Is the better than average effect better explained by cognitive or motivational accounts?
ABSTRACT

The better than average (BTA) effect is a kind of social comparison in which people evaluate themselves with reference to an average peer or the midpoint of a distribution, which is usually used as a normative standard. Research has consistently shown that people place themselves above this standard, and also above specific peers. The BTA effect has been obtained in multiple studies, with diverse populations in different cultures, on many dimensions, and with different measurements techniques. Studies on the social comparison phenomena suggests that people have a tendency to believe they are better than others in different ways and that negative events in life are less likely to happen to them than their peers. Researchers cannot agree on whether the BTA effect has a cognitive source and is constructed spontaneously, or reflects an already favourable self-image caused by motivated self-enhancements needs. The BTA effect could, in other words, be a consequence of self-enhancement mechanisms that reveals an already favourable self-image, or it could be a separate mechanism altogether. This paper concludes that the BTA effect is due to self-enhancements needs, at least in part, which is a desire to view oneself in a favourable light relative to one’s peers.
INTRODUCTION

Most people are pretty average and normal and not so out of the ordinary – but few people believe it. But nonetheless, knowing where one stands in the social hierarchy, either it is high or low is of vital importance for adaption, evolutionary psychology suggests (Beach & Tesser, 2000). And when you don’t know where you stand compared to others or on the social ladder, one often has to make comparisons based on guess, conjecture, and projection. Manufactured comparisons may sometimes be required because of the impossible task to perform complex calculations that would be needed to actually determine personal standing in diffuse social groups with respect to various traits (Suls, Lemos & Stewart, 2002). And in the social comparison with other people, most people think of themselves as unique and exceptional, and this is especially true when they compare themselves with the average peer. This tendency for people to rate themselves as being better than the average peer, meaning higher than the generalized other on positive attributes and lower on negative attributes (Taylor & Brown, 1988), is one of the best-documented constructive comparisons. This relative over-evaluation of one’s own attributes compared to the average peer has been denoted with a variety of names, including the “above-average effect” (Dunning, Meyerowitz and Holzberg, 1989), the “superior conformity of the self” or the “primus inter pares” (first among equals) effect (Codol, 1975), or the “better than average effect (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986). I will in this paper use the term “better than average (BTA) effect, and since being identified more than 35 years ago and systematically studied the last 25 years, the effect has been a subject of much research and debate. Initially the BTA effect was thought to be motivated by self-enhancement needs (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986), that individuals rate themselves more positively than others because it makes them feel good about themselves to believe they are above average. However, even though most researchers agree that self-enhancement needs still is of importance in the BTA effect, a variety of cognitive mechanisms has been described as the source to produce the effect (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004). In this paper I will review research on the BTA effect and discuss whether it is better explained by motivational or cognitive factors.

BACKGROUND

One of the earliest demonstrations of the BTA effect occurred during data collection in conjunction with the 1976 College Board Exams. About one million students took the SAT that
year, and the students were asked to indicate where they stood in relation to the median. A great portion placed themselves above the median, i.e. in leadership ability approximately 70% placed themselves above the median, in athletic ability 60% placed themselves above the median, and in the ability to get along well with others 85% rated themselves above the median. Incredibly, 25% of the students rated themselves in the 1st percentile on the ability to get along well with others! About the same time, Cross (1977) circulated a questionnaire to instructors in the University of Nebraska, concerned primarily with undergraduate teaching issues. But he also included a question asking professors to rate their teaching abilities. Results showed that 94% of the professors at the faculty placed themselves above the median in teaching ability and 68% considered their teaching abilities to be in the top 25%. These data demonstrated at the outset that the BTA effect was not limited to college students.

One of the basic questions underlying Festinger’s (1954) original formulation of the social comparison theory, was ‘how do people evaluate their own abilities?’ Festinger proposed that even though people have a fundamental desire to evaluate their abilities, they don’t have an objective standard to test them against. By using the abilities of others as a subjective reality, people are able to reduce this uncertainty. Festinger called this a ‘cold’ process (Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991), but suggested that there is a unidirectional drive upward in evaluations, in the sense that people tend to compare themselves with individuals that are better off than themselves on a given ability. In the 1980s and 1990s a ‘hotter’ version of social comparison theory emerged, emphasizing the importance of downward comparisons as a source of self-enhancement and positive affect (Alicke, 1985, Taylor, 1989), with the BTA effect as perhaps the most famous example where people compare their characteristics or behaviors against a norm or standard. The norm or standard is usually the average standing of their peers on that one specific characteristic they compare themselves with. This BTA effect has since been obtained in multiple studies, with diverse populations, on many dimensions, and with different measurements techniques. Research on the social comparison phenomena suggests that people have a tendency to believe they are better than others in a different ways and that negative events in life are less likely to happen to them than their peers. Closely related to the BTA effect is the comparative-optimism effect, where individuals tend to be influenced by self-serving biases and show unrealistic, comparative optimism when judging their own vulnerability to negative events or prospects of positive events Weinstein (1980). While the BTA effect compares the self to an
average peer on behavior and trait dimensions, the optimistic bias is more related to comparisons regarding life events such as winning the lottery or having a heart attack. The two phenomena’s are therefore somewhat similar, as one has the tendency to underestimate one’s risk for misfortune and to overestimate one’s chances of good fortune (Taylor & Brown, 1988). According to Brown (2011), researchers on the BTA effect has found that most people believe they are more athletic, better organized, better drivers, better workers, better leaders, fairer, more polite, virtuous, honorable, and more moral than others; competent, capable and talented than others; and more understanding, compassionate and sympathetic than others.

EXPLAINING THE BTA EFFECT

Several studies demonstrate how motivations, such as a motivation for self-enhancement, can influence judgments and behaviors. And consistent with most research, the bulk of the explanations offered for the BTA effect and the similar comparative-optimism effect have assumed that motivation is the ultimate source of the biased judgments (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Brown, 2011). When people are motivated by self-enhancement needs, one often evaluate oneself more positively than they evaluate others because it makes them feel good about themselves to believe they are above average. Such an explanations involve two broad issues. The first issue is about the role of interpersonal and behavioral comparisons in the BTA effect. One explanation for the effect is that when people are asked to compare themselves with an average peer, people often select comparison targets that fare particularly poorly on the judgment dimension (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986). Another explanation is that people tend to think selectively about behaviors on which they do better than others (Weinstein, 1980). Alicke, Vredenburg, Hiatt, & Govorun (2001) have argued, in contrast to these views that behavioral comparisons are not necessary to account for the effect, and that people tend to routinely engage a BTA heuristic that involves a compromise between existing self-knowledge and ideal trait conceptions.

Though generally acknowledging that self-enhancement needs play some role in the foundation of the BTA effect, several theorists have described a variety of cognitive mechanisms that also produce the effect (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Giladi & Klar, 2002; Krizan & Windschitl, 2007; Kruger, 1999; Windschitl, Conybeare, & Krizan, 2008). Some researchers have suggested, for example, that focalism (i.e., a tendency to focus on themselves rather than on
the average peer when making comparative judgments), informational differences (i.e., a tendency to know more about oneself than others), naïve realism (i.e., where a tendency to give undue weight to one’s own perspective produces a BTA effect where one’s view of the world is a passive reflection of the world as it actually is), and egocentrism (i.e., people’s own behaviors or characteristics are considered more thoroughly and weighted more heavily, and a tendency, therefore, to give undue weight to one’s own perspective) might as well produce a BTA effect in the absence of any motivated need.

DIRECT AND INDIRECT MEASUREMENTS

According to Chambers and Windschitl (2004), research on the BTA effect employ two basic methodologies assessing people’s judgments about their comparative status on a given ability, trait, or likelihood dimension: the direct and the indirect method. With the direct method, participants are asked to compare themselves to an average peer on a single scale with “average” as the midpoint. Direct scales are usually anchored with wording such as “considerably below average” at the low end and “considerably above average” at the high end. The estimate of the BTA effect is equivalent score achieved; the higher the number the greater the size of the effect. With the indirect method, on the other hand, participants are asked to rate the self and average peer on separate scales. The difference between the two types of absolute judgments serve as an indirect measure of a person’s perceived relative status on the dimension, and the BTA effect is calculated by subtracting the average rating from the self rating so that higher scores indicate greater bias. Researchers can assess at a group level whether participants in their sample were generally overoptimistic, and studies suggest that people are more self-serving when they use the direct rather than the indirect scale (Otten & van der Pligt, 1996). Direct scales is thought to provide a stronger comparative frame and elicit more pronounced tendencies to contrast the self upward from the average peer or to contrast the average peer downward from the self, but both methods have been used successfully to document the BTA effect (Helweg-Larsen & Shepperd, 2001).

MODERATING THE BTA EFFECT

When one tries to identify variables that moderate the BTA effect, Alicke (1985) point to research showing that enhanced positive ratings and decreased negative ratings of self in relation
to average peer will be mediated by the degree of control that person believes he or she has over positive and negative characteristics. In other words, people view themselves to be characterized more by positive controllable than positive uncontrollable traits in relation to the average peer, and more by negative uncontrollable than negative controllable traits. Kruger (1999) shows the same effects when difficult rather than easy skills are being considered, when comparisons are made directly and not indirectly (Otten & van der Pligt, 1996), and when a one compare oneself to a specific individual rather than an aggregate characterized by the term ‘most other people’ (Klar & Giladi, 1997). However, not all people sustain the BTA effect to the same degree, e.g. people who are depressed or low in self-esteem might not exaggerate their standing as much their high-esteem counterparts (Brown, 1986; Taylor & Brown, 1988). And self-esteem is maybe the first individual difference factor that comes to mind in considering variations in the BTA effect, something Brown (1986) found in his research; e.g. that the tendency to evaluate oneself more favorably than others was greater for participants high in self-esteem than for participants low in self-esteem. It should be noted that this effect was obtained for positive and not for negative traits. Suls, Lemos, and Stewart (2002, Study 1) evaluated the self versus average peer comparisons of high and low self-esteem participants on traits varying in ambiguity. And whereas both high and low self-esteem individuals exhibited a greater BTA effect for ambiguous versus unambiguous traits on positive trait dimensions, low self-esteem individuals did not show this ambiguity effect on negative trait dimensions. Therefore, it might look like only high self-esteem individuals benefited of the interpretational latitude afforded by negative, ambiguous traits. Regarding depressive individuals, Tabachnik, Crocker and Alloy (1983) wanted to compare the self versus average peer judgments made by students who scored comparatively high or low on the Beck Depression Inventory. Their findings showed that depressed participants viewed themselves as more similar to the average peer on both depression-relevant and depression-irrelevant items. These findings suggest that depressives exhibit a reduced BTA effect across the board, mainly because the depression-relevant items were all negative, and the depression-irrelevant items were predominantly positive. I.e., depressives have a diminished tendency to evaluate themselves less negatively on negative characteristics relative to the average peer as well as a reduced tendency to evaluate themselves more positively on positive characteristics.

One dimension known to moderate the BTA effect judgments has been the nature of the
comparison target. While traditional social comparison studies involve comparisons between individuals, BTA effect research involves comparisons between an individual and an average peer. An average peer is in reality a hypothetical or statistical entity, and research in the field of decision-making shows that people tend to de-emphasize or misuse statistical information (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). The BTA effect might therefore decrease or even disappear when comparisons are performed between real people rather than between a real person and an average peer. Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, and Vredenburg (1995) wanted to investigate this hypothesis and conducted different studies to see if the BTA effect indeed would be eliminated if people had to compare themselves to a real person rather than an average peer. They also wanted to see what happened when people had to be in the same room with the comparison target. Results from the studies showed that the BTA effect was present in both the group who had to compare themselves to a real person and in the group that compared themselves to an average peer, but the BTA effect was significantly reduced in the real people-group. Studies like this established two important differences between real and hypothetical comparison targets. The first difference turned out to be individuation. Any specific target apparently reduces the BTA effect in relation to comparisons with a hypothetical entity such as an average peer. Live contact was the second difference. The BTA effect is apparently reduced when people are in the same room with the comparison target, regardless of whether an actual interaction takes place. The study suggested that individuals adjust their evaluations when comparing with real versus hypothetical targets, but people still view themselves more favorably in person-to-person comparisons.

MOTIVATIONAL ACCOUNTS VS NON-MOTIVATIONAL ACCOUNTS

There have been several mechanisms proposed to explain how the BTA effect operates. Chambers and Windschitl (2004) proposes that although different motivated accounts may indicate different cognitive mechanisms mediating judgments, each account assumes some form of self-serving motivation. E.g. a motivation to maintain a positive sense of self-esteem or self-enhancement is commonly assumed to underlie the above-average effect (Alicke, 1985), and a desire to reduce fear and anxiety has frequently been assumed to underlie the comparative-optimism effect (Weinstein, 1980). On the other hand, many researchers don’t think motivational concerns are the exclusive or perhaps even the dominant source of bias when it comes to comparative judgements like the BTA effect. For example there have been empirical
demonstrations of below-average effects and comparative-pessimism effects, both of which would seem incongruent with motivational accounts (Kruger, 1999). I will in the next section look at the different motivational and non-motivational accounts, and each of these will be discussed in turn below.

Motivational account: Better-Than-Average Heuristic

Alicke et al. (1995; 2001) have proposed that the BTA effect is attributable to people applying a BTA heuristic. This heuristic entails an automatic tendency to evaluate the self relative to others along a behavioral or trait dimension, and they automatically infer that their dispositional qualities or ability levels exceed those of others without surveying their own and others actual dispositional qualities and abilities. And they do not assume that people normally review their behaviors to make self-other judgments. The assumption that people apply a BTA heuristic is consistent with Sears’ (1983) concept of a person positivity bias, and with the general positivity bias that encompasses social judgment (Matlin & Stang, 1978). Social objects of different value varies in degree of assimilation, and family members and friends are usually evaluated with a great deal of positivity, concrete individuals are accorded more than an average or hypothetical peer, and at the peak of the positivity ladder resides the self. Research show that trait comparisons are especially vulnerable to the BTA heuristic since trait conceptions can become independent of behavioral exemplars (Klein & Loftus, 1993). Although the BTA heuristic assumptions have not been tested directly, there is strong indication to suggest that behavior recruitment is not a necessary component of the BTA effect. One source of support comes from the fact that the BTA effect emerges even under extreme cognitive load conditions (Alicke et al., 1995). Research on what is called the “better-than-myself” effect (Alicke et al., 2001) is another source of support for the nonbehavioral assumption, where participants readily acknowledge that their behavior frequencies are similar to others’, and still conclude that their own trait-relevant behaviors are more exemplary. Such research provides reasonably strong evidence that differences in behavior recruitment are not a necessary component of the BTA effect.

Motivational account: Selective Recruitment

In the better-than-average-heuristic one emphasized the exclusively self-serving nature of
comparative judgments and how one focus on inflated self-assessments. But other motivated accounts reflect the intention of people generating or holding unfavorable or unflattering views of the referent group. The logic behind this is that when individuals hold unreasonable negative beliefs about the trait standing or risk likelihood of the average peer, comparisons made with these unrealistic groups yield more positive judgments about the self (Brown, 1986). Whenever two entities are being compared on a given dimension, any difference in the accessibility or relevant trait or likelihood information about the two entities can lead to a biased comparative judgment. And some explanations of the BTA effect, and most explanations of the optimistic bias, involve the way people think about their characteristics in relation to others. For example, Perlof and Fetzer (1986) related comparative-optimism effects to an active downward comparison process. Markus (1977) has shown in her studies how self-schemas for trait dimensions facilitate the recall and prediction of trait-relevant behaviors, and Kuiper and Rogers (1979) have shown that trait-judgments for the self are made more rapidly, easily, and confidently that trait judgments for another unfamiliar person. One explanation could be that judgments about the self are more likely to involve the operation of a well-defined schema than are judgments about another person. The biased-referent idea and selective recruitment is shown in various studies (Rothman, Klein, & Weinstein, 1996; Weinstein, 1980), that, for example, unrealistic optimism may arise, not through exaggerated judgments of one’s own ability to avoid unwanted events, but from inflated judgments of the average peer’s likelihood of experiencing those unwanted events (Rothman et al., 1996). It has also been shown that for undesirable events, perceptions of event controllability, such as people believing that actions could be taken to avoid the event from occurring to them, were positively associated to a measure of victim prototype activation, and both of these variables were positively related to optimism in participants’ comparative judgments (Weinstein, 1980). Weinstein (1980; 1984) proposed in his early optimistic bias research that the most prevalent variant of this explanation, namely, that when people compare their characteristics to others, they think selectively about their own strengths or about others’ weaknesses. In a study Weinstein (1980) tested the selective recruitment hypothesis in which participants listed behaviors that increased or decreased their chances of experiencing series of life events. When some participants were then given the opportunity to read others’ lists, a reduced optimistic bias appeared in participants who had access to others’ lists versus those who did not have access to this information. Notably, access to other people’s answers reduced,
but did not eliminate, the optimistic bias.

Regarding the selective recruitment hypothesis, Perloff and Fetzer (1986) noticed that when people were asked to compare themselves with an average peer they selected targets that compare unfavorably on the judgment dimension. People chose to compare themselves to an especially dishonest person, for example, which would cast their own honest behaviors in an especially favorable light. Perloff and Fetzer (1986) tested this downward comparison idea with participants who had to compare their vulnerabilities to misfortune with those of their closest friend, a close friend, and the average college student. And they suggested two main explanations for why comparisons with ambiguous or vague referent groups, such as the average peer, are more likely to produce unrealistic optimism than are comparisons with personalized referents, such as a close friend. First, comparisons with an ambiguous referent group such as the average peer permit the person to activate the prototypical victim of the unwanted event in question. Second, it is anxiety provoking to assume that the risk probability of negative events of an individualized referent, such as a close friend, since it is thought to be comparable with their own risk likelihood. They also found what they called “the illusion of invulnerability” was reduced when people compared themselves to a specific, well-known comparison target, as their closest friend, relative to when they compared with a close friend or with an average college student. However, there are competing explanations for these findings, and the explanation Perloff and Fetzer (1986) favored was that people possess more information about their closest friends, which enables them to conclude that these friends are no more susceptible to misfortune than themselves. However, another explanation is that people like their closest friend more than a close friend or an average peer and evaluate their closest friend more positively on this basis.

Motivational account: Self Versus Aggregate Comparisons

Another related explanation that comes under the motivated accounts is what is referred to as the person positivity bias, or the tendency to hold a more favorable view of an individual than the social group he or she belongs to. Sears (1983) argues that entities will be evaluated more favorably to the extent that they resemble real human beings rather than a vague group of people or aggregates of humans. For example, individuals are motivated to view the risk likelihood of an individuated target or a distinct person, to be less than risk likelihood of the generalized referent group, because individuated targets are more similar to the self than are generalized referent
groups. In the optimistic bias and BTA paradigms, a single entity, the self, is compared to an aggregate, usually the average peer. The fact that the self is more often than not evaluated more favorably than the average peer is generally believed to manifest self-esteem enhancement. But on the other hand, demonstration of “non-selective superiority and inferiority” biases (Klar, 2002; Klar & Giladi, 1997; Giladi and Klar (2002) questions whether self-enhancement assumptions are required to explain the BTA effect. What Klar and Giladi have demonstrated in several experiments is that any member of a positively evaluated group is rated more favorably than the group average. For example are randomly selected students at one’s university evaluated more favorably than the average student at the same university. The findings of Klar and Giladi’s (1997, 2002) suggest that this greater positivity people claim for themselves, may be subsumed by a general tendency to place greater weight on single entities than on aggregates. Their consistent findings of inferiority biases, i.e. the tendency for members of disliked groups to be evaluated less favorably than the group as a whole, extend the generality of their view. The findings of Alicke et al. (1995) are consistent with those of Klar and Giladi’s in showing that the BTA effect is reduced by comparisons with individuated entities versus an average peer. Klar and Giladi’s results suggest further that part of the tendency to evaluate oneself more favorably than an average peer is due to the greater weight people place on any individuated entity versus an aggregate such as an average peer. On the other hand, Alicke et al.’s research show that compared to other entities, the self has a favored role in that the BTA effect is greater when the self is compared to any other individuated entity. Consequently, while Klar and Giladi’s model provides a cogent and general account of individual-group comparisons, an additional factor appears to be operating when the self is plugged into the comparison.

Nonmotivational accounts: Egocentrism

Egocentrism is probably the most dominant nonmotivational explanation for the optimistic bias and BTA effects. Egocentrism as applied to the BTA effect has typically referred to the notion that thoughts about the self and about self-relevant information mean so much more than thoughts about others and other-relevant information. It is also the tendency to place undue weight on one’s own characteristics, beliefs and experiences versus average comparisons (Kruger, 1999). Studies showing that self versus average peer comparisons are predicted better by absolute self ratings (i.e., self ratings alone, without ratings of the average) than by absolute peer
ratings (i.e., peer ratings alone, without ratings of the self), is one source of support for the egocentrism view. Kruger (1999) also found that a cognitive load manipulation increased the size of the bias in participants comparative judgments, suggesting that participants were inhibited in their ability or motivation to fully consider the standing of other people on the dimension, a task that presumably requires some effort. In one study, Klar and Giladi (1999) had participants make absolute ratings of their own contentment, absolute ratings of their peers’ contentment, and also comparative ratings of their own contentment relative to their peers. They found that absolute self-ratings predicted the comparative contentment ratings better than did absolute peer ratings. The mechanism behind the egocentrism effect could be that self-relevant information might be more accessible or available than equivalent forms of other-relevant information (Kuiper & Rogers, 1979; Markus, 1977).

Kruger’s (1999) made a most compelling demonstration of the egocentrism position by demonstrating that people consider themselves worse than average on difficult tasks. The hypothesis was that if focusing egocentrically on their positive attributes leads individuals to think that they are better than their peers, then focusing on their negative attributes should lead them to think that they are worse than their peers. This effect can also be viewed from an anchoring and adjustment perspective, where judgment about oneself serves as an anchor for a comparative response and that adjustments from this anchor tend to be insufficient. On tasks where people believe that they have high ability, anchoring on their own characteristics should lead to relatively extreme positive self-judgments, with insufficient upward adjustments for their peers. For tasks on which people believe that they have low ability, on the other side, anchoring should lead to extreme negative self-judgments, with insufficient downward adjustments for their peers. And research on activities classified as easy (e.g., driving, using a mouse) or difficult (computer programming, juggling) showed, in accord with the egocentrism position, that participants consistently placed themselves above the 50th percentile for easy activities, and below the 50th percentile for difficult ones. These findings suggests that people concentrate egocentrically on their own attributes in comparative judgments, and that emphasis on their positive or negative characteristics leads them to overestimate their self-judgments.

Chambers, Windschitl, and Suls (2003) have found that participants’ likelihood judgments regarding winning a trivia game against a competitor were mostly determined by their estimates
of how much they knew about the relevant categories and not their evaluation of how much their competitor knew about those categories. This tendency to concentrate egocentrically on characteristics and personal prospects has important implications for self-other comparisons, inducing overconfidence about their prospects when people think egocentrically about their own prospects of success, whereas factors that predict equally unfavorably for themselves and others leads to pessimistic predictions.

Nonmotivational account: Focalism

Another potential non-motivated source of bias in comparative judgment is focalism, which is the tendency to place greater weight on whatever hypothesis or outcome is currently the focus of attention (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998). In contrast to egocentrism, which explicitly involves self-reference, focalism is the idea that people sometimes focus too much on information that has been called to their attention and fails to adequately consider equally relevant information in the background (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998). It involves focusing on an object due to the way a judgment task is structured, and by asking people to compare their characteristics to those of an average peer, studies on the BTA effect tend to place the self in the focal position and the average peer in the referent position. And since self-representations include a greater number of unique qualities than other representations (Karylowski, 1990; Karylowski & Skarzynaka, 1992), focusing on the self emphasizes these unique features and leads people to perceive themselves as less similar to the average peer. By making the self the focal object, the BTA effect methodology increases the perceived differences between self and other. The focal, or target, entity that is specified by a comparative question tends to carry more weight in comparative judgment than does the referent that is specified by the question (Chambers, Windschitl, & Suls (2003). The main support for focalism comes from studies using the optimistic bias paradigm. Otten and van der Pligt (1996) and Eiser, Pahl, and Prins (2001) manipulated whether people were asked to estimate how they would fare relative to their peers on various life events (self-other focus), or how their peers would fare relative to themselves (other-self focus). If the positions of self and average are switched, such that the average peer is made the focal object and the self is made the referent, the BTA effect should be reversed or at least reduced. And studies indeed showed a reduced optimistic bias in the condition where the average peer was the focal object and the self was the referent. And the magnitude and even the direction
of bias in people’s comparative judgments can be reliably influenced by a manipulation of whether the self is in the target or referent position of the comparative judgment (Chambers et al., 2003; Otten & van der Pligt, 1996).

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The BTA effect is a kind of social comparison in which people evaluate themselves with reference to an average peer or the midpoint of a distribution, which is usually used as a normative standard. Research has consistently shown that people place themselves above this standard, and also above specific peers. The BTA effect show us that people evaluate themselves more favorably than their peers, and this effect is not due solely to the tendency to focus on themselves as the judgment object, the weight they place on their own characteristics in comparative judgments, or on the tendency to recruit favorable information about themselves. In fact, one can reasonably argue that the BTA effect serve self-enhancement needs, through for example egocentrism and selective recruitment. Selecting downward comparison targets, or thinking egocentrically about one’s own positive qualities, may represent motivated tendencies to reach favorable conclusions about one’s standing relative to others. Accordingly to various findings the BTA effect is due, at least in part, to a desire to view oneself in a favorable light relative to one’s peers. And even though proponents of the view that self-enhancement reflects little more than defensive neuroticism, it has been proven to be healthy for people to think favorably of themselves. An optimistic outlook and a positive self-image boost harmonious personal relationships and encourage successful goal striving, and people who feel good about themselves are less prone to negative moods and depression (Taylor et al., 2003). It is therefore no surprise that people use many different strategies in the purpose to strive to maintain favorable self-images. There are several behavior tendencies which serves to promote favorable self-views, including denying responsibility for negative outcomes and taking credit for positive ones (Zuckerman, 1979), exaggerating the ability of people who outperform them and they outperform (Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst, & Zhang, 1997), and searching selectively for information that confirms and approves a positive self-image, and at the same time evaluating others in such a way that it reflects favorably on one’s own performance (Dunning & Cohen, 1992). But the BTA effect is difficult to locate in the different areas of self-enhancement mechanisms (Tesser, 2000). As we have seen in this paper, it is not clear whether the BTA effect has a cognitive source and is
constructed spontaneously, or reflects an already favorable self-image caused by motivated self-enhancements needs. The BTA effect could, in other words, be a consequence of self-enhancement mechanisms that reveals an already favorable self-image, or it could be a separate mechanism altogether. One still do not know exactly what kind of phenomenon the BTA effect is, although several BTA effect studies have been conducted. Research doesn’t give a clear answer to if the BTA effect mainly reflect a tendency to contrast the average downward from the self, the tendency to contrast oneself upward from the average, or upward assimilation of both self and average toward an ideal trait concept, with greater assimilation for the self, as the BTA heuristic suggests. As presented in this paper, several studies have shown that individuals evaluate themselves more favorably not only in comparisons with an “average peer”, but also in comparisons with specific peers – although the effect is reduced in latter comparison. And one could say that the BTA effect is not only due solely to the amorphous nature of comparing oneself with an average peer. Research concerning the nature of the difference between comparisons with specific and average peers might give us some clues of the mechanism behind the BTA effect. One possible explanation for these differences is that people might see other real human beings as living and breathing individuals and evaluate them more favorably than statistical entities on this basis (Sears, 1983). On the other hand, focalism and egocentrism have been shown to moderate the BTA effect, and these judgment features have been suggested as alternatives to the traditional self-enhancement assumptions (Chambers & Windshitl, 2004). Hamamura, Heine, and Takemoto (2007) also claim that there are cognitive processes, and not motivational, that produces the BTA effect, and points to the cultural dimension where East Asians do not appear to be motivated to self-enhance. Brown (2011), on the other hand, argues that this position confuses ‘can’ for ‘does’, and that although cognitive processes can affect the magnitude of the BTA effect, motivational biases ordinarily produce it. He also points to other studies and cross-cultural research on the BTA effect that show that once trait importance is taken into account, there is sufficient evidence that East-Asians show a BTA effect comparable to the effect shown by Westerners. This suggests that the psychological correlates of the BTA effect are broad and general (Brown & Cai, 2009), and that such findings propose that self-enhancement needs are a universal imperative (Brown, 2010). All over the world and in numerous studies, people who show signs of psychological well-being; as low anxiety, low depression, happiness, high self-esteem, and subjective well-being, demonstrate a greater BTA effect than those who are
depressed, chronically anxious, unhappy, or dissatisfied with themselves or their life (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

In this view its difficult to see how cognitive processes of egocentrism and focalism would predict, or even promote, psychological well-being. The cognitive and nonmotivational position would have more credibility if it could be shown that factors demonstrated in focalism and egocentrism, either in isolation or combination, would be able to eliminate the BTA effect. But what research tells us is that the variations in these judgment facets do not eliminate the BTA effect, they just alter them. If one for example look at the case with focalism, when the average peer is the focal object and the self is this referent, for it to provide a sufficient explanation of the BTA effect people would have to evaluate average peers more favorably than themselves – but this is not what happens. Reversing the position of self and the average peer, as in studies on focalism, reduces but does not eliminate the effect, and the same is shown for effects characteristic to egocentrism. Consequently, the kinds of comparisons people make, and the specific information they focus on, while being important moderators of the BTA effect, do not serve to explain it. The failure to wholly clarify the various mechanisms behind the BTA effect does not, of course, confirm and establish the role of self-enhancement. But different findings do, nonetheless, indicate a role for self-enhancement. Alicke (1985) found that the BTA effect increases with positive and controllable traits and decreases with negative uncontrollable traits, which provides a source of support for the self-enhancement motive. Result like this shows us that when people feel responsible for their positive characteristics they are most self-overvaluing, and when they believe that fate accounts for their negative characteristics, people are least self-aggrandizing. Additional characteristics of the BTA effect are the consistent finding of the effect being stronger on ambiguous or subjectively defined dimensions (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989), indicating a role for self-enhancement. And findings by Weinstein (1980) supporting the notion that there is a positive tendency for people to evaluate oneself more favorably than others as the desirability of the judgment dimension increases, and a negative tendency to evaluate oneself than others as the judgment dimension decreases, offers even more basic support for the self-enhancement motive. Perceived probability for positive events and degree of desirability were significantly correlated with the amount of optimistic bias, while negative correlated for probability of negative events. Apparently, people are most self-serving when they have the latitude to construe comparisons in a manner that emphasizes their
superiority.

But still there are reasons to look for other explanations for the above average, better than average, and comparative-optimism effects. One of the main assumptions regarding the motivated accounts is that people use self-serving bias in comparative judgments to feel better about themselves. But research shows that negative mood states, anxiety about negative outcomes, and threats to self-esteem does not provoke unrealistic optimism and do not motivate an increased degree of self-serving bias in comparative judgments – which would be logical if people wanted to feel better about themselves (Helweg-Larsen & Shepperd, 2001). In fact, anxiety, for example, has been found to be negatively related to unrealistic optimism (Taylor & Shepperd, 1998). And no studies of self-esteem threat show any increase bias in comparative judgments (Suls et al., 2002). In addition, studies by Klar (2002) show that people exhibit biases in their comparative estimates for individuals who are only peripherally related to themselves, which is a another reason for looking beyond the motivated accounts. From the perspective of the motivated accounts, people should be motivated to give favorable comparative judgments only to those whom one has a vested interest in maintaining favorable beliefs. This would be to be more precise; the self, friends, and members of one’s immediate group or family, and it seems contradictory that people presumably would have self-serving motives when they exhibit biases towards people they hardly know.

Focalism and egocentrism, which is the two most prominent and general nonmotivational explanations of the BTA effect, assume that the BTA effect involves the type of behaviors or comparison targets people regularly think about, or the relative emphasis they place on their own actions and characteristics. But research on the better-than-myself effect shows that the tendency to evaluate oneself more favorably than the average peer persists even when behavioral evidence is equated for self and other. And the inclinations to emphasize one’s own characteristics and actions, and to focus on selectively favorable information that casts oneself in the most positive light, could as easily be interpretable as serving the need to self-enhance. On the other hand, Kruger’s (1999) findings of the worse-than-average effect and Klar and Giladi’s (1997) findings of inferiority biases, seemingly contradicts the idea of self-enhancement and that people automatically identify with ideal trait conceptions. However, by expanding the BTA heuristic view to include the possibility for contrast as well as assimilation effects, this apparent
discrepancy can be readily resolved, since the contrast effects are most likely to occur when the object of judgment is clearly unfavorable, such as a disliked individual or a behavioral weakness. In different studies, for example with activities such as juggling and playing chess—activities for which the majority of people readily recognize their shortcomings, Kruger obtained his worse-than-average effects. Under such circumstances, where people readily recognize their shortcomings, instead of automatic aspiring to ideal trait conceptions, it is assumed that people automatically would contrast themselves from the ideal. And although Kruger argued that people make comparative judgments by first assessing their own skills and insufficiently adjusting for this anchor, Brown (2011) reasons that none of the tasks Kruger studied was particularly important when it comes to the BTA effect. It would certainly be nice to be a good juggler, but self-enhancement-wise, its not comparable to being an honest, competent person.

As a consequence of the articles I have presented in this paper, research and studies suggest that the BTA effect stems from, more or less, a desire to view oneself more favorably than one’s peers. But I realize that any reasonable explanation of the BTA effect must include both the why and the how of behavior, so it seems foolish at the same time to argue that nonmotivational mechanisms are unimportant in explaining the BTA effect. If one argues that the BTA effect appears because an individual wish to view him or her more positively, it tells us nothing about how the effect occurs. Future investigations could perhaps profit from trying to explain in a deeper sense how the nonmotivational mechanisms and the motivational goal interacts.
REFERENCES:


