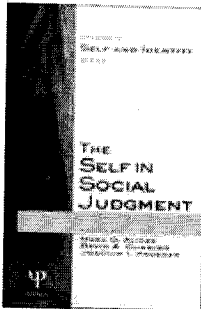


To Thine Own Self Be True

A review of

**The Self in Social Judgment**

by David A. Dunning, Mark D. Alicke, and Joachim I. Krueger (Eds.)

New York: Psychology Press,
2005. 304 pp. ISBN 1-84169-418-5. \$65.00Reviewed by
Norman Noach Milgram

☞ Polonius advises his son, Laertes, to become wholly aware of one's self and, if he does so, he will undoubtedly follow its moral dictates in his dealings with others: "Thou canst not then be false to any man" (*Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 3). If Shakespeare had access to the book under review, he would have been bemused to learn that the self as a moral standard is still virgin territory for psychological exploration, but he would have been taxed in trying to comprehend the complex relationships that exist between the self in its automatic and volitional modes and the perception of, judgments about, and behaviors toward other people.

☞ The editors, who jointly authored the first and last chapters and coauthored three other chapters, state in the introduction that their goal in organizing the volume was not only to bring together diverse research approaches to the topic of the self and social judgment but also to identify major themes and unresolved issues at the intersection of the self and social judgment. In my opinion, they succeeded.

— This book is not for everyone. It is designed for advanced graduate students and for social cognition researchers. They will find in this slim volume both breadth of topics in social judgment and depth of conceptual analysis of individual topics. The prisoner's dilemma (Chapter 2) is the match point for a game in which the authors' efforts at exposition and the readers' subsequent illumination will result in a win for either both sides of the court or for none. The chapter offers a systematic discussion of social projection, the individualistic and collective self, and irreconcilable theories of rationality, with reference to social choice. Readers who have prior knowledge of the dilemma and modest mathematical and logical skills will traverse the terrain with reasonable success. Readers who have neither but who are motivated to resolve paradoxes and master conceptual complexities will be equally successful and rewarded for their efforts. All other readers will have to be content with partial understanding of the issues and their ramifications and with the face-saving assurance that Nobel Prize laureates in economics have grappled with these issues and have set the standard according to which mere mortals may aspire and never attain.

— The editors/authors made strenuous efforts to elucidate these issues. They allude to four major themes in the opening chapter and expand on them in their summary chapter. Selected elements of these themes are presented below.

Social Projection

— Social projection states that other people are like us and perceive and interpret reality as we do. Consequently, it is prudent to act on this assumption in dealing with these others. We are more likely to do so and to profit when we have little direct knowledge of the other; under these conditions, it is probably wise to

trust the other person to appraise the situation in much the same manner as we do and, consequently, to engage in cooperative behavior with him or her. On the other hand, we typically have some individuating knowledge based on prior contacts with the person or on stereotypic assumptions about the gender, age, or social group to which the other belongs. Under those circumstances, we do well to temper the social projection assumption.

☛ Caution is also critical if we and the other person or persons are in different situations at the point in time when we are called on to project and to act. Let us suppose that we have just finished eating a full meal and are interacting with someone whom we know to be hungry. Under these circumstances, if we estimate how we would feel and what we would do if we were hungry and then assume that the other, who is in fact hungry, would do the same, our estimates are likely to be inaccurate. We do not fully appreciate that estimates made on a full stomach differ from estimates when made on an empty stomach, and we will miss the mark of how the hungry person actually feels and thinks. The authors (Chapter 3) aptly refer to this discrepancy between assumption and reality as an *empathy gap*.

Uniqueness

☛ If similarity with others is one side of the social interaction coin, the assumption of personal uniqueness is the other side of the coin. The underlying motives for both assumptions are self-enhancement and monitoring and maintenance of self-esteem. This motive may be gratified by the assumption of similarity (equivalent to membership) with reference to an admired group or by the assumption of personal uniqueness (i.e., the perception that one is superior to others in some or conceivably all

respects). Particular situations on the one hand and particular personal traits on the other will tip the scale in favor of either similarity or uniqueness. Research has shown that most people report that they are above average in performance in a given situation or in a given characteristic, but this effect is sensitive to environmental constraints. The "better-than-average effect" is blunted if the situation and/or trait in question are objectively defined and if the self-enhancement motive is reduced.

— The self-serving bias also appears in causal attribution: We take too much credit for our successes and too little responsibility for our failures. As the meta-analysis in Chapter 8 indicates, differential causal attribution follows from our attributing our success to our good intentions and superior abilities and our failures to situational factors beyond our control.

The Self as a Social Judgment Standard

— The relationship between self-related and social-related standards of social judgment raises a number of questions (Chapter 9). Are social judgments based on one's personal strengths and weaknesses, that is, on the self as a social standard, or on socially consensual standards, and under what circumstances are they based on the former or the latter? Do evaluations of self consistently affect evaluations of others or do evaluations of others modify self-evaluations? Several different approaches are cited in the volume:

1. Which standards have greater salience for the individual? When standards based on others are given salience over self-evaluations, self-evaluations will change. When self-evaluations are more salient, they will modify or determine the evaluations of

- others (Chapter 6).
2. What is the initial hypothesis of the individual? When people begin with a hypothesis of similarity (e.g., with reference to people they admire), they will see greater similarity between themselves and the admired others; when they begin with a hypothesis of difference (e.g., with reference to people they dislike or hate), they will be biased to see difference. Research is mandated to elucidate other factors in the real world that dispose people toward an initial similarity or difference hypothesis (Chapter 6).
 3. If we assume that people have a proclivity to emphasize their uniqueness, why do they exaggerate their uniqueness? Malle (Chapter 8) attributes exaggerated self-perceived uniqueness to the greater knowledge that people have about their own intentions and about the reasons for their actions as compared with what they know about the intentions and actions of others (e.g., I am unique and superior to others because I know why I do what I do, and because I know less about others, I assume that they are not unique).
 4. What is the direction of social comparison? If the initial focus of comparison is on the self, then features associated with the self will have more impact than features associated with the other person; if the focus of comparison is on the other person, the reverse will hold true. This follows from the finding that unique

features receive more weight than shared features when the comparison is from self to other (Chapter 7).

5. What is the downside of the uniqueness imperative? When we consistently emphasize the differences between ourselves and others, we may conclude that our less attractive attributes (e.g., indecision and anxiety) are as unique as our attractive attributes. As a consequence, we will pay a heavier psychic price for the former attributes than people who acknowledge shared features in general and shared unattractive features in particular (Miller & McFarland, 1987).

Who's on First?

The controversy over the priority in development and primacy in day-to-day functioning of the individual self and the group-dependent, social, or collective self is dealt with at considerable length (Chapters 10 and 11). These authors assert that the personal self is on first and cite supporting findings: (a) people feel worse about a threat to their self-esteem than to the esteem of their group; (b) even people living in Asian collectivist cultures are more upset about threats to self than to group when the threat refers to attributes important to them, in their case, collectivist attributes such as cooperativeness and family orientation; and (c) people evaluate themselves more positively than they evaluate their group, and their group more positively than they evaluate out-groups.

Considerable attention is given to explicating and refuting an alternative theory by Karniol (2003) that puts social perception ahead of self-perception. She assumes that

perception begins with generic or collectivist notions of what people are like and what they are likely to do. Individual self-concepts are then derived from this protocenter template; people start with their representations of what people are like in general, compare these representations with their own attributes, and then construct self-concepts based on what they themselves must be like. The heat generated by this controversy is reflected in the invited rejoinder of two contributors to the present volume (Krueger and Mussweiler) to Karniol's article.

The Moral Self Holds the High Ground

— The self is a moral standard, and many of the phenomena associated with the self in other domains apply to the moral domain. For example, the tendency to describe one's attributes as better than average is more pronounced in moral attitudes and behaviors than in other domains. This tendency, labeled "the Muhammad Ali effect," is reflected in the insistence of ordinary people that they are better than others, although not necessarily smarter, better looking, or superior in any consensually verifiable attributes.

— People evaluate moral behavior by others according to their own professed moral choices and actions, but they do not always practice what they preach. When people hold others to stricter standards than those to which they hold themselves, they are guilty of judgmental hypocrisy (Chapter 12). This behavior has classical Freudian roots in attributing to others intentions and behaviors that are unacceptable to him- or herself. In a more general sense, people who are anxious about their intelligence, attractiveness, or popularity will be harsher in judging these attributes in others than people who are comfortable about themselves with reference to these attributes.

Parting Thought

The theory and research that characterize the self and social judgment may be likened to a religious play that provides moral aphorisms: The self does not live alone, selfhood includes other people with whom we are familiar, who are important to us, and for whom we care; we judge others by the yardstick we apply to ourselves, and when we err in our judgments, we are provided with rules and admonitions by which to correct our errors in judgment; and we are able to empathize with another person when we have experienced the particular situation in which the individual finds him- or herself or when we deliberately enter into this situation.

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