Why I Think I’m Better Than Them, but Not Him

Clayton R. Critcher\textsuperscript{1} and David Dunning\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1}University of California, Berkeley

\textsuperscript{2}Cornell University

Author Note

Clayton R. Critcher, Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley; David Dunning, Department of Psychology, Cornell University

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Clayton R. Critcher; Haas School of Business; 545 Student Services Bldg. #1900; University of California, Berkeley; Berkeley, CA 94720. Email: ClaytonCritcher@haas.berkeley.edu

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Abstract

People tend to think they are superior to the “average person,” but they compare themselves less favorably to a specific, unknown individual than they do to the population from which that individual was drawn. It has remained unclear why. Recent research suggests that behavioral forecasts of a randomly-selected individual are inflated for positive behaviors that stem from internal forces—e.g., one’s moral character or strength of will—relative to forecasts about the population in general. The present paper showed that an analogous mechanism accounts for why people are more modest when the comparison target is a single other individual. Specifically, “better-than-average” self-ratings were diminished when participants compared themselves to individuals, but only to the extent that they compared themselves along traits that were governed by one’s will (e.g., politeness) versus fixed (e.g., imaginative). The present findings reinforce the value of applying new psychological discoveries to solve lingering mysteries.

KEYWORDS: better-than-average effect, social comparison, trait judgments, individual will, self-assessment
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Most people think they are better than the average other (Alicke, 1985; Dunning, 2005). Explanations for this better-than-average effect have focused on why the self is evaluated so positively. People may be motivated to self-enhance (Critcher, Dunning, & Armor, 2010; Guenther & Alicke, 2010), may be blind to their own shortcomings (Ehrlinger, Johnson, Banner, Dunning, & Kruger, 2008; Kruger & Dunning, 1999), may idiosyncratically redefine traits to permit the self to outshine others (Critcher, Helzer, & Dunning, 2011; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989), or may simply justify their supposed superiority because they are more confident in their positive self-knowledge than in their positive knowledge about others (Hilbert, 2012; Moore & Healy, 2008). These explanations are not mutually exclusive, but their sheer number shows the attention that the self has received in this research tradition (for a review, see Sedikides & Alicke, 2011).

However, could people’s theories about others also explain this false superiority? In one exception to the self-centered social comparison focus, Alicke et al. (1995) varied the nature of the social comparison target and found that the degree of the better-than-average effect could be influenced. College students compared themselves less favorably to a randomly-selected student than to students in general. Across multiple studies, this (minimally) individuated student was instantiated in a number of ways—e.g., as the person “sitting next to you,” a person displayed on a TV screen, or as a person whose interview transcript one read. “The degree of reduction due to individuation was approximately the same across these various conditions” (p. 823; Alicke et al., 1995).

Although Alicke et al.’s (1995) findings have been highly influential in the self literature, it has remained unclear why this reduction in the above-average effect emerged. Why do people
see themselves as less superior to an individual than to the population from which that individual is drawn? Critcher and Dunning (in press) recently documented an asymmetry between behavioral forecasts of individuals (“How likely is it that the randomly-selected student will donate money to Doctors Without Borders this month?”) and populations (“What percentage of students will donate…?”). Individuals, relative to populations, were seen as more likely to engage in socially desirable behaviors, and a differential sensitivity to constraints (DSC) account explained this difference. Individuals were forecast as more likely than populations to perform behaviors that emerge due to forces from inside an individual (e.g., a guilty conscience) as opposed to social forces (e.g., social norms). Thus, individuals were forecast as more likely to perform behaviors compelled by an individual’s internal moral conscience or strength of will.

We hypothesized that Critcher and Dunning’s (in press) DSC account may be applied to explain Alicke et al.’s (1995) findings. If so, the more humble self-versus-individual comparative ratings uncovered by Alicke et al. (1995) should emerge most strongly on positive traits that are a product of an individual’s internal or moral will (e.g., politeness) versus traits that are fixed and less “willable” (e.g., imaginativeness). As part of Alicke et al.’s Study 1, participants rated themselves on 20 positive traits while comparing themselves to the average of the student population or to a same-sex stranger they saw but did not interact with. In their Study 2, participants rated the self, and then separately either the student average or a specific same-sex stranger for 16 traits. Based on the descriptive statistics reported in the paper, for each trait we calculated the effect size (Cohen’s $d$) of the reduction in self-ratings observed when comparing to an individual rather than to the population.

We asked 126 members of a public university on-line subject pool and 131 Americans on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk to consider the traits used in Alicke et al.’s (1995) Study 1 and
Study 2, respectively. Participants were told that “Sometimes people show a trait because something inside them encourages them to behave a certain way—that is, if something inside of them wills it hard enough”, but in other cases “People show a trait because they simply do or do not have that quality, regardless of how hard they will it.” Participants rated each trait on a scale from 1 (not a matter of willing it) to 7 (a matter of willing it). We then correlated the size of Alicke et al.’s effects with these ratings of “will”. The relationship was strong, both for Alicke et al.’s Study 1, \( r(18) = .71, p < .001 \), and Study 2, \( r(14) = .52, p = .04 \). That is, self-ratings were reduced in the individual-comparison condition to the extent that the trait in question was controllable by will. To make certain that this relationship could not be accounted for by the positivity of the traits, we reran these correlations while partialing out each trait’s positivity (as reported in Anderson, 1968). These correlations, depicted in the Figure, remained significant: \( pr(17) = .70, p = .001 \) (Study 1), \( pr(12) = .69, p = .01 \) (Study 2).

In sum, Critcher and Dunning’s (in press) DSC account helps solve a lingering mystery about Alicke et al.’s influential findings. Just as individuals are forecast as more likely than populations to perform behaviors that stem from an internal will, the self compares itself relatively more favorably to populations (versus individuals) for positive traits that are seen as “willable” (versus fixed). Whereas previous research has identified circumstances under which the self will be more or less likely to rate itself as better than others (Alicke & Govorun, 2005), the present findings offer the first mechanistic account of why the self is likely to compare itself especially favorably against a population average as opposed to a specific other. Although some evidence has suggested that judgments of the self relative to others are mostly just judgments of the self that neglect considerations about others (e.g., Klar & Giladi, 1999; Kruger, 1999), the present findings both suggest that and explain why the comparison other matters. Our results
emphasize that new discoveries are not merely launching pads for exploring uncharted territory, but can prove valuable in resolving lingering mysteries from psychology’s past.
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References


Figure. Scatterplots showing the relationship between the size of the individual-population asymmetry—the difference in social comparisons to an individual or a population—from Alicke et al. (1995)’s Study 1 (top panel) and Study 2 (bottom panel), and the extent to
which each trait was rated as a product of an individual’s will, controlling for trait positivity (Anderson, 1968).