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On using what we know about ourselves in thinking about others: Not so fast

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ABSTRACT

We argue that the frequently assumed privileged role of the self as a habitual reference point in social judgments is often hindered by the fact that, unlike other persons, the self is typically represented primarily in terms of internal, unobservable characteristics. This idiosyncratic feature of self-representations may render them incompatible with many other social representations. Yet, such limitations are not universal. In particular, incompatibility is less of a problem when (1) the judgment target is someone psychologically close; (2) accessible self-representations involve distant (rather than recent) self-memories; (3) accessible self-representations are relatively abstract, (semanticized) rather than event-specific; or, (4) social judgements concern not a specific other person but more abstract social concepts such as traits.

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It is virtually impossible to think about anything without thinking about something else. This applies also to social cognition. Considering a person or another social category, typically brings to mind other social concepts representing individuals or social categories. When activated such representations serve as social reference points (Holyoak & Gordon, 1983; Karylowski, 1990; Karylowski, Konarzewski, & Motes, 2000). They play an important role in making judgments by providing anchors (Tversky, 1977), and, particularly in the case of less familiar targets, by providing an opportunity for “judgments by proxy” (Beike & Sharman, 1994; Mussweiler & Epstude, 2009) that is making judgments by extrapolating information from a (more familiar) reference point to a (less familiar) target. In fact, even dissimilar reference points can help in making accurate social judgments by providing hints regarding what the target is not, what the target will not do, etc. (Mussweiler, 2003).

While it is undoubtedly true that in activating social reference points, individuals need to be highly selective – what we know about social objects, is too enormous to be all activated at once – the rules governing the recruitment of specific exemplars remain somewhat

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obscure. One general principle that applies here refers to accessibility of potential reference points. Such accessibility can be both chronic and situationally determined (Andersen, Glassman, Chen, & Cole, 1995). Thus, an exemplar that is well developed and has been recently activated will be more likely to be recruited as point of reference than an exemplar that is poorly developed and has not been activated recently.¹

In this paper we will summarize evidence, mainly based on our own research, that the often assumed privileged position of the self as a habitually preferred point of reference in making judgments about others is, under most circumstances, unjustified. We will attempt to show why the self is typically not well suited to be a point of reference of choice. We will also point to some conditions that make the privileged position of the self as a reference point more likely.

Self as a reference point in thinking about others

If exemplar accessibility is important in the recruitment of social reference points, then one exemplar that should enjoy a particular advantage is the self. There can be little doubt that self-knowledge constitutes an exceptionally rich structure and as such its chronic accessibility should be very high. In fact, it has been speculated that the self constitutes the richest structure in the entire cognitive system (Rogers, 1981). And because every situation in which we find ourselves carries at least a potential for activating the self, situationally determined accessibility should also be very high.

Indeed, several lines of research have been interpreted in terms of privileged status of the self as a social reference point. This includes attributive projection (Holmes, 1968; Lemon & Warren, 1974; Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988; Shrauger & Patterson, 1974); attributive contrast (Dunning & Cohen, 1992); false consensus effect (Marks & Miller, 1987; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977); asymmetries in self-other similarity judgments (Cross et al., 2002, 2011; Holyoak & Gordon, 1983); and, increased accessibility of self-judgments after making similar judgments regarding others (Dunning & Beauregard, 2000; Dunning & Hayes, 1996; Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, 2002). Yet, as noted by Karniol (2003), those effects are open to alternative interpretations that do not invoke activation of self, or in fact activation of any other social exemplar, but assume involvement of generalized representations such as stereotypes, implicit personality theories, etc. Moreover, demonstrating a privileged status of the self would require comparisons with other exemplars. Yet, even when other exemplars were included in studies claiming evidence for the privileged role of the self (Dunning & Beauregard, 2000; Dunning & Hayes, 1996; Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, 2002; Mussweiler, Epstude, & Rueter, 2005), such exemplars were selected in a way making the comparison rather unfair. Specifically, effects involving the self were compared to effects involving representations of other people that were relatively little known (e.g., acquaintances).

While a goal of finding another exemplar that is as rich and as chronically accessible as the self would probably be unrealistic, comparing effects involving the self with effects involving other well developed exemplars (such as best friend, romantic partner, parent, etc.), could provide at least a marginally fair comparison. Several studies conducted by myself and my collaborators (Karylowski, 1999, 2005; Karylowski et al., 2000; Karylowski & Ranieri, 2006; Niewiarowski & Karylowski, 2006; see Karylowski, 2009 for a review) attempted to achieve that goal.

Some of those studies (e.g., Karylowski et al., 2000, Experiments 2 and 2a) utilized a variation of the *task-facilitation paradigm* (Klein, Loftus, & Burton, 1989; Srull & Wyer, 2015). A typical experiment involved a number of trials. Each trial consisted of two judgments

regarding a specific psychological characteristic, different in each trial. In the experimental trials, the target of the first judgment was always either an acquaintance or a stereotypical representation such as “most men of my generation,” “most women of my generation,” etc. The second judgment always involved the same characteristic but the target was either “oneself” or another person that participant knew very well, such as best friend, parent, etc. The main interest was to assess the degree to which performing the first judgment reduced the time required to perform the second judgment. We assumed that if making a judgment regarding another target involves spontaneous activation of relevant aspects of the self, then a subsequent judgment regarding the self should be facilitated more than similar judgments involving other highly developed exemplars, stereotypes or people in general.

As would be expected, the results confirmed that making an initial judgment regarding another target (e.g., an acquaintance) facilitated subsequent judgment regarding oneself. However, at least as large, and typically larger, facilitating effects occurred for other well developed exemplars. This occurred even for judgments involving privileged information such as judgments of preferences, where the advantage of the self should be particularly large. Thus, taken together, those results show absolutely no evidence of a privileged status of self, other well developed exemplars do equally well or better.

In the experiments just described the focus was on the spontaneous activation of self-knowledge and knowledge regarding highly familiar others. In other experiments (e.g., Karylowski et al., 2000, Experiments 1 and 1a), we tried a somewhat different approach. It was based on activating relevant aspects of self-knowledge or of a highly familiar exemplar prior to making judgments regarding a less familiar target. This was done to assess the possibility that, even though the self does not have a particularly privileged position in terms of being spontaneously recruited as a point of reference, such privileged position might manifest itself in situations when a potential point of reference (self or a familiar other) has already been activated prior to making judgment regarding a less familiar target. Thus, in those experiments the target of the first judgment was always either the self or a highly familiar other and the target of the second judgment was relatively unfamiliar (e.g., an acquaintance). Again, no evidence for the privileged role of the self vis a vis other well developed exemplars was found in those experiments. On the contrary, activating other exemplars tended to facilitate subsequent judgments regarding relatively unknown others to a greater degree than activating self-knowledge. This was the case regardless of whether a test judgment involved a similar acquaintance, a dissimilar acquaintance, or a hypothetical “typical” person. And it was the case not only for regular trait-judgments, but also for trait-judgments requiring participant to guess how would the person in question describe himself or herself, and for judgments of preferences. So, even when other-judgments concern privileged, private, information (such as other-person’s self-assessments or preferences) the advantage of the self as a point of reference does not show.

At first glance those results seem puzzling. There can be little doubt that in terms of its richness the self has no equal. Yet, when it may win with other-person exemplars that are poorly developed (e.g., Dunning & Hayes, 1996), in comparison with a representation of highly familiar others, it consistently loses. Does that mean that such representations are more chronically accessible than the self? This seems unlikely. However, accessibility is not the only factor that plays a role in the recruitment of specific exemplars. Another important principle concerns shared category membership – there is a tendency to activate as points of reference those exemplars that are perceived as compatible with the target. For instance, research shows that the recruitment of social reference points is facilitated when target and

potential point of reference share membership in the same social category, such as sex, generation, etc. (Karylowski et al., 2000).

The idiosyncratic self

Because individuals have direct access to their own thoughts, plans, feelings, desires and other features that are not directly observable from the outside but not to such unobservable features of others (Jones & Nisbett, 1972), self-knowledge tends to be idiosyncratic. Such idiosyncrasy goes beyond the issue of perceived self-other differences or lack of trait-overlap (“I am outgoing and he is a loner”). Rather, it involves differences in what *kind* of content predominates in our representations of the self compared to our representations of other people. Indeed, there is extensive evidence that self-descriptions tend to include more privileged, unobservable characteristics than our descriptions of others (Andersen, Glassman, & Gold, 1998; Andersen, Tuskeviciute, Przybylinski, Ahn, & Xu, 2015; McGuire & McGuire, 1988; Prentice, 1990; Vazire, 2010; Vazire & Mehl, 2008). And even when the same verbal labels are applied to ourselves and others, their meaning might be different.

This last phenomenon is illustrated in a series of experiments conducted by myself and my associates (Niewiarowski & Karylowski, 2008, 2015). Participants in those experiment made two sets of trait judgments. The first set was a generic trait-judgment task. In the second set, the same trait-labels were used for the same targets but this time each label was accompanied by one of two modifiers, either “feels” or “looks.” Thus, for a given trait, for each target, we collected two trait-judgments. One involved a generic trait-label without a modifier (e.g., honest, emotional, lost, etc.) and the other one involved the same trait-label preceded by a modifier (e.g., “feels honest,” “feels emotional,” “feels lost” or “looks honest,” “looks emotional,” “looks lost,” etc.). We predicted that generic trait-labels used in the first set will be interpreted differently depending on the target. For the self as a target, traits will be understood primarily in terms of their unobservable manifestations. Yet when another person serves as a target, the same trait-labels will be interpreted primarily in terms of their overt, observable manifestations. As a result, for self, generic trait judgments should predict subsequent feels judgments better than subsequent looks judgments. The pattern should be reversed for judgments regarding others, resulting in a significant interaction between target (self vs. other) and type of the predicted judgment (feels vs. looks). Results of a typical experiment (Niewiarowski & Karylowski, 2008, Experiment 1) are presented in Figure 1. The results are consistent with our predictions. Subsequent experiments (Niewiarowski & Karylowski, 2015) revealed that the effect is not restricted to absolute trait-judgments but can also be observed in trait-judgments involving comparisons between the self and others. Thus it appears that even when individuals are explicitly asked to consider the self and the other within a single (comparative) trait-judgment, the trait is likely to be interpreted for the two targets differently, thus biasing the comparison.

Similar results were obtained not only for self-other comparisons involving acquaintances but also for a variety of other-person targets including public figures, social stereotypes, etc. (Niewiarowski & Karylowski, 2008, 2015). One notable exception concerns best friend as a target. Here the pattern of results was typically somewhere in-between the pattern characteristic for judgments regarding relatively unfamiliar others (interpreting traits in terms of their observable manifestations) and the pattern characteristic for self-judgments (interpreting traits in terms of their privileged, unobservable manifestation). Thus, at least in terms

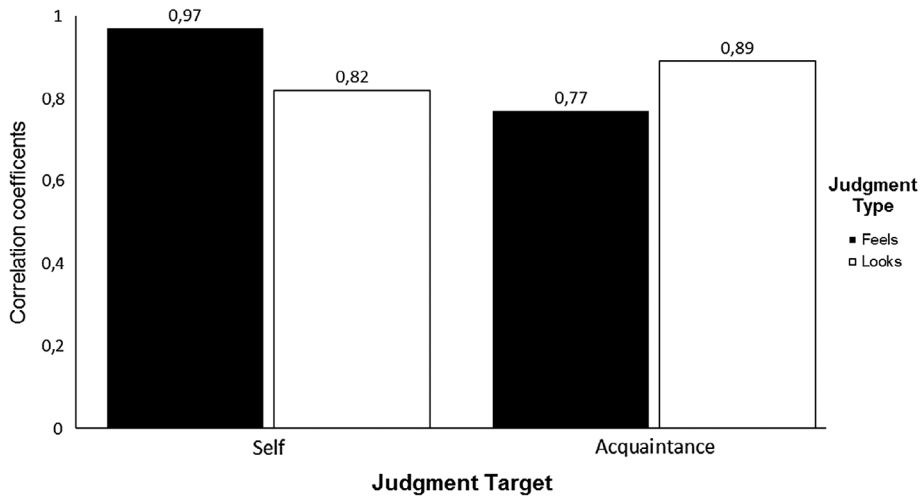


Figure 1. Mean correlations between generic trait-judgments and specific (“feels” vs. “looks”) trait-judgments for self and for a same-sex acquaintance. Source: Adapted from Niewiarowski and Karylowski (2008), Experiment 1.

of how trait-labels are interpreted in social judgments, best friend appears to be a rather universal exemplar, that represents a compromise between how the self and how others are normally represented. This is consistent with results of other studies that compared representations of self, highly familiar others (including friends), and less familiar others (e.g., Pronin, 2008).

Comparing latencies of “feels” and “looks” judgments regarding oneself and other people provides direct evidence regarding differences in accessibility of unobservable and observable characteristics in cognitive representations of the self and others (Karylowski & Ranieri, 2006, Experiment 2). As can be seen in Figure 2, trait-judgments tend to be faster for “feels” than for “looks” judgments when the self is the target. Yet, opposite pattern can be seen for judgments about others, pointing to greater accessibility of observable as compared to unobservable aspects for other-person exemplars.

Mrozinski and Karylowski (2011) obtained a conceptual replication of those findings using characteristics that were participant-generated, rather than experimenter-provided. Participants were first asked to provide trait-labels for characteristics that were uniquely descriptive of their own private selves, their own public selves, and their views of the private and the public selves of two specific others: an acquaintance and a best friend. In describing private selves participants were asked to focus on “thoughts, feelings and emotions that are characteristic of that person and are directly observable from the outside.” In contrast, in describing public selves they were asked to consider “behaviors and features that are characteristic of that person and are directly observable from the outside.” As can be seen in Figure 3, response latencies indicated that, in general, characteristics descriptive of one’s own person (both private and public) were more accessible when used in making judgments of private rather than in making judgments of public selves of oneself and others. The opposite results were obtained for characteristics provided by participants as descriptive of their acquaintances (both private and public). Those characteristics were more accessible in making judgments about public selves, again, either of oneself or others. No reliable differences

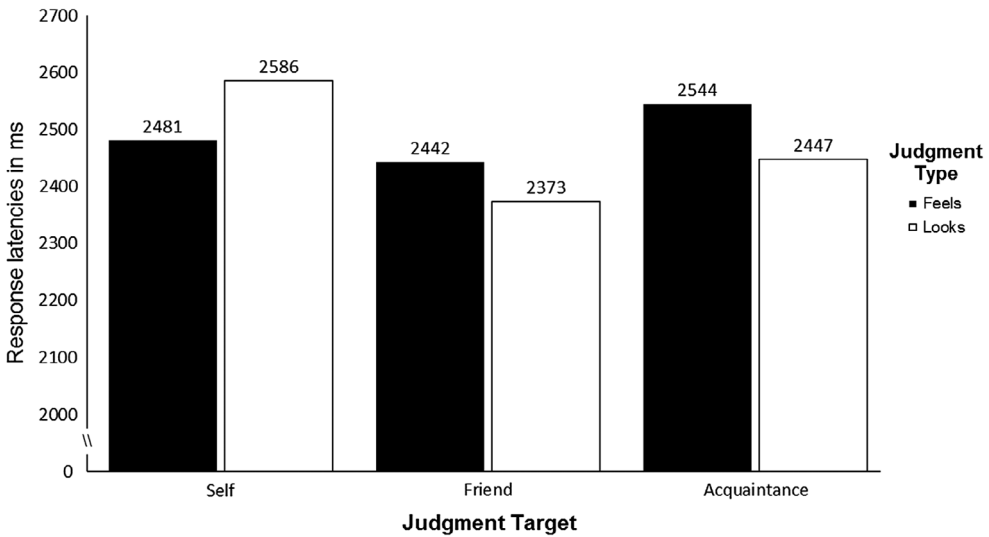


Figure 2. Mean latencies of “feels” and “looks” judgments for self and others. Source: Adapted from Karylowski and Ranieri (2006), Experiment 2.

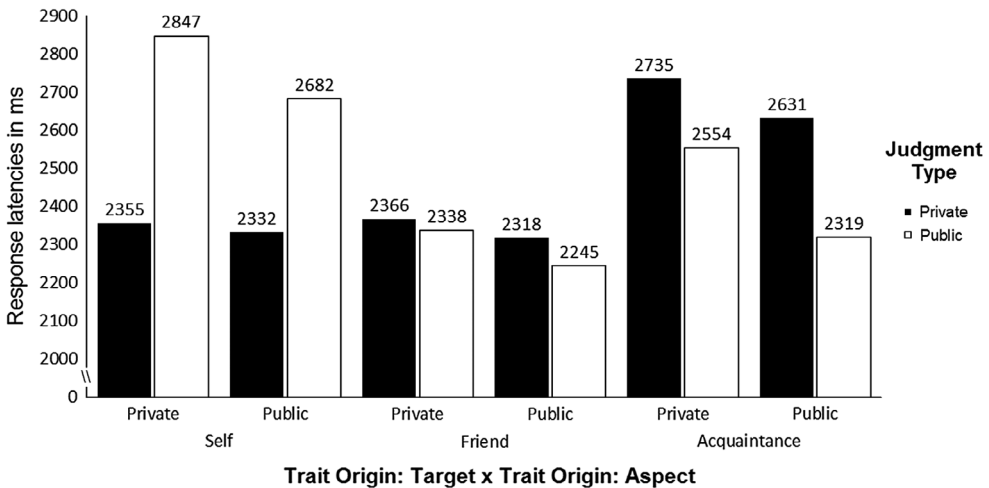


Figure 3. Mean latencies of trait judgments depending on judgment aspect (private vs. public) and trait-origin (originally selected as highly descriptive of private vs. public aspects of self, vs. same-sex friend vs. acquaintance). Source: Adapted from Mrozinski and Karylowski (2011).

were found for characteristics descriptive of best friends. Because, by definition, private selves (of oneself and of others) represent mainly what is unobservable from the outside while public selves represent what is directly observable, this pattern of results is consistent with the view that self-representations differ from other-representations in accessibility of unobservable vs. observable aspects of traits. In parallel to other, previously described data, such self-other differences apply to comparisons involving the mental representations of acquaintances but not comparisons involving the mental representations of significant

others (e.g., best friend). This is one more illustration of the finding that, in terms of their properties, both structural and functional, representations of friends occupy middle ground between the representations of less familiar others and representations of the self (Andersen et al., 1998; Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Prentice, 1990; Pronin, 2008).

In search of a more compatible self

Because incompatibility between self-representations and representations of others is less pronounced when the others in question are personally close, the self might be a good reference point in thinking about best friends, significant others, close family, etc. Unfortunately, it is in thinking about people that we know less well that “judgments by proxy” would be of particular value. Is incompatibility between the self and representations of others that are not particularly close inevitable? Not necessarily. Self is not a unitary concept and multiple self-representations can be accessed at different times, or even simultaneously (Conway, 2005; Kihlstrom, Beer, & Klein, 2003; McConnell, 2011; McConnell, Brown, & Shoda, 2013; Skowronski, 2012). Results of our recent studies (Karylowski & Mrozinski, 2017a, 2017b) show that some types of self-representations are, at least in terms of accessibility of unobservable vs. observable content, quite compatible with how others are typically represented.

In searching for more compatible, less idiosyncratic, selves we focused on two factors: (1) whether the self-representation is relatively contemporaneous, concerns oneself at present or in a recent past vs. it concerns oneself in a more distant past and (2) whether it is highly event-specific (anchored primarily in episodic memory) vs. general (anchored primarily in semantic memory). A recent experiment (Karylowski & Mrozinski, 2017b) addressed both of those factors within a single design. Half of the participants (episodic memory condition) were asked to make judgments regarding how they were feeling (unobservable) and how they acted (observable) in two specific situations, one recent and one that occurred about 10 years ago. The other half (semantic memory condition) were asked to make judgments regarding how they were *typically* feeling and how they *typically* acted in two periods of their lives: again, recently and about 10 years ago.

As can be seen in Figure 4, for the recent self, the feels judgments (presumably, involving unobservable characteristics) were significantly faster than the acts judgments (presumably involving observable characteristics). However, for the self in the more distant past, the acts judgments were significantly faster than the feels judgments. In addition, the feels judgments were significantly faster than the acts judgments for the recent self, yet, they were significantly slower for the self in the distant past. Those effects of time occurred both in the episodic memory and in the semantic memory conditions. Yet, overall, the advantage of the feels judgments in terms of speed occurred more for judgments based on the episodic memory (event specific) than for judgments based on the semantic-memory (generalized). Thus, accessibility of observable (act) as compared to unobservable (feel) aspects of autobiographical memories may be facilitated both by retrieving older autobiographical memories and by retrieving memories that are semantic rather than event-specific. This is, perhaps, because with the passage of time representations of the self loose their initial strong ties to the original experience of the self as an insider. This allows adopting a more balanced view that is more compatible with how others are typically represented.

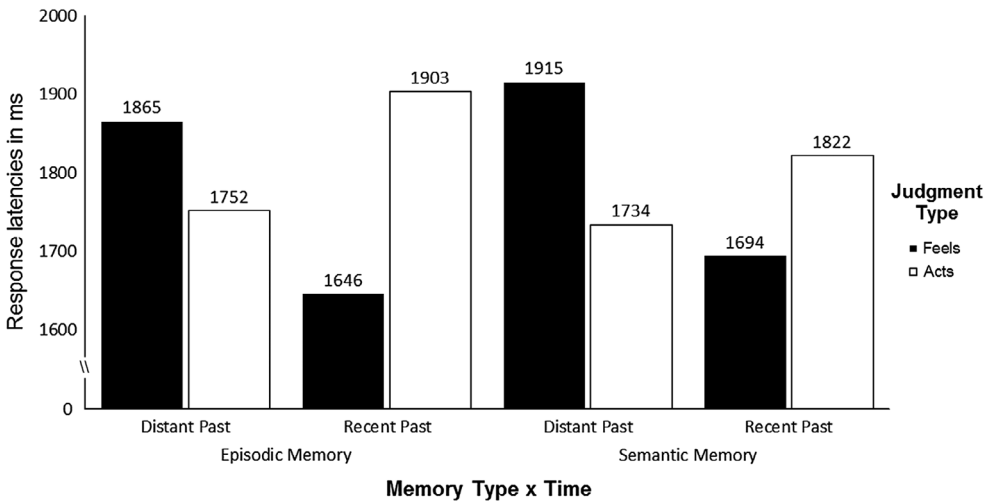


Figure 4. Mean latencies of self-judgments depending on judgment aspect (feels vs. acts), time (distant past vs. recent past), and memory type (episodic vs. semantic). Source: Adapted from Karylowski and Mrozinski (2017b).

Self as a default target in thinking about traits

Even though the data presented above suggest that, because of increased compatibility, compared to contemporaneous self-representations, representations of the self in the past may be more likely to be recruited as reference points in thinking about others (especially others that are not particularly close to us), we currently have no direct evidence for such effects. There is, however, evidence that the recruitment of the self as a point of reference in social judgments is facilitated if the question of compatibility is eliminated by focusing on social judgments that do not involve specific others. After all, social information can be organized in a variety of ways and organization according to persons is just one way (cf., cognitive diversification principle (Carlston & Smith, 1996). In particular, instead on focusing on persons or groups, individuals often focus on life events, traits, or attributes with no direct reference to specific targets.

The prediction that the self constitutes a default point of reference in semantic processing of traits (rather than persons) was tested in an experiment by Karylowski and Ranieri (2006, Experiment 1). The main focus was on comparing latencies of trait judgments regarding oneself vs. other social exemplars, friends and acquaintances, depending on whether the trait judgment question was preceded by (a) a question regarding the meaning of that trait (semantic priming question), or (b) a control question. Answering the priming question immediately before answering the trait judgment question should, of course, result in less time needed to answer the second question compared to control trials. More interestingly, if in answering the semantic priming question, we tend to bring to mind the self, then savings in time required to answer the subsequent trait judgment question should be larger when the target of that second question is the self rather than another person. Results were consistent with the prediction, suggesting that the self does, indeed, have a privileged status in processing trait-related information when compatibility is not an issue. Additional analyses

confirmed that those results occurred for both desirable and undesirable traits, thus discounting an alternative explanation in terms of self-enhancement.

The role of the self in semantic processing of traits has been explored further in a subsequent experiment (Karylowski & Ranieri, 2006, Experiment 2). The experiment, already mentioned in a previous section, included an alternative manipulation intended to encourage semantic processing of trait labels. The manipulation was relatively unobtrusive and consisted simply of introducing – in half of trials – a brief delay between presentation of the trait label and presentation of the judgment target (participants made only one trait judgment in each trial). Overall, results confirmed the prediction that giving participants extra time to process trait labels before the judgment target is specified, reduced time required to make judgments more for the self than for any other target (including highly familiar others). However, this effect was modified by trait observability. It was stronger when a trait label was accompanied by a modifier feels (e.g., feels attractive, feels depressed, etc.) compared to when it was accompanied by a modifier looks (e.g., looks attractive, looks depressed, etc.). Thus, as would be expected, the recruitment of the self as a point of reference in processing trait-related information is facilitated by focusing on unobservable rather than on observable trait aspects.

Summary and future directions

Contrary to a long tradition of assuming that self-knowledge has a privileged status as a habitual point of reference in thinking about others, a direct comparison with other well developed social representations such as friends, close family members, etc. suggests that this is not the case. While the richness and chronic accessibility of the self are probably unparalleled, its relatively idiosyncratic nature makes our self-knowledge rather incompatible with what we know about others. This will limit the relevance of the self not only for making explicit judgments about others (e.g., trait-judgments) but also for a variety of other social cognitive processes including ability to understand others' points of view, their goals, preferences, motives, emotional responses, etc.

Yet, the resulting challenge to the role of self in social cognition should not be overstated. Specifically, the lack of compatibility between self-representations and the representations of others, while perhaps typical, does not seem to be universal. Firstly, such incompatibility would be less of a problem in judgments involving others that are personally close. Such persons tend to be represented in ways that are more similar to how the self is normally represented, thus decreasing incompatibility. Secondly, compared to the contemporaneous representations of the self, representations of the self in the past are more compatible with how others are typically represented. Thirdly, representations of the self that are highly generalized (not event-specific) tend to be more compatible with typical other-representations. Finally, the privileged status of the self as a habitual point of reference, even in comparison with other-person representations that are well developed, can be demonstrated in social judgments that do not focus on a specific target. Thus, when the focus is on processing information regarding attributes rather than regarding individuals, self-knowledge is particularly likely to be activated. Future research should examine how those factors, both separately and in combination, might help in overcoming incompatibility-related limitations in the use of various forms of self-knowledge in social cognition.

Note

1. It should be noted that a fundamental question regarding social reference points concerns the type of representation that is being activated. There is a long tradition of considering social reference points in terms stereotypes – representations of groups rather than individuals (Karniol, 2003). However, considerable evidence points also to the role of social exemplars, that is representations of individuals, as social reference points (Carlston & Smith, 1996; Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011; Cross, Morris, & Gore, 2002; Smith & Zárate, 1992). Moreover, effects traditionally explained in terms of stereotypes, can often be interpreted in terms of the activation of specific exemplars as points of reference and without evoking stereotype activation (Karniol, 2003; Karylowski et al., 2000). Without taking a position regarding a relative prominence of stereotypes vs. individual-person exemplars as reference points in social judgments, our present focus will be on exemplars rather than on stereotypes.

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