

Not so above average after all: When people believe they are worse than average and its implications for theories of bias in social comparison ☆

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Abstract

Recent research calls into question the generally accepted conclusion that people believe themselves to be better than average. This paper reviews the new theories that have been proposed to explain the fact that better-than-average effects are isolated to common behaviors and abilities, and that people believe themselves to be below average with respect to rare behaviors and uncommon abilities. These new theories are then used to revisit prior findings of better-than-average effects. When viewed in light of recent work, the evidence suggests that prior findings overstated the degree to which people engage in self-enhancement by believing that they are better than others when in fact they are not. Prior studies have often confounded desirability with commonness and have used subjective measures of comparative judgment that capitalize on people's tendency to conflate relative with absolute self-evaluation. © 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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There can be little doubt that people use social comparisons with others to make sense of their own outcomes (Blount & Bazerman, 1996; for reviews, see Buunk & Gibbons, *in press*; Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, *in press* this volume). But an important body of research in judgment and decision making suggests that these comparisons are systematically biased. For some time, it has been accepted wisdom that people see themselves in an unrealistically positive light. Dunning, Heath, and Suls (2004) summarize the litera-

ture this way: "People, on average, tend to believe themselves to be above average—a view that violates the simple tenets of mathematics." Likewise, Peterson (2000) concluded that "Apparently, in our minds, we are all children of Lake Wobegon, all of whom are above average" (p. 45). The accumulated evidence was strong enough that one of the most popular textbooks in social psychology claimed: "For nearly any subjective and socially desirable dimension ... most people see themselves as better than average" (Myers, 1998, p. 440). Numerous influential psychological and economic theories have been built on the foundational assumption of self-enhancement (Baumeister, 1998; Benabou & Tirole, 2002; Brown, 1998; Daniel, Hirshleifer, & Sabrahmanyam, 1998; Dunning, 1993; Epstein, 1990; Greenwald, 1980; Steele, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988). These theories are based on evidence that people believe that they are better than others, and they offer to explain it.

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Widespread better-than-average (BTA) effects have important practical implications. The notion that stock market investors believe that they are better than other investors at identifying the next great investment opportunity has been used to explain the high rate of trading in the stock market (Odean, 1998). The claim that managers believe they are better than others has been used to explain the high rate of corporate merger and acquisition (Malmendier & Tate, 2005). The notion that disputants believe that their claims are more justified than are those of others has been used to account for the prevalence of labor strikes and lawsuits going to trial (Babcock & Loewenstein, 1997; Neale & Bazerman, 1985). And the belief that their armies are stronger than those of others has been invoked to explain nations' willingness to make the costly choice to go to war (Johnson, 2004).

However, recent developments have called into question the conclusion that people believe that they are better than others (Blanton, Axsom, McClive, & Price, 2001; Hoelzl & Rustichini, 2005; Kruger, 1999; Moore & Kim, 2003; Windschitl et al., 2003). People report themselves to be worse than others at difficult tasks such as computer programming, coping with the death of a loved one, or attaining high social status (Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2005; Blanton et al., 2001; Kruger, 1999; Windschitl et al., 2003). They believe that they are less likely than others to experience rare events such as living past age 100 or graduating in the top 1% of the class (Kruger & Burrus, 2004). The consistent and predictable presence of worse-than-average (WTA) effects has important implications for theories seeking to explain biases in social comparison. Can findings of WTA effects be dismissed as small anomalies in a broad literature in which better-than-average (BTA) effects are the norm? Perhaps WTA effects highlight something more profound—a theoretical oversight or an empirical omission in the large body of research that finds BTA effects.

I will explore these concerns by first reviewing the evidence of WTA effects and the theories that can best account for them. These theories delve into the underlying psychological mechanisms involved in comparative judgment and help reconcile the apparent conflicts between WTA and BTA findings. I will then discuss prior evidence of BTA effects and explore the degree to which general theories developed to explain WTA effects can also account for prior findings of BTA effects. This exploration strongly suggests that prior work has substantially overestimated the size and prevalence of BTA effects by focusing on frequent events, simple tasks, and common abilities. Finally, I discuss evidence for motivational effects on comparative judgments and explore the limits of the new theories' ability to explain BTA effects.

Worse-than-average effects

When the task is difficult or success is rare, people believe that they are below average. For example, people report believing they are below average with respect to their unicycle riding and juggling skills (Kruger, 1999). Similarly, University of Iowa students report believing that they stand only a 6% chance of beating fellow University of Iowa students in a trivia contest featuring questions on the history of Mesopotamia (Windschitl et al., 2003). In contrast, a trivia contest featuring questions on TV sitcoms inspired an average estimated probability of winning of 70%. Naturally, these beliefs are erroneous because the tests will be simple or difficult for everyone. On average, the actual probability of winning must be 50%. Moore and Kim (2003, Experiment 1) gave participants \$4 and invited them to bet on whether they would beat a randomly selected opponent in a trivia contest. Those who expected the quiz to be simple (sample question: "What is the common name for the star inside our own solar system?") bet significantly more on winning (mean bet = 74% of their \$4) than did those who expected the quiz to be difficult (sample question: "What is the name of the closest star outside our solar system?"; mean bet = 40% of their \$4).

When negotiators' tasks are made more difficult by the presence of a tight final deadline, people on both sides of the negotiation believe that they will obtain worse outcomes than they would have if given more time (Moore, 2005). Even assuming agreement in purely distributive negotiations, people report believing that a tight deadline will lead them to obtain a smaller portion of the negotiating surplus and will lead their opponents to obtain a larger portion (Moore, 2005). This erroneous belief persists, even in the face of experience, and even in negotiations where deadlines are actually beneficial (Moore, 2004b). As a result of this mistaken belief, people will keep their deadlines secret in order to avoid revealing to the other side what they believe is a weakness (Moore, 2004a). Naturally, this puts negotiators in the worst possible position of having to speed up their own concessions in order to obtain an agreement before the deadline, while their opponents concede more slowly.

Prior evidence seemed to show that people believe positive events are more likely to happen to them than to others, and also that people believe negative events are less likely to happen to them than to others (Klein & Weinstein, 1997; Weinstein, 1980; Weinstein & Lachendro, 1982). However, this early work tended to confound event commonness and valence: positive events (e.g., owning your own home) were also common and negative events (e.g., attempting suicide) were also rare. It turns out that when this confound is controlled, there is a large effect of event commonness: People believe that they are more likely than others to experience common events—such as living past age 70—and less likely than

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