the OC scale (items within different subscales) were substantially lower and consistent (0.24), suggesting discriminant validity (Campbell and Fiske, 1959; Churchill, 1979).

Second, the convergence of the items on the two factors demonstrated convergent validity of the scale. The “clean” loading of each item on only one factor suggests discriminant validity. CHARIM1 and CHARIM4 demonstrated the highest cross loadings, 0.39 and 0.38 respectively. However, these loadings were considerably lower than those on the power subscale (0.92 and 0.87 respectively).

Finally, Fornell and Larcker (1981) proposed the use of variance extracted and shared variance statistics in the assessment of convergent and discriminant validity. Variance extracted is the amount of the joint variance captured by the construct and not by measurement error. Fornell and Larcker recommended 0.50 as a benchmark for the establishment of convergent validity. Variance extracted was 0.55 for the expectations subscale and 0.61 for

the image subscale, suggesting a moderately strong degree of convergence on the two factors.

Shared variance is the squared correlation between two constructs and should be significantly less than the extracted variances for either of the constructs. Shared variance between the two subscales was 0.09, suggesting discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

A second data collection

A second data collection was conducted to serve as a basis for future research hypotheses. In this sample, surveys were made available to approximately 400 lower and middle level managers in a single organization attending a management development seminar. Approximately 65 per cent ($n = 262$) of the attendees completed the survey. In addition to completing the scale, each respondent also provided gender data as well as the most recent summary performance evaluation scores for the three performance appraisal categories utilized in the organization: evaluation by management, evaluation by peers, and technical competence. The management and peer evaluation scores stem from behaviorally anchored ratings, whereas technical competence is based on a point system for skill mastery. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity.

Table II provides factor loadings for one-factor and two-factor solutions, as well as those for image and expectations subscales. These results also depict "clean" loadings, thereby supporting the integrity of the scale.

Table III shows the correlations between scores on the OCS and performance appraisals. Factor scores (regression method) were computed to measure the image and expectations factors of OC and the construct as a whole. When the three evaluation scores were pitted against the three OCS factor scores, eight of the nine correlation coefficients were significant at the 0.05 level.

Levene's test for equality of variance tested for significant differences between men and women in the survey. Although management and peer evaluations were not found to vary significantly by gender, the men in the sample received higher evaluations for technical competence (see Table IV). Men also scored significantly higher on the expectations charlatan component. No significant differences were found on either the image component or OC as a whole.

Discussion

As one might expect, peer evaluations were significantly and positively correlated with both management and technical evaluations. However, the correlation between management and technical evaluations was significant and negative. In other words, as objective, technical assessments of performance declined, management assessments increased. There are at least three possible explanations for this phenomenon, each of which is worthy of discussion.

First, some managers may abrogate their responsibility for appraisal and use their subjective evaluations to "help" those subordinates who score poorly

Variable	Item	Single factor loading	Two-factor loadings Expect.	Image	Subscale factor loadings**
CHAREX1	It's more important to look busy than to be busy	0.387	0.672	0.129	0.699
CHAREX2	It's better to figure out how the organization will evaluate you and work accordingly than to figure out what the organization needs and do it	0.542	0.748	0.281	0.767
CHAREX3	I am only concerned about what the organization expects from me, not what the organization should be doing	0.502	0.794	0.208	0.766
CHAREX4	It's better to do what your boss tells you than worry about whether it's correct or not	0.484	0.776	0.194	0.779
CHARIM1	I try to dress better when I'm going to be seen by key organizational decision makers	0.872	0.372	0.885	0.895
CHARIM2	You should make a special effort to enhance your appearance when you're going to be seen by those with the most power in your organization	0.833	0.340	0.853	0.863
CHARIM3	In today's competitive world, maintaining a strong positive image is critical to career success	0.786	0.182	0.877	0.874
CHARIM4	It's a good idea to do what will result in strong evaluations even if it's not exactly what the organization needs to be done	0.766	0.325	0.778	0.793
CHARIM5	Problems often arise when you have a confrontation with someone important in your organization	0.550	-0.035	0.699	0.671

Notes: * Coefficient alpha for the single factor scale (i.e. the OCS) was 0.811.

** Coefficient alphas were 0.732 and 0.879 for the image and expectations subscales respectively

Table II.
The organizational
charlatan scale:
organizational data

on the technical assessment component. This manipulation of the system violates the integrity of the performance appraisal process, limits the organization's ability to separate high performers from low ones, and inevitably leads to a substantial central tendency.

Second, some managers may be poor assessors of performance. Other factors being equal, one would expect that subordinates with superior technical skills would be seen by their managers as performing at least at a par with their peers. Under this scenario, the managers are either unwilling or unable to effectively discern performance differences. There is ample support in the

	Evaluation by management	Evaluation by peers	Evaluation for technical competence	Expectations factor score	Image factor score	Overall charlatan factor score
Evaluation by management	1.0000					
Evaluation by peers	0.5451*	1.0000				
Evaluation for technical com.	-0.2099*	0.3546*	1.0000			
Expectations factor score	0.3007*	0.1679*	-0.0768	1.0000		
Image factor score	0.1311*	-0.1943*	-0.2086*	0.2503*	1.0000	
Overall charlatan factor score	0.2323*	-0.0865	-0.2009*	0.6226*	0.9135*	1.0000

Table III. Correlations among factor scores and evaluation measures

Note: * significant at 0.05 level

Variable	Male (n = 146)	Female (n = 116)	Levene's <i>f</i> -score	Significance level
Evaluation by management	6.38	6.75	0.016	0.898
Evaluation by peers	6.50	6.37	0.110	0.295
Evaluation for technical competence	8.11	5.94	30.853	0.000
Expectations factor score	0.03	-0.04	14.313	0.000
Image factor score	-0.05	0.07	0.001	0.980
Overall charlatan factor score	-0.03	0.04	0.733	0.393

Table IV. Results of Levene's tests for equality of variances

literature for the notion that a substantial portion of managers are ineffective appraisers of subordinate performance (Bloom, 1999; Longnecker and Fink, 1997).

Third, subordinates who struggle in technical areas may compensate by engaging in behavior that improves their management evaluations, as suggested by the significant negative correlation between OC and the technical evaluation score. If this is true, then managers are being deceived by subordinates more skillful at hiding poor performance than at improving it.

There is likely enough truth in each of these three explanations to help explain the negative association between management and technical evaluations. In unison, they provide a dismal outlook on the validity of performance appraisals in the organization sampled and quite possibly in others as well. Managers who are poor evaluators and use the subjective part of

performance appraisal to counter undesired scores in other sections are easy prey for the subordinate charlatan lying in wait.

Another finding is equally disturbing. Correlations between management evaluations and the OC factors scores were positive and significant. In other words, management evaluations improved when subordinates placed greater emphases on maximizing one's image and doing what one believes is expected by the organization. This supports the notion that charlatan behavior has a positive effect on subjective performance assessments.

Technical evaluation scores were negatively correlated with the image and with the overall measure for OC, lending credence to the notion that less technically competent workers may engage in image-building behavior to compensate for their technical deficiencies. However, no association was found between technical competence and expectations. Hence, while they may be fooling their managers with positive images, less technically competent managers are no more interested than their peers in meeting the expectations of their organization.

Although peer evaluation scores were positively associated with expectations, they were negatively associated with image. Hence, when individuals seek to meet the expectations of the organization, their peers are favorably impressed. However, when they seek to artificially inflate their images to conceal poor performance, their peers are not fooled.

Given the difference in technical competence associated with gender, generalizations are not suggested. Nonetheless, this is consistent with other pertinent studies (see Fletcher, 1999) which have noted gender differences in the performance appraisal process.

Conclusions and an agenda for future research

The scale developed and tested in this paper builds on the impression management research by considering one's preference for image over performance. The OCS provided support for two dysfunctional components of organizational charlatanism: a preference for impressions over reality in organizational behavior, and an over-emphasis on measures of performance. Whereas one's impression management score suggests little about one's actual ability or performance, one's score on the OCS can assist managers in separating employees who are performance-driven from those who are not. In other words, OC necessarily comes at the expense of performance, whereas impression management does not.

The development of the scale – in conjunction with insight extracted from the second data collection – suggests a variety of research questions. First, how substantial is the role of charlatan behavior in overall performance appraisals in most organizations? Evidence from the literature and the second data collection suggests that OC exists and is prevalent in at least one organization. However, organizational differences such as managerial experience, emphasis on PA, and management philosophy suggest caution in rendering generalizations based on the sample in the present study.

Second, what can be done to reduce OC in organizations? Use of the OCS in its present or a refined form can enable managers to identify OC behavior in present and prospective managers. However, astute organizational charlatans may not only possess the ability to beguile their managers, but test administrators as well. Since charlatans do not appear to fool their coworkers as easily, increased reliance on peer evaluations may provide part of the answer.

Third, do employees become organizational charlatans to cover their incompetence, or does incompetence occur when one discovers that one's charlatan behavior can serve as a substitute for high performance? If the former is true, then organizations should simply seek to avoid hiring charlatans. However, if the latter is true, organizations should consider making changes so that OC does not become a rational response to organizational challenges.

Following this logic, is it possible that some individuals become charlatans only after they are victimized by the organizational bureaucracy? To what extent must organizations accept responsibility for the charlatans that thrive within?

Finally, does one's gender influence the likelihood that one will engage in charlatan behavior or have greater success doing so? The second data collection suggested that men scored higher on the expectations dimension of the scale, but implications of this phenomena are unclear.

In sum the present study has demonstrated that charlatan behavior is measurable and is associated with performance appraisal. Future research should seek to clarify this critical nexus and enable practitioners to reduce the negative influence that charlatans have on their organizations.

Notes

1. The three-member team examined each of the items independently and then as a group. The team sought to be as conservative as possible in selecting items which clearly reflected the proposed definition of the construct. Nine items were eliminated after an examination of cross loadings and further discussion among the researchers revealed some questions concerning possible inappropriate wording or redundancy.
2. There was no overlap in the first and second undergraduate samples.

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