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ACCESSIBILITY OF PRIVATE AND PUBLIC ASPECTS OF TRAITS DESCRIPTIVE OF ONESELF AND OTHERS[1]

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Summary.—Previous research has shown that compared to mental representations of others, mental representations of ourselves are characterized by relatively greater accessibility of private, unobservable content, as opposed to content that is public and observable. Are those differences preserved when individuals focus on their own public selves and/or on private selves of others? Participants were asked to make social judgments involving traits that, in their view, were highly descriptive of either public or private selves of themselves, their best friend, or an acquaintance. Results demonstrated that highly self-descriptive traits were more accessible in social judgments involving individuals' private rather than public selves. This was true not only for traits descriptive of one's private self but also for traits descriptive of one's public self. Furthermore, other-descriptive traits, including traits that were highly descriptive of representations of private selves of others, were more accessible in social judgments involving public rather than private selves.

A large portion of social memory consists of representations of individual persons (exemplars). Such exemplars include representations of specific others who we know (or know about) and, of course, of ourselves (Smith & Zarate, 1992; Carlston, 1994). One way in which representations of one's self differ from other social exemplars is in terms of observability (Pronin, 2008). For instance, research shows that privileged, unobservable characteristics are used more frequently in self-descriptions than in the descriptions of others (McGuire & McGuire, 1988; Prentice, 1990; Andersen, Glassman, & Gold, 1998; Pronin, Kruger, Savtisky, & Ross, 2001; Vazire, 2010). Also, judgments regarding unobservable characteristics are relatively faster than judgments regarding observable characteristics for self but not for others, implying greater accessibility of unobservable characteristics in self-representations compared to mental representations of others (Karylowski & Ranieri, 2006).

It should be noted that observability, high or low, is also implicated in the distinction between private and public self (Scheier & Carver, 1983). The distinction assumes that individuals form not only representations of their private selves, which rely on what is not directly observable from the outside (thoughts, feelings, intentions, etc.), but also representations of their public selves, focusing on their own overt actions and other

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observable features. Applying a similar distinction to mental representations of others, assumes that such representations include not only public but also private selves of others, that is, an individual's views of other persons' thoughts, feelings, and intentions (Andersen, *et al.*, 1998; Vazire & Carlson, 2011).

It can be argued that in constructing representations of their own public selves, individuals are faced with a rather challenging task. Specifically, there is an apparent contradiction between individuals' tendency to see themselves in terms of what is private, unobservable from the outside on one hand, and an external perspective implied by the *public* designation, on the other. This contradiction could manifest itself in relatively high accessibility of private (unobservable) as opposed to public (observable) aspects of characteristics that form an individual's public self. Thus, if *reliable* and *well-dressed* constitute prototypical (highly descriptive) characteristics of John's public self, then for John—in thinking about himself and other people—*reliable* and *well-dressed* may be accessible primarily in terms of private, unobservable aspects of those characteristics. This could include the individual's intentions to appear reliable and well-dressed, his affective reactions to being perceived as reliable and well-dressed, associated hopes, fears, etc.

A similar reasoning applies to characteristics that form an individual's representations of the private selves of specific others. In this case, there appears to be a contradiction between a tendency to see others in terms of what is public and observable from the outside on one hand, and an internal perspective implied by the *private* designation on the other. Such contradiction could manifest itself in a relatively high accessibility of public (observable) as opposed to private (unobservable) aspects of characteristics that form an individual's representation of another person's public self. Thus, if in John's view, *shy* and *insecure* constitute prototypical characteristics of the private self of his friend, Bill, then for John, *shy* and *insecure* may be associated primarily with public, observable manifestations of those characteristics (what Bill and other shy and insecure people say and do, how they look, etc.). As a result, *shyness* and *insecurity* may be accessible primarily in terms of their public rather than private aspects.

The purpose of the present experiment was to examine accessibility of public (observable) and private (unobservable) aspects of trait-related information in trait-judgments regarding one's self and others. Of particular interest was accessibility of private and public aspects of traits highly descriptive of individuals' own public selves and traits that, in their view, are highly descriptive of private selves of specific others (friends or acquaintances).

Method

Participants

A total of 54 Polish psychology majors (48 women, 6 men, *M* age = 20.9 yr., range 18–27) participated in the experiment in return for extra credit.

Procedure

The study was conducted individually in a computer lab. Participants completed three sequential tasks: (a) a trait-generation task, which provided the trait-descriptors (stimuli) for the experiment; (b) the experimental task, which consisted of judgments of trait descriptiveness for different targets (self vs others) and different aspects (public vs private); and (c) an observability rating task which served as a manipulation check to ensure that private and public traits generated during the trait-generation task were perceived as public (observable) and private (nonobservable), respectively, by participants.

Trait-generation task.—The purpose of this task was to collect information regarding highly descriptive traits of three targets: (a) oneself, (b) best friend of the same sex, and (c) same-sex acquaintance. Participants were asked to provide first names or nicknames of their same-sex best friend and their same-sex acquaintance and then, for each of those two targets and for themselves, to list characteristics (trait labels) that fit each target best. Participants were told that any particular person may be characterized both by a private and a public self. Private self was described as "… thoughts, feelings, and emotions that are characteristic of that person and are not directly observable from the outside …" while the public self was described as "… behaviors and features that are characteristic of that person and are directly observable to others …" For each of the three targets, participants were asked to list at least six unique trait-labels describing "private self of that person" and at least six unique trait-labels describing "public self of that person." Next, for each of the three targets (self, friend, and acquaintance) and for each of two aspects (private and public), participants were asked to select three trait-labels best describing that person in that aspect. The resulting set of 18 trait-labels was used in generating questions for the experimental task.

Experimental task.—Participants were asked to make judgments regarding descriptiveness of each of the 18 traits selected during the trait-generation task. There were 108 experimental trials preceded by six training trials. Each trial consisted of a single question in the form of: "Does X describe Y of Z?" where X was one of the 18 traits, Y was one of the two aspects ("private self" or "public self"), and Z was one of the three targets ("yourself," name of the same-sex best friend, or name of the same-sex

acquaintance). Thus, trait-judgment questions differed systematically not only in terms of the target person (self, friend, or acquaintance) and the aspect on which the question focused (private or public) but also in terms of the origin of the trait being judged (traits selected during the trait-generation task as highly descriptive of either a public or private aspect of oneself, best friend, or acquaintance). Answers during the trait-judgment task were provided on a scale from 1: Definitely no to 5: Definitely yes, using numerical keys.

The 108 experimental trials constituted a completely balanced $3 \times 2 \times 3 \times 2$ within-subject design. The four independent variables were as follows: (a) origin target (trait descriptive of oneself, best friend, or acquaintance), (b) origin aspect (trait descriptive private self vs public self), (c) judgment target (oneself, best friend, or acquaintance), and (d) judgment aspect (private vs public self of target). Each of the 36 combinations of the design appeared in three experimental trials, each time with a different trait.

The experimental trials were grouped into nine blocks, each consisting of 12 questions. All questions within each block involved the same target (oneself, best friend, or acquaintance). Furthermore, each block was divided into two subblocks: one consisting of six questions regarding private self and the other one consisting of six questions regarding public self of a given target. The questions constituting each subblock differed with respect to the trait-origin with each of the six traits used in a given subblock representing one of the six origin categories (traits descriptive of public or private selves of oneself, best friend, or acquaintance). The nine blocks were divided into three sets of consecutive blocks constituting three replications of the experimental design. Within a given set, each block involved trait-judgments regarding a different target (oneself, best friend, or acquaintance). The order in which targets appeared in consecutive blocks was counterbalanced across participants using Latin square design. Also, in each block, for half of the participants, judgments involving private aspects occurred first and for the other half, judgments involving public aspects occurred first.

Observability-rating task.—As a manipulation check, immediately after finishing the experimental task, participants were presented with traits generated during the trait-generation task and asked to rate observability of each trait on a scale from 1: Definitely unobservable to 5: Definitely observable.[2] Traits were presented one at a time in random order.

[2]We included both traits that were used in the experimental task and traits that were generated by participants but were not used in that task. This was done to explore possible differences in observability between characteristics that were selected by participants as most descriptive in each category and those that were generated for that category but were omitted from the final selection.

Results

Response Latencies

Latencies of trait-judgments for the 108 experimental trials of the trait-judgment task constituted the primary measure. Latencies shorter than 500 msec. (0.8% of responses) were considered invalid and were excluded from the analysis. In addition, latencies longer than 10,000 msec. (0.9% of responses) were truncated to that value. Latencies were then converted to natural logarithms[3] and collapsed across three replications. Because the experimental sample included only six men, participants' sex was not included in the analyses.

Preliminary analysis of within-subject correlations between response latency and extremity of trait-judgment (with responses of "1" and "5" coded as most extreme and responses of "3" coded as least extreme) revealed that latencies were negatively correlated with judgment extremity. Average Fisher's z was $M = -.22$, corresponding to $r = -.21$. Even though this correlation was only moderate, across participants it differed significantly from 0 ($t_{52} = 9.65$; $p < .001$). Thus, as would be expected (cf. Luce, 1986), more extreme responses were associated with shorter latencies of responding. In order to avoid potential confounding and to reduce error variance, all subsequent analyses of latency data were conducted on latency scores adjusted for response extremity.[4]

Repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) conducted on adjusted latency scores revealed a significant main effect of origin aspect ($F_{1,51} = 5.20$, $p < .03$; $\eta^2_p = 0.09$). Overall, judgments involving traits descriptive of public selves of oneself, friend, or an acquaintance, were faster ($M = 2{,}415$ msec.) than judgments involving traits descriptive of private selves of those same persons ($M = 2{,}524$ msec.). This effect was not predicted and does not seem to be theoretically relevant.[5]

The main effect of origin target was also significant ($F_{2,50} = 24.08$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2_p = 0.49$). Follow-up tests showed that judgments involving traits descriptive of best friend were faster ($M = 2{,}316$ msec.) than judgments involving traits descriptive either of oneself ($M = 2{,}544$ msec.) or an acquaintance ($M = 2{,}555$ msec.; $F_{1,51} = 26.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p{}^2 = .34$, and $F_{1,51} = 44.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.47$, respectively). This effect must be considered in light

[3]Truncating extremely long latencies and using logarithmic transformation were done to reduce positive skew (cf. Winer, 1971, p. 200). To facilitate presentation, throughout the article mean latencies are reported in milliseconds.

[4]Auxiliary analyses performed on latency data not adjusted for extremity of responses provided support for all main conclusions.

[5]It should be noted that 2/3 of experimental trials involved others (friends or acquaintances) as targets. Also, 2/3 of traits used as stimuli were selected as highly descriptive of others. Because, in general, others are represented primarily in terms of what is observable (Pronin, 2008), observable rather than unobservable features might have been more heavily primed throughout the experiment.

of a significant interaction between origin target and judgment aspect ($F_{2,50} = 37.05$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2_p = 0.60$). For self-descriptive traits, trait judgments were faster for private ($M = 2{,}343$ msec.) than for public aspects ($M = 2{,}764$ msec.; $F_{1,51} = 48.15$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2_p = 0.49$). However, for traits descriptive of an acquaintance, judgments were faster for public ($M = 2{,}434$ msec.) than for private aspects ($M = 2{,}683$ msec.; $F_{1,51} = 13.05$, $p < .002$; $\eta^2_p = 0.20$). No significant difference between latencies of trait-judgments involving private and public aspects occurred for traits descriptive of one's best friend. Such judgments tended to be relatively fast (as indicated by the main effect of judgment target) regardless of whether judgments involved private or public aspects.

It is important to note that the interaction between origin target and judgment aspect was not modified by a three-way interaction with origin aspect ($F_{2,50} < 1$, ns). As shown in Fig. 1, traits that were highly descriptive of oneself were more accessible in their private (unobservable) than in their public (observable) aspects regardless of whether they were originally generated as descriptive of private or of public aspects of oneself. Indeed, trait-judgments were significantly faster for private than for public aspects not just for traits that were originally generated as descriptive of private aspects of oneself ($F_{1,51} = 30.61$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2_p = 0.38$), but also for traits that were originally generated as descriptive of public aspects of oneself

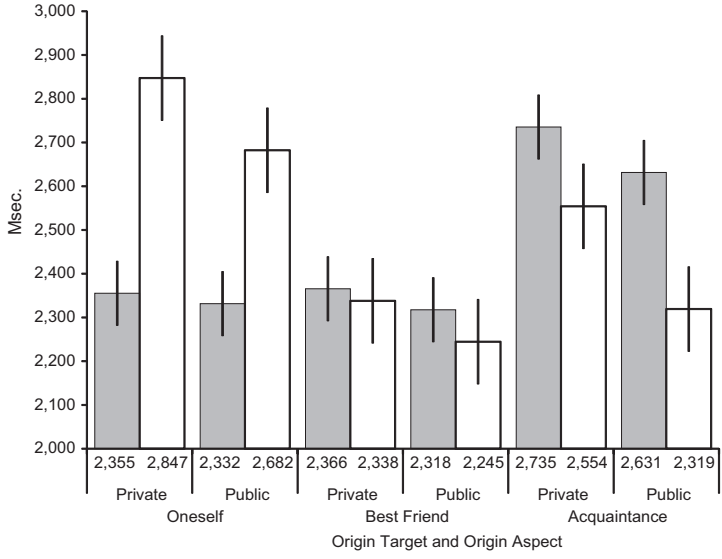

FIG. 1. Mean latencies of trait judgments depending on judgment aspect (Private, ■; Public, □), origin target, and origin aspect. Error bars represent the standard error.

($F_{1,51} = 16.67$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2_p = 0.25$). In addition, trait-judgments were significantly faster for public than for private aspects, not just for traits that were originally generated as descriptive of public aspects of an acquaintance ($F_{1,51} = 17.59$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2_p = 0.26$) but also, though not quite significantly, for traits that were originally generated as descriptive of private aspects of that acquaintance ($F_{1,51} = 3.83$, $p = .056$; ; $\eta^2_p = 0.07$).

Such patterns indicate that not only characteristics central to our construals of our own private selves but also those central to construals of our public selves tend to be accessible primarily in terms of their private aspects. Similarly, accessibility of characteristics central to our representations of an acquaintance tends to be higher for public than for private aspects, regardless of whether such characteristics describe the public or private self of that person.

The only other significant effect was the interaction between judgment target and judgment aspect ($F_{2,50} = 3.49$, $p < .04$; $\eta^2_p = 0.12$). Judgments regarding oneself were significantly faster for private ($M = 2{,}420$ msec.) than for public aspect ($M = 2{,}556$ msec.; $F_{1,51} = 10.26$, $p < .002$; $\eta^2_p = 0.17$). This, however, was not the case for judgments regarding best friend or an acquaintance (both $F_{1,51}$s < 1; ns). Thus, compared to other exemplars, self appears to be unique in affording greater accessibility to its private, as opposed to its public, aspects. This finding is consistent with results by Karylowski and Ranieri (2006). They reported that for trait-judgments regarding oneself, but not for trait-judgments regarding others, latencies of trait-judgments were shorter when a given trait was paired with a verb "feels" (e.g., "feels sad") compared to when it was paired with a verb "looks" (e.g., "looks sad").

Trait-descriptiveness and Trait-observability

One relatively trivial explanation of the interaction between origin target and judgment aspect is based on the assumption that in selecting traits that were highly descriptive of public aspects of themselves, participants typically focused on such characteristics that were relatively descriptive of public aspects of their own selves, but were even more descriptive of private aspects. Similarly, in selecting traits highly descriptive of private aspects of others, participants might have focused on traits that were even more descriptive of others' public aspects. However, analysis of how participants responded to trait-judgment questions in terms of trait-descriptiveness provides convincing evidence against such explanation. Specifically, repeated-measures ANOVA performed on trait-descriptiveness data revealed no significant interaction between origin target and judgment aspect. At the same time, both the interaction between origin target and judgment target and the interaction between origin aspect and judgment aspect were highly significant ($F_{4,48} = 54.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .82$,

TABLE 1
Mean Trait-descriptiveness Scores of Trait-judgments Depending on Judgment Target, Judgment Aspect, Origin Target, and Origin Aspect

Origin Target and Aspect	Judgment Target and Aspect								
	Oneself			Best Friend			Acquaintance		
	Private	Public	Overall	Private	Public	Overall	Private	Public	Overall
Oneself									
Private	4.54	3.85	4.20	3.14	3.15	3.15	2.88	2.83	2.86
Public	3.58	4.66	4.12	2.85	3.36	3.10	2.56	2.95	2.75
Overall	4.06	4.25		3.00	3.25		2.72	2.89	
Best Friend									
Private	3.33	2.96	3.14	4.28	3.74	4.01	2.51	2.63	2.57
Public	2.96	3.22	3.09	3.57	4.47	4.02	2.51	2.60	2.55
Overall	3.14	3.09		3.93	4.11		2.51	2.61	
Acquaintance									
Private	3.13	2.78	2.96	2.79	2.61	2.70	4.22	3.59	3.91
Public	2.95	2.81	2.88	2.64	2.70	2.67	3.60	4.52	4.06
Overall	3.04	2.79		2.72	2.66		3.91	4.06	

and $F_{1,51} = 63.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.55$, respectively). As can be seen in Table 1, the pattern of mean descriptiveness scores was consistent with directions provided to participants on how traits should be generated during the trait-generation task. Specifically, traits generated as descriptive of oneself, traits generated as descriptive of best friend, and traits generated as descriptive of acquaintance were judged as most descriptive of those specific targets ($F_{2,50} = 88.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.78$; $F_{2,50} = 65.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.72$; and $F_{2,50} = 67.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.73$, respectively). Also, traits generated as descriptive of private aspects were judged as more descriptive in judgments involving private aspects than in judgments involving public aspects ($F_{1,51} = 22.53$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2_p = 0.31$), yet traits generated as descriptive of public aspects were judged as more descriptive in judgments involving public aspects than in judgments involving private aspects ($F_{1,51} = 30.85$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2_p = 0.38$).

Finally, additional support for participants' compliance with instructions for selecting traits comes from observability judgments. Repeated-measures ANOVA performed on observability scores for traits used during the trait-judgment task revealed a highly significant effect of origin aspect ($F_{1,54} = 46.60$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2_p = 0.46$) and no other significant effects. As expected, traits selected as highly descriptive of public aspects of oneself and others were judged as more observable ($M = 4.09$) than traits selected as highly descriptive of private aspects ($M = 3.30$).[6]

[6]Auxiliary analyses revealed that a similar, although somewhat weaker, effect occurred for traits generated during the trait-generation task but not selected for inclusion in the experimental task ($F_{1,4} = 21.11$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2_p = 0.28$).

Discussion

Response latencies showed that traits selected as highly descriptive of one's own person were more accessible when used in making judgments of private rather than in making judgments of public selves of oneself and of other people. This was the case even for traits that were selected as particularly descriptive of one's public self. At the same time, traits that were selected as highly descriptive of an acquaintance, including traits that were selected as highly descriptive of an acquaintance's private self, were more accessible when used in making judgments of public selves. Thus, it appears that in processing trait-related information for traits that are particularly descriptive of their own public self, individuals are still bound by a tendency to focus on private and unobservable aspects, rather than on public aspects. In the same vein, in processing trait-related information relevant to construals of the private selves of acquaintances, individuals persevere in focusing on public and observable aspects, rather than on private aspects. Such inflexibility does not seem to occur in the case of mental representations of significant others (e.g., best friend). This last finding is consistent with results of earlier studies showing that in terms of their properties, both structural and functional, representations of highly familiar others occupy a middle ground between representations of unfamiliar others and representations of the self (Karylowski, 1990; Prentice, 1990; Andersen, *et al.*, 1998; Idson & Mischel, 2001).

Additional data regarding descriptiveness and observability of traits generated by participants as highly descriptive of private and public selves of themselves and others indicated that accessibility could not be explained simply in terms of overlapping descriptiveness or in terms of linguistic properties of traits generated for different descriptiveness categories with respect to traits' observability. As it turns out, participants were quite successful in generating relatively observable traits that were uniquely descriptive of their own public selves and in generating relatively unobservable traits that were uniquely descriptive of the private self of an acquaintance. Taken together with the accessibility data, these results may, at first glance, seem counterintuitive. It should be noted, however, that even relatively unobservable characteristics such as happy, curious, or suspicious, can be processed primarily in terms of their observable manifestations rather than in terms of unobservable internal states. Similarly, highly observable characteristics such as punctual, generous, or talkative can be processed primarily in terms of their unobservable aspects—feelings, intentions, and thoughts about being punctual, generous, or talkative (Karylowski & Ranieri, 2006).

The results were consistent with the notion that despite a tendency to think of ourselves in terms of private, unobservable characteristics and

to think of others in terms of their public characteristics (McGuire & McGuire, 1988; Prentice, 1990; Karylowski, Konarzewski, & Motes, 2000; Karylowski & Ranieri, 2006), individuals are capable of forming representations of the private selves of others, and of their own public selves (Scheier & Carver, 1983; Andersen, *et al.*, 1998). Yet, the results clearly showed that in terms of accessibility, characteristics that are central to such representations retain their adherence to the notion of self as unobservable versus the other as observable (Pronin, 2008). Public or not, uniquely self-descriptive characteristics remain accessible primarily in terms of their private, unobservable aspects. Uniquely other-descriptive characteristics are accessible primarily in their public, observable aspects. Future research should address implications of this phenomenon for asymmetries in how individuals make judgments regarding private and public aspects of themselves and others and for behavioral consequences of such asymmetries.

Perhaps the most important limitation of present experiment has to do with how trait-stimuli were obtained. Specifically, instructions given to participants for generating traits, emphasized differences between targets and between private versus public selves. It is not entirely clear how this relates to more spontaneous processes of forming social representations, where substantial overlaps between representations of self and others and between representations of public and private selves may be present.

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