

Why I Think I Am Better Than Them, but Not Him

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## Abstract

Most people think they are above average, a statistically impossible result. That said, people compare themselves less favorably to a specific, unknown individual than they do to the population from which that individual was drawn. Although this difference was identified almost twenty years ago, an explanation for it has remained elusive. Two studies and reanalysis of previously-published findings help identify when and why this social comparative difference emerges. The effect was found to emerge strongly on moral traits (e.g., respectful) but weakly on non-moral ones (e.g., imaginative). For moral dimensions, people self-reported a strategy of assuming the best about others until proven wrong, instead of withholding judgment until learning more. But crucially, people only applied this “assume the best” strategy when comparing themselves to individuals, but not to populations. In combination, this pattern helps explain when and why the social comparison asymmetry emerges. Furthermore, these findings suggest how people can simultaneously maintain their self-esteem by seeing the self as special (in the population), but not lose faith in the goodness of specific individuals, a cynicism that could preemptively discourage the formation of social bonds.

**KEYWORDS:** better-than-average effect, social comparison, impression formation, benefit of the doubt, moral character

### Why I Think I'm Better Than Them, but Not Him

Most people think they are better than the average other person (Alicke, 1985; Dunning, 2005), a biased impression that cannot be true except under abnormal statistical circumstances. Historically, explanations for this better-than-average effect have focused on why the self is evaluated so positively. People may be motivated to self-enhance (Critcher, Dunning, & Armor, 2010; Guenther & Alicke, 2010), be blind to their own shortcomings (Ehrlinger, Johnson, Banner, Dunning, & Kruger, 2008; Kruger & Dunning, 1999), redefine traits to permit the self to outshine others (Critcher, Helzer, & Dunning, 2011; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989), or simply justify their superiority due to greater confidence in their positive self-knowledge than in their knowledge of others (Hilbert, 2012; Moore & Healy, 2008). These explanations are not mutually exclusive, but their sheer number shows the attention the self has received in this research tradition (Sedikides & Alicke, 2011).

What role do beliefs about others play in people's sense of self-superiority? In one exception to the *self*-centered social comparison focus, Alicke et al. (1995) found that undergraduate participants compared themselves less favorably to a single randomly-selected student than to students in general. Across multiple studies, this (minimally) individuated student was instantiated in several ways—e.g., as the person “sitting next to you,” a person displayed on a TV screen, or as a person whose interview transcript one read. “The degree of reduction due to individuation was approximately the same across these various conditions” (p. 823; Alicke et al., 1995). These findings have remain influential, but mysterious, across time.

We propose that this social comparative difference reflects an asymmetric strategy when considering comparison others—one that applies differently to people in general versus specific, albeit unknown, individuals. Social interactions occur with individuals, not with entire

populations. Certain traits, especially those of a moral nature, provide the foundation upon which social life thrives (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). But herein lies a potential problem. If the self sees itself as much better than others, this could discourage the formation of social bonds with individuals. We propose that the self tempers its relative self-aggrandizement when comparing itself to specific individuals, especially on those traits where seeing the self as much better than a specific other could maladaptively doom social interaction before it has begun. That is, we propose people may avoid this difficulty by “assuming the best” about the moral (but not necessarily non-moral) nature of other people until proven wrong. People need not begin with the assumption that each person they meet is as intelligent or imaginative as the self. But without some initial faith in how honorable or responsible specific others are, people may be discouraged from initiating adaptive social bonds. By this account,

To begin, we returned to Alicke et al.’s (1995) Study 1. Participants rated themselves on 20 positive traits,<sup>1</sup> comparing themselves to the average of the student population or to a same-sex stranger they saw but did not interact with. From descriptive statistics reported in the article, we calculated for each trait the effect size (Cohen’s  $d$ ) of the reduction in social-comparative bias observed when comparing the self to an individual rather than to the population. We asked 126 members of a public university on-line subject pool to rate each trait on a scale from 1 (*not related to moral character*) to 7 (*very reflective...*). Consistent with our account, the strength of the social comparison asymmetry correlated with the trait’s moral connotation,  $r(18)=.81$ ,  $p<.001$ , even with trait positivity (as reported in Anderson, 1968) controlled,  $pr(17)=.78$ ,  $p<.001$  (see Figure 1).

We conducted two further studies to provide a stricter and fuller test of our account. Participants compared themselves to the population of others in a room or to a specific stranger

in that room (Study 1), or to the population of Americans or to a randomly-selected American depicted in a blurred photo (Study 2). We predicted that the social comparison asymmetry would again emerge, especially for comparisons on moral dimensions. In Study 2, participants also indicated for each trait whether they would “assume the best” about someone else until proven wrong, or withhold judgment until they learned more information. We predicted that people would endorse the assume the best strategy for traits higher in their moral connotation, and that a tendency to apply this strategy in comparing oneself to individuals (but not to populations) would help to explain the social comparison asymmetry.

### Study 1

#### Method

**Participants and Design.** One hundred thirty-eight undergraduates at the University of California, Berkeley, participated as part of a longer session for which they received \$15. Each participant was randomly assigned to an *individual* or *population* comparison condition.

**Procedure.** Participants took part in groups ( $M = 23$  participants; range = 10 to 36). Each sat at an individual computer station from which all others were visible. Participants learned they would assess themselves on 39 traits. Twenty were positive traits used in Alicke et al.’s (1995) Study 1; twenty traits were randomly sampled from positive traits catalogued by Anderson (1968). One trait, *aggressive*, was not used because it was clear the trait would be seen as immoral, not moral or non-moral.

Participants offered a *comparative rating* on all 39 traits. Participants in the *population* condition judged themselves compared to everyone else in the room. Ratings were made on 9-point scales anchored at 0 (much less than the average of those here) and 8 (much more...), with 4 explicitly labeled as well (about the same as...). Participants in the *individual* condition

compared themselves against a specified other person in the room. As in Alicke et al. (1995), this random individual was always someone the participant did not already know. In this way, any social comparison asymmetry can be attributed to the target's status as an individual, not a friend. The ratings were made on a similar scale, ranging from 0 (much less than the person) to 8 (much more...), with 4 labeled too (about the same as...). Note participants in the population condition compared themselves to the average in the room, instead of positioning themselves in the distribution of the population, to make the two conditions' response scales more comparable.

Finally, participants rated each trait on the extent to which it reflected one's moral character from 1 (not at all reflective of moral character) to 7 (very reflective...).

## **Results and Discussion**

We analyzed the data in two ways. First, we aggregated responses for each trait to conduct an analysis much like our reanalysis of Alicke et al.'s (1995) data. Second, we used a more conservative multi-level modeling approach that took advantage of the fact that participants differed in the extent to which they saw any given trait as higher or lower in its moral connotation. This more conservative method tests whether, for any specific trait, different participants' comparative ratings against individuals versus populations can be traced to differences in how they construe the moral connotation of that particular trait.

**Aggregation.** Consistent with Alicke et al. (1995), we found that people compared themselves more favorably to populations ( $M=6.17$ ) than to individuals ( $M=5.25$ ),  $t(38)=16.78$ ,  $p<.001$ . Providing support for our account, this comparison asymmetry was greater on traits with higher moral connotations,  $r(37)=.68$ ,  $p<.001$ . This correlation remained significant after controlling for trait positivity,  $pr(36)=.63$ ,  $p<.001$  (Figure 2).

**Multi-level modeling.** To prepare for the multi-level modeling analysis, we created a

variable, *target*, to differentiate the two conditions (+1: population, -1: individual). Target was a Level-1 variable nested within trait in a random-slope, random-intercept model predicting participants' comparative ratings. This permitted the influence of the target manipulation on the comparative ratings to vary for different traits (random-slope), and also accounted for differences between traits in participants' tendency to rate themselves more or less favorably (random-intercept). We again found participants compared themselves more favorably to the population of students than to a specified individual student,  $t(31526.61)=14.84, p<.001$ .

Next, we tested, for any given trait, whether the social comparison asymmetry was greater for participants who saw the trait as higher in its moral connotation. Toward this end, we included two additional Level-1 variables: *moral connotation* (centered within each trait) and the *target X moral connotation* interaction. Consistent with our main hypothesis, the target X moral connotation interaction was positive and significant,  $B=.09, SE=0.02, t(5402.88)=4.55, p<.001$ . Although people compared themselves 0.75 points more favorably to populations versus individuals when a trait was seen as less strong (-1 SD) in its moral connotation,  $t(16363.02)=10.02, p<.001$ , this gap grew to 1.12 points when a high moral connotation (+1SD) was seen,  $t(14280.94)=15.41, p<.001$ . These results reinforce the conclusions from the aggregation analyses.

## Study 2

Study 2 built on Study 1 in three ways. First, participants indicated for each trait the extent to which they would “assume the best” about others until proven wrong, as opposed to “withhold judgment” until learning more. We predicted that people would adopt the assume the best strategy more for moral traits, but then apply it only when comparing themselves to individuals, not populations. If so, this would provide more precise mechanistic support for our

account.

Second, although participants in the individual condition in Study 1 compared themselves to strangers, they were strangers about whom they had some (minimal) information. They could easily assess their appearance, style of clothing, and body movements. In Study 2, those in the individual condition saw a blurred picture of an individual's face, thus reducing the concrete information they had about the person. Third, social comparisons were made against an individual who was not present and was unlikely to be met. Observing that participants "assumed the best" about the moral character of even these individuals would speak to the robustness of our effects.

## **Method**

**Participants and Design.** Three hundred five Americans were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk and compensated for their participation. Participants were randomly assigned to an *individual* or *population* condition.

**Procedure.** Participants rated themselves on the same 39 traits used in Study 1. Those in the *population* condition were asked to consider "all American adults" and to compare themselves on 9-point scales to the average of that population. The scale was anchored at 0 (much less than the average of Americans), 8 (much more...), with the midpoint (4) labeled as well (about the same as...). Those in the *individual* condition were instead shown a blurred stock image of a man or a woman. The picture had supposedly been randomly sampled from "an enormous database of pictures of randomly-identified American adults." The picture was blurred to remove individuating features of the picture, so that the target's status as an individual would be salient (see Figure 3). Participants were asked to compare themselves to this target on a similar 9-point scale, anchored at 0 (much less than the person) and 8 (much more...). The scale

midpoint (4) was labeled as well (about the same as...).

We then assessed two additional measures, collected in a random order. The first was the *moral connotation* measure used in Study 1. The second measure assessed participants' self-reported tendency to "assume the best" about people on the trait until they learn otherwise. This strategy was contrasted against "withholding judgment" until learning more about a person. For each of the 39 traits, participants indicated on 7-point scales the extent to which they adopt each strategy: from 1 (tend to withhold judgment until learn more) to 7 (tend to just assume the best until learn otherwise).

## Results and Discussion

**Aggregation.** Participants compared themselves more favorably to the population of American adults ( $M=6.40$ ) than to an individual American adult ( $M=5.55$ ),  $t(38)=14.52$ ,  $p<.001$ . Conceptually replicating Study 1, this difference was larger for traits that were higher in their moral connotation,  $r(37)=.74$ ,  $p<.001$ . Controlling for trait positivity did not eliminate this effect,  $pr(36)=.68$ ,  $p<.001$  (Figure 2).

We next explored whether a strategy of assuming the best about the moral character of specific individuals (but not about people in general) would account for the social comparative asymmetry. Toward this end, we first found people reported they assumed the best about others for traits high in moral connotation,  $r(37)=.38$ ,  $p=.02$ . Furthermore, even when controlling for the perceived morality and positivity of the traits, the "assume the best" strategy predicted a greater social comparison asymmetry,  $pr(35)=.34$ ,  $p=.04$ .

To better understand this relationship, we asked to what extent "assume the best" was applied to comparative ratings against populations versus individuals. As hypothesized, endorsement of "assume the best" predicted diminished self-ratings when comparing the self

against individuals,  $pr(35)=-.35, p=.03$ , but not populations,  $pr(35)=-.04, ns$ . In short, the social comparison asymmetry emerges in part due to a tendency to assume the best about the moral character of specific individuals, even if such generosity does not extend to beliefs about people in general.

**Multi-level modeling.** We used a similar data analytic approach to Study 1. Again, people compared themselves more favorably to a population than to a randomly-selected individual,  $t(34.31)=15.89, p<.001$ . This gap grew larger to the extent that the traits' perceived moral connotation was higher,  $t(940.28)=4.13, p<.001$ . Also, we found that the perceived moral connotation of a trait predicted the extent to which participants reported assuming the best when evaluating others on that trait,  $B=0.14, SE=0.01, t(34.37)=10.12, p < .001$ . Indeed, a strategy of assuming the best influenced comparative ratings against individuals more than against populations,  $t(8370.18)=2.19, p=.03$ . In particular, when comparing themselves with individuals, participants tempered their comparative self-assessments to the extent that they reported assuming the best about others,  $B=-0.06, SE=0.03, t(113.85) = 2.03, p = .04$ . In contrast, when comparing themselves to a population, participants' comparative self-assessments were not sensitive to their self-reported assume the best strategy,  $B = 0.02, SE = 0.03, t < 1$ . These results substantiate the conclusions from the aggregation method.

### General Discussion

Two studies and a reanalysis of Alicke et al.'s (1995) Study 1 helped to resolve a lingering mystery in the social comparison literature—that people compare themselves more favorably to populations than to specific individuals. First, we identified the type of traits for which this social comparison asymmetry emerges. Second, we identified one reason why.

We found that the social comparison asymmetry was: 1) strongest for traits that were

higher in their moral connotation (aggregation analyses), and 2) strongest for individuals who saw a given trait as relatively higher in its moral connotation (multi-level modeling analyses). These effects were maintained while controlling for trait positivity, showing the effects are not merely another instantiation of *person positivity*, a tendency to like individuals more than the populations from which they hail (Sears, 1983). Study 2 found that people self-reported a strategy of “assuming the best” about others—as opposed to withholding judgment—when it comes to moral traits. But this strategy applied only to comparisons against individuals, not populations. That said, other mechanisms may be at play. Critcher and Dunning (2013) identified a separate dynamic that may apply here as well—a tendency to focus on internal or external influences when forecasting the behavior of individuals and populations, respectively. Future research may identify still further still.

The present findings are noteworthy in that people applied the “assume the best” strategy when comparing themselves to “mere individuals,” including those they did not plan to interact with (Study 1) or actually meet (Study 2). Previous research has identified how people’s attitudes and impressions shift in advance of interactions with specific others—for example, by tuning their own attitudes to match their partner’s (Higgins & Rholes, 1978; Ledgerwood, Trope, & Chaiken, 2010; McCann & Higgins, 1992) increasing expectations of liking (Darley & Berscheid, 1967), or assuming their partner will complement their own levels of dominance (Tiedens, Unzueta, & Young, 2007). Consider Fetchenhauer and Dunning’s (2009) findings that most participants “trusted” specific others with whom they were paired in an economic trust game, even as they estimated that most others would prove untrustworthy. The present paper suggests this in part stemmed from a tendency to “assume the best” about specific individuals (but not populations), though future research would be necessary to determine whether this

strategy was heightened because actual interaction was imminent.

Are the present findings at odds with previous research that has characterized social perception as cynical? For example, people show a tendency to become highly suspicious about the motives behind others' seemingly selfless behavior (Critcher & Dunning, 2011; Fein, 1996). Remember though that our participants reported assuming the best "until they learned otherwise." In this way, we believe that individuals may initially err toward optimism to reap the benefits of testing out many possible social partners, but then err toward cynicism to avoid the costly mistake of continued, misdirected social investment. By analogy, choosy homebuyers may be well served by optimistic expectations about a particular house (thus encouraging them to take a look inside), even as they may shift toward incredibly high standards before making an offer.

### **Conclusion**

Some have suggested that judgments of the self relative to others are mostly just judgments of the self that neglect considerations about others (e.g., Klar & Giladi, 1999; Kruger, 1999). The present findings both suggest that and explain why the comparison other matters. Beyond helping to resolve a longstanding mystery in the social comparison literature, these findings may help in explaining how people can satisfy their motivations to maintain an elevated sense of self-worth (Critcher et al., 2010; Dunning et al., 1989; Guenther & Alicke, 2010; Taylor & Brown, 1988) without undermining the self's need to forge social bonds of trust and cooperation with specific others (e.g., Williams & Nida, 2011). That is, people can see themselves as a member of the elite few when considering how they stack up against a population, but then temper their sense of moral exceptionalism in considering specific others. If moral systems provide crucial support for social life, it is precisely on these dimensions that the self may wish to temper its self-aggrandizement.

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## FOOTNOTE

1. In our two experiments, we had participants make ratings on positively-framed traits (e.g., polite, well-read) as opposed to negatively-framed traits (e.g., impolite, poorly-read) to simplify analyses (i.e., high moral connotation would predict the same direction of effect across traits). To match our studies, we include Alicke et al.'s (1995) positive-framed traits only in our reanalysis.

Individual-population asymmetry,  $d$  (Alicke et al., 1995, Study 1)

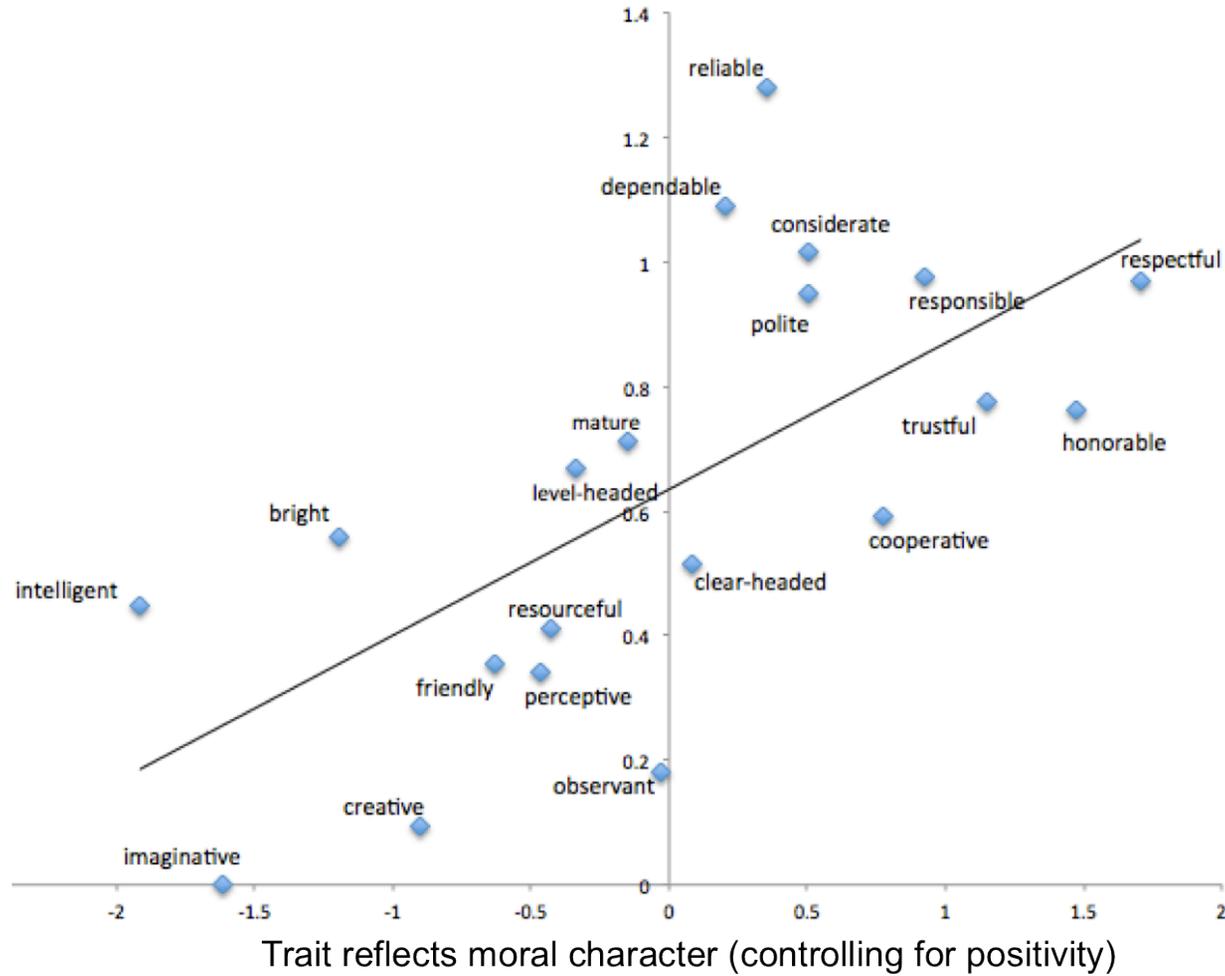


Figure 1. Scatterplot showing the relationship between the size of the individual-population asymmetry—the difference in social comparisons to an individual or a population—from Alicke et al. (1995)’s Study 1, and the extent to which each trait was rated as reflective of moral character, controlling for trait positivity (Anderson, 1968).

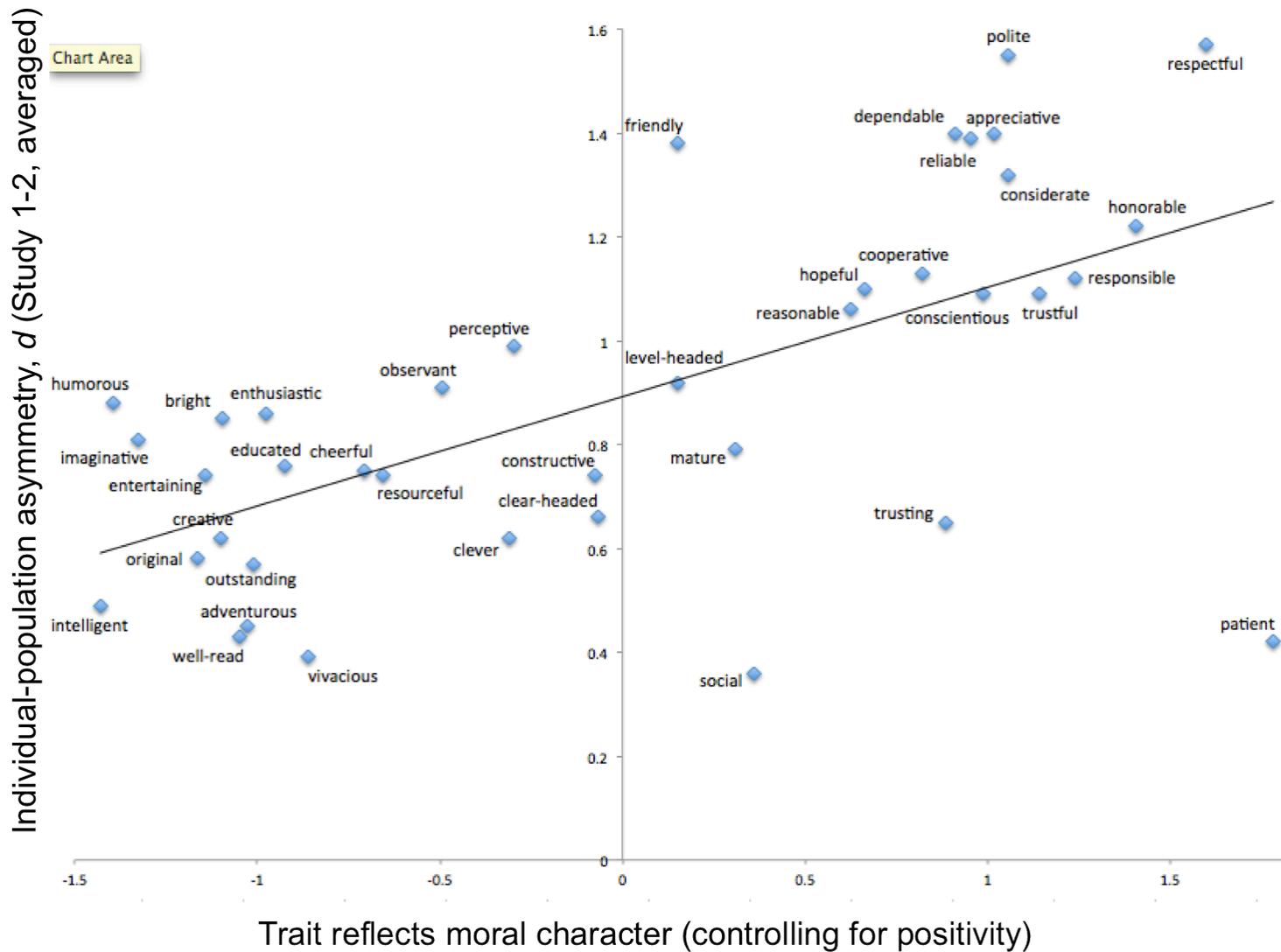
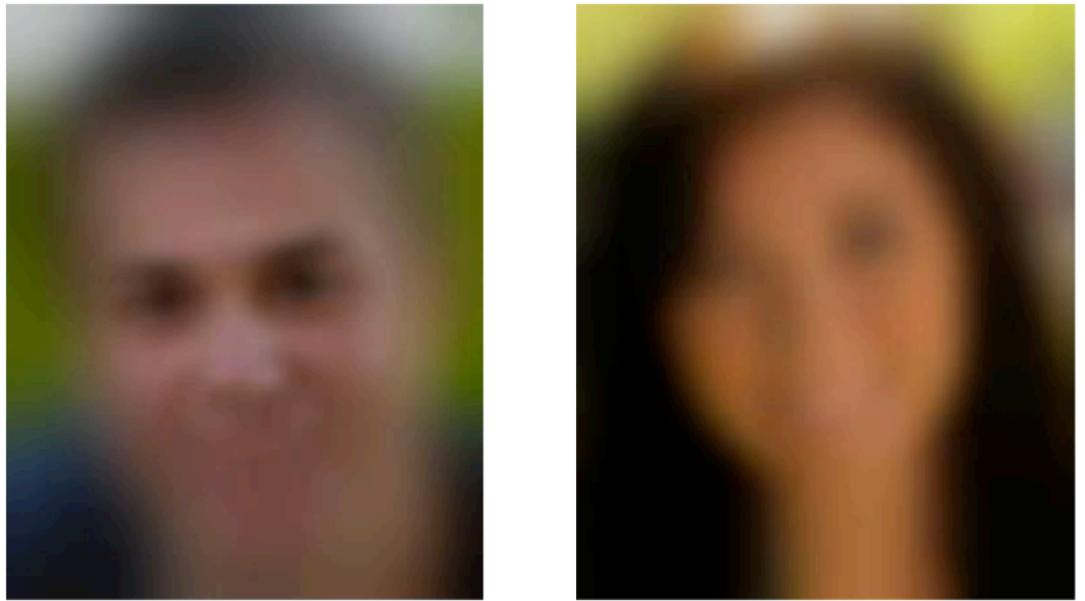


Figure 2. Scatterplot showing the relationship between the size of the individual-population asymmetry—the difference in social comparisons to an individual or a population—averaged across Studies 1 and 2, and the extent to which each trait was rated as reflective of moral character, controlling for trait positivity (Anderson, 1968).

BETTER THAN THEM, BUT NOT HIM



*Figure 3.* Individual comparison targets in Study 2.