
Conceptions of the Self and Others Across Time

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People are full of plans, goals, hopes, and fears—future-oriented thoughts that constitute a significant part of the self-concept. But are representations of others similarly future oriented? Studies 1a and 1b demonstrate that the future is seen as a larger component of the self than of another person. Study 2 found that because self-identity is tied to an unrealized future, the self is thought to be less knowable than others in the present. Study 3 indicates that people believe that others need to know who they are striving to be in order to be understood—more so than they believe they need to know others’ strivings to understand them. Studies 4a and 4b tested an important implication of these findings, that because so much of who they are is tied to the future, people believe they are further from their ideal selves than others are. Implications for judgment and decision making are discussed.

Keywords: *self; future; temporal perspective; self-other differences; social perception*

Much of mental life is occupied by plans for the future—vacations we plan to take, career goals we aim to achieve, personal growth we hope to actualize. This persistent focus on our hopes, plans, and goals can result in the sense that much of who we are resides in the future. Who we are is not just who we are right now or what we were like in the past, but who we are striving to be (Emmons, 1986, 1989; Markus, 1983; Markus & Nurius, 1986). The self, in other words, may be seen as more of a vector than a point in space; to understand who we are, we must know where we are headed as well as where we currently are.

Our understanding of others may be different. Although we assign meaning to the actions of others by making inferences about the intentions underlying those actions (Barr & Keysar, 2005; Malle & Knobe, 1997a, 1997b), such inferences are often rather circumscribed and we can never know another person’s intentions and

aspirations as well as we can know our own (Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). Understanding others therefore may consist more of understanding what they are like in the present and what they have done in the past. To be sure, we may know that Michael plans to be a successful businessman, Lindsay aims to be a philanthropist, and Buster hopes to become more independent. But such plans, aims, and hopes pale in comparison to what we know of our own aspirations, and they can take a back seat to what we think Michael, Lindsay, and Buster are like right now and what we know they have done in the past. We may think of others, in other words, less as vectors than as points in space.

In this article, we explore whether the sense of a person as extended in time might indeed differ for the self and others. We began the reported research with the expectation that the future would constitute a bigger part of people’s self-conceptions than it does of people’s conceptions of others. One’s sense of oneself consists more of the person one strives to be than does one’s sense of someone else. As Markus (1983) put it:

One of the dramatic differences between self-perception and the perception of others can be found in the simple fact that when I perceive myself, I see not only my present capacities and states, but very importantly my potential: What I hope to become, what I plan to do, what I am worried will happen, etc. When I perceive another person, or another person perceives me, this aspect of perception,

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under most conditions, is simply not evident and typically there is not much concern with it. (p. 553)

Markus's insight comes from her work on "possible selves"—representations of future selves thought to be an integral part of the general self-concept, over and above what is currently known about the self. These future selves may be the person one hopes, expects, or even fears one will become, providing future standards to be met or avoided, and serving as standards for assessing the current self. But although possible selves make up an important part of the self-concept, there is indirect evidence that people may not include such future-oriented information in their representations of others, as Markus herself indicated might be the case.

People consider themselves to be more flexible and variable than others, for example. People are less likely to assign a particular trait to themselves than to someone else when given the option of choosing—or not—which of two bipolar traits describes them or someone else (Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Marecek, 1973). People are reluctant to indicate that a particular trait is self-descriptive because they seem to believe that both apply (Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988). That is, people believe they cannot be described by any given trait, because who they are is fluid and responsive to the situation, able to change at any moment.

In addition, a diverse body of evidence suggests that people consider intentions to be highly informative about their own traits and ability, but not so informative about the traits and abilities of others, despite the importance of inferences about intentions in understanding the meaning of another person's past behavior or predicting their future actions (e.g., Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Malle & Knobe, 1997b). Andersen and Ross (1984), for example, found that people consider thoughts and feelings—intentions included—to be more revealing of one's own true personality than the personalities of others. Similarly, work on the introspection illusion indicates that people rely heavily on their own introspective thoughts when assessing who they are but do not do the same for others, preferring instead to use behavior as the basis for assessing someone else, even when they have access to that person's introspective thoughts (Pronin & Kugler, 2007). Intentions are also used as more of a basis for predicting one's own behavior than the behavior of others. The planning fallacy, for instance, occurs in part because people substitute their intended completion times for their estimates of when they will actually finish (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994). However, when making estimations of others' completion times, they instead use base rates as a guide, looking at the particular person's past behavior or at people's behavior in general. Similarly, when predicting

future altruistic behavior, people base their estimates of their own behavior on how they intend to act, but rely on base rates and other observable information to make estimates of other people's behavior (Epley & Dunning, 2000).

The tendency to draw more heavily on intentions in self-assessment than in the assessment of others has been shown to contribute to the above-average effect, or the tendency for a disproportionate percentage of people to think they are above average on a host of positive traits and abilities (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning, 2005; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). Kruger and Gilovich (2004) found that when making self-assessments, people are inclined to give themselves credit for how they intend to behave. Intentions receive less weight in evaluations of someone else's standing on a given trait or ability, which tend to be based almost entirely on that person's actual performance or behavior. Thus, when people are prevented from using intentions in assessing where they stand on a given trait, they produce lower self-ratings that more closely resemble the ratings they give someone else. That is, preventing them from relying on their intentions to the usual degree prevents them from self-enhancing to the usual degree.

All of this evidence that people place more weight on future considerations in self-assessment than in assessments of others suggests that people may come to think of the self as residing, to a substantial degree, in the future. Thus, the future may have a disproportionate influence on conceptions of the self, leading to the view that the self is not just dynamic (Cantor, Markus, Niedenthal, & Nurius, 1986; Dweck, 1996) but uniquely dynamic.

We conducted four studies to examine the idea that the future is seen as a larger component of the self than of other people. In Studies 1a and 1b, we examined people's beliefs about how much their own versus another's identity is based on who they were in the past, who they are right now, and who they will be in the future. In Study 2, we used a paradigm developed by Pronin and colleagues (Pronin, Kruger, Savitsky, & Ross, 2001) to examine whether the greater influence of the future on conceptions of the self relative to others would entail that the self is seen as less knowable to others in the present than others are to the self. In Study 3, we investigated whether people believe that what others need to know to understand them differs from what they believe they need to know to understand others. In Studies 4a and 4b, we sought to test one implication of the tendency for self-conceptions to be more anchored in the future than conceptions of others, by investigating whether the self is seen as further from being the best it can be than other people are. Across these four studies, we varied the nature of the "other" that participants made judgments about to ensure that the overall self-other difference we report is a general one.

STUDIES 1A AND 1B: THE SELF ACROSS TIME

Because people's lives are passages through time, there are three ways in which they can be described: as the person they have been, the person they are, and the person they may be. In Studies 1a and 1b, we asked participants to apportion how much the past, the present, and the future should count in assessments of the self and others. If people believe that they are more dynamic than others, and the future is thus a bigger part of them than of other people, they should be more likely to include the future in their self-descriptions than in their descriptions of someone else.

Study 1a Method

Participants. One-hundred-six Cornell undergraduates (77 female, 29 male) participated in exchange for extra credit in psychology and human development classes.

Materials. Participants in the *self* condition were asked to consider how they would describe their ability as students. More specifically, they were asked the following:

Suppose that you have been asked to determine how good a Cornell student you are, relative to other Cornell students of your age and gender. This assessment can be based on three different aspects of yourself: how good a student you have been in the past, how good a student you are at the moment . . . , and how good a student you think you might potentially be in the future. How much weight do you think is appropriate to give each of these aspects when making your self-assessment (i.e., what portion of the whole picture of you as a Cornell student would you base on each of these aspects)?

To indicate how much weight should be assigned to each component, participants were to assign percentages to their past, present, and future performance or abilities as a student, with the sum of these percentages being equal to 100%. Participants in the *other* condition were asked to "Suppose that John, a sophomore here at Cornell, has been asked to determine how good a student he is, relative to other Cornell students of his age and gender." Then following the same instructions as those above, they were asked to indicate "How much weight do you think it is appropriate for John to give each of these aspects when making his self-assessment . . . ?"

Study 1b Method

Participants. Fifty Cornell undergraduates (43 female, 7 male) completed this questionnaire, also in

exchange for extra credit in psychology and human development classes.

Materials. The materials were the same as those used in Study 1a, except that participants were not asked about their abilities as students. Instead, they were asked how they would describe themselves more generally as people. Thus, participants in the *self* condition were asked to indicate the extent to which who they are is composed of what they were like in the past, the person they are in the present, and the person they might potentially be in the future. Participants in the *other* condition were asked to make the same assessments about "John, a sophomore here at Cornell."

Results and Discussion

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

We predicted that what one might be like in the future would constitute a more substantial part of conceptions of the self than conceptions of another person—in this case, a hypothetical person named John. Evidence in support of this prediction was obtained in both Study 1a and 1b. In terms of academic ability, the future was judged to be a larger component of one's own identity as a student ($M = 28.0\%$, $SD = 11.7$) than John's ($M = 20.0\%$, $SD = 12.5$), $t(104) = -3.38$, $p < .001$, $d = .66$. Likewise, the future was thought to be a larger part of one's overall self ($M = 30.6\%$, $SD = 13.6$) than John's ($M = 21.6\%$, $SD = 12.4$), $t(48) = -2.46$, $p < .02$, $d = .69$. Thus, the future looms larger in people's assessments of themselves than it does in their assessments of others.

Given that the future constitutes a larger share of self-conceptions than conceptions of others, the past or present self (or both) must necessarily loom less large. There was no notable and consistent pattern to these ratings, however. Participants saw their own and another person's academic ability as residing relatively equally in the present ($M_s = 40.1$ and 42.5 , respectively) but unequally in the past ($M_s = 31.9$ and 37.2 , respectively). But this pattern was reversed when it came to overall identity. Participants saw their own and another person's overall ability as residing relatively equally in the past ($M_s = 28.2$ and 29.6 , respectively) but unequally in the present ($M_s = 41.2$ and 48.8 , respectively).¹

The results of these two studies suggest that people are more likely to call on predicted or desired future states when assessing or describing the self than when assessing or describing others. And because the future, unlike the past and the present, is unknowable, the increased influence of the future on assessments of the self relative to assessments of others suggests that these

two types of assessments should differ in predictable ways. We designed Study 2 to examine whether the unknowability of the future is reflected in the perceived unknowability of the self.

STUDY 2: THE EMERGING SELF

The future can be predicted, anticipated, even savored, but it cannot be truly known or perceived. If people think that who they might become is a significant component of who they are, it follows that they might think there are important aspects of themselves that are unknowable to others. Indeed, people are likely to believe that it is harder for someone else to know them than it is for them to know someone else. Pronin and colleagues (Pronin et al., 2001) have provided evidence consistent with this idea, demonstrating that people believe that more of who they are is private and imperceptible to others and thus they are less knowable than other people. In Study 2, we sought to expand on Pronin et al.'s findings and investigate people's beliefs about how much of the self is knowable now, how much will be revealed in the future, and whether these assessments differ for the self and someone else. That is, beyond Pronin and colleagues' finding that people believe that their hidden (current) thoughts, feelings, motives, etc. make them unknowable to others, do they also believe that there is less of them available in the present to be known, with more of who they are expected to come into being and be fleshed out in the future? We therefore adapted Pronin et al.'s (2001) procedure to examine whether people believe that the future needs to be taken into account more in order to get to know them than to get to know others, and that the greater weight that needs to be assigned to the future means that there is less of who they are available to be known in the present.

Method

Participants. Sixty-eight Cornell undergraduates (54 female, 14 male) participated in exchange for extra credit in selected psychology and human development courses.

Materials. Participants read a questionnaire that stated the following:

Most people have a pretty good sense of the kind of person they have been in the past and currently are in the present. However, the person we will be in the future is, by nature, as yet unknown. In this way, people are like icebergs—part of us is visible and part of us is still hidden, to potentially emerge later on. Of course, exactly how much is above the surface and how much is below

the surface varies from person to person—that is, some people will change very little in the future and are pretty much the person now that they will always be; that is, these people can be seen as an iceberg that is mostly visible above the surface. Others may change very much in future years, so most of them are still under the surface.

Participants in the *self* condition were asked to consider the iceberg metaphor and apply it to themselves. They were asked to think about who they have been, who they currently are, and who they will be, and to consider how much of “who they are” is visible above the surface and how much remains unseen, to be revealed in the future. They were asked to represent their thoughts about who they are by circling the appropriate image from a series of 10 illustrated icebergs, each of which had an identical shape. Across the set of 10, however, the amount of water covering the iceberg varied incrementally, such that the first iceberg was almost entirely submerged and the last was almost entirely above the surface (for more detail, see the appendix of Pronin et al., 2001). Participants in the *other* condition made the same assessment, not about themselves, but about a specific acquaintance of their choice, whose initials they were asked to report.

Results and Discussion

The 10 icebergs were each assigned a number that reflected the extent to which they were submerged, with 1 assigned to the most submerged iceberg and 10 assigned to the least submerged. Participants who were asked to pick an image to represent themselves tended to pick a more submerged iceberg ($M = 5.5$, $SD = 1.6$) than those who were asked to pick an image to represent an acquaintance ($M = 6.2$, $SD = 1.3$), $t(65) = 2.03$, $p < .05$, $d = .50$.² Thus, people appear to believe that there is more of who they are that is hidden and will be revealed at some point in the future and that they are more likely to change in the future than other people.

Studies 1a and 1b demonstrated that people believe that what they'll be like in the future is a more significant part of who they are than is the case for others. Study 2 extended that finding by providing evidence that people believe that who they are is more likely to emerge in the future than is the case for someone else. In Study 3, we sought to investigate whether the future looms larger in self-assessment than in the assessment of others, even when the future need not be traded off, in zero-sum fashion, against the past and present. In addition, Study 3 was designed to examine the extent to which the future differentiates the self and others relative to other, nontemporal kinds of information that people might use to assess themselves and others.

STUDY 3: WHO AM I, WHO ARE YOU?

In the studies presented thus far, participants were forced to trade off the extent to which the past, present, and future should be weighted when assessing themselves and others. Someone in Study 1a who stated that her intended future self is a big part of who she is had to reduce how much weight she thought should be assigned to her past or present self. Someone in Study 2 who depicted himself as a largely submerged iceberg necessarily depicted a smaller already-revealed self. What would happen if participants were not forced to make such trade-offs? Would the future loom larger in characterizations of the self even when past, present, and future considerations could be assessed independently?

To find out, we asked participants in Study 3 to rate how much each of several different attributes constitute either (a) an important part of who they are or (b) an important part of who someone else is. We expected participants to assign higher ratings to attributes involving the future (such as the kind of person one wants to be) when these ratings were made for themselves than for another person.

Method

Participants. Fifty-nine Cornell undergraduates participated as part of an experimental session in which they completed a number of studies in exchange for extra credit in various psychology and human development classes.

Procedure. In the *self* condition, participants were given a questionnaire that began by stating that different people think of different things when contemplating who they are. Several illustrations were provided:

Some people might think of their characteristic behaviors, while others may think of their emotional tendencies. Some might think of what they've accomplished; others may think of what they are striving to be. Some people may think of a combination of all these things.

Participants were then given a list of specific types of information they might consider when thinking about what constitutes who they are. Their task was to rate how much they would consider each type of information when trying to answer the question, "Who are you?" These ratings were made by circling the appropriate numbers on a 1 to 9 scale, with 1 labeled *definitely does not represent who I am*, and 9 labeled *definitely does represent who I am*. These ratings were made for 11 types of information: "the kind of person you would like to be"; "the kind of person you have been in the past, up until this moment"; "how you

would like to see yourself"; "how you would like others to see you"; "the personality traits that describe you"; "behaviors or activities that are indicative of your personality"; "your typical friends and social groups"; "your typical moral and emotional reactions"; "the kind of person you think you could be"; "the kind of person you think you will be in the future"; and "the kind of person you intend to be in the future."

Participants in the *other* condition read the same paragraph, but with it altered so that they were to assess the relevance of these various types of information when thinking about what constitutes someone else. The main question they were to consider was not "Who are you?" but "Who is ____?" The exact person to be considered was not specified: Participants were free to consider either a specific person they knew or the abstract concept of "a person." Participants made these ratings on the same 1-to-9 scale, but with 1 labeled *definitely does not represent who another person is* and 9 labeled *definitely does represent who another person is*. The wording of each type of information was changed from *you* and *your* to *this person* and *his/her*.

Results and Discussion

If our thesis is correct, the items that refer to the future should yield the largest differences between participants' ratings in the self and other conditions. Indeed, the three future-oriented items all yielded a striking self-other difference: Participants indicated that they are more likely to consider the kind of person they think they could be ($M = 6.0$, $SD = 1.7$) than the kind of person someone else could be ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 2.1$), $t(57) = 2.84$, $p < .01$, $d = .75$; more likely to consider the kind of person they think they will be in the future ($M = 6.5$, $SD = 1.3$) than the kind of person they think someone else will be ($M = 5.0$, $SD = 1.5$), $t(57) = 3.92$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.04$; and more likely to consider the kind of person they intend to be in the future ($M = 6.6$, $SD = 1.5$) than the kind of person someone else intends to be in the future ($M = 5.4$, $SD = 1.7$), $t(57) = 3.08$, $p < .01$, $d = .82$. Because we looked at participants' ratings of 11 types of information, it is necessary to correct for multiple comparisons. With a Bonferroni correction leading to a new significance standard of $p = .0045$, the pattern of significant results changed only slightly. The kind of person one *will be* and the kind of person one *intends to be* in the future remained statistically significant, but the kind of person one *could be* dropped to marginal significance, $p < .009$.

The pattern of results for the other eight items was quite different.³ Participants indicated that their friends are more indicative of who they are ($M = 6.7$, $SD = 1.6$) than someone else's friends are indicative of him or her

($M = 5.8$, $SD = 1.9$), $t(57) = 2.10$, $p < .05$, $d = .56$. After the Bonferroni correction, however, this difference was no longer significant. None of the other seven items yielded any differences between self and other either before or after the Bonferroni correction, all t s < 1.6 .

It appears that people are more likely to take information about the future into account when considering who they are than when considering who someone else is. Understanding oneself, in other words, is quite a different task than understanding someone else. A big part of self-understanding is an assessment of where one is headed, and so consideration of intentions, plans, and hopes loom relatively large. The understanding of others is more tied to where they have been and where they are, and so such future considerations command less attention and receive less weight.

The tendency to view the self, in part, as something off in the future suggests an interesting wrinkle on the self-enhancement bias. It has been documented repeatedly that people tend to endorse more flattering characterizations of themselves than of other people (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning, 2005). But if people are more likely to think of the self as an evolving construction and other people more as finished products, they should be willing to endorse at least one characterization of themselves that is, on the surface at least, not particularly flattering. That is, people may believe that they are further away than others are from being the person they want to be, regardless of how positively they otherwise view themselves in the present.

STUDIES 4A AND 4B: PROXIMITY TO THE POTENTIAL SELF

The only research of which we're aware that speaks to this issue is the work of Wilson and Ross (2001), who have shown that people often believe that they have changed more from what they were like in the distant past than others have. Ross and Wilson offer a motivational account of this result, claiming that people are inclined to denigrate what they were like in the past so that they can feel good about what they are like now in comparison. People feel no such need to make favorable temporal comparisons when it comes to others. Applied to thoughts about the future self, Wilson and Ross's findings can be used to make two diametrically opposed predictions. On one hand, the same need to feel good about what one is like now might lead people to think that they are closer than others to their full potential to avoid feeling bad about what they are like now. On the other hand, the tendency to see others as more static than oneself entails that others are necessarily seen as closer to their full potential.

Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), with its focus on comparisons among "actual," "ought," and "ideal" selves, might seem to offer some guidance on this issue, but the research it has inspired has not compared actual-ideal discrepancies one sees in oneself and those one sees in others. Research on self-discrepancy theory has examined how people take the expectations and desires other people have for them and incorporate them into their self-concepts (e.g., Moretti & Higgins, 1999a, 1999b). But the ideal or ought selves that people derive from others' expectations are not necessarily the same as the best possible self they themselves expect or aspire to be, and thus there would seem to be little that self-discrepancy theory can offer about whether people are inclined to see themselves as closer to, or further from, the future self they expect to realize than other people are from their future selves. We designed Studies 4a and 4b to investigate this question empirically.

We used two different procedures to examine the hypothesis that people see themselves as further from their best possible selves than they consider other people to be. One way to examine the difference between a current self and one's best possible self is simply by looking at the overlap between the two. We examined this overlap in Study 4a using a measure inspired by the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Participants indicated which set of overlapping circles indicated either how much their current self overlapped with the person they wanted to be, or how much someone else's current self overlapped with the person he or she wanted to be. A second way to examine the difference between a current self and a best possible self is to examine the perceived distance between the two. The self-help market has popularized the idea that positive self-change is a journey; for instance, entering the words "journey to self-improvement" into Google brings up more than 2 million pages. Accordingly, in Study 4b, we asked participants to consider the aphorism "life is a journey" and to indicate where they are—or another person is—on the journey toward becoming the best person they could be.

Study 4a Method

Participants. Eighty-six Cornell undergraduates (63 female, 23 male) volunteered to complete a brief survey at various locations around campus.

Procedure. Participants in the *self* condition read a brief paragraph explaining that life is a process of growth toward becoming the best person that one can be. They were then asked to think about the amount of overlap that existed between who they are now and their best possible self. They were presented with six

pairs of circles, one white and one gray, which varied incrementally in their degree of overlap, from complete separation to complete overlap. Participants were asked to view the white circle as a representation of who they are at the moment and the gray circle as a representation of their best possible self. They were then asked to indicate the pair of circles that best represented their belief about the overlap between the two. Participants in the *other* condition read the same information but were asked to consider everything in the context of a specific other person who, to them, best represents the typical Cornell student of their age and gender. After providing this person's initials, they were to indicate the pair of circles that represented their belief about the overlap between his or her current and best possible selves.

Study 4b Method

Participants. Fifty-one Cornell University undergraduates (30 female, 21 male) participated in exchange for extra credit in various psychology classes.

Procedure. Participants were given a questionnaire that began with the following paragraph:

The phrase "life is a journey" is a clichéd but useful way to describe the idea that life is a process of growth and development. We all have an obvious starting point, as well as a destination, the point at which we have become the best person we *can* be. Think about yourself. Where are you on this journey? How close do you think you are to being the best person you could ever be?

Located just below this paragraph was a 151-millimeter line, labeled with the two endpoints, "just starting out" and "at your destination." The questionnaire instructed participants in the *self* condition to make a slash mark on the line at the point at which they believed they fell. Participants in the *other* condition were instructed to do the same for the individual who best represented, to them, the typical Cornell student of their age and gender.

Results and Discussion

In Study 4a, the six pairs of circles were assigned numbers reflecting the degree of overlap between the "current self" circle and the "best self" circle, with 1 corresponding to the pair with no overlap and 6 corresponding to the pair with complete overlap. As predicted, participants tended to think that there is less overlap between their current and their ideal selves ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 1.0$) than there is for the typical Cornell student ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.8$), $t(84) = 2.46$, $p < .02$, $d = .54$.

Similarly, in Study 4b, participants tended to believe that they were not as far along the journey to the best

person they could be ($M = 47.5$ millimeters, $SD = 23.6$) than they thought the typical Cornell student was ($M = 74.4$ millimeters, $SD = 25.0$), $t(49) = 3.95$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.13$. Thus, on the journey toward self-actualization, people think they have further to go than the average person does to become the person they want to be.

One might wonder whether these results are simply an artifact of self-enhancement. That is, maybe people believe that they are currently farther than others are from who they expect to be because they foresee bigger and brighter futures for themselves than they do for others. This concern is called into question, however, by data we report elsewhere (Williams, Gilovich, & Dunning, 2007). In the pertinent study, participants were asked to think of a specific person who has "the same potential as you do...", someone whose "potential level of accomplishment and fulfillment in life is, overall, the same as yours." Once they had a specific person in mind, they were asked to indicate how close both they and the other person were to realizing that potential. We found, as we did here, that participants thought they were farther from the desired endpoint than the other person—even when the desired endpoint was held constant. Thus, the tendency for people to believe that they have made relatively modest progress toward fulfilling their potential is not an artifact of people believing that they have more potential than others (although they might very well believe that). However, it is possible for people to think that they are more likely than an equally gifted peer to realize whatever potential they have—in fact, that is a reasonable extrapolation from the results of Studies 1 through 3, such that future potential can be counted more for the self than for others because the self is seen to be more likely to attain that potential. And the insistence that other people exhibit more evidence that they can attain their potential in order to be seen as having it, reflected in Studies 4a and 4b as well as Williams et al. (2007), constitutes a logical extension of our findings, not an artifactual explanation of them.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across four studies, we found that people factor in future states more when sizing up themselves than when sizing up other people. In Studies 1a and 1b, the future was seen as a bigger component of the self than of other people, both with respect to academic ability and the self as a whole. Study 2 demonstrated that the increased weight assigned to the future results in a self that is viewed as currently less knowable than other people. Study 3 found that the information deemed necessary to understand a person is different for the self than it is for

others. Knowing who one is striving to become is considered more important in understanding the self than it is in understanding others. Finally, the results of Studies 4a and 4b indicate that in part because future selves loom larger in self-assessment than in the assessment of others, people believe that they are further from their ideal selves than others are.

This is not to say, of course, that people do not consider the future when assessing others. Indeed, the capacity to recognize that other people have their own plans about the future and to predict with some accuracy what they intend to do is vital to successful social interaction (e.g., Jones & Davis, 1965). We contend, however, that the relative weight assigned to future intentions and past behavior is quite different when thinking about the self than when thinking about others. One's own intentions are much more psychologically prominent than someone else's and thus figure more prominently in predicting our own future behavior, and in our self-conceptions more broadly, than they do when trying to predict or understand others. Indeed, understanding ourselves is largely an effort to understand where we are headed; understanding others is more of an effort to understand where they are.

The results of the four studies reported here support this contention, as does prior work showing that people assign more weight to intentions in self-assessments than in the assessments of others (e.g., Kruger & Gilovich, 2004). Further support for this idea comes from research on people's predictions about their own and others' behavior (Buehler et al., 1994; Epley & Dunning, 2000). This work shows that people are more likely to use information about past behavior—either that of the individual in question or general base rates—when making predictions about others than when making predictions about themselves and that their predictions about their own behavior tend to be heavily influenced by how they intend, or merely hope, to behave.

This idea also fits with a parallel finding from our lab—that is, that people see their best performances as truer reflections of where they stand on specific ability or trait dimensions than is the case when thinking about the abilities or traits of others (Williams & Gilovich, 2007). Students, for example, tend to think that their highest course grades best capture who they are as students but that another person's average grade is the truest reflection of the kind of student that person is. And when asked to choose a photo from a group of 12 that best captures what one really look likes, the modal participant chose the best-looking photograph for themselves but a photo closer to one of average attractiveness for someone else. These findings fit with the present analysis in the sense that if what people are striving for constitutes who they are, then their best

performances will be taken as the best representations of their true selves. In contrast, if others are seen as more of a point in space than a vector, then their average performances will be taken as most telling of their true standing.

Boundary Conditions

There may be some predictable variation in the extent to which people weigh the future more heavily in sizing up themselves than in sizing up others. Time itself may be one source of such variation. That is, it would be entirely reasonable if people's identities were weighted toward their future selves in direct proportion to how much of a future they believe they have. Indeed, research suggests that the elderly are more inclined to anticipate stability or even decline from the present to the future and to see their actual and ideal selves as less discrepant than do young and middle-aged adults (Ryff, 1991). Those in the later stages of life, in other words, might not exhibit the effects documented here or might even show a reversal of the tendency to see the future as more reflective of who they are than who others are. In addition, elderly individuals who view their own futures as consisting of little other than decline may not see them as consistent with their intentions and desires and thus may think of their past or present selves as more of a reflection of who they are—and the future as a more essential element of someone else, particularly those who belong to younger generations.

Also, the extent to which other people's hopes, aspirations, and intentions are factored into our sense of who they are is likely to vary in direct proportion to how well we know them and how closely connected we feel to them. The closer the relationship to another, the blurrier the line between the self and other (Aron & Aron, 2001), and the more our conceptions of them are likely to be based on the same types of information we use in understanding ourselves. This idea should be familiar to all parents, whose job it is to keep the future in mind at nearly all times and to try to nurture a child's potential. A parent's hopes and dreams for a child are often as optimistic as those they have for themselves (e.g., Bird, 1988; Galper, Wigfield, & Seefeldt, 1997) and can be every bit as salient as who the child is right now.

Implications

The tendency to view the self as a work in progress and others as more fixed and unchangeable may unwittingly lead people to advocate rules and policies for others that differ from what they would set for themselves. The way one would set up a welfare program, for example, is likely to be quite a bit different depending

on whether the decision maker believes that people can work themselves out of poverty (like they themselves could) or that welfare is simply a means of managing poverty, not a stepping stone to financial improvement. Getting politicians and policy makers to see how policies would affect people like themselves, in other words, may promote the adoption of policies that recognize people's capacity for change and encourage individuals to achieve their full potential. Some activist groups seem to recognize this, occasionally challenging state and national leaders to, for example, live for a week on the amount of money one would earn on welfare or eat for a week on the amount of money provided by food stamps.

The tendency to see the self as located to a substantial degree in the future can also contribute to the maintenance of bad habits. That is, given that people believe they are more likely to change and improve than others are, they may allow themselves to start smoking or eat too much in the present because they'll be able to make the necessary corrections later on. Beyond any tendency to believe that one has more will power, more resilience, or even more good luck than others do, the greater prominence of one's own future possibilities can lead to the conviction that the struggle for self-improvement will be less of a struggle for oneself than for others. The experiences of others—their failures to stop smoking or lose weight—provide visible evidence that change can be difficult. But others' failures, reflective of their fixed or static selves, are often dismissed as irrelevant to one's own chances of reform, chances that are better reflected in one's desires and intentions (Koehler & Poon, 2006; Kruger & Gilovich, 2004) and in the conviction that one's identity is based in part on a future self that is different from the present.

More generally, seeing the future as a substantial component of the self may contribute to the tendency for people to grant themselves more license for questionable behavior than they would grant others. Such licensing effects typically occur when people, having performed (or committed themselves to perform) a virtuous behavior, grant themselves permission to engage in other actions that are less virtuous (Khan & Dhar, 2006, 2007). Thus, if people have confidence that they will change for the better, they might allow themselves to give into vice in the present by mentally offsetting it with virtue in the future. That is, people may draw on their intentions to behave well in the future as a form of moral credential (Monin & Miller, 2001), allowing them to engage in less virtuous behavior in the moment—behavior they would not countenance or morally offset in someone else.

Although some of the implications of seeing the future as a bigger component of the self than of others—like those we have laid out—may be negative, the

phenomenon itself is surely a positive and productive one on balance. That is, it is hard to imagine how a person could have hopes, dreams, intentions, and plans without those future-oriented representations affecting his or her sense of self. And such thoughts about the future—near or distant, happy or sad, realistic or pure fantasy—are not only important parts of what makes us the species that we are but are also important components of what make us the successful species that we are.

NOTES

1. We report only descriptive statistics here because as we noted, the results are not consistent across the two domains of academic ability and overall identity. And more importantly, given that participants' assignments to past, present, and future had to sum to 100%, any significance tests on these data would not be independent of those reported for participants' apportionments to the future, which is the critical dependent measure.

2. One participant's response was more than 3 standard deviations beyond the mean of the remaining data and therefore was excluded from the analysis.

3. We wrote the item "the kind of person you would like to be," thinking that it would elicit more thoughts of the "wouldn't-it-be-great" sort that are closer to fantasies than true thoughts about the future. However, it can, of course, be considered something of a future-oriented item. Participants did state that it should be considered more heavily in thinking about who they themselves are ($M = 6.3, SD = 1.9$) than who someone else is ($M = 5.8, SD = 1.8$), although this difference was not statistically significant, $t < 1$. When this item is averaged with the three unambiguously future-oriented items, the overall composite is highly significant, $t(57) = 3.82, p < .001, d = 1.01$.

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