Ongoing Discussion "Thought Piece"

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Lake Wobegon and Other Places
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As we all know, in Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, all the children are above average.[1] Social psychologists have come to refer to the tendency to believe that one is more "athletic, intelligent, organized, ethical, logical, interesting, fair-minded, and healthy – not to mention more attractive – than the average person" as the "above-average effect."[2] There are numerous documented cases of the above-average effect in the workplace. "Zenger …studied several hundred engineers at two high-tech companies and found that 32% of the engineers in one company and 42% in the other rated their own performance in the top 5% of all engineers."[3] In another study, 94% of college professors were reported to say they do above-average work. As a statistician, I wonder what the reference population might be – do individuals consider that they are above the average of all professionals of that type in the world, in America, in their organization, in their work group, or what? Without seeing how the questions were posed to people in these studies, that question cannot be answered.

There has been extensive discussion of the reasons for and consequences of the above-average effect, as well as disagreements about how common it is, in the academic literature. Dunning and his colleagues discuss two general themes in explaining the effect: "People lack crucial information they need when they compare themselves against others; they also ignore valuable information that they actually possess or could seek out."[4] Kruger explains that "When people compare themselves with their peers, they focus egocentrically on their own skills and insufficiently take into account the skills of the comparison group. This tendency engenders the oft-documented *above-average effect* in domains in which absolute skills tend to be high but produces a reliable *below-average effect* in domains in which absolute skills tend to be low." For example, the below-average effect would generally operate if a typical American were asked about his or her skill among Americans in speaking Mandarin. He or she would forget that most other Americans would be just as lacking in that skill. He suggests "that people 'anchor' on their assessment of their own abilities and insufficiently 'adjust' to take into account the skills of the comparison group." He goes on to assert that "the tendency to see oneself as above average may not be as ubiquitous as once thought."[5] He observes that there are apparently enough people with negative impressions of themselves to support a "booming industry offering self-help books and confidence-building audiotapes." So, it appears there is some disagreement in the community of North American social psychologists about the extent of the above-average effect. It might be safe to say, however, that comparisons with others tend to be flawed.

Another point of disagreement is the role of positive illusions about the self as a contributor to good mental health. In one paper, Taylor and Brown state that "considerable research evidence suggests that overly positive self-evaluations, exaggerated perceptions of control or mastery, and unrealistic optimism are characteristic of normal human thought. Moreover, these illusions appear to promote other criteria of mental health, including the ability to care about others, the ability to be happy or contented, and the ability to engage in productive and creative work."[6] Colvin and Block argue

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[1] Keillor, G. (1985). *Lake Wobegon Days.* New York: Viking Press.
[2] Kruger, J.(1999), "Lake Wobegon Be Gone! The 'Below-Average Effect' and the Egocentric Nature of Comparative Ability Judgments,"*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77(2), 221-232.
[3] Dunning, D., Heath, C., and Suls, J.M. (2004), "Flawed Self-Assessment: Implications for Health, Education, and the Workplace," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5(3), 69-106.
[4] Dunning et al, 73.
[5] Kruger, 221.
[6] Taylor, S.E. and Brown, J.D. (1988), "Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health," *Psychological Bulletin*, 103(2), 193-210.

strongly against Taylor and Brown's view and conclude that "it remains unproven that positive illusions foster mental health."[7]

Albert Bandura has written extensively "about how people judge their capabilities and how their self-percepts of efficacy affect their motivation and behavior." He argues that "competent functioning requires both skills and self-beliefs of efficacy to use them effectively…Initiation and regulation of transactions with the environment are, therefore, partly governed by judgments of operative capabilities – what people think they can do under given circumstances…Advantageous self-percepts of efficacy that foster active engagement in activities contribute to the growth of competencies. In contrast, perceived self-inefficacies that lead people to shun enriching environments and activities retard development of potentialities and shield negative self-percepts from corrective change." He warns that there are consequences to large misjudgments of personal efficacy. "People who grossly overestimate their capabilities undertake activities that are clearly beyond their reach. As a result, they get themselves into considerable difficulties, undermine their credibility, and suffer needless failures…People who underestimate their capabilities also bear costs, although…these are more likely to take self-limiting rather than aversive forms." Bandura writes that "the efficacy judgments that are the most functional are probably those that slightly exceed what one can do at any given time. Such self-appraisals lead people to undertake realistically challenging tasks and provide motivation for progressive self-development of their capabilities."[8] Could it be that the above-average effect is just a relatively mild version of overestimation of capabilities that has little potential to do harm and could be beneficial?

To me, the striking thing about the above-average effect, as well as the below-average effect, is the object of comparison. Am I comparing myself to others or am I comparing myself to myself at an earlier time? Is my focus on improvement and learning, or is it on social comparison? Of course, questions by psychologists that ask people to compare themselves to others will automatically bring answers that involve social comparison. How much social comparison do people actually do? How much do they need to do? Is there a need for social comparison to build self-esteem? Is this need a characteristic of all humans? With questions like these in my mind, I ran across a really interesting paper authored by Heine, Lehman, Markus, and Kitayama in the journal *Psychological Review*. The authors suggest that in North American culture "it is assumed that people seek positive self-regard; that is, they are motivated to possess, enhance, and maintain positive self-views."[9] The authors questioned the generalizability of these motivations across cultures; they examined Japanese culture and concluded that "many elements of Japanese culture are incongruent with such motivations" and a "self-critical focus is more characteristic of Japanese."[10] They propose that "tendencies to possess, enhance, and maintain positive self-views may not be basic to humankind, but may depend, in large part, on significant aspects of contemporary North American culture."[11]

Heine and his colleagues argue that the individual "constructs his or her own identity as a meaningful cultural entity…in North America a key component of constructing the self involves the continual self-affirmation of the individual as an autonomous agent…In Japan, a key component of constructing the

[7] Colvin, C.R. and Block, J. (1994), "Do Positive Illusions Foster Mental Health? An Examination of the Taylor and Brown Formulation," *Psychological Bulletin*, 116(1), 3-20.

[8] Bandura, A. (1986). *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

[9] Heine, S., Lehman, D., Rose Markus, H., Kitayama, S. (1999), "Is There a Universal Need for Positive Self-Regard?" *Psychological Review*, 106(4), 766-794.

[10] Heine et al, 766.

[11] Heine et al, 766.

self involves the continual affirmation of the relationships of which the individual is part and thus an affirmation of the self as an active, mutually validating, and validated cultural agent…this suspension of the self in a network of relationships renders the need for positive self-regard necessarily weak and functionally disconnected for many social and psychological processes of the Japanese person…affirmation of the self as an interdependent agent is achieved not by seeking positive self-regard but rather by maintaining a chronic self-critical view."[12] They go on to note that most self-esteem research has been conducted by North Americans about North Americans. They observe that there is a "significant concern" with self-esteem among North American researchers, but research on the subject "occupies a conspicuously smaller proportion of journal space in Asia…This strengthens our belief that self-esteem, as it is conventionally researched and understood, may be, in significant ways, a North American phenomenon." They assert that the extent to which the person is motivated to have a positive self-view is a psychological process that could vary between cultures.

Edgar Schein defines culture as "a pattern of basic assumptions – invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration – that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. Because such assumptions have worked repeatedly, they are likely to be taken for granted and to have dropped out of awareness."[13] The word "worked" in Schein's definition leads to thoughts about how those outside the culture might not have the same view. Heine and his colleagues discuss assumptions about what it means to be a person in North America. They say that "these assumptions have been taken for granted for so long that they have become invisible, yet they are easily recognized." They are "reflected in and fostered by key institutions such as schools and courts and the media, they are enacted in everyday cultural practices such as those of child care, and they are part and parcel of much of Western social science… The person is assumed to be a separate and somewhat nonsocial individual who exists independently…The individual has a right and responsibility, in fact a moral obligation, to become separate, autonomous, efficacious, and in control…A raft of democratic institutions and political practices have been expressly designed to give voice to the rights and preferences of rational self-interested individuals…The idea of the…separate, and unique individual is also pervasively represented and reproduced in a vast array of culturally significant social representations…, including images, proverbs, and stories of men who are masters of their fates and captains of their ships, lone cowboys, boys who pull themselves up by their own bootstraps…" I note that a lot of movies have been made about these people.

According to Heine and his colleagues, "within Japanese culture there is a shared belief in the interdependence of the self with others…it is within the contextual fabric of individuals' social relationships, roles, and duties that the interdependent self most securely gains a sense of meaning…The interdependent self thus is most complete when the individual is seen as functioning smoothly within a larger, more encompassing collective…states of relatedness and embeddedness, or having connections with others, are of paramount concern…The construction of a Japanese individual's identity as a meaningful cultural entity usually involves the validation of the individual's social relationships by constantly seeking to identify and confirm shared expectations and norms, and to adjust the self to better fit in with the requirements of the relationships. The self gains meaning by being firmly suspended and supported within a web of mutually binding social relationships…tendencies to dwell on positive aspects of the interpersonally disengaged individual

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[12] Heine et al, 767. One of the authors of the paper was a member of the faculty of Kyoto University at the time the paper was published.
[13] Schein, Edgar H. (1985), *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

remain relatively unelaborated…a positive self-view is not required for the construction and symbolic affirmation of the identity as an active, mutually validating and validated cultural agent." This appears to be a very different social systemic view of the individual than the one generally held by North Americans. In the introduction to his book, *Capitalism and Freedom*, Milton Friedman states, "If I do not like what my local community does, be it in sewage disposal, or zoning, or schools, I can move to another local community and though few may take this step, the mere possibility acts as a check. If I do not like what my state does, I can move to another."[14] This argument expresses a viewpoint in which the relationships of the individual with extended family, neighbors, and work are of little or no consequence. It offers a considerable contrast to the description of the Japanese individual's view. A friend has observed that the Japanese view fits the refinement and improvement of an existing system while Friedman's view might lead to abandonment of systems that should be destroyed or provide provocation for system redesign or recreation.

Heine reports that a self-critical orientation is characteristic of the Japanese individual. "This self-critical orientation among people participating in Japanese culture is encouraged early in life through the mechanism of hansei (self-reflection). Hansei involves the individual looking back over a particular event and focusing on what wasn't done ideally and what she or he should try to improve in the future. Hansei is a hallmark characteristic of the Japanese education system…in which children are encouraged to search for their own inadequacies and weaknesses – those aspects of themselves that need to be corrected. This tendency to draw children's attention to potential shortcomings stands in sharp contrast to the tactics of North American caretakers, who tend to draw attention to children's positive features by praising, encouraging, and complimenting them…Japanese individuals acquire the mental habit of identifying a relevant ideal role image and comparing the state of the self with this ideal. Because any discrepancies from the ideals are bound to be negative, Japanese self-perceptions tend to be critical and self-effacing. Yet, this self-criticism is in service of future improvement and achievement of the self. Hansei does not stop after graduation but continues throughout Japanese adulthood…Japanese frequently search for how they might do more – indeed, their quest for self-improvement has been likened to a national religion…People engaged in Japanese culture appear to concern themselves more with the process of becoming better, than with "being" good. To use an increasingly common American reflection, Japanese seem more concerned with the journey than the destination…Japanese are motivated to seek and discover the standards of excellence within a given context, critically assess themselves to determine what they are missing, and endeavor to eliminate the perceived deficit. This practice of self-improvement serves to promote unity in relationships and simultaneously affirms one's identity as an interdependent being committed to the shared values of the group."[15] I am reminded that Peter Senge identified personal mastery as one of the disciplines to be practiced.

The contrasts identified between Japanese culture and North American culture may provide a partial explanation for the ease with which some companies in Japan adopted Deming's Shewhart Cycle as a way of going about improvement and American companies appear to have found the practice of continual improvement more difficult. Addressing the question "Am I (or we) improving/learning" rather than the question "How do I compare to others," as part of their cultural makeup may have made it much easier to accept and practice continual improvement in Japanese organizations.

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[14] Friedman, Milton (1982), *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
[15] In a Sloan Management Review article published in 2009, hansei is identified as part of Toyota's problem-solving and improvement methodology.

Another aspect of our culture that may contribute to our apparent tendency toward other-reference rather than self-reference is our intense belief in the value of competition. But, is competition necessary or sufficient for excellence? I would suggest the answer to that question is neither. That it is not necessary needs only one counter-example to demonstrate. I wonder with whom Charles Darwin or Albert Einstein was competing. I wonder if either of them was concerned with their ranking among scientists. To address sufficiency, I appeal to Deming's frequent observation that the worst thing you can have is a poor competitor. Witness the American automotive industry before foreign companies changed the game. Do not mistake these comments as a condemnation of a free market economy. They support the argument that we should focus more on self-reference and evaluation of whether we are learning and improving than on whether we can be satisfied with ourselves the way we are as a result of other-reference. However, this would require a massive cultural change that we may not be inclined or equipped to accomplish. Any attempt would need to be designed to take our culture into account.

Biography

Gipsie Ranney is an international consultant to organizations on management, quality improvement and statistical methodology. She was a member of the faculty of the Department of Statistics at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville for fifteen years. She was a co-founder of the University of Tennessee's Institute for Productivity through Quality, and she developed and conducted numerous seminars on quality improvement. She served as Director of Statistical Methodology for General Motors Powertrain Group from 1988 to 1992. She was the first president of the W. Edwards Deming Institute. She co-authored *Beyond Total Quality Management: Toward the Emerging Paradigm*, published by McGraw-Hill, and contributed to *Competing Globally Through Customer Value*, published by Quorum. She has published papers on quality improvement and statistical methods. The American Society for Quality awarded her the Deming Medal for 1996, "for outstanding contribution in advancing the theory and practice of statistical thinking to the management of enterprises worldwide." Gipsie holds a B. S. in Mathematics from Duke University and a Ph.D. in Statistics from North Carolina State University.