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Why the Parts Are Better (or Worse) Than the Whole: The Unique-Attributes Hypothesis

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Abstract

People tend to rate members of a positive group (e.g., best friends) as superior to the average of that group and members of a negative group (e.g., worst enemies) as inferior to the average of that group. Five experiments tested a new theoretical account of these *nonselective superiority* and *inferiority biases*. According to this account, a member's unique attribute (the dimension distinguishing that member positively or negatively from other group members) is used as the standard for comparing that member with other group members. The experimental results supported this hypothesis. When participants compared a randomly selected popular or unpopular vacation destination with other destinations, the target destination's unique attribute was more accessible than its nonunique attributes (Experiments 1–4), and a popular destination was judged less above average if one of its nonunique attributes was the salient comparison standard (Experiment 4). In addition, the unique attribute was used as the comparison standard for evaluating novel stimuli (Experiment 5). Alternative accounts and implications for general comparison processes are discussed.

Keywords

comparisons, standards, attributes, above-average effects, nonselective inferiority and superiority biases

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Member-to-group comparisons are prevalent in everyday life. A person might consider whether one politician would make a better president than other candidates, whether one home is more suitable than other prospective homes on the market, whether one food item is healthier than others, or whether one vacation spot is more desirable than others. In turn, the outcomes of such comparisons have important consequences for a person's choices, decisions, moods, thoughts, and, ultimately, welfare. Indeed, rational models of choice are predicated on the idea that human beings can maximize their utility by identifying the best and worst options in a choice set (Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1947).

However, recent work by Klar and his colleagues (e.g., Giladi & Klar, 2002; Klar, 2002; Klar & Giladi, 1997) suggests that people are far from unbiased in their comparisons. Individual members of positively valenced groups (e.g., healthy foods, good politicians) are rated better and individual members of negatively valenced groups (e.g., unhealthy foods, bad politicians) are rated worse than the group average, in defiance of simple mathematical rules stating that the average of the individual members must equal the group average. In one of the first studies demonstrating these *nonselective inferiority* and *superiority biases*, Giladi and Klar had shoppers evaluate randomly selected pleasant-smelling or unpleasant-smelling soaps and found that any given pleasant soap was rated better than the rest of the group, and any given unpleasant soap was rated worse than the rest of the group. These effects have since been observed with other object categories, including desirable and undesirable acquaintances, restaurants, social groups, pieces of furniture, hotels, and songs, and thus appear to be highly robust and reliable (e.g., Windschitl, Conybeare, & Krizan, 2008).

In explaining these nonselective biases, Giladi and Klar (2002) proposed that when one member of a positive or negative group is compared with others (e.g., how does good restaurant A compare with other good restaurants B and C?), that member is evaluated against a standard that is one part local (restaurants B and C) and one part general (all other restaurants, including bad ones). Thus, although the member that is being evaluated should be compared only with the normatively appropriate local standard, it is actually compared with a hybrid standard that includes both the local and the general standard. Consequently, almost any member of a positive

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group will be rated better than others (because the general standard is more negative than the local standard), and almost any member of a negative group will be rated worse than others (because the general standard is more positive than the local standard).

In this article, I propose an additional reason (beyond the confusion of local and general standards) why almost any group member is rated more extremely than others in its group. When all the objects under consideration are positive, their positive attributes are likely to figure more prominently than their negative attributes in the judge's evaluation, and when all the objects under consideration are negative, their negative attributes are likely to figure more prominently than their positive attributes in the judge's evaluation (Shafir, 1993; Tversky, 1977). Judges evaluating a group of popular automobiles will dwell on their stylish looks or excellent maintenance records, rather than on their high sticker prices, for example. In addition, each member of a group will differ from others (on average) along at least one attribute, though it may be similar to the others on other attributes. For example, one popular automobile may be better than others (on average) in terms of its looks, whereas another may be better in terms of its maintenance record. When a member is compared with others in its group, that unique attribute may receive more weight than other relevant attributes. In other words, the comparison may be made primarily on the dimension or attribute that most distinguishes the target from other group members—in effect, the unique attribute becomes the salient comparison standard. This simple idea can explain why almost any member of a positively valenced group is judged superior to the rest of its group (because its unique positive attribute becomes the comparison standard), and almost any member of a negatively valenced group is judged inferior to the rest of its group (because its unique negative attribute becomes the comparison standard).

This *unique-attributes hypothesis* stands in contrast with Klar's LOGE (local-general) model (Giladi & Klar, 2002). Consider two popular vacation destinations: Las Vegas (known for its exciting entertainment and nightlife) and Honolulu (known for its beautiful scenery). The LOGE model and the unique-attributes hypothesis both suggest that these destinations will be rated individually as better than other popular vacation spots (such as Paris, London, and New York), but for different reasons. According to the LOGE model, Las Vegas and Honolulu will be evaluated according to a hybrid standard that includes not only other popular vacation destinations, but also unpopular ones (e.g., Omaha or Detroit). The unique-attributes hypothesis, in contrast, proposes that Las Vegas and Honolulu will be evaluated more favorably than other popular vacation destinations because their entertainment opportunities and climate and scenery, respectively, are better than those of other locations.

The unique-attributes hypothesis follows from Dunning and his colleagues' work on idiosyncratic trait definitions (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). Dunning et al. have shown that when people are asked to define a particular trait dimension, such as "intelligence" or "leadership," they emphasize their own idiosyncratic personal characteristics, so that they all see themselves as "above average" with respect to these socially admired traits. For example, a highly mathematical person would define intelligence in terms of mathematical ability, whereas a highly artistic person would define it in terms of creativity. However, Dunning has argued that motivated reasoning underlies this phenomenon—that idiosyncratic trait definitions are self-serving and help to protect or enhance the self-concept (e.g., Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995)—whereas I suggest that using an object's unique attribute as the comparison standard is not necessarily a motivated phenomenon and can occur simply because unique attributes are more distinctive or perceptually salient than nonunique attributes (Brenner, Rottenstreich, & Sood, 1999; Houston & Sherman, 1995; Hsee & Leclerc, 1998; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978; Tversky, 1977). As a consequence of its salience, a unique attribute will be used as the comparison standard even in evaluations of inanimate, nonself objects (when self-serving motivations are presumably absent), and use of such a standard can even give rise to below-average ratings of the target (e.g., when a member of a negatively valenced group is compared with others in its group according to its unique negative attribute). The five experiments reported in this article tested these predictions.

These experiments provide the first evidence for the unique-attributes hypothesis and demonstrate that it can explain nonselective biases. In Experiments 1 through 3, participants compared randomly selected popular or unpopular vacation destinations with others; each selected destination had a unique positive (popular destinations) or negative (unpopular destinations) attribute. Various process measures (e.g., thought protocols, implicit measures of accessibility) were utilized to show that each selected destination was rated more extremely than other members of its group because its unique attribute was used as the comparison standard. Experiment 4 examined whether an object is evaluated less extremely when one of its nonunique attributes is made the salient comparison standard, and Experiment 5 examined whether a unique attribute is utilized as the standard for evaluating novel stimuli (i.e., ones outside the local set).

Experiment 1: Popular Destinations

In this experiment, participants compared either Las Vegas or Honolulu with other popular vacation destinations. Both cities should be rated above average with respect to other popular destinations—Las Vegas because of its superior entertainment and Honolulu because of its superior climate.

Method

Psychology students (N = 123) learned that they would be evaluating several popular vacation destinations in a

computerized task. Five destinations were listed on the first screen (Las Vegas; Washington, DC; Honolulu; Paris; and Chicago), and one of these was then selected by the computer, ostensibly at random (Las Vegas or Honolulu). Participants spent a few minutes thinking about activities they would do at the selected destination; they then rated how desirable that destination was compared with the other four destinations on the list (on a scale from –4, *much less*, to 4, *much more*) and wrote a few sentences explaining their answer. They then compared the selected destination with the others on the list along four specific attributes: climate, entertainment, culture, and cuisine (on the same scale from –4 to 4); the time they took to make these judgments was unobtrusively recorded by the computer. Next, these same four attributes were presented as options, and participants selected which one they had thought about most when comparing the target destination with the others. Finally, they rated the absolute desirability of the target destination and of the other four destinations as a group, on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very*). Order of attribute comparisons and absolute judgments (target and group) was counterbalanced across participants.

In preliminary analyses, two independent raters coded each open-ended thought protocol for whether the participant explicitly mentioned aspects relating to climate (e.g., nature, weather, scenery) or entertainment (e.g., clubs, nightlife, partying). Agreement between the raters was acceptable for both attributes, Φs > .68, p_{rep}s > .99; therefore, their ratings were combined (discrepancies were resolved through discussion).

Results

As Table 1 shows, participants rated Las Vegas and Honolulu above average compared with the other popular destinations, $t(61) = 2.98$ and $t(60) = 18.24$, respectively, p_{rep}s > .97, despite the fact that all the destinations were desirable. Thus, participants exhibited a nonselective superiority bias (Giladi & Klar, 2002). This bias arose because they used the unique attribute as the comparison standard, ignoring the fact that the target destination was similar to or worse than the other destinations on a host of other attributes, and hence not necessarily above average. For instance, in their open-ended thought protocols, participants who evaluated Las Vegas made more references to entertainment than to climate, $\chi^2(1, N = 61) = 39.06$, $p_{rep} > .99$, and those who evaluated Honolulu made more references to climate than to entertainment, $\chi^2(1, N = 61) = 16.01$, $p_{rep} > .99$. In addition, when participants were asked directly which attribute they thought about most in making their comparisons, more participants who evaluated Las Vegas referred to entertainment than to climate, $\chi^2(1, N = 39) = 27.92$, $p_{rep} > .99$, and more participants who evaluated Honolulu referred to climate than to entertainment, $\chi^2(1, N = 47) = 32.36$, $p_{rep} > .99$.[1]

Not only was the unique attribute mentioned and thought about most often, but it was also more accessible than the other (nonunique) attributes. Participants were faster to judge Las Vegas's standing on entertainment than its standing on climate, and slower to judge Honolulu's standing on entertainment than its standing on climate, a pattern confirmed by a significant Target × Attribute interaction, $F(1, 121) = 26.91$, $p_{rep} > .99$, $\eta^2 = .18$. This finding lends additional support to the unique-attribute hypothesis, which posits that when an object is compared with others, its unique attribute should be more accessible than other attributes and thus should be used as the comparison standard.

The hypothesis also posits that an object's perceived desirability should be more closely related to how it compares with others on its unique attribute than to how it compares with others on its nonunique attributes. This prediction was tested by

Table 1. Mean Dependent Measures for Each Target Condition in Experiment 1

	Target	
Dependent measure and attribute	Las Vegas	Honolulu
Comparative judgment	0.79* (2.01)	2.51** (1.07)
Attribute mentioned in thought protocol		
Climate	11%	97%
Entertainment	93%	36%
Attribute reported as thought about most		
Climate	5%	70%
Entertainment	59%	7%
Attribute-comparison response time (seconds)		
Climate	9.50 (4.39)	6.64 (3.26)
Entertainment	7.44 (4.96)	8.95 (5.52)
Relationship between absolute target judgment and attribute comparison (β)		
Climate	0.40**	0.57**
Entertainment	0.26*	0.13

Note: Mean comparative judgments were tested against 0 (indicating "same as average," or no bias) using one-sample *t* tests. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.
*p_{rep} > .88. **p_{rep} > .95.

regression analyses using attribute-comparison ratings (for climate and entertainment) to predict ratings of the target destination's absolute desirability. As expected, Honolulu's desirability was related only to its perceived standing on climate, its unique attribute, $p_{rep} > .99$, and not to its standing on entertainment, its nonunique attribute, $p_{rep} = .69$. Las Vegas's desirability was significantly (and independently) related to its perceived standing on both entertainment, its unique attribute, and climate, its nonunique attribute, p_{rep}s $> .91$. Thus, Honolulu was rated desirable, and more desirable than other popular vacation spots, because its climate was superior, and Las Vegas was rated similarly in part because its entertainment was superior.

Experiment 2: A Replication

A potential problem with Experiment 1 is that only two of the five destinations were evaluated individually, and these may have been particularly extreme instances. Demonstrating a nonselective bias requires that all members of the group are evaluated and judged (on average) to be above or below average. Experiment 2 addressed this issue. Thirty-seven participants went through the same procedure as in Experiment 1, but all five destinations were evaluated individually. On average, the five destinations were rated above average ($M = 1.59$), $t(36) = 4.74$, $p_{rep} > .99$. Three of the destinations individually received above-average ratings—Las Vegas: $t(8) = 3.16$; Honolulu: $t(8) = 18.00$; Paris: $t(7) = 11.23$ (p_{rep}s $> .94$). The remaining two (Washington, DC, and Chicago) received average ratings (p_{rep}s $< .51$). The conditions for demonstrating a nonselective bias were thus met in this experiment.

Moreover, participants said that each destination, with the exception of Chicago, had an attribute that clearly distinguished it from the other destinations (e.g., entertainment for Las Vegas, culture for Paris), $\chi^2(12, N = 37) = 65.84$, $p_{rep} > .99$. Of greater interest, they reported thinking more about the unique attribute than about other attributes when making their comparisons, $\chi^2(12, N = 37) = 33.68$, $p_{rep} > .99$; they judged the target destination's standing on its unique attribute somewhat faster than its standing on other attributes, paired $t(34) = 1.68$, $p_{rep} = .86$; and their ratings of the target destination's overall desirability were more strongly related to its perceived standing on the unique attribute than to its perceived standing on the other attributes, average βs = 0.53 versus 0.06. Thus, key findings from Experiment 1 were replicated.

Experiment 3: Unpopular Destinations

The previous experiments found strong support for the unique-attributes hypothesis in comparisons involving desirable stimuli. Experiment 3 examined whether the hypothesis is also relevant to comparisons involving undesirable stimuli. Fifty-nine participants compared either Des Moines (known for its lack of entertainment options) or Compton (known for its crime and violence) with other unpopular vacation destinations (Birmingham, Wheeling, Fargo, and the other target destination). Otherwise the procedure was the same as in Experiment 1. The results, shown in Table 2, again supported the unique-attributes hypothesis. Participants rated both Des Moines and Compton below average compared with the other unpopular destinations, $t(29) = –2.43$ and $t(28) = –2.63$, respectively, p_{rep}s $> .93$, exhibiting a nonselective inferiority bias. In addition, they made more references to the target destination's unique attribute than to its nonunique attribute in their open-ended thought protocols, $\chi^2(1, N = 30) = 11.67$ (Des

Table 2. Mean Dependent Measures for Each Target Condition in Experiment 3

	Target	
Dependent measure and attribute	Des Moines	Compton
Comparative judgment	–0.63* (1.43)	–0.86* (1.77)
Attribute mentioned in thought protocol		
Crime	10%	62%
Lack of entertainment	63%	17%
Attribute reported as thought about most		
Crime	0%	59%
Lack of entertainment	60%	17%
Attribute-comparison response time (seconds)		
Crime	8.17 (4.08)	8.00 (5.80)
Lack of entertainment	6.95 (3.12)	8.65 (5.00)
Relationship between absolute target judgment and attribute comparison (β)		
Crime	0.05	0.45*
Lack of entertainment	0.23	0.25

Note: Mean comparative judgments were tested against 0 (indicating "same as average," or no bias) using one-sample *t* tests. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.
*$p_{rep} > .88$.

Moines) and $\chi^2(1, N = 29) = 7.35$ (Compton), p_{rep}s > .99; said they thought more about the target's unique attribute than about its nonunique attribute when making their comparisons, $\chi^2(1, N = 18) = 18.00$ (Des Moines) and $\chi^2(1, N = 22) = 6.56$ (Compton), p_{rep}s > .99 (see note 1); and were quicker to judge the target's relative standing on its unique attribute than its standing on its nonunique attribute (Target × Attribute interaction), $F(1, 57) = 3.95$, $p_{rep} = .88$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Finally, participants' ratings of the target's absolute desirability were more closely related to its perceived standing on the unique attribute than to its perceived standing on its nonunique attribute.

Experiment 4

Thus far, I have shown that an object is rated more extremely than its group because its unique attribute is more cognitively accessible than other relevant attributes and, hence, serves as the comparison standard. When one of the target object's nonunique attributes is made more cognitively accessible, that attribute (rather than the unique attribute) should become the comparison standard, and, consequently, the target should be rated less extremely relative to other group members. Experiment 4 tested this prediction. As in Experiment 1, participants compared Honolulu with other popular destinations. Before doing so, they were told to think about how Honolulu compared in terms of its nonunique attribute (entertainment) or its unique attribute (climate), or they were given no special instructions (control condition). Participants in the first condition were expected to rate Honolulu less above average than those in the latter two conditions.

Method

Psychology students ($N = 104$) took part in this study. The procedure was identical to that of Experiment 1, except for the following changes. First, the target destination was always Honolulu. Second, prior to making their evaluations, participants were instructed to think about how Honolulu compared with the other destinations in terms of entertainment (nonunique-attribute condition) or in terms of climate (unique-attribute condition), or were given neither instruction (control condition). Third, the open-ended thought protocols were omitted.

Results

Table 3 shows that participants in all conditions rated Honolulu above average compared with the other popular destinations—unique-attribute condition: $t(23) = 14.00$; nonunique-attribute condition: $t(23) = 7.15$; control condition: $t(56) = 20.26$ (p_{rep}s > .99). However, as predicted, they rated it less above average in the nonunique-attribute condition than in the unique-attribute and control conditions, $t(46) = –2.15$ and $t(79) = –2.45$, respectively, p_{rep}s > .90; this pattern was confirmed by a significant effect of focusing condition, $F(2, 102) = 3.75$, $p_{rep} = .91$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Ratings in the latter two conditions did not differ significantly, $p_{rep} = .30$, which indicates that participants given no special instructions (control condition) were likely focused on the unique attribute by default.

Did participants in the nonunique-attribute condition rate Honolulu less above average because they tended to use entertainment, rather than climate (the unique attribute), as the comparison standard? Two additional findings suggest that they did. First, participants judged Honolulu's standing on climate more rapidly than its standing on entertainment, $F(1, 102) = 22.00$, $p_{rep} > .99$, $\eta^2 = .17$, but, as expected, this difference was marginally greater in the unique-attribute condition than in the nonunique-attribute condition, $F(1, 46) = 2.67$, $p_{rep} = .81$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Second, when Honolulu's perceived standings on climate and entertainment were used to predict ratings of its absolute

Table 3. Mean Dependent Measures for Each Focusing Condition in Experiment 4

	Focusing condition		
Dependent measure and attribute	Nonunique attribute (entertainment)	Control	Unique attribute (climate)
Comparative judgment	2.04_a (1.40)	2.72_b (1.01)	2.79_b (0.98)
Attribute-comparison response time (seconds)			
Climate	6.11 (2.42)	6.67 (3.01)	5.97 (3.16)
Entertainment	7.46 (3.24)	8.24 (4.08)	9.30 (5.08)
Relationship between absolute target judgment and attribute comparison (β)			
Climate	0.34†	0.24†	0.60**
Entertainment	0.32†	0.17	0.07

Note: One-sample *t* tests indicated that mean comparative judgments in all conditions differed significantly from 0 (indicating "same as average," or no bias), p_{rep}s > .95. Comparative judgments not sharing the same subscript differed significantly (p_{rep}s > .88). Standard deviations are given in parentheses.
†$p_{rep} > .82$. **$p_{rep} > .95$.

desirability, its standing on climate was the only independent predictor in the unique-attribute and control conditions (a pattern mirroring results in Experiment 1), p_{rep}s > .84. However, its standing on climate and its standing on entertainment were equal and independent predictors in the nonunique-attribute condition, p_{rep}s > .81. Thus, although Honolulu's climate is superior, participants in the nonunique-attribute condition rated Honolulu less above average than those in the other conditions because they took into account that Honolulu's entertainment is not superior.

Experiment 5

If the unique attribute is more accessible after people make a comparison, that attribute may be utilized as the standard when they subsequently evaluate a novel stimulus (i.e., one not in the original comparison group). For example, if "crime" is more accessible after an evaluator compares a city with a particularly high crime rate (e.g., Compton), then the evaluator may rate other high-crime cities (e.g., Detroit) more negatively than cities that are undesirable for other reasons, such as poor entertainment options (e.g., Fargo). Conversely, if "boredom" is more accessible after an evaluator compares a city with poor entertainment options (e.g., Des Moines), then the evaluator may do just the opposite: rate high-crime cities more positively than other cities with poor entertainment options. Experiment 5 investigated these *dimension-linked contrast effects* by having participants judge the desirability of novel destinations (ones high in crime and ones having poor entertainment options) after first comparing a destination that did or did not share the same unique attribute.

Method

Participants were 43 psychology students. The procedure was similar to that of Experiment 1, except that after comparing Des Moines or Compton with other undesirable spots (in this case, Birmingham, Wheeling, Cincinnati, and the other target destination), participants considered four new destinations (two high-crime destinations, Detroit and Harlem, and two low-entertainment destinations, Fargo and Flint; cities were selected on the basis of pretesting). These four destinations were presented in counterbalanced order and rated individually on a scale from 1 (*very bad*) to 9 (*very good*).

Results

Ratings for the two high-crime and two low-entertainment destinations were averaged within each category and submitted to a 2 (target destination) × 2 (type of novel destination) mixed analysis of variance. As predicted, the interaction was significant, $F(1, 43) = 4.26$, $p_{rep} = .89$, $\eta^2 = .09$. Participants who evaluated Des Moines rated the low-entertainment destinations less favorably than the high-crime destinations (*M*s = 4.45 vs. 4.70), whereas those who evaluated Compton rated the low-entertainment destinations more favorably than the high-crime destinations (*M*s = 4.73 vs. 4.24). Thus, the unique attribute served as the salient comparison standard in the evaluation of new stimuli, resulting in those stimuli being evaluated less favorably when they shared the target object's unique (negative) attribute and more favorably when they did not.

General Discussion

Objects, events, and people can be compared on an almost infinite number of dimensions, and each object, event, or person is better or worse than others on at least one dimension (although similar on many other dimensions). Thus, each member of a group has a unique attribute—an attribute that distinguishes it positively or negatively from other group members. This simple fact can help explain why members of generally positive groups are each judged better than the group average and members of generally negative groups are each judged worse than the group average: The unique attribute becomes the comparison standard, such that each member of a positive group is compared with others according to its unique positive attribute (and hence judged above average), and each member of a negative group is compared with others according to its unique negative attribute (and hence judged below average).

In the present experiments, randomly selected popular vacation destinations were rated better than the group average, and randomly selected unpopular vacation destinations were rated worse than the group average; these findings replicated nonselective biases reported previously (Giladi & Klar, 2002). Results were consistent with the unique-attributes hypothesis in that the target destination's unique attribute was more likely than other attributes to be mentioned in open-ended thought protocols, was thought about most when participants made a comparison, and was more cognitively accessible than the target's nonunique attribute (as indexed by covert reaction time measures, which are less susceptible than other measures to self-report biases; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977); these patterns all imply that the unique attribute served as the salient comparison standard (Experiments 1–4). In addition, a popular destination was rated less above average when one of its nonunique attributes was made the salient comparison standard (Experiment 4), and the unique attribute influenced evaluations of completely novel stimuli (Experiment 5); these findings indicate that the unique attribute is perhaps the default standard in many comparison contexts.

The present findings are consistent with the unique-attributes hypothesis, but not with several leading alternative accounts of comparison biases. In particular, the data cannot be explained by a tendency to confuse an object's absolute and relative standing (conflation; Moore, 2007) or to make more extreme judgments about (differential regressiveness; Moore & Small, 2007) and give more weight to (differential confidence; Kruger, Windschitl, Burrus, Fessel, & Chambers, 2008) whichever object in the comparison is known with greater confidence or certainty.[2] Unlike the unique-attributes hypothesis, these accounts cannot explain why unique attributes were

particularly accessible following a comparison, why focusing on nonunique attributes diminished nonselective biases, why the influence of unique attributes carried over to evaluations of novel stimuli, or why nonselective biases occurred even though participants had roughly equal knowledge about all group members. Neither can these accounts explain the strong association between a group member's desirability and its standing on its unique attribute.

The LOGE model (Giladi & Klar, 2002) has difficulty explaining many of these same findings. However, the LOGE model and the unique-attributes hypothesis should be viewed not as rivals, but as complementary accounts that concern independent judgment processes that are most relevant to different instances of bias. For example, on the one hand, the LOGE model (but not the unique-attributes hypothesis) is relevant to situations in which the objects can be compared only along a single dimension. Indeed, Klar and his colleagues (Klar, 2002; Klar, Karelitz, Roziner, & Levi, 2008) have demonstrated nonselective biases with unidimensional stimuli (e.g., tall or short people compared in terms of their physical height), and even with group members that are completely devoid of distinguishing features.

On the other hand, the unique-attributes hypothesis is more relevant to situations in which the objects being compared are multidimensional. It is relevant to a special class of nonselective biases known as above-/below-average effects (Alicke, 1985; Kruger, 1999; for reviews, see Alicke & Govorun, 2005, and Chambers & Windschitl, 2004), the tendency for most people to think their abilities, personality traits, or event chances are better or worse than the average person's, depending on the specific ability, trait, or event in question. The LOGE model is not relevant to such biases because the local and general standards are presumably the same (people compare themselves with the *average* person, rather than with a subset that is particularly high or low on the evaluative dimension). The unique-attributes hypothesis implies that such biases may result from people focusing on their own unique attributes when they compare themselves with others. For example, a person who is especially good in math but poor in science may judge his or her intelligence to be above average or below average depending on whichever attribute (math vs. science ability) happens to be more salient at the moment.

These differences aside, the two accounts share one basic assumption. According to both, an object is judged better or worse than the comparison group (the local standard) because it is "good" or "poor" in an absolute sense (the general standard). However, the unique-attributes hypothesis goes beyond the LOGE model by specifying the nature of the absolute (general) standard. In particular, according to this hypothesis, an object is good or poor in an absolute sense only insofar as it compares favorably or unfavorably with other objects along at least one dimension—its unique attribute. Hence, the unique attribute may function as the general standard described by the LOGE model. As the present experiments revealed, an object will be evaluated above or below average when that attribute is the focus of attention, as is usually the case (Experiments 1–4), and will be evaluated as less above or below average when that attribute is not the focus of attention (Experiment 4).

In summary, each member of a group is inferior or superior to other members of the same group in some way. The tendency to use such a unique attribute as the comparison standard (to the exclusion of nonunique attributes) can help explain the ironic finding that nearly any member of a superior group seems better than the others, and nearly any member of an inferior group seems worse—in essence, why the parts are better or worse than the whole.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interests with respect to their authorship and/or the publication of this article.

Notes

1. Only participants who referred to one of the two focal attributes (e.g., climate or entertainment in Experiment 1, crime or lack of entertainment in Experiment 3) were included in these analyses, and thus the degrees of freedom for these tests are necessarily reduced in some cases.
2. The overweighting accounts all assume that the target object receives more weight than the referent group in the comparison, so that the comparison judgment reflects the target's absolute standing on the evaluative dimension more than the referent group's absolute standing on that dimension. Evidence of such overweighting was observed in all of the experiments. In Experiment 1, for example, comparative ratings were more strongly related to absolute desirability ratings for the target destination (βs = 0.62 and 0.71 for Honolulu and Las Vegas, respectively; p_{rep}s > .99) than for the nonselected destinations (βs = –0.25 and –0.11, p_{rep}s < .95, respectively). However, the present experiments also showed that the target destination's desirability is mainly a function of its standing on its unique attribute (rather than its nonunique attributes).

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