

## The “Better Than Myself Effect”

Mark D. Alicke,<sup>1,2</sup> Debbie S. Vredenburg,<sup>1</sup> Matthew Hiatt,<sup>1</sup>  
and Olesya Govorun<sup>1</sup>

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*Participants in three studies were asked to estimate the percentage of times they exhibited polar ends of a trait dimension (e.g., behaved cooperatively or uncooperatively) when the opportunity to display that trait arose, and then to evaluate their standing on the trait based on their behavioral estimates. Approximately 6 weeks later, participants were provided with behavior estimates that purportedly represented the average estimates of their peers and asked to evaluate the average person’s standing on the trait dimension. The “better than myself effect” is reflected in the finding that people consistently evaluate themselves more favorably than others, even when the behavioral estimates on which they base their ratings of the average person are the identical estimates they provided for themselves. Study 1 demonstrated the basic “better than myself effect,” and Study 2 showed that participants did not alter their behavior estimates when they learned that the average person’s estimates were the same as their own. Study 3 demonstrated the “better than myself” effect in comparisons with a randomly selected peer rather than the average peer. A fourth study, using a different methodology, showed that people who wrote behavior descriptions to represent their standing on a trait dimension, and then read similar trait descriptions from a randomly selected peer, also continued to evaluate themselves more favorably than others, despite basing these evaluations on behavior descriptions that were presumably no more favorable than those provided by others.*

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“Who am I” is a core question in religion, philosophy, and the psychology of the self. Unsurprisingly, social and personality psychologists approach this issue differently from theologians and arm-chair metaphysicians. Instead of tackling the ultimate questions of human existence, we occupy ourselves with the more

<sup>1</sup>Ohio University, Athens, Ohio.

<sup>2</sup>Address all correspondence to Dr Mark D. Alicke, Department of Psychology, Porter Hall, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, 45701; e-mail: alicke@ohiou.edu.

tractable problem of self-knowledge. Put another way, instead of explaining who we are, self-theorists try to explain who we think we are. From this vantage, the fundamental task for the psychology of the self is to identify the components of self-knowledge and to trace the process by which they cohere into a self-concept.

Self-knowledge comprises episodic information about specific behavioral experiences and semantic information representing abstractions from those experiences (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984). The semantic information that has most captured social and personality psychologists' attention is trait knowledge. Traits represent consistent behavior patterns. A person who succeeds on most intellectual tasks is "intelligent"; one who consistently excels on athletic tasks is "athletic"; and so on. Traits are important elements of self-knowledge because they specify characteristic modes of behavior, thought, and feeling. As such, psychologists have viewed traits as the building blocks of the self-concept.

Prominent self-theories assume that people define their traits by monitoring their behaviors and comparing their behavioral outcomes to those of relevant comparison targets. The central tenet of Bem's self-perception theory (1967, 1972), for example, is that when trait knowledge (or knowledge of other internal states such as attitudes or emotions) is ambiguous, people use their overt behavior as an interpretive guide. People who want to know whether they are introverted, for example, recruit instances of prior relevant behavior or monitor future behavior. In a similar spirit, Buss and Craik's act-frequency approach (Buss & Craik, 1983) to personality assumes that people define themselves according to the frequency with which they perform trait-relevant behaviors. Finally, virtually all social comparison theories (for current reviews, see Suls & Wheeler, *in press*) assume that self-knowledge derives from the outcomes of specific comparisons. For example, people who express more politically conservative opinions than those they compare with presumably use this information to define themselves as politically conservative.

The assumption that people think about their behaviors or behavioral outcomes when assessing their characteristics also underlies theories of self-serving biases such as the "better than average" effect. The better than average effect reflects the tendency for people to evaluate themselves more favorably than an average peer on most behaviors and characteristics (Alicke, 1985; Alicke, Koltz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Klar & Giladi, 1997). One explanation for this effect is that when asked to compare themselves to an average peer, people selectively recruit behaviors that ensure the favorableness of the comparison. For example, when asked to compare their athleticism to that of the average peer, people may think of their most athletic performances and base the comparison on these data (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986; Weinstein, 1980). Similarly, when asked to assess the probability that they versus the average person will get divorced, be fired from a job, or contract a serious disease, people may think of facets of their behavior that reduce their chances of experiencing such misfortune.

Klein and Loftus refer to the assumption that people assess their traits by accessing specific behaviors as the behavioral exemplar view. They contrast this position to a trait abstraction view claiming that traits can be diagnosed by directly accessing abstract trait concepts stored in memory (Klein & Loftus, 1993). The trait abstraction view assumes that people possess general trait concepts, and when asked to judge a trait such as intelligence, they first search their memories for an abstract concept of intelligence. According to the trait abstraction view, individual behavioral episodes are reviewed only when preexisting trait concepts are absent or unavailable. The research program of Klein, Loftus, and their colleagues (e.g., Klein, Loftus, & Burton, 1989; Klein, Loftus, Trafton, & Furnham, 1992; Klein, Loftus, & Sherman, 1993) strongly supports the trait abstraction (what they call the “dual exemplar”) view over the behavioral exemplar position. Their research consistently shows that participants require the same amount of time to recall an instance in which they displayed a trait regardless of whether they first judge whether the trait is self-descriptive or simply define the trait. If people accessed specific behaviors to answer trait questions, then judging whether a trait was self-descriptive would facilitate recalling an instance in which the trait was displayed. Based on numerous failures to find such facilitation effects, Klein and Loftus argue that trait and behavioral information are stored in separate memory systems.

Klein and Loftus’s findings that people do not typically access behaviors to assess traits questions the validity of the assumption that people routinely think about behaviors when making such judgments. This assumption is also brought into question by the finding that the better than average effect is unaltered by cognitive load manipulations that make it extremely difficult for participants to recruit specific behaviors when making comparative trait judgments (Alicke et al., 1995, Study 7). Furthermore, the better than average effect has been obtained in circumstances in which participants make 365 trait comparisons in a relatively short time period (Alicke, 1985), and it seems implausible to assume that they recruited specific behaviors for each comparison. Finally, Klar and Giladi (1997) have shown that any member of a positively evaluated group is evaluated more favorably than the average member, suggesting that at least part of the better than average effect can be explained in terms of general, heuristic judgment strategies that do not involve imagining behavioral exemplars.

The ability to isolate traits from their behavioral components permits people considerable latitude to concoct favorable self-images. In other words, if traits are relatively autonomous, people can maintain favorable trait perceptions with relatively little concern for behavioral contradiction. Most self-theories assume that people essay to maintain the most favorable self-concepts possible within the bounds of believability (e.g., Greenwald, 1980; James, 1890; Schlenker, 1980, 1982; Tesser, 1988). Thus, a person who wishes to view herself as popular can discount contradictory behavioral data as long as the distortion is not egregious. The tendency to view one’s traits more favorably than reality warrants potentially

accrues benefits such as avoiding negative moods or depression (Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994).

We sought, in the four studies reported here under, to provide further support for the assumption that trait assessments are, at least to some extent, independent of objective behavioral data. Because our argument is a negative one (i.e., we are suggesting what people *don't* do when they define their traits), our claims are modest: We simply hope to provide data suggesting that there is more to the way people think about their traits than a direct behavior-to-trait link would imply. We are not, therefore, seeking to supplant a particular theory but rather to suggest that theories of the trait–behavior relationship be expanded to include the possibility of nonbehavioral components.

The first three studies explored the independence of trait assessments from behavioral data in the context of the better than average effect. In each study, participants estimated in a pretesting session the percentage of time their behaviors represented polar ends of a trait dimension. For example, participants were asked to estimate the percentage of time they were tolerant or intolerant when the opportunity to display this trait arose. After making percentage estimates, participants rated themselves on the corresponding trait dimension. Later in the academic quarter, participants were shown the percentage estimates purportedly provided by the average college student or a randomly selected peer. After reading each percentage estimate, participants were asked to evaluate the person or the average peer on each trait dimension. For example, after learning that the peer was cooperative 83% of the time and uncooperative 17% of the time, participants were asked to rate the peer's cooperativeness on a 21-point scale, based on the percentage estimates. What participants didn't know, however, was that the estimates provided by this "peer" were actually the identical estimates they had provided in the pretesting phase. In other words, if a participant during the pretesting phase reported being tolerant 80% of the time and intolerant 20% of the time, the participant received the same percentage estimates from the hypothetical peer. Thus, comparisons between self-ratings and ratings of the hypothetical other really represented comparisons with oneself. This methodology provides the opportunity to assess whether trait ratings differ when behavioral estimates are equated. The "better than myself" effect occurs when people's self-ratings on trait dimensions are more positive than their ratings of a hypothetical peer who, in terms of behavioral estimates, is actually themselves.

We also conducted a fourth experiment to demonstrate conceptually similar results using a different methodology. In this study, participants were asked to list all the behaviors they could think of, positive and negative, that defined their standing on a specific trait dimension (e.g., honest–dishonest). After rating themselves on the trait dimension, participants read the behavior listings of a randomly selected peer and rated that person on the same dimension. Assuming no differences in the favorableness of the behaviors listed by randomly selected pairs of students, the finding that people continue to evaluate themselves more favorably

than their peers based on behaviors of equivalent valence provides another way of suggesting that trait and behavior assessments are at least partially independent.

## STUDY 1

### Method

#### *Participants*

One hundred and fifty-one introductory psychology students (66 male and 85 female) received extra course credit for participating in Study 1.

#### *Phase 1: Pretesting Session*

The pretesting session was conducted in large groups. The experimenter began by reading the following instructions:

One of the fundamental concepts in psychology is the concept of a trait. Traits represent consistent patterns of behaviors, beliefs, or emotions. For example, a person who consistently behaves with hostility in many different situations would be characterized by the trait of hostility. Similarly, a person who likes gourmet food, is able to discriminate among fine wines, and who appreciates many types of music and art might be called cultured.

We are interested in your perceptions of your traits. We want to know, for example, the percentage of times you think you behave cooperatively or uncooperatively when the opportunity to display this trait arises. For example, suppose you had 100 opportunities to behave cooperatively or uncooperatively; if you think you are the most cooperative person in the world you might say you behaved cooperatively 99% of the time and uncooperatively 1% of the time. In all, we will ask you to make such percentage estimates on 26 trait dimensions. We would like you to make your responses in the following manner:

Of all the occasions on which you have the opportunity to be cooperative or uncooperative, what percentage of the time do you think you are cooperative and what percentage of time do you think you are uncooperative?

\_\_\_\_\_ % cooperative

\_\_\_\_\_ % uncooperative

Please be sure that your percentage estimates total to 100%.

After making each estimate, participants were asked to use their percentage estimates to rate themselves on the corresponding trait dimension. Ratings were made on 21-point scales (e.g., I AM: 1 – *extremely uncooperative*, 21 – *extremely cooperative*). All scales were oriented so that higher numbers represented the favorable end of the trait dimension.

### *Phase 2: Experimental Session*

During the last 2 weeks of the academic quarter, participants returned for the final part of the experiment. At this session, participants were told that we had been collecting data from their peers throughout the quarter, and that we were going to provide them with the average percentage estimates given by students for each of the 26 trait dimensions they had responded to earlier in the quarter. Actually, each participant received the exact estimates he or she had previously provided. Thus, if a student estimated during pretesting that she was cooperative 80% of the time and uncooperative 20% of the time, she was given these exact estimates for the average college student. Estimates were typewritten in the appropriate spaces. No students expressed suspicion about receiving the same estimates they had previously provided.

After reading each percentage estimate, participants rated themselves in comparison to the average college student using a 21-point scale (e.g., 1 – *much less cooperative than the average college student*, 21 – *much more cooperative than the average college student*).

## **Results and Discussion**

Positive differences from the midpoint of the scale indicate the degree to which participants rated themselves more favorably than the average college student. Two-tailed *t*-tests (testing the difference from zero) were calculated for each of the 26 trait dimensions in this and in subsequent studies. Table I displays the average difference from the midpoint for each trait dimension, along with *t* values and *p* values.

Table I shows that the “better than myself” effect was pervasive in these data, occurring at conventional significance levels on all but 3 of the 26 trait dimensions. Sign-tests looking at the frequency of differences from the midpoint were also significant on 23 out of 26 dimensions (each at  $p < .0001$ ). These data show that the tendency to evaluate oneself more favorably than the average college student is not eradicated when behavioral estimates are equated for each trait dimension. This finding casts further doubt on the assumption that self-serving tendencies such as the better than average effect occur because people consider a biased sample of behaviors in making trait comparisons.

One possible explanation for the results of Study 1 is that participants mentally adjusted their behavior estimates after receiving (ostensibly) normative data. That is, after seeing what they believed were the average estimates of their peers, participants may have believed that they were unduly modest or that others exaggerated their positive behaviors. As a result, participants may have mentally adjusted their own percentages, thereby justifying or validating their elevated trait evaluations. Evidence of behavioral adjustment has been obtained by

**Table I.** Mean Difference From Scale Midpoint of Self-Ratings Versus Average College Student Ratings (Study 1)

Trait	Difference from midpoint	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Cooperative	4.25	16.82	.001
Aggressive	0.46	1.15	.252
Honest	4.68	18.46	.001
Sophisticated	3.10	11.61	.001
Intelligent	3.75	14.98	.001
Socially sensitive	3.17	8.92	.001
Athletic	2.61	6.24	.001
Ambitious	3.59	12.38	.001
Artistic	0.70	1.68	.096
Uncomplaining	2.28	7.61	.001
Contented	2.93	9.06	.001
Unwasteful	2.83	8.64	.001
Independent	4.46	14.69	.001
Forgiving	3.93	10.63	.001
Unjealous	2.10	5.54	.001
Unmaterialistic	2.09	6.11	.001
Musical	0.60	1.37	.174
Cultured	2.62	7.36	.001
Uninhibited	1.89	5.83	.001
Imaginative	3.46	11.73	.001
Tolerant	3.98	10.87	.001
Untraditional	1.30	3.50	.001
Cautious	2.91	8.51	.001
Unsuspecting	1.40	3.98	.001
Polite	5.76	19.28	.001
Trustworthy	5.85	20.21	.001

*Note.* A value of zero would indicate no difference between self and average college student ratings. Positive numbers indicate that self is rated more favorably than the average college student. All tests are two-tailed.

Klein (1996) and Klein and Kunda (1993) in research on health-threatening behaviors. Participants in some of the conditions of these studies were shown false norms suggesting that their peers engaged in fewer health-threatening behaviors than themselves. Participants who received these data subsequently lowered their own frequency estimates relative to those who had not been shown the false norms.

Klein’s research involves revisions in specific health-related behaviors such as eating fatty foods and exercising rather than alterations in trait-related behaviors. Nevertheless, if participants did alter their behavior frequency estimates after viewing peer judgments, this would undermine the claim that traits are relatively independent of behavioral estimations. To assess this possibility, we gave participants in Study 2 the opportunity to provide new behavior estimates after receiving the ostensible normative data (actually their own prior behavior estimates). According to the view that trait assessments are relatively autonomous of behavior estimates, participants should have no need to adjust their behavior estimations

upward. We predicted, therefore, that the better than myself effect would occur without corresponding adjustments in behavior estimations.

## STUDY 2

### Method

#### *Participants*

Participants in the second study were 91 (23 male and 68 female) introductory psychology students who received extra course credit for their participation.

#### *Procedure*

The main procedural difference between the first and second studies was that participants in Study 2 made percentage estimates in both phases of the experiment. As before, participants estimated the frequency with which they performed various behaviors in the initial pretesting session and then rated themselves on each trait dimension. During the experimental phase, which was held at the end of the academic quarter, participants were again provided with the percentage estimates of the “average peer” (actually their own) and were asked to make trait ratings of themselves in comparison to the average peer. In Study 2, self and average college student ratings were made on separate 21-point scales rather than on a single scale. Participants were also asked to provide percentage estimates of their own trait-relevant behaviors as they had in the pretesting session. Thus, participants in Study 2 could modify their behavior estimates with respect to what they believed were the average estimates. Half the participants made percentage estimates before trait ratings and half made trait ratings first.

## Results and Discussion

Table II displays mean differences for trait ratings of oneself versus the average college student. Positive values indicate the degree to which self was rated better than average by subtracting average college student ratings from self-ratings. As Table II shows, these results closely paralleled the findings of the first study in that the better than myself effect was obtained (at  $p < .05$ ) on 21 of the 26 trait dimensions. In addition, sign tests on the frequency with which behavior estimates were above the midpoint were significant for 19 of the 26 dimensions.

Changes in behavior estimates between the pretesting and experimental sessions were also assessed for each of the 26 trait dimensions. Positive values indicate a change in the direction of higher percentage estimates. As Table II shows, there was relatively little evidence that participants altered their estimates of the

**Table II.** Mean Difference From Scale Midpoint of Self-Ratings Versus Average College Student Ratings and Mean Difference in Behavior Estimates (Study 2)

Trait	Mean trait difference	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean behavior estimate difference	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Cooperative	4.00	12.43	.001	2.04	1.67	.099
Aggressive	0.07	0.14	.445	-1.13	-0.52	.603
Honest	4.06	10.74	.001	1.63	1.72	.089
Sophisticated	2.20	5.88	.001	1.55	0.81	.418
Intelligent	3.01	9.84	.001	1.00	0.72	.472
Socially sensitive	3.66	8.10	.001	-2.23	-1.11	.269
Athletic	1.63	3.05	.002	1.00	0.58	.562
Ambitious	2.29	5.30	.001	1.80	1.03	.305
Artistic	1.17	2.18	.016	-0.67	-0.36	.720
Uncomplaining	0.68	1.59	.058	2.13	1.01	.316
Contented	1.88	4.71	.001	-1.20	-0.59	.560
Unwasteful	1.31	3.23	.001	-0.03	-0.01	.988
Independent	3.61	9.06	.001	3.91	2.40	.019
Forgiving	3.74	8.78	.001	2.38	1.64	.104
Unjealous	1.14	2.58	.006	4.07	1.84	.069
Unmaterialistic	2.03	4.85	.001	2.65	1.30	.197
Musical	1.04	1.90	.030	1.96	0.92	.359
Cultured	2.07	5.27	.001	1.12	0.55	.583
Uninhibited	1.40	3.94	.001	-0.27	-0.14	.892
Imaginative	3.05	7.59	.001	0.31	0.21	.835
Tolerant	2.76	7.17	.001	0.64	0.41	.681
Untraditional	0.86	1.77	0.40	-4.76	-1.96	.053
Cautious	1.34	2.98	.002	5.59	2.51	.014
Unsuspecting	0.28	0.59	.278	3.51	1.28	.205
Polite	4.58	11.86	.001	2.63	1.98	.051
Trustworthy	5.41	16.15	.001	2.67	2.26	.026

percentage of times they engaged in trait-related behaviors as a result of seeing what they believed were average estimates (actually their own). Only 5 of the 26 comparisons attained traditional significant levels ( $p < .05$ ), and one comparison showed a significantly decreased behavior estimate. The general failure to increase one's behavior estimates was confirmed by a MANOVA, which showed no overall tendency for participants to alter their behavior estimates on the 26 trait dimensions,  $F(1, 52) = 1.15, ns$ . In addition to replicating the “better than myself” effect, therefore, the results of Study 2 cast further doubt on the assumption that behavior estimates are an integral component of self–other trait comparisons.

### STUDY 3

The tendency to view oneself more favorably than the average person is a staple finding in social psychology. The better than average effect has been obtained on trait ratings (Alicke, 1985; Alicke et al., 1995; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989) and behavior ratings (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989), on items related

to depression (Tabachnik, Crocker, & Alloy, 1983), and on perceptions of risk for misfortune (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986; Weinstein, 1980). Previous research has demonstrated that the better than average effect is strongest when comparisons are ambiguous. Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg (1989), for example, demonstrated that the effect is larger when people provide their own idiosyncratic definitions of trait dimensions than when the dimensions are defined by the experimenter. Furthermore, Alicke et al. (1995) showed that people are less biased in comparing themselves to a real, concrete individual, even one they have never interacted with and have no specific information about, than with the average peer.

It is possible, therefore, that the better than myself effect is limited to comparisons with an average peer, and that people would be more likely to use behavioral information when comparing themselves to a real, concrete individual. The purpose of Study 3, therefore, was to assess whether the better than myself effect emerges when people compare themselves with a real person rather than the average peer.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Ninety-three introductory psychology students, 24 male and 69 female, participated in Study 3.

### *Procedure*

Study 3 incorporated 34 instead of 26 trait dimensions. Otherwise, the procedure for Study 3 was the same as for the first study with one major exception, namely, that half the participants in the second phase of the experiment were purportedly shown the percentage estimates of a randomly selected peer from another class. The remaining participants received what they thought were the average percentage estimates. Thus, half the participants compared themselves to a randomly selected peer whereas the other half compared themselves to the average college student. As before, however, the behavior estimates participants received in Phase 2 were the identical estimates they had provided in Phase 1. Trait ratings of self, the peer, or the average student were made on separate 21-point scales.

## **Results and Discussion**

Table III displays the means for trait ratings of oneself, the randomly selected peer, and the average college student. As in the first two studies, comparisons

**Table III.** Mean Ratings of Self, Average College Student, and Specific Other Student (Study 3)

Trait	<i>M</i>			Self vs. Average		Self vs. Other	
	Self	Average	Other	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Cooperative	16.63	13.97	16.21	10.03	.001	1.25	.214
Aggressive	11.29	13.15	10.59	-4.63	.001	1.71	.091
Imaginative	15.25	14.29	14.91	2.80	.006	1.65	.103
Honest	17.89	13.77	17.62	16.46	.001	1.19	.238
Kind	17.91	14.88	17.83	12.06	.001	0.52	.607
Sophisticated	14.53	12.98	14.24	5.21	.001	1.30	.198
Dependable	17.97	14.29	17.81	14.80	.001	0.62	.536
Polite	17.52	14.28	17.34	11.56	.001	0.94	.350
Trustworthy	18.33	14.12	18.29	15.46	.001	0.30	.765
Intelligent	16.68	15.03	17.02	5.58	.001	1.67	.099
Athletic	14.83	14.30	14.07	1.06	.292	2.77	.007
Sincere	16.97	13.79	17.13	9.70	.001	0.66	.510
Happy	15.69	15.04	15.79	1.94	.055	0.53	.599
Generous	16.26	13.56	16.01	9.58	.001	1.31	.192
Ethical	16.30	13.39	16.04	8.99	.001	1.22	.226
Tolerant	16.13	13.95	15.84	6.75	.001	1.55	.125
Talkative	15.57	15.28	15.45	0.77	.443	0.72	.476
Ambitious	14.94	12.79	14.36	5.70	.001	2.51	.014
Artistic	13.07	12.41	11.81	1.54	.126	4.99	.001
Untraditional	13.94	12.15	13.47	4.17	.001	2.51	.015
Cautious	14.75	11.51	14.38	7.17	.001	1.97	.052
Friendly	17.26	15.16	17.27	6.04	.001	0.06	.951
Uncomplaining	13.27	11.75	11.37	4.75	.001	3.37	.001
Contented	14.52	13.62	14.14	2.61	.011	1.68	.096
Unwasteful	14.51	12.30	13.65	5.44	.001	2.79	.006
Independent	16.54	15.69	14.59	2.82	.006	3.64	.001
Forgiving	16.60	14.60	16.15	7.06	.001	1.79	.077
Unjealous	14.17	12.80	13.79	3.71	.001	1.17	.245
Unmaterialistic	13.88	11.30	12.42	5.79	.001	3.67	.001
Uninhibited	12.65	11.63	12.03	2.59	.011	2.43	.017
Reliable	17.62	14.04	17.71	13.17	.001	0.36	.722
Unsuspecting	13.77	13.22	13.27	1.51	.134	1.44	.152
Musical	12.44	12.42	11.62	0.04	.966	2.11	.038
Cultured	14.32	12.88	13.82	3.57	.001	1.69	.094

between oneself and the average college student revealed a pervasive better than myself effect, emerging at a conventional significance level for 29 of the 34 trait dimensions.

A MANOVA including all 34 response dimensions also demonstrated a consistent better than myself effect in comparisons with a randomly selected peer,  $F(1, 59) = 3.22$ ,  $p < .0001$ . As the values for the univariate comparisons in Table III show, however, these differences were far weaker than for the average student comparisons, occurring at traditional significance levels on 11 of the comparisons. As demonstrated previously by Alicke et al. (1995), therefore, comparisons with real individuals result in considerably less bias than comparisons with abstract standards such as the average college student. Nevertheless, although the

better than myself effect was diminished in comparisons with real people, it still emerged reliably in these comparisons.

## STUDY 4

The first three studies show that people evaluate their traits more favorably than those of others even when the behavior frequencies on which the trait evaluations are presumably based are equated. Study 4 was designed to circumvent two possible limitations of the better than myself paradigm. One potential limitation derives from the self-report nature of this methodology. Because participants supply their own frequency estimates, they may believe their estimates are more accurate than those of others. If so, one might argue that people use behavior frequencies to assess their traits but make mental adjustments for their presumably more accurate estimations. This explanation assumes a considerable amount of complex comparative reasoning, but is at least a possible alternative. Another potential limitation of the better than myself paradigm is that even if people grant the equivalence of behavior frequencies, they may believe their own favorable behaviors are more meritorious than those of others. For example, people may believe their kind behaviors outshine others' similar acts.

So although the better than myself effect provides one source of evidence for the independence of behavioral and trait analysis, it would be desirable to demonstrate the same point with a different methodology. To this end, participants in Study 4 were asked to list all the behaviors they could think of that were relevant to their standing on trait dimensions such as kind–unkind. After listing their trait-relevant behaviors, participants rated their standing on that trait. Participants were then told that they would receive a similar questionnaire filled out by a randomly selected peer in an adjoining room. After reading that person's self-reported, trait-related behaviors, participants evaluated that person on the same trait dimension. Assuming there is no difference in the favorableness of behaviors reported by randomly paired participants, higher ratings for self would provide another way of demonstrating the independence of trait assessments from behavioral exemplars.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants were 120 introductory psychology students whose participation partially fulfilled a course requirement. Upon arriving for the experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of four classrooms. Participants in two classrooms received questionnaire packets that asked them to list all behaviors they could think of that were relevant to their standing on the trait dimensions

kind–unkind and intelligent–unintelligent, whereas participants in the other two classrooms listed behaviors relevant to the dimensions honest–dishonest and creative–uncreative. Sixty-two participants were in the first two classrooms (responding to kind–unkind and intelligent–unintelligent) and 58 were in the latter two (responding to honest–dishonest and creative–uncreative).

Participants were instructed to take as much time as required to list all the behaviors they could think of that were relevant to their standing on the trait dimensions. Participants were encouraged to list all the behaviors that came to mind, including negative and positive instances of the trait dimension. Each trait dimension was listed on a single page, with room on the front and back for behavior descriptions. The following page repeated the trait dimension along with a 10-point scale ranging from 1 to 10. Participants were informed that everyone would finish at different times and that the experimenter would provide further instructions when everyone had completed listing their behaviors.

Once everyone had finished, the experimenter announced that they would be exchanging their behavior descriptions with a randomly selected person in an adjoining room, but that neither their, nor the other person’s, trait ratings would be exchanged. Each participant then received a peer’s behavior listings. Because there were an equal number of participants in each classroom, it was possible to pair all participants with a peer. Participants were instructed to read all the behavior descriptions carefully. When they were finished reading the behavior descriptions, they were given another questionnaire containing the trait rating.

### Results and Discussion

Means, *t*-test, and significance values for ratings of self and other on each of the four trait dimensions are provided in Table IV. Correlated *t*-tests conducted on each of the four trait dimensions showed that despite priming behavioral exemplars specific to trait-related dimensions, the tendency to view oneself more favorably than others emerged on three of the four trait dimensions. The only dimension on which this tendency did not emerge (i.e., creative–uncreative) is a relatively objective dimension on which self-serving trait attributions are typically minimized (Alicke et. al, 1995). Assuming that randomly paired participants did not differ in

**Table IV.** Mean Rating of Self and Other (Study 4)

Trait	<i>M</i>		Self vs. Other	
	Self	Other	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Kind–Unkind	7.85	7.21	2.87	.006
Intelligent–Unintelligent	7.90	6.98	3.57	.001
Honest–Dishonest	8.12	7.05	4.07	.001
Creative–Uncreative	6.83	6.64	0.61	.541

the favorableness of their behavior descriptions, these findings show that people continue to view themselves more favorably than others even when the behavioral descriptions these traits are based on are equated for favorableness.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The four studies in this paper add to a growing set of findings that question whether trait assessments are depicted accurately as summaries of trait-relevant behaviors. In the first three studies, participants compared their traits with those of the average college student or a randomly selected peer. By asking participants to evaluate their traits in terms of the percentage of times they exhibited specific behaviors, and then to evaluate the average peer's (or another person's) traits in terms of those exact same percentages, we were able to examine differences in trait judgments while equating behavior estimates. The better than myself effect is reflected in the finding that people consistently evaluate themselves more favorably than others even when the behavior estimates upon which they base their ratings of another person (or the average person) are the identical estimates they provided for themselves.

Study 1 showed that participants evaluated themselves more favorably than the average college student based on estimates of average performance that were identical to the ones they had previously provided. In Study 2, participants were given the opportunity to revise their behavior estimates after seeing the average performance of others. Although participants in Study 2 again demonstrated a very pervasive better than myself effect, they did so without consistently altering their behavior estimates. This finding eliminates the possibility that participants mentally altered their behavior estimates after seeing what they believed were the average estimates of others. Instead, participants generally adhered to their original estimates while continuing to elevate their trait ratings.

Previous research has shown that people are much less egocentric when comparing themselves to a real person, even one they have not interacted with and have no specific information about, than when comparing to an average peer (Alicke et al., 1995). Accordingly, the results of Study 3 showed that the better than myself effect was diminished when people compared themselves with randomly selected peers, but was nevertheless significant across the 34 trait comparisons. Thus, the better than myself effect is not limited to abstract comparisons with the average student.

The fourth study circumvented possible limitations of the better than myself paradigm. In this experiment, participants first listed all the behaviors they could think of that were relevant to their standing on one of four trait dimensions and then evaluated themselves on that dimension. Participants then read a randomly selected peer's behavior listings for the same trait and rated that person on the same trait scale. Despite having primed specific trait-related behavioral exemplars, and

assuming no overall differences in the favorableness of the behaviors listed by randomly selected peers, the results of this study show that participants continue to evaluate themselves more favorably on the trait dimension when they are asked to base their evaluations on the behaviors they have listed or read about.

We recognize that it is virtually impossible to establish with certainty what people *don't* do when they evaluate their traits. Our goal in these studies was to provide suggestive evidence that casts doubt on the view that traits are completely constructed upon behavioral exemplars. We believe that trait conceptions are influenced by various sources including behavioral outcomes, social comparisons, social feedback, and ideal images of how people would like to be perceived on trait dimensions. Once trait conceptions are established, they develop a degree of autonomy from their behavioral exemplars. This autonomy allows people to maintain their better than average self-images even when confronted with contradictory behavioral information. In fact, the ability to ignore contradictory behavioral data is implied by the better than average effect because of the obvious fact that people cannot all, in reality, be better than average.

The better than myself effect suggests that trait assessments involve an extra-behavioral component. The obvious next step in this line of research is to identify which extra-behavioral mechanisms contribute to the tendency to evaluate oneself more favorably than behavioral evidence warrants. One possibility is that people tend to conflate their real and ideal selves. Thus, while people may be fairly accurate in ranking their trait characteristics, they are prone to confuse how good they are with how good they would like to be. A number of factors might contribute to this real–ideal conflation including a tendency to engage disproportionately in thoughts about ideal behaviors (e.g., to imagine receiving the highest score on a test), and to surround oneself with friends and acquaintances who reinforce these thoughts (e.g., you would be as good as her if you had the same opportunities). Whereas concrete behavioral analyses occur at a conscious level, contributions from the ideal self may be relatively unconscious or automatic. Thus, when people assess a trait such as intelligence, ideal conceptions of intelligence are automatically elided into concrete analyses based on behavioral experiences. Because ideal influences are automatically added into trait conceptions, they are not eradicated by contradictory behavioral information. Further research is needed to disentangle real and ideal contributions to comparative trait analyses.

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