Self-Enhancement, Self-Protection and Ingroup Bias

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines how self-enhancement and self-protection function within a group context regarding people's ingroup and outgroup judgments. Results demonstrated basic self-enhancement and self-protection effects such that participants routinely rated themselves higher on the positive traits and lower on the negative traits than either the group or a past participant. Participants' judgments regarding the outgroup member mimicked this rating pattern; however, their judgments concerning the ingroup were mixed. Interestingly, participants were actually self-critical at times and in some cases engaged in self-derogation, rating themselves lower on positive traits and higher on negative traits.

The need to belong is a fundamental human motive, having both physical and psychological benefits (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For instance, group identification can affect people's feelings of self-worth, as evidenced by work in basking in reflected glory (Ware & Kowalski, 2012). Pertinent to the current research, people can also bolster their self-esteems and engage in self-enhancement and self-protection through their group and social judgments. In the present paper, we are interested in these two self-motives (self-enhancement and self-protection) and how they operate within a group context.

SELF-PROTECTION AND SELF-ENHANCEMENT

Self-protection, though closely tied to self-enhancement, remains an independent concept, which involves decreasing and defending the self against negative self-views. People typically implement self-protection machinations when an event threatens to reduce a self-interest below a personal or appropriate tolerance level (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). Furthermore, researchers have asserted that self-protection comprises various avoidant tendencies, which makes intuitive

sense if a person is making judgments regarding their negative qualities such as when one is entertaining their own mortality (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009).

Most research, however, has focused primarily on self-enhancement, and has followed related, but distinct, theoretical paths. Self-enhancement is exemplified by the self-serving bias where people connect desired outcomes to personal factors within their control, but attribute negative outcomes to external factors, blaming situational factors beyond their control (Shepperd, Malone, & Sweeny, 2008). Self-enhancement can trace its origins back to the early days of psychology where psychologists touched on individuals' "self-seeking" natures and their tendency to protect their egos (Allport, 1937). One approach, based on Allport's (1937) self-insight theory, proposes that self-enhancers perceive themselves more positively than others perceive them. For example, people can misremember and reconstruct events in self-serving ways such as when college students erroneously recall and inflate their poor high-school grades (Bahrick, Hall, & Berger, 1996). In contrast, works based on Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory suggest that self-enhancers perceive themselves more positively than they perceive others. For instance, individuals routinely rate themselves more favorably, compared to an average peer, on a profusion of traits (Alicke, 1985). Furthermore, interesting effects have resulted from exploring the multiplicity of ways individuals can enhance their self-concepts.

SELF-ENHANCEMENT THROUGH SOCIAL JUDGMENT

One method by which people can achieve self-enhancement is through their evaluations of the people that make up their social worlds, their social judgments (Brown, 1986). A consistent finding within the self in social judgment literature is the tendency for people to tailor their judgments of others in order to maintain or bolster positive self-images. Indeed, individuals regularly evaluate others' performances in ways that place themselves in favorable lights (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998). For example, Beauregard and Dunning (1998) found that low-performing participants tended to rate high-, medium-, and low-performing targets fairly positively, thereby giving them leeway to judge themselves positively. High-performing individuals, in contrast, differentiated among high-, medium-, and low-performing targets, judging rather negatively the target individuals they outperformed. Consequently, high-performing participants were able to heighten the distinctiveness of their achievements.

Of particular importance to the present study, people also can fulfill their need for self-enhancement through their social judgments of various ingroups to which they belong (Abrams & Hogg, 2001). Typically, people favor their ingroups (groups to which they belong) over outgroups (groups to which they do not belong) (Messick & Mackie, 1989). Another group judgment method people use to self-enhance is to judge themselves as typical members of positive ingroups (Burkley & Blanton, 2005). Curiously, a direct comparison of the self to both an ingroup and outgroup member appears to be lacking in the literature. One of the contributions of the present study is to address this research gap and investigate whether people will self-enhance in reference to their ingroup judgments. The current study also advances the growing body of research examining how one's self-judgments compare to one's social judgments, specifically how an individual's self-judgments tend to differ from their social judgments within an ingroup/outgroup context.

SELF-ENHANCEMENT IN DISCREPANT SELF AND SOCIAL JUDGMENTS

Within the social psychology canon, psychologists have documented numerous instances of discrepant self and social judgments (Pronin et al., 2001). For example, people believe their inner lives and emotions are richer than others' and contend they are less biased in their judgments than are their peers (Pronin et al., 2001). Individuals also tend to predict they are more likely than their peers to engage in helpful actions such as donating money to charities and giving blood (Epley & Dunning, 2000). Interestingly, except for some work in the moral hypocrisy and discrimination literatures, few researchers have examined whether discrepant self and social judgments arise within an ingroup/outgroup context (Ouinn and Olson, 2001; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007).

DISCREPANT SELF AND INGROUP JUDGMENTS

The propensity for members of disadvantaged groups to judge that they have experienced less discrimination than a fellow ingroup member is a robust finding within the discrimination literature (Quinn & Olson, 2001). For instance, single mothers who receive government assistance feel as though they experience less discrimination than do their fellow ingroup members (Olson, Roese, Meen, & Robertson, 1995). Forays into discrepant self and ingroup judgments have also emerged within recent moral hypocrisy literature, detailing that actor participants extended favorable judgments to fellow ingroup members in that they judged transgressions committed by ingroup members to be as acceptable as their own immoral actions (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007). The current study is related to this finding, but distinct since there is no behavioral component present.

This being the case, the reviewed literature focusing on socially-relevant performances appears warranted since work in terror-management demonstrates self-enhancement and self-protection can result in not only a bolstered self-esteem, but also nurture interpersonal relations and encourage ingroup unity (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003). Indeed, theorists contend that self-enhancement and self-protection are integral in both social judgment and intergroup behaviors (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009).

HYPOTHESES

Since previous literature demonstrates participants tend to rate themselves higher on positive traits (self-enhancement) and lower on negative traits (self-protection) than they rate the group or specific individuals, we first hypothesize that participants' self-ratings on the positive traits (creativity, spontaneity, and competence) will, on average, be higher than their ratings of both the group and a specific individual (Jamie). Similarly, we hypothesize that participants' self-ratings on the negative traits (narrow-mindedness, messiness, and impulsivity) will, on average, be lower than their ratings of both the group and Jamie.

Next, we focus our second series of hypotheses on discrepant self and social judgments within an ingroup and outgroup context. The self-enhancement literature suggests that participants will engage in self-enhancement without regard to the nature of the group, be it an ingroup or an outgroup. In contrast, work within moral hypocrisy suggests ingroup members receive special

treatment. This leads us to hypothesize that self-ratings on the positive traits (creativity, spontaneity, and competence) will, on average, be similar to the participants' ratings of both the group and Jamie in the ingroup condition, but, on average, will be higher in the outgroup condition. Similarly, we hypothesize that self-ratings on the negative traits (narrow-mindedness, messiness, and impulsivity) will, on average, be similar to the participants' ratings of both the group and Jamie in the ingroup condition, but, on average, will be lower in the outgroup condition. That is, we expect participants to judge ingroups similarly to themselves but engage in self-enhancement/protection with outgroups.

METHOD
112 undergraduate (40 male and 72 female) students at a large Midwestern university completed the experiment in return for partial course credit. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 28, with a median age of 18. Two participants did not provide age information. Upon entering the lab, we informed participants that the study would investigate how art preferences influence judgments. We told participants they would see 12 pairs of artwork, projected from an overhead projector for 10 seconds and asked them to indicate which piece of artwork they preferred, A or B. After viewing the 12 pairs of artwork, a second experimenter located in the hallway outside the lab scored the participants' responses. Utilizing a Klee and Kandinsky minimal group paradigm, we privately informed all participants that they expressed a preference for the Klee artwork and we subsequently explained that lovers of Klee artwork as a whole have either positive or negative personality traits. Additionally, we told participants either positive or negative information about a fictional past participant with a gender neutral name (Jamie), who expressed a preference for artwork by either Klee (ingroup) or Kandinsky (outgroup). We then asked participants to make judgments concerning certain traits regarding Klee group members as a whole, the fictional past participant (Jamie), and themselves. The self-descriptive traits used in the current study consisted of a mixture of six positive and negative traits. The positive traits presented were creativity, spontaneity, and competence while the negative traits were impulsivity, narrow-mindedness, and messiness. Participants made their judgments on ten-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (low) to 10 (high).

RESULTS

Overall, participants tended to rate themselves high on the positive traits and low on the negative traits, with their ratings of Jaime demonstrating a less pronounced spread between positive and negative traits. Finally, the group ratings fell somewhere in between self-ratings and ratings of Jamie.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Traits.

	Creativity	Messiness	Impulsivity	Narrow-mindedness	Likeability	Similarity	Spontaneity	Competence
Self	7.65	4.48	5.47	2.87	--	--	6.55	7.93
	(1.93)	(2.70)	(2.13)	(1.87)			(2.15)	(1.65)
Group	7.26	4.15	4.28	3.69	7.21	6.62	5.47	6.89
	(2.81)	(2.97)	(2.95)	(2.91)	(2.86)	(2.90)	(2.53)	(2.81)
Jaime	6.06	4.88	5.21	4.96	6.12	5.34	5.22	6.15
	(3.19)	(3.16)	(3.29)	(3.31)	(3.16)	(3.26)	(2.55)	(3.02)

Note. -- = not measured

We conducted a paired samples t-test to test our first hypothesis and to determine whether significant differences in overall mean ratings would emerge among the group, Jamie, and self. Results generally support our hypothesis and indicate significant differences (Table 2) between average self and group ratings on all of the traits except for creativity and messiness. Similarly, we found significant differences between Jamie and self on all traits except messiness and impulsivity. Examination of these mean differences demonstrates either self-enhancement or self-protection on every trait except impulsivity between Jamie, the group and the self.

Table 2: Paired Sample T-tests of Individual Traits.

	Creativity	Spontaneity	Competence	Narrow-mindedness	Messiness	Impulsivity
GS	-.391	-1.055*	-1.045*	.836*	-.318	-1.181*
JS	-1.609*	-1.309*	-1.781*	2.118*	.427	-.227

Note. GS= Group ratings-Self ratings, JS= Jamie ratings-Self ratings

*=p<.01

In order to examine our second hypothesis looking at the effects of the participant judging a member of the ingroup versus the outgroup; we repeated the analysis restructuring the data into subgroups. We then conducted a separate series of paired sample t-tests on those participants who judged the outgroup and those who judged the ingroup.

The results for the participants who judged the outgroup (Table 3) clearly demonstrate the self-enhancement effects for all variables, but we found mixed results for self-protection. We found

significant differences for only narrow-mindedness and messiness between the self and the group, and narrow-mindedness between the self and Jaime. We found the demonstrated effects to be very robust with mean differences ranging between 1.1 and 2.1 points, or, between a ten to twenty percent difference on the scale.

In contrast, those who judged the ingroup presented much more mixed results (Table 3). We discovered self-enhancement or self-protection effects for spontaneity between self and group only, and creativity, narrow-mindedness, and competence between self and Jamie. Interestingly, participants actually demonstrated self-derogation on creativity, impulsivity, and messiness between self and group. In other words, participants rated themselves as less creative and more impulsive and messy than the ingroup as a whole.

Overall, in comparison to those participants who made outgroup judgments, those who judged the ingroup were much less uniform in their display of self-enhancement and self-protection. Specifically, the results suggest that there appears to be some support for the idea that self-enhancement and self-protection operate differently and, additionally, interact with the nature of the group being judged.

Table 3: Paired Sample T-tests of Individual Traits Structured by Ingroup/Outgroup.

		Creativity	Spontaneity	Competence	Narrow-mindedness	Messiness	Impulsivity
Outgroup							
	GS	-1.860*	-1.375*	-2.036*	2.054*	1.161*	.268
	JS	-1.790*	-1.768*	-1.804*	2.143*	.946	.161
Ingroup							
	GS	1.130*	-.722*	-.019	-.430	-1.852*	-2.685*
	JS	-1.426*	-.833	-1.760*	2.093*	-.111	-.630

Note. GS= Group ratings-Self ratings, JS= Jamie ratings-Self ratings

*=p<.05

Overall, these results provide some preliminary support for the idea that individuals respond differently when rating the self on positive versus negative traits in relation to an ingroup. Specifically, it appears as if individuals do not always rate the self more favorably on positive traits in relation to the ingroup as a whole and sometimes judge themselves more harshly on the negative traits. In contrast, participants tend to rate themselves better than Jamie on positive and negative traits. Subsequently, these results show that self-enhancement and self-protection is occurring only when rating specific members of the ingroup (Jamie). Curiously, participants seem to find more faults with themselves and other group members than with the ingroup as a whole.

DISCUSSION

The present research adds to the self-enhancement and self-protection literature in a number of ways. First, we found basic self-enhancement and self-protection effects such that participants routinely rated themselves higher on the positive traits (self-enhancement) and lower on the negative traits (self-protection) than either the group or a past participant. Secondly, we also examined how self-enhancement and self-protection tendencies play out when participants judge an outgroup and ingroup member. Participants' judgments regarding the outgroup member were fairly pedestrian and clearly demonstrated the traditional self-enhancement and self-protection effects since participants made higher self-ratings on the positive traits and lower self-ratings on the negative traits. However, participants' judgments concerning the ingroup were mixed. We found self-enhancement and self-protection effects for spontaneity between self and group, and creativity, narrow-mindedness, and competence between self and Jamie. However, participants were actually self-critical and rated themselves as less creative and more impulsive and messy than the ingroup as a whole.

Self-derogation and the worse than average effect

The same mechanisms that contribute to worse than average (WTA) effects, namely egocentrism and generalized group accounts (Moore, 2007) offer possible reasons for these self-derogation results. Egocentrism maintains that people think about themselves and others differently especially since they know and care more about themselves than those around them and have more in-depth knowledge about themselves than they do about others (Pronin, Lin & Ross, 2002). In fact, perhaps our participants have inside knowledge and consider themselves as uncreative, messy individuals. The generalized group account simply states that BTA and WTA effects are fortified when people compare themselves to a vague, amorphous group as opposed to comparing themselves to a specific individual (Windschitl, Kruger, & Simms, 2003). This account can also help shed some light on why participants judged themselves more harshly than the ingroup on creativity, impulsivity, and messiness. The finding that participants rated themselves as less creative than their ingroup is particularly interesting and possibly not too surprising because WTA effects typically emerge when participants deem tasks as rare and difficult (e.g. creative thinking tasks such as joke telling) (Kruger, 1999). Additionally, the finding that participants rated themselves as more messy than the ingroup as a whole could be due to people's tendency to not rate themselves as better than average on specific attributes and traits (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989).

Integration of WTA, self-enhancement and self-protection effects

The present research found evidence of self-enhancement, self-protection and even self-derogation. Therefore, it is essential to contemplate when the various effects will emerge. We will consider two contenders. A likely candidate is how personally relevant the trait is to the person, the degree to which the trait contributes to the contingency of self-worth of the participant. For instance, people may be more open to self-criticism on those traits and skills that are low on contingency of self-worth. Research supports this notion since participants tend to poorly remember negative social/performance feedback when it pertains to central self-traits (e.g., untrustworthy, unkind) compared to tangential self-traits (e.g., unpredictable, complaining)

(Green et al., 2008). A second candidate is how the participants construe and interpret the traits in question, especially if the trait is ambiguous like spontaneity. Indeed, priming research suggests recent experiences can influence a person's judgments of ambiguous situations (Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977).

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