

"Long before it's in the papers"

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It seems we're all more human than average

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For many, it's almost a truism that most people think they're "better" than average, and a good deal of past research supports that common observation.

But an emerging body of research adds a new twist. The findings suggest that most people also think they're more "human" than average—possessed, they feel, of greater emotional depth and general humanness.

A report in the March 6 online issue of the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, published by the British Psychological Society, offers what its authors call "preliminary evidence" that this phenomenon is "truly universal," characteristic of every culture.

The study, by Steve Loughnan of the University of Melbourne, Australia, and colleagues in four other countries, reviews the evidence and examines possible reasons for the effect.

"It appears that across the world people may not only think 'I am better than average', but further 'I am more human,'" the group wrote. "People see themselves as embodying human nature more than others," in particular the traits of "positive and negative emotionality, vivacity, and liveliness."

Interestingly, they added, people are less apt to rate themselves as exceptional on the specific aspects of human nature they believe make humans "unique," those that distinguish us from animals. Such characteristics don't necessarily coincide with "core" attributes of humanity, the researchers noted: for instance, curiosity may be seen as central to being human, but isn't unique to humans. Conversely, politeness may be considered as not a core human trait, though it does separate us from animals.

The evidence for the "more human" effect has been emerging for several years, but only in the new report did the authors present a cross-cultural study, surveying 480 people in six countries: Australia, Germany, Israel, Japan, Singapore, and the United States. Participants were asked to fill out questionnaires with questions about various traits in themselves and in the

average person.

“The more a trait was considered desirable, part of human nature, and uniquely human the more it was attributed to the self relative to others,” the report’s authors wrote, with these three effects listed in order of decreasing strength. “Self-enhancement and self-humanizing therefore appear to be cross-culturally robust,” they added. “The self-enhancement effect was stronger than the self-humanizing effect in four nations, but self-humanizing was stronger in Germany and Japan.”

Although somewhat weaker than the “I’m-better-than-average” effect, the “I’m-more-human” effect appeared more cross-culturally consistent, Loughnan and colleagues said. Indeed, although the better-than-average effect is supported in a variety of studies, there has been debate as to whether it’s truly universal, with some researchers attributing the effect more particularly to certain Western cultures.

There is no agreed explanation as to why people might tend to see themselves as more human than average. Loughnan and colleagues cited two possible reasons, which further research might investigate. One “is that self-humanizing reflects an attempt to establish or maintain a feeling of connectedness with the human collective,” they wrote.

“Alternatively, self humanizing may result from people having more direct access to their own internal processes than those of others. Greater familiarity with our internal world may result in viewing the self as deeper, more complex, and more human... self-humanizing may largely result from basic limitations in our knowledge of other minds.”