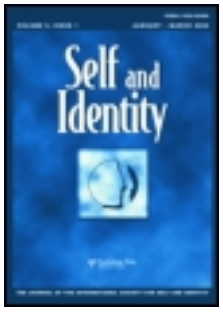

Self and Identity
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/psai20

Considering the situation: Why people are better social psychologists than self-psychologists

Emily Balcetis [a] & David Dunning [b]

[a] Psychology Department, New York University, New York City, NY, USA

[b] Psychology Department, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA

Available online: 22 Nov 2011

To cite this article: Emily Balcetis & David Dunning (2011): Considering the situation: Why people are better social psychologists than self-psychologists, Self and Identity, DOI:10.1080/15298868.2011.617886

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2011.617886

Self and Identity, 2011, 1–15, i*First* article
http://www.psypress.com/sai
ISSN: 1529-8868 print/1529-8876 online
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2011.617886

Psychology Press
Taylor & Francis Group

Considering the situation: Why people are better social psychologists than self-psychologists

Emily Balcetis[1] and David Dunning[2]

[1]Psychology Department, New York University, New York City, NY, USA
[2]Psychology Department, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA

Are people better self- or social psychologists when they predict prosocial behavior? Why might people be more or less accurate when predicting their own and others' actions? In two studies, participants considered variants of situations classically known to influence helping behavior (being alone vs. in a group, being in a good rather than bad mood). Participants made predictions about how they and their peers would act. Their predictions revealed that participants incorporated situational variations into social predictions, yet failed to do so when making self-predictions. These errors in self-prediction were not generated by response scale-type. This evidence suggests that people more appropriately use their knowledge of situational pressures when engaging in social rather than self-predictions.

Keywords: Above average effect; Accuracy; Motivation; Social predictions; Situation.

People tend to think positively of themselves, often to unrealistic degrees. They think they are smarter than their intellectual performance justifies (Ehrlinger, Johnson, Banner, Dunning, & Kruger, 2008). They expect to be more courteous than they turn out to be (Balcetis, Dunning, & Miller, 2008). They also think of themselves as healthier, more ethical, and more sophisticated than their peers (see Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning, 2005; Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004, for reviews). For instance, 88% of young Americans claim to be above average drivers (Svenson, 1981), even though the leading cause of all unintentional deaths for this demographic are motor vehicle accidents (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004).

For people to claim on average that they are above average is to provide self-judgments that defy the constraints of mathematical calculation. What is the exact error that leads to these statistically implausible self-assessments? There are two possible sources. One possibility is that when describing themselves in relation to others, people might be overly and erroneously optimistic about their own actions but right about those of their peers. A second possibility is that they could be right about themselves but overly and erroneously pessimistic about their peers. In other words, people could either make overly optimistic and positive predictions when

Received 10 April 2011; accepted 27 July 2011; first published online 25 November 2011

The research was supported financially by National Institute of Mental Health Grant RO1 56072 and National Science Foundation Grant 0745806 awarded to DD.

We thank Shana Cole for comments on this manuscript. We also thank Chelsea Finn, Lorraine Ricci, Michael VanWert, and Gabriel Gabrosek for assistance with data collection.

Correspondence should be addressed to: Emily Balcetis, Psychology Dept, Meyer Hall, 6 Washington Place, New York City, NY 10003, USA. E-mail: emilybalcetis@nyu.edu

serving as a self-psychologist or overly pessimistic and negative predictions when serving as a social psychologist.

Although people could generate implausible comparative self-assessments through two routes, evidence suggests that flattering appraisals are due to errors in perceptions of the self rather than in perceptions of other people. People seem to be adequate "social psychologists," in that their estimates of peers' attitudes and behaviors tend to be roughly accurate. For example, although only 5% of American adult respondents in a national survey reported that they themselves are obese, they estimated that 37% of other Americans are—a prediction remarkably close to the actual 31% figure (Pew Research Center, 2006). Likewise, people are rather accurate when estimating peers' attitudes, like the proportion of people who are pro-choice about abortion or who dislike McDonald's hamburgers (Nisbett & Kunda, 1985).

In contrast, people are poor "self-psychologists." People often make predictions for their own prosociality that are more favorable than turns out to be true. Although 83% of respondents in one study predicted they would buy a flower in a charity drive for the American Cancer Society, only 43% did (Epley & Dunning, 2000). In another study, although 90% of college students expected they would vote in the next Presidential election, only 69% actually voted (Epley & Dunning, 2006).

The present research stringently tested whether people are indeed more accurate when predicting others' behaviors compared to when predicting their own behaviors. Importantly, we asked one important question not yet assessed in the existing literature. Specifically, we tested one reason why people might be more accurate when making social predictions compared to self-predictions. We asked whether people realize whether changing the features of situations alters social behavior. More specifically, we asked whether people hold different psychological theories regarding the power of situations to shift their own behavior versus that of others. We predicted that people would consider and incorporate the changing situational pressures when predicting others' actions, but fail to do so when predicting their own.

Earlier Investigations of Self-Versus Social Prediction

As such, our primary questions of interest expand on classic and existing research. In order to address why people might be better social psychologists than self-psychologists, we first asked if people understand how situations shape social behavior; this question has been at the center of social psychological research since its early days. Second, we asked if people apply their understanding of situational influence when making both self- and social predictions; a question not yet systematically tested. We asked if people believe that situations change others' behaviors differently from the way those situations change self-behavior, and in so doing intended to provide one explanation for why self- and social predictions differ so much.

To our knowledge, no systematic research has explored whether people's understandings and use of situational dynamics explains, at least in part, why people seem to make better predictions about their peers than they do about themselves. Some classic work comes close. Milgram (1965), for example, investigated how different situational circumstances changed the actual likelihood of obedience to authority. Milgram also polled senior psychology undergraduates and his colleagues to determine what people expected participants would do in one version of his classic experiment (Milgram, 1963). While this work approximates our

questions of interest, it does not systematically approach the empirical question and does not address error in both self- and social prediction.

Other research extended Milgram's work, but also failed to ask whether people understand and incorporate the influence of situational circumstances into self- and social predictions. For example, Bierbrauer (1979) found that focused training could lead people to rely more heavily on situations to describe the behavior of Milgram's participants. However, Bierbrauer, like Milgram, never explicitly compared whether people made different predictions for their own and others' behaviors. Also, Bierbrauer did not look to see how well people could anticipate whether variations of his experiments would influence obedience rates. In addition, Miller, Gillen, Schenker, and Radlove (1974) asked participants to predict whether they and others would shock "the learner" as Milgram's participants had. While some participants in some instances predicted they were less likely than some other people to shock the learner, Miller and colleagues did not test whether people's predictions changed as a function of varying situational circumstances. Thus, the question of whether people update predictions as situational circumstances shift is still an open one.

Herein, we predicted that people apply their knowledge about how situational circumstances change behavior to different degrees when predicting their own and others' actions. More specifically, we predicted that people would anticipate that situational factors would influence the behavior of other people more than it would their own behavior. Why would this be so? In predictions about themselves, people tend to emphasize their own agency. People believe their actions are the result of their intentions, plans, and aspirations; they tend to believe their free will guides their own actions (Pronin & Kugler, 2010) and that base rates are not applicable to self-predictions (Epley & Dunning, 2000). In fact, when asked to predict the likelihood they or another student would donate money, cheat on a test, etc., in the near future, eye tracking technology demonstrated that people looked to informative base rates when making social predictions far more than when making self-predictions (Balcetis, 2009). These tendencies combine to lead participants to neglect the impact of situational forces on their actions (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994; Koehler & Poon, 2006; Koehler, White, & John, 2010; Peetz & Buehler, 2009).

Other people, in contrast, are perceived as being driven by fixed features of their personalities, random factors in situations, and the imperatives of their past history (Pronin & Kugler, 2010). In other words, people believe they proactively decide which action to pursue; they also believe others are more reactive to the situational demands (see also Savani, Markus, Naidu, Kumar, & Berlia, 2010, for a cultural perspective on this pattern of perceptions).

Thus, we predicted that people would give greater weight to situational features and dynamics when predicting the behavior of others than they would when predicting their own behavior. Indeed, past research suggests it is self-prediction that is more faulty than peer prediction (Balcetis & Dunning, 2008; Balcetis et al., 2008; Epley & Dunning, 2000, 2006). As a result, we predicted that self-perception rather than social perception would reflect a neglect of situational forces. That is, we explored the possibility that neglecting the impact of situational dynamics might be a significant source of error in self-prediction relative to social prediction.

Relation to the Actor–Observer Effect

At first blush, the notion that people emphasize situational influences more when making inferences about others than when explaining their own behavior would

seem to contradict a classic principle in social psychology. That principle is the *actor–observer effect* (Jones & Nesbit, 1971; Ross, 1977), in which people emphasize the situation when explaining personal behavior but emphasize dispositional factors when explaining other people's behavior. But, as recent theoretical treatments of attribution have shown, the patterns of people's ordinary explanations of behavior are more nuanced and at times appear to contradict this classic principle. Attributing causes to the person versus the situation is far more complex than the classic effect alone would suggest (Malle, 2010, 2011).

That said, we think this seeming contradiction between our hypothesis and the actor–observer effect is more apparent than real. Previous actor–observer research measured people's explanations for their own and others' behaviors in retrospect, whereas this research measured the forces people think influence behaviors in prospect. It is possible participants' retrospective descriptive frames and underlying prospective theories diverge. For example, it is possible for someone to hold a dispositionist view of their own behavior, yet retrospectively describe it in ways that appear to be situational (Ross, 1977). For example, if a person decides to give blood, they may believe that this is a reflection of their generous nature but still cite situational reasons to explain the action (e.g., ''I cannot ignore so many people needing blood!''). It is also possible for people to have situationist theories about others but express those theories in dispositionist terms. A person may believe that another person fails to give blood because the experience is scary, yet describe that belief in dispositionist terms (e.g., ''He's a coward'').

In addition, we focused on a dimension of attribution that differs from the one on which the classic effect focuses. We asked whether people view their behavior as proactive. That is, we asked whether people judge themselves more than they judge others to be free agents who choose how to act upon the world. We also asked whether people view others, in contrast, as reactive. That is, we asked whether people judge others more than they judge themselves to be driven by unchangeable responses that arise in response to situational forces. Thus, our focus was on the freedom people perceive in their actions compared to the freedom they perceive in the actions of others.

Extant Data on Self-Versus Peer Predictions

There is one extant study that tentatively suggests that people apply a different theory regarding the impact of situational forces on behavior when considering their own actions compared to those of others. Epley and Dunning (2000, Study 4) asked respondents to predict whether they and a randomly selected peer would volunteer for an additional task in the lab so that an experimental partner would not have to. Respondents predicted how much their own and a peer's decision would be influenced by the amount of time that would have to be sacrificed if they volunteered. Respondents also predicted how much their own and a peer's choices would be influenced by whether the partner was a college student or a 10-year-old girl.

The single study conducted on this issue still leaves open the question concerning the use of situational dynamics in self- and social prediction for two reasons. First, one situational variation did not change actual behavior, in that participants did not actually volunteer more often when their partner was the 10-year-old rather than a college student. Thus, it was not possible for the researchers to ask whether

participants understood the impact of situational constraints when the situation did not shift actual behavior.

Second, another situational variation did change behavior, but participants did not anticipate that it would. That is, participants did not predict that the amount of time would influence their own or others' choices. While this evidence might suggest that people are equally poor self- and social psychologists, one aspect of their paradigm leaves a residual concern. The researchers collected predictions in a within-subject format. That is, participants examined all possible situational variations (time to be sacrificed and partner identity) before making their predictions about self and other. This might have clued participants in—or demanded that they be clued in—about the possible power of situations to influence behavior. There is extant evidence that information is weighed differently when different situational alternatives are displayed jointly rather than separately; situational features are not salient when they are presented separately rather than in a comparative format (Hsee & Zhang, 2004). It is unclear whether participants would still believe that situations have more of an impact on other people than on the self when variations of the situation were presented in a between-subject format rather than within-subject one. If considering only one situational variation, will people still show any sensitivity to or understanding of how that exact situation may influence other people's behavior or their own?

Overview of the Current Research

In the current research, we asked whether people understand how situational circumstances change behavior. We also investigated the degree to which people incorporate this knowledge into self- and social predictions. To do so, we focused on one type of behavior—helping behavior—that has been a focus of social psychology for at least four decades (Batson, 1991; Darley & Batson, 1973; Darley & Latané, 1968; Weiner, 1980). We presented participants with two situational variations, group size and mood, that shift the degree to which people help a stranger. Classically, people are significantly more likely to help if they are alone. As the number of other people grows, any single individual is increasingly likely to do nothing (Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Darley, 1968, 1970). Second, a person's mood influences helping behavior. People tend to be more helpful when in a good mood compared to a bad mood (Baron, 1997; Forgas & George, 2001; Isen & Levin, 1972).

We gave participants descriptions of situations that offered opportunities to engage in prosocial behavior. In Study 1, participants predicted if they and their peers would help another person either when they where alone or in a group. In Study 2, they made predictions either when experiencing a good or bad mood. We then staged the situations under consideration for other participants to actually experience. Actual behavioral base rates in these circumstances served as a measure against which we assessed how accurate, or erroneous, people were in their self- and social predictions.

We anticipated that when people predicted others' actions, they would adjust appropriately for situational variations. However, when people predicted their own actions, they would not adjust predictions in light of situational variations. Further, we expected that social predictions would deviate less from actual base rates relative to self-predictions. These patterns would suggest people do understand the power of situational variations to shape prosocial behavior, but differentially apply this insight when predicting their own and others' actions.

Study 1: Group Size

Study 1 assessed the degree to which predictions of prosocial behavior were sensitive to being alone versus in a group. We asked some participants whether they and others would help an experimenter clean up a mess. Other participants actually experienced this situation; from this group we calculated the proportion of people who helped as a measure of actual rates of prosocial behavior. We also manipulated the situational circumstances. Some participants imagined, whereas others actually experienced, the opportunity to help while in the presence of 2–3 other participants. Others imagined or experienced the situation as the single participant in the room.

We expected that participants would estimate that they would help more than would their peers. Additionally, we expected that participants would give little weight to group size when making self-predictions. However, we expected they would give weight to group size—to an appropriate degree—when making social predictions. Thus, self-predictions should be more inaccurate across situations than social predictions.

Methods

Participants and design. In exchange for course credit, 104 undergraduates confronted one of four between-subjects experiences. Participants were either assigned to the *experiencer* condition ($n = 52$) or the *predictor* condition ($n = 52$). Crossed with this variable, participants were randomly assigned to one of two group size conditions: *alone* ($n = 52$) or *group* ($n = 52$).

Procedures. Experiencers completed a consent form. As the experimenter turned to place it on the shelf behind her, she bumped into a TV cart stacked with boxes of puzzle pieces, spilling approximately 300 pieces onto the floor. The room was large enough and the pieces distributed across the floor in such a manner that all participants had the opportunity, space, and time to assist in the clean up. While doing so, she noted the number of people who helped clean up the mess. Experiencers randomly assigned to the group condition witnessed this accident while in the presence of 2–3 other participants, whereas experiencers assigned to the alone condition witnessed this accident without other participants around.

Predictors read a description of the event that precisely matched the situation that experiencers encountered. The description noted the number of people who were present to witness the accident. Predictors indicated, by checking *yes* or *no*, whether they would help the experimenter pick up the pieces and estimated the percentage of other students who would help in the same situation.

Results and Discussion

Accuracy of self-predictions. Did predictors expect themselves to help more than their peers? We ran a 2 (Target: self, other) × 2 (Group Size: alone, group) repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the predicted likelihood of helping with Target as a within-subjects variable. In this analysis, there was a main effect of Target, $F(1, 50) = 55.85$, $p < .001$, and Group Size, $F(1, 50) = 4.54$, $p = .04$. Importantly, the expected interaction between Target and Group Size was significant, $F(1, 50) = 5.15$, $p = .03$. Participants predicted that Group Size would influence the likelihood that others would help. Specifically, participants expected a greater

percentage of others would help when alone than in a group, $t(50) = 3.68$, $p = .001$, see Table 1, row 1. However, participants did not predict that group size would influence the likelihood that they would help; the percentage of participants who predicted they would help when alone did not differ from the percentage of participants who predicted they would help when in a group, $\chi^2(1, N = 52) = 0.22$, $p = .64$, see Table 1, row 2.

In actuality, group size did influence helping. More participants helped when alone than in a group, $\chi^2(1, N = 52) = 4.06$, $p < .05$, see Table 1, row 3. To test whether participants overestimated their own helping behavior, we ran a 2 (Role: predictor, experiencer) × (Group Size) ANOVA on the percent of people who predicted they would help and who actually did. There was a main effect of Role, $F(1, 100) = 42.04$, $p < .001$, and a main effect of Group Size, $F(1, 50) = 6.22$, $p = .01$. Importantly, the interaction was significant, $F(1, 50) = 3.99$, $p < .05$. While participants who experienced being in a group were actually less likely to help than participants who were alone, $\chi^2(1, N = 104) = 4.06$, $p = .04$, participants' predictions of their own helping behavior did not differ as a function of group size, $\chi^2(1, N = 104) = 0.22$, $p = .64$.

Accuracy of social predictions. Although inaccurate when predicting their own behavior, participants were more accurate when predicting others' behaviors, although they still overestimated the likelihood that others would help. We ran a 2 (Role: predictors, experiencers) × 2 (Group Size: alone, group) ANOVA on estimates of others' helping behavior and actual helping behavior. There was a main effect of Role such that participants predicted that more people would help than actually did, collapsed across group size, $F(1, 100) = 11.23$, $p < .001$. In addition, there was a main effect of Group Size, $F(1, 100) = 11.55$, $p = .001$, such that both estimates of and actual helping behavior was reduced when in groups. However, there was no significant interaction between the two, $F(1, 100) = 0.12$, $p = .73$. The situational variation of group size influenced both predictions for others' helping behavior and actual behavior to an equal degree.

In sum, participants revealed themselves to be comparatively better social psychologists than self-psychologists. They thought that experiencing the helping situation in a group, rather than being alone, would decrease their rate of helping by 4%, but would decrease the rate for others by 22%. The actual rate of decrease turned out to be 27%. We also tested this divergence in another way. We used standard errors associated with participants' perceptions of the impact of being in a group. When making self-predictions, participants overwhelmingly underestimated the actual impact of being in a group (predicted 4% impact for self versus 27%

TABLE 1 Study 1 Predicted for Oneself, Percentage of Others Who Would Help, and Actual Rates of Helping as a Function of Group Size (*SD* in parentheses)

	Helping condition		
	Alone	Group	Difference
Predicted % of others	72% (18.3)	50% (24.2)	22%
Predicted self as a helper	92% (27.1)	88% (32.4)	4%
Actual % helpers	50% (50.0)	23% (42.1)	27%

actual impact), $z = 2.80$, $p = .005$. The predicted estimate of impact for peers did not differ significantly from the actual impact (22% predicted impact for others versus 27% actual impact), $z = 1.20$, *ns*.

Thus, when acting as a social psychologist, participants' predictions were more closely aligned to actual base rates for helping than when acting as a self-psychologist. From these data, we can infer that people do understand how situational variations influence the likelihood of helping behavior, as they apply this understanding when acting as a social psychologist; however, they fail to apply this information when acting as a self-psychologist.

Study 2: Mood as an Influence on Behavior

Study 2 assessed whether participants were sensitive to a different situational feature known to influence helping behavior—a persons' mood. Some participants imagined that they and others had been put in either a good or bad mood. They predicted whether they and others would donate money to a charity. Other participants actually experienced the situation. We anticipated that predictors would expect that they would donate more money than would others. We also anticipated that social predictions would depend on mood, whereas self-predictions would be invariant across mood conditions. We then measured the accuracy of these predictions.

In addition, we measured self- and social predictions via several approaches to ensure that the patterns were not specific to a certain measurement technique. To compare self- against social predictions, predictors separately indicated the likelihood that they and a randomly selected other would engage in the prosocial behavior. Given that social predictions vary depending on whether predictors consider a single other or a group (Epley & Dunning, 2006), this approach equated the singular nature of the target person in question. To assess the accuracy of self-predictions, predictors made binary decisions about whether they would or would not engage in the prosocial action; these binary predictions were tested against the actual percentage of experiencers who engaged in the action. To compare social predictions against a standard of accuracy, predictors estimated the percentage of others who would engage in the prosocial action; this prediction was tested against the actual percentage of people who engaged in the action. These techniques ensured that pairs of comparisons used responses that were made on the same scales.

Methods

For course credit, undergraduates randomly assigned to the *predicted good mood condition* ($n = 45$) imagined choosing two clips among several to watch. Some were clearly entertaining (e.g., mockumentary of a freshman college student's recount of being caught peeing in the shower), while others were clearly boring (e.g., instructional video on how to attach a trailer to a semi-truck). They also imagined consuming candy while watching these clips. Participants randomly assigned to the *predicted bad mood condition* ($n = 44$) imagined that they could not choose the videos they watched but, instead, were assigned to watch two boring videos. Bad mood predictors also imagined that they were forbidden to consume any of the candy sitting on their tables. All predictors imagined receiving $5 for this experience. Predictors predicted the degree to which they would be in a *good mood*, in addition to how *happy*, *cheery*, *sad*, *angry*, and *bored* they expected they would be using a 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much so*) Likert scale.

Then, predictors imagined they were given the opportunity to donate a portion of their payment back to an educational charity in Tanzania. A photograph of children in schools accompanied a paragraph that described the mission of the charity, how funds were used, and the history of the charity. Predictors anticipated their own and others' actions by responding to two types of questions. First, predictors indicated on a binary measure, by checking *yes* or *no*, whether they thought they would donate a portion of their money. Second, they indicated the likelihood that they would donate some money to the charity, using a 0–100% likelihood scale.

Predictors also anticipated others' actions. They thought about a single, randomly selected student from their same school, of their same gender, that they considered typical. Predictors indicated the likelihood that this student would donate some money using the 0–100% likelihood scale. They also predicted the percentage of typical university students from their same school who were participating in this same experiment that would donate some of their money.

To assess the accuracy of predictions, a second group of participants ($n = 52$) actually engaged in the experience in exchange for $5. These *experiencer* participants were randomly assigned to either the *actual good mood condition* ($n = 26$) where they chose which videos they wished to watch while consuming candy, or the *actual bad mood condition* ($n = 26$) where they were assigned to watch the boring videos and forbidden to eat the candy. After watching these videos, participants completed the same mood measures as predictors. Then, they were handed five $1 bills. The experimenter gave participants an information sheet and an envelope and left them alone in their own cubicle to read about the Tanzanian charity and consider whether they wished to donate money. Experiencers saw the same photograph and paragraph describing the Tanzanian charity as predictors. Experiencers read that if they wished to donate to this charity, they could seal an amount of money of their choosing and the informational sheet in the envelope and deposit the envelope in the box containing other envelopes in their cubicle. If they did not wish to donate, they could seal the informational sheet in the envelope and leave the envelope in the box.

Results

Manipulation check. We formed a composite measure of participants' predicted and actual moods. Higher scores indicated more positive moods. In a 2 (Mood Condition: good, bad) × 2 (Role: predictors, experiencers) between-subjects ANOVA, we observed the expected main effect of Mood Condition, $F(1, 133) = 69.28$, $p < .001$; participants both expected and actually did experience greater positive mood in the good mood condition ($M = 4.3$) relative to the bad mood condition ($M = 3.4$). These data suggest the mood manipulation successfully influenced anticipated and actual mood.[1]

Accuracy of self- and social predictions. Did participants anticipate that their own likelihood of donating would be higher than the likelihood of someone else donating? We conducted a 2 (Target: self, other) × 2 (Predicted Mood Condition: good, bad) repeated-measures ANOVA on the estimated likelihood that the self would donate and that a randomly selected comparison other would donate, based on responses to both continuous likelihood measures. There was no main effect of Predicted Mood, $F(1, 87) < 1.00$. There was a main effect of Target, $F(1, 87) = 132.55$, $p < .001$.

Importantly, there was an interaction between Target and Predicted Mood, $F(1, 87) = 8.10$, $p = .006$.[2] Participants predicted that mood would not influence their own behaviors. They predicted that the likelihood that they would donate some of their money was not different when experiencing a good mood and a bad mood, $t(87) = 1.26$, $p = .21$, see Table 2, row 1. However, predictors expected that mood would affect other people's donating behaviors. Participants predicted that there was a greater likelihood that another student would donate when in a good mood than a bad mood, $t(87) = 2.75$, $p = .007$, see Table 2, row 2.

Given the actual rate of donating, predictors inaccurately forecasted their own prosocial behaviors. We assessed the accuracy of self-predictions by comparing participants' binary self-predictions (see Table 2, row 3) against the actual rates of donating (see Table 2, row 4). We ran a 2 (Role: predictors, experiencers) × 2 (Mood Condition: good, bad) ANOVA on the percent of participants who thought they would and those who actually did donate. There was a main effect of Role, $F(1, 137) = 46.52$, $p < .001$, but no main effect of Mood, $F(1, 137) = 2.04$, $p = .16$. Importantly, the interaction was significant, $F(1, 137) = 4.33$, $p = .04$. Although participants who experienced a bad mood were actually less likely (although marginally so) to help than those in a good mood, $\chi^2(1, N = 141) = 2.79$, $p = .095$, participants' predictions regarding their own helping behavior did not differ as a function of mood condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 141) = 0.50$, $p = .48$.

Although inaccurate when predicting their own behaviors, participants were more accurate when predicting others' behaviors. We ran a 2 (Role: predictors, experiencers) × 2 (Mood Condition: good, bad) ANOVA on the percentage of others that predictors expected would donate relative to the actual percentages of experiencers who did donate in each mood condition. There was no main effect of Role suggesting that participants accurately predicted the average rate of others' donating behaviors, $F(1, 137) = 1.76$, $p = .19$. There was a significant main effect of Mood Condition, $F(1, 137) = 8.06$, $p = .005$, suggesting that estimates for both actual and predicted generosity were higher in the good compared to bad mood condition. Additionally, there was no significant interaction between Role and Mood Condition, $F(1, 137) = 1.08$, $p = .30$.

Again, participants more accurately predicted others' prosocial actions than their own. They predicted that going from a good to a bad mood would increase their own donation behavior by 4% but decrease it among others by 8%. In actuality, there was a rate of decrease of 23%. We described this another way by again using the standard error associated with participants' perceptions of impact of the situation using the likelihood measures. Participants grossly underestimated the impact of

TABLE 2 Study 2 Predictions of Helping for Self and Other and Actual Rates of Helping as a Function of Mood Induction (*SD* in parentheses)

	Mood condition		
	Good	Bad	Difference
Predicted self-likelihood	79 (25.6)	83 (25.1)	−4%
Predicted other likelihood	61 (18.2)	53 (18.8)	8%
Predicted self as helper	89% (31.2)	93% (25.5)	−4%
Actual % helpers	58% (49.4)	35% (47.7)	23%

mood in their self-predictions. They predicted much less of an impact than the actual impact (again, predicted −4% impact for self vs. 23% actual impact), $z = 8.51$, $p < .0001$. They also underestimated the impact in their peer predictions (predicted 8% impact for others vs. 23% actual impact), $z = 5.15$, $p < .0001$. However, the analyses above indicate that their estimates of the impact when making predictions about others were significantly more accurate than predictions about the self.

In sum, although not perfect, participants' predictions were more closely aligned to actual base rates when acting as a social psychologist compared to when acting as a self-psychologist. From these data, we can infer that people do understand how situational variations influence the likelihood of helping behavior, as they apply this understanding when acting as a social psychologist; however, they fail to apply this information when acting as a self-psychologist.

General Discussion

We asked whether and why people are more accurate social psychologists or self-psychologists. In answering these questions, this research made four primary contributions to the existing literature. First, participants expected that they would be more likely to act in socially desirable ways than would others. Across these scenarios, participants expected they would choose the prosocial course of action roughly 90% of the time. However, they predicted that, on average, only 47% of their peers would engage in the same prosocial behavior. Study 2 suggested that this difference was not produced by measurement technique; when asked to predict the likelihood of their own and others' actions the same self–other differences in predicted prosociality emerged.

Second, these studies suggested this bias is the result of errors when assuming the role of self- rather than social psychologist. Whereas the vast majority of respondents expected to engage in prosocial behaviors, only 41% of respondents actually did so when faced with real choices. Relative to the actual rates of engaging in these prosocial behaviors, respondents overestimated the prosocial nature of their own behavior by over 49%. Yet, when predicting others' actions, participants were far more accurate; they overestimated the prosocial nature of their peers' behaviors by only 6%. Again this was not the result of measurement issues as the same general pattern of inaccuracy in self-prediction emerged when binary self-predictions were compared against the actual base rate of engaging in prosocial behavior (Study 2).

Third, participants' predictions suggested that they held different theories regarding the power of situational variations to affect behavior depending on whether they predicted their own or others' actions. We can infer from participants' predictions that they believe their behaviors would be invariant across situations whereas others' behaviors would be responsive to situational constraints. In Study 1, participants expected that others would be 22% less likely to help when in a group than when alone. However, participants did not expect their own helping behavior to change as a function of group size. Likewise, in Study 2, participants predicted an 8% drop in charitable giving when others were in a bad mood compared to a good mood, but did not predict a change in their own donations as a result of mood.

Finally, we explored the accuracy of participants' theories regarding the influence of situational variations. In Study 1, the presence of bystanders influenced helping behavior. However, when engaging in self-prediction, participants showed no insight into how the presence of bystanders would influence them. When engaging in social

prediction, participants showed rather accurate insight. Similarly, in Study 2, being in a good rather than a bad mood increased the likelihood of donating money to a charity. Again, when predicting their own actions, participants failed to anticipate the influence of mood; however, participants more accurately forecast the effect of mood on their peers' behavior.

We must note that although participants did not explicitly articulate their theories of human behavior, our results do serve as evidence of theories participants held. We can infer participants' theories regarding situational dynamics by examining how, in a between-subject format, those variations changed both types of predictions they made. This approach to investigating participants' lay theories is a particular strength of this work. Previous work, which exposed respondents to all variations of a situation in a within-subject format (Epley & Dunning, 2006), may have prompted consideration of those variations via demand characteristics—an issue avoided by our between-subjects method.

Error in Prosocial Predictions Alone?

One might wonder if this phenomenon is specific only to situations when people are considering prosocial, moral, helping behaviors. Do participants understand how situational features influence the likelihood of engaging in antisocial or negative behavior? Are they sensitive to the effects of varying aspects of negative situations when acting as self- and social psychologists? There are two primary reasons that we believe participants will appear insensitive to situational features when predicting their own antisocial behaviors but will update predictions regarding others' antisocial behaviors. First, in Studies 1 and 2, participants who predicted they would not engage in the prosocial behavior were in fact indicating they intended to engage in the negative behavior. That is, when reporting they would not engage in prosocial action, participants were actually refusing to help the experimenter (Study 1) and declining the opportunity to donate money (Study 2). The task inherently required that participants simultaneously make a choice about whether they would engage in a prosocial or antisocial behavior.

Second, we collected additional data that tested whether people know how different situations affect the likelihood of engaging in antisocial behaviors and whether they use this information when acting as self- and social psychologists. We tested the accuracy of participants' predictions regarding stealing money. Participants completed a trivia test in which they earned \$0.10 for each correct answer. In the baseline condition, the experimenter graded the tests and paid participants. In the anonymity condition, participants' graded then shredded their own tests before paying themselves from a jar containing hundreds of dimes. We counted the number of dimes taken at the end of the session and computed the average amount of money taken per participant under conditions of anonymity. When the situation included anonymity, participants took on average \$0.18 more per person (\$1.74) than they actually earned in the baseline condition (\$1.57, $SD = \$0.35$), one sample $t(24) = 2.49$, $p = .02$. This suggests that anonymity is a situational feature that facilitates stealing, on average.

Other participants took the quiz and predicted the amount they and another student would take under conditions of anonymity. Participants failed to anticipate how the situation would affect their own behavior, as the amount they expected they would take under conditions of anonymity (\$1.68, $SD = \$0.98$) did not differ significantly from the amount that participants actually earned in the baseline

condition, $t(62) = 0.54$, $p = .59$. That is, self-predictions aligned with what constituted honest behavior. However, participants anticipated and incorporated the situational effects of anonymity into social predictions; they predicted others would take more ($2.34, $SD = \$1.63$) than the amount earned in the baseline condition, $t(62) = 2.35$, $p = .02$. That is, participants' social predictions suggested they anticipated others would steal more than what constituted their fair and honest amount. Participants seemed to use their understanding of how situational constraints affect antisocial behavior more so when acting as a social psychologist rather than a self-psychologist. Of course, future research could more systematically explore whether sensitivity to situational constraints is moderated by the valence of the domain in question, although preliminary evidence suggests the same pattern arises.

Concluding Remarks

Taken together, these studies suggest both good news and bad news for people acting as lay psychologists. The good news is that people display some level of insight into the ability of situational variations to shape potential actions that their peers will choose. The bad news is that people fail to realize, or choose not to realize, that this knowledge should be applied to predictions of their own behavior as well. This suggests a paradox in their predictive performance. People appear to be better social psychologists than they are self-psychologists. Perhaps if they can make the connection that the two psychologies share a good deal in common, this leaves an avenue for their self-psychology to improve.

Notes

1. It is possible that people did not actually think they and others would respond differently to the charity opportunity, but instead thought watching funny movies and eating candy would improve their own mood but will do little to change others' moods. To test this, a separate group of participants ($n = 14$) imagined either the good or bad mood inductions and predicted their own mood and the mood of another person using the same mood measures as in Study 2. In a 2 (Mood Condition: good, bad) × 2 (Target: self, other) repeated-measures ANOVA (mood as a between-, target as within-subjects variable), there only a main effect of Mood, $F(1, 12) = 21.11$, $p = .001$, Ms = 3.9 and 2.9 for good and bad mood conditions, respectively. There was no main effect of Target or interaction. These data indicate participants believed the mood manipulations would equally affect themselves and others. This concern does not pertain to Study 1, as it is not possible for participants to believe that they and others would experience different group sizes.
2. We tested whether self-presentational concerns shaped predictions by varying the public or private nature of the predictions. Since being perceived as better than others is a strong motivation, particularly for Americans (Balcetis et al., 2008), making predictions more public could exacerbate the differences between self- and social prediction relative to actual base rates. In Study 2, we randomly assigned half of the participants to the *public prediction condition*; they wrote their names, e-mail addresses, and university majors on the top of the survey and handed their survey back to the experimenter after completing it. We randomly assigned the others to the *private prediction condition*; they were reminded that responses were anonymous and could not be tied to any identifying information. These participants placed their completed surveys in envelopes and deposited their sealed envelopes into a box containing many other envelopes. We conducted all analyses including the Anonymity variable and

found no main effects or interactions. These results suggest that the effects are unlikely to be driven by concerns regarding self-presentation or anonymity.

References

Alicke, M. D., & Govorun, O. (2005). The better-than-average effect. In M. D. Alicke, D. Dunning, & J. Kruger (Eds.), *The self in social judgment* (pp. 85–106). New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Balcetis, E. (2009). How a biased majority claim moral minority: Tracking eye movements to base rates in social predictions. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *45*, 970–973.

Balcetis, E., & Dunning, D. (2008). A mile in moccasins: How situational experience reduces dispositionism in social judgment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *34*, 102–114.

Balcetis, E., Dunning, D., & Miller, R. L. (2008). Do collectivists "know themselves" better than individualists? Cross-cultural studies of the "holier than thou" phenomenon. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *95*, 1252–1267.

Baron, R. A. (1997). The sweet smell of helping: Effects of pleasant ambient fragrance on prosocial behavior in shopping malls. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *23*, 498–503.

Batson, C. D. (1991). *The altruism question: Towards a social psychological answer*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Bierbrauer, G. (1979). Why did he do it? Attribution of obedience and the phenomenon of dispositional bias. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *9*, 67–84.

Buehler, R., Griffin, D., & Ross, M. (1994). Exploring the "planning fallacy": Why people underestimate their task completion times. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *67*, 366–381.

Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2004). *Second Injury Control and Risk Survey (ICARIS-2)*. OMB Number 200-1996-00599. Atlanta, GA: United States Department of Health and Human Services (Available from: http://http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/osp/icaris2.htm).

Darley, J. M., & Batson, C. D. (1973). "From Jerusalem to Jericho": A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *27*, 100–108.

Darley, J. M., & Latané, B. (1968). Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *8*, 377–383.

Dunning, D. (2005). *Self-insight: Roadblocks and detours on the path to knowing thyself*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Dunning, D., Heath, C., & Suls, J. (2004). Flawed self-assessment: Implications for health, education, and the workplace. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, *5*, 69–106.

Ehrlinger, J., Johnson, K., Banner, M., Dunning, D., & Kruger, J. (2008). Why the unskilled are unaware: Further explorations of (lack of) self-insight among the incompetent. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *105*, 98–121.

Epley, N., & Dunning, D. (2000). Feeling "holier than thou": Are self-serving assessments produced by errors in self or social prediction? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *79*, 861–875.

Epley, N., & Dunning, D. (2006). The mixed blessings of self-knowledge in behavioral prediction: Enhanced discrimination but exacerbated bias. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *32*, 641–655.

Forgas, J. P., & George, J. M. (2001). Affective influences on judgments and behavior in organizations: An information processing perspective. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *86*, 3–34.

Hsee, C. K., & Zhang, J. (2004). Distinction bias: Misprediction and mischoice due to joint evaluation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *86*, 680–695.

Isen, A. M., & Levin, P. F. (1972). The effect of feeling good on helping: Cookies and kindness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *21*, 384–388.

Jones, E. E., & Nisbett, R. E. (1971). *The actor and the observer: Divergent perceptions of the causes of behavior*. New York, NY: General Learning Press.

Koehler, D. J., & Poon, C. S. K. (2006). Self-predictions overweight strength of current intentions. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *42*, 517–524.

Koehler, D. J., White, R. J., & John, L. K. (2010). Good intentions, optimistic self-predictions, and missed opportunities. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *2*, 90–96.

Latané, B., & Darley, J. (1968). Group inhibition of bystander intervention in emergencies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *10*, 215–221.

Latané, B., & Darley, J. (1970). *The unresponsive bystander: Why doesn't he help?* New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Malle, B. F. (2010). Intentional action in folk psychology. In T. O'Connor & C. Sandis (Eds.), *Blackwell companion to the philosophy of action* (pp. 357–365). Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Malle, B. F. (2011). Time to give up the dogmas of attribution: An alternative theory of behavior explanation. In M. P. Zanna, P. Devine, J. M. Olson, & A. Plant (Eds.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 44, pp. 297–352). Boston, MA: Academic Press.

Milgram, S. (1963). Behavioral study of obedience. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *67*, 371–378.

Milgram, S. (1965). Liberating effects of group pressure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *1*, 127–134.

Miller, A. G., Gillen, B., Schenker, C., & Radlove, S. (1974). The prediction and perception of obedience to authority. *Journal of Personality*, *42*, 23–42.

Nisbett, R. E., & Kunda, Z. (1985). The perception of social distributions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *48*, 297–311.

Peetz, J., & Buehler, R. (2009). Is there a budget fallacy? The role of savings goals in the prediction of personal spending. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *35*, 1579–1591.

Pew Research Center. (2006, April). *Americans see weight problems everywhere but in the mirror* (Accessed 25 March 2011 from: http://pewresearch.org/pubs/308/americans-see-weight-problems-everywhere-but-in-the-mirror).

Pronin, E., & Kugler, M. B. (2010). People believe they have more free will than others. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, *107*, 22469–22474.

Ross, L. (1977). The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: Distortions in the attribution process. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (vol. 10). New York: Academic Press.

Savani, K., Markus, H. R., Naidu, N. V. R., Kumar, S., & Berlia, N. (2010). What counts as a choice? US Americans are more likely than Indians to construe actions as choices. *Psychological Science*, *21*, 391–398.

Svenson, O. (1981). Are we less risky and more skillful than our fellow drivers? *Acta Psychologica*, *47*, 143–148.

Weiner, B. (1980). A cognitive (attribution)–emotion–action model of motivated behavior: An analysis of judgments of help-giving. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *39*, 186–200.