



Brief report

Behind bars but above the bar: Prisoners consider themselves more prosocial than non-prisoners

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That people evaluate themselves more favourably than their average peer on desirable characteristics – the better-than-average effect (BTAE) – is one of the most frequently cited instances of motivated self-enhancement. It has been argued, however, that the BTAE can be rational when the distribution of characteristics is skewed such that most people lie above the mean. We addressed whether the BTAE is present even among people liable to be objectively below average on such characteristics. Prisoners compared their standing on pro-social characteristics – such as kindness, morality, law abidingness – with non-prisoners. Prisoners exhibited the BTAE on every characteristic except law abidingness, for which they viewed themselves as average. Given that prisoners are unlikely to be objectively above average on pro-social characteristics, the findings push for a motivational interpretation of the BTAE.

The tendency for people to evaluate their characteristics and prospects more favourably than those of their peers is one of the staple findings in social and personality psychology (Alicke & Sedikides, 2011). As long as these claims of superiority are not egregious, overestimating the quality of one's abilities, traits, circumstances, possessions, and relations yields certain benefits. For example, unrealistically favourable self-views can instil the confidence needed to persevere at difficult tasks, provide the motivation required to overcome setbacks and obstacles, and engender positive self-feelings (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Dufner *et al.*, 2012; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). But, of course, self-enhancement has drawbacks too, particularly when it leads people to miscalibrate their personally and socially deleterious habits and characteristics. For example, those who are lazy, engage in harmful health practices, alienate others with their selfishness or poor social skills, and fail or refuse to recognize these inadequacies will be unlikely to rectify their faults (Dufner *et al.*, 2013; Hoorens, 2011; Hoorens, Pandelaere, Oldersma, & Sedikides, 2012; Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007).

Self-enhancement theorists assume that self-enhancement tendencies are bounded by reality constraints; that is, by the need to maintain believability to oneself and others

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(Brown & Dutton, 1995; Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011; Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). From this vantage, those who possess inferior social or physical characteristics, or who operate on unusually low moral or ethical planes, would seem to face considerable obstacles to self-enhancement, due to the sheer degree of reality distortion required. Research has shown, however, at least in intellectual domains, that students at the low end of performance distributions are the most inaccurate at estimating their task outcomes (Kruger & Dunning, 1999; for a debate on the topic, see Krueger & Dunning, 2002; Krueger & Mueller, 2002). Apparently, those who occupy the bottom rung of intellectual skills lack the insight required to recognize their shortcomings. Although these findings pertain to inaccuracy in performance estimations rather than self-enhancement *per se*, they suggest that individuals who are objectively poor in a behavioural domain exhibit self-enhancement due to meta-cognitive failures (i.e., the inability to self-analyse), motivational forces (i.e., the need to maintain or amplify their favourable self-views), or both.

One purpose of this research, therefore, was to assess whether people who by dint of their objective status are likely to occupy the low end of trait distributions also exhibit self-enhancement on these characteristics. More important, however, we were interested in resolving a central theoretical issue that involves the most frequently cited instance of self-enhancement in the literature, namely, the better-than-average effect (BTAE; Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Brown, 2012; Guenther & Alicke, 2010; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). The BTAE is the finding that people consistently evaluate themselves more favourably than an average peer on most trait characteristics. Although the BTAE is moderated (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004) by factors such as *focalism* (the effect is larger when an average peer is compared with the self than when the self is compared with an average peer), *egocentrism* (the effect is larger or smaller depending on whether one is selectively thinking about one's own strengths or weaknesses), and the *nature of the comparison target* (the effect is smaller when the self is compared with a specific peer than to an average one), the basic BTAE effect persists across these variations (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Sedikides & Alicke, 2012). Furthermore, although alternatives to self-enhancement interpretations have been posited, evidence has established that the desire to maintain positive self-views is a prominent contributor to the effect (Brown, 2012; Gaertner, Sedikides, & Cai, 2012; Guenther & Alicke, 2010).

The BTAE effect, however, is typically not measured with reference to an objective standard. That is, there is usually no unequivocal way to assess whether or not people are better than average on a particular trait. As such, a sceptic could argue that, at least in some circumstances, people's assumption of superiority is rational rather than biased. In particular, it is possible for most people to be better than average in a negatively skewed trait distribution – one in which the majority of people studied are above the mean (or the median). Given that the BTAE has been obtained on so many trait dimensions, has emerged in diverse circumstances, and varies in the direction that self-enhancement theories predict (such as with increasing trait desirability or importance; Alicke, 1985; Brown, 2012; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005), this argument is not plausible as a general critique of self-enhancement claims. Nevertheless, it would buttress the self-enhancement perspective to demonstrate the BTAE's existence among a sub-population of people whose status on the trait dimensions is too low to argue convincingly that their average standing is disproportionately positive.

To this end, we assessed the BTAE among individuals who were serving prison sentences for criminal convictions on trait dimensions related to good citizenship or pro-sociality such as honesty, law abidingness, and self-control. Although the BTAE has

not been studied in prison populations, research has shown that prisoners are overly optimistic about their post-release chances of recidivism; in particular, they predict that they will be less likely to commit future crimes than objective recidivism rates indicate (Dhimi, Mandel, Loewenstein, & Ayton, 2006). We conjectured that this unrealistic optimism about future behaviour would extend more generally to unrealistic trait evaluations. Arguably, it would not be surprising if prisoners viewed themselves more favourably than the average prisoner, given the readily available instances and salience of negative or criminal behaviour to which they are exposed in prison. It is a different matter, however, if prisoners viewed their moral and ethical characteristics to be superior to those of people in the non-incarcerated population. If prisoners possess inflated self-views on characteristics such as these, it not only suggests that they possess poor self-insight – akin to the low-performing students in Kruger and Dunning's (1999) studies – but also that their prospects of reforming their unfavourable characteristics are weak, given that they view themselves favourably rather than unfavourably relative to others on these traits.

Method

Participants

We tested 85 convicted offenders at a prison in the south of England. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 34 years ($M = 20.40$, $SD = 1.65$). Although their offences varied, the majority was incarcerated for violence against people (36.7%), robbery (25.3%), drug offences (5.1%), and burglary (5.1%); 17.7% of inmates checked the option 'prefer not to say', and the remaining few reported being convicted of fraud and forgery (2.5%), motoring offences (2.5%), sexual offences (1.3%), theft and handling stolen goods (1.3%), criminal damage (1.3%), and other offences (1.3%). When we analysed the data reported below on the basis of crime classification, type of crime did not moderate the reported findings. Of the 85 cases collected, we used only 79 in the analysis. We removed five cases due to identical responses on each of the questions, and one case due to an implausible age.

Procedure

The experimenter greeted the participants in a meeting room as part of a larger prison-wide event attended on a voluntary basis by approximately 200 prisoners. Up to 20 participants were tested in each session. Participants were seated around tables, but with sufficient space between them to guarantee privacy and response confidentiality. After explaining that they were being requested to participate in a study of self-perception, participants were instructed to read (or had read to them) and sign a sheet indicating informed consent. The experimenter then distributed the questionnaire to each participant. Ensuring anonymity, and in an effort to reduce concerns about responses being linked to individuals, participants were reassured that no identifying information would be collected; indeed, members of the prison staff were nearby but absent during data collection. Participants submitted their responses directly to the experimenter upon completion.

Dependent measures

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section was prefaced with the following instructions: 'Please rate yourself in comparison to the average prisoner on each

of the following characteristics'. The nine traits were as follows: moral, kind to others, trustworthy, honest, dependable, compassionate, generous, law abiding, and self-controlled. For each of these traits, respondents were asked to respond on a 11-point scale ($-5 = I$ am much less [insert trait] than the average prisoner, $5 = I$ am much more [insert trait] than the average prisoner). The primary question of interest was whether or not participants would rate themselves as better than the average prisoner (i.e., greater than zero) on each of the given traits.

The second section of the questionnaire was identical to the first, except that, instead of asking participants to compare themselves with the average prisoner, it asked them to compare themselves with the average member of the community. (The order of the first and second sections was counterbalanced.) The final section of the questionnaire contained demographic information comprising age, ethnicity, language, the category of offence for which they were serving their current sentence, and whether or not they had committed repeated offences. Debriefing concluded the testing session.

Results

An initial analysis included an order variable pertaining to whether participants first compared themselves with prisoners or with the average community member. None of the findings reported below was qualified by order, and so we excluded it from the analysis. Also, some participants ($n = 11$) failed to respond to every item. However, analyses conducted with these participants removed yielded the same results, and so we included them in the analyses.

Comparison with prisoners

Participants rated themselves as significantly better than the average prisoner on all traits, with mean values above zero indicating a positive better than average bias (Table 1). Specifically, they rated themselves as more moral, kinder to others, more self-controlled, more law-abiding, more compassionate, more generous, more dependable, more trustworthy, and more honest.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for self-to-prisoner ratings and self-to-community member ratings, as well as differences between self-to-prisoner and self-to-community member ratings

Traits	Self-to-prisoner	df	Self-to-community	df	Self-to-prisoner versus self-to-community	
						df
Kind to others	2.25* (1.91)	75	1.99** (1.87)	74	.17 (1.83)	71
Honest	2.55* (1.91)	75	2.09** (2.04)	74	.44* (1.66)	71
Trustworthy	2.71* (2.19)	74	2.37** (2.19)	74	.24 (1.73)	70
Dependable	2.47** (2.21)	75	2.68** (1.84)	73	-.27 (2.08)	70
Generous	2.47** (2.18)	75	2.50** (2.06)	73	-.03 (1.60)	70
Compassionate	1.72** (2.21)	75	2.08** (2.15)	72	-.34 (1.88)	69
Law abiding	0.79* (2.71)	75	-0.07 (3.08)	73	.72* (2.73)	70
Self-controlled	2.09** (2.26)	75	1.62** (2.15)	73	.34 (2.03)	70
Moral	1.93** (2.31)	75	1.81** (2.16)	73	.20 (2.21)	70

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; test value = 0.

Comparison with community members

Participants rated themselves as better than the average community member on all traits, with the exception of 'law-abidingness' (Table 1). In particular, they rated themselves as more moral, more kind to others, more self-controlled, more compassionate, more generous, more dependable, more trustworthy, and more honest. Remarkably, although participants did not rate themselves as significantly more law abiding than community members, they rated themselves as equally law abiding, which may be the most surprising finding of all given their incarcerated status.

Discussion

The BTAE is featured prominently in almost all textbook discussions of self-enhancement. The effect has been obtained with different methodologies and populations, and, although it varies in magnitude with manipulations of focalism, egocentrism, and individuation (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004), the effect is remarkably robust across these variations (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Sedikides & Alicke, 2012). Furthermore, the effect is characterized by unique neural markers (Beer & Hughes, 2010).

Regardless of whether the BTAE is measured on separate scales, one for self and one for an average peer (indirect method), or a direct comparison is made on a single scale (direct method), participants are usually asked to compare themselves with a peer from a common population, such as another college student, or even more specifically, a student at their university. The purpose of these instructions is to prevent participants from selecting a comparison group that is demonstrably inferior on the trait dimension. For example, if college students compared their intelligence with that of the average person in the population of non-college students, the BTAE effect would most likely reflect reality rather than any sort of self-enhancement bias. However, if the trait distribution in the designated population (e.g., college students at a particular university) is negatively skewed, such that the majority of scores fall above the mean (or the median), the BTAE effect could simply be a statistical necessity. Although the BTAE's robustness across hundreds of trait dimensions (Alicke, 1985) precludes this explanation as a general account of the phenomenon, it would strengthen the self-enhancement argument to demonstrate the effect in conditions under which the skewed distribution argument is untenable.

One way to achieve this is to compare two different distributions of participants, where one is objectively inferior to the other on the traits measured. Although there is undoubtedly some overlap between prisoners and non-prisoners on traits related to pro-sociality and good citizenship, there is also good reason to assume that the average non-prisoner is more honest and law abiding than the average prisoner. With one exception, prisoners evaluated themselves more favourably than the average, non-incarcerated individual on every trait. The one exception – law abidingness – on which prisoners saw themselves as equal to the average citizen, probably makes the point more strongly than any other trait dimension. These findings clearly demonstrate that the BTAE does not depend on distributions in which the participants sampled have unusually high status on the trait dimensions.

As mentioned in the introduction, some research suggests that people treat the BTAE as a judgment about the self (Klar, 2002; Kruger & Burrus, 2004; Windschitl, Kruger, & Simms, 2003) rather than as comparative judgment. According to this suggestion, the BTAE is a judgmental heuristic reflecting focalism or egocentrism rather than an instance

of motivated self-enhancement. We reviewed the relevant literature elsewhere (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Sedikides & Alicke, 2012) and concluded that, even when focalism or egocentrism contributes to the BTAE, they rarely eliminate motivational contributions to the effect. Moreover, the possibility that BTAE neglects considerations of the comparison with other was falsified in our study. Prisoners did not view themselves more favourably in an indiscriminate manner; that is, independently of comparison target. Instead, although they compared themselves more favourably with other prisoners across all traits, they did not compare themselves more favourably with community members on law abidingness. The judgemental selectivity that prisoners displayed is evidence against focalism and, more generally, against strictly cognitive views on the BTAE. The BTAE is a comparative judgment, reflecting, at least in part, motivated self-enhancement.

In the current research, we took precautions (e.g., privacy, guarantees of anonymity, and confidentiality) to ensure sincere participant reporting. Three patterns converge to suggest that reporting was genuine and the results valid. First, the BTAE was reduced for law abidingness, the least ambiguous trait (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989), in reference to community members. Second, collapsing across traits, participants manifested a weak, non-significant tendency to self-enhance more (i.e., show a stronger BTAE) relative to other prisoners ($M = 2.03$) than relative to community members ($M = 1.91$), $t(72) = 0.80$, $p = .43$. Finally, and more specifically, prisoners self-enhanced more relative to other prisoners than relative to the general population on two relatively unambiguous traits: honesty, $t(71) = 2.71$, $p = .026$, and law abidingness, $t(70) = 2.20$, $p = .03$ (Table 1).

We consider these findings to be among the most compelling demonstrations of self-enhancement in the large BTAE literature. The findings are also generative, raising questions such as: Do prisoners rate themselves as positively as a matched sample of community members do? What are the mechanisms underlying the obtained BTAE? Are prisoners in denial of their crimes? Do they admit but minimize the severity or immorality of the crime? Or, alternatively, do they plainly demonstrate lack of insight (Kruger & Dunning, 1999)?

In addition, the findings have implications for people who possess relatively low abilities in certain domains and exhibit deleterious behaviours. At the very least, the results are consistent with Kruger and Dunning's (1999) observation that people who occupy the unfavourable end of ability distributions are the most inaccurate in estimating their performance. In the same way that people with low abilities fail to apprehend the criteria that are required for success, the prisoners in our study seem to have a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to be law abiding. Of course, not all people who commit felonies are incarcerated, but the average person who is incarcerated almost certainly ranks lower on the characteristics we studied than those who are not in jail.

Furthermore, the findings raise issues regarding the self-views of other groups who have especially poor skills or detrimental behavioural habits (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004). Do students on academic probation believe that they have better than average academic skills? Do serial divorcees think that they are better marital partners than the average spouse? Do people who overeat, smoke cigarettes, and fail to exercise assume that they have average or better than average health habits? If so, the prospects for people in these categories to improve their abilities and characteristics are not promising. As with Kruger and Dunning's (1999) low performers, people who believe, versus objective indicators, that they are average or better than average on characteristics and behaviours for which they actually are far below average, lack the understanding required to rectify

their shortcomings. It would be interesting and practically useful in future research to explore ways of debiasing better than average judgements, especially among groups for whom this self-view deviates considerably from reality.

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