

STUDIES IN  
SELF AND IDENTITY  
SERIES

# THE SELF IN SOCIAL JUDGMENT

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# 1

## Self as Source and Constraint of Social Knowledge

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*Every man is pent up within the limits of his own consciousness, and cannot directly get beyond those limits any more than he can beyond his own skin.*

—Schopenhauer, 1901, *The Wisdom of Life*, p. 5

As Arthur Schopenhauer realized, and as common sense confirms, human thinking and feeling happens on the inside. Departures from the strictures of self seem to be reserved to altered states of consciousness or to artful imagination as in the movie *Being John Malkovich*. Otherwise, as pop icon Paul Revere observed, “no matter what you do, you’ll never run away from you.” Judgments about things out there are tied to events in here—there simply is no place else to go. It is the *self* that makes evaluations, reaches inferences, and has emotions.

To say that the self is involved in judging others is in one sense a truism. Because experiences of other people involve the perceiver’s own thoughts and feelings, social judgment necessarily depends on the self. The interpretations and inferences are subjective inasmuch as they arise from the perceiver’s own thoughts and feelings. Rather than simply asserting this truism, the task of psychological research is to illuminate the specific ways in which the self influences social judgment and the consequences of that influence for perceivers and their interaction partners.

Social judgments contain an element of subjectivity, and the exact nature of this subjectivity depends on biases arising from the egocentric limitations of the self. This is not to say that people always expect others to share their beliefs or to use the same values as a basis for moral judgment; nor does it guarantee that

people always evaluate the characteristics of others less favorably than their own, or that they expect others to be at greater risk for misfortune and disease. Research has established, however, that the self tends to influence social judgment in all these ways and more. People's own histories, preferences, desires, goals, beliefs, and self-views, as well as the emotional, physical and environmental states they find themselves in, exert a powerful influence on the way they see others. To be sure, social judgments are also sensitive to the particular behaviors of others and the attitudes they hold (Jussim, 2005), but the role of these "objective" social stimuli is only a part of the story. The goal of this volume is to explore the various egocentric sources of social judgments and the various similarities and differences between self- and social-perception that they produce.

### A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Many of the founding figures of modern psychological thought recognized that perceptions of others are systematically tethered to perceptions of the self. William James (1915), for example, noted that people view their "own lusts in the mirror of the lusts of others" (p. 314). Students of abnormal psychology also recognized the intimate connection between understanding others and understanding the self. Sigmund Freud (1924/1956) believed that people project onto others those impulses that are too threatening to be admitted into consciousness. Moving away from a psycho-pathological perspective, Karen Horney (1939) believed that projection is "not essentially different from the tendency to assume naively that others feel or react in the same manner as we ourselves do" (p. 26). In Carl Rogers's (1951) humanistic framework, basic similarities between self- and social-perception were also critical because Rogers assumed that people's social experiences are organized into a "self-structure." Those experiences, however, that are too discrepant to be assimilated into that structure are distorted to be made to fit or are ignored altogether.

Pioneers such as McDougall (1908), Mead (1934), and Sullivan (1947), who worked within a more sociological framework, also recognized the linkages between the self-concept and social perception. Krech and Crutchfield (1948) emphasized that the *relation* between self and others was the critical component of the psychological field, and Combs and Snygg (1959) asserted that the characteristics and actions of others are perceived and judged using the self as a frame of reference. As they put it, others "are not really fat unless they are fatter than we" (p. 145).

These theoretical efforts were reflected in work on methodology and measurement. Thurstone and Chave (1929) sought to create equal-interval attitude scales by having judges assign scale values to various attitude statements. An important assumption of this procedure was that judges can assign values without interjecting their own attitudes. Thus, when assigning a numerical rating to the statement: "Women should not be allowed to hold political office," people who agree and disagree should arrive at the same value. Hovland and Sherif (1952)

questioned this assumption by showing that judges with extreme attitudes tend to contrast discrepant positions away from their own. Personal attitudes thus emerged as anchors or standards against which attitude statements were compared. In this sense, social judgments are no different from psychophysical judgments of stimulus height or weight. In either case, readily available knowledge of one stimulus shapes judgments of other stimuli as the person encounters them. In a compelling demonstration of this anchoring effect, Dawes, Singer, and Lemons (1972) showed that during the Vietnam War era those considered to be Hawks judged Dovish statements to be more extreme than did Doves themselves, and Doves judged Hawkish statements to be more extreme than did Hawks (see also Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995).

### SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE

This brief historical excursion shows that two themes predominated in the early work on social perception (as they still do today). These are the themes of similarity and difference, or, put differently, assimilation and contrast. Overall, work on perceived similarities has received the most attention. This line of research has focused on how people use their attitudes, preferences, and likely actions to make predictions about others. Since Floyd Allport (1924) introduced the concept of *social projection*, hundreds of studies have demonstrated that people begin by assuming that others are similar to them. Allport himself found striking evidence for social projection when surveying students' attitudes at Syracuse University. The more students admitted to cheating on exams, the more they felt that cheating was common among their classmates (Katz & Allport, 1931). This was an important finding because Allport originally believed that projection was limited to public behavior, and especially to behavior in crowds. With its premium on privacy, cheating is the antithesis of a group mentality.

Subsequent work has continually found that people's own behaviors predict how common they think these behaviors are in the group (e.g., Wallen, 1943). In a study that has become a modern classic, Ross, Greene, and House (1977) recast the concept of social projection within the framework of Kelley's (1967) theory of causal attribution. Kelley proposed that social consensus is a cue for understanding the causes of behavior. When consensus is high (i.e., most people act the same), it is likely that aspects of the social situation call forth this behavior. If, however, there is a minority of dissenters, it is appropriate to attribute their dissenting behavior to internal properties, such as idiosyncratic personality characteristics or attitudes. Ross et al. suggested that social projection leads people to perceive high consensus for their own behaviors, and thus to assume that the behaviors of others who act differently stem from idiosyncratic factors within those people. Although Ross et al. (1977) called this consensus bias "false," researchers by the late 1980s proposed that it is reasonable for people with scant information about others to assume that their own behaviors are common (Dawes, 1989; Hoch, 1987).

However, researchers sometimes found that the story involved perceptions of difference rather than of similarity. Most of this research concerned with perceived differences, or contrast, converged on the conclusion that people do not simply exaggerate the differences between themselves and others, but that they also perceive themselves to be better than others. This finding too was anticipated by some of the great intuitive theorists of the nineteenth century. James (1890) rejected the idea that people are exclusively motivated by selfish instincts, saying that "I might conceivably be as much fascinated, and as primitively so, by the care of my neighbor's body as by the care of my own" (p. 325). He recognized, however, that the former passion, which he termed the "sympathetic instinct," is less powerful than the latter, which he termed the "egoistic instinct." James's conclusion that "the pure Ego, *per se*, can be an object of regard" (p. 325) was stimulated by German philosopher Adolf Horowitz (1878), whom James quoted at length on the issue. Horowitz summarized his own views in the rhetorical question of "how much more intelligent, soulful, better, is everything about us than about anyone else?" (p. 267). This insight was as prescient as it was accurate.

### THE SELF EXALTED

Modern empirical research on the theme of perceived self-other differences is particularly indebted to studies by Alan Edwards (e.g., Edwards, 1959), Neil Weinstein (e.g., Weinstein, 1980), and Ola Svenson (e.g., Svenson, 1981; see also Greenwald, 1980, or Taylor & Brown, 1988, for influential reviews) who demonstrated what has become known as the better-than-average effect, or self-enhancement more generally, in which people express exalted beliefs about themselves that are arguably too positive to be objectively possible. As in the case of social projection, research on self-enhancement evolved to address fundamental questions concerning the rationality and the adaptiveness of human judgment (Kwan, John, Kenny, Bond, & Robins, 2004), and questions concerning the role played by the cognitive and motivational processes that underlie these phenomena (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004).

Research on self-enhancement phenomena has been guided by the assumption that self-knowledge is richer and more diverse than knowledge of others. This view can again be traced to Horowitz and James, who believed that "our own things are fuller for us than those of others because of the memories they awaken and the practical hopes and expectations they arouse" (James, 1890, p. 327). During the recent era of research on social cognition, this idea found expression in studies on self-schemas, which suggested that the self-concept is a particularly well-encoded knowledge structure (e.g., Bargh, 1982; Kihlstrom, Cantor, Albright, Chew, Klein, & Niedenthal, 1988; Markus, 1977; Rogers, Kuiper & Kirker, 1977). A study by Markus, Smith, and Moreland (1985), which showed that well-articulated self-views indeed shape perceptions of others, is an excellent example of work during this period.

### ALTERNATIVE VIEWS

Although the idea that self-perception shapes social perception has become widely accepted within the field of social cognition, the claims of alternative theories must be noted. Following Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934), symbolic interactionism stressed the supremacy of the "generalized other." According to this view, people represent social knowledge in highly compact images of what others are like and what they expect. The self-concept is seen as contingent on social perception, as adaptable, as perpetually renegotiated, and as reconstructed as needed (Stryker & Satham, 1985). Emerging from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), self-categorization theorists (e.g., Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) proposed the related idea that individual self-concepts are grafted onto social identities or "collective selves." Most recently, Karniol (2003) articulated the idea that collective social representations can wield primacy over individual self-concepts in a sophisticated theory of "protocentrism" (as opposed to egocentrism). While there is arguably some truth to both the egocentric (or individualist) and the protocentric (or collectivist) approach, the objective of research is to test and model the various interdependencies of human judgment and to take a close look at what is meant by the claim that some kind of knowledge is more primary than another.

### THE CHAPTERS

Each chapter in this volume provides a snapshot of recent research on the relation between self-beliefs and social judgment. By bringing these snapshots together in this volume, we hope to sketch a mosaic of contemporary theory and evidence that begins to piece together how self- and social-judgment coexist and influence each other.

#### *Social Projection*

The objective of the first two chapters following this overview is to examine how the self-concept influences judgments and predictions of others. In chapter two, Krueger and Acevedo extend a Bayesian framework developed by Dawes (1989), and discuss the conditions under which projecting self-behavior onto population estimates increases the accuracy of social perception. Going beyond previous research, they explore the question of how social projection may affect choices among alternative courses of action. The model they present suggests that projection can lead people to act in socially desirable ways on the assumption that others will reciprocate. When applied to social dilemmas, such as the famous prisoner's dilemma, this analysis suggests that social projection can reduce the perceived conflict between self-interest and the collective good. In other words, social projection may improve both social judgment and social behavior.

In chapter three, Van Boven and Loewenstein then ask how people make predictions about others who are in a different situation than themselves. According to their dual-judgment model, people first imagine how they would act in the situation the others are in. In other words, people simulate their own hypothetical behavior by anchoring it on their present behaviors or mental state. In a second step of inference, they anchor their predictions of others on their own predicted behavior in the situation. Van Boven and Loewenstein find that both inferences fail to account for differences between situations and differences between people. As a result, cross-situational social predictions leave sizeable *empathy gaps*. These gaps are theoretically noteworthy because they help explain other well-known judgmental pitfalls, such as the hindsight bias or the curse of knowledge, which can detract from effective interpersonal behavior (as, for example, in the context of sales negotiations).

### Self-Enhancement

Whereas perceptions of self-other similarities lie at the core of research on social projection, research on self-enhancement explores how and when people perceive themselves to be different. A pervasive finding is that self-evaluations are more generous and optimistic than evaluations of others. What processes produce this difference between perceptions of self and others?

Chapter four is dedicated to an exploration of the cognitive processes involved in the perception of self-enhancing comparisons. Building on current theory and research on two-process models of judgment and decision making (e.g., Kahneman & Frederick, 2002), Gilovich, Epley, and Hanks attribute self-enhancement to a simple—and largely automatic—form of reasoning about the self. These authors propose that most self-concepts are automatically associated with perceptions of desirability. When predicting their own behavior in a different situation, for example, people's own good intentions and high hopes for success come to mind easily. With this anchor of optimism in place, predictions are corrected only reluctantly and with effort. Even when engaging the more deliberative and slower second reasoning system, people tend to test their optimistic self-views by favoring evidence that supports them. Inasmuch as this set of biases, that is, the combination of automatically positive expectations and selective testing of these expectations, is unique to the self-perspective, it follows that perceptions of others are often more accurate.

In chapter five, Alicke and Govorun continue to examine the nature of self-other comparisons by honing in on the well-known “better-than-average effect.” These authors review several recent models that seek to account for this type of self-enhancement by a variety of “cold” cognitive mechanisms. One of these mechanisms is egocentrism, which states that people view themselves more favorably than others because positive self-attributes are readily accessible and are accorded greater weight in social comparisons than others' attributes. According to the related notion of focalism, greatest weight is given to the attributes of

whichever person is the focus of attention, which is usually the self. Alicke and Govorun note, however, that none of these mechanisms can explain the full range of self-enhancement phenomena. For example, the finding that self-enhancement is greatest for attributes that people feel they can control suggests the operation of motivated reasoning (Alicke, 1985).

### Self and Others Compared

Social projection and self-enhancement are two sides of the same coin. Whereas social projection creates perceptions of self-other similarities, self-enhancement creates perceptions of differences. The two are not mutually exclusive; indeed they may be observed in the same studies (Krueger, 2000; Van Boven & Loewenstein, chapter three).

In chapter six, Mussweiler, Epstude, and Rüter present a comprehensive model of comparative judgments, of which self-other comparisons are specific instances. Their model can predict when people assimilate judgments of others to their own self-concepts, and when they contrast those judgments away from the self. Likewise, the model assumes that self-judgments are mutable in that they can be assimilated to or contrasted away from salient social standards. The model describes social judgments as occurring in two stages. In the first stage, people form holistic impressions regarding the overall similarity between themselves and others. Then, in the second stage, whatever information is more consistent with the initial assessment becomes more accessible. Testing hypotheses of similarity and dissimilarity by reviewing biased samples of accessible information results in final judgments that are assimilative or contrastive depending on whether similarity or dissimilarity is first assumed.

Mussweiler and colleagues note that perceptions of similarity and dissimilarity depend in part on the relative number of matching and mismatching features between targets of comparison (Tversky, 1977). In chapter seven, Hodges builds on Tversky's classic model to show that judgments about the self and others involve two kinds of asymmetries. The first asymmetry occurs in judgments of similarity. Here, the self-concept serves as a habitual reference point. Overall, judgments of similarity are higher when people assess how similar others are to them than when they assess how similar they are to others. The second asymmetry occurs in comparative judgments. Here, people come to evaluate others only in terms of their unique features. When evaluating themselves, they make use of both their own unique features and those they share with others. Both of these asymmetries are consistent with the view that the self-concept enjoys a place of psychological prominence, from which, in Hodges's words, it is not easily dislodged.

Delving deeper into the different ways in which people think about themselves and others, Malle describes a “folk-conceptual theory of behavior explanation” in chapter eight. According to this theory, it is far from sufficient to look for differences between self-related cognition and other-related (i.e., “social”) cognition along single dimensions. Instead, his model postulates that selves (i.e., actors) and

others (i.e., observers) hold radically different perspectives. Again, it is assumed that the self-perspective is unique in that it rests on a richer and more accessible foundation of relevant knowledge and in that it is more closely linked to motivational concerns, such as impression management. Malle reviews empirical support for these basic assumptions, and then proceeds to review the evidence for a whole family of asymmetries that affect the ways in which people account for their own behavior and the behavior of others. Following Heider (1958), Malle argues that more can be gained from the distinctions between intentional and unintentional behaviors and between observable and unobservable behaviors than from the classic dichotomy of personal versus situational causes.

### Integrative Approaches

The next three chapters cut across the traditional phenomenon-based research areas. In chapter nine, Balceris and Dunning present a parallel-constraint satisfaction framework that aims to account for both perceptions of self-other similarities and differences. In this connectionist approach, personal characteristics, behaviors, and preferences are nodes in a cognitive-emotional network. These nodes may excite or inhibit one another automatically and in parallel. Working from the assumption that the personal self-concept holds a place of prominence among people in individualist societies, Balceris and Dunning develop the idea that the self-concept sets the constraints within which social perception can operate. Backed by a wealth of earlier research evidence, their model assumes that (a) people construe other's characteristics in ways that enhance self-esteem, and that (b) relevant aspects of the self-concept are automatically activated whenever people set about making judgments about others. With these theoretical and empirical assumptions in place, the model can represent the ways in which people come to perceive similarities and differences between themselves and others, and how they fill in missing information.

However, there can be more than one way to construe the self. The *individualist* self is a vehicle that allows people to see themselves as unique. In contrast, a *collective* self construes a person as a member of an important social group (e.g., family, friends, college peers). In chapter ten, Gaertner and Sedikides compare the power of individualist and collectivist selves to influence social thought and action and confront head-on the question of which self is primary. Gaertner and Sedikides review evidence that leads them to conclude that the individual self-concept enjoys psychological primacy. The most direct evidence is that people are more distressed by threats to their personal self than by threats to groups they belong to and care about.

Two additional findings challenge the presumed power of the collective self even more directly. One is that members of collectivist societies self-enhance just as much as members of individualist societies. What matters is the characteristic at issue. People with a collectivist self-construal claim to be superior to others in domains that are valued in a collectivist culture (e.g., "I am more modest than the

average person!"). The other finding suggests that discriminatory behavior in *ad hoc* laboratory groups can be explained without reference to the somewhat circular idea that people discriminate because they need to differentiate the ingroup from the outgroup. Instead, it is sufficient to suppose that people expect ingroup members, but not outgroup members, to reciprocate their own generosity.

Pursuing this egocentric perspective on ingroup bias in chapter eleven, Otten carefully reviews the claims of several theories built around the notion of collective self-construals (i.e., social identity theory, self-categorization theory, and their most recent variants). After noting that collectivist explanations of ingroup bias face empirical difficulties, such as the lack of evidence for the idea that the expression of ingroup bias raises a person's self-esteem, Otten explains ingroup bias more parsimoniously with the idea that self-knowledge is quickly accessed and easily projected to appropriate social targets (e.g., members of one's own group). According to this view, ingroup bias necessarily occurs among people whose self-images are positive (i.e., self-enhancement) and who expect members of their own groups to be similar to them (i.e., social projection).

In the concluding chapter twelve, we review the emergent themes in this volume and address some controversial issues. Of central interest is the question of the extent to which the individual self-concept is involved in judgments of others. The chapters in this volume suggest that the self has considerable causal power, but a prominent alternative to this view asserts that generalized beliefs about people (or "protocenters") guide both judgments of individual others and the self (Karniol, 2003). A second important question is how perceptions of personal superiority can lead to self-defeating judgments and behavioral outcomes. Here we refer an emerging line of research on *moral hypocrisy* (Alicke, 1993; Batson, Thompson, & Chen, 2002). We conclude by considering directions for future research on the interplay of self- and social perception.

In doing so, we try to fulfill one goal that inspired this volume. Work on the relationship between self and social judgment appears often in the historical terrain of psychological research, but usually in a fragmentary and isolated manner. It is our hope that by bringing current research on the topic under one roof, we can begin to identify integrative principles that explain the relation of self to social judgment, point to new research questions, and most importantly, identify this topic as an important and coherent one that represents an integrated body of work.

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