Thinking about Others versus Another: Three Reasons Judgments about Collectives and Individuals Differ

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Abstract

In this article, we review evidence that people are more positive in assessments of specific individuals than they are about collectives of others, even when people have essentially no information about the individual or collective they are judging. We offer three explanations for this difference. First, evaluative "attacks" on individuals are more aversive than similar attacks on collectives. Second, to encourage or smooth interaction, people sometimes "assume the best" about individuals until proven wrong. Social interaction occurs between specific individuals, so such optimism does not extend to people in general. Third, in making judgments of individuals versus collectives, people naturally focus on different types of information. For an individual, people spontaneously consider influences that operate inside an individual (e.g., one's will, one's moral conscience). But for collectives, people instead contemplate influences that operate at a social level (e.g., social influence, social norms). We explore how these three proposals help predict when judgments of individuals and collectives do or do not differ.

The Harvard Crimson identified the now-infamous 2012 Harvard cheating scandal as the school's most important news event of the year (Crimson News Staff, 2012). After a teaching assistant in a government course noticed striking similarities between students' responses on their take-home final exams, a university board investigated the matter further and brought cases against 125 of the 279 students enrolled in the class. A quarter of the students were subsequently forced to withdraw from the university. Although a stated purpose of Harvard's making this story public was to raise awareness about the seriousness of academic dishonesty, the attention also led people around the country to consider just how prevalent academic dishonesty is in the American university system.

As one considers the behavior of others, one can conceive of that "other" in two ways. First, one can ask what a collection of people (e.g., the students in the Harvard government class, Americans, employees) are like. Alternatively, one can consider what a randomly-selected person (e.g., a student in the Harvard government class, an American, an employee) is like. These reflect judgments about *collectives* and *individuals*, respectively, and should prompt the same conclusion about human nature.

But how we think about the other matters. When we asked participants about the percentage of America's college and university students who had been entirely academically honest in the last 30 days, respondents' estimate depended significantly on whether they thought about a collective (others) or an individual (another). People thought a slim minority of students in general, 48%, had been academically honest in the last month. However, when asked whether a randomly-selected student had been honest – which should, given no other information, produce the same estimate – respondents said there was a 62% chance that that this student would be honest (Critcher & Dunning, 2013).

In this article, we consider how thinking about others at the collective or individual level influences judgments and beliefs about as well as behavior toward them. We find that people are more charitable in their approach to individuals than to collectives across a variety of judgment and behavioral contexts. After reviewing evidence consistent with this individual–collective asymmetry, we put forward three reasons why we think such differences emerge. First, we argue that people are discouraged from making negative judgments of individuals (but less so collectives) because such assessments can be aversively harsh or cruel. Second, we posit that because social relationships develop with specific individuals, as opposed to abstract collectives like the human race, people sometimes give individuals the benefit of the doubt until proven wrong. Third, we suggest that as people consider individuals versus collectives, they naturally focus on different information – factors that operate inside individuals versus forces that operate at a social level, respectively. This focus on different types of information can have predictable effects on judgments. We review previous evidence consistent with each of these claims.

A Person Is Viewed More Favorably than People

In general, when social psychologists have considered the distinction between individuals and collectives, they have examined how and when impressions of others lean on their group memberships (e.g., race, sex) rather than on more individuating information. From this tradition, person perception can unfold in a lazy manner that is guided by stereotypes about a person's groups or in a more detailed way that takes into account information unique to the individual (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Given the field's historical interest in stigmatized groups, this research often reflects a tension between negative preconceived notions that may be overcome by more positive interpersonal experiences (Golebiowska, 1996, 2001).

Instead of considering the tension between group-based (e.g., stereotypes) and individuating sources of information, we instead consider how the fact that a judgment target *is* an individual or *is* a group influences how people think about them. That is, we examine how perceptions of others may become more or less charitable merely as a function of their being represented as an individual or a collective, even in the absence of information that would push for more negative (e.g., prejudice toward a group) or positive (e.g., an endearing interaction with an individual) assessments. Although there has been a historical interest in comparing deindividuated (e.g., an African American) versus individuated (e.g., my African American friend Gregg) targets, there has been much less research to directly compare deindividuated individuals and their comparable groups (e.g., an African American versus African Americans, a student versus students, etc.).

In considering *mere individuals* – representations of a person merely as a person, with no individuating information about him or her – people tend to have especially positive expectations and evaluations. In one study, participants saw pictures of individuals' faces (Willis & Todorov, 2006). Some faces were presented extremely briefly (100 ms), such that little other than the target's status as a person could be gleaned. Other faces were presented up to 900 ms longer, giving the viewer more time to observe the (admittedly minimal) individuating information about the person. Participants then had to decide whether the individual possessed each of five different positive qualities (e.g., competence). Across all judgments, participants' evaluations were more positive when they barely observed the face (at 100 ms, meaning it was detected merely as an individual) than when they observed more individuating information (at 500 ms or a full second). In some ways, this boost reflects a default positive assessment given to individual entities, whether or not they are people. For example, when a product's brand is unspecified, people assume it is top-notch until told otherwise (Kardes, Sanbonmatsu, Cronley, & Houghton, 2002). But other evidence

suggests that human individuality confers a special positivity. Sears (1983) argued targets are evaluated more positivity the more they resemble individual humans, a bias he termed *person positivity*. Furthermore, people ascribe personhood to inanimate objects through pronoun selection ("he" or "she" as opposed to "it") when describing liked (e.g., America) as opposed to disliked inanimate entities MacKay and Konishi (1994).

In contrast, basic assessments of collectives tend to be more negative. In part, this may be related to the fact that although a randomly-selected individual might be exceptional, the average member of a collective is by definition, well, average – a tautological characterization that connotes evaluative blandness (Shepperd, Carroll, Grace, & Terry, 2002; Weinstein, 1980). Even when describing groups directly, people tend to use more critical terms. For example, Vonk and Ashmore (2003) had participants name types of men or women. As the authors noted, "many of the types were negative" (e.g., wallflowers, suckers), "and few were positive" (p. 276). It seems people are in the habit of describing collectives by what distinguishes them in a negative or abnormal way.

Other research indicates that some of this negativity toward collectives grows as the size of that collective grows. In one study, participants judged – relative to the average of a comparison group – their own risk that a variety of negative life events would befall them. As the size of the comparison group grew larger, participants compared themselves more positively to this group average (Price, Smith, & Lench, 2006). Given the self was a constant component of these relative judgments, this pattern implies that participants' assessments of the collective (i.e., the component of the relative judgment that changed) became more negative as this target moved further and further away from an individual toward becoming more of a depersonalized mass of people. If similar group size effects were found in other domains (beyond perceived risk), it would suggest that differences between individuals and collectives should not be thought of as reflecting a drastic discontinuity between one person and two, but instead an important continuum. After all, two trees do not a forest make.

In one of the first studies to directly compare assessments of collectives to assessments of specific individuals, Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, and Vredenburg (1995) found that participants compared themselves more favorably to a population average than to a random individual, even one about whom they had almost no information. Notably, it seemed to be the comparison target's status as a mere individual, not details of the variety of ways in which the individual target was instantiated (e.g., as a person displayed on a still-image TV screen, as the person who happened to be sitting next to the participant), that prompted this modesty (Alicke et al., 1995). Several studies have found that people compare themselves just as modestly against an acquaintance or a stranger or an arbitrary fellow student as they do against a close friend (Hoorens & Buunk, 1993; Regan, Snyder, & Kassin, 1995). This may speak to just how much people's positive perceptions of individuals (versus collectives) stem from their mere status as individuals as opposed to positive individuating information held about them. Making this point in a different way, Martz et al. (1998) found that even though one's best friend is judged to be more positive than the average person, one's best friend's relationship is not seen as better than the average relationship. This suggests that one's tendency to see one's best friend as better than a population average may relate as much (if not more) to one's best friend being an individual as opposed to specific positive information one knows about that person.

There is one judgment paradigm in which people sometimes judge collectives more positively than individuals. Research on the nonselective superiority and inferiority biases asks participants to compare individuals to the average of a reference group of which the individual is a member (Klar, 2002). In one such paper, whereas an anonymous fellow student was rated as more polite than the average student, an anonymous member of the terrorist group Hamas was rated as *less* polite than the average Hamas member (Klar & Giladi, 1997). At first glance, this

might seem to suggest that individuals are judged to be more extreme than collectives – on both positive and negative dimensions.

However, additional mechanistic evidence suggests that these perceptions do not actually reflect different perceptions of individuals and groups, but instead a bias that emerges when people make comparative judgments. When people compare A (a specific member of Hamas) against B (the average Hamas member), their judgments are disproportionately a function of their feelings about A (which, in the case of a Hamas member, is negative). What looks like an individual-negativity bias disappears when people state their judgments about individuals and collectives separately (Giladi & Klar, 2002). This suggests that this research tradition tells more about cognitive biases in comparative judgments than it does about differences in how people view individuals and collectives.

Although many documented differences in judgments of individuals and collectives violate basic logical or statistical standards, there are some contexts in which greater skepticism toward collectives is warranted. Research on the *discontinuity effect* has found that collectives sometimes *are* more selfish and less cooperative than individuals (Brown, 1954; Schopler & Insko, 1992; cf. Rabbie, 1998). In many experiments from this tradition, participants play a prisoner's dilemma. In the classic version of this economic game, each player decides simultaneously, and thus without awareness of the other's decision, whether to cooperate and share winnings or to defect and abscond with extra winnings. The payoff structure of the game is set up such that it is mutually beneficial for the two players to cooperate, but either side stands to gain alone by defecting. The catch is that mutual defection results in a worse outcome for everyone than mutual cooperation. In one representative study by Schopler et al. (1993), some participants played as members of a collective that played out prisoner's dilemma against another collective. Others participated as individuals and played out the game against another individual. Suggesting that cynicism toward groups may be warranted, collectives were more likely to defect (i.e., to take the selfish approach) than were individuals.

However, note that the results of Schopler and colleagues' (1993) study are imperfect for our purposes in two ways. First, Schopler and colleagues look at the behavior of groups who must act in unison – i.e., as an individual. Our interest is less in how people consider groups that work together, but in how people consider depersonalized aggregates of people who separately and independently are "doing their own thing". Second, Schopler et al.'s findings are ambiguous in a way that many studies in the discontinuity effect literature are (see Messick & Mackie, 1989): It is unclear whether groups' competitiveness reflects their own inclination to be competitive or their expectation that their (group) opponents will play competitively. Remember, players should not be willing to cooperate themselves unless they believe their opponents will cooperate.

In a clever experiment, Insko, Schopler, Hoyle, Dardis, and Graetz (1990) had individuals or collectives play a prisoner's dilemma with a twist. That is, in addition to the standard options of cooperation and defection, players could also withdraw from the game, leaving them with a guaranteed outcome that was worse than mutual cooperation but better than what would be earned from mutual defection. Withdrawal is an attractive option if one believed one's opponent was likely to defect, but should be relatively unappealing if one is confident in one's opponent's cooperation. Collectives were more likely to withdraw than were individuals, suggesting that collectives' more selfish play was not simply a reflection of their own aggressive stance, but reflected a belief that other collectives would behave competitively.

In sum, although social psychology has had a historical interest in dissociations between evaluations of individuals and the groups from which they come (e.g., Olson & Fazio, 2003), it is also the case that mere individuals are judged differently from mere groups. People judge individuals positively even, and perhaps especially, when they know nothing about them. In

contrast, assessments of an equivalent collection of individuals tend to be more negative. Not only do people's labels for identifiable groups tilt toward the evaluative negative, but their expectations about randomly-formed collections of people are also more cynical. Although there is some evidence that collectives are more antisocial than individuals, those findings are in part a self-fulfilling prophecy of the belief that other collectives are likely to be more selfish than other individuals.

In the remaining sections, we consider three reasons why judgments of individuals and collectives differ.

Reason #1: Making a Negative Judgment about an Individual Seems Harsher than Making a Negative Judgment about a Collective

People value other individuals and, unless given some justification, are reluctant to express dislike for them (Herbst, Gaertner, & Insko, 2003; Sears, 1983). In fact, even when people have some inclination to express dislike for an individual, the strong norms against interpersonal hostility serve to make this unlikely.

In one classic demonstration of this fact, LaPiere (1934) sent questionnaires to hotels and restaurants in the United States asking, "Will you accept members of the Chinese race as guests in your establishment?" Of the 256 responses he received, 92% indicated they would not. Notably, LaPiere had actually traveled around the United States with a Chinese couple, includ-ing to many of the establishments that had responded to his survey. Only one establishment refused them service. While much discussion of these results (including LaPiere's own interpre-tation of their meaning) has focused on the disconnect between attitudes and actual behavior, this stark dissociation also reflects a difference in people's willingness to be dismissive toward abstract groups versus actual individuals from those groups. We suspect that this is why modern-day opponents of gay rights prefer to discuss the society harm posed by homosexuals as a group, for describing Kristin or Larry as threats to society may come across as strident and harsh.

Of course, in LaPiere's (1934) field study, the individuals were also more concrete and personalized than the collectives. That is, on the survey, "Chinese race" was simply words on a page, whereas the "Chinese person" was a living, breathing human asking for a room for the night. This difference may reflect an important difference between the way people typically interact with individuals and populations, but other research suggests that even when these humanizing details are removed, people still are more averse to expressing harsh treatments of individuals versus collectives.

In particular, research on the *identifiable victim effect* has found that the misfortune of an individual is more distressing than the misfortune of a collective. In one study, all participants began with $10, but a random half of them had to return that money. Those who still had money (i.e., the allocators) had a chance to donate some of their money to the "victims" left with nothing. Some allocators had been linked to a specific victim when they decided how much to donate. Other allocators knew that they would be linked later, but crucially, at the time these allocators decided how much money to donate, they were focused on the victims merely as a collective. Even though allocators in the individual condition knew nothing about their paired victim other than an uninformative identification number, these allocators donated significantly more than those who were focused on victims as a collective (Small & Loewenstein, 2003).

A complementary study that shows a superficial reversal of the identifiable victim effect yields insight into why this asymmetry emerges. Small and Loewenstein (2005) showed that victims are more likely to punish an individually-identified perpetrator – one who tried to free ride on the monetary sacrifices of the victims – than an as-yet-unidentified perpetrator. It seems people are

more emotionally moved by individuals than they are by collectives. Without reason to see an individual as morally suspect, attacks on him or her inspire distress (Kogut & Ritov, 2005), confirming Josef Stalin's famous insight that the death of a single person is a tragedy, whereas a million deaths is a mere statistic. But when one has been cheated by an identifiable individual instead of a depersonalized one, this inspires a stronger anger response (Small & Loewenstein, 2005). Applied to our context of interest, this suggests that people will avoid "victimizing" (innocent) individuals with harsh assessments even as they willingly do so toward collectives.

If a reluctance to express harshness toward individuals in part underlies differences in people's judgments of individuals and populations, then this asymmetry should be especially likely to emerge in contexts in which targets are to be judged negatively. Miller and Felicio (1990) showed participants pictures of women who were either especially attractive or especially unattractive. Participants were asked to judge the attractiveness of the collective as a whole or to provide attractiveness ratings of the women individually. When judging the attractive set, judgments of the collective were as positive as were judgments of the individual women. But when judging the unattractive set, judgments of the individual women were systematically inflated compared to judgments of the group as a whole.

By our logic, this reluctance to express harshness toward individual women applied to the extent that evaluations could be negative and thus distressingly harsh. This (undesirable) opportunity presented itself when considering unattractive women, but not unambiguously attractive women. Furthermore, the fact that this asymmetry emerged in judgments of unattractive, but not attractive, women shows that the individual–collective dissociation does not stem from an attempt to use the entire range of the rating scale when rating the individual women. Had this produced the asymmetry in judgments of the unattractive women, we would have expected to see a reverse asymmetry in judgments of attractive women (one by which judgments of individual attractive women would be less positive than judgments of the group as a whole).

By our reasoning, people should be reluctant to express negative judgments toward an individual person, but not necessarily an individual inanimate object. That is, it is harsh actions toward an individual human being, not just any individual entity, that are insulting, and thus discouraged. Data affirm this conjecture. Participants were asked to look through profiles of 24 job candidates. Some participants were asked to construct a short list of candidates to potentially hire. Other participants were to construct a list to potentially fire. Thus, earning a spot on the hire or fire list represented a positive accolade or a negative indictment, respectively. Demonstrating a reluctance to target individuals with a negative assessment, participants' hiring list was longer than their firing one Levin et al. (2001). But showing that this reflected a bias in assessing individual *people* and not merely an asymmetry in choosing versus rejecting, the experimenters did not find that participants constructed short lists of different sizes in deciding which of 24 stocks to buy or sell. Thus, the reluctance to reject individuals appears to stem from people's unwillingness to indict *a person* in particular.

Beyond a concern that negative evaluations of individuals are harsh in and of themselves, negative evaluations of individuals may be avoided because of greater ambiguity about the evaluator's motives. People learn to temper their negative assessments of others when such harshness can be attributed to petty vendettas or personal prejudice (Bergsieker, Leslie, Constantine, & Fiske, 2012). However, when expressing pessimism about people in general or a varied collection of people, there is unlikely to be any one uniting characteristic of the others that could serve as an alternative unjustifiable cause for the negative judgments. Of course, this mechanism does not apply and might even have the reverse implication if instead of describing a non-descript group (e.g., "people," "students"), one is instead labeling a specific, identifiable group (e.g., African Americans). In the latter case, people may be especially reluctant to indict such

identifiable groups with negative descriptors, leading to what Bergsieker et al. (2012) called *stereotyping by omission.*

In other cases, people may take a negative stance toward a population precisely because of a characteristic that is prevalent (or at least perceived to be prevalent) in that population. But if this characteristic is not true of every individual in the population, then by people's own standard, they are set to take a more positive or lenient approach toward these untarnished individuals in the collective. Thus, people may oppose immigration by a particular national group because of a belief that they will pose an economic burden on society, but this rationale necessitates that individual prospective immigrants who are economically self-sufficient be welcomed (see Aalberg, Iyengar, & Messing, 2012).

Reason #2: There May Be a Functional Benefit to Assuming the Best about Individuals, But Not Necessarily People in General

Stevens and Fiske (1995) argue that a need to find the world a benevolent place is one of a few basic human motives. In one of social psychology's most-cited articles, Taylor and Brown (1988) noted that mentally well-adjusted individuals do not perceive the world entirely accurately but instead have positive illusions that help to maintain their sense of well-being. We posit a complementary idea: By beginning with inflated expectations about others, we set the stage for potentially-rewarding social interaction that otherwise would not occur (see Darley & Berscheid, 1967). And because social interactions occur between individual humans rather than between huge swaths of the human race, people may be practiced at granting the benefit of the doubt to individual people instead of to large collectives.

By this reasoning, we should expect to observe apparently illogical behavior in which people place faith in individuals, even though those individuals are drawn from populations about whom people are more cynical. Fetchenhauer and Dunning (2009, 2010) asked people to play a two-player economic trust game. In the first stage, the first player (the sender) received $5 from the experimenter and had to decide whether to pocket the money and exit the game or to send the money to the second player (the receiver). If the $5 was sent to the receiver, that $5 became $20. At that point, the receiver could decide whether to pocket the small fortune or prove trustworthy and return half of that money ($10) to the sender.

Senders tended to assume that most receivers would prove selfish and run off with whatever money they receive. But when it came time to playing with a specific individual, most senders – sometimes as many as 75% – took a leap of faith and trusted their opponent. Dunning, Anderson, Schlösser, Ehlebracht, and Fetchenhauer (2014) argue that in order to facilitate mutually beneficial social interaction, norms have developed that encourage us to show baseline respect for the integrity and goodwill of individual others. When Rabbie (1998) modified the prisoner's dilemma to contain a feature of the trust game – having the two players make their decisions sequentially instead of simultaneously – participants were especially unlikely to make a selfish move against an individual (compared to a collective). Instead, participants cared more that an individual other know that the participant had assumed the best about him or her.

Although faith in the goodness of others may be critical to kick-starting social exchange, this does not suggest that people need begin with such inflated assessments of all aspects of individuals. If we begin with assumptions that others possess much less moral integrity than we do ourselves, we may be discouraged from ever entangling our fates with theirs. As a result, we would never place ourselves in situations that permit us to learn about the moral goodness of others. In contrast, we need not begin with such positive assessments of traits that will be easily assessed upon initial meeting (e.g., attractiveness, friendliness) or traits that describe skills or abilities that

can be learned with experience and are not prerequisites for social relationships (e.g., imaginativeness, intelligence), what Peeters and Czapinski (1990) called self-profitable traits.

In recent work (Critcher & Dunning, 2014), we examined whether these ideas might help to explain Alicke et al.'s (1995) finding, described earlier, that people compare themselves more favorably to people in general than to specific individuals about whom they have little-to-no information. We hypothesized that the social comparison asymmetry should be most likely to emerge for traits that reflect a person's moral character, those dimensions for which we may wish to assume the best in other individuals until proven wrong. To test this proposal, we had 126 undergraduates at University of California, Berkeley, consider 20 traits used in Alicke et al.'s research and rate them based on how reflective they were of a person's moral character. Some traits were seen to be highly reflective of moral character (e.g., *respectful*, *responsible*), whereas other traits were non-moral (e.g., *creative*, *bright*).

We found that moral traits were those for which people were more humble in their self-comparisons against individuals, relative to the self-aggrandizement they showed against collectives. Additional evidence suggested that it was the morality of these traits, not their positivity, controllability, definitional ambiguity, or interpersonal nature that explained these effects. In other studies, we found that participants indicated that they tried to assume the best about others for traits that are moral but did so less for traits that are non-moral in nature. Crucially, participants ended up applying this "assume the best" strategy to their judgments of specific individuals, but not collectives.

We have argued that many systems of social and economic exchange depend on people beginning with at least a modicum of faith and trust in others. Of course, this optimism in others can backfire if it persists in the face of evidence that another is untrustworthy. This may be why the hopefulness in people's expectations of others is accompanied by both a suspicion (Cosmides, 1989; Fein, 1996) and a cynical bias in considering others' past (Critcher & Dunning, 2011). That is, the costs to being a cynic versus a Pollyanna may differ in prospect and in retrospect. Optimism in prospect can encourage one to explore more potential partners for social exchange, but cynicism in retrospect pushes one to be especially choosy before settling on an individual in whom to make a costlier long-term investment.

Reason #3: Judgments of Individuals versus Collectives Draw on Different Sources of Information

Out in the wilderness, some may see the forest, whereas others just see the individual trees. For those who see specific trees, they may identify them as short or tall, evergreen or deciduous, gymnosperms or angiosperms – properties that describe each tree as an individual. But for those who see the overall forest, they may be attuned to whether it is dense or sparse, tropical or temperate, saturated or dry – characteristics that describe the relation between the individuals and their relationship to the broader ecosystem. That is, different characteristics become salient depending on whether one is concentrating on the individual versus the specific.

We suggest that in considering individuals versus collectives, people are similarly attuned to different features. In particular, when considering a single person, one thinks about individual-level, internal dynamics, such as what a person would want or will in a situation. In fact, failing to attend to or ascribe such internal experience to others dehumanizes them Harris and Fiske (2009). And consistent with our perspective, it has been said to be easier to dehumanize groups than individuals because of the abstract level at which groups are represented (Golebiowska, 2001).

Instead, when considering collectives, external forces that guide behavior from the outside, such as social norms and influences, become emphasized. Such forces operate in a broad social context and thus reflect features at the collective level. For example, according to the *third-person effect*, people see others as more susceptible to media influence than they think they themselves

are. Consistent with the perspective advanced here, this effect grows larger as the size of the collective grows (Tewksbury, 2002). As people's conception of others moves further and further from a single individual toward a large mass of people, the sense that those others will be influenced by social forces grows.

By our reasoning, it is not that people are unaware that groups are composed of individuals with agentic minds with internal dynamics or that people are affected by those around them. Instead, we argue that the relative salience of these features waxes or wanes with a shift in how people think about others. Illustrating this point and further buttressing our account, Hoorens and Smits (2001) showed that if people were first asked to consider the extent to which people could control the occurrence of various outcomes, people no longer compared themselves less favorably to others along these dimensions. That is, by making focal an individual-level feature (internal control) when considering a comparison target that does not naturally call for such a focus (the average of a population), negative assessments of others were tempered. Thus, people do not deny the influence of individual agency when considering collectives, but they may not weight such factors without prompting.

Drawing on these ideas, we recently argued that forecasts of individuals ("How likely is a randomly-selected person to…?") and populations ("What percentage of people are likely to…?") systematically differ when individual-level forces and social forces have different influences on behavior (Critcher & Dunning, 2013). We explored such a difference in the context of forecasting moral and immoral behaviors. Although immoral behaviors are discouraged by an individual's internal moral conscience as well as by collective social norms, moral behaviors are seen more as a product of one's individual moral conscious and less mandated by social forces (see Critcher & Dunning, 2013, for a more detailed elaboration of these ideas).

Across a number of studies, we observed a forecasting asymmetry: Individuals were forecast as more likely than collectives to do moral behaviors (given they are encouraged by the individual-level moral conscience), but no less likely to perform immoral behaviors (given they are discouraged by both individual and social forces). For example, people thought there was a 40.7% chance that a randomly-selected student would spontaneously give up his or her seat on a bus to an elderly person but that only 28.5% of students in general would do the same. In contrast, participants estimated that 24.6% of students would cheat on an exam by copying someone else's answers, a number that was strikingly similar to the estimated 25.2% chance that a randomly-selected student would do the same (Critcher & Dunning, 2013). Van Lange, Rusbult, Semin-Goossens, Gorts, and Stalpers (1999) observed a similar individual-collective asymmetry in that people thought that they did more constructive things in their dating relationships than did same-sex strangers their own age, but they did not think that they did fewer destructive things in their relationships than did others.

That said, there are no doubt limits to this asymmetry, some that have been demonstrated and others that have yet to be tested. Critcher and Dunning (2013) showed that even though individuals were forecast as more likely to perform morally selfless acts than were collectives (e.g., giving up a seat on a bus to an elderly person), individuals were not judged as more likely than populations to perform those acts when they would not be compelled by a moral conscience (e.g., giving up a seat on a bus to a healthy 14-year-old). Another study showed that under the right conditions, an individual–collective asymmetry can emerge in forecasts of immoral acts. In the study, individuals and populations were judged as similarly unlikely to treat someone else badly in an economic game, thus replicating the lack of an individual–collective asymmetry in forecasting selfish acts. However, when told that the behavior would unfold anonymously, respondents estimated that a randomly-selected individual would be less likely to cheat than would people in general. That is, the cloak of anonymity removed the possibility of social censure that could keep bad behavior in check (thus increasing cynicism in forecasts of

collectives of people) but did not change what the moral conscience would assess as right or wrong (leaving forecasts of individuals unchanged).

What has not been tested is whether similar asymmetries emerge when judging individuals from groups that are believed to be fundamentally immoral. For example, is a randomly-selected White supremacist more likely to give up a seat on a bus than White supremacists in general? In this case, people may no longer have positive baseline assumptions about the moral character of individuals, in which case the asymmetry may not emerge. On the other hand, even though the estimates of prosociality might be relatively low when assessing individuals or collectives from detested groups, the same moral boost for judgments of individuals might be observed. This and other variants await direct test.

Conclusion

Social psychology is fundamentally interested in how people think about and behave toward others. We have reviewed a variety of evidence that people tend to be more positive in their assessments of an individual person as opposed to collectives of people, even when people have essentially no information about the person or people they are assessing. We suggest that a stronger aversion to applying a negative judgment to a person as opposed to people, a functional faith in the goodness of a person as opposed to people in general, and a tendency to lean on different information when making forecasts about a person as opposed to people, explain why people reach diverging conclusions about individuals and collectives that are functionally equivalent. If future research can uncover when it is that people spontaneously construe others as individuals or as collectives, then the present framework should prove especially useful in understanding when and why people's faith in humanity comes and goes.

Short Biographies

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David Dunning is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at Cornell University. His research focuses on accuracy and illusion in self and social judgment. His research has appeared in many top scholarly journals and is showcased in his book *Self-insight: Roadblocks and Detours on the Path to Knowing Thyself*. He received a BA in Psychology from Michigan State University and a PhD in Psychology from Stanford University.

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