On the Status of Self in Social Prediction: Comment on Karniol (2003)

Constantine Sedikides
University of Southampton

A challenge to mainstream notions on the status of the self in social prediction is welcome. The self-as-distinct model (R. Karniol, 2003) is thoughtful, provocative, and parsimonious, but it is also underspecified, undertested, and selective in its treatment of the evidence. More important, the model does not provide compelling answers to issues pertaining to the origins of prototypic social knowledge, the status of self-knowledge, the content of the self-representation, whether the use of self in social prediction is a logical contradiction, and whether the self's role in social prediction is amotivated.

Theoretical and empirical inquiry on the role of self in social prediction has long been at the forefront of the psychological agenda. In the social cognition literature, there is practically no dispute of the influence of the self-representation in social prediction. The widely shared notion is that the self plays a prominent and critical role in social prediction. Rather, the debate involves the clarification of the cognitive processes through which self-knowledge impacts on social prediction.

Karniol's (2003) article attempts to change the terms of the debate. The article describes a provocative, thoughtful, and parsimonious theoretical model, the self-as-distinct (SAD) model, which challenges the mainstream and issues a call for revisionist thinking. According to the model, the role of the self in social prediction is secondary, if that. Instead, prototypic social knowledge drives social prediction. The self is merely represented in terms of features that are distinct from prototypic knowledge.

Although a cogent challenge to a complacent mainstream is welcome, the SAD model leaves several important questions unanswered. These concern the origins of prototypic social knowledge, the status of self-knowledge, the content of self-representation, whether the use of self in social prediction constitutes a logical contradiction, and whether the role of the self in social prediction is amotivated.

How Is Prototypic Social Knowledge Derived?

The SAD model does not specify the genesis of prototypic social knowledge. How is such knowledge derived, and in reference to which baseline is it processed? It would be desirable if the model, instead of relying on a rather arbitrary computer metaphor (Besnard, 1989; Reiter, 1985), were grounded on evolutionary, neuroanatomical, or developmental accounts.

I argue that prototypic social knowledge is filtered through self-knowledge. Information about the social environment is initially processed in reference to the self (me–not me). Prototypes are the outcome of classification of social knowledge in terms of the me–not me distinction. This view is rooted in evolutionary

accounts of the self (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1997): Using the self as an informational source for social inference and prediction conferred critical evolutionary advantages, as it allowed for pre-emptive and rapid action (Humphrey, 1986). Corroborating evidence for the relevance and functionality of the self-system attests that the self is a distinct neuroanatomical structure (Kelley et al., 2002) and that a sense of self emerges late in the 2nd year of development quite irrespectively of social context (Howe & Courage, 1997). In summary, self-knowledge is pivotally implicated in the formation of prototypic social knowledge, a claim that runs contrary to the SAD model.

Is Self-Knowledge Simply a Deviation From Prototypic Social Knowledge?

According to the SAD model, self-knowledge is represented in terms of its distinctiveness from prototypic social knowledge. Self-knowledge has no special status. If anything, its role is subordinate to that of generic social knowledge.

However, this tenet of the model is disputed by some of the very same evidence summoned to support it. The majority of participants in relevant experiments (e.g., 70%; Dunning & Hayes, 1996, Study 1) do acknowledge the use of self in social judgment, and those who report having used the self manifest the strongest social judgment effects (e.g., contrast; Dunning & Hayes, 1996, Study 2). It is important to note that when making judgments about a target person, people mention the self more often than acquaintances, persons similar to the target, persons who exemplify the relevant trait dimension, or consensus information (i.e., population norms; Dunning & Hayes, 1996, Study 1). It is of no surprise, then, that self-knowledge is more accessible than consensus information, as determined by speed of trait ratings, and that self-descriptiveness judgments facilitate consensus estimates more than vice versa (Clement & Krueger, 2000). Not even the explicit provision of consensus information can diminish people's proclivity to use the self as an information source (Dunning & Cohen, 1992, Studies 4 and 6).

However, the most direct counterevidence for the SAD proposal that self-knowledge is subordinate to generic social knowledge stems from research on self–other judgments. Studies by Srull and Gaelick (1983) are a case in point. They reported that self–other similarity is judged as lower when the direction of comparison is self-to-other than when the direction of comparison is other-to-

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Constantine Sedikides, Centre for Research on Self and Identity, Department of Psychology, University of Southampton, Highfield Campus, Southampton SO17 1BJ, England. E-mail: cs2@soton.ac.uk

self. That is, participants perceive the self as less similar to others than they perceive others as similar to the self. This research was guided by Tversky's (1977) feature-matching model, according to which judgments of similarity between two objects involve comparisons of feature sets that the two objects share and do not share. As such, direction of comparison will influence the judgment. Similarity of the more-to-less elaborate object will be judged lower (because of the high number of mismatches), whereas similarity of the less-to-more elaborate object will be judged higher (because of relatively few mismatches). Hence, the research by Srull and Gaelick simply demonstrates that self-knowledge is more elaborate than other knowledge (see also Catrambone, Beike, & Niedenthal, 1996; Holyoak & Gordon, 1983; Simon & Hastedt, 1997). It is important to note that the same point is illustrated in the sequence effects of the false-consensus literature: Participants report lower self–other similarity when they register their behavioral choices before, rather than after, their consensus estimates (Fabrigar & Krosnick, 1995; Mullen et al., 1985; Mullen & Hu, 1988). The same point is also illustrated in a study in which other judgments constituted a more effective prime for self-judgments than vice versa (Karylowski, Konarzewski, & Motes, 2000), assuming that other judgments spontaneously activate the self (Dunning & Hayes, 1996, Study 1). This point documents the status of the self as a habitual reference point and, in fact, as a more robust and influential reference point than familiar others (Karylowski, 1990). In summary, self-knowledge is not stored as a mere exception to generic social knowledge. Instead, it has primacy over social knowledge.

Is the Self-Concept Atypical?

The SAD model rests on the proposal that self-knowledge is atypical. In support of this proposal, some research suggests that people momentarily shift their self-definitions by overemphasizing their distinct self-conceptions in response to contextual influences such as the presence of similar others (McGuire & McGuire, 1988) or the introduction of a psychological threat (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998, Study 3). This research illustrates that people can contrast the self from others and they do so when the context facilitates such a contrast. At issue, however, is not whether individuals can contrast the self from others, but rather what the default or predominant content of their self-knowledge is. In contrast to the SAD model, I argue that the default content of self-knowledge is mixed, although similarities with others are overrepresented compared with differences with others.

The argument in favor of similarities as the default content of the self is bolstered by several lines of inquiry. Gentner and Markman (1994) established that a focus on differences necessitates a focus on similarities when two objects are compared: Similarities compose the backdrop against which differences are explored. A focus on similarities, then, is a primary structural characteristic of human judgment, and as such, one would expect for self-knowledge to store predominantly information that denotes similarities rather than differences with others. Indeed, Mussweiler (2001a, 2001b) demonstrated that self-knowledge referring to similarities (rather than differences) with a social comparison standard is highly accessible. Similarly, Olson and Janes (2002) found that people expect similarities rather than differences among self-relevant events: Participants were more surprised by unex-

pected differences than unexpected similarities among events that had implications for the self.

The typicality of self-knowledge is documented in an investigation by Gramzow, Gaertner, and Sedikides (2001). In one study (Pilot Study 1), participants rated 100 behaviors for general positivity and typicality. In a second and more crucial study (Pilot Study 2), participants rated the degree to which the positive–typical, negative–typical, positive–atypical, and negative–atypical behaviors were similar or dissimilar to the self. Participants rated positive behaviors as more similar to the self than negative behaviors, and they rated typical behaviors as more similar to the self than atypical behaviors. It is interesting to note that participants regarded the positive–typical behaviors as most similar to the self and the negative–atypical behaviors as least similar to the self.

Other research also backs the claim that self-knowledge is both typical and positive. Participants endorse nomothetically derived positive and typical traits (e.g., trustworthy, friendly, and kind) as their own most important traits (Sedikides, 1993). Also, the trait terms that participants use to describe themselves are essentially the same positive and typical traits that they use to describe others (Lemon & Warren, 1974). Self-knowledge is disproportionately positive (Kendall, Howard, & Hays, 1989), and people consider themselves slightly superior to others on self-relevant dimensions (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Characteristically, this self-enhancement bias can be taken as evidence of distinctiveness. In this case, distinctiveness takes on the meaning of scaling discrepancies (i.e., possessing more of the same trait) rather than the endorsement of discrete trait categories. Regardless, the self-concept does include distinct knowledge. People believe that their positive and typical attributes are more favorable than those of others. Furthermore, given the vastness and complexity of such self-knowledge, it should come as no surprise that it is highly differentiated (Mandrosz-Wroblewska, 1989).

Does the Use of Self in Social Prediction Constitute a Logical Contradiction?

The SAD model is based on the premise that the use of self in social prediction constitutes a logical contradiction. How can a distinct self produce useful social prediction? The trouble, however, with this argument is that it does not specify from whose perspective the use of self constitutes a logical contradiction. It may be a contradiction from the rational standpoint of the experimenter, but it is an irrelevance from the perspective of the participant. There is no reason to suspect that rationality supremely rules judgment, in general, and social judgment, in particular.

That individuals regard the self as distinct (e.g., more positive and more complex than others) does not imply that they refrain or ought to refrain from using the self in predicting others' attributes and behavior. It is those distinct self-conceptions (e.g., self-schemas) that exert the strongest assimilative effects on social prediction (Carpenter, 1988; Green & Sedikides, 2001; Lewicki, 1984). People not only think of themselves as superior, but they also expect others to self-enhance on the very same trait dimensions (Krueger, 1998). People regard others as similar to themselves (the false-consensus effect [FCE]) even when they consider themselves distinct. These are empirical patterns that the SAD model cannot explain.

Is the Role of the Self in Social Prediction Amotivated?

The SAD model posits that the role of the self in social prediction is practically amotivated. Granted, the model predicts that in self-relevant domains different self–other predictions are more common than same self–other predictions, whereas in non self-relevant domains different self–other predictions are less common than same self–other predictions. However, these patterns are thought to result from the activation of different knowledge structures (i.e., distinct self-knowledge vs. prototypic social knowledge) rather than from motivational processes per se. In positing that the role of the self in social prediction is amotivated, the SAD model turns its back on a vast literature, accumulated in the last 10 years, that documents that the uniqueness of the self-representation (as opposed to other representation) rests on two of its most critical attributes: (a) Its content and momentary shifts are mostly a function of motivational influences, and (b) its effect on social knowledge structures is mostly motivational (Baumeister, 1998).

As stated above, the SAD model would be hard-pressed to explain why distinct self-conceptions (i.e., self-schemas) have strong assimilative effects on social prediction. It would also have trouble explaining why the FCE is more pronounced in the case in which perceivers regard their own characteristics as normative (Alicke & Largo, 1995), with normativeness being a byword for self-schematicity. An alternative, motivational interpretation would well account for FCE patterns that the model would find puzzling. For example, in shrewd self-serving maneuvering, individuals overestimate the representation of their weaknesses in others, but they do not necessarily overestimate the commonness of their strengths (Mullen & Goethals, 1990). Also, people tone down, but do not desist, the FCE when they feel the need to assert their uniqueness (Kernis, 1984) or validate a rather problematic self by symbolically associating with others (i.e., seeking comfort in strength in numbers; Kulik, Sledge, & Mahler, 1986).

This latter point raises an important issue: Not only assimilation but also contrast effects are typically motivated. For example, when participants are outperformed by another person on a self-defining domain (e.g., intelligence), they contrast this person away from the self (i.e., they overexaggerate this person's ability); however, when they outperform their competitor, they overexaggerate their own ability (Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst, & Zhang, 1997). In a similar vein, participants who consider themselves at the low end of a dimension (e.g., athleticism) rate unathletic targets favorably, whereas those high on athleticism rate these targets unfavorably (Dunning & Cohen, 1992, Study 4). The canny use of the self in the waxing and waning of social judgment is a function of self-serving motivation (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998).

It is interesting to note that a strategic and tactical implementation of contrast versus assimilation effects could explain the core and direct evidence for the SAD model (Karniol, 2002). Although detailed description of this research is forthcoming, it is arguable that the higher proportion of different (as opposed to same) self–other predictions in self-relevant domains is a result of subjective perceptions of threat (i.e., higher need for uniqueness) rather than the signature of cognitive architecture.

Concluding Remarks

The SAD model is both thoughtful and thought provoking. It will stir up the calm and settled waters of the literature on the role of self in social perception. However, the SAD model has its weaknesses. It does not provide compelling answers to issues pertaining to the origins of generic social knowledge, the status of self-knowledge, the content of the self-concept, whether the use of self in social prediction is a logical contradiction, and whether the self's role in social prediction is amotivated. Moreover, the model, in its present form, is underspecified (e.g., it does not account for contrast and assimilation effects). It is also undertested. Finally, evidence in its favor tends to be circumstantial and selective, whereas inconsistent evidence is not treated thoroughly, if at all.

The SAD model is also parsimonious, but this is a bittersweet attribute for a model to have. Intellectual elegance is appreciated, but plausibility is also desirable. The model, with its overemphasis on a specific computer metaphor and with its total neglect of motivational processes, may promote a rather implausible version of the self-representation and the functions that this representation serves in the social prediction domain.

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