



# Explaining False Uniqueness: Why We are Both Better and Worse Than Others

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## Abstract

People see themselves as unique from others – as having better personalities and abilities, more desirable opinions, and brighter futures than almost everyone else. In the past, researchers attributed these ‘false uniqueness perceptions’ primarily to a need or desire to see oneself in the most charitable light possible (i.e., self-enhancement). More recent findings – that oftentimes people claim to be worse off than others – call this view into question and raise the need to find explanations that can account for both positive and negative forms of uniqueness perceptions. This review describes several of the leading non-motivated (cognitive) explanations for false uniqueness perceptions and discusses recent empirical findings that establish their role in these phenomena. The rationality of false uniqueness perceptions and the status of motivated reasoning are also briefly considered.

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If humans share one thing in common, it is the tendency to see themselves as unique. Unique not just in any way, but as early research on social comparison judgments indicated, unique in ways that are *socially desirable*. In countless surveys with people from all age, education, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups around the world, most report themselves to be kinder, fairer, happier, more honest, polite, generous, athletic, logical, attractive, socially skilled, and better drivers, managers, friends, lovers, and parents than the average person (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986; Campbell, 1986; College Board, 1976–1977; Epley & Dunning, 2000; Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985; Svenson, 1981; for a review, see Alicke & Govorun, 2005). In other words, most people think they are ‘better than average’ with respect to their abilities and personalities, one of several manifestations of false uniqueness perceptions.

Not only do people think their abilities and personalities are superior, they also believe their futures are brighter, too. They say they are less likely than others to experience negative outcomes – to develop the flu, have a heart attack at an early age, be unemployed, seriously injured in an automobile accident, become addicted to drugs and alcohol, be mugged – and more likely than others to experience positive outcomes – to live past age 80, have a successful career, have a happy marriage, an intellectually

gifted child, and a good starting salary (Larwood, 1978; Perloff & Fetzer, 1986; Weinstein, 1980, 1987).

Apparently, they also work harder and produce more than others. When comparing their own versus others' contributions to a group activity, people often claim more than their fair share and far more than is logically possible (Ross & Sicoly, 1979). As one example, students working together on a group project reported contributing approximately 20% more of the work than they believed their peers contributed – all were uniquely hardworking.

Even in matters of subjective opinion and emotions, people tend to see themselves as better than the average. During the 1970s, an era when racial attitudes were shifting towards increased tolerance and acceptance, people believed they were personally less prejudiced than the average resident in their town (Fields & Schuman, 1976). And following the September 11 terrorist attacks, most Americans believed they were more upset than their fellow citizens by the events of that day, as if they were all uniquely 'touched' by the tragedy (Smith, Rasinski, & Toce, 2001). New parents report being more 'joyful' at the birth of their child than they assume other new parents feel, making them all look especially caring, devoted, and loving. And citizens in one survey said they were more concerned about the environment and enthusiastic about environment protection laws than their fellow citizens were (White & Plous, 1995).

So widespread and robust were these findings – variously called 'above average effects,' 'unrealistic optimism,' 'false uniqueness,' and 'positivity biases' – that the author of one of the most popular psychology textbooks was led to conclude, 'For nearly any subjective and socially desirable dimension . . . most people see themselves as better than average' (Myers, 1998; p. 440). At the time, many theorists assumed these phenomena reflected motivational concerns, particularly the desire to see or describe the self in the most favorable light possible (e.g., Brown, 1986; Kunda, 1990; Regan, Snyder, & Kasson, 1995; Suls & Wan, 1987; Weinstein & Klein, 1995). By distorting their social standing, the argument went, people could gain a sense of comfort, esteem, and self-satisfaction. Some even went so far as to claim these false uniqueness perceptions were an indispensable part of a well-functioning mental health system, by buffering people from the inevitable stressors, hassles, and setbacks of daily life (Taylor & Brown, 1988). The explanations for these phenomena, like the phenomena themselves, thus had the flavor of self-enhancement. The picture that emerged from this early research, then, was of the person as a 'zealous self-affirmer,' someone who was all too eager to believe her abilities, attitudes, traits, contributions, and prospects for the future were uniquely superior.

But this picture was only half complete. Soon, findings began trickling in that did not mesh well with these motivational explanations. For instance,

people would claim themselves to be more moral than average, but not necessarily smarter (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989). Students would rate themselves better than the 'average student' at their university on all sorts of personality attributes, but not much better than any single student selected at random (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995). Far from being boldly optimistic, people would rate their chances of being harmed in a natural disaster, a serious auto accident, or by a serious illness no differently than others' chances after having lived through these events (Burger & Palmer, 1992; Kulik & Mahler, 1987; McKenna & Albery, 2001), or when such catastrophes were impending (Taylor & Shepperd, 1998). People were overly optimistic for some negative outcomes, such as 'having a heart attack before age 40', but not other, equally-devastating outcomes, like 'developing cancer' (Weinstein, 1980). Not only would people see themselves less at risk than the average person, they would believe the same about almost any other individual (Klar, Medding, & Sarel, 1996; see also Epley & Dunning, 2000; Klar & Giladi, 1997; Klar, 2002), and even randomly selected *objects* (e.g., a pleasant-smelling soap) were rated more positively than others from the same category (Giladi & Klar, 2002): It seemed the self was beginning to lose its privileged place in the world.

More damaging to the motivational explanations have been recent findings in the literature of 'below-average effects' and 'unrealistic pessimism.' Residents living in the vicinity of a nuclear power plant disaster believed they were at greater risk for radiation-related illnesses than other residents living in the same vicinity (Dolinski, Gromski, & Zawisza, 1987). College students thought they were more uncomfortable with binge-drinking practices than the average student at their campus, even while believing that alcohol use was normative – and thus, highly encouraged and even admired – among their peers (Prentice & Miller, 1993; see also McFarland & Miller, 1990). Patients diagnosed with phobias believed their fears were much more profound than those of other patients with the same phobia (Suls, Wan, Barlow, & Heimberg, 1990). College students believed they suffered more embarrassment during a public speech than they believed other speakers experienced (Marcus & Miller, 1999; see also Sabini, Cosmas, Siepmann, & Stein, 1999). Asked how well they would cope with severe misfortunes, like becoming sterile, contracting AIDS, or having a spouse die in an automobile accident, most people thought they would fare worse than others (Blanton, Axsom, McClive, & Price, 2001). People judged themselves 'below average' in their ability for particularly difficult tasks, like computer programming (Kruger, 1999) or performing highly difficult athletic maneuvers, like 'heading' a soccer ball (Van Yperen, 1992), even when these abilities were considered important to the self. College students were unduly pessimistic about their chances of scoring in the top-half of the class grade distribution when expecting to take a very difficult exam (see, e.g., Moore & Kim, 2003; Windschitl, Kruger, &

Simms, 2003). People would see themselves as having greater-than-average chances for certain negative events, like being overcharged at a restaurant or getting a call from telemarketers, and less-than-average chances for certain positive events, like meeting a famous celebrity, winning the lottery, or living past age 100 (Chambers, Windschitl, & Suls, 2003; Klar & Ayal, 2004; Kruger & Burrus, 2004; see also Fenigstein, 1984). The early view of the person – as someone who ‘peered at the self through rose-tinted glasses’ – was soon replaced by a view of someone who was occasionally self-deprecating, self-defeating, and self-loathing.

### **Non-motivated (Cognitive) Accounts of False Uniqueness Perceptions**

What explains these biased judgments? If motivational accounts were found wanting, were there any simpler, more parsimonious explanations that could account for all varieties of false uniqueness perceptions, including both unrealistic optimism *and* pessimism, above-average *and* below-average effects, overclaiming responsibility for both good *and* bad actions? In a recent review of the literature on comparative biases, Chambers and Windschitl (2004) proposed an information-processing model of social comparative judgments that attempts to explain each of these forms of biased judgment (and potentially many others). The model describes the general sequence of steps – from information recruitment, absolute evaluation, and comparative judgment formation – that a person may go through en route to assessing his or her relative standing on some dimension, along with several non-motivated (cognitive) processes that may operate at any one of these steps and ultimately produce a biased comparative judgment. The simplicity of the model allows it to be applied to almost any type of social comparison – be it comparisons of one’s abilities, personality characteristics, event chances, emotions, contributions to a group activity, or attitudes and beliefs.

Below, I will summarize several of the primary non-motivated accounts of bias described in their review, along with a discussion of studies that have empirically tested these accounts. In isolation or in combination, each of these processes (and their effects on comparative judgments) have been strongly confirmed by these studies. All in all, these non-motivated accounts do a better job of explaining the full spectrum of false uniqueness perceptions than many of their motivational counterparts, they make a number of novel predictions, they shed light on some anomalies in the literature on comparative judgments, and they invoke well-understood and well-researched cognitive and judgment principles. Thus, when analyzed from the perspective of these non-motivational accounts, what were seemingly self-enhancing perceptions were actually the flawed by-products of people’s normal (but imperfect) information processing and reasoning abilities.

*Egocentrism*

Relative to other drivers, how likely are you to be seriously injured in an automobile accident? Answering this question requires you to assess your own and other drivers' absolute chances and then compare these assessments. Yet, because self-relevant information comes to mind with greater ease and in greater quantities than does equivalent information about others (Kuiper & Rogers, 1979; Prentice, 1990), you probably focused mostly on you own absolute chances when making the comparison and gave insufficient attention to the absolute chances of other drivers. Consequently, because your absolute chances of being seriously injured in a car accident are quite slim, you (like most people asked this question) probably concluded that your risk is 'below average'.

This egocentric tendency – to focus almost exclusively on one's own absolute standing when making a comparison and neglect to consider others' absolute standing – implies that whenever people's absolute chances for an event are high, abilities are good, traits are strong, contributions are large, or emotions and attitudes are intense, they will judge themselves more likely, more able, possessing more of a trait, having contributed more, and experiencing stronger attitudes and feelings than the comparison group. And conversely, whenever their absolute chances for an event are low, abilities are poor, traits are weak, contributions are small, and emotions and attitudes are weak, people will judge themselves less likely, less able, possessing less of a trait, having contributed less, and experiencing weaker attitudes and feelings than the comparison group.

Egocentrism can explain the superiority biases initially noted in the literature, but unlike motivational accounts, it also has the power to explain the inferiority biases documented more recently. For instance, whereas people rate themselves 'above average' in ability for easy tasks like driving a car, operating a computer mouse, and solving very easy math problems – all tasks where absolute ability/performance tends to be high – they rate themselves as having 'below average' ability for difficult tasks like juggling, computer programming, and solving very difficult and complex math problems – all tasks where absolute ability/performance tends to be low (Kruger, 1999). Egocentrism can also explain why test takers are overly optimistic about their chances of finishing in the top half of a class on an easy exam, but overly pessimistic about their chances when the exam is very difficult: they consider how an easy (difficult) exam will boost (hinder) their performance, but fail to thoroughly consider the fact that it would have roughly the same effect on the performance of other test takers, too. And it can explain why people think they could do a better job than others coping with relatively mundane negative outcomes (like breaking a bone, something most people could manage with) but a worse job coping with relatively severe negative outcomes (like becoming sterile or contracting AIDS,

things most people would struggle mightily with; Blanton et al., 2001).

Moreover, egocentrism can also explain why group members tend to credit themselves more than others in their group for both desirable *and* undesirable outcomes (why, for example, husbands and wives not only claim to have done more of the household chores than their spouse but also started more of the arguments and left more messes; Ross & Sicoly, 1979). Specifically, people note their own inputs, both good and bad, but fail to think exhaustively about the inputs made by other group members. Egocentrism can also explain ‘emotion intensity biases,’ the assumption that we experience our own attitudes, preferences, and emotional states with greater intensity than other people experience theirs (Chambers & Suls, 2007). When comparing how much they and others like a delectable dessert, despise a reviled dictator, or desire for their home football team to win the championship game, people focus almost exclusively on their own strong likes, hatreds, and wants, and end up concluding that they personally like, hate, and want these things more than others do. And whereas people say they have ‘greater-than-average’ chances for frequently occurring events, they say they have ‘less-than-average’ chances for rarely occurring events, producing unrealistic optimism for frequent, desirable and infrequent, undesirable outcomes (e.g., receiving a heartfelt kiss from a girlfriend or boyfriend, being falsely accused of a serious crime), but unrealistic pessimism about infrequent, desirable and frequent, undesirable outcomes (e.g., dating a famous celebrity, receiving a parking ticket) (Chambers et al., 2003; Kruger & Burrus, 2004; see also Klar et al., 1996; Klar & Ayal, 2004; Price, Pentecost, & Voth, 2002).

Other aspects of the egocentrism account have also received support. First, when absolute self-other evaluations (How honest are you? How honest is the average person?) are solicited along with comparative judgments, evaluations of the self correlate more strongly with comparative judgments than do evaluations of the comparison group (Chambers et al., 2003; Eiser, Pahl, & Prins, 2001; Klar & Giladi, 1999; Kruger, 1999; Windschitl et al., 2003). Second, above- and below-average effects become magnified when people’s cognitive resources are depleted by a distracting secondary task – tasks that would further limit their ability to give adequate attention to the absolute standing of the comparison group when making a comparison (Kruger, 1999).

Third, manipulations of event characteristics, such as to the perceived frequency, desirability, or controllability of an event, produce predictable changes in comparative optimism and pessimism (e.g., Chambers et al., 2003; Gold, 2007; Kruger & Burrus, 2004; see also Kruger, 1999; Reber, Meier, Ruch-Monachon, & Tiberini, 2006). Although such manipulations should have no overall effect on people’s comparative risk estimates because they affect the self and comparison group’s chances exactly the same, they do, evidently because people give too little consideration to

how the comparison group's chances are affected and too much to how their own are affected. In some recent studies examining comparative judgments of ability, for instance, Reber et al. (2006) manipulated the perceived ease of a task while holding objective performance constant. Participants judged themselves 'above average' in ability when the task felt easy but only 'average' or even 'below average' when the task felt difficult (see also Kruger, 1999).

Fourth, when attention is shifted towards the comparison group and away from the self – by instructions to think carefully about the comparison group (Chambers & Suls, 2007; Weinstein & Lachendro, 1982), by asking questions specifically about the comparison group (Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Windschitl et al., 2003), or by having participants read biographical information written by members of the comparison group (Weinstein, 1980) – the superiority and inferiority biases typically observed diminish, disappear, or reverse themselves. When egocentrism goes away, so do false uniqueness perceptions.

### *Selective accessibility*

One cause of egocentrism mentioned earlier is the notion that self-relevant information comes to mind with greater perceived ease than does information about others. The consequence is that, when making a comparison, a person will usually find it easier to come up with instances of his own traits (or ability, likelihood, attitudes) than those of the comparison group. Sometimes, a person will use this difference in 'subjective ease' as a rough approximation of his or her relative standing: The easier it feels to recall instances of trait or behavior *X* in oneself than in others, the more *X* self will be judged in relation to others (akin to use of an 'availability heuristic,' Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). For example, someone may claim to be a 'worse than average' public speaker because she can more easily remember occasions when she fumbled an important line, stuttered, or 'went blank' during a speech than occasions when her peers did the same – even if the occasions she remembers about herself and her peers are identical in terms of overall quantity and quality.

In one study examining the role of accessibility differences in comparative biases (Chambers & Kruger, 2007), participants both compared themselves with their peers along a number of trait dimensions (e.g., 'How honest are you compared to the average university student?') and made separate absolute judgments about themselves and their peers (e.g., 'How honest are you?' and 'How honest is the average university student?'). The time they took to make each of these three judgments was unobtrusively recorded. In line with the selective accessibility account, people judged their own absolute standing on trait dimensions more rapidly than they judged their peer's absolute standing. Moreover, these self-other accessibility differences translated into biased comparative judgments: Those who were relatively

faster to report on the self (than on the average student) exhibited stronger bias in their comparative judgments than those who were slower, just as the selective accessibility account would suggest.

As mentioned earlier, people tend to overclaim their relative contributions to group activities – they take more credit for work than they give to other members of their group. Savitsky, Van Boven, Epley, and Wight (2005) have demonstrated that self-other accessibility differences are a major cause of this phenomenon because one's own inputs tend to be more accessible or available in memory than the inputs made by fellow group members. In one of their studies, students who had worked together on a class paper estimated what percentage of the total work had been their own. As has often been observed, they tended to overclaim responsibility. However, when they were asked to list some of *their peer's* individual contributions before estimating their own overall contribution – in essence, forcing them to think explicitly about the work their peers had done and making those contributions more accessible in memory – they were much less apt to overclaim responsibility (see also Ross & Sicoly, 1979, Experiment 5).

If people rely on the 'ease' with which information about the self versus others comes to mind, then manipulating the accessibility of such information should affect thoughts about their comparative standing. In a study by Caruso (2008), participants recalled either two or eight examples of their own or the average student's assertiveness. Most participants found it quite difficult to recall eight examples of their own or the average student's assertiveness but quite easy to recall only two examples. Consistent with the selective accessibility idea, participants judged themselves much less assertive than average after recalling many examples than after recalling only a few (see also Schwarz & Vaughn, 2002). Interestingly, the effects of accessibility differences on comparative biases were driven by changes in self-judgments alone; the accessibility manipulation (i.e., number of examples recalled) influenced judgments of one's own assertiveness but not the average student's assertiveness. The message from this research on selective accessibility is that people may judge their social standing as much by the subjective ease with which information about themselves versus others can be brought to mind, as by the amount or quality of the information actually recalled.

### *Focalism*

Apart from any general tendency to overweight self-relevant information and underweight information relevant to others (i.e., egocentrism), we have a corresponding tendency to give particular weight to information that has been brought to the forefront of our attention and overlook equally relevant information in the background (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998; Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000). This 'focalism,'

as it is called, has immediate implications for comparative judgments because these judgments require assessments of two or more entities (e.g., me vs. my neighbor, my grandpa vs. the typical senior citizen) and one entity may attract more attention than the other(s) simply because the comparative question is represented or phrased in such a way that it implicitly draws attention to that particular entity. Thus, that ‘focal’ entity will receive disproportionate weight in the comparative judgment and be judged as more extreme than the ‘non-focal’ entity.

A number of studies have confirmed that focalism plays a key role in comparative biases and false uniqueness effects. For instance, simply reversing the ordering of the comparative question – making the non-focal entity focal (and vice versa) – substantially reduces or even reverses these effects (Chambers et al., 2003; Eiser, Pahl, & Prins, 2001; Hodges, Bruininks, & Ivy, 2002; Hoorens & Buunk, 1993; Kruger & Burrus, 2004). For instance, participants express optimism (above-average chances) when asked the question ‘Compared to the average student, how likely are you to earn a good-paying job after graduating?’, but no optimism (same-as-average chances) when asked the very same question in its reversed form, ‘Compared to you, how likely is the average student to earn a good-paying job after graduating?’

Likewise, when pairs of students predicted their chances of beating each other on a trivia game, they nearly always thought they would win when the game was comprised of easy trivia categories (like ‘Adam Sandler movies’) but lose when it was comprised of difficult categories (like ‘Russian literature’). But when asked about their *competitor’s* chances of winning rather than their own – in essence, making the competitor ‘focal’ – these *shared circumstance effects* virtually disappeared (Windschitl et al., 2003). In a study examining a closely related question, Moore and Kim (2003) had students place bets on one co-participant’s chances of beating another (non-focal) co-participant on a trivia game. They bet more when the quiz was easy rather than difficult evidently because they considered how an easy quiz would improve the focal co-participant’s performance (and how a difficult quiz would impair it) without considering that it would affect the non-focal co-participant’s performance similarly.

One may ask whether egocentrism plays any role separate from focalism. That is, if comparative biases are reduced when the self takes the non-focal position, is there any reason to say that the self (and self-relevant information) is usually given more weight than others in the comparison? Indeed, there is. First, although biases are reduced by putting the self in the non-focal position, they are merely reduced and *not entirely reversed in direction and magnitude* – as they should be if judges are only giving weight to whichever entity (self or comparison group) is made focal (see Chambers et al., 2003; Eiser et al., 2001; Haslam & Bain, 2007; Windschitl et al., 2003). Second, even when the self is made non-focal in the comparison and the comparison group is made focal, judgments about the self’s

absolute standing still predict comparative ratings as well as, or better than, judgments about the comparison group's absolute standing (e.g., Chambers & Suls, in press; Eiser et al., 2001; Windschitl et al., 2003).

### *Generalized groups*

Think quickly: How good is the average person at ballroom dancing? It is tough to know, in part, because it is difficult to form a confident impression of a large, abstract entity like the 'the typical person' or an 'average student.' But you can probably say with greater certainty something about how good you, your best friend, spouse, Grandpa, or your boss is. This is because we usually form more cohesive, schematic impressions of single individuals than groups, even when these impressions are based on the very same information (Susskind, Maurer, Thakkar, Hamilton, & Sherman, 1999). The tendency to form more confident and extreme judgments about single, concrete, highly individuated targets than about large and diffuse groups (or collections of individuals) has obvious implications for false uniqueness effects. In general, almost any single, individuated target (be it oneself, a best friend, an acquaintance, or Grandpa) will be judged as more extreme when compared with almost any large, diffuse group or collection of individuals (most students, the typical American, the average senior citizen). This will be especially true when the large reference group is unfamiliar and one about which the perceiver has no strong pre-existing stereotypes.

There is a wealth of evidence favoring the generalized group account. As mentioned earlier, students rated themselves more 'above average' when comparing themselves with the 'average student' than when comparing themselves with a single, live student selected at random, even though the latter should be representative of what the 'average student' is like (Alicke et al., 1995; see also Price, 2001; Price, Smith, & Lench, 2006). And almost any single, randomly selected member of a group – even a member about which very little is known – tends to be rated as more extreme than the average of the group (Klar et al., 1996; Klar & Giladi, 1997; see also Giladi & Klar, 2002). For example, in one of Klar and Giladi's (1997) studies, Israeli students were presented with only minimal information (e.g., the I.D. number) about a single, randomly selected member of ' Hamas,' a Palestinian group linked to numerous terrorist attacks inside Israel. Students overwhelmingly rated that member more negatively than the average Hamas member, as if 'each part' of this despised group was 'worse than the whole.' In another study, the same Israeli students rated a single, randomly selected student from their university (an admired social group) more positively than the average university student, even when the only 'information' they possessed about the single student was a picture, name, or ID number (Klar & Giladi, 1997). Dozens of other studies have found stronger false uniqueness perceptions when single individuals are

compared with large, abstract social groups than when compared with other, single individuals – whether the individuals being compared are the self, a friend, a casual acquaintance, or even a relatively unknown stranger (e.g., Perloff & Fetzer, 1986; Suls, Lemos, & Stewart, 2002).

### **Are False Uniqueness Perceptions Rational?**

Most researchers agree that false uniqueness perceptions constitute biased judgments. Clearly, not everyone can be better or worse off than everyone else. Neither can everyone contribute more, nor have more intense attitudes and emotional experiences, than the average person in their group. However, there are occasions when it may be perfectly sensible to judge oneself to be different from others (even beyond those occasions when one is *known* to be dissimilar). That is, when information about the comparison group is inadequate or held with little confidence, as is often the case, a person may rely on the one piece of information that is most readily available and reliable – information about the self. Thus, when judging one's relative standing on some dimension, a person may give more weight to what is known (i.e., the self's absolute standing) than what is unknown (i.e., the absolute standing of the comparison group). Consequently, when a person's absolute standing is extreme, he may reasonably assume his comparative standing is also extreme. For example, being confident that I am fearful of a terrorist attack, but uncertain about how fearful other Americans are, I may deduce that I am more fearful than other Americans. This belief, although quite rational for any individual, would produce false uniqueness perceptions (e.g., above- and below-average effects) when everyone in the group reasons in the same way (for a related but distinct explanation emphasizing the regressiveness of self-other predictions, see Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Moore & Small, 2007).

In one study illustrating this 'rational discounting,' pairs of students competed against each other in a mock war game (Kruger et al., in press). Both sides had either exceptionally good or poor armaments, but critically, the amount of information they possessed about their competitor's armaments was either the same or less than the amount they possessed about their own. When they had the same amount of information about both sides, participants were no more optimistic about emerging victorious in battle when they had good armaments than when they had poor armaments. However, when they had less information about their competitor's armaments than their own, participants with good armaments were highly optimistic and those with poor armaments were highly pessimistic.

The idea of 'rational discounting' supposes that whenever one entity in a comparison is known with greater certainty than the other entity, the more confidently known entity will be judged as more extreme than the other. This occurs in comparisons between self and others, of course, because people usually know much more about themselves than they do

about others (hence, we are 'egocentric' in our comparisons). If it is true that people give more weight to whichever entity is confidently known, then they should give more weight to someone they know well than to someone they do not know when making a comparison between the two. In another study, participants predicted the chances that a high school acquaintance (someone they knew fairly well) would defeat a study co-participant (someone they did not know at all) on a trivia game comprised of easy or difficult item categories (Kruger et al., in press). Indeed, they thought their high school acquaintance would win on the easy categories but lose on the difficult categories, evidently because they were more confident about how the difficulty of the category items would affect the performance of their high school acquaintance than the performance of their co-participant.

### **The Role of Motivation**

Although evidence favoring the non-motivational accounts of false uniqueness perceptions is mounting, it would be a mistake to deny that motivations (particularly the motivation to self-enhance) play some part in these phenomena. Indeed, there are a number of findings in the literature that are difficult if not impossible to reconcile with the non-motivated accounts I have reviewed.

For example, given fabricated information suggesting that the average person has very low risk for a disease, people strategically adjust their perceived personal risks to a point even lower, as if to preserve their uniquely invulnerable status (Rothman, Klein, & Weinstein, 1996; see also Klein & Kunda, 1993; Weinstein & Klein, 1995). In one clever study by Alicke et al. (2001), students rated themselves along several positive and negative trait dimensions. Later, they were shown the ratings of 'another student' (which, unbeknownst to them, were actually the ratings they made earlier) and asked to rate themselves once again on the same trait dimensions. The result? They judged themselves even better than this other 'student' – in effect, they were even better than themselves! And whereas people are self-effacing in their comparative judgments after their self-concepts have been publicly threatened, they are self-aggrandizing after their self-concepts have been privately threatened (Brown & Gallagher, 1992). In other words, if the legitimacy of their self-views cannot be challenged by others, people will grasp the opportunity to self-enhance and claim to be better off than others. And even after other event factors like frequency and controllability are controlled for, people still say their (relative) chances are greater for desirable than for undesirable events (Chambers et al., 2003; see also Alicke, 1985).

Findings like these, which seem more fitting with motivational accounts, illustrate a fundamental point about false uniqueness perceptions: they are multiply determined and subject to the influence of both motivated

and non-motivated processes. Researchers interested in false uniqueness perceptions must now move beyond debating whether one type of process or the other is responsible and begin to explore the complex interplay between these processes (see Moore, 2005 for efforts in this direction).

## Summary

People often see themselves as unique from others in terms of their personalities, abilities, opinions, and futures. As this brief review has revealed, these 'false uniqueness perceptions' can be understood as outcomes of three distinct non-motivated processes: The tendency to overweight information about the self and underweight information about the comparison group (egocentrism), the tendency to overweight focal information and underweight non-focal information (focalism), and the tendency for single, individualized persons to be weighted more heavily than large, abstract social groups (generalized groups) when making a comparison. Depending on the specific trait, ability, opinion, or event in question, each of these processes may give rise to both positive forms of false uniqueness perceptions (e.g., above-average effects, unrealistic optimism, overclaiming responsibility for positive outcomes) as well as negative forms (e.g., below-average effects, unrealistic pessimism, overclaiming responsibility for negative outcomes). Along with fundamental motives to protect or enhance the self, these non-motivated (cognitive) accounts provide a compelling explanation for when and why otherwise ordinary humans come to see themselves as extraordinary.

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## Short Biography

John Chambers is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Florida, where he has been since receiving his Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Iowa in 2005. He has taught courses in introductory social psychology, judgment and decision making, and social cognition, and his current research examines self-referential thinking in social comparison and judgment. He has authored papers in journals such as *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *Psychological Bulletin*, and *Psychological Science*.

## Endnote

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Traditionally, researchers have used two methods to assess false uniqueness biases. In the 'direct method,' people report how they compare with a reference along a given dimension. For example, a group of people might be asked 'How honest are you compared to the average person?' and respond on a verbal or numeric scale anchored by phrases such as *I'm more honest, I'm as honest, and I'm less honest*. The researcher then examines whether the average response deviates from the scale midpoint (representing 'same as average'), and bias is revealed if the average response systematically deviates in one direction or the other from the midpoint. In the 'indirect method,' people report their own or the comparison group's absolute standing along a dimension (e.g., 'How honest are you?' and 'How honest is the average person?') using a common response scale (e.g., *not at all to very*). The researcher then compares the average responses given for the separate targets, and bias is indicated if the average response for one target systematically deviates from the average response for the other target. Typically, researchers observe more robust false uniqueness effects using the direct method than using the indirect method, possibly because some of the non-motivated processes outlined in this article (namely, egocentrism and focalism) are operative only when people make direct comparisons (for a discussion, see Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Helweg-Larsen & Shepperd, 2001).

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