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# The rational side of egocentrism in social comparisons ☆

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**Abstract**

Prior work has found that when people compare themselves with others they egocentrically focus on their own strengths and achievements more than on the (equally relevant) strengths and achievements of the comparison group. As a consequence, people tend to overestimate their comparative standing when absolute standing is high and underestimate their comparative standing when absolute standing is low. The present research investigated a rational discounting explanation of this bias—namely, that people weight the target of the comparison (the self) more than the referent of the comparison (others) because they typically have more knowledge about the former than the latter. In three studies, we found that the tendency to focus on the target in social comparisons—and the over and underestimation of relative standing that tendency engenders—was reduced (but not eliminated) as people's knowledge about the comparison group increased. These results suggest that there may be a rational side to egocentrism in social comparisons.


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Social comparisons are ubiquitous. How does my health compare with that of the average person? How much have I contributed compared with my collaborator? How do I stack up against the competition?

Almost as ubiquitously, these judgments are associated with self-enhancement. People tend to overestimate their comparative strengths and achievements (e.g., Alicke, 1985; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Myers, 1998). They are unrealistically optimistic about their comparative likelihood of experiencing the good things in life (Weinstein, 1980; Weinstein & Lachendro, 1982). They overestimate their role in collaborations (Kruger & Gilovich, 1999; Ross & Sicoly, 1979). And they are overconfident in competitions (Plous, 1993).

More recent work, however, suggests a more nuanced picture of self-enhancement in social comparison. For instance, although individuals overestimate their social standing in easy ability domains (such as driving a car or operating a computer mouse), they underestimate their social standing in more difficult domains (such as juggling or computer programming) (Burson, Larrick, & Klayman, 2006; Klar & Giladi, 1997; Kruger, 1999). As well, whereas people tend to overestimate their comparative likelihood of experiencing common desirable events (such as living past 70), they underestimate their comparative likelihood of experiencing rare desirable events (such as living past 100) (Chambers, Windschitl, & Suls, 2003; Kruger & Burrus, 2004). Similarly, although married couples overestimate their relative contribution to frequently-performed household chores (such as cleaning the dishes), they under-

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estimate their relative contribution to infrequently-performed household chores (such as cleaning the oven) (Kruger & Savitsky, 2006). And whereas competitors are overconfident about their chances of winning when faced with a "shared benefit" (a circumstance that benefits all competitors equally, such as "wildcards" in the game of poker), they are underconfident when faced with a shared adversity (Moore & Kim, 2003; Windschitl, Kruger, & Simms, 2003).

What accounts for these reversals? Prior work has suggested that when people compare themselves with others—be it in terms of their strengths and achievements, their likelihood of experiencing an event, their contribution to a collaboration, or their likelihood of winning a competition—they egocentrically focus on their own strengths/likelihood/contribution and underweight the strengths/likelihood/contribution of the comparison group. For instance, when people compare their driving ability with that of the average person, they tend to focus on their own driving ability more than the driving ability of the average person. Similarly, when married individuals estimate how much they have contributed to household chores compared with their spouse, they tend to focus on their own contribution to the task more than their spouse's contribution. And when people predict the outcome of a competition, they focus on their own strengths and weaknesses more than on the strengths and weaknesses of their opponent (Moore & Kim, 2003; Windschitl et al., 2003). As a consequence, individuals overestimate their relative standing when absolute strengths/likelihood/contributions are high and underestimate their relative standing when absolute strengths/likelihood/contributions are low (Burson et al., 2006; Chambers et al., 2003; Klar & Giladi, 1997; Kruger, 1999; Kruger & Burrus, 2004; Kruger & Savitsky, 2006; Moore & Kim, 2003; Windschitl et al., 2003).

Less clear, however, is the reason self versus other comparisons are egocentric. One possibility is that the mere act of comparing the self with others (as opposed to others with oneself) naturally focuses attention on the target of the comparison (the self) at the expense of the referent (others). This "focalism" explanation follows from (among other things) Tversky's (1972, 1977) work on judgments of similarity, the anchoring and adjustment heuristic (Chapman & Johnson, 2002; Epley & Gilovich, 2001; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), and the more general finding that focal hypotheses tend to receive greater weight than non-focal hypotheses (Burrus & Kruger, 2006; Fox & Levav, 2000; Giladi & Klar, 2002; Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Klayman & Ha, 1987; Kruger & Burrus, 2006; Lord, Lepper, & Preston, 1984; McKenzie, 1998; Rottenstreich & Tversky, 1997; Trope & Mackie, 1987; Tversky & Koehler, 1994; Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000). Consistent with this explanation, whereas roommates tend to overestimate their contribution to frequently performed tasks when they compare their own contribution with that of their roommate, this tendency is reduced when they compare their roommate's contribution with their own (Kruger & Savitsky, 2006; see also Ross & Sicoly, 1979, Experiment 5). Similarly, whereas competitors faced with a shared benefit are overconfident when they estimate their own chances of winning, they are less confident when they estimate their competitor's chances of winning (Moore & Kim, 2003; Windschitl et al., 2003).

Another possibility stems from the difference in accessibility between information pertaining to one's own strengths/likelihood/contributions versus those of the comparison group. A large body of work suggests that self-related information is more spontaneously and efficiently retrieved than is other-related information (Kuiper & Rogers, 1979; Markus, 1977; Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Srull & Gaelick, 1983). As such, all else equal, it is easier to think of one's own strengths and achievements than it is to think of the strengths and achievements of the comparison group. Consistent with this explanation, manipulations of the relative salience of self vs. other-related information influence the extent to which individuals are egocentric in their social comparisons. For instance, in one study participants were less confident about their chances of beating a competitor in a futuristic videogame when both were asked to wear blindfolds (a circumstance which would impair the performance of both competitors equally)—the typical egocentrism effect. However, that tendency was reduced when the salience of one's competitor's circumstance was increased (such as by placing him or her in the same room as the subject) (Chambers & Kruger, 2006).

Unexamined, however, is another, perhaps more parsimonious explanation for egocentrism in social comparison. Rather than focalism or differences in information *salience* leading to egocentrism, it may be that differences in information *availability* account for the effect, that is, differences in the amount of knowledge people have about themselves versus the comparison group (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004). After all, people have considerably more information about themselves than they do about others. Whereas one's own computer programming ability (or lack thereof) is painfully apparent, for instance, the computer programming prowess of "the average person" is at best an educated guess. As well, although one might have a reasonably good idea of how many times one's spouse has done the dishes, the reliability of that estimate likely pales in comparison with the reliability of one's estimate of one's own dishwashing.

This difference in knowledge suggests that the tendency to focus on oneself when comparing oneself with others (and the various biases that tendency engenders) may in part reflect a rational discounting procedure. If one has more (and more accurate) knowledge about one's own ability, future, or contribution than about the absolute ability, future, or contribution of others, then it may be quite sensible for one to focus on the former (what one knows) more than the latter (what one doesn't know) when comparing the two. Consider the task of predicting the outcome of a trivia contest between oneself and a randomly selected other on the topic of Mesopotamian history. Suppose