



Reports

The better-than-my-average effect: The relative impact of peak and average performances in assessments of the self and others[☆]

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ABSTRACT

We examine whether people call to mind different manifestations of various traits when considering what they are like than when considering what others are like. Specifically, do people think that peak manifestations of their traits and abilities best capture who they are themselves, but that other people are better captured by their average performances or trait expressions? In *Studies 1a and 1b*, participants were more likely to believe that their own most attractive photographs best represent their typical appearance than others' do. In *Study 2*, participants' estimates of where they stand on various trait dimensions coincided with their highest possible standing, whereas their estimates of an acquaintance's standing coincided with the midpoint between the latter's highest and lowest possible standing. In *Study 3*, regression analyses revealed that students' predictions of their own final exam score were based most heavily on their highest score received to that point, but their predictions of someone else's final exam score was based most heavily on that student's average score. We discuss how this tendency fits in the broader literature on self–other differences in evaluation and how it contributes to above-average effect.

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Introduction

At Thanksgiving dinner, a family member takes three photos of you. You look awful in one of them, great in another, and the third is somewhere in between. Which photo would you think best captures the “real” you?

You make three visits to Sam's dorm room to find clues to what he is like. On one visit, the room is in shambles; on another, the place is immaculate; and on the third, it is somewhere in between. Which would you say best reflects Sam's true level of conscientiousness?

Our research examines whether people approach these sorts of questions differently when they pertain to the self versus others. Specifically, we examine whether people tend to consider their own best efforts and outcomes as most reflective of who they “really” are, but view average efforts and outcomes as most representative of who others are. That is, we were interested in whether people spontaneously call to mind more favorable information when evaluating and understanding themselves than when evaluating and understanding others.

Our thesis connects to research that examines the circumstances in which people represent categories, not by typical exemplars, but

by extreme instances (Gilovich, Cone, & Rosenzweig, 2011; Morewedge, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2005). When people are asked to think about “a flight delay,” for example, chances are that they automatically call to mind a particularly long delay, not an average one. What we examine here is whether, in self and social perception, the tendency to call to mind typical or extreme instances varies with who is being assessed. In self-assessment, do people focus on instances of past behavior that represent the best they have to offer, leading to what we call a *better-than-my-average effect*?¹ And when it comes to assessing others, do people focus on something closer to the other's average behavior?

Why might there be such a self–other asymmetry in what is considered most reflective of a person's true traits and abilities? People's thoughts about themselves are often taken up with their aspirations and plans for the future, which are typically aimed toward doing one's best. Thus, a top performance is often experienced as the fulfillment of an intention, the “real” outcome one aims for, with anything less being experienced as a departure caused by insufficient effort, unfortunate circumstances, or “chance error.” When it comes to other people, however, we have less access to their plans and aspirations, and what little we know about their mental states is often abstract and uncertain, as opposed to the concrete and keenly-felt representations of our own

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¹ This should not be confused with the similar-sounding but conceptually distinct “better than myself” effect, whereby people rate themselves more favorably than a target person with the exact same attributes as the self (Alicke, Vredenberg, Hiatt, & Govorun, 2001).

efforts and goals (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). Thus, our sense of someone else's standing on a given trait or ability dimension is more heavily influenced by their overt behavior. This encourages an emphasis on another's performance as a whole, such that we tend to think of others as best captured by their average performance in a given domain or their typical manifestation of a trait.

Support for these ideas comes from research on how knowledge of intentions influences people's judgments. People assign great weight to their intentions when predicting their future behavior, even when they are aware that their intentions may not have been especially predictive in the past (e.g., Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994; Koehler & Poon, 2006). People tend to weight intentions much less heavily when predicting the behavior of others, and this is one reason why people are often more accurate in predicting others' behavior than their own (Epley & Dunning, 2000; Pronin & Kugler, 2007). Kruger and Gilovich (2004) tied the tendency to weight intentions more heavily when assessing the self than when assessing others to the above-average effect (e.g., Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). People give themselves credit for their intentions when assessing how kind or thoughtful they are, but don't similarly credit intentions when considering the kindness and thoughtfulness of others.

Williams and Gilovich (2008) found that people tend to define themselves to a considerable extent by who they intend to be in the future, but define others by their past and present behavior. Note that a personal best represents the goal to which one is headed, or at least notable progress toward that goal. Therefore, if people "count" as part of their self-definitions what they are striving to be like, they are likely to consider a peak performance or the highest manifestation of a given trait as a particularly informative element of who they are. But because people tend to view others more in terms of what they've done than what they are aspiring to do, they are likely to give more equal weight to the full range of others' behavior. Another person's best, then, is likely to be seen as merely part of the normal variation in their behavior to be averaged together with all other instances of their past behavior.

Overview of the present studies

Numerous studies have documented that people use different information when evaluating themselves than when evaluating others (e.g., Epley & Dunning, 2000; Pronin et al., 2004), but this is the only research that examines this particular difference in the basis of self and other perception: that people weight personal bests more heavily in self-assessments than in the assessments of others. In *Studies 1a and 1b*, we examined whether people tend to choose the best of a set of photographs as most representative of what they are really like, but choose more of an average photograph as most representative of someone else. In *Study 2*, we asked a nonstudent sample to specify a range representing their own or an acquaintance's highest and lowest possible percentile standing on a number of traits—that is, to provide the equivalent of a confidence interval for their own or an acquaintance's true standing. A second group simply gave a point-estimate of their own or an acquaintance's standing on these traits. We examined whether participants' point-estimates of their own standing tended to coincide with the upper end of the intervals provided by the first group of participants, and whether their point-estimates of their acquaintances' standing tended to lie near the middle of the intervals. In *Study 3*, we asked students right before final exams to tell us how they had done on all components of a course to date – their quizzes, problem sets, etc. – and to predict how well they would do on the final exam. We also provided them with the same information about another student and asked them to predict that student's final exam performance. We examined whether students' own top performances to date were the best predictors of how they thought they would do and whether the other students'

average performances were the best predictors of how they thought those students would do.

Studies 1a and 1b

The first two studies are laboratory analogs of the example with which we began this article. We took a series of photos of participants and asked them to indicate which one best represents their true appearance. After they did so, they ranked the pictures in order of attractiveness. They then did the same for photos of another individual: the previous participant in *Study 1a* and a randomly-selected celebrity in *Study 1b*. We examined whether participants were more likely to select the most attractive photograph when choosing the most representative photograph of themselves than when choosing the most representative photograph of the previous participant or a celebrity.

Method

Participants

Fifty-five University of Florida undergraduates (36 female, 19 male) participated in *Study 1a* for extra credit. Twenty-four Cornell undergraduates (19 female, 5 male) participated in *Study 1b* in exchange for \$5 or extra-credit.

Procedure

In both studies, individual participants were escorted into a room with a white wall and a black chalkboard to have a "photo shoot" of 12 pictures under varying conditions—with the camera held vertically and horizontally, positioned in front of the black and the white backgrounds, and while smiling with their teeth showing, smiling with their lips closed, and neutral-faced, in each possible combination. Once the photos were taken, participants were seated at a computer where the digital photos were uploaded so that all twelve could be seen simultaneously.

Participants were then asked: (1) how representative the twelve pictures as whole were of the participant's appearance (indicated by placing a slash mark on a 151-mm line with the endpoints labeled "does not capture what I look like" and "effectively captures what I look like"); (2) which picture out of the 12 was most representative of how the participant typically looked; and (3) to rank all twelve photos in terms of attractiveness.

Participants were then informed that they would also evaluate the photographs of another person. In *Study 1a*, the other person was the previous participant in the study (none of the participants knew one another). The previous participant's pictures were displayed the same as their own had been and participants made the same judgments of this person's images as they had made of their own. Participants were also asked to sign a consent form allowing the experimenter to show their photos to the next participant.

Participants in *Study 1b* were told that the person whose photos they were to evaluate would be a celebrity randomly selected from a group of ten. The ten celebrities were chosen on the basis of pretesting that established that: (1) they were widely recognized and reasonably well-liked by our subject pool, and (2) they were not regarded as especially attractive or unattractive. A research assistant who was unaware of the hypothesis downloaded from the internet twelve pictures of each of ten celebrities—Nicholas Cage, Jim Carrey, Claire Danes, Tom Hanks, Pink, Dennis Quaid, John C. Reilly, Christina Ricci, Barbara Walters, and Serena Williams. The photos were structurally the same as those taken of the participants themselves: front-facing headshots depicting varying degrees of smiling. They were arrayed on the computer the same as their own photos had been and participants rated them in terms of how well, as a set, they captured their subjects. They also chose which photograph was most representative of the target's typical appearance and ranked the 12 photos from

least to most attractive. Finally, they reported whether they recognized and could name the celebrity.

We ran two studies with two different targets to examine the robustness of the predicted effect. We used the previous participants as targets in *Study 1a* so that there were no differences in the type of person assessed in the self and other conditions. But one might object that because participants did not know the previous participant, they might feel more compelled than they would in most everyday-life circumstances to select a more average photo to represent that person. Accordingly, in *Study 1b* we used targets with whom our participants were familiar—celebrities. The use of celebrity targets represents a particularly stringent test of our hypothesis: although we did not use the best-looking group of contemporary celebrities, show-business individuals are typically seen made-up, in flattering lighting, etc., and so they are likely to be represented quite positively in our subjects' minds. One might therefore expect participants to select something close to the most attractive photo of a given celebrity to match the glamor of Hollywood. This inclination notwithstanding, we predicted that the tendency to assess others in terms of their average appearance would be strong enough to lead participants to select representative photos of the celebrities that were much closer to average in terms of attractiveness than the photos they selected as most representative of themselves.

Results

Gender had no significant influence on the results of these or the following studies and is not discussed further.

Study 1a

As predicted, participants tended to choose a higher ranked photo as the one most representative of how they themselves typically look than they did for the previous participant, choosing on average the self-rated second or third most attractive picture for themselves ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 2.9$) and the fourth most attractive picture for the other person ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 3.4$), $t(54) = -2.76$, $p < .01$, $d = .83$. They were also more inclined to choose their own top-ranked photo as most representative of who they are than they were to choose the top-ranked photo of the previous participant as most representative. Fifty-eight percent of the participants (32 out of 55) chose their own top-ranked photo as most representative, but only 40% percent (22 out of 55) chose the top-ranked photo of the other person, McNemar paired proportion $\chi^2(1, N = 55) = 4.05$, $p < .05$, $\phi = .27$. This pattern occurred despite concerns about consistency, fairness, and self-presentation that doubtless arose in some participants because of the within-subjects nature of the design.

Interestingly, the twelve pictures of the other participant taken as a whole seemed to participants more representative of the other person's appearance ($M = 102.6$ mm, $SD = 26.7$) than their own set of 12 photos were of themselves ($M = 94.3$ mm, $SD = 34.2$), paired $t(54) = -2.19$, $p < .05$, $d = .60$.

Study 1b

Participants in this study also tended to choose a higher ranked picture as most representative of how they themselves typically look than they did for another person (the celebrity), choosing on average the third-ranked picture for themselves ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 3.0$) but the fifth ranked picture for the celebrity ($M = 4.9$, $SD = 3.3$), paired $t(22) = 2.36$, $p < .05$, $d = .54$. They were also significantly more inclined to choose their own top-ranked photo as most representative of who they are than they were to choose the top-ranked photo of the celebrity as most representative. Fifty percent of the participants (12 out of 24) chose their own top-ranked photo as most representative of their true appearance, but only 17.4% percent (4 out of 23)²

chose the top-ranked photo of the celebrity, McNemar paired-proportion $\chi^2(1, N = 23) = 4.08$, $p < .05$, $\phi = .42$.

Twenty-one of the 24 participants recognized their assigned celebrity and 17 could name their celebrity. The results for those who could and could not recognize or name their celebrity were not markedly different. There was no difference in how representative as a whole participants thought their own pictures were of their typical appearance ($M = 90.3$, $SD = 29.0$) and the celebrities' photographs were of the celebrities' typical appearance ($M = 86.0$, $SD = 34.7$), paired $t(22) < 1$, *ns*. Nevertheless, participants were more likely to identify the most flattering photograph as the one that best captured their own true appearance than they were to pick the most flattering photo of the famous person with whom they had been paired.

Study 2

If people tend to access their peak efforts when evaluating themselves, their assessments of where they stand on a given trait dimension ought to coincide with their sense of where they stand at their best. People's assessments of someone else's standing, in contrast, ought to be closer to the midpoint between what they sense is that person's best and worst possible standing. We examined this prediction by giving participants a list of positive traits and asking half of them to provide a percentile estimate of their own or someone else's relative standing among their peers. The other half was asked to provide a range representing their own or someone else's highest and lowest possible standing. If our hypothesis is correct, the "point estimates" of participants' own standing should fall near the top of the (aggregate) range, but the point estimates of someone else's standing should fall near the middle.

Method

Participants

161 participants (71 male, 90 female), ranging in age from 18 to "over 65," were recruited on Mechanical Turk and received \$.10 for their efforts.³

Method

Participants were randomly assigned to think either about themselves and their traits or about an acquaintance of their gender and approximate age. Participants then considered their own [their acquaintance's] standing on the following traits: *creative, generous, honest, good-humored, friendly, bright, caring, open-minded, logical, trustworthy, warm, and perceptive*. In the *point estimate* conditions, participants assigned themselves [their acquaintance] a percentile ranking for each trait, reflecting where they thought they [their acquaintance] stood on the trait relative to other people of their age and gender. In the two *range* conditions, participants assigned themselves [their acquaintance] a highest and lowest possible standing. More specifically, they were told (in the *self* condition):

A percentile score represents the percentage of the comparison group that *ranks below you* on a particular trait. Here, we are interested not in one particular rating, but in a *range of scores* that captures where you are relative to other people. For example, if one of the traits below were "height," and you considered yourself to be shorter than most people of your age and gender, you might rate yourself between the 10th and 30th percentiles. This means that you are sure that you are no shorter than the bottom 10% of people (of your age and gender), and you are at most taller than 30% of other people. If you are not absolutely sure, you should adjust your upper

² One person failed to choose a representative picture for the celebrity.

³ Five participants who reported ratings that were extreme outliers (>3 SDs from the mean) were not included in the analyses.

and lower bounds until you are sure that your true standing is between that range.

On the other hand, if you thought you were taller than most people of your age and gender, you might enter a range of, say, 65% to 80%. This would mean that at least 65% of people are shorter than you, and at the very most you are taller than 80% of people of your age and gender...

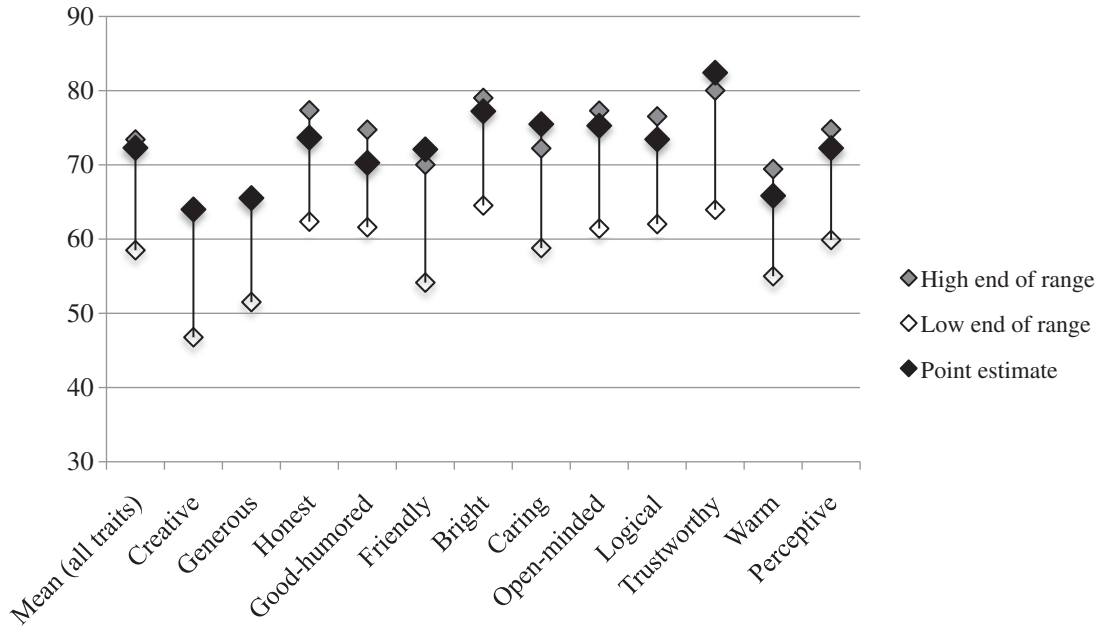
The instructions in the *other* conditions were identical except “you” and “your” were changed to “your acquaintance” and “his or her.”

Results

Fig. 1A presents the ranges and point estimates of participants' self-assessments. As predicted, the point estimates were near the upper bounds of the aggregate ranges on all twelve traits. As Fig. 1B shows, this was not the case for participants' assessments of their acquaintances, which were above the midpoint of the range on three traits and below the midpoint on the others.

To assess the statistical significance of this pattern, we averaged across the twelve traits both for participants' assessments of their own standing and their acquaintances' standing (shown in Figs. 1A and B). The mean point estimate for the self ($n=45$, $M=72.3$, $SD=11.6$) was significantly different from the midpoint ($n=41$,

A. Range and point estimates for the self



B. Range and point estimates for the acquaintance

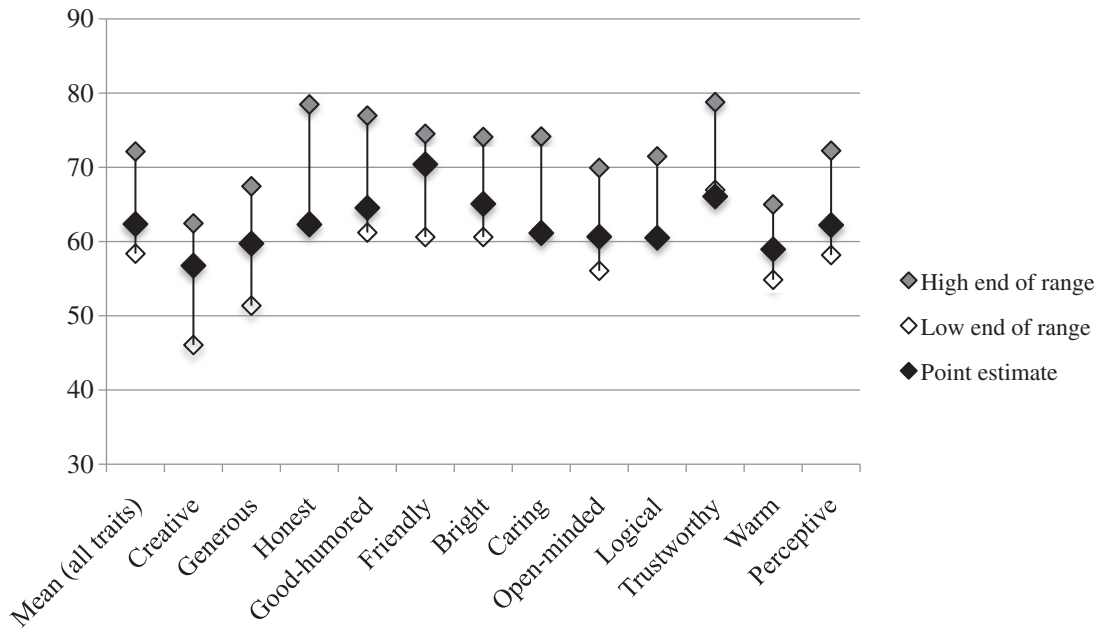


Fig. 1. Participants' point estimates and upper and lower bounds on their own standing (A) or an acquaintance's standing (B) on 12 traits (and a composite of all 12). A. Range and point estimates for the self. B. Range and point estimates for the acquaintance.

$M = 66.0$, $SD = 13.0$) between the mean upper and lower bounds, $t(84) = 2.39$, $p < .05$, $d = .51$, but did not differ from the mean upper bound ($M = 73.4$, $SD = 12.5$), $t < 1$. In contrast, the mean point estimate for the acquaintances ($n = 37$, $M = 62.4$, $SD = 14.3$) was significantly different from the mean upper bound ($n = 33$, $M = 72.1$, $SD = 14.5$), $t(68) = -2.84$, $p < .01$, $d = .68$, but did not differ from the midpoint ($M = 65.3$, $SD = 14.5$), $t < 1$.⁴

As this pattern implies, and consistent with the literature on the above-average effect, the average point-estimate of participants' own standing was significantly higher than the average point-estimate of their acquaintance's standing, $t(78) = 3.43$, $p = .001$, $d = .76$. However, neither the mean upper or lower bound for the self and other differed significantly, $t < 1$.

These results make it clear that people assess their standing on various traits very differently than they assess the standing of others. People's estimates of where they stand on a given dimension are nearly indistinguishable from the aggregate best possible standing on that dimension. People's assessments of another person's standing lie closer to the midpoint between the aggregate best and worst possible standing.

Study 3

Whether evaluating photographs or assessing their standing on various traits and abilities, people tend to look at their best efforts and think, "that's me." They are less likely to seize upon the best when assessing others. If this asymmetry reflects a fundamental difference in how the self and others are represented, it should also influence the basis of people's predictions about their own and others' future performance. We pursued this idea in Study 3, examining whether students' predictions of their own final exam grades are based more heavily on their *best* performance during the semester, but their predictions of other students' final exam grades are based more heavily on the student's *average* performance during the semester.

Method

Participants

Thirty-five Cornell undergraduates participated for extra credit.

Procedure

Participants were run individually near the end of the semester. They received a questionnaire asking them to choose a specific course they were taking, "...preferably one in which there are quite a few 'inputs' into your final course grade—a couple of prelims, one or more papers, a problem set or other assignment, and a final exam." They were then asked to write down each input that had been completed thus far and to indicate the percentage of the possible points they received on each. Participants were then asked to indicate what percentage of the points they thought they would receive on the final.

Participants also received the "inputs" from another participant's questionnaire—i.e., a listing of all the inputs to that person's course grade completed thus far and the percentage of the total points earned in each.⁵ From this information, participants estimated the percentage of the points this person would likely receive on the

final. The order in which participants completed the self and other questionnaires was counterbalanced.

Results

We regressed participants' predicted final exam grades for themselves and the other student onto the relevant target person's best and average grade across all assignments and tests. Consistent with our predictions, participants' own best grades were a significant predictor of their estimated final exam grade, $B = .76$, $t(34) = 2.51$, $p < .05$, but their average grades were not, $B = -.32$, $t(34) = -1.19$, $p = .24$. The opposite was true of participants' predictions about the other person's final grade: the average semester grade was a significant predictor of the estimated final exam grade, $B = .52$, $t(32) = 2.46$, $p < .05$, but the best grade was not, $B = .09$, $t(32) = .39$, $p = .70$. Examined differently, participants assigned more weight to the average score when predicting the other person's final exam score than when predicting their own final score, $t(68) = 2.46$, $p < .05$, and they assigned more weight to the best score when predicting their own final exam score than when predicting the other person's final exam score, although this difference was only marginally significant, $t(68) = 1.79$, $p = .08$.

General discussion

These studies support our contention that people believe the most favorable examples of their traits and abilities best capture who they really are—they are prone to a *better-than-my-average effect*. This tendency, furthermore, is limited to the self: people believe that others are best captured by more average examples of their behavior. Participants in Studies 1a and 1b were more likely to choose more attractive photos as the best representations of their own appearance than they were for someone else. In Study 2, participants' estimates of their own relative standing corresponded to estimates of their highest possible standing; their estimates of the relative standing of others corresponded more closely to the midpoint of others' highest and lowest possible standing. Study 3 established that people's predictions of their own future performance are based most heavily on their best prior efforts, but their predictions of someone else's performance are based most heavily on that person's average prior performance.

These results contribute to the literature on self-enhancement and self-other differences in judgment. Previous research has shown that the above-average effect is more pronounced on ambiguous traits, as people take advantage of the ambiguity of "agreeable" or "talented" to construe the trait in question in ways that favor their own strengths (Dunning et al., 1989). Careful drivers give extra weight to carefulness when considering whether they are a better-than-average driver and those skilled in handling the wheel give greater weight to skill (Schelling, 1978). Our results suggest another dimension of ambiguity – "should I give more weight to how I am at my best or how I am on average?" – that allows people to think highly of themselves even on otherwise unambiguous traits, such as "punctual" or "fast."

These findings also connect to research on the "inside–outside" dimension of judgment. That is, self-assessments are typically based on private information available largely through introspection whereas assessments of others are typically based on information publicly available through overt behavior (e.g., Buehler et al., 1994; Epley & Dunning, 2000, 2006; Kruger & Gilovich, 2004; Pronin & Kugler, 2007). The inside perspective, furthermore, often biases people's judgments, leading to self-predictions that are more unrealistically optimistic than predictions about the prospects of others (Buehler et al., 1994; Epley & Dunning, 2000; Koehler & Poon, 2006). Our findings reinforce this pattern: by definition, people perform generally at an average level and so self-predictions that downplay average performance in favor of past peak performance will tend to be less

⁴ It might appear that participants tended to provide point estimates of their acquaintance's standing that were systematically below the mean of the range of estimates. Not so. As mentioned, the mean point estimate across the 12 traits does not differ significantly from the midpoint of the range estimates ($t < 1$) and the difference is not large in absolute terms (62.4 vs. 65.3). Furthermore, for none of 12 traits is the mean point estimate significantly different from the midpoint of the range for that trait, and only one is even marginally significant ($p = .096$).

⁵ The "inputs" information of each participant was given to a single other subject but subjects were not yoked—subject A's inputs were given to subject B, but subject B's were given to another participant. Two participants provided unusable responses (A's and B's instead of percentages) when estimating the other participant's final exam performance.

accurate than other-predictions that do just the opposite—however motivating ambitious expectations might be (Willard & Gramzow, 2009).

But the present work goes beyond existing research on the inside–outside distinction by demonstrating that assessments of the self and others also differ on an “up–down” dimension. People tend to sample from the top of the distribution when evaluating their own traits and abilities, but from the middle of the distribution when evaluating others. This leads to a pronounced *better-than-my-average effect* when it comes to self-assessments, but no comparable effect when it comes to the assessment of others.

The *better-than-my-average effect* helps to explain its earlier and better-known namesake, the above-average effect. People's tendency to consider their top manifestation of a trait as most representative of their own standing, but an average manifestation as most representative of another's standing, virtually guarantees that people will rate themselves, on average, as above-average on most positive traits and abilities. Indeed, we asked participants in another study which single example of behavior would give another person the most accurate impression of their standing on various trait dimensions—their worst, average, or most flattering manifestation of the trait in question. We found that the more inclined they were to state that their highest manifestation of a trait best captures what they are really like, the more likely they were to rate themselves as above average on the trait in question ($r(40) = .51, p < .001$).

We do not claim that people never define others by their best. People's impressions of others are sometimes influenced, certainly, by occasions in which others exceed their typical performance. This is especially true in domains that are defined more in terms of capacity or extremity than typicality (Reeder & Brewer, 1979). Athletes, for example, are often thought of in terms of their best performances, such as the records they set or their game-winning heroics. Writers are often best known for their Pulitzer Prize-winning books, actors for their Oscar-winning roles, and singers for their hits.

It is also likely that the closer we are to another person, the more inclined we are to consider particularly flattering instances of behavior as most diagnostic of his or her true nature or ability. We often root for our loved ones and take as much of an inside perspective on their lives as we do for our own. Indeed, the closer we are to another person, the weaker the boundaries between self and other (e.g., Aron & Aron, 2001), and the more likely we are to use the same criteria to judge self and other.

What we contend, and what our data support, is that although we may sometimes, in particular domains, or for certain people characterize others according to who they are at their best, we do so for ourselves much of the time and across many domains. Indeed, what we have documented here might extend a step further—to people's bests as they are imagined or intended to be, not as they actually are. That is, people may factor in “potential” more when evaluating

themselves than when evaluating others. Indeed, people appear to believe that potential should be taken into account more in trying to understand their own true nature than in trying to understand someone else's (Williams, Gilovich, & Dunning, in press).

We based the present research on earlier work showing that people think of themselves more as works in progress than they do for other people. It is their bests to which people aspire, and so when they realize their bests, it is those peak accomplishments that seem most representative of who they are. From one's own perspective, then, it seems entirely logical to conclude that one is better than one's average.

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