Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful: Self-enhancing biases in threat appraisal

Tanya Menon a,*, Leigh Thompson b,1

a The University of Chicago, Graduate School of Business, 5807 South Woodlawn Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637, USA
b Kellogg School of Management, Donald P. Jacobs Center, 2001 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60208-2001, USA

Received 5 April 2006

Abstract

We compare people’s intuitive judgments about how the self and others respond to threat. We propose that people hold a self-enhancing belief in “threat immunity,” i.e., they see themselves as more secure than other people in the face of threat. In Study 1, people assumed that they threatened others more than others threatened them. In Study 2, people on project teams estimated that both they and their teammates provoked roughly equal levels of threat in others, although they experienced less threat than did other people. Study 3 experimentally manipulated threat perceptions in an interactive context and revealed that when people held self-enhancing threat appraisals, those with whom they interacted experienced lower satisfaction with the outcome and relationship. Finally, Study 4 demonstrated that, as compared to people who affirmed themselves and thus focused on the self, people who affirmed another person displayed lower threat immunity. The self-enhancing nature of these threat appraisals reveals how competition and envy emerge in organizations—or at least, how people imagine they emerge.

© 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Self-enhancement; Affirmation; Threat; Envy

Consider Donald Trump’s protégé, Carolyn Kepcher, who rapidly rose in his organization, even earning a seat next to Trump in the boardroom of “The Apprentice.” She wrote a business book and accepted various speaking engagements, and began to create a brand of her own (Stowe, 2006). However, just as she was stepping out from under Trump’s shadow, he fired her. Kepcher might find comfort in the interpretation that she simply grew “too big for the boss (Stowe, 2006, p. 1).” People facing hostile bosses or co-workers often reach the conclusion that those others are beset with threat, and hold their own beauty, brains, successes, and other admirable qualities responsible (Exline & Lobel, 1999, 2001; Vecchio, 2005). This inference is captured in the insulting comeback, “Don’t hate me because I am beautiful, hate me because I am young.”

Although people are sensitive to the threats that others experience (Exline & Lobel, 1999, 2001; Vecchio, 2005), they may not acknowledge their own experience of threat so readily. For his part, Trump denied that threat played any role in this turn of events, saying, “I like Carolyn. What I did was for her own good (Stowe, 2006, p. 2).” He also maintained that she was lax in her job and had failed to complete various projects (Stowe, 2006). People who face potentially threatening rivals quickly profess that they do not resent them because they are so beautiful or talented, but for their less flattering attributes. People dislike those who threaten them (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004), subtly criticize them (Fournier, Moskowitz, & Zuroff, 2002), avoid their good ideas (Menon, Thompson, & Choi, 2006), gossip about them,
give them “back-handed” compliments, and even “over-help” them to undercut how others perceive their competence (Gilbert & Silvera, 1996). It is difficult for people to admit that someone else threatens them (Schoeck, 1959) because, to do so, they must acknowledge the other person’s talents, their own failures by comparison, and their socially undesirable response (Johnson, 1987; Vecchio, 2000; Wilson & Dunn, 2004).

Despite the vast literature on social comparison, one topic that has been largely overlooked is people’s intuitive judgments about how the self and others experience potentially threatening social comparisons. In contrast to prior research that suggests that people underestimate their own capacity to cope with threat (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998), the examples above suggest that people readily attribute threat to others, but overestimate their own ability to withstand threat. We label this tendency to see the self as more secure in the face of threat than other people threat immunity. Self-enhancement thus affects the social comparison process in two ways: not only who people compare themselves to (Taylor, 1983; Thompson & Crocker, 1990; Wills, 1981), but also how people interpret the threats that follow from comparisons.

People’s intuitive assessments about the state of their own and others’ egos matter because they trigger a variety of interpersonal implications. People who see themselves as uniquely immune from threat effectively affirm their own resilience, and thus may be especially capable of coping with otherwise upsetting social comparisons (Spencer, Fein, & Lomore, 2001). However, the self-enhancing nature of these attributions also conveys one’s sense of superiority and distrust of others’ motives. These beliefs can inadvertently undermine relationships and contribute to a competitive, indeed paranoid, atmosphere within organizations (Edmondson, 1999; Kramer, 1998; Vecchio, 2005). We suggest that these basic and self-enhancing perceptions reveal how competition and envy emerge in organizations (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004; Vecchio, 2000) — or at least, how people imagine they emerge.

Threat immunity: Self-enhancing judgments in threat appraisal

When people appraise threat, they make a cognitive and affective judgment regarding another person’s motives towards the self (Andersen, Glassman, & Gold, 1998; Kramer, 1998; Menon & Blount, 2003; Srull & Wyer, 1989). Although other people can pose many kinds of threat (e.g., being physically dangerous or untrustworthy), we focus on the threats that people pose because of their exemplary attributes, i.e., their skills, talents, and abilities. These threats affect one’s self image and can breed a variety of negative responses, e.g., envy, frustration, helplessness, and stress (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004; Tesser, 1988; Vecchio, 2000).

We examine systematic patterns in people’s self-assessments about the threats that they and other people experience. In contrast to recent research that suggests that people are unaware of and underestimate their psychological defenses (Gilbert et al., 1998), we propose that self-affirmation and ultimately self-enhancement lead people to see themselves as more resilient to threat than other people. Additionally, we consider how this self-enhancing bias in threat appraisal affects interpersonal interaction.

Two pains of social comparison: Being a threat vs. being threatened

When people make upward comparisons, i.e., comparisons to people who outperform the self (Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Wood, 1989), they experience one kind of pain associated with social comparison. Specifically, they experience threat—negative affect, distress, defensiveness as they consider their relative inadequacies (Tesser, 1988; Wills, 1981), which can develop into frustration, helplessness, or envy (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004; Vecchio, 2000).

The superior performer experiences a second kind of pain associated with social comparison, i.e., they worry that they may elicit envy, resentment, and anger in those who have been outdone (Exline & Lobel, 1999, 2001). This discomfort has been documented in a variety of contexts (see Exline & Lobel, 1999), notably among people involved in close relationships (Tesser, 1988); women who fear others’ resentment of their superior performance (Berg, Stephan, & Dodson, 1981; Heatherington, Crown, Wagner, & Rigby, 1989) and minorities who fear outperforming the in-group (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995).

Intuitive assessments of own vs. others’ threat

Fortunately, the first kind of pain, which derives from making an upward comparison, is often not as bothersome as one might expect (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). This is because people use their affiliative resources (Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993) and psychological defenses to reconstrue the threatening implications of the upward comparison and thus blunt its impact on the self (Gilbert et al., 1998). For instance, people who identify a potentially damaging comparison (e.g., a rival outperforms the self at work) may resolve it in a way that defends their ego (e.g., I’m a better athlete than my rival).

This capacity for self-protection reveals that people possess a “psychological immune system,” i.e., a “system of cognitive mechanisms that ameliorates their experience of negative affect (Gilbert et al., 1998, p. 617).” However, people also display immune neglect, i.e., they fail to appreciate the workings of their psychological
immune system and underestimate their ability to rebound from threats (Gilbert et al., 1998). People over-

predict their affective responses (e.g., they predict that negative events such as not getting tenure or just missing the train will be more distressing than they actually prove to be (Gilbert et al., 1998). Although people exhibit a particular blindness to how their own psychological immune system operates, Gilbert and colleagues note that they shrewdly detected other people’s attempts at self-protection (e.g., quickly concluding that a man whose girlfriend has just dumped him only fools himself when he says afterwards that he actually wasn’t interested).

Whereas these authors emphasize the aspects of the psychological immune system that have to do with defense mechanisms and rationalization, one’s affirmative resources are an aspect of the psychological immune system that reflects more favorably on one’s self. Indeed, we predict that people will be well aware of the power of their own, as compared to others’, affirmative resources to render them immune from threat.

**Hypothesis 1.** People exhibit threat immunity, i.e., they see the self as less vulnerable to threat than other people.

**Interpersonal consequences of threat immunity perceptions**

Prior research characterizes people’s sensitivity to the threats they provoke in others as an empathic response (Exline & Lobel, 1999). Relational concerns drive this phenomenon, and it is correlated with interdependence, empathy, fear of success, and sociotropy (the desire to please and win approval of others), and can result in patterns of self-presentation in which people minimize their achievements (Exline & Lobel, 1999, 2001). Additionally, the phenomenon can arise from self-protective concerns, e.g., fearing that outperformed people will respond with envy, hostility, and retaliation (Exline & Lobel, 1999).

The current paper complements this adaptive and empathic characterization of these threat appraisals (Exline & Lobel, 2001) by emphasizing their more dysfunctional features. The processes by which people detect and infer threat involve, not just empathy, but also egocentrism, which complicates attempts to respond adaptively. In particular, we hypothesize that an inappropriate (and self-enhancing) concern about the threats that the self evokes in others—coupled with other people’s likely (self-enhancing) denial of those threats—leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy. People sense when others interpret their motives negatively, and thus come to harbor ill-will against the actor, negative reactions that the actor readily codes as confirmation of their initial threat appraisal. Thus, in contrast to what might be expected from an empathic response, we predict:

**Hypothesis 2.** People experience greater interpersonal discomfort when they interact with people who exhibit threat immunity, as opposed to people who do not hold these assumptions.

These basic perceptions about one’s own and others’ motives potentially instigate negative affect at minimum, and even more problematically, organizational competition, envy, and paranoia.

**Overview of studies**

In four studies, we systematically compare people’s intuitive assessments about the threats they evoke in others with the threats they experience following comparisons with competent others. We examine (a) people’s perceptions about the level of threat that they and others experience, (b) the underlying egocentric process, (c) their interpersonal implications, and (d) a strategy to attenuate this pattern of inference.

In Study 1, we test Hypothesis 1, and establish the basic threat immunity effect. Participants recalled situations in which they either were the target of a threatening upward comparison or made such a comparison themselves. People believed that they threatened others more than others threatened them. Further, when people believed they were threatening, they self-minimized; in contrast, they self-enhanced when they were threatened.

Study 2 replicates the threat immunity effect in an interactive context and introduces third-party ratings of threat to begin examining underlying causal mechanisms. We examine two potential explanations about the egocentric process involved. First, given that people overestimate the degree to which the social spotlight shines on the self (Gilovich, Medvec, & Savitsky, 2000), they may overestimate the extent to which others compare themselves to the self (Lassiter & Munhall, 2001). Thus, people may expect others to experience more threat because they simply assume that others compare more with the self than the self compares with others. We label this form of egocentrism, “Self as Standard for Comparison.”

Alternatively, given that people tend to overestimate their contributions (Ross & Sicoly, 1979) and presume that they are more skilled than they really are (Alicke, 1985; Kruger & Dunning, 1999), people may imagine that their performance is substantially better, and hence more threatening than it actually is. This suggests a more self-aggrandizing asymmetry: specifically, people assume that the self threatens a given person more than a third party would threaten that person. We label this self-enhancing alternative the “Threat Capital” explanation, i.e., people overestimate their own capacity to provoke threat in others. We do not find support for either of these mechanisms: people did not overestimate the
degree to which others focused on the self in social comparisons, and further did not see the self as more threatening than third parties.

To examine Hypothesis 2, which predicts that threat immunity produces negative interpersonal consequences, Study 3 experimentally manipulates threat perceptions in an interactive context. Specifically, we created an intensive one-on-one conflict simulation in which we randomly assigned participants to one of two roles: employee or boss. In the “threatening” condition, employees believed that they had matched them, based on their responses to a personality test, with someone whose weaknesses were their personal strengths—and who they therefore might threaten. By contrast, bosses were either in a control condition or were “threatened,” i.e., told that we had matched them with someone whose strengths were their personal weaknesses—and who they were unlikely to threaten. We expected that parties with greater asymmetries in threat appraisal would experience more negative interactions.

Our fourth study further examines mechanisms. We first consider the “Self-Defense” explanation. Perhaps people deny the threats that they experience to salvage their bruised egos. It is often difficult to admit that someone else is threatening; therefore people may prefer to deny that others threaten them to protect the ego from the painful recognition that they have been outperformed (Vecchio, 2000).

Alternatively, we consider the “Immunity Salience” explanation. People often hold more charitable views about the self than others (Epley & Dunning, 2000; Jones & Nisbett, 1972) because of availability biases (Ross & Sicoly, 1979). Because other people’s sources of immunity—their values, talents, and skills—are not readily available, people may underestimate others’ abilities to recover from threat—unless these sources of affirmation become salient.

Given prior research that indicates that self-affirmation reduces defensiveness (Spencer et al., 2001), self-affirmation should mitigate the bias if it is a defense mechanism. Alternatively, if the bias results because one’s own sources of immunity are more salient than others’, then self-affirmation, which increases the focus on the self, should exacerbate the bias relative to “other-affirmation,” which highlights other people’s positive qualities. We find support for this Immunity Salience explanation.

Operationalization of key construct: Threat immunity

Threat immunity encompasses several perceptions; intrapersonally, it involves assessments about (1) one’s own experience of threat and (2) one’s perception of others’ experiences of threat. When threat immunity occurs in an interpersonal context, it also involves other people’s assessments about these same variables, i.e., (3) their own experience of threat, and (4) their perceptions of the self’s experience of threat. As a result, multiple asymmetries arise and the four studies in this paper reflect several ways to conceptualize their self-enhancing nature. In Study 1, we view threat immunity as a within-person asymmetry, and show that people perceive themselves to be more resilient to threat than they perceive others to be (1 vs. 2). In Study 2, we add between-person evaluations and show that people also perceive themselves to be less threatened than their interaction partners perceive them (1 vs. 4). Study 3 experimentally manipulates the interpersonal aspect of this bias. We lead people to see themselves as threatening or not, and to interact with people who expect to be threatened or not (2 vs. 3). In addition to manipulating threat perceptions in Study 3, we also measure the magnitude of the bias as the degree to which people perceive a gap between their own and others’ threat levels (1–2). Studies 3 and 4 both use this difference score and thus conceptualize threat immunity as a continuous variable. Given statistical concerns around difference scores (Edwards, 2001; Edwards & Parry, 1993), we also report analyses that do not rely on the difference measures. While the asymmetries in threat appraisal take various forms, we believe that they each capture the same basic ideas: i.e., we see ourselves as less threatened than we see others and we see ourselves less threatened than they see us.

Study 1: The self as threat vs. the threatened self: Asymmetrical perceptions

In Study 1, we compare people’s perceptions of the threats they evoke in others versus the threats they experience. As predicted by Hypothesis 1, we expected that people would believe that they had threat immunity, i.e., they would be more likely to presume that they threatened others than to admit that a competent other threatened the self. Further, given that people often try to minimize their positive qualities if they suspect that they threaten others (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Daubman, Heatherington, & Ahn, 1992; Heatherington et al., 1989; cited in Exline & Lobel, 1999) we predicted that when people infer that they threaten others, they would be more likely to self-minimize.

Methods

Participants

Forty management students (MBAs) (56% men) participated in the study as part of a seminar on organizational behavior.

Procedure and materials

We randomly assigned the participants to one of two conditions: “self as a threat” or “self as threatened.” We asked them to think about either people who they had threatened due to their performance and qualifications,
or, in the second condition, people who had threatened them for those same reasons. Specifically, they read the following prompt in the “Self as threat” condition:

Please think about people who are in your network at work. Of this network, please consider the people who are somewhat threatened by you—your performance and/or your qualifications. Please think about the people who might be competitive with you because they are somewhat jealous of you.2

In the “Self as threatened” condition, they read the following prompt:

Please think about people in your network at work. Of this network, please consider the people whose performance and/or qualifications make you feel a bit threatened, i.e., please think about the people who you might get a little competitive with because you are somewhat jealous of their progress in the organization.

Participants then answered several questions about both kinds of situations. We asked them to rate, on a seven-point Likert scale, how often they experienced such a reaction at work (1 = hardly ever, 7 = very frequently). We next asked them to recall a specific person towards whom they exhibited threat/who exhibited threat, and participants rated how threatened they felt/ the other person felt (1 = hardly threatened, 7 = very threatened). They described their strategies to deal with the person, and rated, on a seven-point Likert scale, the extent to which they tried to minimize their own accomplishments and strengths; build up the other person’s accomplishments and strengths; draw attention to their own accomplishments; or draw attention to the other person’s weaknesses (1 = not at all, 7 = to a great extent).

Results

As predicted, managers believed that they had greater threat immunity than did others. Specifically, they believed that they threatened others more than others threatened the self (M = 4.75, SD = 1.36 vs. M = 3.26, SD = 1.41; F(1,40) = 8.43, p < 0.01).

Further, managers also used different strategies when dealing with the situations. As predicted, they were more likely to minimize their strengths when they dealt with someone who they thought perceived them as a threat (M = 3.11, SD = 1.90 vs. M = 2.14, SD = 1.08; F(1,40) = 4.14, p < 0.05) but drew attention to their own accomplishments when someone threatened them (M = 4.64, SD = 1.22 vs. M = 3.39, SD = 1.61; F(1,40) = 7.77, p < 0.01). Indeed, the more people inferred that the self threatened the other person, the more they minimized their strengths, r(38) = 0.57, p = 0.05.

Discussion

This study supports Hypothesis 1, revealing the basic self-enhancing asymmetry associated with threat immunity: managers believe that their colleagues threaten them less than they threaten their colleagues. Further, in contrast to what one might expect from a self-enhancing inference, this phenomenon is associated with a self-minimizing behavioral response. Participants who thought that they threatened someone else also played down their own strengths, at least according to their own self-reports. This suggests that managers believed that self-minimizing strategies were a normatively appropriate response to avoid antagonizing a threatened business associate. How the supposedly threatened manager perceives these strategies and whether such strategies indeed effectively smooth social relations is another issue—particularly if others deny that they are actually threatened.

We have yet to identify the reasons why people assume that they experience fewer threats than do others. One explanation is that people assume that the self is the standard that other people use to make social comparisons (Lassiter & Munhall, 2001). We therefore examine whether a parallel asymmetry exists with respect to social comparisons, i.e., do people believe others compare more with the self than the self compares with others? Alternatively, people might assume that even though they compare themselves to others about as much as others compare themselves to the self, these comparisons simply bother the self less.

Another explanation is that people are particularly likely to assume that the self threatens others. Given that people overestimate their own skills and abilities relative

---

2 We developed our questions about threat following a series of pilot studies. First, we found that people’s reports of how threatened, intimidated, and how much they compared themselves with the other party were highly correlated with one another, and the reliability was .80. The reliability for the items that considered how much the other person seemed to be threatened, intimidated, and comparing was .75. We did not form a scale because of the theoretical differences between some of these items (e.g., compare vs. threaten). In another pilot, we considered the variety of different kinds of threats people might pose. For instance we asked people how threatened they were versus others were due to intellectual abilities, interpersonal skills, beauty, and social networks. We only found the threat immunity effect for the internal qualities-intellect and interpersonal skills in particular. Given the pretest results, we constrained our questions about threat by (a) providing a detailed description of what we meant by threat and (b) limiting our questions to threats that concerned one’s own abilities and talents. These domains may have emerged as relevant because they were especially salient to our study population, i.e., MBA students who value their own intellect and interpersonal talents. As our Associate Editor suggested, people may be especially likely to make erroneous threat appraisals because they fail to recognize that different domains are salient to different people (e.g., an excellent golfer may be especially likely to imagine that a friend envies them—whereas that friend may care more about tennis). Further, domain relevance may determine whether interpersonal strategies such as humility are effective or not: i.e., if people care about a common domain (e.g., intellect), humility may effectively diffuse threats; if they do not, (e.g., golf) it may be unnecessary (Tesser, 1988).
Study 2: Threat appraisal on project teams

Researchers have characterized self-enhancement biases in two ways (Kwan, John, Kenny, Bond, & Robins, 2004). Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that self-enhancers perceive themselves more positively than they perceive others whereas self-insight theory (Allport, 1937) argues that self-enhancers perceive themselves more positively than others perceive them. Study one indicates the intra-person asymmetry in threat appraisal, i.e., people perceive themselves to be more resilient to threat than they perceive others to be. In Study 2, we add an inter-person asymmetry, i.e., we examine whether people also perceive their responses to threat more favorably than their interaction partners perceive them. To better understand the self-enhancing nature of this egocentric bias, we examine threat appraisals in teams and compare how people evaluate (a) the threats that they evoke in others, (b) the threats that others evoke in them, and (c) the threats that other teammates evoke in one another.

Methods

Participants

A total of 117 MBA students, 62% male, participated as part of a class exercise. First, the students formed 2–6 person, self-selected project teams that worked together on their final projects for an entire quarter. After 10 weeks, we surveyed people about the relationships within the team.

Procedure and materials

The first part of the survey asked team members to describe their relationship to each of the other participants on the team. They answered these questions on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = to a great extent):

To what extent did this person compare him/herself with you during this project?

To what extent was this person threatened by you during this project?

Next, they answered parallel questions about how they reacted to each group member:

To what extent did you compare yourself with this person during this project?

To what extent did you feel threatened by this person during this project?

Participants then assessed the level of threat between all group members, excluding themselves:

Think about the relationships between the other members of your group (not including you). Write their initials and evaluate the degree to which each person felt threatened by the other person.

Results

We summed managers’ ratings of the self, other, and third parties and used paired samples t-tests to compare them. We replicated Study 1 and found the predicted differences in threat perception whereby people believed that they threatened others (M = 2.0, SD = 1.2) more than others threatened them (M = 1.7, SD = .9), t(109) = 2.9, p < .01. We then tested the “Threat Capital” explanation, i.e., whether people expected the self to be especially likely to threaten others. We did not find evidence for the Threat Capital explanation: people believed that the self threatened others (M = 2.0, SD = 1.2) as much as other teammates threatened them (M = 2.0, SD = 1.0), t(98) = -.9, p = .38, n.s.3 However, people did assume that the self was more immune to threat than others: they assumed that others threatened the self significantly less (M = 1.7, SD = .9) t(96) = −3.5, p < .01 than the self threatened other people (M = 2.0 SD = 1.2) and other teammates threatened them (M = 2.0, SD = 1.0).

Next, we examined whether the effect arose because people assumed that others saw the “Self as a Standard for Social Comparison” (Lassiter & Munhall, 2001). We did not find an asymmetry with respect to social comparison. People reported that they compared themselves with others (M = 3.2, SD = 1.4) only as often as they expected others to compare themselves with the self (M = 3.1, SD = 1.4), t(107) = −.68, p = .49, n.s.3

Given the importance of this study for ruling out alternative explanations, we replicated it, this time with 3–4 person groups in which we randomly assigned people to groups. We replicated each of the patterns with respect to threat perception that we found in Study 2. The only pattern that differed from Study 2 was that people assumed that they threatened others more (M = 3.10, SD = 1.40) than their teammates compared themselves to the self (M = 2.65, SD = 1.36) t(98) = 3.83, p < .01, which suggests that people see the self comparing as much if not more with others—yet simply feeling less bothered by these comparisons than others.
Discussion

Study 2 tentatively eliminates several alternative explanations for asymmetries in threat perception. First, we do not find support for the Threat Capital explanation that people believe that the self has unique attributes that particularly threaten others; indeed, people assumed that the self threatened others as much as other people threaten them. Second, given that people were no more likely to believe that others compare themselves to the self than they themselves compare with others, the asymmetry does not arise from the egocentric notion that the self is the center of other people's social comparisons. However, people do consider the self to be uniquely immune from threat. Thus, people report less threat than they observe in other people, both when those people interact with the self and with third parties.

Further, the effect is unlikely to be either an artifact of Study 1's recall methodology or even simply isolated to one's rivals. Indeed, the effect occurs even among people who presumably liked and respected one another enough to choose to work together on a class project.

However, we have so far only surveyed people about the natural processes by which these inferences occur. To eliminate various artifacts around how people are selected and to fully understand the consequences of these perceptions for social interactions, we randomly assign people to interaction partners, experimentally manipulate their tendencies to make these inferences, and examine how these threat perceptions affect the quality of social relationships.

Study 3: Implications of threat immunity for interpersonal outcomes

Study 3 placed threat appraisals in an interactive, interpersonal context and examines the social-organizational consequences. We experimentally manipulated employees' propensity to infer that their skills threaten their boss. When employees believe that they threaten a boss, they can conveniently explain away the boss' negative feedback or resistance to their proposals. However, Hypothesis 2 predicts that this inference also undermines the quality of the resulting relationship. An employee who experiences threat immunity assumes that the boss possesses a suspicious ulterior motive and further, implies that the employee is in fact more skilled than the boss, which challenges the status hierarchy.

In addition to experimentally manipulating employees' propensity to infer that they threaten their bosses, we also manipulate the boss' expectations that they deal with a high performer who potentially threatens them. We developed these manipulations in two steps. Prior to the experiment, the MBA students completed a battery of assessments, including Myers–Briggs.

People in the employee role were either in a control condition or in a condition in which they believed that, based on the Myers–Briggs, their strengths were the boss' weaknesses and they were likely to threaten their bosses. The bosses, in turn, were either in a control condition or a condition in which they believed that, based on the assessments, their weaknesses were the employees' strengths, and their employees were unlikely to find them threatening.

The design was a 2 × 2 (control/employee threatening) × (control/boss threatened). The four resulting conditions were: (1) full control: neither the boss nor the employee had any preconceived notions about each other, (2) threatened boss: the employee had no preconceived notions about the boss, but the boss had information that they dealt with an employee who might threaten them, (3) threatening employee: the employee believed that they threatened the boss but the boss had no preconceived notion that the employee could threaten them, and (4) threatened boss + threatening employee: the employee believed that they threatened the boss and the boss believed that the employee could threaten them. One of the conditions (employee believed that they threatened the boss but the boss was not threatened) replicates the asymmetry identified in the previous two studies whereby people presumed they threaten a counterpart, who does not experience threat or denies it. In this condition, and whenever people overattributed threat to their counterparts, we expected particularly negative interactions because such asymmetries reflect a misinterpretation of the other party's motives, appear self-enhancing, and fail to respond to their underlying concerns. Additionally, we measure threat immunity as a continuous variable and predict that the greater one's threat immunity perceptions, the more negative the interaction will be from the other side's perspective.

Methods

Participants

Ninety-eight MBA students (69% men) participated as part of a class exercise.

Procedure and materials

We randomly paired the students, and placed in them in the role of either a senior brand manager (boss) or an assistant brand manager (employee). The participants learned that the employee had identified an important new technology for their company and had already managed to convince the boss to acquire it. For employees, the goal of this conversation was to convince the boss to give them responsibility for the project:

Now, you are hoping that she/he will put you in charge of leading the new team that develops this initiative.
You wonder how he/she would react to your proposal. It is a great opportunity for the company—and yourself. But the decision is up to the senior marketing manager.

On the other hand, the bosses had other interests: Ideally, you would like to maintain control over these new ventures. New ventures are an important means by which you could increase your influence in the organization.

We created the manipulations based on two steps. Earlier in the course, participants completed the Myers–Briggs inventory. Given that the MBAs held the Myers–Briggs in high regard, our manipulations had high face validity:

Control: there was no indication of threat in the relationship.

“Threatening employee” condition: employees read the following in their packet:

Note. For the purpose of this exercise, we have paired you with someone whose weaknesses are your strengths based upon your self-reported MBTI and TKI responses. Therefore, it is possible that they may feel somewhat threatened by your skills and abilities when they interact with you. Please do not share this information…

Further, bosses were in one of two conditions:

Control: no information about threat.

“Threatened boss” condition: bosses read the following in note in the packet:

Note. For the purpose of this exercise, we have paired you with someone whose strengths are your weaknesses based upon your self-reported MBTI and TKI responses. Therefore, they are unlikely to feel threatened by your skills and abilities. Please do not share this information.

Participants then discussed the situation for 20–30 min and completed a survey. In the first part of the survey, they assessed, on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = to a great extent), the degree to which their counterpart was likable, competent, threatened, self-promoting, self-effacing, compared themselves with the self, and was interested in a personal relationship with the self. Then participants answered parallel questions about themselves including: the degree to which the self was comparing, threatened, self-promoting, and self-effacing. Finally, they rated the degree to which they felt satisfied with the management structure of the project and with their relationship to the other party. We debriefed participants during an in-class lecture.

Results

Manipulation check

As expected, employees in the “threatening” condition were more likely to assume that they threatened their bosses more than the control, regardless of the bosses’ condition (M = 3.44, SD = 1.61 vs. M = 2.43, SD = 1.40), F(3, 95) = 4.96, p < .05. An egocentric misperception occurred when bosses interpreted the behavior of these “threatening” employees. Bosses were more likely to assume that their own skills and abilities threatened these employees (M = 3.3, SD = 1.3), as compared to the control (M = 2.4, SD = 1.4), F(3, 95) = 5.4, p = .03, when the employees in fact assumed the opposite, i.e., that they threatened the boss. Bosses in the threatened conditions, however, were as reluctant as the control to admit that the employees actually threatened them.

Asymmetries in threat perception

Replicating Studies 1 and 2, we found both an intra- and interpersonal threat asymmetry. First, across conditions, bosses (M = 3.0, SD = 1.4 vs. M = 2.45, SD = 1.4), t(52) = 2.4, p = .02 and employees (M = 3.0, SD = 1.6 vs. M = 2.4, SD = 1.3), t(53) = 3.2, p < .01 were more likely to think that the self threatened the other person than the other person threatened the self. Second, bosses (M = 2.9, SD = 1.4 vs. M = 2.3, SD = 1.3), t(48) = 2.5, p = .02 and employees (M = 3.0, SD = 1.6 vs. M = 2.45, SD = 1.2), t(48) = -2.5, p = .02 assumed that the other person experienced more threat than that person admitted they experienced.

As in Study 2, these asymmetries were restricted to threat perception. Bosses reported that they compared themselves more with the employee than they thought that the employee compared with the self (M = 3.7, SD = 1.9 vs. M = 3.1, SD = 1.7), t(51) = -2.7, p < .01, i.e., opposite to the above pattern with respect to threat perceptions. Employees were also somewhat more likely to think that they compared themselves to the boss than vice versa, though these differences were not significant (M = 3.7, SD = 1.7 vs. M = 3.4, SD = 1.8), t(53) = -1.4, p = .17, n.s.

We next consider how these threat appraisals impact interpersonal relationships.

Perceptions of the other party

Employees who thought that they threatened their bosses rated their bosses as less competent (M = 5.3, SD = 1.0 vs. M = 5.9, SD = 8.9), F(3, 45) = 4.6, p = .04 and marginally less likable (M = 5.3, SD = 1.2 vs. M = 5.9, SD = 7.9), F(3, 45) = 3.0, p = .09 than did employees in the control condition. Bosses perceived these employees as less likable than employees in the control, although these differences missed significance (M = 5.4, SD = 1.2 vs. M = 5.9, SD = .9), (F(3, 45) = 3.0, p = .11, n.s.). Further,
bosses perceived the employees to be marginally more 745 competent in the two congruent conditions, i.e., threaten- 746 ing boss + threatening employee (M = 5.8, SD = 1.0), 747 and full control (M = 5.6, SD = 0.8), as compared to the 748 asymmetrical conditions (i.e., the “threatened boss” con- 749 dition (M = 5.2, SD = 0.7), or the “threatening employee” 750 condition, (M = 5.2, SD = 1.2), F(3, 45) = 3.1, p = .08.

**Strategies**

Bosses viewed the employees who thought that they 752 were a threat as more self-promoting (M = 5.2, SD = 1.2) 753 than the control (M = 4.1, SD = 1.9), F(3, 45) = 6.0, 754 p = .02, and as marginally less self-effacing, (M = 2.2, 755 SD = 1.4 vs. M = 3.0, SD = 1.5), F(3, 45) = 3.1, p = .09. 756 However, subordinates did not report differences in the 757 strategies they used across conditions.

**Interpersonal outcomes**

Employees who thought that they threatened their 760 bosses were less satisfied with their relationship to their 761 bosses (M = 5.0, SD = 1.8 vs. M = 6.0, SD = 1.0), 762 F(3, 45) = 3.1, p = .03, but did not differ in their satisfac- 763 tion with the management structure across the condi- 764 tions. Bosses who dealt with employees who saw 765 themselves as a threat were also less satisfied with their 766 relationship to them (M = 5.0, SD = 1.6), as compared to 767 the control (M = 6.0, SD = 9.0), F(3, 45) = 5.0, p = .03. Fur- 768ther, they were least satisfied with the management 769 structure of the project in the “threatening employee” 770 condition, i.e., when the employee assumed that they 771 threatened the boss and when the boss lacked precon- 772ceived notions that led them to feel threatened (M = 4.6, 773 SD = 2.0), relative to all three other cells—the full con- 774 trol (M = 6.0, SD = 1.1), F(1, 22) = 4.1, p = .06; “threat- 775 ened boss + threatening employee” (M = 6.0, SD = 7.0), 776 F(1,23) = 5.2, p = .03; and the “threatened boss” condi- 777 tion (M = 6.1, SD = 8.0), F(1,20) = 4.5, p < .05.

Whereas these manipulations capture the interper- 780 sonal asymmetry (one’s own belief that the self threatens 781 others versus the counterpart’s preconceived notions 782 about threat) we next examine how intrapersonal threat 783 immunity predicted relationship satisfaction. We com- 784 puted intraperson threat immunity scores (Appraisal of 785 the other person’s threat – Appraisal of own threat), and 786 included both the employees’ and bosses’ scores as 787 covariates in the regressions reported in Table 1. The 788 dependent variables were composite variables created 789 from the two outcome measures, satisfaction with the 790 management structure and with the relationship, which 791 both employees, r(47) = .80, p < .01, and bosses, 792 r(51) = .78, p < .01, rated. The independent variables were 793 the manipulations (employee threatening/control; boss 794 threatened/control). The bosses’ threat immunity pre- 795 dicted employees’ satisfaction with the outcome, β = .5, 796 p < .01, whereas their own level of threat immunity was 797 not significant. Replicating the pattern, employees’ threat immunity predicted the bosses’ satisfaction, 799 β = .32, p < .01, while their own level of threat immunity was not significant. Simply put, the greater one’s threat immunity, the more dissatisfied one’s partner was follow- 800 ing the interaction, suggesting that when we see our- 801 selves as threatening, others do not enjoy interacting with us.4

**Discussion**

The results reveal two striking patterns. First, in 807 support of Hypothesis 2, people who regard themselves 808

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Employee threat immunity predicts boss’ satisfaction and boss’ threat immunity predicts employee’s satisfaction following a conflict (Study 3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N = 44</td>
<td>Boss satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee threat immunity score</td>
<td>−.32(11)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boss threat immunity score</td>
<td>−.20(13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee threatening/control</td>
<td>.19(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boss threatened/control</td>
<td>−.55(46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee threatening/not threatening × Boss threatened/not threatened</td>
<td>.53(69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>5.94(33)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The asymmetry is calculated as: appraisal of the other person’s threat – appraisal of own threat. Thus, larger numbers indicate more egocentric perceptions, i.e., the self experiences less threat than the other person. ** p < .01.

4 Given the mathematical concerns around difference scores (Edwards, 2000; Edwards & Parry, 1993) we used polynomial regression to ana- 809 lyze the two dependent variables (boss and employee satisfaction) with the components of the difference scores entered as predictors. The ma- 810 nipulations were not significant in either of these models so we dropped them. Our effects paralleled the analyses reported above with a few notable differences.

We first examine boss satisfaction. Only one component of the difference score approached significance: boss’ satisfaction was nega- 815 tively associated with the employees’ perception that they threatened 816 them, β = −.51, r(36) = −1.65, p < .11. However, two interaction terms were significant. First, supporting a “congruence model”, boss’ satis- 817 faction was higher when they attributed threat to the other party and the employee in turn admitted they felt threatened, β = .23, r(36) = 2.59, p < .01. Second, when both employees and bosses attribut- 820 ed threat to one another, boss’ satisfaction decreased, β = −.22, r(36) = −3.24, p < .01.

No multiplicative effects emerged with respect to the employees’ sat- 823 isfaction, suggesting that a linear model is appropriate. Employees’ sat- 824 isfaction was negatively associated with the boss’ attribution of threat to the employee, β = −.51, r(36) = −2.97, p < .01 and the employees’ at- 825 tribution of threat to the boss, β = −.35, r(36) = −2.24, p < .05. Finally, the employees’ satisfaction was positively associated with the boss’ ad- 826 mission of threat, β = .43, r(36) = 2.04, p < .05. These results, in both the employee and boss ratings, supplement and support the analyses that result using the difference score.

Please cite this article in press as: Menon, T., & Thompson, L., Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful: Self-enhancing biases in threat appraisal, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes xxx (2007) xxx-xxx
as threatening elicit less favorable reactions from a counterpart and lower satisfaction with the interaction. Even though people rarely communicate these perceptions about threat to one another explicitly, interaction partners clearly sensed them. Most powerfully, for both bosses and employees, the counterpart’s threat immunity perceptions better predicted their satisfaction than even their own inferences about threat! Second, whereas Study 1 revealed that people try to engage in self-minimizing strategies when they threaten others, Study 3 indicates that their counterparts perceive them as self-promoting—given the self-enhancing assumptions that underlie their actions. These patterns of threat appraisal can pose problems for social-organizational interaction; thus, we now consider how to attenuate them. On one hand, these processes could reflect “Self-defense”. Because people are motivated to protect the self, they deny that they experience threat. Alternatively, according to the “Immunity Salience” explanation, one’s own affirmative resources could simply be more salient than other people’s affirmative resources, and people therefore fail to realize that others are as secure as the self. We test these two alternative explanations and use this understanding of process to both exacerbate and attenuate this phenomenon.

Study 4: “Other-affirmation” attenuates threat immunity relative to self-affirmation

Does the asymmetry in threat appraisal result because people under-represent the threats that the self experiences (as a “Self-defense”) or because people overestimate the threats that others experience (due to “Immunity salience”)? Prior research indicates that people who have affirmed themselves exhibit fewer behaviors associated with defensiveness (Fein & Spencer, 1997). For instance they make more comparisons to superior performers (Spencer et al., 2001) and are also more likely to learn from internal rivals (Menon et al., 2006). If people’s defensive denial causes this biased inference, self-affirmation should attenuate it. However, if people’s focus on the self instead causes this bias, then self-affirmation should exacerbate, or at least perpetuate, the effect. In contrast, “other-affirmation,” in which people focus on others’ valued qualities, would remind people that others also possess the affirmative resources to remain secure. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3. People who have affirmed themselves will be more likely to exhibit threat immunity, relative to people who affirm the other person.

As in Study 3, we measure threat immunity as a continuous variable.
highlight their inadequacies (Aronson, Blanton, & Cooper, 1995). We differentiated between these two “other-affirmation” conditions because, if the bias was the product of a defensive reaction, affirming the other person on a personally valued dimension could exacerbate it further. On the other hand, if the bias is due to the salience of others’ affirmational resources, there should be no differences between these two conditions, both of which highlight these resources.

Other-affirmation (personally relevant dimension). Below is a list of characteristics and values, some of which may be important to you, some of which may be unimportant. Please think about the value on this list that is most personally important to you and most personally important to the person you have just thought about. Write 2–3 sentences about why this value is important to them.

Other-affirmation (non-relevant dimension). Below is a list of characteristics and values, some of which may be important to you, some of which may be unimportant. Please think about the value on this list that is least personally important to you and most personally important to the person you have just thought about. Write 2–3 sentences about why this value is important to them.

After participants wrote about a quality from a list of values (e.g., artistic skills/aesthetic appreciation, sense of humor, relations with friends/family, spontaneity/living life in the moment social skills), they answered two questions on a seven-point Likert scale where 1 = only a little and 7 = a lot: How much did you feel threatened? How threatened do you suspect that this person felt by you?

Participants then answered several questions about how they would deal with the situation.

Results

The manipulation checks worked: people who thought about someone who threatened them felt that the other party threatened them more ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 1.5$) than they threatened the other party ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 1.5$), $F(1,151) = 11.7$, $p < .01$. In contrast, people who thought about someone who they believed that the other person would feel more threatened than the self, ($M = 5.1$, $SD = 1.3$ vs. $M = 3.8$, $SD = 1.7$), $F(1,151) = 26.5$, $p = .01$.

To examine the effect of affirmation condition, we used the difference measure to capture threat immunity (appraisal of the other person’s threat – appraisal of own threat) and compared it across the eight conditions. Thus, the higher values in Fig. 1 reflect more biased assumptions that the other is threatened whereas the self is immune.

First, participants exhibited higher immunity to threats when they thought about situations in which the self threatened others as compared to when others threatened the self, $F(1,151) = 43.1$, $p < .01$. Further, affirmation condition was significant, $F(3,149) = 3.4$, $p = .02$. Specifically, although the four affirmation conditions did not differ from one another in the “self as threatened” condition, people’s threat appraisals varied in the “self as threat” condition. People in the two “other-affirmation” conditions exhibited less threat immunity than did people in the self-affirmation and the non-affirmation (control) conditions. Thus, people in the other-affirmation (personally relevant dimension) condition were significantly less likely to experience threat immunity relative to the self-affirmation condition, $F(3,149) = 5.5$, $p = .02$, and marginally less likely relative to the non-affirmation control, $F(3,149) = 3.3$, $p = .07$. Likewise, people in the other-affirmation (non-relevant dimension) condition were significantly less likely to display threat immunity relative to both the self-affirmation condition, $F(3,149) = 6.8$, $p = .01$, and the non-affirmation control, $F(3,149) = 4.5$, $p = .04$.

Discussion

In support of Hypothesis 3, we found that other-affirmation significantly reduced threat immunity perceptions relative to “self-affirmation”. Whereas current research characterizes self affirmation as recourse from the defensive and self-protective mechanisms that the threatened self employs (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Steele et al., 1993; Steele & Liu, 1983), self-affirmation may threaten the other's perception of threat.

5 Given the issues associated with difference scores, we once again report supplementary analyses. First, we examined the correlation between the two components of the difference score (ratings of own and others’ threat) and found a lack of correlation between these measures, $r(153) = .06$, n.s., which alleviates some concerns around the reliability of the difference measure (Edwards, 2001). Next, we performed two regressions using both the two component measures of the difference score as dependent variables. Whereas affirmation was associated with both of these variables, one’s own self-report of threat, $F(3,149) = 1.94$, $p = .13$, and attribution of threat to others, $F(3,149) = 1.00$, $p = .39$, neither was significant on its own.
contain a potential contradiction. Although enhanced perceptions of threat immunity may increase one’s ability to learn from an otherwise threatening target, more negative side effects can result as well. Relative to other-affirmation, people who affirm themselves are signifi-
cantly more likely to view themselves as less threatened than others, which can set stage for lowered rapport. Indeed, self-affirmation could have similar implications for other self-serving biases.

We proposed “other affirmation” as a means to attenuate the bias. In contrast to perspective taking (Moore & Kim, 2003), in other-affirmation, the self does not attempt to understand the other person—the focus is fully directed to the other person and his/her affirming qualities. “Other-affirmation” demonstrates that other selves possess the same resilience and defenses as one’s own self. It is thus a powerful means by which to reverse the intuitive assumption that our own good qualities intensely threaten others, while other people’s positive qualities provide a paltry defense from threat and envy.

General discussions

Across four studies that used multiple methods, this research addresses: (1) how people assess the threats that the self and others experience, (2) what causes differences between these assessments, (3) how threat appraisals affect social interactions, and (4) how these differences can be attenuated (see Fig. 2). Managers held a belief in their own threat immunity, which we characterized as self-enhancing in multiple ways. One way to view it is as an intra-personal asymmetry: i.e., people believe that the self experiences lower levels of threat than other people experience (Studies 1–4). A complementary view is the inter-person asymmetry, i.e., people think that they threaten others more than others report is actually the case (Studies 2 and 3).

Study 1 used a recall methodology and compared participants who considered either someone who they threatened or someone who threatened them. Participants believed that the self threatened other people more than others threatened the self. Further, participants were more likely to use self-minimizing strategies when they dealt with someone with whom they had threatened.

Study 2 replicated Study 1’s findings in actual work teams and eliminated three alternative explanations. First, we ruled out the possibility that Study 1’s findings were simply due to qualitative differences in the type of threat situations that people recalled. Second, people believed that, although they made comparisons with others just as frequently, these comparisons simply did not threaten the self. Finally, people did not believe that the self possessed any special “threat capital.” In fact, they assumed that the self and other team-mates threatened other people equally. Thus, the key asymmetry that differentiated the self from others was its unique capacity to remain unthreatened, relative to others.

The third study, in which we manipulated people’s propensities to infer that they threatened another party, revealed that asymmetries in threat appraisal strained social interactions during a conflict situation. People in the role of employees were either in a control condition or had a preconceived notion that they threatened their boss. People in the role of their bosses were also either in a control condition or told that their subordinates might threaten them. When people dealt with counterparts who had higher threat immunity perceptions, they tended to experience more negative outcomes and relationships.

In Study 4, we experimentally manipulated self- and other-affirmation to attenuate the threat immunity effect. In particular, we found that other-affirmation, which made other people’s affirmational resources salient, attenuated threat immunity relative to self-affirmation.
However, these studies also reflect several limits. First, although we have identified one key mechanism, the salience of the self’s vs. other’s affiliation resources, and tentatively eliminated several others, we acknowledge that this asymmetry is possibly multiply determined and shaped by motivational factors as well. For instance, perhaps threat immunity beliefs represent an illusion of control (Langer, 1975), whereby the self overestimates its ability to cope with and control its responses, relative to others. Perhaps people who feel threatened may be particularly motivated to experience control and to see the other person through a self-enhancing lens. One hint of this effect was that bosses in Study 3 who dealt with a “threatening” employee actually inferred that their positive qualities threatened the employee—even though the employee had just the opposite thought in mind.

Further, although we have examined people who were rivals (Studies 1 and 4), friends (Study 2), and randomly assigned partners (Study 3), perhaps the type of person participants think about (Johnson, 1987), for instance, close friends versus competitors, moderates the effect. Relatedly, individual differences (e.g., empathy (Exline & Lobel, 1999) or Machiavellianism (Vecchio, 2000) or cultural variables (e.g., independence–interdependence) affect people’s threat appraisals. Specifically, gender, organizational culture, and national culture affect the social costs people incur when they evoke envy (Exline & Lobel, 1999) and thus shape people’s strategic responses. In collectivistic cultures such as Japan, which emphasize harmonious interpersonal relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), people who inspire envy incur greater costs (Schoeck, 1969). As a result, these cultures inculcate values such as “modesty” and regard self-minimizing behaviors more positively than do members of individualistic cultures (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999).

Finally, as one reviewer suggested, these studies only consider the interpersonal aspects of threat immunity. Further research might consider threat immunity in an intergroup context. Especially when people are members of high-status groups, they may regard themselves as victims of collective envy. For example, Americans coming to terms with the motivations of the 9/11 attackers often settled on the explanation that people in the Middle East were fundamentally envious of America’s freedom, wealth, and power. In his article, “Why do terrorists hate us?” Fareed Zakaria enumerated these commonly heard explanations: “We stand for freedom and they hate it. We are rich and they envy us. We are strong and they resent this (2001, p. 20),” as well as his own more nuanced explanations. While envy certainly underlies many intergroup stereotypes (Glick & Fiske, 1996), further research should examine when and how threat immunity extends to group-level processes.

Theoretical implications of threat immunity

Social comparison
People can reconstrue, rationalize, and affirm themselves, and thereby reinterpret the consequences of an otherwise threatening social comparison. As people deploy their defenses, however, a variety of self-enhancing biases naturally emerge. Beyond traditional self-enhancing biases that direct with whom the self chooses to compare (Taylor, 1983), threat immunity is another way in which self-enhancement shapes the social comparison process. In defining threat immunity as egocentric, we note that the concept also involves a variety of paradoxes that make it complicated to interpret as favoring the self. On one hand, threat immunity is a self-enhancing bias that paradoxically can lead people to minimize the self, rather than to adopt a more self-promoting style of presentation. Further, these asymmetrical threat perceptions do not appear to necessarily favor the self given that they involve the assumption that others negatively appraise the self. However, this assumption is egocentric first, because it is a positive interpretation of a negative appraisal of the self. That is, people assume that their good qualities bother others—rather than their more undesirable qualities. Second, if the bias is egocentric, the asymmetry should decrease following manipulations that reduce focus on the self, as we find in Study 4.

The egocentric nature of this bias is critical to understand how “mind reading” (Ames, 2004; Jones & Nisbett, 1972) occurs in social comparison. This research highlights the fact that people do not just make social comparisons, they also try to discern how others make social comparisons as well. However, the systematic biases that pervade our intuitive threat appraisals can interfere with our ability to deal with threatened people more effectively. We may indeed threaten people and make them envious, but (a) perhaps not as much as we think and (b) even if we threaten people, they probably will not admit it. Thus, it may be dangerous to act on intuitive interpretations of other people’s social comparisons, and necessary to reconsider the strategies we use with people we suspect find our talents and achievements threatening.

Self-affirmation and the perils of over-affirmation
Whereas prior research has considered the consequences of threat, affirmation, and other processes of self-maintenance (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Menon et al., 2006), little research has considered people’s implicit judgments about their own and others’ affirmation accounts. “People have a rosy view of their own affirmative accounts (seeing their own ego as stable, resilient, and well-balanced) whereas they are more likely to infer that other people’s accounts are closer to ego depleting (and hence, less capable of withstanding threat).
Additionally, whereas prior research has demonstrated the benefits of self-affirmation in reducing people’s propensities to engage in defensive behaviors (Fein & Spencer, 1997), we identify a dark side of self-affirmation. Specifically, self-affirmation naturally increases the salience of the self, and, as such, perpetuates threat immunity perceptions—along with, possibly, a host of other biases that derive from an over-focus on the self, its values, and its perspectives. Indeed, given that decades of research have characterized people as self-serving and self-aggrandizing, research on over-affirmation may be a promising research area. As we discovered, other-affirmation is one remedy for this over-focus on the self and its positive qualities.

**Threat immunity vs. immune neglect**

Finally, consider research on affective forecasting and in particular, immune neglect, which suggests that people underestimate their “psychological immune systems” (Gilbert et al., 1998). Although Gilbert et al.’s (1998) findings seem to contradict our argument that people are well aware of their own immunity to threat, our research in fact builds on their work. First, we have measured people’s reports about their past or current states rather than their predictions about their future states. As a result, people who describe their threat level may have already engaged in the psychological work that enables them to defend against and mitigate those threats. By contrast, they are unable (and also possibly unmotivated) to perform this same kind of psychological work for another person.

Second, we suspect that these two streams of research emphasize two distinct operations that the psychological immune system performs. Whereas Gilbert and colleagues emphasize psychological work that employs defensiveness and rationalization, this paper focuses on psychological work that relies on self-affirmation. As Gilbert et. al. (1998) observe, one’s own rationalization and defensiveness are invisible to the self but clearly transparent to others. By contrast, the findings on threat immunity predict that people’s affiliational resources are salient to the self but hidden to others. Thus, when people intuitively compare how the self and others achieve their resilience, they may find different mechanisms responsible: the self copes by virtue of its affiliational resources; others use rationalizations and defense mechanisms to achieve a more “fake” recovery. The implication here is that we attend to and neglect different aspects of the self’s and others’ psychological immune systems.

**Organizational implications of threat immunity**

One of the fundamental principles of effective management and leadership is vigilance. To avoid unpleasant surprises, managers must “watch their backs” against rivals who play politics and carefully monitor the activities of rivals in other companies. When managers detect threats in others, they identify rivals who harbor negative motives and thus protect themselves (Exline & Lobel, 1999). Further, these appraisals enable managers to articulate the talents and skills that they believe they possess, which enhances their sense of control in the environment. When people see the self as resilient, they confidently assert themselves; defend the self from negative feelings associated with rivalry and social comparison; and perhaps can even learn from threatening rivals (Menon et al., 2006; Spencer et al., 2001). Moreover, when people infer that others experience threat, this might even connote a certain degree of empathy for them (Exline & Lobel, 1999). These arguments suggest that, rather than eliminating the bias by under-predicting the degree to which others experience threat, managers should infer—and even over-predict—that they threaten others.

A second way to eliminate the bias may be to more readily admit that other people threaten the self. This prescription also seems inappropriate in the era of the learning organization. People should open-mindedly transfer and accept good ideas wherever they find them—and admitting one’s threats, rivalries, and agendas certainly interferes with this process.

Given these considerations, we do not argue that threats are illusory and that people should ignore potential threats in the environment. Instead, managers should recognize the degree to which their threat appraisals contain egocentric biases that complicate relationships. Thus, even though over-attributing threat to others is often appropriate and accurate, these self-enhancing asymmetries produce biases and create a variety of management problems.

For instance, threat appraisals can serve as a cognitive cue to “fine tune the volume of the self.” “Fine-tuning” refers to people’s attempts to control the “volume” of the self—i.e., its potential to impinge on, bother, and threaten other selves. When people overestimate the threats that they provoke in others, they may lower the volume too much. They may overestimate the fragility of others and thus be unwilling to pursue conflicts directly or provide them with honest, critical feedback. Further, although the self-minimizing tendencies we observed in Study 1 could function as a diplomatic response to an awkward situation or a signal that a manager does not desire to engage in a battle of egos, these strategies also inhibit knowledge transfer in organizations. If managers privately believe that they threaten others, they may censor their ideas and personal opinions out of fear that potentially threatening rivals may lower the volume of the self. When people see the self as resilient, they confidently assert themselves; defend the self from negative feelings associated with rivalry and social comparison; and perhaps can even learn from threatening rivals (Menon et al., 2006; Spencer et al., 2001). Moreover, when people infer that others experience threat, this might even connote a certain degree of empathy for them (Exline & Lobel, 1999). These arguments suggest that, rather than eliminating the bias by under-predicting the degree to which others experience threat, managers should infer—and even over-predict—that they threaten others.

A second way to eliminate the bias may be to more readily admit that other people threaten the self. This prescription also seems inappropriate in the era of the learning organization. People should open-mindedly transfer and accept good ideas wherever they find them—and admitting one’s threats, rivalries, and agendas certainly interferes with this process.

Given these considerations, we do not argue that threats are illusory and that people should ignore potential threats in the environment. Instead, managers should recognize the degree to which their threat appraisals contain egocentric biases that complicate relationships. Thus, even though over-attributing threat to others is often appropriate and accurate, these self-enhancing asymmetries produce biases and create a variety of management problems.

For instance, threat appraisals can serve as a cognitive cue to “fine tune the volume of the self.” “Fine-tuning” refers to people’s attempts to control the “volume” of the self—i.e., its potential to impinge on, bother, and threaten other selves. When people overestimate the threats that they provoke in others, they may lower the volume too much. They may overestimate the fragility of others and thus be unwilling to pursue conflicts directly or provide them with honest, critical feedback. Further, although the self-minimizing tendencies we observed in Study 1 could function as a diplomatic response to an awkward situation or a signal that a manager does not desire to engage in a battle of egos, these strategies also inhibit knowledge transfer in organizations. If managers privately believe that they threaten others, they may censor their ideas and personal opinions out of fear that potentially threatening rivals may lower the volume of the self. When people see the self as resilient, they confidently assert themselves; defend the self from negative feelings associated with rivalry and social comparison; and perhaps can even learn from threatening rivals (Menon et al., 2006; Spencer et al., 2001). Moreover, when people infer that others experience threat, this might even connote a certain degree of empathy for them (Exline & Lobel, 1999). These arguments suggest that, rather than eliminating the bias by under-predicting the degree to which others experience threat, managers should infer—and even over-predict—that they threaten others.
less willing to assume this self-promoting role. If managers recognize their propensity to over-attribute threat to others, perhaps they will be more willing to share good ideas with one another and tout their benefits in organizations. As these examples suggest, although the self’s impact may indeed be too great in many situations—in many other situations, it may be highly functional for the self to raise its volume.

Second, although people are indeed frequently envious of one another (Salovey, 1991; Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004; Vecchio, 2000), invoking these dynamics too readily can cause unnecessary friction in organizations. Study 3 shows how this inference causes social relationships to noticeably deteriorate. How we perceive a threat immunity predicts an interaction partner’s satisfaction with the outcomes of the conflict—indeed, even more than their own assumptions about threat. These appraisals create a self-fulfilling prophecy in the interaction—people perceive threat where none may exist, elicit negative responses from the other person, which then confirm the belief that they harbor negative motives toward the self.

Finally, even though it can be highly uncomfortable to openly acknowledge that another person has outperformed the self and possesses valued qualities, having the self-knowledge to admit threat could reduce defensiveness. Thus, if we bring ourselves to admit that a colleague who has been promoted more quickly threatens the self, we can understand more clearly why we seem to automatically dislike most of the ideas she proposes. When we admit threat, we can move on and engage with the other person in a more self-aware and less defensive way.

1316 Conclusion

According to Festinger (1954), a primary reason why people make social comparisons is their drive to evaluate their talents, abilities, and skills. However, we propose that social comparisons are social in another sense: people are also driven to evaluate how others respond to their own qualities. In the process, they often discover that, in comparison to the self, who is secure, resilient, and thoroughly comfortable when it encounters talented people, others tend to be more threatened. In sum, we realize that although we are unfazed by all the richer, smarter, and more attractive people of the world, other people may hate us simply because we are beautiful—a prospect that is simultaneously alarming and also rather gratifying too.

1331 References


Please cite this article in press as: Menon, T., & Thompson, L., Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful: Self-enhancing biases in threat appraisal, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes (2006), doi:10.1016/j.obhdp.2006.10.007
Menon, T., Thompson, L., Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful: Self-enhancing biases in threat appraisal, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 94 (2003), 33–47.


Please cite this article in press as: Menon, T., & Thompson, L., Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful: Self-enhancing biases in threat appraisal, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes (2006), doi:10.1016/j.obhdp.2006.10.007