Self-Esteem, Construal, and Comparisons With the Self, Friends, and Peers

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Extending the better than average effect, 3 studies examined self-, friend, and peer comparisons of personal attributes. Participants rated themselves as better off than friends, who they rated as superior to generalized peers. The exception was in direct comparisons, where the self and friends were not strongly differentiated on unambiguous negative attributes. Self-esteem and construal played moderating roles, with persons with high self-esteem (HSEs) exploiting both ambiguous positive and ambiguous negative traits to favor themselves. Persons lower in self-esteem exploited ambiguous positive traits in their favor but did not exploit ambiguous negative traits. Across self-esteem level, ratings of friends versus peers were exaggerated when attributes were ambiguous. HSEs seemed to take advantage of ambiguity more consistently to present favorable self-views; people with low self-esteem used ambiguity to favor their friends but were reluctant to minimize their own faults.

Where do people generally rank themselves among their peers? Such phrases as "keeping up with the Joneses" or "He's a big fish in a small pond" reflect the keen interest people have in how they rank on important traits and characteristics with respect to other members of their social group. Indeed, evolutionary psychology suggests that where people stand in the social hierarchy is of vital importance for adaptation (Beach & Tesser, 2000). Although social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) originally was concerned only with realistic self-appraisals based on information about relative standing, some comparisons are constructive in the sense that they are based on guess, conjecture, and projection (Goethals, 1986; Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977; Mullen et al., 1985; Suls, 1986; Suls & Wan, 1987; Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985). Manufactured comparisons seem required in many cases because of the complex calculations that would be needed to actually determine personal standing with respect to various traits, such as patience or sarcasm, in a diffuse social group such as college students. Even when one is making a comparison with a single individual, however, the calculation may be based on guesswork because of the difficulty of tallying all or even a majority of instances of one's own and the other person's relevant behavior.

One of the best-documented constructive comparisons is the *better than average effect* (BTA; Alicke, 1985; Codol, 1975; Klein & Weinstein, 1997; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Weinstein, 1980; see Marsh & Richards, 1990, for an exception), which refers to the tendency for people to rate themselves as being higher than the average or generalized other (e.g., other college students) on positive attributes and lower on negative attributes. Because, logically, the majority of people cannot be above average (unless the attribute has a negatively skewed distribution; Krueger, 1998), this perception is considered by some researchers to be a bias or an illusion that affords benefits by sustaining global feelings of self-worth (Taylor & Brown, 1988; cf. Colvin & Block, 1994; John & Robins, 1994). However, all persons may not sustain the BTA effect to the same degree. For example, persons who are depressed or low in self-esteem might not exaggerate their standing as much as their high-esteem counterparts (Brown, 1986; Martin, Abramson, & Alloy, 1984; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Thus, the answer to the question "Where do people generally rank themselves?" appears to be "better than others," although persons with low feelings of global self-worth might be less aggrandizing.

The first question logically leads to a second one, "How do people think their friends rank within the social group?" Identifying where friends' traits and abilities fall relative to other people indicates what one can expect of friends and also can reflect on one's own standing. Both cognitive and motivational theories suggest that the unit bond (Cialdini et al., 1976; Heider, 1958; Tesser, 1986) between the self and friends should increase the perception that friends are similar in attributes and outcomes (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992, Experiments 2–4; Collins, 1996; Stapel & Koomen, 2001; Wheeler, 1966). Therefore, friends also may be perceived as having superior status relative to other members of the reference group (i.e., to be better than average). In support of this hypothesis, Brown (1986, Experiment 2) reported that positive attributes were rated as more descriptive

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and negative attributes as less descriptive of friends than of others. In addition, persons with high self-esteem were more apt to "see their friends as better than most people" (Brown, 1986, p. 364). Ratings of friends on negative traits did not vary as a function of self-esteem, but this matter deserves more research because Brown had participants rate themselves and others on separate scales (e.g., "How well does punctual describe me [others]?"). Such ratings do not necessarily mean that participants directly compared themselves with their friends; participants could have used a wide range of standards: for example, an absolute sense of their standing (Klar & Giladi, 1999) or temporal comparisons (Albert, 1977; Suls, Marco, & Tobin, 1991; Wilson & Ross, 2000). In the conventional operationalization of the BTA effect, however, the social comparison is made explicit: "How punctual are you compared with other college students?"

Perceived relative standing with friends also should be important, a point forcefully communicated in writer Gore Vidal's comment that "every time a friend succeeded something inside me died" (cited in Frank, 1985, p. 56). A case can be made that people should want to be better than even their close friends, but the unit relationship between friends and assimilation processes may oppose this tendency. In fact, whether people perceive themselves to be better than, worse than, or the same as their friends can create problems, as discussed in Brickman and Bulman's (1977; see also Tesser, 1986) influential essay on the potentially invidious effects of social comparisons. Past findings are inconsistent about perceptions of relative standing with friends. Brown (1986, Study 2) found that participants' self-evaluations were more favorable than their evaluations of friends, but in another experiment he reported no difference. This is complicated by evidence indicating that the BTA effect is stronger when people evaluate themselves relative to diffuse or generalized targets (e.g., the average college student; Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenberg, 1995). When the target has individuating characteristics, as is the case for friends, the BTA effect should be reduced (Klar, Medding, & Sarel, 1996). However, rarely is the effect completely eliminated (Brown, 1986; Klar et al., 1996, Study 4). The question remains, then, whether the self consistently is accorded privileged status relative to friends and what role, if any, dispositional self-esteem plays.

To answer these questions, in three studies we examined self versus peer comparisons, self versus friend comparisons, and friend versus peer comparisons on judgments of personal attributes. In addition, we tested the moderating role of dispositional global self-esteem on social perceptions.

In these studies, we also considered the contributing role of the ambiguity of the trait or attribute dimension. Dunning, Meyerowitz, and Holzberg (1989) noted that traits vary in the degree to which they can be defined by ambiguous versus nonambiguous criteria. For example, leadership is an ambiguous domain, because one person's definition of a good leader may entail giving attention to detail and articulation of goals, whereas another person's definition may include the ability to prod and bully. Being studious, however, seems less ambiguous, because it permits less latitude in construal. According to Dunning et al., the BTA effect should be stronger when people rate themselves on ambiguous traits that allow idiosyncratic criteria that place them in the best light. For less ambiguous traits, the BTA effect should be reduced because people have less latitude in interpretation.

In two studies, Dunning et al. had college students rate themselves relative to their peers on a series of traits and attributes that varied in ambiguity. The attributes represented four categories: ambiguous positive, ambiguous negative, unambiguous positive, and unambiguous negative traits. Results showed that ratings were higher on positive ambiguous traits than on positive unambiguous traits and lower on ambiguous negative traits than on unambiguous negative traits. Consistent with the construal hypothesis, the BTA effect was stronger when the definition of the attribute permitted participants to use their own idiosyncratic criteria.

If we extend this reasoning, one hypothesis is that persons who are high in self-esteem (HSEs), as opposed to those who are low in self-esteem (LSEs), should exhibit a stronger BTA effect, which should be exaggerated for both positive and negative ambiguous traits, as HSEs are purported to show more evidence of self-serving appraisals (Baumeister, 1993; Brown, 1986; Martin et al., 1984; Taylor & Brown, 1988). However, an alternative hypothesis is that both HSEs and LSEs should endorse more positive ambiguous (vs. unambiguous) attributes, but the latter may be unable to minimize their standing on negative ambiguous traits (i.e., valence-selective construal). Several strains of evidence show that depression and low self-esteem are more strongly related to negative than to positive beliefs (Bargh & Tota, 1998; Gotlib & Olson, 1983; Pelham, 1991). As Pelham (1993) observed,

> even those [researchers] who have emphasized the negative, self-defeating nature of depression have often found that depressed and nondepressed persons differ primarily in the degree to which they possess negative beliefs or respond to negative information. When it comes to positive beliefs or their reactions to positive events, depressed and nondepressed persons are frequently indistinguishable. (p. 186)

Hence, LSEs, like HSEs, may enhance themselves on positive ambiguous traits but have more difficulty disavowing the possession of negative ambiguous traits. This may translate into LSEs not exhibiting more self-enhancement on ambiguous (vs. unambiguous) negative attributes. In Study 1, we assessed whether HSEs (vs. LSEs) take greater advantage of construal for both positive and negative attributes or whether LSEs only show a deficit in being unable to take advantage of construal for negative ambiguous traits.

In a second study we assessed self versus peer comparisons and also tested whether a similar pattern extended to ratings of friends relative to ratings of others. As we mentioned earlier, Brown (1986) reported that HSEs showed more inflated ratings of friends than did LSEs, which may represent a way for the former to boost or maintain their sense of personal worth (this has sometimes been referred to as basking in reflected glory, or "BIRGing"; Cialdini et al., 1976; Tesser, 1986). In Study 2 we assessed whether appraisals of friends relative to generalized others were more favorable when traits could be construed broadly (cf. Hayes & Dunning, 1997). It was unclear whether HSEs rather than LSEs should make more use of trait ambiguity to exaggerate their friends' standing relative to other people. Some past evidence indicates that LSEs, although reluctant to take credit for their own assets, seek self-enhancement vicariously through their affiliations with others (Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988). Thus, LSEs might use trait ambiguity to inflate their friends' standing.

In a third study we examined participants' direct comparisons of themselves with friends as a function of self-esteem and trait ambiguity. Previous evidence described earlier has been inconsistent on this issue (Brown, 1986). Although HSEs may describe their friends in very positive terms as a way to inflate their own self-worth, one may also obtain gains by positively differentiating oneself from one's friends. If this is the case, then trait ambiguity should provide such an opportunity. On the other hand, if HSEs want to see both themselves and their friends as having positive attributes (i.e., assimilation), trait ambiguity provides more opportunity to do so. Whether LSEs see themselves as better off than their friends and what role construal plays were unclear from available theories and evidence, and, consequently, we treat these issues as empirical questions. In a final pair of studies (Studies 4a and 4b), we assessed whether other aspects of the traits besides ambiguity might account for the obtained effects.

Study 1

In Study 1, participants who previously had completed a global self-esteem scale rated themselves on a series of personal characteristics relative to other college students. In this study we examine whether participant self-esteem and trait ambiguity affect comparative judgments. The design was a 2 (positive vs. negative attributes) × 2 (unambiguous vs. ambiguous attributes) × self-esteem with the first two variables within subject and the last variable treated as a between-subjects continuous variable. To aid in the interpretation of significant interactions involving self-esteem (the continuous independent variable), we generated predicted values at the mean and plus and minus one standard deviation on the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale to represent the moderate self-esteem (MSE), HSE, and LSE groups. We then compared these values using post hoc probes.

Method

Research participants. Ninety-eight college students (50 women, 48 men) at a large midwestern university served as participants in exchange for credit toward a course requirement. Several weeks prior to the study, they had completed a global self-esteem scale in a large group testing session.

Procedure and materials. During a group testing session, participants completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, which consists of 10 items answered on 4-point scales with *strongly agree* (1) and *strongly disagree* (4) as endpoints. The internal reliability was .86. The mean response (averaged across items) was 3.22 ($SD = 0.46$). Several weeks later in small group testing sessions, participants were asked to rate themselves compared with the average undergraduate at their university on 27 trait–attribute items on 7-point Likert-style items with the endpoints *exhibited much less* (−3) and *exhibited much more* (3). The 27 traits were taken from Dunning et al. (1989) and represented four categories: ambiguous positive (i.e., sensitive, sophisticated, quick, idealistic, disciplined, ingenious, sensible), ambiguous negative (i.e., inconsistent, neurotic, naive, compulsive, submissive, insecure, impractical), unambiguous positive (i.e., neat, thrifty, studious, well read, mathematical, athletic, punctual), and unambiguous negative (i.e., sarcastic, clumsy, gossipy, gullible, wordy, sloppy, bragging). The traits were presented in one random order.

At the beginning of the experimental session, the participants were presented with the attribute list and were informed that some of the items were personal in nature. To facilitate honest responses, participants were assured of confidentiality and were instructed to record only a special code number on the questionnaire (to enable us to connect the ratings to the self-esteem scores collected earlier in the semester).

Results

We used analysis of variance (ANOVA) using the general linear model on the averages of the trait ratings for each category (e.g., ambiguous positive, ambiguous negative) with valence (positive, negative) and ambiguity (high, low) as repeated variables and self-esteem score as a continuous between-subjects variable. To aid in the interpretation of significant interactions involving the continuous independent variable, we generated predicted values at the mean and plus and minus one standard deviation on the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale to represent the responses of the MSE, HSE, and LSE groups. We then compared these values using post hoc probes with least significant difference (LSD) tests (Aiken & West, 1991). Preliminary analyses including sex of participant as a variable revealed no significant main or interaction effects. Consequently, sex is not included as a variable in the analyses described in this article.

Significant main effects were found for trait ambiguity, $F(1, 96) = 18.28$, $p < .001$, and for trait valence, $F(1, 96) = 149.26$, $p < .001$, respectively. The ambiguity main effect indicates that the participants' ratings were more positive when the trait was ambiguous ($M = 0.10$, $SD = 0.73$) than when the trait was unambiguous ($M = -0.09$, $SD = 0.75$), but this effect has little meaning because it represents responses collapsed across positive and negative traits. The valence main effect shows that ratings were higher for positive traits ($M = 0.58$, $SD = 0.71$) than for negative ones ($M = -0.58$, $SD = 0.77$). The main effect of self-esteem was not significant by conventional levels, $F(1, 96) = 3.20$, $p = .08$.

The Trait Ambiguity × Trait Valence interaction was significant, $F(1, 96) = 27.81$, $p < .001$. Participants made more self-serving ratings of the ambiguous positive traits ($M = 0.82$, $SD = 0.69$) than of the unambiguous positive ones ($M = 0.34$, $SD = 0.73$), $F(1, 96) = 36.39$, $p < .001$. In contrast, ratings of ambiguous negative traits ($M = -0.63$, $SD = 0.77$) and unambiguous negative traits ($M = -0.53$, $SD = 0.77$) did not differ significantly, $F(1, 96) = 1.81$, *ns*.

A significant self-esteem and trait valence interaction, $F(1, 96) = 11.79$, $p < .001$, indicated that as self-esteem level increased, the difference between ratings of positive and negative traits become larger, with HSEs claiming more positive attributes and fewer negative attributes than did MSEs, who, in turn, were more self-aggrandizing than were LSEs. However, this interaction was qualified by the significant Self-Esteem × Trait Ambiguity × Trait Valence interaction, $F(1, 96) = 6.15$, $p < .01$ (see Table 1). We computed separate comparisons with LSD tests between predicted means for ambiguous positive and negative traits and predicted means for unambiguous positive and negative traits for HSEs, MSEs, and LSEs. HSEs rated themselves more favorably on ambiguous positive and negative traits than on unambiguous ones. MSEs and LSEs also showed more self-enhancement on ambiguous versus unambiguous positive attributes, ps $< .05$, but their ratings of negative attributes did not vary as a function of ambiguity. (In fact, for LSEs, the trend was in the opposite direction.) The results indicate that people, regardless of self-esteem level, endorse more positive ambiguous (vs. unambiguous) traits. How-

Table 1
Predicted Mean Ratings of Self Versus Other Students as a Function of Self-Esteem, Trait Valence, and Ambiguity

Self-esteem level	Low ambiguity	High ambiguity
HSE		
Positive trait	0.41_a	0.95_b
Negative trait	-0.66_a	-0.99_b
MSE		
Positive trait	0.34_a	0.82_b
Negative trait	-0.53_a	-0.63_a
LSE		
Positive trait	0.28_a	0.70_b
Negative trait	-0.39_a	-0.28_a

Note. Means within a row that do not share a subscript differ at $p < .05$ according to least significant difference test. HSE = person with high self-esteem; MSE = person with moderate self-esteem; LSE = person with low self-esteem.

ever, LSEs and MSEs did not appear to exploit the ambiguity for negative attributes.

We computed *F* tests between the predicted means and zero (the scale midpoint, labeled *exhibited the trait the same*) to determine whether each diverged from the "I'm average" response (i.e., 0). Dunning et al. (1989) found that ratings significantly diverged from zero only when participants evaluated themselves in relation to peers on ambiguous traits. In contrast, we found that each cell mean in Table 1 was significantly different from zero according to *F* tests, with values ranging from 7.01 to 141.06 and with *p*s $< .01$ at least. Across ambiguous and unambiguous traits and level of self-esteem, participants reported themselves to be above average on positive characteristics and below average on negative attributes. Thus, although trait ambiguity influenced the magnitude of the BTA effect, people reported being better than average even on unambiguous traits. Because we used the same set of trait dimensions, the most probable reason for the discrepancy is the greater statistical power ($N = 98$) of our study than of Dunning et al.'s (*n*s = 27 and 25). The discrepancy is one of degree, however, as more self-enhancing estimates (i.e., larger positive difference from 0.00 for positive attributes, larger negative difference for negative attributes) were shown in ambiguous trait domains (see Table 1).

Discussion

We found the BTA effect across levels of self-esteem, with participants rating themselves in more favorable terms than they rated generalized others. In addition, we found new evidence suggesting that HSEs took more advantage of the flexibility afforded by both negative and positive attributes that could be construed broadly and idiosyncratically. Persons who fell on the middle to low end of the self-esteem continuum also made more self-serving appraisals on positive ambiguous attributes but did not differentiate between ambiguous and unambiguous negative traits. Thus, we obtained evidence for valence-selective construal on the part of LSEs. These results are consistent with Pelham's (1991) observation that LSEs (or persons with depression), like HSEs, do lay claim to positive attributes; the LSEs' difficulty lies in dwelling on their negative qualities.

Study 2

This study replicates Study 1 and also examines whether HSEs appraise their friends as higher on ambiguous traits than they appraise the generalized college student. In earlier research (Brown, 1986), HSEs evaluated their friends more positively than they evaluated the average person. In Study 2 we examine whether this tendency is stronger when attributes permit an ambiguous or idiosyncratic interpretation. The design was a 2 (ambiguous vs. unambiguous traits) × 2 (positive vs. negative traits) × 2 (self vs. other students) × self-esteem (as a continuous variable). The first two variables were within subject.

Method

Participants. Two hundred eight students (122 women, 86 men) were recruited for partial completion of a course requirement. Earlier in the semester, they had completed the Self-Rating Scale (Fleming & Courtney, 1984). This instrument contains domain-specific scales (e.g., Academic Aptitude) as well as seven items measuring global self-esteem that are rated on 7-point scales ranging from *never felt* (1) to *always felt* (7). We used only the Global Self-Esteem subscale ($\alpha = .89$). The mean response was 5.59 ($SD = 0.95$).

Procedure and materials. All participants completed rating scales with regard to the same list of 27 attributes used in Study 1. By random assignment, 98 participants received instructions to rate themselves relative to other students at the university on each of the attributes. The remainder of participants rated their best friend in comparison with other students at the university. Participants completed the attribute scales in a packet of other questionnaires that were administered for different purposes. We connected the rating scale responses to the self-esteem measure using a special code number.

Results

Average ratings for each trait category were calculated for each participant and analyzed with a general linear model ANOVA with trait valence (2), trait ambiguity (2), comparison target—self versus other students or best friend versus other students (2), and self-esteem as independent variables. The first two variables were repeated variables; the last two were between-subjects. Sex of participant was included as a variable in preliminary analyses. Because there were no main or interaction effects involving sex of participant, it was not included in the analyses described below. As in Study 1, we followed up interactions involving self-esteem, the continuous independent variable, by calculating predicted means at the mean and plus and minus one standard deviation on the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale to represent values for MSE, HSE, and LSE groups.

The main effect of trait valence was significant, $F(1, 204) = 201.54$, $p < .001$, indicating that ratings were higher for positive ($M = 0.51$, $SD = 0.78$) than for negative traits ($M = -0.54$, $SD = 0.76$). The main effect for trait ambiguity also was significant, $F(1, 204) = 18.87$, $p < .001$; participants endorsed ambiguous traits ($M = 0.05$, $SD = 0.76$) more than unambiguous traits ($M = -0.09$, $SD = 0.77$), although because this main effect collapsed across positive and negative attributes and target, it has little meaning. There was no overall effect of self-esteem or of the Self-Esteem × Target interaction.

The Ambiguity × Valence interaction, $F(1, 204) = 63.40$, $p < .001$, indicates that there was a larger difference between am-

biguous and unambiguous traits for positive traits ($M = 0.73$, $SD = 0.76$ vs. $M = 0.27$, $SD = 0.80$) than for negative traits ($M = -0.61$, $SD = 0.77$ vs. $M = -0.45$, $SD = 0.74$). The Self-Esteem × Trait Valence interaction, $F(1, 204) = 6.01$, $p < .02$; the Self-Esteem × Comparison Target × Trait Ambiguity interaction, $F(1, 204) = 3.89$, $p < .05$; and the Self-Esteem × Trait Valence × Comparison Target interaction, $F(1, 204) = 4.14$, $p < .04$, also were significant. Trends replicated the pattern in Study 1: HSEs endorsed more positive traits and disavowed more negative traits for themselves than did MSEs, who, in turn, showed this pattern to a greater degree than did LSEs.

These lower order interactions were qualified by the four-way Self-Esteem × Comparison Target × Trait Valence × Trait Ambiguity interaction, $F(1, 204) = 4.07$, $p < .03$. To assess the pattern of this complex interaction, we separately examined the three-way Trait Ambiguity × Trait Valence × Self-Esteem interactions for self-ratings versus ratings of other students and for friend ratings versus ratings of other students. The three-way interaction for self versus other ratings was significant, $F(1, 204) = 6.23$, $p < .05$ (see Table 2). LSD tests indicate that HSEs rated themselves more favorably on ambiguous than on unambiguous attributes whether the traits were positive or negative, ps $< .05$. MSEs and LSEs also rated themselves more favorably on ambiguous positive traits than on unambiguous traits, ps $< .05$, but means for ambiguous and unambiguous negative traits did not differ (see Table 2). Consistent with the results of Study 1, LSEs and MSEs did not make more self-serving assessments on ambiguous negative characteristics. In fact, as in Study 1, the trend was for LSEs to be slightly less enhancing under ambiguity. We note this to underscore that the LSEs responded differently than the HSEs did; the difference was not merely one of degree.

The three-way interaction was not significant for ratings of friends versus others, $F < 1$. Instead, across self-esteem levels, ratings were consistently more favorable to the target (i.e., best friend) than to the average student, ps $< .05$. That is, participants saw their friends as having more positive attributes and fewer negative attributes, especially when the attributes could be construed with considerable latitude. The only exception was that HSEs' ratings of ambiguous versus unambiguous negative traits did not differ significantly, although the trend (-0.57 vs. -0.41; $p = .13$) was the same as in other cells. Brown (1986, Study 2) found that HSEs did not promote friends (vs. peers) on negative traits, but, as noted earlier, he had participants make separate ratings of friends and the average student. Most people appear to describe their friends in more favorable terms on desirable and undesirable characteristics in direct comparisons with generalized peers (e.g., other college students).

Table 2
Predicted Mean Ratings of Self or Best Friend Versus Others as a Function of Self-Esteem, Trait Valence, and Ambiguity

	Self vs. others		Friend vs. others	
Self-esteem level	Low ambiguity	High ambiguity	Low ambiguity	High ambiguity
HSE				
Positive trait	0.41_a	0.91_b	0.26_a	0.68_b
Negative trait	-0.71_a	-1.09_b	-0.41_a	-0.57_a
MSE				
Positive trait	0.35_a	0.83_b	0.21_a	0.64_b
Negative trait	-0.53_a	-0.66_a	-0.38_a	-0.59_b
LSE				
Positive trait	0.29_a	0.74_b	0.15_a	0.60_b
Negative trait	-0.36_a	-0.22_a	-0.35_a	-0.61_b

Note. Means within a row that do not share subscripts within comparison condition (self vs. other or friend vs. other) differ at $p < .05$ according to least significant difference test. HSE = person with high self-esteem; MSE = person with moderate self-esteem; LSE = person with low self-esteem.

As in Study 1, the predicted means were tested against zero to ascertain whether participants' ratings diverged from the "I'm average" response. All but one of the means diverged significantly from zero; the significant Fs ranged from 5.49 to 68.53, ps $< .001$. Only LSEs' ratings of friends versus others on unambiguous positive attributes ($M = 0.15$) were not different from the "I'm average" response, $F(1, 204) = 1.65$, *ns*.

Discussion

Study 2 replicates the tendency for only HSEs to rate themselves more favorably than they rate peers on ambiguous negative traits, but all participants made more self-enhancing assessments on positive traits when the attribute permitted latitude in interpretation. In rating their friends in comparison with the average peer, participants across self-esteem levels made more favorable assessments of their friends when the trait could be construed broadly. Thus, LSEs and MSEs appeared reluctant to exploit trait ambiguity to minimize their own negative attributes, but they minimized the failings of their friends. This is reminiscent of Brown et al.'s (1988) suggestion that persons with low self-esteem boost their self-worth by aligning themselves with others who are perceived to be worthy. We also found evidence that HSEs boosted their best friends, another example of "BIRGing" (Cialdini et al., 1976; Tesser, 1986) or assimilation (Brown et al., 1992; Stapel & Koomen, 2001).

Study 3

In the preceding studies we found that evaluations of self and friends (vs. the generalized peer) were more favorable on ambiguous than unambiguous traits, with the exception of self versus peer ratings of negative attributes by persons with lower self-esteem. We have yet to explore whether the self is rated more favorably in direct comparisons with friends when traits can be construed broadly. As described by Brickman and Bulman (1977), potential costs can arise from seeing oneself as superior (e.g., other's envy), equal (e.g., lack of distinctiveness), or inferior (e.g., envy of others) to a close friend. Further, tendencies toward contrast and assimilation may be highly charged in close relationships and create opposing tensions that cancel each other out (Beach et al., 1998). To examine this question, in Study 3 we had participants (who varied in self-esteem level) directly compare themselves with their best friend on ambiguous and unambiguous attributes.

Method

Participants. Two hundred sixteen students satisfying a course requirement in elementary psychology (131 women, 85 men) participated.

Procedure and materials. Several weeks earlier, the participants had completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale during large group testing sessions. The mean response was 3.33 ($SD = 0.52$; $\alpha = .90$). Subsequently, in small group sessions, participants completed the same list of 27 trait adjectives that we used previously. Instructions asked participants to rate themselves in comparison with their same-sex best friend at the university. Special code numbers were used to link the trait scale ratings with the self-esteem scale that had been completed weeks earlier.

Results

Average ratings in each category were analyzed with trait valence (2) and trait ambiguity (2) as repeated measures and self-esteem score as a continuous between-subjects variable. The main effect for trait valence was significant, $F(1, 206) = 80.75$, $p < .001$. Ratings were higher on positive ($M = 0.50$, $SD = 0.68$) than on negative traits ($M = -0.03$, $SD = 0.63$). The main effects for self-esteem, $F(1, 206) = 1.65$, and trait ambiguity, $F < 1$, were nonsignificant. A significant interaction between trait valence and trait ambiguity, $F(1, 206) = 27.81$, $p < .001$, indicated that ratings were more self-serving when participants were evaluating themselves in comparison with a friend on ambiguous negative traits ($M = -0.13$, $SD = 0.66$) than on unambiguous negative traits ($M = 0.07$, $SD = 0.60$), $F(1, 206) = 13.81$, $p < .001$. Ratings of the ambiguous positive traits ($M = 0.54$, $SD = 0.64$) were more self-serving than were those for unambiguous positive traits ($M = 0.44$, $SD = 0.70$), $F(1, 206) = 3.85$, $p < .05$.

There also were significant Self-Esteem × Trait Ambiguity, $F(1, 206) = 5.60$, $p < .01$, and Trait Valence × Self-Esteem interactions, $F(1, 206) = 15.33$, $p < .001$, but these were subsumed by the significant Trait Ambiguity × Trait Valence × Self-Esteem interaction, $F(1, 206) = 7.59$, $p < .001$. Predicted means for ratings of each type of trait were computed at the mean and plus and minus one standard deviation on the Self-Esteem Scale; LSD comparisons were calculated between ratings of ambiguous and unambiguous traits separately for positive and negative attributes. Across levels of self-esteem, participants reported being superior to their best friends on positive attributes, with no significant differences between ambiguous and unambiguous traits. On unambiguous negative traits, participants, regardless of self-esteem level, did not differentiate themselves significantly from their friends. However, HSEs rated themselves more favorably on ambiguous (vs. unambiguous) negative traits than they rated their friends, $p < .05$, and MSEs showed the same (nonsignificant) trend. In contrast, LSEs tended to report having slightly higher levels of negative attributes than their friends (see below and Table 3).

We compared the predicted means with zero to determine whether ratings significantly diverged from the "I'm the same as my friend" response. Ratings favored the self and were significantly different from "I'm the same" ratings for all three self-esteem groups, with *F*s ranging from 3.75 to 147.08. LSEs' mean rating of ambiguous negative attributes was marginally significant, $F(1, 206) = 3.35$, $p = .06$. There were four notable exceptions to this pattern. HSEs' and MSEs' ratings did not differ from zero on unambiguous negative traits, *F*s < 1. Also, LSEs actually rated themselves somewhat higher (hence, less favorably) than they rated their friends on negative traits. These results diverge from Studies 1 and 2, in which persons from all self-esteem levels perceived themselves in more favorable terms on both positive and negative attributes than they perceived the average student. Direct comparisons with friends seem to temper self-enhancement on negative dimensions.

Table 3
Predicted Mean Ratings of Self Versus Best Friend as a Function of Self-Esteem, Trait Valence, and Ambiguity

Self-esteem level	Low ambiguity	High ambiguity
HSE		
Positive trait	0.53_a	0.64_a
Negative trait	-0.02_a	-0.36_b
MSE		
Positive trait	0.45_a	0.54_a
Negative trait	0.06_a	-0.13_a
LSE		
Positive trait	0.37_a	0.45_a
Negative trait	0.12_a	0.11_a

Note. Means within a row that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$ according to least significant difference test. HSE = person with high self-esteem; MSE = person with moderate self-esteem; LSE = person with low self-esteem.

Discussion

Across self-esteem levels, ratings favored the self over friends on positive attributes, particularly those that could be construed broadly. On negative traits that were low in ambiguity, participants did not differentiate themselves from friends. However, HSEs presented themselves more favorably than they presented their friends on negative ambiguous (vs. unambiguous) traits (and MSEs showed the same trend). As in Studies 1 and 2, LSEs did not positively differentiate themselves from others on ambiguous versus unambiguous undesirable characteristics. In fact, LSEs reported having slightly more negative attributes than their best friends. There tended to be less evidence of self-enhancement than in the earlier studies, in which participants compared themselves or a friend with a generalized other. The relationship with friends seems to limit the tendency to perceive oneself as better off, especially with regard to negative attributes.

Studies 4a and 4b

The correlational nature of the data reported in Studies 1–3 leaves open the possibility that participants were not responding as a function of trait ambiguity but perhaps as a function of other aspects of the traits that happened to covary with ambiguity. Traits differ in many way that might covary with ambiguity, but trait controllability, importance, and observability have been identified as especially important in self-judgments (Diener & Fujita, 1997; Miller & McFarland, 1991; Taylor & Brown, 1988). To assess whether ambiguity was confounded with these dimensions, we asked a new sample (Study 4a) to rate the 27 traits from Dunning et al. (1989) for controllability, importance, and observability. Participants also completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale so that we could determine whether ratings of the three dimensions varied as a function of self-esteem. If differential patterns did not emerge, then we could be more confident that trait ambiguity was responsible for earlier results. A separate sample of participants (Study 4b) rated the same 27 attributes for desirability

and completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale. This allowed us to assess whether perceived desirability of the traits also covaried with self-esteem in such a way as to contribute to our earlier results.

Method

Participants. One hundred thirty-three (61 women, 72 men) and 84 (51 women, 33 men) college students participated in Studies 4a and 4b, respectively, for credit toward a requirement in introductory psychology.

Procedure and materials. Participants in Study 4a completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, followed by three sets of ratings of Dunning et al.'s (1989) 27 attributes. For one set of ratings, instructions requested that participants rate each trait or attribute in terms of how much control or lack of control people generally have over the expression of the trait on a scale ranging from –3 (*extremely uncontrollable*) to 3 (*extremely controllable*). For another set, instructions requested ratings of the traits in terms of importance of having or not having the trait on a scale ranging from –3 (*extremely unimportant*) to 3 (*extremely important*). In the third set, participants were asked to rate the degree to which the trait is based on internal, unobservable cues, as opposed to external, observable cues, on a scale ranging from –3 (*based completely on internal, unobservable cues*) to 3 (*based completely on external, observable behaviors*). Each participant made all three sets of ratings; however, order of rating dimension was randomly varied across participants. Participants rated all traits on one dimension prior to rating them on the other dimensions. Traits were presented in different random sequences across the rating tasks. In Study 4b, participants completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale and then rated all 27 traits on a scale ranging from –3 (*extremely undesirable*) to 3 (*extremely desirable*).

Results

Study 4a. We conducted ANOVAs with self-esteem as a between-subjects continuous variable and ambiguity (2) and valence (2) as within-subject variables on the average control, importance, and observability ratings of the 27 traits classified into the four Trait Valence × Trait Ambiguity categories. Positive traits were seen as more controllable than were negative traits, $F(1, 131) = 3.90$, $p < .05$, but there were no systematic differences in perceived control as a function of ambiguity or self-esteem. Although the Trait Ambiguity × Trait Valence × Self-Esteem interaction was statistically significant, $F(1, 131) = 4.72$, $p < .05$, none of the post hoc probes were significant or yielded interpretable patterns.

Analysis of the trait importance ratings yielded no significant effects, although positive traits tended to be rated as more important, $F(1, 131) = 2.80$, *ns*. Analysis of trait observability ratings indicated a marginal main effect of self-esteem, $F(1, 131) = 1.84$, and a Trait Ambiguity × Self-Esteem interaction, $F(1, 131) = 1.41$. In summary, ambiguity did not systematically covary with controllability, importance, or observability. Further, there was no evidence for differential perceptions of any of these dimensions as a function of dispositional self-esteem.

Study 4b. The average desirability ratings of the traits, classified into the four Trait Valence × Trait Ambiguity subcategories, were subjected to the same kind of analysis used in Study 4a. As would be expected, the main effect of valence was statistically significant, $F(1, 81) = 11.43$, $p < .001$, with positive traits ($M = 1.25$, $SD = 0.49$) rated as more desirable than negative traits ($M = -1.30$, $SD = 1.04$). There were marginal interactions of ambiguity and self-esteem, $F(1, 81) = 2.44$, *ns*, and of ambiguity, valence, and self-esteem, $F(1, 81) = 2.22$, *ns*, but these interactions showed no statistically significant or interpretable patterns.

Discussion

The ratings collected in Studies 4a and 4b indicate that trait ambiguity did not covary with trait valence, controllability, importance, or observability. There also were no meaningful differential associations with dispositional self-esteem. Although other dimensions may covary with trait ambiguity, these data rule out the possibility that the results were due to participants' responses to the controllability, importance, or observability of the particular traits. This bolsters our confidence that the latitude of interpretation provided by ambiguous traits accounts for the Self-Esteem × Construal interactions found in Studies 1–3.

One other alternative explanation should be considered. Perhaps HSEs (vs. LSEs) perceive traits differently in terms of ambiguity. For example, might LSEs see traits (especially negative ones) as less ambiguous, which would constrain their ratings more than those of HSEs? The difficulty encountered by this explanation is that if LSEs see traits as more constraining, then they should not have shown stronger trends to minimize their friend's weaknesses on ambiguous (vs. unambiguous) traits than did HSEs (in Study 2). Further, an inherent tendency on the part of LSEs to see traits as more constraining contradicts their greater self-endorsement of positive ambiguous versus unambiguous traits.[1]

General Discussion

Extending the BTA effect, in three studies we examined self, friend, and peer comparisons of personal attributes. Participants rated themselves as better off than their friends, whom they rated as superior to generalized peers. The exception was in direct comparisons, where participants rated themselves and friends similarly on negative unambiguous attributes. The most novel findings concern the moderating roles of self-esteem and construal in the construction of comparative judgments. HSEs evaluated themselves more favorably relative to the average peer on ambiguous traits. They also rated their friends more favorably than they rated generalized peers on positive attributes (with ambiguous traits showing the strongest differentiation). In direct comparisons with friends, however, HSEs perceived themselves as better on positive attributes, independent of ambiguity, and better on negative traits (i.e., lower) only when they were permitted a latitude of interpretation. Ranking oneself in comparison with a friend was associated

[1] Hayes and Dunning (1997) reported that ambiguous traits (which overlapped with our list) tended to be seen as more socially desirable ($r = .27$, $p < .02$). Although ambiguity did not covary with desirability in Study 4b, Hayes and Dunning's results suggest the alternative hypothesis that ambiguous traits may receive more endorsement simply because they are more desirable. Although this explanation might account for higher positive trait endorsements for ambiguous traits, it is contradicted by our results, which show that participants did not endorse more negative ambiguous (vs. unambiguous) traits for themselves or their friends. In any case, ratings of desirability did not systematically vary as a function of self-esteem, so the Self-Esteem × Trait Ambiguity interactions are not plausibly explained by confounding between ambiguity and desirability.

with a more complex pattern for HSEs than were the other comparisons, presumably because of the opposing pressures of assimilation and contrast in close relationships.

LSEs and MSEs took advantage of the idiosyncratic interpretations permitted by positive ambiguous traits, but they did not differentiate between ambiguous and unambiguous negative traits in comparisons between themselves and others. They also rated their friends more favorably in comparison with other people on both positive and negative ambiguous (vs. unambiguous) traits. Thus, LSEs and MSEs seemed to use ambiguity to present their friends more favorably on negative dimensions, although they seemed reluctant to do so for themselves. As noted earlier, Brown et al. (1988) suggested that persons with low self-esteem may not take personal credit for their assets or contributions but "seek self-enhancement vicariously via their associations with others" (Brown, 1993, p. 123). The present results provide additional evidence of self-enhancement through vicarious association on the part of persons with lower self-esteem (LSEs and MSEs). In direct comparisons with close friends, however, LSEs and MSEs rated themselves higher on positive trait dimensions but did not exploit the opportunity afforded by ambiguity. On negative dimensions, LSEs actually described themselves as having slightly more flaws than their friends.

In sum, we saw a consistent pattern of self-enhancement in the comparative judgments of HSEs. By contrast, LSEs and MSEs accentuated their positive traits but did not minimize their negative traits. In fact, they exhibited more evidence of using construal to enhance their friends than to enhance themselves. More generally, evaluations on negative trait dimensions seemed to pose a special dilemma for LSEs and MSEs. They perceived themselves to have more positive attributes than they perceived other people to have (as did HSEs), but, in contrast to HSEs, they seemed reluctant to minimize their failings.

An interesting question is whether the differences shown by LSEs and HSEs simply reflect the tendency for the latter to say more good things about themselves when unconstrained by reality (i.e., on ambiguous traits), without any real checking of reality. Alternatively, perhaps HSEs are more in the habit of weighting positive information, so that for any broad category, they are more likely to use the subinformation within the category that is more favorable. First, it is important to emphasize that both LSEs and HSEs were more self-aggrandizing with regard to positive ambiguous traits. Because everyone seemed to espouse positive traits as self-descriptive, the two alternative explanations cannot be differentiated for positive self-descriptions. The relative ratings found for negative traits, however, are more informative. Differential weighting of past behaviors or a reluctance to say good things about oneself can both account for LSEs' failure to describe themselves more favorably on negative ambiguous attributes. But if LSEs have a general tendency to give positive information less weight, even for a broad category, then they should not have minimized their best friends' possession of bad ambiguous traits more than HSEs did. The most parsimonious interpretation is that, compared with HSEs, LSEs simply have more difficulty disavowing bad things about themselves, even when unconstrained by reality.

Other writers (e.g., Baumeister, 1993; Taylor & Brown, 1988) have proposed that HSEs are better able to accentuate their positive characteristics and minimize their negative characteristics through selective perception, interpretation, and memory. The present studies augment existing research (Baumeister, 1993; Taylor & Brown, 1988) on attributions of control, performance appraisal, and optimism by showing that HSEs also take more advantage of construal and, as a consequence, can think of themselves as having more desirable traits and fewer undesirable traits.

LSEs do not lack all forms of self-enhancement; they did show evidence for enhancement when positive traits permitted an appreciable latitude of interpretation. They did not show this pattern, however, when the traits were negative. Most persons who are classified as low in self-esteem do not think of themselves as totally worthless; rather, they describe themselves in more noncommittal terms (see also Pelham, 1991, 1993). Consistent with Baumeister (1993) and Pelham (1993), even LSEs exhibited the BTA effect with regard to the generalized other and, to some degree, with regard to a best friend (i.e., they rated themselves as more advantaged than a friend on positive attributes) but seemed reluctant to take too much credit for themselves.

Specific Targets, Pseudocomparisons, and Limitations

The present results also are relevant to recent research indicating that the BTA effect is reduced when one compares oneself with a familiar other or a concrete other (Alicke et al., 1995; Perloff & Fetzer, 1986). In addition, any concrete person (self or others) tends to be rated more positively than a generalized average other (Klar & Giladi, 1997). A proposed explanation is that a concrete target has individuating characteristics that promote judgments according to a singular perspective based on personal qualities, attitudes, and inclinations rather than according to a distributional perspective, which relies on perceived group base rates (Klar et al., 1996, p. 230). However, although familiarity reduced the BTA effect, it was not eliminated (see Klar et al., 1996, Experiment 4). In fact, in Study 3 all participants rated themselves more favorably than they rated a best friend on positive attributes, and HSEs also did this for negative ambiguous traits. Thus, merely individuating the target does not make the BTA effect disappear completely. This suggests that the singular–distributional explanation does not furnish a complete account of the BTA effect.

Another issue is whether the BTA effect involves an actual comparative judgment (see also Wood, 1996). Weinstein and Lachendro (1982) first reported that, in explaining their unrealistically optimistic judgments, participants usually cited their own advantaged standing on related risk factors but never mentioned their peers' standing, as if no comparison was being made (see also Heine & Lehman, 1995). Klar and Giladi (1999) and Kruger (1999) provided direct evidence that rather than basing their self-ratings on a comparison with others, people actually rely on their own absolute self-judgments. For example, in judging how contented they were, people used their own absolute sense of satisfaction in a particular domain and gave little apparent consideration to the comparison group. Consistent with this idea, participants' comparative judgments (e.g., to the question "How contented are you compared with other students of your gender and age?") were predicted better by absolute judgments of the self (e.g., "How contented are you?") than by absolute judgments of the comparison group (e.g., "How contented are other students of your gender and age?") or by the difference score computed between absolute self-judgments and absolute other judgments

(Klar & Giladi, 1999; see also Kruger, 1999). Diener and Fujita (1997) also reported that self-perceptions rather than social comparisons played the major role in judgments of subjective well-being. Thus, in estimating comparative abilities, people frequently take insufficient account of the comparison group and instead use themselves and their own skills as judgmental anchors (see also Dunning, 2000; Suls, 1986). This is most likely the circumstance when people have extensive experience with the attributes, as was the case for the kinds of traits used in the present studies. In contrast, classic social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) is concerned with testing out new traits and skills, a situation in which people probably are uncertain and need to rely on peers as judgmental anchors (Suls, 1986; Wheeler, Martin, & Suls, 1997).

Aspects of the present results are consistent with the idea that participants use their absolute standing to make trait judgments. The stronger BTA effects in HSEs can be accounted for by the HSEs' greater absolute sense of their traits and abilities. Also, to the extent that a trait dimension can be idiosyncratically construed, people with a higher absolute sense of their worth should be better able to take advantage of the latitude of interpretation to accentuate their positive attributes and minimize their negative attributes. However, the absolute-level perspective is not able to account for all of the present results. If participants only used their absolute sense of the degree to which they possessed a particular attribute to make estimates, then the magnitude of the BTA effect should have been the same across targets and comparison groups.

The correlational nature of the results is acknowledged as a limitation. We cannot discount, for example, the possibility that self-esteem, rather than causing differential use of construal, is the product of differential construal. That is, by defining traits in such a way as to make themselves feel better, people obtain a boost to self-esteem. This alternative explanation seems to presume, however, that the particular traits we used were central and salient for the individual's self-schemas (Markus, 1977). Also, a rather circuitous process would need to be posited to explain how ratings for friends versus others (Study 2) would enhance dispositional self-esteem. Nonetheless, correlational data cannot completely eliminate the possibility of reverse causation or third-variable explanations. Results of Studies 4a and 4b do show that trait ambiguity was not confounded with controllability, observability, importance, or desirability, thus increasing confidence that the ambiguity of the traits was responsible for the observed effects.

Conclusion

Whether the BTA effect is based on a pseudocomparison or motivational mechanisms (these are not mutually exclusive alternatives), the present results demonstrate the contribution that individual differences in construal make to comparative judgments about the self and others. Across self-esteem level, people showed evidence of using trait ambiguity to their advantage with respect to positive attributes. Lower self-esteem, however, seems to be associated with a reluctance to use construal to minimize undesirable personal attributes. Such persons seem able to accentuate the positive, as the old song insists, but eliminating the negative seems to be more difficult for them. LSEs do not think they lack positive qualities; rather, they too readily acknowledge their negative attributes.

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