

Deconstructing the Better-Than-Average Effect

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Corey L. Guenther

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This dissertation titled
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by
COREY L. GUENTHER

has been approved for
the Department of Psychology
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Mark D. Alicke
Professor of Psychology

Benjamin M. Ogles
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

ABSTRACT

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Director of Dissertation: Mark D. Alicke

The tendency for people to evaluate themselves more favorably than the average peer, or, the better-than-average effect (BTAE), is one of social psychology's most reliable findings. The present research deconstructs the BTAE to address two questions which remain conspicuously unanswered in the literature. The first concerns the extent to which the BTAE is a motivationally driven phenomenon. Previous explanations for the effect have debated the extent to which self-enhancement motives underlie self versus average peer comparative judgments. The present studies inform this inconsistency by showing that the BTAE contains both motivational and perceptual-cognitive components. Specifically, it is argued that the effect results from an anchoring-and-adjustment process whereby judgments of the average peer are anchored on, and assimilated toward the self, and that enhancement motives impact the degree to which this assimilation occurs. For trait dimensions on which the self is positively evaluated, enhancement motives limit the amount of average peer assimilation that occurs (Study 1). But for those dimensions on which the self is negatively evaluated, enhancement motives augment average peer assimilation (Study 2).

Secondly, the present research also explores the question of how judgments of self are derived in contexts typical of those employed in BTAE research. Particularly, it is argued that self judgment is a heuristic-driven process by which people naturally, and

perhaps automatically conflate self description with idiosyncratic prescription of how much of various traits an individual *should* have. Study 3 demonstrates that when made absolutely, self judgments and idiosyncratic ideal conceptions are nearly identical across trait dimensions. Moreover, Studies 3 and 4 provide converging evidence that this extreme similarity may result from the presence of a negotiation process during self and ideal judgment, in which it is conferred how the self rates relative to one's ideal standards, and, how such standards relate to present self standing. Discussion focuses on implications for existing perspectives as well as directions for future research.

Approved: _____

Mark D. Alicke

Professor of Psychology

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INTRODUCTION

“When you are as great as I am, it’s hard to be humble.”

“I am the greatest...I said that before I even knew I was.”

- Muhammad Ali

Muhammad Ali is widely considered the greatest heavyweight boxer in American boxing history, and perhaps further, one of the greatest athletes of the 20th century. And, as can be testified with the quotations above, he is perhaps just as well known for the frankness with which he professed his athletic prowess to the world around him. Though few people possess the type of talent and ability which afforded Ali such forthright self-aggrandizement, perhaps even fewer realize as such. In fact, like Ali, the finding that people consistently perceive themselves as better than “average” across a wide array of traits, skills, and abilities has become one of social psychology’s most reliable phenomena. Known as the better-than-average effect (BTAE), this tendency has been demonstrated across a diverse set of trait characteristics (Alicke, 1985), using a variety of dependent measures (e.g., Watson, Dritschel, Obonsawin, & Jentzch, 2007; Codol, 1975; Svenson, 1981), and throughout several populations (e.g., Cross, 1977; Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004). And, if one includes discussion of the optimistic bias—the tendency to overestimate one’s likelihood of experiencing positive life events and underestimate the probability of experiencing negative events (Weinstein, 1980)—then the proclivity for people to perceive themselves more favorably than their peers becomes even more pervasive. Although the BTAE is only a single example of the type

of self-other comparison in which people engage, it is one of the most well-researched comparative phenomena in the social psychological canon.

Various theoretical explanations have been proffered for the BTAE, each of which is capable of accounting for at least some instances of the effect's generality (for recent reviews see Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Alicke & Govorun, 2005). And, given the wealth of data which have been gathered to support each of these perspectives, it is reasonable to conclude that the BTAE is a multiply determined phenomenon which cannot fully be accounted for by any single theoretical explanation.

In addition to demonstrating the ubiquitous nature of the BTAE, research has also revealed factors which moderate the phenomenon. For example, Alicke (1985) found better-than-average tendencies to be largest on positive controllable dimensions and smallest on negative uncontrollable dimensions, perhaps reflecting the belief that "I am good, but fate makes me bad." Dunning, Meyerowitz, and Holzberg (1989) showed that when participants are given freedom to idiosyncratically define those trait dimensions on which they are being evaluated, the BTAE is larger than when such trait definitions are controlled. Similarly, Allison, Messick, and Goethals (1989) found the BTAE to be larger on moral, subjectively construed dimensions than on objectively measured dimensions such as intellect. Taken together, these findings suggest that the greater subjectivity permitted in self versus other comparative judgments, the greater the tendency for people to present themselves in an overly favorable light.

Two unanswered questions continue to loom prominently in the better-than-average research, however. The first is the extent to which the BTAE is driven by

motivational processes. While some researchers construe the BTAE as a self-serving phenomenon by which people strategically evaluate themselves more favorably than the average peer (Alicke, 1985; Alicke & Govorun, 2005), others argue the effect is fully accounted for by non-motivational processes. Specifically, such theorists contend that the BTAE fully results from differences in cognitive processing devoted to self- and other-related information (see Chambers & Windschitl, 2004). Thus, the extent to which strategically enhancing motives are involved in establishing self versus average peer judgments remains unclear.

Second, although much research has focused on the process by which judgments of the average peer are generated (e.g., Alicke & Govorun, unpublished data; Kruger, 1999; Weinstein, 1980), far less research has centered on the other half of these comparative judgments—namely, how evaluations of the self are derived in this comparative context. For example, it is clear from recent work using both correlational (e.g., Klar & Giladi, 1999; Kruger, 1999) and experimental methods (Balcetis & Dunning, 2005; Alicke & Govorun, unpublished data) that social judgment is largely an anchoring-and-adjustment process in which the self serves to anchor judgments of other individuals. However, what remains far less clear is how the very self-ratings used to anchor judgments of others are in themselves established. We do not know, for example, whether the self is judged relative to some concrete comparison standard (Smith & Zarate, 1992), some abstract ideal standard (Alicke & Govorun, 2005), or in fact whether any comparison process occurs at all.

Thus, the purpose of the present research is two-fold. First, I aim to provide experimental evidence that the BTAE is indeed a motivationally driven phenomenon, as suggested by some theorists (e.g., Alicke & Govorun, 2005). Second, I will explore the process by which self judgments are derived in this comparative context, specifically focusing on whether this process is similar to that which is involved in establishing judgments of the average peer. In particular, I will examine whether self judgments are derived via an assimilative process by which self evaluations are pulled toward idiosyncratically defined “ideal” standards.

The remainder of the paper will proceed as follows. First I will discuss the foremost non-motivational accounts advanced for the BTAE. Second I will discuss existing evidence suggesting the BTAE entails a strategic motivational process, and present findings from two studies demonstrating that self-enhancement motives can be discerned in self versus average peer comparative judgments. Lastly, I will discuss two additional studies which explore the process by which self judgments are derived in self versus other comparative contexts. Specifically, these studies empirically test the better-than-average heuristic (e.g., Alicke & Govorun, 2005)—which contends self views are established via automatic assimilation toward idiosyncratic “ideal” standards—as an explanation for how self judgments are established in comparative contexts.

Non-Motivational Accounts for the BTAE

Various non-motivational accounts have been extended for the BTAE, the most prominent of which include: people selectively recruit information or comparison targets which flatter the self-image (e.g., Weinstein, 1980; Perloff & Fetzer, 1986); a tendency to

more positively evaluate single entities than aggregate standards (Giladi & Klar, 2002; Klar, Medding, & Sarel, 1996); the methodology employed guides participants to overwhelmingly focus on the self, consequently enhancing the self's positivity (*focalism*; e.g., Otten & van der Pligt, 1996; Eiser, Pahl, & Prins, 2001; Windschitl, Kruger, & Simms, 2003; Chambers, Windschitl, & Suls, 2003); that people more heavily weight their own behaviors or characteristics relative to those of the average peer (*egocentrism*; e.g., Kruger, 1999; Weinstein, 1980; Dunning & Hayes, 1996); and that the BTAE is produced via anchoring-and-adjustment processes (Kruger, 1999; Alicke & Govorun, unpublished data).

Selective Recruitment of Information and Comparison Targets

Weinstein (1980) explains the optimistic bias—a close relative of the BTAE—as a bias occurring largely due to people's tendency to recruit and focus on factors which improve their own chances of experiencing desirable outcomes, but failure to consider that others may be affected by the same factors. To support his argument, Weinstein (1980) asked participants to evaluate the likelihood that they will experience (or not experience) a variety of future events (e.g., owning your own home, becoming divorced, contracting lung cancer, etc.). While doing so, participants were instructed to list those variables which they believed most heavily influenced their chances of experiencing these events. Overall, participants rated their chances of experiencing positive events to be above average but their chances for enduring negative events to be below average. Importantly, however, when these participants' lists were then given to a second set of participants, the extent to which the second group demonstrated unrealistic optimism was

significantly reduced. Thus, Weinstein (1980) concluded that the tendency to exhibit unrealistic optimism about one's future is in part produced by selectively focusing on factors which enhance one's chances of experiencing positive outcomes, while failing to consider that the same factors will likely influence others as well. When the commonality of such factors is made apparent, the aggrandizement of self-predictions is reduced.

Perloff and Fetzer (1986) offered a similar explanation for the BTAE, arguing that when given the opportunity, participants engage in comparisons with those others which yield the most favorable comparative outcome. In support of their argument, they found that when participants were instructed to compare themselves to a specific target (e.g., a close friend, sibling, etc.) they experienced a reduced "invulnerability to victimization" relative to those who were freely allowed to compare themselves with an abstract, hypothetical other. They contend that the freedom to select an abstract comparison target elicits comparisons to worse-off others, thereby producing the observed BTAE. Resonating with Weinstein (1980), Perloff and Fetzer's (1986) view suggests the BTAE has little to do with self-enhancement, but more to do with the nature of the comparison target being selected in such judgments.

It is important to note that although both Weinstein (1980) and Perloff and Fetzer (1986) were able to reduce the magnitude of the BTAE by controlling the specific information used in the self judgment process, they were not able to wholly eliminate the effect—participants still evaluated themselves more favorably than their comparison target. Thus, they were not able to fully eradicate the possibility that the BTAE is a motivationally driven phenomenon.

Single Entity versus Aggregate Comparisons

Other theorists have argued that differences in information used when evaluating a single entity (e.g., the self, a friend, a sibling) versus an aggregate (e.g., the average person) can account for observed better-than-average effects (e.g., Klar et al, 1996; Epley & Dunning, 2000). More specifically, it is argued that when evaluations are made about a given single entity (self or otherwise), behavioral characteristics or attributes specific to that entity are used when forming an impression. However, when assessments of an aggregate are generated, people must rely on “base-rate” information such as the perceived prevalence of a given trait within the general population (see Chambers & Windschitl, 2004). Consequently, it is argued that basing judgments on concrete, substantive information (as done with single entities such as the self) produces more extreme evaluations than does making the same judgment using only base-rate information (as necessary for judging “average”). Thus, from this view the BTAE has little to do with enhancement motivations driving self judgment, but rather, the self being a singular rather than aggregate entity within self versus average peer comparisons.

To support this contention, across five studies Klar et al (1996) demonstrated that any concrete, familiar target (self, randomly selected peer) was judged as being less vulnerable to negative life events than was a generalized target, such as the average peer. Giladi & Klar (2002) furthered these findings by showing that any individuated target within a group was judged more extremely than the group as a whole—more positively if the group was viewed positively, more negatively if the group was perceived negatively. Thus, Klar, Giladi and colleagues argue that the positivity claimed for the self in better-

than-average paradigms may be subsumed by a more general tendency to place greater weight on single entities than on aggregates.

Focalism

Focalism refers to the tendency to focus overwhelmingly on information that has been called to one's attention at the expense of considering equally important information in the periphery (e.g., Schkade & Kahneman, 1998). In the context of the BTAE, theorists who advance focalism accounts suggest that the effect may result from a tendency for participants' focus to fall primarily on the self and away from the comparative referent, largely as a result of the methodology typically employed. This self-emphasis, it is argued, highlights the unique positive qualities of the self, and thereby produces enhancement in self-evaluations. Thus, this account argues the BTAE represents more of a methodological byproduct than an example of strategic self-enhancement.

Studies supporting the focalism account have sought evidence for their position by demonstrating that altering the focal target of comparative judgments (self as target vs. self as referent) reliably influences comparative bias or optimism (e.g., Otten & van der Pligt, 1996; Eiser, Pahl, & Prins, 2001; Windschitl, Kruger, & Simms, 2003; Chambers, Windschitl, & Suls, 2003). For example, Eiser et al (2001) found that when participants were asked to rate their prospect of experiencing future events (e.g., successful exam performance) compared to that of "typical others", these judgments correlated highly with separate, absolute self-estimates for experiencing these events but not with absolute other-estimates. However, when the comparative task was manipulated so to present prospect estimates for "typical others" as the target and self-estimates as the referent, this

relationship was reversed—comparative judgments correlated highly with other-estimates but not self-estimates. Furthermore, they found comparative optimism to be considerably reduced in this latter condition. These findings support the idea that comparative judgments are driven by the target given focal priority in the judgment task, and that the BTAE may be exacerbated due to the self serving as the target in many better-than-average designs.

Egocentrism

Egocentrism accounts for the BTAE refer to the notion that self-relevant thoughts and information receive a disproportionate amount of weight when making comparative judgments, compared to that given to other-related information. Thus, in contrast to the previously discussed mechanisms which purport that people recruit and use different information for self and other, or, that the self receives undue attention relative to comparative referents, the egocentrism hypothesis argues that even when these factors are equated, self-relevant information is simply given more weight in comparative judgments than is that pertaining to a given referent.

One source of credence for the egocentrism account is the results of Weinstein's (1980) study on the optimistic bias. As previously described, when participants in this study were provided with a list of factors which other students felt impacted their chances of experiencing various life events, the optimistic bias was significantly reduced among these participants. Importantly, however, the bias was not eliminated. Thus, although the experimental design attempted to equate information availability, there remained a tendency for participants to assess their own prospects of experiencing various future

events more favorably than the prospects of others. From an egocentrism perspective, this finding may merely reflect the affinity for people to place undue weight on their personal experiences, thereby resulting in skewed expectations for future outcomes.

In a study providing more direct evidence for the notion the individuals place greater weight on self-relevant than other-relevant information, Kruger (1999) found that while participants readily evaluate themselves as better than average for positive attributes, they also willingly rate themselves as worse than average on difficult tasks. Kruger classified several activities as either easy (e.g., driving, using a mouse) or difficult (telling jokes, juggling) and had participants estimate their percentile ranking for each of these activities. As expected, results revealed that participants consistently rated themselves above the fiftieth percentile for easy activities but below the fiftieth percentile for difficult tasks. In other words, participants seemingly ignored the fact that other individuals also likely excel at the easy tasks and similarly struggle with the difficult tasks. Consequently, they overestimate both their relative standing on positive domains and their shortcomings on negative domains. These findings support the idea that concentrating egocentrically on one's own attributes may account for the oft obtained BTAE in comparative judgments.

Anchoring-and-Adjustment

Perhaps the most prominent and intuitively appealing conjecture about how self versus average peer comparisons are made is represented in anchoring and adjustment models. Kruger (1999), for example, suggested that people anchor on unrealistically favorable self ratings because they focus selectively on their positive behaviors, and then

fail to make adequate adjustments for the positive behaviors of others. This position suggests that the BTAE represents a contrast of the average peer from the self due to a failure to think carefully about the average peer's behaviors or characteristics. Other researchers have advanced similar postulations (e.g., Beauregard & Dunning, 1998; Balcetis & Dunning, 2005), arguing that social judgment consists of anchoring on one's self-views and contrasting judgments of others from that point.

The assumption that the self anchors comparative judgments suggests a dominant role for the self in this context, consistent with existing perspectives (Alicke, Dunning, & Krueger, 2005; Dunning & Hayes, 1996), and has largely been supported by correlational findings (e.g., Klar & Giladi, 1999; Kruger, 1999). For example, Klar and Giladi (1999) have shown that the correlation between self judgments made alone and those made in relation to the average peer is substantial, whereas that between average peer judgments made alone and those made in relation to the self is negligible. This finding supports the notion that self judgment is given greater weight than average peer judgment when these evaluations are derived relationally, and also supports the idea that the self serves to anchor the self versus other comparative process.

However, the idea that the BTAE characterizes a contrast of the average peer from the self represents only one of many possible ways in which self versus average peer judgments might produce the BTAE via anchoring and adjustment processes. These various possibilities are illustrated in Figure 1. In the spirit of the BTAE, each model assumes that the self is evaluated more favorably than the average peer. However, as is

later discussed, it is believed that the mechanisms involved are similar regardless of whether the self is evaluated more or less favorably than the average peer.

At the most simplistic level, the model depicted in Panel A represents the BTAE as a non-comparative phenomenon, suggesting that self and average peer judgments are respectively made independent of one another. Given the social nature of self versus other judgments and the abundance of research which has placed the phenomenon in the realm of social comparison, this model is an unlikely possibility.

Panels B and C present mutual attraction and mutual repulsion models, respectively, and suggest that the consequence of comparative judgments of self and other is for these judgments to be assimilated toward (Panel B) or contrasted from (Panel C) one another. According to the mutual attraction model, the comparative outcome is for self ratings to decrease from baseline levels and for evaluations of average to become more favorable relative to baseline. The mutual repulsion model, in contrast, calls for an enhancement of self-evaluations and a drop in ratings of average when these judgments are made comparatively, relative to when they are made in isolation of one another.

The models depicted in Panels D and E assume that ratings of the average peer serve to anchor subsequent judgments of the self, and that these self-judgments are either assimilated toward (Panel D) or contrasted from (Panel E) the average peer anchor. However, given the affluence of data showing the self to play an exclusive role in social judgment (see Alicke, Dunning, & Krueger, 2005), these models are unlikely depictions

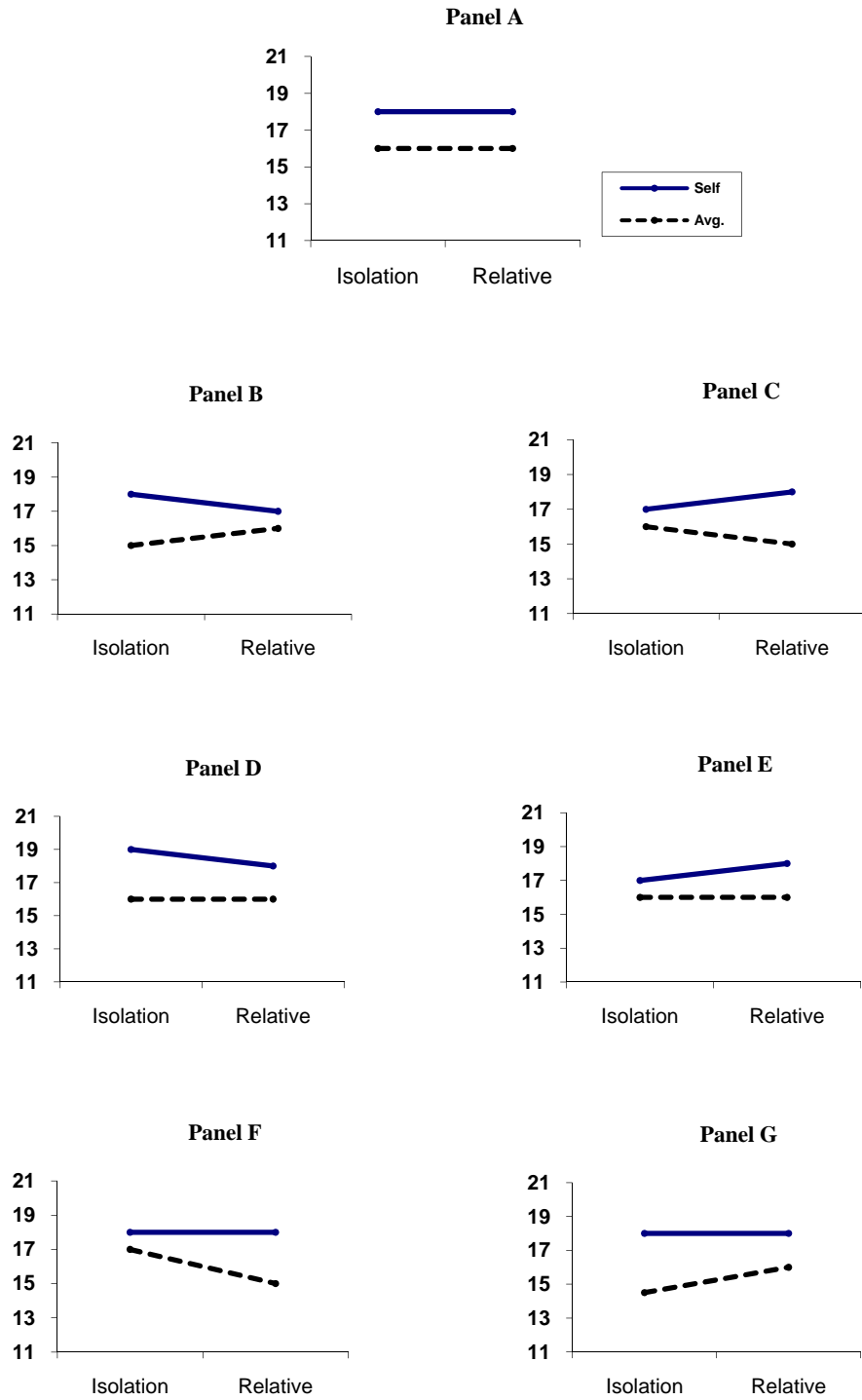


Figure 1. Various Possible Anchoring and Adjustment Effects in Self versus Average Comparisons

of the mechanism underlying the BTAE, but nonetheless are included for sake of completion.

More plausible, on the other hand, are those models depicted in Panels F and G, which assume that the self, not the average peer, serves to anchor comparative judgments. According to Panel F, self judgments anchor subsequent evaluations of the average peer, which in turn are contrasted downward to a point beyond that which they would fall in the absence of a self comparative standard. Of the models discussed thus far, this scenario most consistently reflects existing theoretical applications of anchoring-and-adjustment assumptions to the BTAE (Kruger, 1999; Klar & Giladi, 1999), and would likely be the preferred choice among researchers in the area.

However, in a recent study Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data) predicted otherwise, suggesting instead that the BTAE is produced by the model depicted in Panel G, where the average peer is *assimilated* toward the self anchor. The premise for their prediction rested on two assumptions. First, they presumed that the self generally anchors comparative judgments, in line with previous research on egocentrism (Kruger, 1999; Dunning & Hayes, 1996) and the correlational findings of Klar and Giladi (1999). Second, and more importantly, they argued that most assimilation-contrast theories (e.g., Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Schwarz & Bless, 1992; Mussweiler, 2003; Markman & McMullen, 2003; Herr, 1986) assume that when two items belong to the same category, the outcome of the comparison is assimilation rather than contrast. And, because previous research has established that, like the self, trait ratings for the average peer are consistently more favorable than the midpoint of the trait distribution (Alicke et al.,

1995), the self and average peer could be said to share membership in a class of favorably evaluated objects. Thereby, current perspectives would argue that comparative judgments of self and average peer essentially comprise a comparison of two targets sharing category membership, and therefore assimilation, not contrast, should be the comparative outcome.

More direct to the notion of anchoring, adjustment, and assimilation of average toward the self, Schwarz and Bless (1992) have shown that subordinate objects (such as the average peer) are assimilated toward superordinate objects (such as the self) when they share category membership. In this manner, if the average peer is assumed to be subordinate to the self within the category of favorably evaluated objects, assimilation of average peer ratings ought to be the outcome of comparative judgments when self-ratings anchor the judgmental dimension.

Mussweiler's (2003) selective accessibility model includes similar assumptions, which would suggest an assimilation of average to the self. According to his model, two fundamental processes function in social comparison contexts: similarity testing and dissimilarity testing. Dissimilarity testing (assessing the extent to which a target is dissimilar from a standard) enhances the accessibility of those characteristics possessed by the target which are incongruent with the comparison standard. Consequently, the outcome of dissimilarity testing is typically a contrast of the target away from the standard. Conversely, similarity testing (assessing the extent to which a target is similar to a comparison standard) is said to enhance the accessibility of those characteristics which the target and comparison standard have in common. As a result, similarity testing

generally produces assimilation of the target toward the comparison standard. As applied to the BTAE, then, to the extent that sharing membership in a group of favorably evaluated objects prompts similarity testing between self and average, Mussweiler's (2003) selective accessibility model would also predict assimilation of the average peer to the self.

To evaluate the hypothesis that the average peer is assimilated toward the self in self versus average judgments, Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data) conducted a two-phase experiment. In Phase 1, one group of participants made absolute ratings of where they believed they stood on each of 23 trait dimensions (Table 1). A second group of participants made absolute ratings of where they believed the average peer fell on the same 23 dimensions. In Phase 2 of the experiment (4-6 weeks later), participants who initially made self ratings were given back their self ratings and asked to evaluate, on the same scales, the average peer on each trait dimension. Participants who first made average peer ratings, on the other hand, were also returned their evaluations and asked to provide self-ratings on each dimension. A third group of participants was also included in Phase 2 and were asked to make both self and average peer ratings simultaneously, reflecting the general procedure utilized in BTA research.

By using this design participants were forced to use either the self (condition 1) or average peer (condition 2) to anchor their subsequent judgments. Consequently, Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data) were able to compare whether self and average peer ratings varied as a function of whether they were made in isolation or in relation to their respective anchors. More broadly, the design enabled a test of each of the

Table 1

Bipolar Rating Scales, Alicke & Govorun (unpublished data)

Trait Dimensions

Uncooperative – Cooperative	Uninteresting – Interesting
Unfaithful – Faithful	Deceitful – Candid
Closed-Minded – Open Minded	Unforgiving – Forgiving
Unmotivated – Motivated	Unfit – Fit
Unintelligent – Intelligent	Uncultured – Cultured
Untruthful – Truthful	Unimaginative – Imaginative
Selfish – Unselfish	Unsophisticated – Sophisticated
Cowardly – Brave	Intolerant – Tolerant
Unkind – Kind	Unattractive – Attractive
Unsociable – Sociable	Unathletic – Athletic
Illogical – Logical	Unfriendly – Friendly
Messy – Neat	

Note. Trait ratings ranged from 1 – 21.

models depicted in Figure 1 and ascertained (1) whether self versus average peer judgments are made comparatively at all, (2) if so, which target anchored these judgments and (3) whether assimilation or contrast is the outcome of this comparative process.

Results indicated that across conditions, participants demonstrated the usual BTAE—self ratings were higher than ratings of the average peer regardless of the order in which they were made (Table 2). More importantly, however, Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data) found that, consistent with the egocentrism position which assumes that self-ratings are made without consideration of the average peer, self ratings did not vary across the three conditions. In other words, participants’ self-ratings were essentially the same regardless of whether the self was rated first and the average peer was evaluated with reference to the self, the average peer was rated first and the self was evaluated with reference to the average college student, or self and average were rated at the same time.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Self and Average peer Trait Ratings, Alicke & Govorun (unpublished data).

Condition	Phase 1		Phase 2	
	Self	Average	Self	Average
Self-Average	15.83 (1.64)	---	---	14.27 (1.51)
Average-Self	---	13.62 (1.76)	15.68 (2.18)	---
Simultaneous Rating	---	---	15.94 (1.49)	14.02 (1.81)

Note. Trait ratings could range from 1 to 21. Higher values indicate more positive evaluation.

On the other hand, ratings of the average college student did vary as a function of condition. Consistent with the model displayed in Panel G of Figure 1, ratings of the average college student were higher, suggesting assimilation to self ratings, when they

were made in relation to the self as an anchor. These findings provide strong support for the argument that the BTAE comprises an anchoring-and-adjustment phenomenon whereby the self provides the anchor point, or value against which the referent is compared, and the average peer is then assimilated toward this anchor.

Evidence for Strategic Motivational Judgments?

Evidence obtained in support of the various non-motivational accounts for the BTAE goes a long way toward delineating the processes by which self versus other comparative judgments are made. Given the breadth and surmounting evidence for each of these perspectives, it is clear that the BTAE is a multiply determined phenomenon not fully explainable from any one perspective. However, of the accounts previously discussed, that which has been able to most precisely explore the mechanisms underlying the BTAE is that of Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data), who demonstrated that the BTAE largely comprises an anchoring-and-adjustment phenomenon whereby judgments of average are assimilated toward the self.

On the surface of it, these findings seem to cast considerable doubt on theories which proffer that the BTAE comprises a self-enhancing phenomenon, whereby ratings of the self and average peer are strategically contrived to place the self in as favorable light as possible (Alicke, 1985; Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning et al, 1989). Although it was found that self ratings were consistently more favorable than average peer ratings, demonstrating an assimilation of the average to the self seems to contradict the very nature of self-enhancement assumptions. From a strong self-enhancement perspective, one might expect that average peer ratings would be contrasted in order to distance

oneself as far as possible from the average. After all, how does elevating average ratings so as to bring them closer to the self service the drive to maximize favorability of one's self image?

Though counterintuitive, the findings of Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data) do not discount the assumption that enhancement motives may impact better-than-average judgments. First, the foremost modern perspectives on the interplay between motivational and cognitive processes recognize that self-enhancement tendencies occur against a background of countervailing forces including reality constraints and automatic cognitive mechanisms (see Kunda, 1990). Furthermore, much experimental evidence has been gathered suggesting that the motivation to self-enhance does play a role in the BTAE. For example, Rothman, Klein, and Weinstein (1996) found that people strategically adjusted their perceived personal risk of disease downward relative to various fabricated base-rates of risk, so as to maintain the perception that their vulnerability fell at below-average levels. Rothman et al (1996) provided participants with disease risk statistics which were 150%, 100%, or 50% of their true values. They found that participants' estimates of personal risk decreased in accordance with these comparison statistics, thereby preserving perceptions of imperviousness. These findings are difficult to fully reconcile from any of the non-motivational perspectives previously discussed, suggesting self-enhancement likely plays a role in these comparative judgments.

Similarly, in an intuitive study Alicke, Vredenburg, Hiatt, and Govorun (2001) asked participants to provide behavior frequency estimates and self-ratings along several

positive and negative trait dimensions. Later, participants were shown the very estimates and ratings they had previously attributed to themselves, but were told that they belonged to another randomly chosen student. Participants were then asked, based on the ratings provided, to again offer behavior frequency estimates and self-evaluations along the trait dimensions. Alicke et al (2001) found that frequency estimates and self-ratings during this second evaluation phase were significantly more favorable than those attributed to the “other student”—in other words, participants judged themselves at time two as even better than themselves at time one. Like the findings of Rothman et al (1996), these results are difficult to reconcile from a fully non-motivational perspective, and cast particular doubt on accounts which posit selective recruitment of information and standards as an explanation for the BTAE (e.g., Weinstein, 1980; Perloff & Fetzer, 1986). Taken together the findings of Rothman et al (1996) and Alicke et al (2001), along with other studies obtaining results difficult to explain from a wholly non-motivational perspective (e.g., Dunning et al, 1989; Allison et al, 1989), suggest that strategic motivational evaluations do play a role in the BTAE and other self versus other comparative judgments.

STUDY 1

The purpose of Study 1 is to add to the existing literature by exploring the extent to which self-enhancement motives influence the anchoring-and-adjustment process underlying self versus other comparative judgments. As previously discussed, the finding that self-ratings anchor judgments of the average peer and that these judgments are assimilated toward, not contrasted from, the self is perplexing from a self-enhancement perspective. However, because the self constitutes a relatively positive judgmental anchor, it may automatically induce some degree of assimilation among referent targets with which it is compared, particularly when such targets share group membership. Study 1 therefore aimed to examine whether self-enhancement concerns might *limit* the amount of assimilation that occurs in this context, an effect which would serve to maximize the distance between self and average. If judgmental assimilation of the average peer is a natural cognitive consequence of anchoring such judgments on more favorable self-views, then it is unlikely that enhancement motives will fully eliminate this effect. They may, however, weaken or limit the extent to which this effect occurs in the service of maximizing the distance between self and average which reality will allow.

To examine this possibility, Study 1 employed a forced-anchor design similar to that employed by Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data). All participants judged the self on the same 23 trait dimensions used by Alicke and Govorun in an initial experimental session. Several weeks later participants returned to the lab and rated the average peer on the same dimensions, using their initial judgments as evaluative anchors. Half of the participants were correctly informed that these anchors were those self-ratings they

provided in the initial experimental session. The remaining participants, however, were led to believe that ratings they were given came from a randomly selected student. The critical comparison in Study 1, therefore, was between ratings of the average college student made with reference to scale points described as self ratings, and those made with reference to the identical scale points labeled as made by another student. The prediction is that the degree to which average college student ratings are assimilated should be less when the anchor is believed to be self ratings than when the same scale points are attributed to a randomly selected student.

Method

Participants

Participants were 132 (47 male, 85 female) undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology participating in return for partial course credit.

Design

Study 1 consisted of two phases. Phase 1 took part during a mass pretesting session held during the first week of the academic quarter. All participants made trait ratings on the same 23 dimensions (Table 1) used by Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data). However, in the present study all participants made self ratings during Phase 1 (as opposed to making self or average peer ratings, as they did in Alicke and Govorun).

In Phase 2, held approximately four to eight weeks later, participants returned to the lab and were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the “self-rating” condition, the experimenter returned to participants the self-ratings they provided during Phase 1 of the experiment, and then asked that they evaluate the average college student

on each dimension by imposing a circle on the same rating scales. In the “other-rating” condition, participants were also given their Phase 1 self-ratings and asked to rate the average student on each dimension, but were done so under the guise that the ratings provided were actually self-ratings given by a randomly selected student.

Results and Discussion

Four participants were excluded from analyses due to failure to complete all measures. Self-ratings and average student ratings were combined and averaged across the 23 trait dimensions to yield composite self and composite average student ratings, respectively. Means and standard deviations for these ratings by condition are presented in Table 3.

An independent samples t-test was first conducted to ensure that self-ratings at Phase 1 did not differ across conditions. As expected, self-ratings for those in the “self-anchor” condition did not differ from those provided by participants in the “other-anchor” condition, $t(126) = -.233, p = .816$.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Self and Average peer Trait Ratings, Study 1.

Condition	Phase 1	Phase 2
	Self	Average
Self Anchor	15.41 (2.43)	13.37 (1.87)
Other Anchor	15.50 (2.09)	14.04 (2.10)

Note. Trait ratings could range from 1 to 21. Higher values indicate more positive evaluation. Phase 1 ratings included as a covariate.

The primary analysis then examined whether ratings of the average college student were assimilated toward Phase 1 ratings to a greater extent when those ratings were described as given by a randomly selected student than when the identical scores were described as self-ratings. A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) revealed that, as expected, evaluations of the average college student were higher across dimensions when the anchor was described as another student's self-ratings than when it was described as one's own self-ratings, $F(1, 125) = 4.49, p < .036$, controlling for Phase 1 evaluations. In other words, ratings of the average student were assimilated to a lesser extent when the anchor was described as self ratings than when the identical scores were attributed to another individual.

The findings of Study 1 provide strong support for the notion that self-enhancement motives can be discerned in self versus average peer comparisons. While anchoring these comparative judgments on the self automatically induces some degree of assimilation of average peer evaluations (due to sharing category membership), Study 1 demonstrates that enhancement motives serve to limit the extent to which this assimilative process occurs. Merely labeling an anchor as self-ratings led to less favorable judgments of the average peer relative to when the identical anchor was labeled as the self-ratings of another student—an effect difficult to explain from a purely cognitive perspective. Thus, in conjunction with the findings of Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data), the results of Study 1 paint a portrait of the self as a “modest self-enhancer” when making self versus average peer comparisons—willing to enhance rather than derogate the comparison target, yet maintaining a sense of favorability by adopting

an egocentric focus and limiting the extent to which the “average” is allowed to approach the self.

STUDY 2

Study 1 supports the idea that self-enhancement motives may affect the outcome of self versus average peer judgments, specifically by influencing the degree to which ratings of the average peer are assimilated toward the self. The purpose of Study 2 was to further assess the role that self-enhancement plays by examining how comparative outcomes may change for trait dimensions on which the self is negatively evaluated. Kruger (1999) provided evidence that “below-average effects” can reliably be obtained for domains in which absolute skill level tends to be low (e.g., juggling, computer programming). He argued that such effects occur because people egocentrically anchor on their own poor ability and fail to sufficiently consider that most others likely have the same shortcomings. From this perspective the below-average effect is the consequence of purely cognitive comparative processes whose very nature (i.e., evaluating oneself as worse than average) is anything but self-enhancing.

Nevertheless, the findings from Study 1 suggest that self-enhancement motives may even be discerned from comparisons which produce below-average effects. For trait dimensions on which the self is positively evaluated (as in Study 1), enhancement motives should limit the amount of average peer assimilation that occurs so as to maximize the distance between self and “average”. However, for dimensions on which the self is negatively evaluated, the comparative consequence should be starkly different. Although the perceiver may recognize that the self is indeed “below average” for such traits, enhancement motives should function to *minimize* the distance between self and “average” on these dimensions. Though subtle, such a mechanism would improve one’s

ability to portray his or her shortcomings as typical of the average individual, thereby minimizing their impact on one's overall well-being. Thus, if self-enhancement motives are at play in these comparative judgments, it would be expected that average peer assimilation would be amplified (as opposed to attenuated, as in Study 1) so as to draw ratings of "average" as close to the self as possible.

To this end, Study 2 aimed to examine whether self-enhancement motives amplify the degree of average peer assimilation that occurs for trait dimensions on which the self is negatively evaluated. Participants were randomly assigned to the role of actor or observer to complete (observe the completion of) an experimental task purported to assess a genetic trait intimately linked to experiencing life success. Following the task, half of the participants received negative feedback regarding their performance, indicating they (the actor) lacked this genetic trait, while the remaining participants were not given performance feedback. All participants then estimated what they believed the average score would be after a large sample of university students completed the task. Evidence for the amplified assimilation hypothesis would be obtained if estimates given by actors in the negative feedback condition fell below those given by participants in the no feedback condition (baseline) to a significantly greater extent than estimates given by observers in the negative feedback condition. Such a pattern would show that actors are assimilating their judgments of "average" from baseline to a greater extent than observers, despite using the identical score as a judgmental anchor.

Method

Participants

Participants were 63 (27 male, 36 female) undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology participating in return for partial course credit.

Procedure

Participants completed the experiment individually. Upon arrival, instructions were given both orally by the experimenter and by computer. Participants were told that neuropsychological researchers had recently discovered the presence of a genetic trait that greatly contributes to the amount of material and interpersonal success a person will experience in their lifetime. This trait, referred to as *interpersonal success orientation (ISO)*, was said to have been discovered across race, gender, and ethnicity, and participants were led to believe that the present task was a highly accurate measure of ISO, that businesses, universities, and the military alike were beginning to incorporate into their admissions screening processes.

The task, administered using MediaLab (Jarvis, 2004) computer software, consisted of three sections: a logical reasoning section, an associative memory section, and an interpersonal intelligence section (Appendix A). These components were selected to enhance the task's face validity, as one could argue that excelling in such skills could in fact improve the likelihood of experiencing success in several domains. The logical reasoning section consisted of 15 nonsense syllogisms that required participants to determine whether each syllogism constituted good or poor reasoning. The associative memory section required participants to first study a list of 15 word-number pairings

(e.g., chair – 52) for three minutes, and then recall as many numbers from these pairings as possible in a two minute period (prompted by the matched word, e.g., chair - _____). Finally, the interpersonal intelligence section consisted of 15 items taken from a test of emotional intelligence (http://quiz.ivillage.co.uk/uk_work/tests/eqtest.htm) that asked participants to indicate, of four possible courses of action, which they would personally take in a given interpersonal situation. Participants were told that overall test scores could range from 0-50 and would be cumulative across sections, with higher scores indicating higher levels of ISO.

Actor-Observer Manipulation

Participants were randomly assigned to actor or observer roles. Actors completed the experimental task, while observers were told that through computer networking, they would observe the task as another participant completed it from another room. They were told that once the actor completed the task, they would see the actor's score and be asked to complete a series of questions regarding his or her performance.

Feedback Manipulation

After completion of the experimental task participants were randomly assigned to receive either negative feedback or no feedback regarding the actor's performance. In the negative feedback condition, actors and observers learned that the actor received a score of 23 out of 50, indicating his or her level of ISO was low. In the no feedback condition, participants were not given performance feedback but immediately moved to the dependent measures following the task. This condition was included as a control to obtain a baseline measure of how well participants believed the actor performed and how well

they believed the average student would perform, without the influence of explicit feedback.

Response Measures

Participants in the no feedback condition completed two primary dependent measures following the experimental task. First, both actors and observers estimated the score they believed the actor would receive for his or her performance on the task (from 0 to 50). This question was included to ensure that actors and observers did not have differential performance expectations for the actor. Participants were then asked to estimate, after a sample of 500 students had completed the task, what they believed the average score for the task would be. This question was included to serve as a baseline measure for what “average” performance was considered to be in isolation of other performance information.

Participants in the negative feedback condition completed one primary dependent measure. After being shown the actor’s score, all participants were then asked to estimate, after a sample of 500 students had completed the task, what they believed the average score for the task would be.

Results and Discussion

Five participants were excluded from all analyses—three for failure to complete all dependent measures and two due to excessive suspicion regarding the experiment’s cover story. Means and standard deviations for estimated actor performance (control condition) and estimated average performance are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations for Performance Estimations, Study 2.

Measure	Negative Fdbk.		No Feedback (Baseline)	
	Actors	Observers	Actors	Observers
Estimated No. Correct - Actor	---	---	34.73 (5.21)	35.79 (4.99)
Estimated No. Correct - Average	28.86 (3.79)	31.43 (6.80)	34.27 (4.63)	35.64 (7.14)

Note. Estimations for number correct could range from 0 to 50.

An initial analysis was conducted to ensure that actors and observers did not differ in their performance expectations for actors following the experimental task. Violation of differential performance expectations could be a potential alternative explanation if it was revealed that actors estimated average performance to fall further below baseline than observers following the receipt of negative feedback. This analysis indicated that actors and observers did not differ in their performance estimates, $F(1, 38) = .307, p = .584$, thereby eliminating this alternative explanation.

Two separate analyses were then conducted to determine whether the receipt of negative feedback led actors to assimilate estimations of average performance to the self to a greater extent than observers. First, it was necessary to establish a baseline for expected average performance to use as a standard against which estimates given by participants in the negative feedback condition could be compared. To this end, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare estimates of average performance given by actors and observers in the no feedback (control) condition. This analysis revealed that actors and observers did not differ in their estimations, $F(1, 28) =$

.384, $p = .541$, therefore data were collapsed across these participants to create a single baseline measure for estimated average performance ($M = 34.95$).

The primary analysis was then conducted to compare estimates of average performance given by actors and observers in the negative feedback condition to this baseline measure. Results of a one-way ANOVA indicated that a significant difference did exist between average performance estimates given by actors in the negative feedback condition, observers in the same condition, and the baseline measure, $F(2, 57) = 5.952$, $p < .005$. More specifically, Tukey's post-tests revealed that, as expected, while observers' estimates ($M = 31.43$) did not significantly differ from baseline ($M = 34.93$, $p = .151$), actors' estimates ($M = 28.86$) were significantly lower than baseline ($p < .004$). In other words, actors assimilated their estimates of average performance to a significantly greater extent than observers despite using identical anchor points, as was hypothesized.

The findings of Study 2 support the idea that self-enhancement motives can be distinguished in self versus average peer comparisons even for those trait dimensions on which the self is negatively evaluated. In situations in which the self's traits, skills, or abilities are found to be considerably worse off than those of the average peer (i.e., below-average effects), the results of the present study suggest that self-enhancement motives may function to augment the extent to which perceptions of "average" are assimilated downward toward that negative anchor point. Consequently, while the self is still evaluated more negatively than the average peer, perceptions of "average" on such dimensions become significantly worse compared to conditions in which the self is not threatened (baseline) or when self-enhancement motives are not involved (observers).

It is also worth noting that although the difference was non-significant, observers in the negative feedback condition did provide slightly lower average performance estimates than baseline. Thus, both actors and observers in the negative feedback condition assimilated their estimations of average performance toward the judgmental anchor to some degree (as was expected), but actors did so to a much greater extent. In other words, self-enhancement motives simply magnified the assimilative processes for actors.

FURTHER DECONSTRUCTING THE BETTER-THAN-AVERAGE EFFECT:
ESTABLISHMENT OF SELF JUDGMENT

The findings of Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data) were the first to deconstruct the BTAE and provide direct experimental evidence that (1) the BTAE is a comparative phenomenon in which the self anchors judgments of the average peer, and (2) in making average peer ratings, these ratings are assimilated toward, not contrasted from, more favorable self ratings. In other words, evaluations of average became more positive when made in relation to the self relative to when they were made independently, an outcome which actually produces an underestimation of the BTAE on positive dimensions. This finding is of paramount importance, as previous accounts (e.g., Beauregard & Dunning, 1998; Kruger, 1999; Klar & Giladi, 1999) have construed the BTAE as an anchoring-and-adjustment phenomenon whereby people anchor on their own favorable self-impressions and inadequately contrast ratings of the average peer downward from that anchor point.

From a strong self-enhancement perspective, it could be argued that these findings are rather “anti-self-enhancing” in nature—a troubling vantage point for those who construe the BTAE as a motivational phenomenon (e.g., Alicke, 1985; Alicke & Govorun, 2005). Nevertheless, Studies 1 and 2 were specifically designed to explore whether self-enhancement motives can be discerned in self versus average peer judgments. The results of these studies provide direct experimental evidence that, despite the counterintuitive nature of the assimilative mechanism demonstrated by Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data), enhancement motives can be distinguished in self versus

average peer judgments. Study 1 showed that for trait dimensions on which the self is positively evaluated, self-enhancement concerns limit the amount of average peer assimilation that occurs—thereby maximizing the distance between self and “average” which reality will allow. In contrast, Study 2 showed that for trait dimensions on which the self is negatively evaluated, enhancement motives augment the degree of average peer assimilation that occurs—thereby *minimizing* the distance between self and “average”. Thus, it appears that average peer assimilation is somewhat of a double-edged sword. When such assimilation is favorable to the self (i.e., minimizes the self’s flaws), the effect is facilitated. However, when such assimilation threatens the self (i.e., undermines the self’s positivity), the effect is restricted. This differential assimilation provides convincing evidence for the existence of self-enhancement motives in self versus average peer judgments, as from a purely cognitive perspective there would be little reason to predict this differential pattern of results.

Importantly, however, deconstructing the BTAE to experimentally identify the processes by which judgments of the average peer are established answers only half of the question concerning the nature of self versus other comparative judgments. What remains far less clear is the process by which self judgments, used to anchor ratings of other individuals, are in and of themselves established in comparative contexts. We do not know, for example, whether self judgments are made in reference to a specific comparison standard, as are average ratings, and if so, what this comparison standard is. Further, we do not know whether, if such comparison does occur, the self is assimilated toward or contrasted from this anchor point. Thus, the primary aim of Studies 3 and 4 is

to explore the process by which self judgments are derived in self versus other comparative contexts.

Perhaps the most intuitive conjecture regarding how such self judgments are made within comparative contexts lies in Alicke and colleagues' "better-than-average heuristic" (Alicke et al, 1995; Alicke et al, 2001; Alicke & Govorun, 2005). Alicke and others argue that when judging positively evaluated targets (e.g., the self, friends, family members), these judgments are automatically assimilated toward ideal trait conceptions across judgment domains. More specifically, the heuristic contends that the ideal conceptions toward which these judgments are assimilated are *idiosyncratic* in nature. In other words, positively evaluated targets are said to automatically assimilate toward a point which is *personally* perceived as the ideal level for that trait dimension a person should achieve. Notably, the emphasis placed on the use of *idiosyncratic* standards affords the possibility that "ideal" trait conceptions need not necessarily translate into the highest available scale point. Certainly, some individuals (e.g., a priest) may perceive the ideal level of a given trait (e.g., religiosity) as being the extreme presence of that dimension – which *would* translate into the highest available scale point. Other individuals (e.g., an atheist), however, may perceive the ideal level of the same trait as being something substantially different – perhaps possessing a moderate amount, or even lacking the trait entirely. Such conceptions are likely developed over the course of a person's life experiences, social background, and family orientation, among other sources. Regardless, the point emphasized by the BTA heuristic is that when an individual is asked to judge a target along various trait dimensions, the default process

driving such evaluation is for these judgments to be assimilated toward individual idiosyncratic ideal standards.

Moreover, the heuristic further contends that the degree of assimilation which occurs varies hierarchically according to the amount of positivity initially attributed to the target of evaluation. At the summit of this hierarchy resides the self, which is granted the highest degree of positivity; family members and friends, due to their closeness to the self, reside just below the self and are accorded slightly less positivity; and concrete individuals, and average, hypothetical peers fall at the bottom of the hierarchy, granted the lowest degree of positivity (albeit still positive). The targets which rest atop this hierarchy, it is argued, will experience the greatest degree of assimilation toward ideal conceptions when evaluated (Alicke & Govorun, 2005). As such, this perspective can account for why self judgments tend to be considerably more favorable across dimensions than those judgments made for other groups or entities – the self is simply assimilated toward ideal conceptions to a greater extent.

Importantly, the automatic fashion of self to ideal assimilation presumed by the better-than-average heuristic precludes the argument that people selectively recruit information when making self and average peer judgments (e.g., Weinstein, 1980; Perloff & Fetzer, 1986). The automatic assimilation toward ideal trait conceptions leaves little room for the conscious recollection of behavioral experiences and comparison standards (e.g., Bargh, 1994). And although the better-than-average heuristic is yet to receive direct experimental investigation, previous findings support the notion that self judgments more likely result from the purported automatic assimilation mechanism rather than from

selective recruitment of information. Most notably, the previously discussed “better-than-myself” effect (Alicke et al, 2001) and Rothman et al’s (1996) demonstration of strategic adjustments in risk perception shed doubt on the idea that comparative judgments are made by selectively considering information most likely to yield positive comparison outcomes. Rather, the results of these studies suggest that such judgments are likely made quite effortlessly without referencing specific behavioral evidence. Were people to have accessed specific behavioral referents when making judgments in these studies, it is unlikely that the obtained effects would have been observed.

The remaining two studies provide the first experimental investigation of the better-than-average heuristic (e.g., Alicke & Govorun, 2005) as an explanation for the process by which self ratings are established in self versus other comparative contexts. Specifically, Study 3 examines the heuristic’s tenant that when making self judgments, these ratings are assimilated toward idiosyncratically defined ideal standards. Study 4 then attempts to demonstrate that idiosyncratic ideal standards are *automatically* activated and referenced when making self judgments.

STUDY 3

The primary objective of Study 3 was to investigate whether, when making self judgments across an array of trait dimensions, these judgments are generated via assimilation toward idiosyncratic ideal standards for these domains. To do so, participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. In the primary experimental condition participants made both absolute self and absolute ideal judgments across the same 23 trait dimensions employed in Study 1, during separate experimental sessions. Importantly, participants were unaware that a connection was being made between ratings provided during these sessions. If, in judging the self, people do adopt an “if it’s good, I’m it” mentality and assimilate their ratings toward idiosyncratic ideals, it would be expected that across trait dimensions, the difference between absolute self and absolute ideal judgments would be relatively minimal. In other words, the assimilative mechanism should lead self judgments to closely mirror ideal judgments. Not only should such similarity be evidenced when comparing self and ideal judgments *across* trait dimensions, but also when compared *within* each respective trait dimension. If, on the other hand, self ratings are generated irrespective of ideal trait conceptions, then such self-ideal similarity should not be observed.

To more precisely investigate whether the predicted self-ideal similarity results from self judgments automatically assimilating toward ideal judgments, as proposed by the better-than-average heuristic (e.g., Alicke & Govorun, 2005), or, whether this similarity is produced via some alternative mechanism (i.e., ideal assimilating toward self, conflation of self and ideal), two additional conditions were included in Study 3.

These conditions were based on a variety of theoretical models which have been posited to account for the effects that contextual priming has on judgment and decision making (e.g., Martin, 1986; Schwarz & Bless, 1992; Strack, Schwarz, Bless, Kubler, & Wanke, 1993; Wegener & Petty, 1995). On a broad theoretical level, the better-than-average heuristic's assumption that activated ideal conceptions serve as an anchor toward which self judgments are assimilated essentially places the heuristic in the realm of priming in social judgment (e.g., Higgins, et al, 1977; Srull & Wyer, 1979). From this perspective, automatically activated ideals are proposed to effect the same impact on self judgment that other internally based primes (e.g., affect) have already been established to impose (e.g., Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Moreover, the heuristic's assumption that by default, self ratings are assimilated toward ideal standards is also consistent with existing models of contextual priming which argue that such primes automatically produce assimilation effects in social judgment if not explicitly corrected for (e.g., Martin, 1986; Schwarz & Clore, 1983; Higgins et al, 1977).

Thereby, if self-to-ideal assimilation is a process similar to contextual priming, then calling attention to the potential bias of such "primes" should elicit a judgment correction process similar to that observed in other areas of the priming literature when contextual primes are made explicit (e.g., Martin, 1986; Strack et al., 1993; Wegener & Petty, 1995). For example, Strack et al. (1993) engaged participants in a priming task intended to activate either positive (e.g., friendly, helpful) or negative (e.g., dishonorable) trait dimensions. A short time after, participants were asked to form an impression of an ambiguous target individual. As expected, Strack et al. (1993) found that judgments of

the target were assimilated toward the activated prime. Following the activation of positive traits, the target was judged significantly more favorably than following the activation of negative traits. However, when Strack et al (1993) merely reminded participants of their engagement in the priming task prior to forming their impressions, subsequent judgments were then *contrasted* from the implications of the prime. In other words, judgments were more favorable following negative trait activation than they were following positive trait activation. Strack et al. (1993) argued that this judgmental contrast likely occurred as result of participants attempting to correct for the bias they believed would be imposed by the priming task. Other models of bias correction (e.g., Martin's set-reset model, 1986; Wegener and Petty's flexible correction model, 1995) postulate a similar correction mechanism—that is, when people become aware of a contextual factor that could potentially bias judgment, they attempt to correct for this bias by shifting their evaluations in direction opposite of the presumed impact of the prime.

Applied to the better-than-average heuristic, if activated ideal conceptions serve as a biasing “prime” during the self judgment process, then calling explicit attention to these standards prior to judging the self should elicit a correction process that attempts to offset the expected impact these standards are believed to impose. Thus, if the default is for self to assimilate toward ideal conceptions when such standards are implicit in the judgment context, then bias correction should elicit a contrast of self judgments when made with explicit reference to ideal conceptions. Likewise, if self-ideal similarity is produced via assimilation of ideal conceptions toward self (as opposed to vice versa),

then judging ideals with explicit reference to self anchors should lead these judgments to contrast from their absolute level.

To assess these possibilities, two additional conditions were included in Study 3. All participants in these conditions rated both the self and their idiosyncratic ideals for the same 23 dimensions employed in the previously described condition. However, participants in these conditions made both sets of judgments during the same experimental session. Participants in the “Absolute Ideal-Anchored Self” condition were first asked to indicate, on each of the 23 trait dimensions, what they believe the ideal level, or best amount of each trait to be. When finished, participants were then asked to proceed through the questionnaire a second time and rate themselves on the same scales. This design forced participants to make self judgments with explicit reference to established ideal anchors. Participants in the “Absolute Self-Anchored Ideal” condition engaged in the same judgmental task, but instead first rated the self and second judged their idiosyncratic ideals. Thereby, participants in this condition were forced to make ideal judgments with explicit reference to established self anchors. Comparing self and ideal judgments (averaged across dimensions) between these conditions, and, relative to the primary experimental condition, will allow for determination of whether the presence of judgmental anchors produces a change in the way self and/or ideal evaluations are naturally generated. More precisely, these conditions will allow for exploration of whether a bias correction process (e.g., Martin, 1986; Wegener & Petty, 1995) ensues when an implicit contextual factor (ideal standards) expected to naturally produce

assimilation among referent targets (the self) is made explicit within the judgment process.

Finally, a potential alternative explanation to the position that extreme similarity in absolute self and ideal judgments results from the application of a better-than-average heuristic is that, perhaps when making absolute judgments of *any* two positively evaluated targets, people adopt a similar judgment strategy that yields comparable outcomes. In other words, the predicted self-ideal similarity might have little to do with the self experiencing a unique assimilation toward idealized standards, but much to do with the fact that people simply adopt a similar judgment strategy when evaluating two different targets at two different time periods. To address this potential explanation, a control condition was also included in which participants made absolute ideal judgments in an initial experimental session, and absolute *average peer* judgments during a second, unrelated session. If the predicted self-ideal similarity is simply due to people adopting a comparable evaluation strategy for *any* two targets during isolated judgment sessions, then the same pattern of similarity should emerge when comparing absolute ideal and absolute average peer ratings across experimental phases. However, if extreme assimilation to ideal conceptions is a process uniquely afforded to the self as a judgment target, then significant differences should emerge between average peer and ideal judgments across trait dimensions.

Method

Participants

Participants were 158 undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology at Ohio University randomly assigned to one of four conditions. Participants received credit toward fulfillment of course requirements in exchange for their participation.

Procedure

Participants in the primary condition (“Absolute Ideal-Absolute Self”) participated in two experimental sessions between two and eight weeks apart. The first experimental session took place during a mass pre-testing session at the beginning of the academic quarter. During this session all participants provided absolute ratings on the 23 dimensions used in Study 1 of, in their personal opinion, what they believe the “ideal level” or “best amount” of each trait to be. Specifically, participants read:

“For each of the following trait dimensions indicate in your personal opinion, what you believe the ideal level or best amount of each trait to be by circling one number. Understand that your conception of “ideal” need not always correspond to the highest available scale point. For some traits extreme levels may be unfavorable. Extreme honesty, for example, may also be received as rudeness. For other traits, however, the highest available scale point may be ideal (e.g., intelligence). Simply indicate in your opinion, what you believe the ideal level or best amount of each trait to be.”

Ratings were provided on 21-point scales (e.g., 1 = *Extremely Unintelligent*, 21 = *Extremely Intelligent*). During the second experimental session participants returned to the lab to provide absolute self ratings on the same 23 trait dimensions, with no connection being made to the previous session.

Participants in the “Absolute Self-Anchored Ideal” and “Absolute Ideal-Anchored Self” conditions, respectively, participated in a single experimental session. All

participants in these conditions rated both the self and their idiosyncratically derived ideals on the same 23 trait dimensions. However, the order in which they rated these targets differed by condition. Those in the “Absolute Self-Anchored Ideal” condition were first asked to rate the self on each of the 23 dimensions by circling one number. Once they were finished, they were then asked to proceed through the questionnaire a second time and indicate, on the same scales using a square, what they perceive the “ideal level” or “best amount” of each trait to be (using the instructions previously detailed). Conversely, those in the “Absolute Ideal-Anchored Self” condition progressed through the experimental procedure in identical fashion, except they first indicated their ideal ratings using a circle, and secondly provided self ratings using a square.

Finally, a fourth condition intended to explore whether absolute self ratings are uniquely associated with idealized trait conceptions, or, whether absolute judgments of other positively evaluated targets (the average peer) are just as closely associated with ideal standards, was also included in Study 3. Participants in this condition provided both absolute ideal ratings (session 1) and absolute average peer ratings (session 2) during separate experimental sessions. These ratings were then compared to determine the extent to which average peer ratings reflect participants’ perceptions of “ideal” across trait dimensions, and, whether the degree to which they do so differs from the extent to which self judgments reflect idealized standards.

Results

Self – Ideal Similarity Across Trait Dimensions

For the primary analyses, self ratings, ideal ratings, and average peer ratings were

combined and averaged across the 23 trait dimensions to yield composite self, ideal, and average peer judgments, respectively, for each participant where applicable. Means and standard deviations for these ratings by condition are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Means and Standard Deviations for Ideal, Self, and Average peer Ratings, Study 3

Condition	Target		
	Ideal	Self	Average
Abs. Ideal-Abs. Self	15.60 (1.60)	16.01 (1.31)	-----
Abs. Ideal-Abs. Avg. Peer	15.80 (1.66)	-----	13.40 (1.34)
Abs. Self-Anch. Ideal	17.57 (1.93)	15.95 (1.40)	-----
Abs. Ideal-Anch. Self	16.23 (1.79)	15.48 (1.95)	-----

Note. Trait ratings could range from 1 to 21. Higher values indicate more positive evaluation.

The primary question of interest in the present experiment was whether, when making self judgments across various trait domains, individuals automatically assimilate these judgments toward idiosyncratically defined ideal standards. Thereby, based on the better-than-average heuristic (e.g., Alicke & Govorun, 2005), it was hypothesized that across trait domains a significant degree of similarity would emerge between self and ideal ratings. Importantly, however, it was believed that this similarity would surface most prominently when self and ideal judgments were made in isolation, during separate experimental sessions. Because the better-than-average heuristic assumes that self to ideal assimilation occurs naturally and automatically, it was expected that asking

participants to make these evaluations relationally would initiate a bias correction process that produces a divergence in judgments across dimensions.

To test this hypothesis, a series of repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted to determine the extent to which self judgments reflected participants' idiosyncratic ideals, and whether this similarity differed as a function of whether such judgments were made absolutely or relationally. Results indicated that, as expected, when made in isolation, self ratings ($M = 16.01$) were essentially identical to ideal ratings ($M = 15.60$), averaged across trait domains, $F(1, 38) = 2.482, n.s.$. In fact, self ratings were slightly more *positive* than ideal ratings under these circumstances. This extreme self-ideal similarity lends strong support for the contention that, when asked to judge the self across a variety of domains, people truly adopt an "if it's good, I'm it mentality" and fully conflate self judgments with idealized trait conceptions.

Importantly, this extreme judgment similarity did not emerge when comparing absolute ideal judgments with absolute ratings of the average peer. When made in isolation, conceptions of ideal ($M = 15.80$) were significantly more positive than were ratings of the average peer ($M = 13.40$), $F(1, 35) = 43.13, p < .0001$. Likewise, absolute self judgments ($M = 15.98$) were also significantly more favorable than those of the average peer, $F(1, 111) = 89.57, p < .0001$, replicating typical BTAE findings. Thus, the observed self-ideal similarity does not appear to simply be the product of participants adopting similar judgment strategies when evaluating two different positively evaluated targets at different time periods.

Furthermore, as expected, extreme self-ideal similarity also failed to emerge when self and ideal ratings were made relationally during the same experimental session. When participants first made absolute self judgments and thereafter made anchored ideal judgments, ideal ratings were significantly more positive ($\underline{M} = 17.57$) than were self ratings ($\underline{M} = 15.95$), $\underline{F}(1, 38) = 24.94$, $p < .0001$. Likewise, when self ratings were anchored on initially provided absolute ideal judgments, ideal judgments ($\underline{M} = 16.23$) were again significantly more positive than self judgments ($\underline{M} = 15.48$), $\underline{F}(1, 42) = 9.21$, $p < .004$. Thus as expected, participants appeared to initiate a bias correction process when judging the self and ideal relationally that did not engage when such judgments were made absolutely. Whereas ratings of self and ideal were nearly identical when made in isolation, these judgments diverged considerably when made relationally during the same experimental session.

Self – Ideal Similarity Within Trait Dimensions

If, in judging the self, people do adopt an “if it’s good, I’m it” mentality and assimilate self judgments toward idiosyncratic ideals, then the same pattern of self-ideal similarity observed across dimensions should also emerge when comparing these judgments within each respective trait domain. That is, a significant degree of similarity in self and ideal judgment should also materialize when examined on a trait by trait basis. However, this self-ideal similarity should again be restricted to when such judgments were made absolutely, due to the expectation that bias correction would engage when these judgments were made relationally.

To test this hypothesis, a series of difference scores were first calculated by subtracting participants' self ratings from his or her ideal ratings on each domain. These difference scores were then averaged within each condition, yielding a single, mean difference score for each trait dimension in each condition. Finally, these average difference scores were then subjected to one-sample t-tests to assess whether each significantly differed from a value of zero (no difference). The average difference scores for each trait dimension by condition are summarized in Table 6.

Consistent with the idea that absolute self judgments are assimilated toward ideal conceptions, the average difference score for 20 of the 23 trait dimensions in the primary experimental condition failed to significantly differ from zero (all p 's > .05). In other words, self ratings on 20 of the 23 trait dimensions were essentially identical to ideal ratings for these domains. Significant differences only emerged for judgments of cooperativeness, $t(38) = -3.457$, $p < .001$, unselfishness, $t(38) = -4.430$, $p < .0001$, and candidness, $t(38) = -2.342$, $p < .025$. Interestingly, however, the nature of these differences was such that for each dimension, self judgments were significantly more *positive* than ideal judgments. Thus not only did participants almost uniformly evaluate themselves as meeting their ideal standards across dimensions, but when discrepancies in self and ideal judgment did arise, they were such that participants claimed to *exceed* their ideal standards.

By contrast, for conditions in which self and ideal judgments were made relationally, this extreme self-ideal similarity again did not emerge. In the "Absolute Self-Anchored Ideal" condition, self and ideal judgments significantly differed on 16 of the 23

Table 6

Ideal minus Target Difference Scores by Trait Dimension and Condition, Study 3.

Trait Dimension	Condition			
	Abs. Ideal- Abs. Self	Abs. Ideal- Anch. Self	Abs. Self- Anch. Ideal	Abs. Ideal- Abs. Avg.
Cooperative	-1.59*	0.56	-0.05	0.97
Faithful	-0.82	0.93*	1.55*	2.13*
Open-Minded	0.90	0.14	1.46*	2.81*
Motivated	0.82	0.84	2.82*	3.46*
Intelligent	0.67	1.84*	2.74*	2.84*
Truthful	0.72	1.12*	0.10	4.32*
Unselfish	-3.77*	-0.21	1.72*	-0.78
Brave	-0.21	1.42*	2.36*	2.81*
Kind	-0.10	-0.21	0.85	3.24*
Sociable	-0.10	1.02*	1.00*	0.32
Logical	0.03	1.47*	1.62*	2.81*
Neat	-1.05	0.70	2.59*	3.38*
Interesting	-0.03	1.30*	1.95*	1.70*
Candid	-1.49*	0.84*	0.85	1.22*
Forgiving	-0.21	0.30	1.03	2.43*
Fit	-0.13	1.26*	2.95*	3.59*
Cultured	-0.56	1.93*	4.05*	1.92*
Imaginative	-0.82	1.49*	1.05	1.51*
Sophisticated	-0.72	0.19	1.56*	2.43*
Tolerant	-0.44	0.09	1.28*	1.68
Attractive	0.44	0.93*	2.03*	2.57*
Athletic	-0.46	0.67	1.62*	3.14*
Friendly	-0.87	-0.19	0.13	2.56*

Note. Values tested versus 0. Positive values indicate more favorable Ideal ratings. * $p < .05$

trait dimensions. In the “Absolute Ideal-Anchored Self” condition, significant differences emerged on 12 of the 23 dimensions (see Table 6 for summary). Thus, while some degree of self-ideal similarity did emerge across dimensions in these conditions (i.e., not all difference scores differed from zero), the extent of this similarity was considerably limited. Moreover, for all 28 self-ideal differences that did emerge, the pattern was such that ideal judgments were uniformly more positive than self judgments. Hence, whereas in isolation participants essentially claimed to have met or exceeded their ideal trait expectations, when made relationally, participants were far more likely to report falling short of these ideal standards. This pattern of results again supports the idea that calling explicit attention to the relationship between self and ideal evaluation initiated a correction process that produced a divergence in ratings not evidenced when such judgment were made in isolation.

Evidence for Assimilation of Self to Ideal?

Finally, to more precisely determine whether the documented self-ideal similarity was produced via self judgments automatically assimilating toward ideal conceptions, as proposed by the better-than-average heuristic, or, via some alternative mechanism (i.e., assimilation of ideal toward self, conflation of self and ideal judgments), absolute self and absolute ideal judgments were compared to the same judgments when made relationally. If, as has been postulated based on the better-than-average heuristic, ideal trait conceptions serve as contextual “primes” toward which self judgments naturally assimilate, then the bias correction literature (e.g., Martin, 1986; Wegener & Petty, 1995) suggests that making these “primes” explicit during the self evaluation process should

result in self judgments being contrasted from their absolute baseline level. Accordingly, evidence for this position would be obtained if self ratings anchored on explicit ideal standards were significantly lower than absolute self judgments. Results marginally support this prediction. Self ratings anchored on absolute ideal judgments were marginally less positive ($\underline{M} = 15.48$) than were self judgments made absolutely ($\underline{M} = 15.98$), $\underline{F}(1, 118) = 2.721, p = .10$. Thus, at least to some extent participants appear to have contrasted their self ratings downward when made with explicit reference to established ideal anchors.

Study 3's design also enabled for examination of whether self-ideal similarity results from an alternative mechanism, namely, assimilation of ideal judgments toward self perceptions. Like the theoretical perspective adopted in the previous analysis, if ideal conceptions are naturally assimilated toward self judgments (i.e., ideal standards are defined by self), then making self ratings explicit during the ideal judgment process should result in bias detection and the subsequent contrasting of ideal ratings from their absolute baseline level (e.g., Martin, 1986; Wegener & Petty, 1995). Consequently, evidence for this position would be obtained if ideal ratings anchored on explicit self judgments were significantly higher than absolute ideal judgments. Results strongly support this prediction. Ideal judgments anchored on absolute self ratings were significantly more positive ($\underline{M} = 17.57$) than were ideal judgments made absolutely ($\underline{M} = 15.94$), $\underline{F}(1, 118) = 22.162, p < .0001$. Thus, participants did contrast their ideal trait judgments upward when made with explicit reference to established self anchors.

Discussion

The results of Study 3 further delineate the process by which self judgments are derived in self versus other comparative contexts. Specifically, the findings lend considerable support for the better-than-average heuristic's (e.g., Alicke & Govorun, 2005) contention that, when judging the self within these contexts, people adopt an "if it's good, I'm it" mentality and associate self judgments with idiosyncratic ideal conceptions across trait domains. When made absolutely, participants' self and ideal judgments were nearly identical across 23 trait domains. This extreme similarity was evidenced not only when examined across trait dimensions, but also when compared within each respective trait dimension.

Furthermore, Study 3 also supports the BTA heuristic's assumption that the self's strong association with ideal is a quality uniquely afforded to the self as a judgment target. When absolute judgments of the average peer were compared to ideal ratings, considerable differences emerged. Specifically, the average peer was consistently evaluated less favorably than were perceptions of "ideal" across dimensions. The average peer was also judged less favorably than the self, consistent with previous better-than-average research (e.g., Alicke, 1985). Thus, Study 3 successfully sheds further light on the process by which self judgments are derived in comparative contexts – they are strongly (and uniquely) associated with ideal trait conceptions, an association which naturally produces robust better-than-average effects.

Nonetheless, the findings of Study 3 also suggest that the mechanism by which self-ideal similarity is achieved is something other than the automatic self-to-ideal

assimilation proposed by the better-than-average heuristic. According to the heuristic, self judgments are derived via automatic assimilation toward idiosyncratic ideal conceptions. Yet the results of Study 3 suggest that such assimilation is likely only a portion of the self judgment process. When made with explicit reference to ideal trait conceptions, self judgments were (marginally) contrasted downward from their absolute baseline level, as was expected. This contrast effect is consistent with that found in the bias correction literature (e.g., Martin, 1986; Strack et al, 1993; Wegener & Petty, 1995) when contextual primes believed to naturally produce some degree of assimilation among referents are made explicit within the judgment process. Thus from this perspective, it does appear that to an extent, self judgments are naturally assimilated toward ideal trait conceptions.

Additionally, however, it was also shown that when ideal judgments were made with explicit reference to self anchors, they too were contrasted from baseline. Ideal conceptions were significantly more favorable when made in relation to self judgments as opposed to when made absolutely. In fact, this contrasting pattern was considerably more pronounced than that observed in self judgments. These findings suggest that not only do ideal standards serve as an anchor toward which self judgments naturally assimilate, but conversely, self perceptions also serve as a standard toward which ideal conceptions naturally assimilate. Hence, the heuristic's assumption that self judgments are derived via automatic assimilation toward ideal conceptions (serving as the gold standard) is partly an errant one.

Alternatively, an explanation that more fully accounts for the extreme self-ideal similarity evidenced in Study 3 is that absolute self and absolute ideal judgments are respectively rendered through a mutual assimilation and negotiation process. More specifically, each judgment consists of a negotiation of how closely the self comes to ideal, and conversely, how closely ideals compare to the present self, on a trait by trait basis. And, given that self-enhancement is one of the primary motives guiding self judgment and behavior (e.g., Guenther & Alicke, 2008; Sedikides, 1993), it would be expected that the outcome of this negotiation to be such that judgments of self and ideal are strongly associated. This is exactly what occurred in Study 3.

It is important to note, however, that arguing for the presence of a self-ideal negotiation is not to argue that self and ideal are automatically endorsed as one in the same. Granted, the association of self with ideal standards may be a natural, perhaps automatic, process in judgment contexts. However, reality constraints (e.g., Kunda, 1990) and the need to appear modest (e.g., Schlenker & Leary, 1982) likely prevent the blind endorsement of self as ideal, and instead produce slight divergences of varying degree and direction across trait dimensions. This tendency was evidenced in Study 3. As summarized in Table 6, for some dimensions self was judged slightly more favorable than ideal, whereas on others, self was judged slightly less favorable than ideal. Furthermore, despite the extreme self-ideal similarity evidenced across absolute judgments, the average correlation between these judgments was merely $+0.350$ —a significantly positive correlation, yet one that is underwhelming in light of the extreme judgment similarity that emerged. This lack of a full linear relationship suggests that

despite their extreme similarity, participants did not just mindlessly endorse the self and ideal as one in the same across dimensions. Rather, some degree of cognitive negotiation was engaged during which it was determined specifically where the self falls relative to ideal standards, and the outcome of this negotiation was slightly variable across dimensions. This position, which will be more fully elaborated upon in the General Discussion, essentially argues that when the self or ideal respectively serves as a focal judgment target, the other, as a peripherally activated standard, naturally exerts influence on the final judgment outcome.

STUDY 4

The primary objective of Study 4 was to explore whether idiosyncratic ideal standards are automatically activated when making self judgments, as proposed by the better-than-average heuristic (Alicke et al, 2001; Alicke & Govorun, 2005). To do so, Study 4 was designed after a procedure used by Dunning and Hayes (1996) who sought to obtain evidence that self behaviors are automatically activated and used as reference when judging behaviors of other individuals. Dunning and Hayes (1996) were able to show that, after judging another person's traits and behaviors, participants subsequently made self judgments on the same dimensions more quickly than they did for alternative dimensions not included in the initial judgment task. Furthermore, these target judgments were also made more quickly than were the same judgments made by participants who did not engage in the initial task. These findings suggest that when judging the behavior of another individual, participants automatically activated their self perceptions to serve as reference, which thereby remained accessible to facilitate self evaluation on the subsequent judgment task.

The present study adopts a similar theoretical perspective to investigate whether, as argued by the better-than-average heuristic, self judgment automatically activates ideal trait conceptions, which are thereafter used as guiding reference in the self evaluation process. If ideal standards are automatically activated during self evaluation, then, as demonstrated by Dunning and Hayes (1996), these conceptions should remain relatively accessible for a short time thereafter. Consequently, making self judgments for various

traits should allow subsequent ideal judgments on the same dimensions to be made more quickly than if initial self evaluations had not been made.

To this end, participants in the primary experimental condition first evaluated themselves on various trait dimensions, and a short while after, indicated what they perceive the “ideal level” or “best amount” of each of these dimensions to be. If, as the better-than-average heuristic conjectures, people automatically activate idiosyncratic ideals when making self judgments, these ideals should then remain relatively accessible thereafter and facilitate ideal judgments in the subsequent task.

Method

Participants

Participants were 247 undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology at Ohio University. Participants received partial course credit for their experimental participation and were randomly assigned to one of four conditions.

Procedure

Participants were run individually and all tasks were completed by computer. Upon arrival to the lab participants were told that they would be completing two judgment tasks. The first of these tasks consisted of judging one of three targets along six trait dimensions (randomly ordered), with each dimension ranging from 1-21 (Table 7). Participants in the “self prime” condition, the primary experimental condition, judged the self on each trait dimension. Alternatively, participants in the “average prime” condition rated the average college student on the same dimensions, and those in the “acquaintance prime” condition were asked to think of any acquaintance and judge him or her on the

Table 7

Bipolar Judgment Scales, Study 4

Trait Dimensions

Primary Traits, Tasks 1 and 2

Uncooperative – Cooperative

Unmotivated – Motivated

Unsociable – Sociable

Filler Traits, Task 1

Unkind – Kind

Unsophisticated – Sophisticated

Illogical – Logical

Filler Traits, Task 2

Cowardly – Brave

Untruthful – Truthful

Messy – Neat

same dimensions. These latter two conditions served as control conditions to investigate whether the predicted ideal judgment facilitation is merely the product of priming within each trait domain (e.g., Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977; Srull & Wyer, 1979), or, specifically due to a unique ideal activation exclusively associated with the self evaluation process. Without including these controls it would be impossible to rule out the alternative explanation that judging the self facilitates subsequent judgments of ideal

simply because doing so semantically primes and makes more accessible any information related to the trait domains of interest. Inclusion of these latter conditions, however, addresses that concern. Finally, a fourth “no prime” condition in which participants did not make initial trait judgments was also included to serve as a baseline assessment of how quickly ideal judgments can be made without previously engaging in any sort of judgment task.

After the initial target judgment task, all participants then completed the ideal judgment portion of the experiment. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate whether they believe, in their personal opinion, the “ideal level” or “best amount” of a six different trait dimensions to be more than, less than, or equal to a specified scale value (ranging from 1-21). Three of these dimensions consisted of trait domains previously included in the target judgment task, and the remaining three consisted of filler items not previously included. Inclusion of filler items allowed for within-subject comparisons of response latencies for different trait dimensions. If judging the self on a specific trait results in automatic activation of “ideal” standards for that dimension, then judgments of “ideal” should be facilitated for that domain, but not for those dimensions on which the self was not previously judged. Experimental instructions for this portion of the task read:

*“For each of the following trait dimensions indicate in your personal opinion, whether you believe the ideal level or best amount of each trait to be **MORE THAN, LESS THAN, or EQUAL TO** the specified scale value. Understand that your conception of “ideal” need not always correspond to the highest available scale point. For some traits such extreme levels may be unfavorable. Extreme honesty, for example, may also be received as rudeness. For other traits, however, the highest available scale point may be ideal (e.g., intelligence). Simply indicate in your opinion, whether you believe the ideal level or best amount of each trait to be more than, less than, or equal to the specified scale point.”*

To indicate *more than*, participants were instructed to press the “more than” key (?); to indicate, *less than* they were instructed to press the “less than” key (<); and to indicate *equal to* participants were instructed to press the “equal to” key (>).

For each of the three traits included from the previous task, the specific scale values provided against which participants were to judge their perception of “ideal” were those values each participant used to rate his or her respective target in the first judgment task. For example, if a participant judged their target’s motivation as 15 in the first task, they would then be asked to indicate “In your personal opinion, is the ‘ideal level’ or ‘best amount’ of motivation *more than*, *less than*, or *equal to* 15?” in the second task. For the three filler items (and for control participants), the specified scale value was a randomly generated value falling in the upper 50th percentile of the scale distribution (11-21). The presentation of the six dimensions was randomly ordered, and a 2-second delay occurred between each participant response and the presentation of the next item. Finally, participants were given two practice trials prior to beginning the task to familiarize them with the procedure. Unbeknownst to participants, MediaLab software (Jarvis, 2004) was used to record their response latency for each item as they responded to these questions.

Results

The primary question of interest in Study 4 was whether judging the self subsequently prompted participants to evaluate their ideal standards on the same dimensions more quickly than (a) dimensions on which the self was not previously judged, and (b) participants who first judged the average peer, an acquaintance, or made no initial target judgments (control). Furthermore, it was also expected that participants in

these latter conditions would not experience the facilitation effects proposed to impact participants in the self judgment condition. Thus it was hypothesized that there would be no difference in the response latencies for these participants making ideal judgments on the primary and filler dimensions. To assess these predictions, participants' response latencies for ideal judgments on the primary (cooperative, motivated, sociable) and filler dimensions (brave, truthful, neat) were summed and averaged, respectively¹. Because these latencies were positively skewed, the respective averages were subjected to a natural-log transformation and all analyses thereafter were performed on the log-transformed data. These log-transformed latencies, as well as their corresponding raw latencies, are summarized in Table 8.

Next, the log-transformed latencies were submitted to a 2 (trait dimension: primary vs. filler) x 4 (initial target: self vs. average peer vs. acquaintance vs. control) mixed model analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the first variable being within-subjects and the second between- subjects. This analysis revealed a significant Trait x Target interaction, $F(3, 265) = 5.27, p < .002$. As expected, participants who initially judged the average peer or an acquaintance did not exhibit facilitation effects in their subsequent ideal judgments on the same dimensions. Rather, the amount of time it took these participants to make ideal judgments on the primary trait dimensions did not significantly differ from that needed to make the same judgments on filler dimensions, $t(59) = .200, n.s.$, and $t(64) = .008, n.s.$, respectively. Alternatively, the response latencies for participants in the self judgment condition did significantly differ between the primary

¹ Response latencies greater than 3 standard deviations above the grand mean ($M = 2471.9, SD = 1035.1$) were excluded prior to calculation of average RTs.

Table 8

Mean Response Latencies for Ideal Judgments by Condition, Study 4.

Task 1 Target	Ideal Judgment Response Latency	
	Primary Traits	Filler Traits
Self		
Log-transformed response latency	7.76	7.66
Raw response latency (ms)	2,478	2,263
Average Peer		
Log-transformed response latency	7.66	7.65
Raw response latency (ms)	2,231	2,251
Acquaintance		
Log-transformed response latency	7.64	7.64
Raw response latency (ms)	2,274	2,232
None (control)		
Log-transformed response latency	7.60	7.70
Raw response latency (ms)	2,170	2,373

and filler dimensions. However, the nature of this difference was contrary to expectations. Rather than exhibiting the proposed facilitation effects, participants were actually *slower* to make ideal judgments on the primary dimensions following self evaluation than they were to make judgments for the filler domains, $t(76) = 3.02$, $p < .003$. In other words, these participants appeared to demonstrate an *inhibition* effect, rather than the proposed facilitation effect. In fact, it was only those participants who did

not engage in the initial judgment task (control) who exhibited facilitation effects, making ideal ratings on the primary dimensions more quickly than they did for the filler dimensions, $t(66) = -2.62, p < .011$.

Further support for this inhibition effect is evidenced by comparing response latencies on the primary trait dimensions for those in the self judgment condition to those of participants in the average peer, acquaintance, and control conditions. As expected, response latencies for the primary trait dimensions did not differ among participants in the average peer, acquaintance, and control conditions (all F 's < 1). However, latencies among those in the self judgment condition did differ from those in the comparison conditions—they were significantly *slower*, $\underline{F}(1,265) = 5.912, p < .016$ (contrast coded $+3 -1 -1 -1$)². Thus again, although it was predicted that self judgment would facilitate ideal judgments on the primary trait dimensions, it instead appeared that self evaluation inhibited the ability to quickly make ideal judgments relative to that experienced by participants who initially judged the average peer, an acquaintance, or made no target judgments.

Importantly, this pattern of response latencies was not evidenced for the peripheral, filler trait dimensions. Instead, response latencies for these domains did not differ among any of the self, average peer, acquaintance, or control conditions (*all* \underline{F} 's < 1). Thus, it does not appear that judging the self per se inhibits the general ability to

² When specifically compared among respective conditions, response latencies for the primary dimensions were significantly slower among self judgment participants than control participants, $\underline{F}(1, 265) = 6.40, p < .012$, marginally slower than acquaintance participants, $\underline{F}(1, 265) = 3.22, p = .07$, and non-significantly slower than average peer participants, $\underline{F}(1, 265) = 2.27, p = .133$.

subsequently make ideal trait judgments. Rather, this inhibition occurs only when the domain of interest is one on which the self too has been previously evaluated.

Discussion

The results of Study 4 fail to support the idea that when making self judgments, ideal trait conceptions activated during this process will facilitate ideal judgments during a subsequent task. Not only did the data fail to demonstrate this hypothesized effect, but they strongly *opposed* the expected results. Instead, the data showed that after making self judgments, these judgments imposed a judgmental *inhibition* on subsequent attempts to make ideal trait judgments—ideal judgments were actually made more *slowly* following evaluation of self compared to conditions in which the self was not evaluated. This inhibition effect did not emerge among participants who initially judged their average peer, an acquaintance, or made no initial judgment at all, and, it also failed to surface on peripheral trait dimensions for which the self was not initially evaluated. Taken together, these findings suggest that self and ideal perceptions are intimately related, as was expected. However, the nature of this relationship appears to be different than presumed by the better-than-average heuristic.

Despite this inconsistency, when considered in light of the results obtained in Study 3, it could be argued that Study 4's results make very good theoretical sense. Recall that Study 3's findings suggest that when making self and ideal judgments, this process does not entail the automatic self to ideal assimilation originally put forth by the better-than-average heuristic (e.g., Alicke & Govorun, 2005). Instead, the data suggest that self and ideal judgments are likely generated via a negotiation process during which

it is identified where the self falls relative to one's ideals (assimilation of self to ideal), and, how one's ideals compare to present self standing (assimilation of ideal to self). Therefore, because the facilitation hypothesis put forth for Study 4 was fully predicated on the presence of a pure self to ideal automatic assimilation, it is unsurprising that such effects were not realized given the outcome of Study 3.

Alternatively, the presence of a negotiation process in the development of self and ideal judgments could suggest that the observed inhibition effects should be fully expected. One could argue that the initial establishment of self ratings on the target trait dimensions might have hindered how easily ideal judgments on these domains could thereafter be finalized. Without having to commit to specific self evaluations, participants in the comparison conditions were able to freely negotiate how close to the self ideal judgments were able to fall. Thus bound by no restrictions or reality constraints (e.g., Kunda, 1990), these participants could freely negotiate the self-ideal assimilative relationship, and quickly finalize their ideal judgment. However, because participants in the self judgment condition were forced to establish self anchors prior to judging ideals, the freedom to naturally negotiate the ideal's place relative to the self was artificially restricted. Consequently, the ease with which a final ideal evaluation could be finalized may have been inhibited, resulting in the observed inhibition effects. Because this restriction did not occur for dimensions on which the self was not initially judged (i.e., filler dimensions), inhibition effects were not experienced in these instances.

Moreover, akin to the "Absolute Self-Anchored Ideal" condition in Study 3, initially asking participants to provide self judgments on the target dimensions could have

later induced a bias correction process during the ideal judgment phase. If in making explicit self judgments participants became aware of the potential bias these judgments might impose on subsequent ideal assessments on the same dimensions, then the bias correction process demonstrated in Study 3 might have ensued in Study 4 as well. And, because this process assuredly requires some degree of cognitive effort, the additional resources needed to reach a finalized ideal judgment may account for the inhibition effects observed on the primary trait dimensions. Thus, although the findings of Study 4 contradict the facilitation hypothesis initially put forth, the pattern of findings fit well with respect to the results obtained in Study 3.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The general idea that people consistently and reliably evaluate themselves as better than average across a wide array of traits (e.g., Alicke, 1985), abilities (e.g., Cross, 1977), and moral dimensions (e.g., Allison et al., 1989) is one of the most robust in the social psychological literature. In fact, the concept is so pervasive that it has captured the imagination of many in Garrison Keillor's famed depiction of "Lake Wobegon" (Keillor, 1985), a fictional town in central Minnesota in which "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all of the children are above average" (Myers, 1998, p. 440). Various theoretical explanations have been advanced for the effect (see Alicke & Govorun, 2005, and Chambers & Windschitl, 2004 for reviews), all of which have received convincing evidential support. Thus, it seems appropriate to conclude that the better-than-average effect is a multiply-determined judgment phenomenon.

Moreover, recent experimental evidence from Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data) has more clearly elucidated the specific psychological mechanisms underlying the BTAE. Specifically, their work validated the long-standing presumption that the BTAE comprises a social comparative component (e.g., Festinger, 1954) in which self and average peer judgments are derived relationally (e.g., Klar & Giladi, 1999; Kruger, 1999), and that the nature of this comparison is such that one's own self evaluations serve to anchor judgments of the average peer. In their study, participants' self ratings across various trait domains remained unchanged regardless of whether these judgments were made absolutely or with direct reference to the average peer. Ratings of the average peer,

on the other hand, did not—they fluctuated depending on whether they were made absolutely or relationally.

In addition, Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data) were also the first to demonstrate that in making average peer judgments, these judgments are assimilated toward, not contrasted from, individual self ratings. Many researchers (e.g., Kruger, 1999; Klar & Giladi, 1999; Beauregard & Dunning, 1998) have assumed that the nature of the anchoring-and-adjustment involved in the BTAE is such that judgments of the average peer are contrasted downward from more positive self anchors. However, Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data) showed that when made with explicit reference to previously established self ratings, judgments of the average peer were significantly more *positive* than when made absolutely—evidence supporting an assimilation effect. Thus, Alicke and Govorun’s findings (unpublished data) were paramount in more clearly expounding the specific mechanisms underlying the nature of self versus other comparative judgments.

Given all that is known about the processes underlying the BTAE, two questions remain conspicuously unanswered in the better-than-average literature. First, it is still unclear the extent to which self enhancement motives drive self versus average peer comparative judgments. Some researchers argue that the BTAE can be fully accounted for by differential information-processing underlying self and average peer judgment, respectively (e.g., Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Chambers et al., 2003; Kruger, 1999; Klar et al., 1996). Yet others argue that the effect is jointly driven by perceptual-cognitive and motivational components (e.g., Alicke, 1985; Alicke et al., 2001; Alicke & Govorun,

2005; Allison et al., 1989; Dunning et al., 1989). Little experimental research has been devoted to explicitly exploring the extent to which self-enhancement motives are implicated in better-than-average findings. Thus, Studies 1 and 2 of the present research specifically addressed this question.

Second, though much research has focused on the process by which judgments of the average peer are generated in self versus other comparative contexts (e.g., Alicke & Govorun, unpublished data; Kruger, 1999; Weinstein, 1980), far less has centered on how evaluations of the self are derived in these contexts. We do not know, for example, whether the self is compared to some concrete comparison standard (e.g., Smith & Zarate, 1992), as is the average peer; whether self is compared to some abstract idealized standard (e.g., Higgins, 1987; Alicke & Govorun, 2005); or, whether any comparison process occurs at all. Several models have been posited delineating how content and structure of the self-concept impact self and social judgment (e.g., Showers, 1992; Klein, Loftus, Trafton, & Fuhrman, 1992; Kihlstrom & Klein, 1994; McConnell & Strain, 2007), so perhaps self judgment in comparative contexts also relies on use of stored self-knowledge. Given this ambiguity, Studies 3 and 4 explicitly aimed to better understand the process by which self judgments are derived in self versus other comparative contexts.

Self Enhancement and the Better-than-Average Effect

From a strong self-enhancement perspective, the finding by Alicke and Govorun (unpublished data) that judgments of the average peer are assimilated toward, not contrasted from the self might appear troubling for those who construe the BTAE as a

strategic motivational phenomenon (e.g., Alicke, 1985; Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning et al., 1989). Showing that people willingly draw the self closer to “average” seems compelling evidence that in fact, enhancement motives are *not* implicated in self versus other comparative judgments. Yet, the fact remains that several theorists recognize the interplay which exists between cognitive and motivational processes in the development and maintenance of self and social judgment (e.g., Kunda, 1990). Because the self constitutes a rather favorable judgmental anchor point, it may automatically induce some degree of assimilation among referents with which it is compared (e.g., Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Mussweiler, 2003; Markman & McMullen, 2003). Nevertheless, the presence of this natural cognitive by-product should not preclude the possibility that enhancement motives might too be implicated in the judgment process.

Accordingly, Studies 1 and 2 provide direct experimental evidence that enhancement motives can indeed be distinguished in self versus other comparative contexts, despite the presence of an assimilative mechanism. Study 1 demonstrated that for trait dimensions on which the self is positively evaluated, self-enhancement concerns limit the amount of average peer assimilation that occurs—thereby maximizing the distance between self and “average” which reality will allow. When self ratings used to anchor average peer judgments were deceptively labeled as those given by another individual, ratings of the average peer on the same dimensions were more positive (i.e., greater assimilation) than when the identical anchor points were correctly labeled as self-ratings (i.e., less assimilation). In other words, simply labeling anchor ratings as

belonging to the self limited the extent to which perceptions of average were allowed to approach that anchor.

In contrast, Study 2 showed that for trait dimensions on which the self is negatively evaluated, enhancement motives amplify the degree of average peer assimilation that occurs—thereby *minimizing* the distance between self and “average”. When told they had performed poorly on a task assessing an important genetic trait, actors subsequently assimilated their estimations of average performance downward from baseline to a greater extent than did observers, for whom self-enhancement concerns were irrelevant. Thus, whereas the restriction of average peer assimilation evidenced in Study 1 perhaps serviced the desire to view one’s favorable attributes as unique (e.g., Chambers, 2008), the facilitation of assimilation observed in Study 2 perhaps satisfied the drive to see one’s negative attributes as common (e.g., Ross, Greene, & House, 1977).

Taken together, the differential average peer assimilation evidenced in Studies 1 and 2 provide convincing support for the perspective that self versus average peer judgments are largely influenced by motivational processes. From a purely cognitive perspective there is little reason to predict that such differential assimilation would occur on positive versus negative trait dimensions. Thus, these studies further contribute to the mounting literature supporting the position that the desire to maintain a favorable self-image drastically informs the self judgment process.

Self Judgment in Comparative Contexts: A Heuristic Driven Process?

One of the more appealing suppositions regarding how self judgments are generated in self versus other comparative contexts is that of Alicke and colleagues’

better-than-average heuristic (e.g., Alicke et al., 2001; Alicke & Govorun, 2005). The heuristic argues that, as opposed to sifting through the abundance of behavioral evidence stored in memory to generate self judgments in comparative contexts, people instead apply a “better-than-average heuristic” and automatically assimilate self judgments toward idiosyncratically defined ideal standards for each trait dimension. Note that this view opposes more recent orientations that self and social judgment are tactful processes supported by the use of complex cognitive structures and the retrieval of specific behavioral exemplars (e.g., Kihlstrom & Klein, 1994; Klein, et al., 1992; McConnell & Strain, 2007). Though some research has provided indirect support of the better-than-average heuristic (e.g., Alicke et al., 2001; Rothman et al., 1996), no research to date has directly tested the assumption that when judging the self people automatically adopt an “if it’s good, I’m it” mentality.

To this end, Studies 3 and 4 specifically explored the better-than-average heuristic’s assumption that self judgments in comparative contexts are automatically assimilated toward idiosyncratic ideal conceptions across trait dimensions. Results across studies lent partial support for this assumption. Study 3 demonstrated that, as predicted by the heuristic, absolute self and absolute ideal judgments were strongly associated across 23 trait dimensions—in fact, they were essentially identical. Importantly, this similarity did not emerge when comparing absolute average peer judgments to absolute ideal judgments, thus reinforcing the heuristic’s articulation that close association with idealized standards is a privilege uniquely afforded to the self as a judgment target. Thus,

the results of Study 3 do support the heuristic's contention that when judging the self, people naturally adopt an "if it's good, I'm it" mentality.

However, Study 3 failed to support the argument that the relationship shared by self and ideal is such that self judgments are automatically assimilated toward more positive idiosyncratic ideals. Alternatively, results suggest that self judgment more likely entails a negotiation with ideal trait conceptions, beginning with the mutual conflation of the two as judgment targets, and ending with slight divergences emerging between the two across trait dimensions. The presence of such a negotiation process was suggested in several ways. First, though absolute self and absolute ideal judgments were statistically non-different for 20 of 23 trait dimensions, closer examination of trends in these data suggest that upward assimilation of self to ideal is certainly not the primary mechanism driving this similarity. On the contrary, for 16 of the 23 traits judged, self evaluations were slightly more *positive* than ideal ratings. If assimilation of self toward more positive ideal conceptions were the primary mechanism driving self-ideal similarity, one would expect ideal conceptions to be uniformly more positive than self ratings—clearly this was not the case. Instead, the automatic self-ideal association appears to likely comprise a negotiation which ultimately yields similar judgments for self and ideal, but produces more favorable judgments of self on some dimensions, and more positive evaluations of ideal on others.

The presence of a self-ideal negotiation process is further suggested by the fact that, when made in direct relation to one another, both self and ideal judgments were contrasted from their absolute baseline level as assessed when these judgments were

made in isolation. This pattern of fluctuation solidifies that indeed, perceptions of self and conceptions of ideal are not construed independently—they are made relationally in subjective domains. Were they construed independently, it would be expected that introducing one as a peripheral standard while the other serves as the focal target would have no impact on the outcome of the focal judgment (see Alicke & Govorun, unpublished data). However, this is not what happened. Rather, both self and ideal judgments, while serving as the focal target, fluctuated when the other was introduced into the judgment context as a peripheral standard. Furthermore, when interpreted from the perspective of bias correction (e.g., Martin, 1986; Wegener & Petty, 1995; Strack et al., 1993), the direction of this fluctuation (contrast) suggests that, when made absolutely, both self and ideal judgments are naturally assimilated toward the other as a comparative reference. Hence these data again suggest that self and ideal are naturally associated, but again suggest that the nature of this association is one of negotiation rather than unidirectional, automatic assimilation.

Finally, results of Study 4 also support the argument that self-views and idealized standards are intimately related, and that this relationship consists of negotiating how closely each falls near the other along the judgment continuum. It is reasonable to assume that in any negotiation, the more flexibility one has in their decision latitude, the more quickly that negotiation will likely be resolved. In the event one's decision latitude is restricted, the time needed to successfully resolve that negotiation will likely increase. Consistent with this perspective, participants who initially judged the self on various trait dimensions subsequently took more time to make ideal judgments on the same

dimensions than did those who initially evaluated the average peer, an acquaintance, or made no target judgments. By committing to specific self ratings during the initial task, participants may have restricted their ability to freely negotiate how their perceptions of ideal relate to currently held self-views. In fact, establishing self-anchors may have also forced participants to engage in a bias correction process (e.g., Wegener & Petty, 1995) similar to that evidenced in Study 3, in attempt to maintain modesty and ensure not to judge the self and ideal as one in the same. Participants who did not judge the self, conversely, were not bound by established self judgments, and therefore were afforded more flexibility to quickly establish idiosyncratic ideal perceptions. This pattern of judgmental inhibition is therefore consistent with the self-ideal negotiation hypothesis proffered in Study 3.

Taken together, the results of Studies 3 and 4 shed considerably more light on the question of how self evaluations are derived in judgment contexts typical of those in better-than-average research. In particular, these studies provide convincing evidence that such judgment is indeed likely a heuristic-driven process, characterized by a natural, perhaps automatic, association of self with idiosyncratic ideal conceptions. Demonstrating that self-views are essentially fully conflated with idealized trait conceptions again provides nearly unassailable evidence that self versus other comparative judgments are very much permeated by self-enhancing motives (e.g., Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning et al., 1989; Sedikides, 1993).

Relationship to Existing Perspectives

Heuristic versus Effortful Self Judgment. The perspective that self evaluation in comparative contexts is derived by means of a heuristic-driven process could potentially make a substantial contribution to the self judgment literature. Over the past 20 years social psychological research has been inundated with theoretical models articulating the way in which the content and organization of stored knowledge influences judgment and decision-making processes (see Srull & Wyer, 1989a; Srull & Wyer, 1989b; Devine, Hamilton, & Ostrom, 1994). And, research focusing on the development and maintenance of the self-concept has been no exception. Several modern theories focus on the implications that structure, content, and organization of self-knowledge have on overall well-being and self-judgment in a variety of domains (e.g., Showers, 1992; Klein et al., 1992; Klein & Loftus, 1993; Linville & Carlston, 1994; McConnell & Strain, 2007). Furthermore, several of the theoretical explanations proffered for the BTAE and closely related unrealistic optimism focus on the role which differential access to behavioral information plays in the emergence of such effects (see Chambers & Windschitl, 2004). Therefore, the idea that access to and use of stored self-knowledge and behavioral exemplars is non-essential to the self judgment process is one that could re-orient the way future research approaches the notion of self-concept maintenance.

Consistent with this perspective, recent work by Lieberman, Jarcho, and Satpute (2004) has also posited that people use an “intuition-based”, automatic self-knowledge system in some circumstances to support self judgment, as opposed to a more effortful, “evidence-based” system. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging, Lieberman et al.

(2004) showed that in domains which participants were highly experienced, self-descriptiveness judgments activated a set of neural networks commonly associated with automatic social cognition (e.g., the *X-system*). It was only in those domains which participants had little experience that effortful cognitive processing (e.g., the *C-system*) was utilized to support self judgment. Like the perspective adopted in the present research, these findings clearly suggest that, even at the neural level, in some contexts self judgment is an automatic, heuristic driven process.

A recent study by Balcetis (in press) narrowed on a similar idea, suggesting that possession of enhanced self-views is more likely the result of failure to process and utilize information relevant to specific self judgment, rather than the effortful solicitation of, and adjustment from, such information. Specifically, Balcetis (in press) found that participants looked at and used available base rate information less when judging the likelihood that they themselves would engage in various moral behaviors than they did when making the same judgments about another individual. Importantly, this difference led participants to claim moral superiority over their peers, indicating they were more likely to engage in moral behavior than comparison others. These findings again emphasize the idea that self judgment is not always reliant on the retrieval and strategic processing of relevant information. Rather, in certain contexts self judgment may instead rest on the use of heuristic-based processes.

Focal-Peripheral Self and Ideal Influence. The idea that focal judgments (i.e., absolute self judgments) may be impacted by peripheral factors (i.e., ideal trait conceptions) is not unique in the social psychological literature. As far back as the New

Look movement, Bruner and Goodman's (1947) interpretation for the finding that children from low socioeconomic status (SES) households estimated coins to be larger in size than did those from high-SES households centered on this same idea. They argued that this estimate difference emerged due to the differential value placed on the coins by children from respective SES backgrounds infiltrating their judgments. Though this interpretation is typically discussed with regard to the impact that motivational orientation may have on perception of reality, it is certainly relevant to the present analysis. Essentially, this argument suggests that perceived value, as a peripheral factor in the judgment environment, can significantly impact focal judgments. This idea is consistent with the orientation adopted in the present research that self and ideal perceptions, as peripheral factors, may influence judgments of the other when serving as a focal judgment target.

Similarly, Tajfel's (1957) *accentuation hypothesis* also rests on the notion that judgments of focal targets can be unduly influenced by peripheral factors. The accentuation hypothesis argues that judgments of independent stimuli (e.g., buildings) will be more polarized on a focal judgment dimension (e.g., height) if these items also differ on a second, peripheral dimension (e.g., color) which is correlated with the focal dimension. Even if the peripheral dimension is uninformative in relation to the focal judgment, Tajfel (1957) demonstrated that its presence still led to a polarization of judgment. Similar arguments have also been proffered by Eiser and Stroebe (1972) and Judd and Harackiewicz (1980) regarding the influence that peripheral factors may exert on focal attitudinal judgments. The important point is that unanimously, these theorists

have empirically demonstrated in the realm of social and attitudinal judgment that dimensions in the periphery of an evaluative environment are fully capable of unknowingly impacting judgments on more central dimensions. Thus the orientation adopted in the present research that as peripheral targets, self and ideal perceptions can mutually impact judgments of one another is well-grounded in classic social psychological theory.

Future Directions

Future endeavors should focus on further elucidating the processes underlying the self-ideal negotiation heuristic proposed in the current research. First, while the present studies are strongly suggestive, research designed with the explicit purpose of investigating whether the proposed negotiation process is comprised in the development of self judgment is necessary. Though the data from Studies 3 and 4 lend compelling support for the presence of such mechanism, these studies were initially designed for an alternative purpose—to test the assumptions of Alicke and colleagues' better-than-average heuristic (Alicke & Govorun, 2005). Therefore, research devised with the explicit intention of more closely examining mechanisms involved in the proposed self-ideal negotiation process is sure to be fruitful.

Second, future research should also focus on identifying boundary conditions for, and moderators of, the extreme self-ideal association revealed in the present studies. Surely, reality constraints in certain contexts must limit the extent to which this relationship can be realized. Judging one's ability on difficult tasks, for example, may be one such context. It may be difficult for an individual to conflate judgment of how good

of a computer programmer they are with conceptions of how good of a computer programmer they ideally *should* be, especially if they know relatively little about computer programming. Thus it is important to identify boundaries at which self judgment shifts from heuristic-driven to the effortful reliance on stored self-knowledge.

Finally, it would be interesting to investigate whether trait importance or centrality (e.g., Sedikides, 1993) moderates the strength of the self-ideal association. One might expect this relationship to be considerably stronger for those dimensions which are highly important to or are a central part of one's self-concept. On those dimensions which one cares less about, on the other hand, there may be little benefit to closely associating the self with conceptions of ideal. Future efforts will greatly benefit from exploring those factors which moderate people's tendency to adopt an "if it's good, I'm it mentality" during the self judgment process.

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APPENDIX A

Example items from the test of *Interpersonal Success Orientation*, Study 2**Section 1 Example: Logical Reasoning**

Is the following syllogism an example of good (G) or poor (P) reasoning?

All trees are fish. All fish are horses. Therefore, all trees are horses.

(G)
P

Section 2 Example: Associative Memory

<u>Object</u>	<u>Number</u>
tree	58
tree	_____

Section 3 Example: Interpersonal Intelligence

You've had some lucky successes lately and a friend takes credit for it. Would you

- a. immediately correct that mistaken opinion
- b. let it go the first couple of times, but confront your friend privately after the third time
- c. ignore it. Everyone goes off the rails now and then
- d. do the same thing back to your friend