

# On being concerned about bragging

Dominique Muller\* and Fabrizio Butera

*Université Pierre Mendès France, Grenoble, France*

## Abstract

Research on social comparison has shown that people often declare themselves better than the average person (e.g., Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995). However, Alicke et al. (1995) also showed that, when the comparison target is a specific person, people hesitate to assert their superiority. Thus, people are more reluctant to say that they are superior when the target of comparison is less ambiguous. A first experiment demonstrated that this effect is so robust that participants do not say that they are superior to a coactor even when they are provided with a feedback explicitly stating that they are. They have no problem, however, stating that they are inferior when they are declared so. Nevertheless, a second experiment showed that such bragging-avoiding effect occurs as long as self-evaluation is not under threat. It was demonstrated that, under self-evaluation threat, participants do evaluate their performance as being better than that of the coactor. Without threat, though, participants avoid asserting their superiority, as found before. These results are discussed in terms of primacy of self-evaluation over self-presentation.

**Key words:** Social comparison, bragging, self-evaluation, threat, self-presentation.

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\* Dominique Muller is now at the Department of Psychology, University of Colorado at Boulder.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Fabrizio Butera, Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale de Grenoble-Chambéry, Université de Grenoble II, BP 47, 38040 Grenoble Cedex 9, France  
(e-mail: [fabrizio.butera@upmf-grenoble.fr](mailto:fabrizio.butera@upmf-grenoble.fr))

## INTRODUCTION

What a beautiful day: You just received this morning the editorial letter telling you that your latest paper has been accepted in the *Journal of Impressive Psychology*! Not just that, but your colleague Jordan tells you that your friend Lucy also had a paper accepted today in the *Journal of Pretty Good Psychology*. Indeed a good day. Then, Jordan, who sometimes lives in a different world, asks you who was more successful: you, publishing in JIP, or Lucy, in JPGP. How embarrassing! You do not want him to think that you are bragging by answering, which would be true, that you have been clearly more successful than Lucy. You may well end up telling him that it's about the same. Now, imagine a slightly different scenario in which the roles are just reversed: Your paper has been accepted in JPGP and Lucy's paper has been accepted in JIP. In this situation, it is easier for you to answer Jordan's question by telling the truth. You would surely here recognize that Lucy has been more successful than you. This seems like a strange asymmetry. Thus, what is the problem in telling that we are better than somebody else? Do we do it all the time?

The aim of this paper is to address the above two questions. On the one hand, is it really the case that people have a harder time saying that their performance is better than somebody else's, as compared to the situations in which they have to say that their performance is worse? On the other hand, is this bragging-aversive tendency a general phenomenon, or are there boundary conditions? It will be argued that one boundary condition is the presence of a self-evaluation threat in the social comparison relationship, a threat that could lower this bragging-aversive tendency.

### **Ambiguity in social comparison**

In common sense terms, the scenario described above could seem totally plausible. Although readers familiar with social comparison research may find it in contradiction with a large body of literature showing that people are usually quite comfortable with saying that they are better than their targets of comparison (e.g., Alicke, 1985; Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Brown, 1986; Codol, 1975). Numerous studies indeed demonstrated that people usual-

ly describe themselves as less susceptible to be confronted with negative events than average others (e.g., Alicke et al., 1995; Weinstein, 1980), as possessing more positive traits and less negative traits than the average others (e.g., Alicke et al., 1995; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989) and so on. Why then would you be uncomfortable with claiming that your "performance" of publishing in the JIP is a higher achievement than that of Lucy publishing in JGP? Would it not be easier to say that you are superior to one *specific* person than to an average other?

A quick look at the literature on the "self-other bias" (Brown, 1986), however, helps to realize that this is not a real paradox. It is indeed a recurrent idea in this literature that self-serving comparisons do take place only when people can be sure that they will not appear biased or self-favoring (e.g., Dunning et al., 1989; Klein, 2001). This is apparently why these effects emerge only when the dimension or the target of comparison are sufficiently ambiguous, as in the "average other", to let the door open for construction mechanisms: individuals do not use actual social comparison information but construct a favorable reality by themselves. These comparisons are often what Goethals, Messick, and Alison (1991) labeled "constructive social comparisons". However, people would be more concerned to be judged as self-favoring when these comparisons are less ambiguous (Klein, 2001).

Ambiguity has been proved to be the critical aspect for the comprehension of the above paradox in at least two factors. First, there could be an ambiguity in the dimension of comparison, as demonstrated by authors like Dunning et al. (1989) or Klein (2001). For instance, Dunning et al. (1989) have nicely shown that when traits on which comparisons were made were non-ambiguous (e.g., tall), people did not establish a downward social comparison with the average person. Conversely, they did so when traits were more ambiguous (e.g., sophisticated). Klein (2001) has shown that people judge themselves more favorably, that is, they construct a downward social comparison, only when feedback about their performance (which in fact reported no difference between the participants and the average of previous participants) is sufficiently ambiguous to enable construction. When neither their performance nor that of the previous participants were ambiguous, they did not construct downward social comparison.

Second, ambiguity in the target of comparison too has been demonstrated to be a critical aspect, as in work by Perloff and Fetzer (1986) or

by Alicke et al. (1995). Indeed, these two articles showed that while people had no difficulty in exhibiting downward social comparison when the target was as ambiguous as an average other, they almost never did so when the target of comparison was a specific other (i.e., a single person). In the latter case, participants from Alicke et al.'s study 6 (1995) went as far as establishing an upward social comparison, i.e., reporting that the other person was superior, even if no feedback was provided suggesting the superiority of this specific other.

It then appears that the "self-other bias" is not a general tendency which takes place in any comparison context. According to Dunning et al. (1989, p. 1089): "once the criteria of judgment are clearly established, people have the ability to assess their own standing in relation to their peers accurately". Without claiming that people will be perfectly accurate, it is at least clear that in a situation where both the dimension and the target of comparison are well defined people will not say that they are superior so easily.

### **Self-presentation concerns in social comparison**

Now that we know that people are not willing to express downward social comparison once the criteria of judgment and the target are clearly established, it is possible to push the problem a little bit further and ask if they are going to express both upward and downward social comparison when they are *objectively* inferior or superior to a specific target of comparison. It is worth noting that by objectively inferior or superior we refer to situations where the target and the source of comparison are clearly established, and where there is a quantified measure of the difference between the two protagonists. Therefore these situations are less ambiguous in that everybody knows who is compared and what is the direction of the difference between the source and the target of comparison. To sum up, on the basis of the "self-other bias" literature (e.g., Dunning et al., 1989; Klein, 2001), it is possible to think that in non-ambiguous comparisons there is an asymmetry whereby people could easily admit that they are inferior (Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst, & Zhang, 1997), but would be reluctant to evaluate themselves more favorably than the target (Exline & Lobel, 1999). This asymmetry would be due in part to the fear to appear self-favoring, i.e., to be perceived as a braggart.

There are indeed reasons to think that even in a clearly defined situation, that is, one in which the target is a single specific person with whom relative performance is clearly in one direction or another, people will continue to take into account self-presentation concerns (e.g., Baumeister, 1982; Goffman, 1967). And, since they do, they are afraid to appear as self-favoring – in other words as braggarts – by saying that they are superior to a coactor. This concern should be irrelevant when they have to say that they are inferior, but highly relevant when they have to say that they are superior. This could explain in part why in certain situations outperformers will go as far as avoiding revealing their superiority (see Exline & Lobel, 1999, for a review). Equally in line with this idea, research in the self-presentation area has shown that audiences are sensitive to modesty. In particular, it was shown that, although a person is perceived as more competent when she/he claims a good performance, she/he also induces more antipathy (Powers & Zuroff, 1988; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). As stated by Brown and Gallagher (1992, p. 6): “A desire to be liked tempers peoples’ public expressions of their superiority over others”. This is why researchers have been able to show that expression of superiority is often constrained by the fact that an audience is aware of the actual results (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Brown & Gallagher, 1992; Schlenker, 1975; see also Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002). For instance, Schlenker’s (1975) participants were always self-enhancing when the audience was not aware of past results. However, when the audience was aware of their past results, (a) participants with a success feedback did not evaluate themselves differently from participants who received no feedback, while (b) participants with a failure feedback evaluated themselves significantly lower than those without feedback. Likewise, Tice, Butler, Muraven, and Stillwell (1995) showed that their participants were less self-enhancing when the audience was a friend as compared to a stranger. This effect could presumably be explained by the fact that friends know when positive aspects of the self are exaggerated, or already know these positive aspects and do not need to hear them again and again (Tice et al., 1995). In sum, in accordance with Baumeister (1982, p. 15), it seems that: “Thus, an evaluation is primarily an event that concerns self-presentation. Although responses to it may indeed be influenced by the recipient’s self-esteem, no response to an evaluation should be interpreted without considering its self-presentational context.

unless perhaps the recipient is assured of the evaluation's total and permanent confidentiality".

A different line of research also leads to expect that it could be easier for people to evaluate someone else as better than they are, as compared to evaluating someone else as worse than they are. Hence, there would be a sort of positivity bias in judging other (Drozda-Senkowska & Personnaz, 1988; Drozda-Senkowska & Débard, 1991). According to Drozda-Senkowska and Personnaz (1988), this bias could be dictated by social norms of non-hostility. This literature too suggests that people could be reluctant to evaluate themselves as better, even when some objective information would allow to do so.

Interestingly, even though in a non-ambiguous situation people express a worse evaluation for themselves (compared to the evaluation of a coactor), but not a better, this latter line of research also suggests that the non-hostility norm can be inactivated in certain contexts. Drozda-Senkowska and Personnaz (1988) demonstrated, for instance, that under a context of competition, this positivity bias toward others could be decreased. Consistent with these results, Butera and Mugny (1995) demonstrated that participants confronted with a low-status target of comparison evaluate themselves as clearly superior to the target (downward social comparison) only when they are linked by negative interdependence (competition), and not when they are independent (no competition; see also Mugny, Butera, Quiamzade, Dragulescu, & Tomei, 2003). Given that competition, and therefore comparison of performance, can be threatening (Muller, Atzeni, & Butera, *in press*; Muller & Butera, 2003), these lines of research are particularly relevant to the suggestion that will be made below, that self-evaluation threat could be a factor that overcomes self-presentation concerns.

### **Threat in social comparison**

To address the issue of self-evaluation threat in social comparison, it should be noted that several authors proposed that one would feel threatened when self-evaluation leads to the conscious or unconscious conclusion that performance does not fit the standards (e.g., Steele, 1988; Tesser, 2000; see also Salovey, 1991). A positive evaluation is a fundamental need for human beings (Steele, 1988; Tesser, 1988), which implies that in the domain of performance threat is an expression of a

lack of fit between performance and standards or goals that people have set for themselves (Tesser, 1988). In this article, the term self-evaluation threat will then be used to refer to situations in which performance level is below the standards used to evaluate performance. Standards could be the performance of a coactor, but also the mid-point of an evaluation scale. Indeed, and this is important for our contention, other research has effectively shown that giving a performance feedback below this latter form of standard does induce a threat for self-evaluation (Butera, Maggi, Mugny, Pérez, & Roux, 1996; Muller & Butera, 2003).

The idea that self-evaluation threat could facilitate the expression of downward social comparison is far from new. Actually, this idea has been introduced in the social comparison field (Festinger, 1954; Suls & Wheeler, 2000) in an early research by Hakmiller (1966). He showed that participants threatened by a feedback stating that they scored very high on a scale of aggression towards their parents chose subsequently more downward social comparison targets. Extending this idea, Wills (1981) developed his downward social comparison theory which explicitly stated that under threat people would search for downward social comparison targets. Consistent with Wills' approach, theories such as Tesser's confluency model (2000, 2001) or Steele's self-affirmation theory (1988) predict that any threat to self-evaluation would induce regulatory mechanisms that aim at maintaining self-esteem. Then, a way to reduce a self-evaluation threat, induced, for example, by a bad performance feedback, could be to explicitly evaluate a downward social comparison target as inferior to oneself.

Several studies have already suggested that threat could lead to lower self-presentation concerns and then to the expression of downward social comparison. Hence, Branscombe and Wann (1994) have shown that threat could lead people to more outgroup derogation. Furthermore, Brown and Gallagher (1992) found that self-evaluation threat could reinforce the tendency to see oneself as better than an average person. However, these results appeared only when the audience was not aware of the feedback received by participants. Moreover, as often in the "self-other bias" literature, this experiment took place in a situation where both the target (i.e., most other people) and the dimension were ambiguous. One of the aims of the present research is to test a similar idea but in a context with as little ambiguity as possible, that is, a context where evaluations will be made on the very dimension on which

participants have received a non-ambiguous performance feedback. Moreover, the target of comparison will be a specific other.

## OVERVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

This article presents two experiments. The aim of the first one was to inspect whether participants possessing precise comparison information would be willing to evaluate themselves as better and worse than a specific target of comparison, respectively in downward and upward social comparison situations. More specifically, participants were given their score and a coactor's score, indicating without any ambiguity that they performed either better (downward social comparison) or worse (upward social comparison) than the coactor. In this first experiment, participants had to directly compare their performance (namely, the error rate) to that of the coactor. Here we predicted that in upward social comparison, participants should clearly indicate that the coactor made fewer errors (Alicke et al., 1997). Concerning the downward social comparison condition, two predictions were possible. On the one hand, the objective and clear difference between their score and the coactor's could allow them to evaluate themselves as better than the coactor. On the other hand, it was possible to think that self-presentation concerns (Baumeister, 1982), and more precisely the fear to appear as a braggart in the experimenter's eye, could prevent participants from indicating any difference between themselves and the coactor.

As it will be shown, it was indeed the case that in Experiment 1, under downward social comparison, self-presentation concerns were powerful enough to prevent participants from indicating any difference between themselves and the coactor, despite the objective difference in the provided feedback. The aim of Experiment 2 was then to test the prediction that self-evaluation threat could counteract these self-presentation concerns and lead participants to evaluate their performance as higher than the coactor's in downward social comparison.

## EXPERIMENT 1

Experiment 1 studied whether providing the participants with downward social comparison feedback with an objective and clear difference



between their score and the coactor's allow them to evaluate themselves as better than the coactor, or if self-presentation concerns prevent them from indicating any difference between themselves and the coactor.

## Method

**Participants and design.** Forty-three students were randomly distributed across two conditions: Upward Social Comparison (USC) and Downward Social Comparison (DSC). As a manipulation check, participants were asked to recall their and the coactor's rates of good responses. One participant was dropped from the analysis because he could not report this information, two because of their suspiciousness about the experiment, and three because they did not respond to the main dependent variable. The mean participant age was 20 year-old ( $M = 20.30$ ,  $SD = 3.59$ ). The majority of the participants were women ( $N = 30$ ).<sup>1</sup>

**Materials and procedure.** Each participant arrived at the same time as a confederate. The experimenter explained that in order to save time, he would run two participants simultaneously. The participant and the confederate were then seated in front of a computer, on opposite sides of a table, so that it was impossible for each of them to see the screen of the other. A confederate was used in order to avoid the exchange of critical information. The experimenter then explained the perceptual task that they were required to do: participants were asked to indicate for each of a series of items if a target was present among distractors. Each item was presented for 70 ms, which made it almost impossible for participants to know if their responses were accurate or not. This was important in order to manipulate the performance feedback. After responding to the first series of items, the experimenter told participants to wait the time for the server to analyse the data. The results of both participants were then displayed on each computer screen. Each participant could recognize his/her own score because it was bolded. Actual participants were always given a score of 65% of good responses.

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1. All the analyses presented in this paper have been rerun without male participants. These analyses revealed the same results.

However, the coactor's score was manipulated. Hence, in the upward social comparison condition the coactor allegedly received a score of 80% of good responses, while in the downward social comparison condition this score was 50% of good responses. During the display of the bogus feedback, the experimenter was just behind participants and thus in position to see both scores. After seeing both scores, participants moved to the second phase, with another series of items, at the end of which they filled out a questionnaire while the server was supposed to analyze data from the second phase. In this questionnaire, among different questions not related to this experiment, they were first asked to recall their performance and the coactor's for the first phase; as indicated above, all participants, with one exception, exactly reported both scores. Then, they were asked on a 7-point scale to what extent they thought they have made from far more errors (= 1) to far fewer errors (= 7) than the coactor. Participants were then debriefed, thanked, and dismissed.

## Results and Discussion

First, a *t* test was conducted on the question about the comparison of their performance with the coactor's. This analysis revealed that participants in the USC condition evaluated the extent to which they had made more errors than the coactor ( $M = 2.11$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) higher than the participants in the DSC condition ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ),  $t(35) = 4.97$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $PRE = .41$ .<sup>2</sup> More interestingly, a test against the mid-point of the scale (namely, 4) was also conducted for each group. In the USC condition participants clearly stated that they made more errors than the coactor,  $t(35) = 7.801$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, the mean of the DSC condition was not different than the mid-point of the scale,  $t(35) = 0.89$ ,  $p < .378$ , revealing that participants of this condition did not want to say that they made fewer errors than the coactor. It is worth noting that they did not, despite the fact that all of them recalled correctly

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2. We opt here for presenting the PRE (Proportional Reduction in Error; Judd & McClelland, 1989) as an index of effect size, instead of the more often used  $\eta^2$ . Indeed, the latter is supposed to be the true effect size in the population (the former being simply an estimation), which is by definition a value that cannot be known.

and precisely that their performance was objectively superior to that of the coactor.

These results thus supported the idea that there is no problem for people in saying that someone else had a better performance than theirs. However, they also pinpointed that it is really problematic for them to say that their performance was better than the coactor's. Thus, the same difference between the participants' score and the coactor's score (15%) led in the USC condition to accurately report that they made more errors, but did not lead them to report that they made fewer error in the DSC condition. It then seems that, even if – as suggested by Dunning et al. (1989) – people have the ability to assess their own standing in relation to their peers accurately (which is evident in the manipulation check), they do not claim this standing when this would lead them to claim that they are superior. Self-presentation concerns may then still be active even when there is a clear and objective difference in favor of the participants. In Experiment 2, we will then study whether these self-presentation concerns can be counteracted and more precisely if it is possible to lead people to claim their superiority, by inducing a self-evaluation threat.

## EXPERIMENT 2

According to Wills (1981), people under self-esteem threat would look for downward social comparison targets. As mentioned in the introductory part, an extension of this idea could be that under self-evaluation threat people would use a downward social comparison target, when the situation provides one, in a self-enhancing manner. Thus, it is possible to think that when people are threatened in their self-evaluation they could be willing to claim that they are actually better (or less bad) than their coactor, when evidence clearly indicates that it is the case. Under threat, self-evaluation maintenance could then be considered as more important than self-presentation concerns. The aim of Experiment 2 was to show that self-evaluation threat can lead participants to evaluate their performance as better than the coactor's in downward social comparison.

The present study then reproduced the design of Experiment 1, but with an additional independent variable, that is, the threat associated to the evaluation of participants. In Experiment 1, participants were always

provided with a feedback allocating 65% of good responses. Such a feedback was chosen because it reflects a good performance if this one is evaluated in comparison with a normative standard (Bandura, 1986) and more precisely a normative standard such as the mid-point of a 0% to 100% scale. In the present experiment, self-evaluation threat was introduced by giving half of the participants a performance feedback below the mid-point of the evaluation scale, i.e., 35%. This feedback is threatening<sup>3</sup> because it implies that the participant has not met the standards for a good performance (cf. Muller & Butera, 2003). The other half of the sample received a feedback of 65%, as in Experiment 1.

## Method

**Participants and design.** Fifty-seven students were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions of a 2 (Direction of social comparison: USC, DSC)  $\times$  2 (Performance: Low, High) factorial design. One participant was dropped from the analysis for not having reported the correct feedback score in the manipulation check, and two others because of their suspiciousness about the experiment. The mean participant age was 20 year-old ( $M = 20.33$ ,  $SD = 2.35$ ). The majority of the participants were women ( $N = 51$ ).

**Materials and procedure.** The materials and procedure for this experiment were almost the same as in the previous one. There were however two major differences. The first one concerned the manipulations. Indeed, in order to induce self-evaluation threat, and in line with the idea that a performance below the mid-point of the scale can be threatening (Butera et al., 1996; Muller & Butera, 2003), participants were attributed performance feedback either above or below this mid-point (i.e., 50%). Thus, in the Low Performance condition, participants were attributed a performance of only 35% of good responses. In the High Performance condition, they were attributed a performance of 65%

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3. It is true that the performance of the coactor is a salient standard to evaluate one's own performance, and therefore the two USC conditions also elicit self-evaluation threat (see Muller & Butera, 2003). However, given that our interest here is to counteract self-presentation concerns in DSC, and not in USC, we will concentrate on self-evaluation threat within DSC.

of good responses. Direction of social comparison was manipulated as in the previous experiment by varying the coactor's performance by 15%, but had to be adapted to the participant's level of performance. Thus, the coactor was attributed 50% of good responses in the USC/Low Performance condition, 20% of good responses in the DSC/Low Performance condition, 80% of good responses in the USC/High Performance condition, and 50% of good responses in the DSC/High Performance condition. The second major difference with Experiment 1 concerned the measure of evaluation. Indeed, in order to assess the precise value that the participants attribute to oneself and to the coactor, we used two separate items, asking to what extent their performance (and, separately, that of the coactor) ranged from very bad (= 1) to very good (= 6). Using this kind of methodology also allowed analyzing the data with the target of evaluation as a within-participants measure.

## Results and Discussion

Evaluations of performance have been analyzed as a function of a 2 (Direction of Social Comparison: USC, DSC)  $\times$  2 (Performance: Low, High)  $\times$  2 (Target of evaluation: Self, Coactor) factorial design with the first two factors manipulated between participants and the last factor varying within them.

The ANOVA first revealed an effect of Direction of Social Comparison. Participants evaluated performance as better in USC ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ ) than in DSC ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ),  $F(1, 50) = 5.55$ ,  $p < .022$ ,  $PRE = .099$ . Moreover, a significant main effect of Performance showed that participants evaluated performance as better in the High Performance conditions ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) than in the Low Performance conditions ( $M = 3.29$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ),  $F(1, 50) = 48.72$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $PRE = .493$ . Of utmost interest is the effect of the within-participants factor: on average participants evaluated the coactor's performance ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) as better than theirs ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ),  $F(1, 50) = 113.40$ ,  $p < .01$ . Indeed, there is a strong tendency to evaluate the coactor as better than oneself, even when a very precise and clear-cut feedback is provided and the participants remember it (as shown in the manipulation check). However, this effect was qualified by a Target by Direction of Social Comparison interaction,  $F(1, 50) = 189.25$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $PRE = .79$ , which in turn was qualified

by the three-way interaction,  $F(1, 50) = 5.01, p < .03, PRE = .09$ . This interaction revealed that the Target by Direction of Social Comparison interaction was more potent under Low Performance,  $F(1, 50) = 123.02, p < .01$ , than under High Performance,  $F(1, 50) = 69.09, p < .01$ . This interaction was decomposed in order to inspect our prediction that self-evaluation threat, namely a low performance, should lead participants to evaluate themselves more favorably than the coactor in DSC; simple-effect tests were thus conducted, opposing both targets of evaluation for each level of the between-participants design.

The simple-effect tests conducted under High Performance (no threat) were in line with Experiment 1: as can be seen in Figure 1, USC participants evaluated the coactor ( $M = 5.14, SD = 0.53$ ) as better than themselves ( $M = 3.71, SD = 0.61$ ),  $F(1, 50) = 125.32, p < .01$ , while DSC participants did not evaluate themselves ( $M = 4.07, SD = 0.73$ ) as better than the coactor ( $M = 4.00, SD = 0.55$ ),  $F(1, 50) = 0.31, p < .57$ . In contrast, as expected, under Low Performance (self-evaluation threat), USC participants again evaluated the coactor ( $M = 4.29, SD = 0.47$ ) as better than themselves ( $M = 2.54, SD = 0.50$ ),  $F(1, 50) = 188.07, p < .01$ , but this time their counterparts in the DSC condition evaluated themselves ( $M = 3.33, SD = 0.49$ ) as better than the coactor ( $M = 3.00, SD = 0.43$ ),  $F(1, 50) = 5.84, p < .02$ .

The results of the High Performance conditions, those without self-evaluation threat, thus replicated the effects observed in Experiment 1: Participants had no difficulty in evaluating their performance as lower than the coactor's under USC, but were again reluctant to state that their performance was higher under DSC. Again, this was true despite the fact that they clearly and precisely remembered that their performance was 65% while the coactor's was 50%. As in Experiment 1, the same difference of 15% led to different behaviors in upward and in downward social comparison, even if in this experiment the two scores were evaluated independently and not interdependently as in Experiment 1.

However, in the Low Performance conditions, those with self-evaluation threat, the results were fairly different. Indeed, when the participants' performance was allegedly below the mid-point of the evaluation scale (namely, 35%), they did express both their inferiority in upward social comparison *and* their superiority in downward social comparison. Under threat, they seemed to be less concerned with self-presentation concerns. This result supports the idea that self-evaluation

maintenance could counteract these concerns and lead to the expression of superiority in downward social comparison.

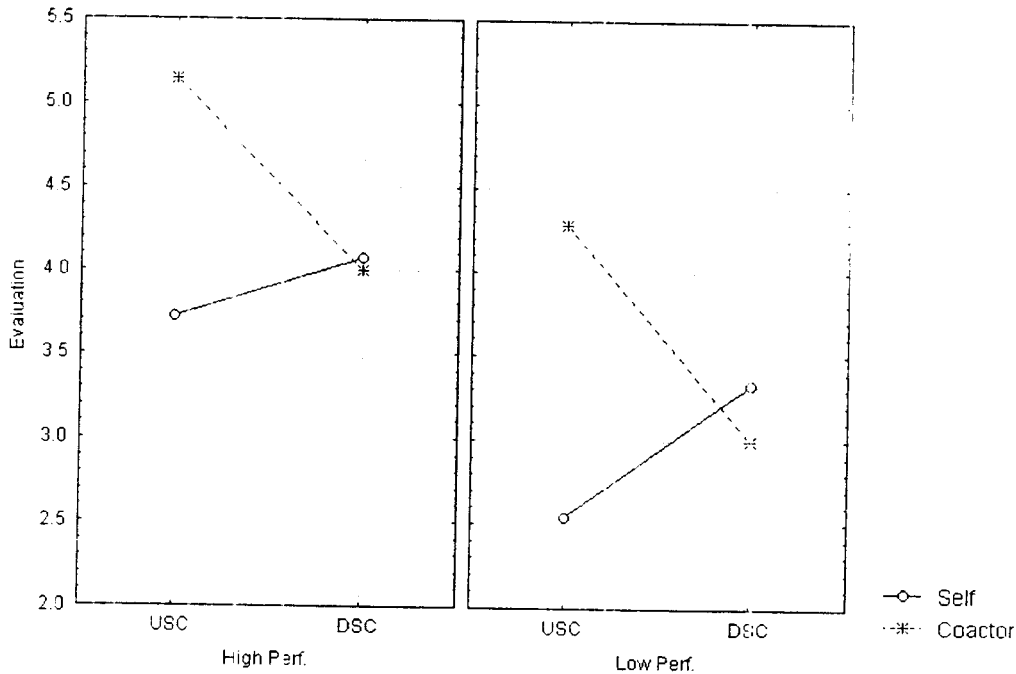


Figure 1. Experiment 2: Evaluation of self and other as a function of the direction of social comparison and the level of performance.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

In Experiment 1, it was relatively safe to predict that participants should be willing to evaluate the coactor as better than themselves when they were given the “objective” proof that the coactor outperformed them by 15%. First, the information on the relative performance was absolutely clear. Second, it is not a problem, in terms of social desirability, to say that someone is superior; there is no risk to appear as a braggart. Third, this is in line with the general positivity bias toward others (Drozda-Senkowska & Débard, 1991; Drozda-Senkowska & Personnaz, 1988). The results clearly supported this prediction. In contrast, it was not so sure that the clarity of the difference with the coactor would allow people to claim what was true, i.e., that they had done fewer errors than the coactor. If we refer to Dunning et al. (1989), the

clarity of the criteria should lead to expect people to be accurate in their assessment of their standing in relation to the coactor. However, the work in the self-presentation field leads to expect that participants could still be afraid of expressing a lack of modesty (Baumeister, 1982; Powers & Zuroff, 1988; Schlenker & Leary, 1982) and of being seen as braggarts. The results showed that, although the participants' superiority was clearly reported in the manipulation check, participants did not express that there was a difference in performance between themselves and the coactor.

These results seem in line with Baumeister's (1982) idea that responses concerning evaluation could be influenced by people's self-esteem, but are primarily influenced by self-presentation concerns. It could have been more self-enhancing for participants to express their superiority over the coactor, but to do so they would have had to neglect self-presentation concerns, which they did not. Self-presentation concerns seem really powerful.

Nonetheless, Experiment 2 demonstrated that under certain conditions self-evaluation maintenance mechanisms (Tesser, 1988, 2000; Steele, 1988) are able to counteract these self-presentations concerns. Indeed, this experiment not only replicated Experiment 1, but also showed that under self-evaluation threat people could be willing to express their superiority over the coactor. These results suggest that people's responses may well be primarily influenced by self-presentation concerns (Baumeister, 1982), but that these concerns only counteract a "regular" self-enhancement need, and not a stronger one induced by a threat in self-evaluation. At this stage, this is just a tempting idea, in need of further investigations.

## **Limitations**

Along this paper, and based on previous work, we took for granted that it was self-presentation concerns which prevented participants from saying that they were superior to the coactor. An alternative explanation could however be that, given the difficulty of the task, participants in fact had a harder time believing they were superior, than inferior, to the coactor. Nevertheless, this alternative explanation is less economical than the one based on self-presentation concerns, given that (a) all the participants did remember correctly their and the coactor's score, (b)



participants that were suspicious about the bogus feedback have been excluded, and (c) a generalized lack of belief in self-superiority cannot account for the expression of self-superiority in the Low-Performance/DSC condition. It is true, however, that in order to reinforce the proposed interpretations, future research should manipulate the “private” versus “public” level of participants’ responses – as it is common in the self-presentation literature (Baumeister, 1982). This would be an appropriate way to directly manipulate the level of self-presentation concerns that was held constant in the present research. Another way to address the problem of the contribution of self-presentation concerns to the reported effects would be to devise a measure of self-presentation concerns and to observe its mediating effect.

Furthermore, self-evaluation threat was not measured directly which could also be seen as a limitation of Experiment 2. However, we believe that self-evaluation threat – and threat in general – is not a construct that could be easily measured. The reason for this is that people sometimes do not even experience this threat consciously or, if they do, they would be reluctant to admit that it is the case. This could explain why, even in domains as popular as stereotype threat (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995), dissonance (e.g. Festinger, 1957), or social influence (e.g., Butera & Mugny, 2001), threat has never been measured really convincingly. Accordingly, self-evaluation threat must often be assumed on the basis of various manipulations based on different standards of evaluation (e.g., Muller et al., in press; Muller & Butera, 2003).

Finally, a peculiarity of our procedure is worth a note. The feedback given to the participants evaluated their performance on the first phase of the task, which implied the possibility of a subsequent feedback. This could be an important dimension, given that the self-presentation literature has shown that people more easily appear as modest when a further evaluation is expected that could turn out to be embarrassing if it is not as good as the first one (e.g., Schneider, 1969). Hence, it could be interesting to replicate the above results in a setting where no further evaluation is expected.

The above limitations open the way for future investigations on the fascinating phenomenon of self-evaluation. The present research contributed to this field in showing that bragging is indeed an aversive behavior and people consistently avoid evaluating themselves as superior to a coactor – even when they are objectively declared superior –, but this is so as long as their self-evaluation is not under threat.

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## RÉSUMÉ

Les recherches portant sur la comparaison sociale ont montré que souvent les gens se disent supérieurs à un individu moyen (e.g., Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995). Néanmoins, Alicke et al. (1995) ont également montré que, lorsque la cible de comparaison est une personne spécifique, les gens hésitent à affirmer leur supériorité. Ainsi, les gens sont peu disposés à dire qu'ils sont supérieurs quand la cible de comparaison est moins ambiguë. Une première expérience démontre que cet effet est tellement robuste que les participants ne se disent pas supérieurs à un coacteur même quand un feedback leur indiquant explicitement qu'ils le sont leur est présenté. Ils n'ont, cependant, aucun problème à dire qu'ils sont inférieurs quand ils sont déclarés comme tel. Toutefois, une seconde expérience indique qu'un tel effet d'évitement de vantardise apparaît uniquement si les individus ne sont pas menacés dans leur auto-évaluation. Il est démontré qu'en situation de menace de l'auto-évaluation, les participants évaluent leur performance comme étant meilleure que celle du coacteur. Sans cette menace, les participants continuent, comme illustré précédemment, à éviter d'affirmer leur supériorité. Ces résultats sont discutés en termes de primauté de l'auto-évaluation sur l'auto-présentation.

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