

STUDIES IN  
**SELF AND IDENTITY**  
SERIES

# THE SELF IN SOCIAL JUDGMENT

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# 12

## The Self in Social Perception Looking Back, Looking Ahead

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**S**ocial and personality psychology has always been concerned with the question of how people come to understand themselves and their social world. Although research on self-perception and social perception has been at the core of the research enterprise, researchers have rarely taken a direct look at the intersection of the two. Classic and modern work has certainly uncovered many interrelations between self and social perception, but this work has, to a considerable extent, remained fragmentary. In the archives of social and personality psychology, one could find work on self and social judgment, but one would have to search through far-flung, uncatalogued, remotely connected sources.

Our goal in organizing a volume on the self in social judgment was not only to bring together diverse research approaches to this topic under one umbrella, but also to identify major themes and unresolved issues that lie at the intersection of the self and the social. So what did we learn? The foregoing chapters reveal four fundamental issues pertaining to the self in social judgment.

### EMERGING ISSUES

#### *Perceptions of Similarity*

First and perhaps foremost, the self plays a central role as a source of information when people predict the actions and preferences of others. The notion of social projection harkens back to Freud's (1924/1956) depth-psychological construct, but it is now recast in a more general frame. Freud was interested in how projection

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serves unconscious needs, and he discussed its consequences to illustrate the operation of these needs. In contrast, contemporary work on projection shows that a great deal has been learned about how various ecological constraints can shape the effects projection has on perception and behavior.

One important constraint is the absence of direct knowledge about others. When this state of ignorance exists, people's best bet is to rely on what they know about themselves and how they think they would act. Projection then serves as a useful tool of mental simulation, while sparing the person the laborious and uncertain task of taking another's perspective. In the social world, a state of true ignorance with respect to the attributes or intentions of others may rarely be fully realized. Krueger and Acevedo (chapter two) suggest, however, that the standard one-shot prisoner's dilemma comes close to this kind of state. In its pure form, the dilemma aims to create a situation in which a player is left to his or her own devices. Any individuating information about the other player, as well as stereotypic knowledge derived from the player's membership in a certain social group, is deliberately stripped away. It is here that projection can do the greatest good by guiding a person toward cooperative behavior, inasmuch as he or she trusts that the other appraises the situation in much the same way.

When, however, there is information suggesting that others may be different—be it in terms of their idiosyncratic attributes or in terms of group-related stereotypic assumptions—projection should be tempered if best results are to be obtained. One such constraint is information about the situation in which others find themselves. Van Boven and Loewenstein (chapter three) report that people project too enthusiastically across situational boundaries. According to their dual-judgment model, people first predict how they themselves would feel or act in a different situation, and they then project these estimates onto others who actually are in that situation. Failing to fully appreciate the power of different situations to elicit different responses, people are left with *empathy gaps*. A person with an empty stomach thus overestimates how having a full stomach affects a person's decisions, and someone who has the benefit of hindsight knowledge fails to appreciate how the judgments of others who lack their knowledge may be different.

Both approaches outlined in these chapters share the assumption that social projection springs from an automatic, egocentric source, rather than being strategically engaged or withheld (see Ames, 2004, for such a perspective). Projection is seen as a perceptual default that can only be reduced with time and effort. A person would need to know when projection is ill-advised and then deliberately strive to keep it at bay (Epley, Morewedge, & Keysar, 2004).

### *Perceptions of Difference and Uniqueness*

Whereas social projection involves the assumption of similarity between self and others, the second emergent issue involves the assumption of uniqueness, which typically involves the perception of personal superiority. The apparent conflict between the need to be like others and the need to stand out is widely

recognized (Brewer, 1991; Brewer & Weber, 1994; Markus & Kunda, 1986). The self-enhancement perspective suggests that whichever orientation, similarity or uniqueness, permits a person to maintain a positive self-image, will predominate. The assumption that others share one's political beliefs, for example, renders those beliefs reasonable or justified. The same assumption, however, implies that one's cherished moral, social, or physical qualities are ordinary, and perceptions of similarity are curtailed when they threaten to diminish the luster of one's own valued attributes (Campbell, 1986).

Optimistic biases in general, and the better-than-average heuristic in particular, are the most thoroughly researched manifestations of the personal superiority assumption, and both cognitive and motivational factors have been shown to be relevant (e.g., Chambers & Windshid, 2004; Dunning, 2005). Alicke and Govorun (chapter five) review much of this work, showing that experiments designed to control nonmotivational mechanisms reduce, but do not eradicate, the better-than-average effect. The better-than-average effect is larger inasmuch as people are at liberty to define the meaning of the trait dimension at issue in self-serving ways (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Hayes & Dunning, 1997), and inasmuch as they see the relevant trait-related behaviors as being intentional (Kruger & Gilovich, 2004) or controllable (Alicke, 1985).

Gilovich, Epley, and Hanko (chapter four) also focus on the cognitive basis of personal superiority by distinguishing between two systems of reasoning. The first involves automatic and heuristic judgments, whereas the second requires a more careful deliberation of the available evidence. When the second system is invoked to correct and constrain automatic or "thoughtless" inferences, its efforts often fail to undo the rapid conclusions presented by the more primitive intuitive system.

Interestingly, the scholarship on personal superiority effects makes contact, in subtle but potentially important ways, with other issues discussed in this volume. For example, the two-systems account of self-enhancement proposed by Gilovich and colleagues is similar to previous discussions of anchoring-and-adjustment in social projection (Krueger, 2000). However, it should be noted that this shared theoretical outlook creates a contradiction. Whereas the projective stream of automatic thought leads to the idea that others are no different from the self, the self-enhancing stream leads to the idea that others are worse than the self. The reasonable and empirically sound assumption that most self-concepts comprise a majority of desirable traits implies that effortful curtailments of projection will lead to greater self-enhancement. Conversely, effortful curtailments of self-enhancement will lead to an increase of projection (Krueger, 2002). A person's choice of where to invest precious cognitive resources to correct automatic assumptions may indeed be a matter of motivational considerations.

This work of personal superiority also bears relevance to another self-enhancement bias long-observed in the psychological literature, namely, the self-serving bias in causal attribution (Miller & Ross, 1975). Attributions are self-serving when people take too much credit for their successes and too little responsibility for their failures. With respect to failures, the self-serving bias is an

instance of the actor-observer effect. This makes contact with Malle's (chapter eight) meta-analysis showing that, relative to observers, actors are more inclined to distance themselves from negative behaviors by attributing them to situational factors. Consistent with the general self-enhancement bias, people tend to attribute their desirable behaviors to their good intentions and high abilities rather than to forces outside of their control.

### *The Self as Social Judgment Standard*

The third main area of research is concerned with the role of the self as an evaluative standard. As Dunning and his colleagues have shown in a series of studies, personal strengths and weaknesses affect the way people view others (e.g., Dunning & Cohen, 1992; Dunning, Perie, & Story, 1991). In this volume, Balceris and Dunning (chapter nine) account for a variety of common empirical findings within a general connectionist model. Here, self-related judgments and social judgments are viewed as an interconnected web of ideas that resolves itself, to the extent that it is possible, to a harmonious whole. With the internal consistency of the web being the primary driving force behind belief emergence and belief change, there is no need to assign causal priority to the self. Beliefs about the self and beliefs about others can influence each other. The consistency postulate thus reintroduces the question of when does the self influence social judgment and when is it the other way round?

Addressing the potential bi-directionality of the influence process, Mussweiler, Epstude, and Rüter (chapter six) argue that the self often constitutes the standard by which others are judged. However, when standards based on others are salient, self-evaluations may change. The same comparison between the self and another person can lead either to perceptions of similarity (assimilation) and or to conclusions of difference (contrast). If people begin with a hypothesis of similarity, they will see more similarity between themselves and another person. If they start with a hypothesis of difference, they will be biased toward seeing difference.

This analysis of the comparison process raises further questions. In particular, if people are biased toward seeing similarity or difference because of the initial hypothesis they bring to bear on a comparison, what determines the hypothesis that people begin with? Mussweiler et al. suggest that people start with a hypothesis of self-other similarity if there are salient signs of such (e.g., if the self and the other person belong to the same group), or when the presumption of similarity supports their self-esteem (e.g., when the other person is a revered character). But this first step of generating a hypothesis is still understudied. What other factors, especially those in the real world, bias people toward hypothesizing similarity versus dissimilarity between themselves and others? Future work could profitably focus on this issue, given the importance of that tentative hypothesis for the conclusions people ultimately reach when measuring themselves against others.

In Hodges's feature-matching model (chapter seven), the direction of social comparison matters. If the focus of a comparison is on the self, then features

associated with the self will have more impact than features associated with another person; if the focus of a comparison is on the other person, the reverse will hold true. Unique features receive special weight in comparisons between self and others, whereas features that are shared with others are cancelled, at least when others are being described.

The cancellation of shared attributes may help explain a longstanding puzzle concerning people's self-views. As mentioned above, people tend to see themselves as unique—far too unique than they really can be (see Dunning, in press, for an extended discussion). This belief in uniqueness can be self-reinforcing, leading people to believe they are uniquely competent among their peers (Alicke & Govorun, chapter five). At times, however, the belief in one's own uniqueness can induce self-doubt and anxiety, as when people think of themselves as more inhibited, indecisive, and emotional than others (Miller & McFarland, 1987). If people go through their lives habitually canceling out the qualities others share with them, they may end up feeling more unique than they really are.

Malle (chapter eight) also offers new insights into the question of why people tend to exaggerate their uniqueness. He points out that people often have information about their own behavior that they do not have when trying to explain the behavior of others. They know their intentions and their reasons for choosing certain actions, whereas the intentions and reasons of others are removed from view. If explaining social behavior is a ubiquitous activity—and a generation of research suggests that it is—then it is again clear why people would come to view themselves as special. In short, people can point to all the reasons why they choose their actions, but such reasons are less accessible to explicate the actions of others.

### *Who's on First?*

The fourth main theme is concerned with the status of the individual self relative to group-dependent, social, or "collective" selves. In essence, the question is which self is the one that people concern themselves the most with understanding and preserving. Is it a person's individual or personal self? Or is it their collective self—the one that is based primarily on the groups of which they are members. This theoretical yin and yang of individualism versus collectivism is not new. The influential sociological theory of symbolic interactionism, for example, has long maintained that the group matters to the self—that individual social perceivers, for example, are highly sensitive to how others see them and that they respond accordingly (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Numerous studies have shown, however, that people's ideas of how they are seen by the "generalized other" are more closely related to how they see themselves than how others actually see them (Felson, 1993; Fields & Schuman, 1977; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Krueger, Ham, & Linford, 1996; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979).

In their work, Gaertner and Sedikides (chapter ten) suggest that is the personal self that is on first. They reason that if collective self-construals were central to

people's sense of identity, they would be as vigorously defended as individual self-construals. Instead, people feel worse when negative feedback is directed at them personally than when it is directed at their group, and they derogate this feedback more. This finding, although contrary to the current *zeitgeist* in cultural psychology (Markus & Kitayama, 2003), makes good sense in light of time-honored social-impact theory (Latané, 1981). According to this theory, a threat has a fixed psychophysical force, which dissipates geometrically with the number of people affected by it. Hence, the larger a person's group is, the less an individual needs to be concerned with the threat.

Inasmuch as a threat rouses a person's self-protective defenses, an opportunity to stand out engages his or her self-enhancement motive. If this motive is fundamentally egocentric, as opposed to ethnocentric, it should show itself under appropriate circumstances. Bucking the *zeitgeist* again, Gaertner and Sedikides show that not only Westerners reared on a diet of Protestant individualism think they stand above their peers; Asians, whose cultural-ideological views are rooted in the traditions of Confucius and Lao-Tzu, are not immune either. Members of collectivist cultures also self-enhance, and do so where it matters most to them, namely when their standing on such collectivist attributes as cooperativeness or family orientation is at stake.

Orten's review (chapter eleven) also suggests that the individual self-concept is on first. Its contents shape how people describe the social groups to which they belong. Because these contents are positive for most people, their perceptions of ingroups are positive too, but perhaps a little less so; hence self-enhancement. Descriptions of outgroups, which are less dependent on individual self-concepts, are even less positive; hence ingroup bias.

But is the self really on first at all? Is it really the self that produces all the phenomena that the various contributors to this volume have talked about? Expressing a contrary view, Karniol (2003) suggested that work in the tradition of experimental social psychology has been biased in its individualist cast of social perception (see also Foddy & Kashima, 2002). Karniol's alternative theory of *protocentrism* unabashedly puts social perception on first, ahead of self-perception. Much like self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), *protocentrism* assumes that perception begins with generic or collectivist notions of what other people are like and what they are likely to do. Individual self-concepts are then derived from this generic template; specifically, people identify those attributes that they feel set them apart from the protocoenter, and proceed to identify *with* them. Thus, when people tend to perceive others as similar to themselves, it is not because they start with the self and work outward—seeing people as similar because of some presumptions they have made about the self. Instead, people start with the procenter—some representation of what people are like in general—and then work inward to evaluate what they themselves must be like.

Karniol's (2003) suggestions are provocative and bound to generate a fair amount of research. Some of the present authors have already questioned the force of her argument (Krueger, 2003; Mussweiler, 2003; Sedikides, 2003). A common

theme of this skepticism—and of the work presented in this volume—is that theories staked on the presumed primacy of the individual self are more parsimonious and easier to test than are theories built on more opaque notions of trans-personal collectives, such as the procenter. At present, it seems fair to say that the individual self remains a powerful heuristic for both people in the street and the researchers who study them, but it remains for future work to determine just how pervasive and powerful the impact of this individual self is.

## WHERE TO NEXT?

How might the story of the social self unfold in the future? The chapters in this volume offer some stimulating leads, and we close with a small sampling of additional possibilities.

### *Self as Moral Standard*

To date, one important function of the self has received relatively little attention, namely, the self as a moral standard. Arguably, people rely on their personal beliefs and values when evaluating religious ideals, when estimating groups norms or typical behavior, or when making utilitarian decisions.

Research on the better-than-average effect suggests that moral attitudes and behaviors have a special status because they yield the largest self-enhancement bias (Epley & Dunning, 2000; Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985). Indeed, self-enhancement is so much stronger in the moral than in the intellectual domain that this asymmetry has been dubbed the "Muhammad Ali effect" (Alison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Van Lange & Sedikides (1998). Like the great athlete, many ordinary people believe that they are better, though not necessarily smarter, than others.

Research that has directly compared different standards for moral judgment suggests that people have an egocentric outlook when judging the behaviors of others in the moral domain (Alicke, 1993). In these studies, participants were asked to indicate how they would respond to certain temptations, such as cheating on their income tax, driving while intoxicated, or employing an illegal immigrant. When evaluating the choices of others, people put great weight on whether those choices are the same as their own. This is so even when people recognize their own preferences in certain moral dilemmas to be inferior (as in the examples above) and concede that they would not want their own children to act as they themselves did.

One of the most interesting questions regarding the self in moral judgment concerns the extent to which people exhibit judgmental hypocrisy. Behavior is considered hypocritical if a person endorses one set of behavioral standards as moral while acting according to another (Batson, Thompson, & Chen, 2002). Moral hypocrisy is particularly striking when people holding social positions of moral guardianship commit the very sins they condemn in others.

In social psychology, attitude changes resulting from cognitive dissonance have sometimes been treated as a form of behavioral hypocrisy (Fried & Aronson, 1995; Stone et al., 1994). In a typical experiment, a participant who is subtly induced to behave in a way that is inconsistent with his or her attitude subsequently tends to assimilate the attitude to that behavior. By recognizing a new behavioral reality, this attitude change may not be hypocritical. Indeed, it could be argued that *failing* to alter one's attitude would be hypocritical. A person who disapproves of pornography, for example, is a hypocrite for not developing a more liberal view after hours of visiting pornographic Web sites on the Internet.

Moral hypocrisy is purely judgmental when people hold others to stricter standards than themselves. Examples are the alcoholic who disparages drug users, strict parents who disapprove of other parents' punitive behavior, or elderly people who forget their own past acts of conformity when berating younger people for yielding to peer pressure. Behavioral and judgmental hypocrisy are frequently related: People who commit behavioral hypocrisy by violating their personal standards often evaluate their own transgressions less severely than similar actions committed by others. A popular radio show host, for example, who routinely condemns extra-medical drug use, failed to take a more sympathetic view of drug addicts after his own dependency was disclosed.

Like social projection, judgmental hypocrisy has Freudian roots. The defense mechanism of reaction formation involves seeing characteristics in others that one denies in oneself. The classic example is the person beset with sexual guilt who views others as immoral. In a more general sense, this type of mechanism involves evaluating others with reference to one's insecurities. People who are unsure of their intelligence, attractiveness, or popularity, may be particularly harsh in judging others on these characteristics.

### *How Self and Social Cognition Differ*

Many of the present chapters suggest that self and social perception are so linked that they cannot be separated. Yet, there are important ways in which processes of self-judgment differ from those of social judgment. After all, there are many instances in the literature in which the self and another person have performed the same behavior, but the conclusions reached about the self are quite different from those reached about the other person.

Malle highlights differences that might habitually arise between the conclusions reached about the self and those reached about other people. People have different information about themselves than about others, and that information can steer attributional processes to a different judgment when it is about the self rather than another person. People often know the reasons for their actions and the intentions behind them when they think about their own behavior; but such knowledge may not be available for others. They know the beliefs about the world that prompted their own actions, but may not know the beliefs that others possess

that cause their actions. Without knowledge of such beliefs, people might more quickly attribute the behavior of others to desire than they do to themselves.

In the future, researchers might compare and contrast the processes underlying self and social perception and look for ways in which they diverge. Such an endeavor could start with the different types of information people have at their disposal when reaching self-judgments rather than social ones. That endeavor would also have to examine when the motives underlying self and social judgment are different. It is well-documented that people massage the conclusions they reach about themselves in order to maintain a positive self-image (Kunda, 1990), but they may not harbor that same motive about others. When would this difference in motivation produce the biggest difference in judgment based on the same information?

But a search for differences in self and social judgment might produce a paradoxical side benefit. If one looks at the existing literatures on self and social judgment, one finds that they tend to have different flavors. The literature on social judgment tends to dwell on the information that people have on hand as they try to evaluate others, as well as the types of information they seek (Moskowitz, 2005). The primary motive behind social judgments is often assumed to be the search for accuracy. In studies on self-perception, however, there is a greater variety of assumed motives. Besides having a need for an accurate understanding of self, people are often motivated to maintain or bolster self-esteem, or to find ways to improve the self over time in a quest to realize a personal ego-ideal (Brown, 1998).

If one looks for differences between self and social perception, one will find (at least) a few. But then one should step back and ask if self and social perception are really all that different. Perhaps social judgment is also prompted by a variety of motives, and one could draw inspiration from the self-judgment literature about what types of motives might be at play. That is, work on self and social perception might serve to cross-pollinate each other to produce inspiration about further ideas and hypotheses to pursue.

### *The Boundary Between Self and Social*

One last question has to do with the boundary between the self and the social—where does the self end and others begin? Gaertner and Sedikides tackle this question directly, asserting that the boundary of the self is set between each of our personal identities and the identity of any other individual. Often, however, suggests that self-views can easily leak into perceptions of others within the same group. In the area of interpersonal perception, Aron and colleagues have found that people's self-concepts can, to a degree, merge with the concepts they form of significant others around them. At times, people treat these others exactly as their would treat themselves, as well as show some cognitive confusion about the traits that constitute the "self" and the attributes that make up the other person (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992).

Perhaps selfhood is not a black or white affair, but rather a continuum. There are people out there who definitely fit into the category of "other people," but as one thinks about others who are more familiar, important, and closer to the self, thoughts about those others may take on a self-quality. As Malle noted, people know more about their internal lives—and the thoughts, desires, and intentions that inform their actions—than they know about the internal lives of others. And it shows. People are more likely to talk about their goals and thoughts when explaining their own behavior than when they try to explain the behavior of other people. When explaining others, people fall back on rather abstract and broad traits, such as whether the other person is, for example, aggressive or friendly.

With increasing familiarity and interdependence, however, others are seen and described in much the same way as people see and describe themselves (Idson & Mischel, 2001; Prentice, 1990). Their rich inner lives, filled with intentions, goals, and idiosyncratic interpretations become more appreciated. In short, people who are familiar and important are construed in many of the same ways as the self, as an active being who has nuanced and complicated traits, as well as complex thoughts and feelings. This suggests that the ways people have for thinking about the self is a continuum and that the ways they think about themselves can be extended, if not to all, then at least to some familiar others.

### Parting Thought

The work described in this volume has taught us a lot about the intersection between self and social judgment, but there is still much to discover. Perhaps this is a good situation to be in. The psychology of the self has fascinated psychologists for over a century; the ways in which people sit in judgment of others has also been a central concern. Combining the two topics reveals many interesting phenomena and questions, and undoubtedly further study will reveal more. Young investigators can be heartened by the prospect that there is much more work to do on valuable and fascinating questions that can fill a career. The job is not done, and does not look like it will be any time soon.

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