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Social Projection

At the phenomenal level, the term social projection refers to the finding that, unless there is evidence to the contrary, people assume that the characteristics of individual other people (attitudes, preferences, experience, traits) or the characteristics of groups resemble their own. Social projection is therefore strongest when perceivers know their own characteristics but must guess those of others. The inference from the self to the group is an inductive one, which can be modeled by Bayes's Theorem, which describes the rational updating of beliefs (i.e., about social consensus) are in light of relevant sample information (i.e., one's own characteristics). As the characteristics of most people are, by statistical necessity, correlated with the characteristics of most others, projection serves as a useful inferential heuristic, yielding reasonably accurate predictions under most conditions (Krueger, 2007).

Social projection becomes weaker as people acquire information about the characteristics of other individual group members; yet predictions remain egocentrically biased. Among the likely causes of egocentric overweighting are the comparative accessibility of self-related knowledge, its greater embeddedness in relevant cognitive structures, and its greater emotional significance. The strength of projection also decreases with the distance between the self and the target of prediction in terms of shared group membership, genetic overlap, or geographic location. This type of structural distance is a reasonable source of hypotheses regarding other differences of a more psychological or behavioral nature. Evidence suggests, however, that people discount the predictive utility of their own characteristics too much as the distance to the target increases. Taken together, egocentric weighting and overweighting of distance cues mean that people project too much to those who are close to them and too little to those who are remote.

The categorization of people into ingroups (including the self) and outgroups (excluding the self) is an example of overdiscounting. Whereas people strongly project their own characteristics to others belonging to the same social group, they hardly project at all to people belonging to other groups. This difference in projection has three significant outcomes for intergroup perception. First, people overestimate the differences between groups. Most social groups share many characteristics with one another and with the individual perceiver because all are subsumed within the same, more inclusive, social categories (e.g., mathematicians and philologists are all academics). Lack of projection to the outgroup therefore entails an underestimation of similarities. Second, people perceive ingroups more accurately than outgroups inasmuch as their own characteristics are diagnostic of both ingroup and outgroup features. Not using one's own characteristics

impairs accuracy. Third, people perceive ingroups in more favorable terms than outgroups. As most people's self-images are highly positive and because the strength of projection is independent of this positivity, a group is perceived positively to the extent that a person projects to it.

At the explanatory level, the term social projection refers to the psychological processes that produce the perceptions of self-other similarities at the phenomenal level. Cognitive explanations fall into three classes. According to one account, projection processes are automatically activated once a judgment (e.g., a trait, behavior, or attitude judgment) for a target person or group is needed (Krueger, 2007). In this view, projection is unitary and part of the intuitive system (also known as System 1, Kahneman & Frederick, 2005). According to an alternative account, projection occurs in two discriminable steps. In step 1, people derive a rough estimation of self-other similarity from available cues. If this estimate is positive, they enhance it in step 2 by strategically attributing many of their own attributes to the group (Ames, 2004). This account construes the projection of specific self-related characteristics an operation of the deliberative system (also known as System 2). According to a third account, the final strength of projection reflects the operation of both systems. System 1 rapidly and invariably provides the belief that others are similar to the self. System 2 then assesses whether this assumption of similarity ought to be modified (i.e., reduced) in light of information suggesting social distance between self and group. In this view, social projection is a variant of the general anchoring-and-adjustment heuristic. In contrast to these cognitive explanations, the motivational account suggests that people engage in projection, at least in part, because it allows them to perceive their own characteristics normal and normative.

Much as people project to their ingroups, while neglecting information about other group members, they also project ingroup characteristics to an inclusive, superordinate category, while neglecting the characteristics of outgroups that are equally important parts of that category (Wenzel, Mummendey, Weber & Waldzus, 2003). Compared with Bulgarians, for instance, Belgians will be more likely to ascribe a fondness for French fries to Europeans. The theoretical arguments offered to explain self-projection also apply to ingroup projection. Current opinion emphasizes the motivational approach in particular. By viewing the ingroup as the prototype of the inclusive category, perceivers can justify the relative derogation of the outgroup. Yet, ingroup projection is not a byproduct of self-projection; perceived ingroup characteristics predict perceived category characteristics even when the effect of self-characteristics is statistically controlled (Bianchi, Machunsky, Steffens, & Mummendey, in press).

The interplay of cognitive and motivational processes is more complex when projection occurs in the context strategic interaction. On the one hand, projection enables people to coordinate their actions with others, cooperate with them, and trust that they will reciprocate. People may choose to cooperate in a prisoner's dilemma, for example, because their own choice signals—though does not cause—the likely cooperation of the other (Krueger, 2007). On the other hand, successful deception requires that projection be curtailed. People who assume that others inevitably do as they themselves do and know what they themselves know, are unable outmaneuver them. Poker players can

successfully bluff only if they assume that the other players cannot intuit their intentions; chess players must assume that their opponents cannot look as many moves into the game as they themselves can.

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Suggested Readings

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Keywords

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