Particularistic and Universalistic Evaluation in the Social Comparison Process

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ABSTRACT

In this article we argue that people are motivated to evaluate both the universalistic and particularistic standing of their abilities. One's universalistic standing is assessed by comparing with others who are similar to oneself on attributes related to the ability being assessed. One's particularistic standing is assessed by comparing with reference others, those with whom one shares an identity or bond. In five studies we attempted to distinguish between these two types of evaluation. We manipulated reference closeness by varying the distinctiveness of a shared attribute. In Studies 1 and 2 we gave subjects the choice of comparing a test score with that of either a distinctively similar (reference) other or a nondistinctively similar (nonreference) other. Although the two choices provided equivalent universalistic information, subjects overwhelmingly preferred to compare with the distinctively similar other. Studies 3—5 provided evidence that subjects actually did identify more closely with distinctively similar others than with nondistinctively similar others.

For people to evaluate their abilities and outcomes, they often must compare themselves with others (Festinger, 1954; Merton & Rossi, 1957; Pettigrew, 1967). Not all potential comparison others are equally relevant, however, and considerable social psychological research and theory has addressed the issue of comparison selectivity. Both sociologists working within the tradition of reference group theory (Hyman, 1960) and psychologists working within the tradition of social comparison theory (Suls & Miller, 1977) accord perceived similarity a central role in the selection process. The two traditions differ, however, in the conceptualization of similarity and its role in the comparison process.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) contends that the comparison process is motivated by a drive to evaluate the goodness or badness of one's abilities. This theory postulates that individuals prefer to compare themselves with similar others because others provide the greatest cognitive clarity concerning their abilities. According to Goethals and Darley (1977), the information people gain about their abilities is especially great when they compare themselves with others who are similar to them on attributes that are related to or predictive of the variable they wish to evaluate (see also Suls, Gastorf, & Lawhon, 1978; Wheeler, Koestner, & Driver, 1982; Zanna, Goethals, & Hill, 1975). For example, if people wish to determine how much tennis ability they have, they will prefer to compare themselves with another who is similar in practice time (a variable presumably correlated with tennis performance) than with another who is similar in political ideology (a variable presumably uncorrelated with tennis performance). The logic of Goethals and Darley's (1977) attributional formulation is that by discovering the performance level of another who is similar in practice time, people can confidently attribute their own level of performance to (a) superior ability (if they are better), (b) inferior ability (if they are worse), or (c) average ability (if they are equal).

As this brief summary indicates, social comparison theory (at least contemporary statements of it) conceptualizes the goal of the comparison process to be universalistic evaluation: people determining their standing relative to other people in general. It assumes that people do not care where they stand in relation to particular comparison others per se; other people simply provide the highest informational clarity concerning a person's overall standing on an ability dimension. It is true that doing well or poorly relative to those chosen for comparison purposes will have affective consequences for people, but this is not because of their relation to the others; it is because of what their relation to the others tells them about their universalistic standing. For example, if people play tennis more poorly than someone who is similar to them on attributes that are related to tennis performance, this means that they are not very good at tennis and it is presumably this inference, not the antecedent comparison, that leads to any affect they experience (Goethals & Darley, 1977).
Reference group theory offers a different conceptualization of the comparison process (E. Singer, 1981). The focus of this theory is not universalistic evaluation but rather what we term particularistic evaluation: people determining their standing relative to those others with whom they identify or feel a bond. Whereas social comparison theory has focused on the process by which individuals assess their global status, reference group theory has focused on the process by which people assess their local status (Frank, 1985). Reference group theory views comparisons with similar (reference) others as being more than simply the instrumental means by which people achieve the goal of assessing their overall standing on an attribute (e.g., "What is my level of tennis ability?""). Comparisons with reference others are presumed to be of intrinsic interest to people (Tesser, 1986) and affect their feelings of self-worth directly (e.g., "Am I better or worse than my friend?").

The distinction between universalistic and particularistic evaluation has been overlooked by social psychologists. This probably is because of the methodological difficulty of separating comparison choices that reflect a preference for one type of evaluation over the other. Frequently, the individuals with whom a person shares related attributes will also be the individuals with whom the person identifies. For example, other college students from one's home town will serve both as a reference group and as a relevant social comparison group (at least they will if the attribute of home town is believed to be related to abilities pertinent to the college context). In some instances, however, the two types of groups will diverge. Not all of those who share attributes related to the target task will be reference others and not all reference others will share related attributes. As an example of the first type of divergence, consider how much more distressing it is to do worse than one's friend on an exam than it is to do worse than an anonymous other, even if the two are equally similar to oneself on attributes related to exam performance. The young child who wants to know how his or her task performance compared with that of his or her parent illustrates that reference others need not be individuals who provide people with the greatest cognitive clarity concerning their universalistic standing on ability dimensions.

In our five studies we attempted to demonstrate that people are motivated to evaluate not only their universalistic status but also their particularistic status. We proposed that people will prefer to compare themselves with a reference other than with a nonreference other, even when the reference other cannot provide any more universalistic information.

To test these propositions we first had to devise a means of manipulating the reference closeness of another independently of the other's informational value. The variable we chose for this purpose was the distinctiveness of the attribute that the two individuals shared. Our guiding hypothesis was that people will identify more strongly with others who share a statistically distinctive attribute with them than they will with others who share a statistically nondistinctive attribute with them.

Two sets of empirical findings led us to propose that attribute distinctiveness may contribute to reference closeness. The first of these focuses on the different feelings that members of minorities and majorities have toward their own group. Jellison and Zeislet (1969) found that members of a successful minority were more strongly attracted to one another than were members of a successful majority. Kaplan and Olczak (1971) found that minority subjects cared more than did majority subjects whether in-group members agreed with them. Finally, Gerard and Hoyt (1974) found that members of minority groups evaluated each other more favorably relative to out-group members than did members of majority groups. There is little theorizing in these articles as to why there is a stronger bond among minority group members than among majority group members. Nevertheless, the pattern of results is consistent with the proposition that the fewer the number of people sharing an attribute, the greater is their reference closeness.

The second set of findings that led us to consider the relation between attribute distinctiveness and reference closeness is that reported by McGuire and his colleagues on the phenomenon of spontaneous self-concept (McGuire & McGuire, 1981). This work does not address the issue of in-group identification directly, but it does provide a plausible account for why the distinctiveness of an attribute may affect the reference closeness of individuals sharing that attribute. In an impressive array of studies, McGuire and his colleagues showed that the attributes that individuals spontaneously identify when asked to describe themselves tend to be ones on which they are statistically distinctive in their social contexts. For example, individuals are more likely to mention their ethnicity, gender, or age if their standings on these variables are distinctive in their social context than if they are not. If distinctive attributes generally are more central to one's self-concept than nondistinctive ones, then it could be argued that individuals who share distinctive (and hence important) attributes will identify more strongly with one another.

In summary, we explored the role of particularistic evaluation in the social comparison process. To do this successfully, we first had to discover how to empirically distinguish between two meanings of similarity: shared related attributes versus reference closeness. The means by which we attempted to operationalize this distinction was through the variable
of attribute distinctiveness. The distinctiveness of an attribute is presumed to affect the perceived reference closeness of those sharing it, but not the perceived relatedness of the attribute to the performance dimension.

**Study 1**

In Study 1 we tested the hypothesis that the desire for particularistic social evaluation can influence an individual's choice of comparison others. The experimenter presented subjects with an opportunity to compare their performance score with the performance score of 1 of 2 other subjects. One of these scores was that of a distinctively similar individual, the other was that of a nondistinctively similar individual. Although both scores provided equivalent information concerning universalistic status, we hypothesized that subjects would prefer to see the score of a distinctively similar (reference) other than the score of a nondistinctively similar (nonreference) other.

**Method Subjects**

Subjects were 25 male and female undergraduate volunteers from Simon Fraser University who were recruited by telephone and participated individually.

**Procedure**

The experimenter told the subjects that the study was concerned with the relation between perceptual style (the way in which a person categorizes and processes information) and social perceptiveness (the ability to make accurate judgments of others' personalities). Subjects first completed the test of social perceptiveness and then two tests of perceptual style.

**Social perceptiveness test.**

The social perceptiveness test required subjects to read a biographical description of a person and then to answer 15 multiple-choice questions regarding the individual's past and present life experiences (e.g., whether his parents were strict or lenient). After completing the test all subjects learned that they had obtained a score of 42 out of 60.

**Perceptual style tests.**

Once subjects received their (bogus) score on the social perceptiveness test, the experimenter elaborated on the alleged purposes of the research. He described perceptual styles as being important characteristics of people because of their relation to a wide variety of social and personality characteristics (e.g., whether a person will show a consistent tendency either to ignore or notice small details of social interactions). It presumably was for the purpose of determining why each of the two different perceptual style dimensions relate to social perceptiveness that Study 1 was being undertaken. In accord with this fiction, the experimenter told subjects that once they had been categorized on the two perceptual style dimensions they would be asked to describe the strategies that they had used in answering the questions on the social perceptiveness test. The experimenter also told subjects that their responses on these latter measures would allow the researchers to assess whether people with different perceptual styles use different test-taking strategies. The experimenter emphasized that the two perceptual style dimensions were equally related to social perceptiveness.

The first test of perceptual style required subjects to estimate the number of dots appearing on 10 slides that were each projected for approximately 1 s. A feedback sheet informed subjects that people generally tend to either overestimate or underestimate the number of dots. Following the presentation the experimenter told subjects that their estimates indicated that they were overestimators, as opposed to underestimators. The second test required them to estimate the size of objects presented on each of 10 slides. The feedback sheet informed subjects that people generally tend to judge the objects to be either larger or smaller than they actually are. Following the presentation of these slides, the experimenter told all subjects that their estimates indicated that they were reducers, as opposed to enlargers.

**Distinctiveness manipulation.**

In addition to informing subjects that they were characterized by the overestimator and reducer perceptual styles, the feedback sheet also informed subjects that one of their perceptual styles was distinctive and that the other was nondistinctive. For the purpose of counterbalancing, half of the subjects learned that overestimators were a distinctive group, with overestimators making up 9% of the population and underestimators the remaining 91%, and that reducers
were a nondistinctive group, with reducers making up 88% of the population and enlargers the remaining 12%. The other half of the subjects learned that reducers were a distinctive group, with reducers making up 12% of the population and enlargers the remaining 88%, and that overestimators were a nondistinctive group, with overestimators making up 91% of the population and underestimators the remaining 9%.

Following this feedback the experimenter stated that many participants in the study had requested additional information concerning their score on the social perceptiveness test. These previous participants allegedly had expressed an interest in seeing the scores of others who shared their perceptual style. Accordingly, the experimenter announced to the subjects that he would permit them to see the score of either the last overestimator or the last reducer who had participated in the study. The experimenter then asked subjects to indicate which of the two scores they would prefer to see. Once subjects indicated their preference, the experimenter debriefed them.

Results and Discussion

The experimenter told subjects that the two perceptual styles were related equally to scores on the social perceptiveness test. Consequently, if they were motivated only by the desire to discover how their score compared with people in general, their choice of a comparison other should not have varied with the distinctiveness of the shared attribute. The two scores would be expected to yield equivalent information concerning their universalistic status. On the other hand, if subjects also were motivated to determine how well they compared with reference others, those with whom they shared a bond, then they should have exhibited a preference for the score of the distinctively similar other. This prediction was confirmed. Eighty percent of the subjects chose to see the score of the distinctively similar other, whereas only 20% chose to see the score of the nondistinctively similar other, $\chi^2(1, N = 25) = 9.0, p < .001$.

The experimenter explicitly told subjects that the two perceptual styles were related equally to social perceptiveness. It is possible, however, that subjects believed that the perceptual style dimension on which their standing was distinctive was more highly correlated with social perceptiveness ability than was the perceptual style dimension on which their standing was nondistinctive. If subjects did believe this, they might also have believed that the score of a distinctively similar other would provide them with greater informational clarity concerning their universalistic status than would the score of a nondistinctively similar other. We conducted Study 2 to rule out the possibility that the subjects in Study 1 preferred to see the score of the distinctively similar other because they expected this score to yield greater universalistic information.

Study 2

Whereas the experimenter told subjects in Study 1 that both styles were related (equally) to social perceptiveness, he told subjects in Study 2 that neither perceptual style was related to the ability being evaluated. This information was designed to ensure that subjects would infer that the scores of the distinctively similar and nondistinctively similar other yielded equivalent information concerning their general standing on the ability dimension. We did not expect the absence of a relation between perceptual style and social perceptiveness to affect the perceived reference or particularistic value of the distinctively similar other's score. Once again, we expected the score of a distinctively similar other to better satisfy a need for knowledge about one's local status than the score of a nondistinctively similar other.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 21 male and female undergraduate volunteers from Simon Fraser University who were recruited by telephone and participated individually.

Procedure

The experimenter informed the subjects when they arrived that they were to take part in two brief experiments that were being conducted by different researchers in the psychology department. The alleged purpose of the first experiment was to investigate the strategies people use when taking social perceptiveness tests; the alleged purpose of the second study was to explore the interrelations among perceptual style, age, sex, and family composition.

Subjects began by completing the same social perceptiveness test that was used in Study 1. All subjects learned that they had received a score of 42 out of 60 on the test. The experimenter subsequently asked subjects to provide a brief description of the strategies that they had used in answering the questions on the test. When they had completed this, the
experimenter informed them that the social perceptiveness study was completed and provided them with more information concerning the perceptual style study (see Study 1 for details). The experimenter told subjects that they would take two tests of perceptual style: The first would assess their style on the overestimator–underestimator dimension and the second their style on the enlarger–reducer dimension.

Subjects then completed both the size-estimation and dot-estimation tests (see Study 1), as well as a questionnaire requesting their age, sex, and family size. A feedback sheet subsequently provided them with feedback indicating that they were an overestimator on the first dimension of perceptual style and a reducer on the second dimension. One of these styles was described as being distinctive and the other nondistinctive (see Study 1 for details).

The experimenter continued by telling subjects that many of the previous participants had found their score on the social perceptiveness test difficult to interpret. He stated that even though there was no relation between the dimensions of perceptual style and social perceptiveness ("overestimators perform the same as underestimators; reducers perform the same as enlargers"), people had expressed a desire to see the scores of others who shared their perceptual style. In order to accommodate this desire, the experimenter indicated that he was allowing subjects to see the score of either the last overestimator or the last reducer to have participated in the study. Subjects indicated the score they preferred to see and then were debriefed.

Results and Discussion

The results supported the hypothesis that subjects prefer to compare their score with that of another with a distinctively similar perceptual style than with that of another with a nondistinctively similar style, even when neither of the perceptual style dimensions relates to performance on the target task. Eighty-one percent of the subjects chose to see the score of the distinctively similar other, whereas only 19% chose to see the score of the nondistinctively similar other, \( \chi^2 1, N = 21 = 8.04, p < .005 \).

These results, as do those of Study 1, support the proposition that people's choice of comparison others is not motivated solely by the goal of determining their universalistic standing on the relevant ability dimensions. People also are motivated to determine their local status on attributes, a goal best pursued by comparing with reference others.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 showed that people prefer to compare themselves with a distinctively similar other than with a nondistinctively similar other. We argued that this finding demonstrates people's desire to assess their particularistic status. Underlying this argument are two related assumptions: (a) Individuals view their distinctive traits as being more central and important to their personalities; and (b) individuals identify more strongly with those who share their distinctive (central) traits. To date, however, we have no evidence to support either of these assumptions. In Study 3 we attempted to remedy this omission by examining the hypothesis that individuals believe that their distinctive attributes are more central to their personalities than are their nondistinctive attributes.

Method Subjects

Subjects were 31 male and female undergraduate volunteers who were recruited by telephone and participated individually.

Procedure

The procedure used in this experiment was similar to the one used in Experiment 1. Briefly, the experimenter informed subjects that the purpose of the study was to investigate the relations between two dimensions of perceptual style and social perceptiveness. The experimenter stressed that both perceptual style dimensions were equally related to social perceptiveness and that the major goal of the study was to explore why these relations exist. Consistent with this rationale, the experimenter asked subjects to complete (a) two tests of perceptual style, (b) a social perceptiveness ability test, and (c) a questionnaire assessing their test-taking strategies.

Distinctiveness manipulation.
After completing the two perceptual style tests, subjects received a feedback sheet that revealed that they possessed the overestimator style on the dot-estimation test and the reducer style on the size-estimation test. Furthermore, they learned that one of these styles was distinctive and the other nondistinctive (see Experiment 1 for details).

**Dependent measures.**

Following this feedback the experimenter indicated that she had several pamphlets, each containing information about a different perceptual style. She then explained that because she needed a few minutes to prepare the test materials, the subjects could read one of the pamphlets. The experimenter asked subjects to indicate which of their two perceptual styles they would most like to learn more about and which of their perceptual styles they thought was more central and important in their personality.

**Results and Discussion**

We predicted that subjects would be more interested in learning about their distinctive characteristic than their nondistinctive characteristic. This prediction was confirmed. Eighty-seven percent of the subjects chose to read the pamphlet containing information about their distinctive perceptual style, whereas only 13% chose to read the pamphlet containing information about their nondistinctive perceptual style, \( \chi^2 1, N = 31 = 17.06, p < .001 \). We also predicted that subjects would view their distinctive characteristic as being more important and central to their personality than their nondistinctive characteristic. This prediction also was confirmed. Sixty-eight percent of the subjects indicated that their distinctive perceptual style was more central and important in their personality, whereas only 32% of the subjects indicated that their nondistinctive perceptual style was more important in their personality, \( \chi^2 1, N = 31 = 3.9, p < .05 \).

**Study 4**

Study 3 demonstrated that people view their distinctive traits as being more central and self-defining than their nondistinctive traits. This finding provides a clue as to why people may feel a stronger particularistic bond with distinctively similar than with nondistinctively similar others: The traits they share with distinctively similar others are more central and important to them. However, do individuals actually perceive a closer bond between themselves and distinctively similar others than between themselves and nondistinctively similar others? In Study 4 we examined this hypothesis.

**Method Subjects**

Subjects were 26 male and female undergraduate volunteers from Simon Fraser University who were recruited by telephone and participated individually.

**Procedure**

The experimenter told subjects that the purpose of the study was to investigate the relation between perceptual style and group decision making. The experimenter allegedly was interested in assessing whether groups composed of people with similar perceptual styles make better decisions than groups composed of people with different perceptual styles. Accordingly, subjects learned that once they had completed a test of perceptual style, they would participate in a decision-making task in which they would communicate with another individual via an intercom system.

The experimenter also told subjects that she was interested in determining whether individuals who have knowledge of their partner's background characteristics and perceptual style perform better than individuals without such knowledge. To accomplish this some participants in the study were to learn of their partner's background characteristics and perceptual style and others were not. The experimenter informed all subjects that they were in the shared information condition.

**Distinctiveness manipulation.**

Following the initial instructions, subjects completed the dot-estimation test that was used in Studies 1 and 2 (see Study 1 for details). The experimenter told all subjects that the test had revealed that their characteristic style was overestimation. In addition, half of the subjects learned that overestimation was a distinctive perceptual style (possessed by only 9% of the population), and the other half learned that overestimation was a nondistinctive perceptual style (possessed by 91% of the
The experimenter then gave subjects a background information questionnaire on which they were asked to indicate their age, sex, major, years of education, place of birth, neighborhood, recreational interests, and perceptual style (overestimator or underestimator). After subjects completed this questionnaire, the experimenter took it, explaining that she would give it to their partner. The experimenter returned with a completed questionnaire that she alleged to be that of the other subject. The responses on this questionnaire were generated so as to converge with those of the subjects in some respects and diverge in others. All subjects learned from the questionnaire that their partner also was an overestimator.

**Dependent measures.**

Once subjects had examined the background information questionnaire, the experimenter asked them to provide their first impressions of their partner. The experimenter informed subjects that she was assessing their first impressions because these may influence the decision-making task. The first impressions questionnaire asked subjects to indicate (a) the degree to which they and their partner were similar in perceptual style (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely similar*); (b) how similar their own score would be to that of their partner if they were both to take another test of perceptual style (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely similar*); (c) the degree to which they and their partner were similar to one another in general (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely similar*); and (d) how likely they thought it was that they and their partner had similar interests and personalities (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely likely*). After subjects had provided their first impressions, the experimenter debriefed them regarding the purposes of the study.

**Results and Discussion**

We predicted that subjects would indicate greater closeness to a distinctively similar target than to a nondistinctively similar target. This prediction was supported by two findings. First, subjects predicted that the distinctively similar target would be more similar to them in general (*M* = 6.77) than would the nondistinctively similar target (*M* = 4.92), *t* = 24 = 3.0, *p* < .03. Second, subjects predicted that the distinctively similar target would be more similar to them in terms of interests and personality traits (*M* = 6.69) than would the nondistinctively similar target (*M* = 5.31), *t* = 24 = 2.46, *p* < .03.

That subjects expected distinctively similar others to be more similar to them than nondistinctively similar others in general as well as in terms of interests and personalities raises an interpretational question concerning the findings of Studies 1 and 2. Specifically, do our findings suggest that the subjects in the earlier experiments might have believed that the distinctively similar other was more similar to them on related attributes? We do not think so. First, subjects in this experiment did not rate the distinctively similar target as being more similar to them in perceptual style (*M* = 8.08) than the nondistinctively similar target (*M* = 7.40), *t* = 24 = 1.14, *ns*. Second, subjects did not predict that a distinctively similar target would score more similarly to them on a subsequent measure of perceptual style (*M* = 7.15) than would a nondistinctively similar target (*M* = 7.15), *t* = 24 < 1. In short, distinctively similar others did not perceive themselves to be more similar than nondistinctively similar others on attributes related to their performance score, only on ones related to global similarity.

**Study 5**

The results of the fourth study support the proposition that the distinctiveness of the attribute shared by people affects their perception of in-group similarity, which we used as an index of reference closeness (see Pleban & Tesser, 1981). In Study 5 we pursued the link between distinctive similarity and reference closeness by examining the fraternal component of particularistic evaluation. Previous research has demonstrated that the degree of closeness people acknowledge between themselves and in-group members depends on the accomplishments of the ingroup members (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). The successes or failures of people's in-group can have greater or lesser effects on the individuals' feelings of pride and shame depending on the bond between them. One consequence of this fact is that people can modify their feelings of satisfaction by increasing or decreasing, depending on the circumstances, their perceptions of closeness to their group (Tesser, 1986). In addition, any variable that affects people's feelings of closeness to in-group members should affect the impact that the in-group members' performance has on the people's self-evaluations. One example of such a variable may be the distinctiveness of the bond that unites the in-group. Specifically, a member of a group should be affected more strongly by the fate of his or her group when the attribute shared by the group is distinctive than when it is nondistinctive. In Study 5 we tested this hypothesis.

**Method Subjects**
Subjects were 40 male and female undergraduate volunteers from Simon Fraser University who were recruited by telephone and participated individually.

**Procedure**

Initially, the experimenter informed subjects that they would be participating in two separate research projects that were being conducted by different researchers in the psychology department. The first experiment allegedly was concerned with social percepiveness. Specifically, the research was described as attempting to assess the strategies people use to solve social percepiveness problems. The second experiment allegedly was concerned with the interrelations among perceptual style, age, sex, and family composition.

Subjects began by completing the social percepiveness test, after which the experimenter asked them to briefly describe the strategies they had used in answering the questions on the test. Once subjects had finished this task, the experimenter indicated that the first experiment was completed.

**Distinctiveness manipulation.**

The researchers involved in the second study presumably were interested in whether people of differing ages, sexes, or family composition patterns tend to have different perceptual styles. Accordingly, after subjects described themselves in terms of the demographic categories, they completed the dot-estimation test (see Study 4 for details). The experimenter told all subjects that the test indicated that they were overestimators. In addition, they learned that this style was either distinctive or nondistinctive (see Study 4 for details).

**Performance-level manipulation.**

The experimenter continued by announcing that many previous participants had asked if they could see their score on the social percepiveness test. He explained he could not do that because the calculations would take too long. However, he indicated that he could allow them to see the average scores of the overestimators and underestimators who had participated in the study thus far. He then reminded subjects that social percepiveness was unrelated to perceptual style and, consistent with this, told them that the average score of the overestimators and underestimators was the same, either 56 of 60 points or 26 of 60 points.

We described perceptual style as being unrelated to social percepiveness in order to avoid a potential alternative account of the findings. If the two variables were related, those individuals sharing a distinctive perceptual style would occupy a more extreme relative position (a higher or lower percentile score) in the general distribution of social percepiveness scores than would the group of individuals sharing a nondistinctive perceptual style. Consequently, stronger affective reactions to the performance scores of a distinctively similar group could be mediated by subjects' inferences concerning the relative position of their group (and hence themselves) rather than by their feelings of a fraternal bond. This alternative interpretation would be obviated if the variables are described as being unrelated because the relative standings of the distinctive and nondistinctive groups in the overall distribution would not be expected to differ.

**Dependent measures.**

Once subjects learned the average score of the previous overestimators and underestimators, they completed a questionnaire that asked them to indicate their current mood. Specifically, they were to indicate on 7-point scales the degree to which they felt satisfied, happy, pleased, disappointed, sad, proud, and competent (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely).

Once subjects completed the mood questions the experimenter asked them to indicate (a) the score (out of 60) they thought they themselves would receive on the social percepiveness test and (b) the highest and lowest score they thought would be obtained by those sharing their perceptual style.

We obtained these last 2 measures in order to assess an alternative explanation of the findings. We hypothesized that mood reactions should be more polarized in distinctive than in nondistinctive groups because of the stronger sense of bonding among distinctive individuals. However, it could be argued that the hypothesized effect reflects the differential amount of information subjects in the two groups believe they can deduce about their own score from their knowledge of their group's average score. Specifically, individuals in distinctive groups may be more likely than those in nondistinctive
groups to believe that their own score is close to the average score of their group. Such a belief would follow from the assumption that distinctive groups are more homogeneous than nondistinctive groups (see Simon & Brown, 1987). If subjects do engage in this reasoning, they should (a) predict their own score to be closer to the group mean when their group is distinctive than when it is nondistinctive and (b) predict a smaller group range when their group is distinctive than when it is nondistinctive.

**Results and Discussion**

Because the internal consistency among the seven mood scales was high ($\alpha = .74$), we collapsed the items to yield a single mood index. We performed all subsequent analyses on this index.

**Mood.**

We hypothesized that the performance level of a group would influence the affective responses of group members more when the attribute that the group members shared was distinctive than when it was nondistinctive. A 2 (high vs. low performance) × 2 (distinctive vs. nondistinctive group) analysis of variance (ANOVA) performed on the mood index supported this prediction. In addition to a main effect for performance level, $F(1, 36) = 16.42, p < .001$, there was a significant interaction, $F(1, 36) = 4.24, p < .05$. The means are presented in Table 1.

Simple effects analyses provided further support for the hypothesis. Subjects belonging to the group sharing a distinctive attribute reported experiencing a significantly more positive mood when their group performed well ($M = 5.24$) than when it performed poorly ($M = 3.92$), $t(36) = 4.29, p < .001$. In contrast, the mood of the subjects belonging to the group sharing a nondistinctive attribute was not significantly affected by the performance level of their group, $t(36) = 1.55, ns$.

**Prediction.**

Earlier we raised the possibility that individuals may assume that distinctive groups are less variable than nondistinctive groups. One consequence of this assumption in the present context is that subjects might have believed that they had learned more about their own score from the mean score of their group in the distinctive condition than in the nondistinctive condition. Analyses of subjects' predicted scores provided no support for this account. A 2 × 2 ANOVA performed on the prediction scores (see Table 2) revealed no main effects, $F(1, 36) = 102.32, p < .001$, but no main effect of group distinctiveness ($F < 1$) and no interaction between group performance level and group distinctiveness ($F < 1$).

It is instructive to examine the relation between subjects' predictions of their own scores and the group averages they received. In the low-performance condition (the group average was 26 of 60), subjects' predictions in both the distinctive and nondistinctive conditions ($M_s = 28.67$ and 26.82, respectively) closely paralleled the group average. However, in the high-performance condition (the group average was 58 of 60), subjects' predictions in both the distinctive and nondistinctive conditions ($M_s = 48.30$ and 47.89, respectively) were significantly lower than their group's average, $t(35) = 4.89, p < .01$, and $t(35) = 4.86, p < .01$, respectively. Two inferences can be drawn from this pattern. First, the finding that subjects' estimates, at least in the high-performance condition, deviated from the group average suggests that subjects' estimates were not simply restatements of the group average. This is important because it counters the charge that the experimental constraints were such as to preclude group distinctiveness from having an effect on subjects' predictions even if it was perceived to relate to group variability. The second interesting aspect of these findings is their inconsistency with a self-serving account. In the low-performance condition subjects estimated that they would do just as poorly as the average member of the group, and in the high-performance condition they actually estimated that they would do less well than the average group member.

Finally, it should be noted that the prediction findings support the contention that individuals do not perceive a greater relation between perceptual style and performance when their perceptual style is distinctive. If distinctive individuals perceived a stronger relation between perceptual style and social perceptiveness scores, their predicted scores should have been closer to the group mean than the predicted scores of nondistinctive individuals.

**Group range.**

Analyses of the range estimates (see Table 3) also failed to support the hypothesis that subjects believe there is less variability in distinctive than in nondistinctive groups. A 2 × 2 ANOVA on subjects' estimates of the range of social
perception scores in their group revealed no main effects of either group distinctiveness ($F < 1$) or group performance, $F_{1, 35} = 1.8$, $ns$, and no interaction between these two variables, $F_{1, 35} = 1.61$, $ns$.

**General Discussion**

When people compare their performances with others they can obtain valuable information. If the others are similar to them on attributes that they perceive to be related to the performance in question, such comparisons can yield information about their universal standing on the performance dimension (Goethals & Darley, 1977). For example, people can acquire valuable information about their ability (or at least potential ability) at tennis by comparing themselves with others who are similar to them on attributes related to tennis performance. Thus, if they have played tennis for 1 year, they will gain a clearer fix on their tennis ability if they compare themselves with someone who also has played tennis for 1 year than if they compare themselves with either someone who has played tennis for 6 months or someone who has played tennis for 2 years. People seek such information, Festinger (1954) argued, because without it their evaluation of their tennis ability would be unstable. Also, without a stable evaluation of their tennis ability they would not be able to answer questions such as "Should I consider turning pro in a few years?" or even "Should I enter the tennis tournament at the next meeting of the Society for Experimental Social Psychology?"

The thesis of this article is that the motive to seek universalistic evaluation can be distinguished from the motive to seek particularistic information. People are not always content to know where their level of performance falls in relation to other people generally, they also want to know how it compares with people with whom they identify or feel a bond: their reference group. It is through comparisons with reference others that people assess their self-worth. Even in contexts in which individuals have stable evaluations of their ability, they will be motivated to compare their performance level with that of their reference group in order to assess how satisfied they should feel with their performance. For example, the golfer who has long ago resigned himself or herself to his or her perennial 36 handicap will still be motivated to discover how a particular golfing performance compares with that of reference others.

It is certainly true that feelings of pride and shame are influenced by people's assessments of their universal standing on performance dimensions, but we propose that these feelings are much more strongly linked to their assessments of their particularistic standing. The feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction that people derive from their weekly matches with their tennis partner can hardly be attributable to comparable upward or downward revisions in their assessments of their tennis ability. Fluctuation in the level of self-satisfaction does not derive from the indirect universalistic implications of their victories or defeats but from their direct particularistic implications ("She beat me again!", "I finally beat him," etc.). Just as fraternal feelings of pride and shame derive most strongly from in-group–out-group comparisons involving those in-groups with whom people identify most strongly (see Study 5 and Tesser, 1986), so egoistic feelings of pride and shame may derive most strongly from self-comparisons with those similar others with whom people identify most closely.

Until now, the process of particularistic evaluation has not been distinguished from that of universalistic evaluation. This is probably because the means by which the two types of evaluation are pursued tend to be similar, and in many instances are identical. Whether people are interested in particularistic or universalistic evaluation, they generally engage in comparisons with similar others. The point is, however, that the role played by similar others is fundamentally different in the two comparison processes. The similar others whom people seek out to help in assessing their universal standing hold no special social significance for them; they simply facilitate computation. If individuals could calculate their universal standing by algorithm or divine it from tea leaves, comparisons with others would not be necessary. The comparisons people make with reference others are qualitatively different. From this perspective, similar others are those with whom people share an identity or sense of "weness" (Heider, 1958; Tesser, 1986), not those with whom they share a set of task-specific related attributes. Here people do care about the particular others and their relation to them. It is in relation to them that people define themselves and measure their self-worth. Providing students with Graduate Record Examination or Scholastic Aptitude Test percentile scores, even if they are broken down in terms of related attributes, will not eliminate the students' desire to compare their scores with those of their friends.

We designed Studies 1 and 2 to provide support for the contention that people's choice of similar comparison others can be motivated by the desire for particularistic evaluation as well as universalistic evaluation. We gave subjects in those experiments the opportunity to compare their score on a social perceitiveness test with the score of 1 of 2 other subjects. The others allegedly were similar to them on different perceptual style variables, one of which was shared by many other individuals and one of which was shared by few others. In Study 1 we presented the two perceptual style dimensions as being related equally to social perceitiveness; in Study 2 we presented both dimensions as being unrelated to social perceitiveness. We designed the distinctiveness manipulation to affect the degree of closeness subjects felt toward the
similar others, with distinctive bonds being expected to lead to greater closeness than nondistinctive bonds. We did not expect the distinctiveness of the shared bond to influence the comparison choices of subjects if they were being influenced only by the need for cognitive clarity concerning their global or universalistic status. However, we did expect it to influence subjects' choices if they also were interested in assessing their local status. The results were consistent with this latter prediction. Subjects revealed an overwhelming preference to see the score of the distinctively similar other.

The quest for particularistic evaluation might also have guided certain comparison choices made by subjects in previous social comparison studies. For example, a number of studies have shown that subjects expressed a desire to compare themselves with same-sex others even when they believed that there were no sex differences on the criterion attribute (Feldman & Ruble, 1981; Major & Forey, 1985; Suls, Gaes, & Gastorf, 1979). These comparisons are puzzling if the subjects were attempting to evaluate their universalistic status, but not if they were attempting to evaluate their particularistic status. This latter possibility seems especially plausible in light of the fact that gender constitutes a common basis for establishing identity.

Implications Self-Validation Versus Self-Evaluation

We are not the first to suggest that the choice of comparison others can reflect more than one motive. Previous theorists have distinguished the motive for self-evaluation from the motive for self-validation (Hakmiller, 1966; J. Singer, 1966; Tesser, 1986; Wills, 1981). This latter distinction appears to be orthogonal to the distinction proposed here. In the same way that a person can seek self-evaluation in either a particularistic or universalistic sense, a person can seek self-validation in either a particularistic or universalistic sense. For example, people may be motivated to play tennis against their least skilled friend, not because such a comparison will inflate their estimate of their universal standing on the dimension of tennis ability, but because it will make them feel better about their local standing on that dimension (e.g., "At least I'm better than her!").

Multiple Reference Groups

Both social comparison and reference group theorists have observed that people do not use the same reference groups in all contexts, especially for comparative purposes. Individuals may compare their salaries with one group, their tennis game with another, and their voting behavior with yet another. This attribute-specific pattern of comparison group selection is most likely to occur if universalistic self-evaluation is the goal. The attributes that are perceived to be related to tennis skill will not necessarily be those perceived to be related to voting behavior, and hence the individuals chosen to help evaluate these different aspects of the self need not be the same. On the other hand, particularistic self-evaluations across a wide range of attributes may well derive from the same people. The centrality of certain others in the comparison process has been viewed previously in terms of global similarity (Samuel, 1973; Zanna et al., 1975). However, to the extent that the concept of global similarity refers to the sharing of attributes that tend to be related to or predictive of a great many aspects of the self, it may be misleading. The centrality of certain others in the comparison process may simply reflect their shared identity rather than their global similarity on related attributes. Of course, as we mentioned earlier, the others with whom people identify or share a bond often will be those with whom they share related attributes. The important point, however, is that there will be some circumstances in which people will prefer to compare themselves with reference others than with others who more closely resemble them on related attributes but who are not reference others.

Distinctiveness: The Minimal Reference Group

This research goes beyond demonstrating that people seek comparison information for more than one purpose. Study 3 indicates that people view their distinctive attributes as being more important and central to their personalities than their nondistinctive attributes. Further, Studies 4 and 5 reveal that the distinctiveness of a commonality shared by individuals affects the strength of the bond between the individuals (see also Gerard & Hoyt, 1974; Jellison & Zeisst, 1969; Kaplan & Oleszak, 1971). Subjects in Study 4 reported that they would have more in common with others with whom they shared a distinctive attribute than with others with whom they shared a nondistinctive attribute. Furthermore, the mood of subjects in Study 5 was more strongly influenced by the performance level of a group with whom they shared a distinctive attribute than by the performance level of a group with whom they shared a nondistinctive attribute.

Why should sharing a distinctive attribute create a bond and a sense of we-ness? Earlier we proposed that attribute distinctiveness may influence the group bond through its mediational effect on the self-concept. Specifically, we argued that the more distinctive an attribute is, the more central it may be in an individual's self-concept. The finding of McGuire
and his colleagues (McGuire & McGuire, 1981) that individuals are more likely to spontaneously mention distinctive than nondistinctive attributes when asked to describe themselves is consistent with this speculation. What our findings may suggest beyond this is that people may tend to adopt as reference others those who share attributes that are central to their self-concept. This line of reasoning is clearly speculative, but a study by Miller (1984) is suggestive in this regard.

In that study Miller (1984) categorized subjects in terms of self-schemas with respect to gender (defined as organizations of self-related information about masculinity or femininity). Subjects then chose which of several group norms they wanted to see to evaluate their performance. Schematic subjects, those who incorporated masculine or feminine characteristics into their self-concept, made same-sex comparisons regardless of the relation of sex to performance. In contrast, aschematic subjects made same-sex comparisons only when sex was related to performance. Miller's findings are consistent with the hypothesis that when an attribute of the self (e.g., masculinity or femininity) is important to people's self-concept, those sharing that attribute will be reference others and, consequently, a source of particularistic self-evaluation.

One reason to pursue the link between distinctiveness and reference closeness is its potential for providing an alternative conceptualization of numerous group phenomena. Consider the finding that minority groups are more cohesive than majority groups. One account of this is that minority group members are drawn together in response to majority group persecution or oppression (Coser, 1956). In the case of self-selected groups, it also could be argued that more stringent selection criteria play a role in the greater cohesion of minority groups. Our findings, however, suggest that the greater sense of we-ness that emerges in groups sharing distinctive attributes may arise because there is a greater sense of "iness" in these groups. Minority group members may be more likely to identify themselves in terms of the attribute that makes them distinctive (e.g., homosexuality) than majority group members are to identify themselves in terms of the attribute that makes them nondistinctive (e.g., heterosexuality). As a consequence of this, the former individuals may identify more strongly with one another than do the latter individuals. Future research should address these and other possible implications of statistical distinctiveness.

References

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1

We borrowed the terms universalistic and particularistic from Parsons (1949; see also Berger, 1977).

2

In this study and in all subsequent studies, preliminary analyses indicated that there were no gender effects that approached significance. Consequently, the reported analyses collapse across this variable. Also, preliminary analysis in this and all subsequent studies indicated that the perceptual style dimension did not qualify the distinctiveness effect; hence, all reported analyses collapse across this variable.

3

At first glance these findings may appear to be inconsistent with those of Simon and Brown (1987). Those authors found
that minority group members perceived their group to be less variable (in terms of the attribute on which they were
categorized as a minority–majority) than did majority group members. Our study differs from theirs, however, in that we
attempted to convey to subjects that the variable on which they were categorized (perceptual style) was discrete rather
than continuous.

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