Increasing the Salience of One’s Best Selves Can Undermine Inspiration by Outstanding Role Models

Penelope Lockwood and Ziva Kunda
University of Waterloo

The accessibility of people’s highest hopes and achievements can affect their reactions to upward comparisons. Three studies showed that, under normal circumstances, individuals were inspired by an outstanding role model; their motivation and self-evaluations were enhanced. However, when their most positive self-views were temporarily or chronically activated, inspiration was undermined, and individuals’ motivation and self-evaluations tended to decrease. Another study found that role models inspired participants to generate more spectacular hopes and achievements than they would have generated otherwise. It appears that increasing the accessibility of one’s best selves undermines inspiration because it constrains the positivity of the future selves one may imagine and prevents one from generating the more spectacular future selves that the role model normally inspires.

In the course of their daily lives, most people come across other individuals whose achievements surpass their own. People may be motivated and inspired by such outstanding others, or they may feel discouraged by their own relative inferiority (for reviews, see Collins, 1996; Tesser, 1988; Wood & Lockwood, in press). People come to these comparison situations with varying self-evaluations; one’s self-appraisals may fluctuate from one situation to another (Kernis, 1993), and the relative positivity of one’s self-view may in turn affect how one responds to the comparison. Paradoxically, thinking highly of oneself may reduce one’s ability to draw inspiration from an outstanding other. If you have just been proudly contemplating your best achievements, the realization that another person has far surpassed you may be painful rather than uplifting.

To be inspired by an outstanding other, one must be able to imagine an equally outstanding possible future self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The increased motivation and self-enhancement provoked by a role model stem from the belief that “I, too, can attain similar heights, if I work hard enough.” Indeed, in a set of previous studies, we found that the impact of an upward comparison on the self depended on the extent to which the accomplishments of the superior other seemed attainable (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Outstanding others provoked self-enhancement and inspiration when their achievements appeared attainable, but not when these achievements seemed beyond reach. When a model’s achievements appeared unattainable, either because participants were already too advanced in their careers to be able to achieve comparable success at the same career point or because participants subscribed to a theory that viewed their less stellar abilities as fixed and incapable of improving, inspiration was undermined. It is difficult to be inspired by accomplishments that one cannot hope to achieve (cf. Testa & Major, 1990; Wood & Van der Zoe, in press).

If models of attainable success inspire people by leading them to generate images of similarly successful future selves, then anything that constrains the positivity of the future selves that one may imagine will probably undermine the models’ inspirational impact. Ironically, awareness of one’s highest accomplishments may set such limitations on the positivity of future selves that one can imagine. Under normal circumstances, people may be capable of generating unrealistically positive future selves, as the literature on positive illusions suggests (Taylor & Brown, 1988). However, this ability may be disrupted when people are reminded of the less stellar reality of their existing achievements. Research in other areas lends support to this view. For example, it appears that people will tolerate inconsistencies among their beliefs, but only as long as these inconsistencies are not made salient (for a review, see McGregor, Newby-Clark, & Zanna, in press). Thus, people are less likely to behave in a manner that is inconsistent with their attitudes when these attitudes are made salient (Fazio, Chen, McDonel, & Sherman, 1982; for a review, see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Also,
people are more disturbed by an inconsistency between behaviors they are advocating and their own past behaviors when they are reminded of these past behaviors (Stone, Aronson, Crain, Winslow, & Fried, 1994). Similarly, people who have a large discrepancy between their actual selves and their ideal, hoped-for selves become distressed by this discrepancy only if they are asked to reflect on their ideal selves (Higgins, 1987).

As these examples show, one’s own attitudes, hopes, and past behaviors may exert little impact on one’s current reactions if one is not reminded of them. Although people are disturbed enough by inconsistencies between their past and current reactions that they will attempt to remedy these inconsistencies, they will be unperturbed by these very same inconsistencies if they are not reminded of their past reactions; an inconsistency among two sets of beliefs is disturbing only if both are accessible at the same time (McGregor et al., in press). In the same manner, we suggest that people know full well what they have achieved in the past and what they can realistically hope to achieve in the future. Yet, this knowledge does not prevent them from constructing highly optimistic expectations for themselves unless they are reminded of it. Therefore, people should be inspired by outstanding role models who lead them to generate equally outstanding images of their own future selves, but this inspiration should be undercut when their ability to construct such positive future selves is curtailed by a reminder of their less accomplished actual selves.

For example, on hearing about an award-winning graduating student with a stellar academic record, one may imagine oneself receiving the same award at graduation and reevaluate one’s efforts toward achieving this goal. However, if one has just been reflecting on one’s own best academic achievement, an A, it becomes difficult to imagine a more outstanding possible self. People’s attempts to construct desired self-views are constrained by reality (Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990). One’s own best achievements, when salient, set a limit on the future achievements that one may realistically imagine for oneself.

In the same manner, articulating one’s highest goals for the future may also set limits on one’s aspirations. If, having just spelled out one’s best hopes for oneself, one comes across someone who has achieved much more, one’s ability to imagine an equally accomplished future self is constrained by the less spectacular personal goals that one has just generated. For example, students who have just indicated that their highest goal is to graduate and find a solid job may find it difficult to draw inspiration from a star student who has graduated with distinction and is flooded with lucrative job offers. It is difficult to reconfigure and improve on the recently articulated goals for oneself, and one may even be left feeling inferior by comparison. Thus, increasing the salience of one’s own past selves or hoped-for future selves may disrupt one’s ability to envision a self as outstanding as the superior other, thereby blocking one’s ability to draw inspiration from the other person’s success and undercutting self-enhancement. In this article, we examine these possibilities.

We also examine the impact of superior others on people’s motivation to succeed. We predict that increased aspirations after an upward comparison should be accompanied by an increased motivation to work hard toward achieving one’s newly formed goals. It has been shown that motivation may be boosted by thinking about how things might have turned out better than they had. The realization that “If only I had worked harder, I would have accomplished more” increases motivation to work harder in the future (Roese, 1994). In such cases, the imagined counterfactual outcome leads one to generate guidelines for improving future performance. Upward comparisons may serve a similar function, providing a guide for achieving future success (“If only I work really hard, I will achieve what this person has”).

The boosting of aspirations is a key function of role models, but this area has been largely neglected in the social comparison literature. A number of theorists have suggested that upward comparisons may serve self-improvement motives, but so far, there has been little empirical evidence for this (Aspinwall, in press; Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakof, 1990; Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wood, 1989). Our own previous research documented that individuals exposed to self-enhancing role models reported that they were inspired by them (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), but we, too, did not examine the impact of role models on specific motives and intentions: Do students inspired by an academic role model intend to spend more time at the library? Do they plan to attend their classes more regularly? We would expect such motivation to increase when an outstanding other leads people to envision comparable success for themselves, but not when their ability to envision such success is constrained by a reminder of what is realistically feasible for them.

To examine these ideas, we exposed students to models of superb academic success after first reminding some of them of their best past academic achievements (Study 1) or of their best hoped-for achievements (Studies 2 and 3), and we then assessed the models’ impact on their self-evaluations and motivation. We expected that students who were not reminded of their best selves would experience enhanced self-views and increased motivation, whereas students who were reminded of their best selves would experience no such boost and might even experience deflated self-views and decreased motivation. We assumed that reminders of actual best selves would undercut inspiration because the increased salience of these relatively modest selves would make it difficult to generate the more spectacular possible selves that the role model would otherwise inspire. This view would be strengthened if it could be shown that the hoped-for best possible selves that people generate spontaneously are indeed less spectacular than the ones that an outstanding role model inspires them to generate. Study 3 examined this possibility. Finally, if the salience of one’s own best selves undercuts inspiration by a role model, such inspiration should also be undercut for individuals whose best selves are likely to be chronically salient, namely individuals high in self-esteem. Study 4 examined this possibility.

Study 1: Reminders of One’s Best Past Selves Can Undercut Inspiration by a Role Model

We began by examining whether reminding people of their best past academic achievements would undermine their inspiration by an academic superstar. We created a description of an outstanding advanced student who had excelled at participants’ own major. The role model was said to be in a more advanced career stage than participants so as to enable them to imagine that they, too, could attain comparable success down the road. The role model was said to be in the same major and of the same gender as participants so as to increase his or her perceived relevance to them. Such models of attainable excellence in a relevant domain were shown in our
previous research to provoke self-enhancement and inspiration under normal circumstances (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). To increase the salience of participants’ best past academic selves, half were asked, in a seemingly unrelated experiment conducted before their exposure to the role model, to describe a peak academic experience that had made them feel especially proud. The remaining half were asked, instead, to describe relatively neutral everyday activities.

We expected that the outstanding role model would have a positive impact on self-views and motivation under normal circumstances, when relatively neutral, everyday selves were activated. However, we expected that this inspiration would be undercut and possibly even reversed when individuals’ especially successful past selves were made salient. The activation of their best self would anchor individuals’ self-perceptions in their own reality, limiting their ability to generate a possible future self that was as outstanding as the target.

Method

Participants

Participants were 49 male students enrolled in math, computer science, and biology classes at the University of Waterloo. Students from 1-year classes were recruited to participate, for pay, in a study on the effects of journalistic styles on social perception. Only male participants were included because the majority of students recruited from these classes were men. Participants were selected only if they were in their 1st year of study.

Three participants were excluded because they were uncertain about or had changed their academic major since signing up for the study and thus were exposed to a nonrelevant model (the model was always in the same major as the participant because, in previous research, we found that students were not inspired by a model who had excelled at a domain that they considered irrelevant; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Two participants were excluded because they had failed their previous term and would therefore be unlikely to view the achievements of the target as attainable, regardless of the manipulation. One additional participant was excluded because he disbelieved the cover story. Altogether, 43 participants were included in the analyses.

Procedure

Priming manipulation. The study was conducted in a bogus “two-experiment” format. At the outset of the study, the experimenter told participants that she was an honors student working as a research assistant. She asked participants whether, before going on to the main part of the study, they would complete a brief pilot questionnaire on “student life” to help her develop the materials for her thesis research. In fact, this ostensibly unrelated questionnaire delivered the priming manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to the success-prime or neutral-prime condition. In the success-prime condition, they were asked to write about an academic experience that had made them feel extremely “pleased and proud.” In the neutral-prime condition, they were asked to describe what their activities had been “yesterday.”

Target manipulation. After collecting the priming questionnaire, the experimenter gave participants the second questionnaire, concerning “the impact of journalistic styles on social perception.” Participants in the success-prime and neutral-prime conditions were randomly assigned to either a star-target or a no-target group. Participants in the star-target condition read a bogus newspaper article, ostensibly from a local campus newspaper, describing an outstanding graduating student. The target was said to have recently won a prestigious award for stellar academic achievement and was praised by university officials as “a truly outstanding student” with a “superb academic record.” In addition, because we did not want participants to be able to dismiss the target as a “geek,” the article also described the target’s achievements in athletic, student government, and volunteer community activities. This student was a bright and well-rounded high achiever. To ensure relevance, the article was tailor-made for each participant so that each student read about a same-gender high achiever in his own academic program: that is, a math student read about a math major and a biology student read about a biology major. These procedures closely resembled those used in our earlier research (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, Study 3). No-target participants read a bogus newspaper article, ostensibly from a local community paper, about an animal recently acquired by the local zoo. In sum, we used a 2 (prime: success vs. neutral) X 2 (target: star target vs. no target) between-subjects design.

Dependent measures. After reading the article, participants who had been exposed to the star target were asked to rate him on 40 adjectives among which were embedded 10 that were positively related to success (e.g., bright, ambitious) and 10 that were negatively related to success (e.g., incompetent, unintelligent). All items were rated on an 11-point scale with end-points labeled 1 (not at all) and 11 (very). No-target participants rated the animal they read about on 40 success-neutral adjectives (e.g., colorful, cute).

Next, participants were told that, because their own personality may have affected their perceptions of the article, they would be asked some questions about themselves. All participants then rated themselves on the same items on which star-target participants had rated the star target.

Finally, participants were asked to rate their motivation on two measures. In the first, they provided objective estimates of how much time they planned to devote to six academic and extracurricular tasks that were related to areas in which the target had excelled (e.g., “Next week, I plan to spend ___ hours studying.” “I plan to study at least ___ hours for each of my final exams.” “This year, I plan to spend about ___ hours on volunteer work or charity-related activities”). In the second questionnaire, based on a motivation scale developed by Roese (1994), participants were asked to rate the likelihood that they would engage in a variety of activities; 8 of the 20 items were related to motivation in the target’s areas of academic or extracurricular success (e.g., “Making a special effort to study hard for exams,” “Volunteering to do more community work”). Twelve were unrelated to the target’s success (e.g., “Learning more about art,” “Traveling abroad”) and were included to prevent participants from guessing the true purpose of the questionnaire; these items were not included in the subsequent motivation indexes. All items were rated on a 3-point scale with end-points ranging from −6 (very unlikely to do this) to 6 (very likely to do this).

Results and Discussion

Responses to Priming Manipulation

Participants had little trouble coming up with responses to the questions posed in the priming manipulation. Success-primed participants tended to describe a combination of high school achievements (e.g., “In grade 12, my calculus teacher singled me out with the term ‘brilliant’ for a class”) and 1-year university achievements (e.g., “[On] my computer science mid-term, I got 84%”). Neutral-primed participants tended to describe relatively banal daily activities (e.g., “Went to computer lab for e-mail & surfed the net, library to study,” “Attend classes, work on assignments/projects with friends, home—cook—eat... listen to music”).

Success-primed participants’ open-ended responses were coded by three independent raters who were unaware of participants’ target type condition. The overall positivity of the achievement described by each participant was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from less positive than average (1) to more positive than average (5).
who were and who were not exposed to a star target (Study 1).

Figure 1. Self-ratings of neutral-primed and success-primed individuals who were and who were not exposed to a star target (Study 1).

Ratings of Target

Success-related items were averaged into a single index of the target’s success after first reversing the negative items (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .89 \)). The star target was rated very positively by both the success-primed (M = 9.61) and neutral-primed (M = 9.07) groups, and the ratings provided by the two groups did not significantly differ, \( F(1, 19) = 1.81, p = .19 \).

Self-Ratings

Self-ratings were averaged into an index of success, as target ratings had been (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .88 \)). A 2 (target type) \( \times \) 2 (prime type) analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant Target \( \times \) Prime interaction, \( F(1, 39) = 5.53, p = .02 \); as expected, the outstanding target exerted a different impact on success-primed and neutral-primed individuals (see Figure 1). Neither the target type nor the prime type main effect was significant (both Fs < 1).

A planned comparison revealed that, among participants who were not exposed to the star target, success-primed individuals (M = 8.18) rated themselves more positively than did neutral-primed individuals (M = 7.16), \( F(1, 39) = 4.77, p = .04 \), indicating that the priming manipulation had effectively reminded participants of their better selves. However, priming individuals with their best achievements subsequently undermined their ability to gain inspiration from the role model, as discussed next.

Planned comparisons revealed that neutral-primed participants were positively affected by the superior student: Those exposed to the star student rated themselves more positively than did those who had not been exposed to the star, \( F(1, 39) = 3.59, p = .07 \). This finding replicates our earlier results (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997); namely, under normal circumstances, such a star provokes self-enhancement. However, as expected, this self-enhancement was undercut for participants who had been primed to think about their most successful academic achievement. Instead, those exposed to the star rated themselves less positively than did those who had not been exposed to the star, although this effect did not reach significance, \( F(1, 39) = 2.06, p = .16 \). Thus, priming individuals with their most successful self can nullify the self-enhancing impact of an outstanding role model.

Recall that the successes reported by success-primed participants were coded for their positivity. We would expect that participants whose proudest achievements were least spectacular would be most vulnerable to the threat posed by a comparison to a superior other. The less impressive one’s best achievement, the greater the contrast one will perceive between one’s own success and that of the outstanding other. Moreover, lesser achievements should exert a greater constraint on one’s ability to generate a self as successful as the other. Therefore, we expected that participants whose-best achievements were least positive would rate themselves least positively after exposure to the star target; in the no-target condition, we expected no such relationship between best achievements and self-ratings. Put differently, we expected to find a significant interaction between positivity of achievements and target type for participants in the success-prime condition. As predicted, a regression of self-ratings on target type and positivity of achievements revealed that the Target Type \( \times \) Positivity interaction was significant, \( r(17) = 2.40, p = .03 \), indicating that the slopes in the no-target and star-target conditions differed significantly. Furthermore, using the procedure for testing group differences at specified values of a continuous variable suggested by West, Aiken, and Krull (1996), we found that the difference in self-ratings between the star-target and no-target groups was highly significant at low positivity of achievement levels (1 standard deviation below the positivity of achievements mean), \( r(17) = 3.22, p = .005 \). Expressed in standard deviation units of the self-rating measure, the mean self-rating score for the star-target group was 1.46 standard deviations below that of the no-target group when the positivity of achievements was low. At high

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1 One participant in the success-prime condition described unusually positive past achievements. Because this participant might in fact have seen his own achievements as equivalent or superior to those of the star, we would not expect this participant to experience self-deflation. Indeed, when we excluded this participant from the analyses, the mean self-rating for the star-target group dropped from 7.49 to 7.28, and the planned comparison was closer to significance, \( F(1, 38) = 3.56, p = .07 \), showing greater evidence for a self-deflation effect. We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this possibility.
positivity of achievement levels (1 standard deviation above the positivity of achievements mean), this difference was not significant, \( t(17) = 0.37, p = .72 \). The star-target group was only 0.17 standard deviations above the no-target group at high levels of achievement positivity. This supports our conjecture that exposure to the star target depressed self-ratings the most for individuals whose best achievements were the least positive.

**Motivation Ratings**

Each item on the two motivation measures was standardized, and all items were then averaged to form a single index of motivation (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .77 \)). As expected, the star target exerted a different impact on the motivation of participants in the two priming conditions, as revealed by a significant Target \( \times \) Prime interaction, \( F(1, 39) = 4.57, p < .05 \). (Neither main effect was significant.) The target exerted little impact on the motivation of neutral-primed participants; as can be seen in Figure 2, those exposed to the star showed somewhat higher motivation than did those who had not been exposed to the star, but this difference did not approach significance, \( F < 1 \). In stark contrast, among participants who had been primed with their past success, exposure to the star led to a substantial reduction in motivation; those exposed to the star reported significantly lower motivation than did those not exposed to the star, \( F(1, 39) = 5.84, p = .02 \).

It is unclear why exposure to the outstanding role model did not increase motivation among neutral-primed participants, whose self-views, as reported earlier, were positively affected by this exposure. Perhaps this occurred because their ambitious intentions at the beginning of the term, when this study was conducted, were high enough to preclude further increases in intended efforts. It is clear, however, that reminding students of their proudest achievements left them vulnerable to a decline in motivation in response to an encounter with a more outstanding student.

Fluctuations in self-ratings and motivation tended to go hand in hand. Across all participants, there was a positive correlation between motivation and self-ratings (\( r = .27, p = .08 \)). Positive correlations were also obtained in conditions that produced shifts in self-ratings or motivation, that is, among participants who were exposed to the star (\( r = .34 \)) as well as among participants who were not exposed to the star (\( r = .20 \)); as a result of the smaller sample sizes on which they were based, however, neither of these correlations were significant (both \( ps > .12 \)).

In summary, the outstanding role model exerted a positive influence on participants operating with self-views that were relatively normal for them, namely, those primed with their activities the previous day. These participants tended to rate themselves more positively after exposure to the star (although they did not show a significant increase in motivation). In contrast, the same role model exerted a negative impact on participants who had just been reminded of their proudest achievements. For these participants, exposure to the star led to a substantial drop in motivation and to somewhat deflated self-views (although this deflation was not significant). Thus, increasing the salience of participants’ best selves served to undermine the positive impact of role models and led to discouragement instead.

**Study 2: Articulating One’s Best Hoped-For Selves Can Undercut Inspiration by a Role Model**

In Study 1, inspiration by an outstanding role model was undercut and reversed for participants who had recently been reminded of their best past academic accomplishments. We believe that the increased salience of their best past selves undermined inspiration because, once they became accessible, these best actual selves constrained participants’ ability to generate overly positive possible future selves. If this were true, then thinking about one’s hoped-for, ideal future selves should have a similar effect, provided that the spontaneously generated achievements one hopes to accomplish are less outstanding than those of the superstar. Articulating one’s hoped-for selves should ground one’s possible future selves in one’s own reality and set limits on the positivity of the self one can realistically hope and aspire to become. If everything one hopes to achieve falls short of someone else’s achievements, the inspiration that one might otherwise experience will be undermined. Study 2 examined this possibility.

Another aim of Study 2 was to rule out an alternative explanation for the results of Study 1. In Study 1, neutral-primed and

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2 Variability for one of the motivation items ("This year, I plan to spend ___ hours on volunteer work or charity-related activities") was high, with responses ranging from 0 hr to 600 hr; to reduce the extreme standard deviations on this item, we recoded scores on a 3-point scale ranging from 1 (no volunteer work) through 2 (occasional volunteer work: 1 to 25 hours) to 3 (extensive volunteer work: more than 25 hours). Across all items, six scores were excluded because they were outliers in that each deviated more than 4 standard deviations from the mean for that item.
success-primed participants differed not only in the salience of their own best achievements but also in the salience of the entire domain of achievement. Whereas all success-primed participants recounted an academic achievement, many neutral-primed participants recounted leisure and work activities that had little to do with academics. Perhaps, then, success-primed participants were discouraged by the star not because of the salience of their own best achievements but, rather, because the salience of the domain of achievement might have encouraged them to focus on the contrast between their own academic success and that of the star. To rule out this possibility, Study 2 included an additional set of conditions in which participants reflected on their current academic performance without thinking about their best selves.

In Study 2, individuals described either their actual selves or their hoped-for selves and were then exposed to an outstanding role model. We assumed that individuals who focused on their current, actual self would be inspired by the star: They might recognize that they are inferior to the superstar in the present, but they would still be able to construct a future self-image that is comparably successful. Individuals who focused on their ideal future self would, in contrast, be restricted in their ability to generate a more outstanding future self after exposure to the outstanding other and should consequently be unable to draw inspiration from this person.

Method

Participants

Participants were 95 University of Waterloo male and female undergraduates enrolled in introductory psychology who participated for course credit. Participants’ gender had no effects on any of the analyses and, thus, is not discussed further.

We excluded 6 participants because they disbelieved the cover story and 7 because they were uncertain about or had completely changed their academic major since the pretesting and consequently read about a target in a nonrelevant area of study. Altogether, data from 82 participants were included in the analyses.

Procedure

Participants provided information about their academic major in the context of a larger questionnaire that included many unrelated measures. Priming manipulation. Participants were invited to take part in a study on the effects of journalistic styles on social perception, and they participated individually in a laboratory setting. As in Study 1, participants were asked by the experimenter whether they would be willing to fill out a brief questionnaire on “journalistic styles.” Participants tended to describe a combination of academic and career activities (e.g., “Many students at UW spend their weekends traveling home, shopping, catching up on sleep, partying, doing homework, watching movies or playing sports,” “Students in residence hang around with friends during the day—football games, basketball, etc. Many people go home on the weekends & visit with friends from there”). The responses given by present-actual-primed and future-ideal-primed participants were coded by three independent raters who were unaware of participants’ target type condition. Raters assessed the overall positivity of the description provided by each participant on a 5-point scale with end-points labeled 1 (less positive than average) and 5 (more positive than average). Because the responses of participants asked for their ideal future selves were so obviously different from those of participants asked for their actual current selves, raters assessed each participant’s response relative to responses of other participants in the same priming condition. It is therefore not possible to compare the positivity of the descriptions generated in the two conditions (the effectiveness of the manipulation was evident from the self-ratings of participants in the different priming conditions who were not exposed to the target, as reported in the section on self-ratings). Interrater reliability was high for both the present-prime (Cronbach’s α = .88) and future-prime (Cronbach’s α = .81) conditions. For each participant, we averaged the scores given by the
three raters. We did not code responses made by neutral-primed participants for positivity because these participants, for the most part, did not describe achievements.

Among participants primed with their present actual selves, there was no difference in the positivity of self-descriptions generated by those who were exposed to the star target (M = 3.11) and those who were not (M = 3.24), F < 1. The same was true for participants primed with their ideal future selves who were exposed to the star target (M = 3.01) and who were not (M = 3.20), F < 1.

Ratings of Target

Success-related items were averaged to form a single index of the target’s success after reverse scoring of the negative items (Cronbach’s α = .90). Target ratings by participants in the present-actual-prime (M = 9.88), future-ideal-prime (M = 9.52), and neutral-prime (M = 9.70) conditions did not differ significantly, F < 1.

Self-Ratings

Self-ratings were averaged into a single index of success, as target ratings had been (Cronbach’s α = .90). A 2 (target type) × 3 (prime type) ANOVA revealed a significant Target × Prime interaction, F(2, 76) = 4.60, p = .01; as expected, the target had a different impact on participants in the three priming conditions. There were no main effects of target type, F(1, 76) = 1.63, p = .21, or prime type, F(2, 76) = 1.19, p = .31.

The self-ratings made by participants who were not exposed to the star target indicate that the priming manipulation had been successful, as can be seen in Figure 3. A planned comparison revealed that, for these no-target participants, those primed with their ideal future selves rated themselves significantly more positively than did those primed either with their present-actual selves, F(1, 76) = 8.21, p < .005, or with neutral information, F(1, 76) = 6.67, p = .01. The self-ratings of the present-actual-primed participants did not differ from those of the neutral-primed participants, F < 1. Thus, it is clear that priming with actual current selves had little impact on self-views. In contrast, priming with ideal future selves succeeded in making participants see themselves more positively. However, it also undermined inspiration when participants were exposed to a star, as discussed next.

Our predictions were more precise than a global interaction; we predicted that participants exposed to the star would experience self-enhancement in the neutral-prime condition and in the present-actual-prime condition but would experience self-deflation in the future-ideal-prime condition. These predictions were tested with a single contrast involving the following weights: neutral prime, target (+1), no target (−1); present actual prime, target (+1), no target (−1); and future ideal prime, target (−1), no target (+1). This contrast was highly significant, F(1, 76) = 11.30, p = .001.

We also conducted planned contrasts to test the significance of the patterns obtained in each of the priming conditions. These contrasts revealed that participants in the neutral-prime condition and in the present-actual-prime condition were positively affected by the target. In both of these conditions, participants exposed to the star target rated themselves more highly than did those not exposed to the star; F(1, 76) = 3.91, p = .05, for neutral-primed participants, and F(1, 76) = 4.62, p = .03, for present-actual-primed participants. The opposite was true for participants primed with their ideal future selves; among these participants, those exposed to the star target rated themselves less positively than did those who were not exposed to the star, and this difference was marginally significant, F(1, 76) = 2.94, p = .09. Thus, as in Study 1, increasing the salience of participants’ best selves undermined the self-enhancing impact of the star. When one’s best selves are accessible, be they one’s actual past selves or one’s hoped-for future selves, one’s ability to construct still better future possible selves is constrained. As a result, one cannot gain inspiration from a superior other.

These findings also suggest that it was not simply the focus on academics that caused inspiration to be undercut for participants focusing on their best academic selves. Participants focusing on their current academic selves were just as focused on academics. Yet, their focus on their actual current selves left them free to imagine better future selves because they were not reminded of the limits imposed by their best achievements or hopes. It appears, then, that it was the increased salience of these limits that prevented participants primed with their best past or hoped-for selves from being inspired by the star.

We also expected that participants whose best future selves were least spectacular would view themselves least positively after exposure to the star; these individuals would see the greatest contrast between their own hopes and the star’s achievements and so would see the star’s achievements as least attainable. As in Study 1, we conducted a multiple regression analysis in which self-ratings were regressed on positivity of future selves and target type to test the Target Type × Positivity interaction. This time, the
overall interaction was not significant, \( t(21) = 0.52, p = .61 \). We also regressed self-ratings on positivity of current selves and target type; this interaction was nonsignificant as well, \( t(23) = 0.58, p = .57 \). Therefore, the conclusion that the people with the most negative selves would be affected most negatively by the star remains tentative.

**Motivation Ratings**

As in Study 1, motivation items were standardized and combined to form a single measure of motivation (Cronbach's \( \alpha = .69 \)). As seen in Figure 4, the pattern obtained for motivation paralleled the one obtained for self-ratings. Exposure to the star resulted in increased motivation for participants in the neutral-prime and present-actual-prime conditions but resulted in slightly decreased motivation in the future-ideal-prime condition. The ANOVA on motivation ratings revealed no significant main effects or interactions. However, the more precise contrast testing our specific prediction (using the same weights used in the analysis of self-ratings) was marginally significant, \( F(1, 76) = 2.50, p < .10 \). Planned contrasts within each of the priming conditions were not significant, all \( ps > .10 \). We had predicted that exposure to a star would increase motivation when one's working self-concept contains ordinary selves but not when it contains best selves; the results were in the expected direction but were nonsignificant.

As in Study 1, overall motivation ratings were significantly correlated with self-ratings (\( r = .40, p = .001 \)). Positive correlations were also obtained among participants who were exposed to the target (\( r = .40, p < .01 \)) and who were not exposed to the target (\( r = .36, p = .02 \)). Again, this suggests that fluctuations in self-view were accompanied by fluctuations in motivation.

In sum, as in Study 1, we found that the outstanding role model exerted a positive impact on participants operating with self-views that were relatively normal for them, namely those primed with neutral information or with their current academic selves. These participants rated themselves more positively after exposure to the star. However, asking participants to articulate their highest hopes for themselves sufficed to undercut their ability to draw inspiration from the star.

**Study 3: Outstanding Role Models Inspire Higher Aspirations Than One Would Normally Generate**

Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 suggest that the inspiration sparked by a star role model depends on people's ability to generate a possible future self that is as successful as the star. When accessible, people's best selves ground them in their own reality and constrain their ability to imagine more spectacular future selves. This account implies that the hoped-for selves inspired by a role model are more spectacular than the ones people would generate spontaneously, in the absence of a role model. The role model prompts people to entertain more outstanding images of their future selves than they would otherwise envision.

It is important to demonstrate that the best selves that people generate spontaneously are not nearly as positive as the ones that a star would inspire them to generate, because this expectation plays a central role in our account of why inspiration by a star is undercut when the salience of one's best selves is increased. If, for example, people's normal hopes and aspirations are just as positive as the ones inspired by a star, it would be difficult to argue that reminding them of these hopes and aspirations prevents them from generating the more spectacular ones that are needed to gain inspiration. The main purpose of Study 3 was to demonstrate that outstanding role models inspire people to generate higher hopes and aspirations than they would generate otherwise.\(^4\)

To compare people's normal hopes and aspirations with those inspired by a star, we asked participants to list their hoped-for future achievements either before or after reading about an outstanding role model. We then coded the positivity of each participant's hopes. We expected that hopes generated after exposure to the star would be more positive than those generated before this exposure.

After the exposure to the star, all participants rated themselves on the same success-related measures used in the earlier studies, and they also rated the extent to which they expected their own future success to resemble that of the star. Because this study was designed with the chief aim of assessing the impact of the star on participants' hopes, we did not include a control group that was never exposed to the star. Still, this design does permit comparing the self-views of participants who generated hopes before and after exposure to the star. The procedure for participants who generated hopes in advance was essentially the same as the one for Study 2.

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\(^3\) Across all items, six scores were excluded because they were outliers in that each deviated more than 4 standard deviations from the mean for that item.

\(^4\) We thank Michael Ross for suggesting this study to us.
in which participants were asked to focus on their future ideal selves before exposure to the star. These participants were therefore expected to see themselves less positively and as less likely to be as successful as the star than those who generated their hopes only after exposure to the star, without being constrained by their own best selves.

Method

Participants

Participants were 52 male and female students enrolled in biology and chemistry classes at the University of Waterloo who participated for pay. Participants were selected only if they were in their 1st year of study. There were no gender effects in any of the analyses; therefore, gender is not discussed further.

One participant was excluded from the analyses because she did not have a clear academic major and therefore did not read about a relevant target. One participant was excluded because she disbelieved the cover story, and another was excluded because her self-rating score was more than 3 standard deviations from the mean. Altogether, 49 participants were included in the analyses.

Procedure

Participants were invited to take part in a study on the effects of journalistic styles on social perception, and they participated individually in a laboratory setting. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: pretarget or posttarget. In the pretarget condition, participants were asked by the experimenter whether they would be willing to fill out a brief pilot questionnaire on “student life” before starting the experiment, to help her develop the materials for her honors thesis. As in the future-ideal-prime condition of Study 2, these participants were asked to describe the achievements they hoped to accomplish over the next 10 years. They then read the bogus newspaper article about an outstanding graduating student of the same gender and major as their own and rated the target and then themselves on the same success-relevant traits used in Studies 1 and 2.

In the posttarget condition, participants first read about and rated the outstanding student; the experimenter then asked participants to fill out the bogus pilot questionnaire about their planned achievements. Participants then rated themselves on the success-relevant traits used to rate the target. Finally, participants in both groups were asked to indicate how their future success would compare with that of the target (Jennifer or Jeffrey Walker) on a 13-point scale with labels ranging from —6 (I will be much less successful than Jeffrey/Jennifer Walker) to +6 (I will be much more successful than Jeffrey/Jennifer Walker).

Results and Discussion

Ratings of Target

Success-related items were averaged into a single index of the target’s success after first reversing the negative items (Cronbach’s α = .84). Pretarget (M = 9.52) and posttarget (M = 9.66) participants did not differ significantly in their ratings of the target, F < 1. Both groups rated the target as highly successful.

Coding of Hoped-For Future Selves

Participants’ open-ended responses were coded by three independent raters who were unaware of participants’ experimental condition. Raters first assessed the overall positivity of the hoped-for achievements generated by each participant on a 5-point scale with end-points labeled 1 (less positive than average) and 5 (more positive than average). Raters also assessed the extent to which each description indicated motivation to achieve success, on a 5-point scale with end-points labeled 1 (less motivated than average) and 5 (more motivated than average). Interrater reliability was high for both the positivity measure (Cronbach’s α = .81) and the motivation to succeed measure (Cronbach’s α = .87). For each participant, we averaged the scores given by the three raters on each measure.

As can be seen in Table 1, the hoped-for achievements generated by participants who had articulated their hopes after their exposure to the star role model were more positive than those generated by participants who had articulated their hopes before their exposure to the star, F(1, 47) = 4.54, p = .04. Posttarget participants also tended to express greater motivation to accomplish their hoped-for achievements than did pretarget participants, F(1, 47) = 2.62, p = .11. Thus, as expected, the hopes and aspirations inspired by the role model were indeed more ambitious than those articulated in the absence of such a role model, and the motivation to achieve these hoped-for goals also showed a tendency to be higher after exposure to the role model.

Table 1. As expected, participants who had generated their hopes only after they were exposed to the target subsequently rated themselves more positively than did participants who had generated their hopes before they were exposed to the target, F(1, 47) = 3.59, p = .06. Because we did not include a no-target control group, it is unclear whether posttarget participants rated themselves more positively than did pretarget participants because pretarget participants were negatively affected by the star, because posttarget participants were positively affected by the star, or because of both of these effects. But it is clear that, as in Study 2, participants who were asked to articulate their hopes before they were exposed to the star were unable to see themselves, after this exposure, as positively as did participants who were not reminded in advance of their highest hopes.

Success Ratings

As seen in Table 1, participants’ expectations about the extent to which their own level of future success would approach that of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Pretarget</th>
<th>Posttarget</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coding of future selves</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>3.31</td>
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<td>Objective measures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-ratings</td>
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<td>8.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success ratings</td>
<td>−2.31</td>
<td>−0.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Higher numbers indicate more positive ratings.
star target followed the same pattern obtained for self-ratings: Participants who had generated their hopes only after they were exposed to the target expected their own future success to be more similar to that of the target than did participants who had generated their hopes before they were exposed to the target, F(1, 47) = 3.89, p = .05. Once again, it appears that grounding participants in the reality of their own aspirations before they were exposed to the star served to undercut their ability to envision themselves achieving as much as the star had.

In sum, participants who had generated their hoped-for achievements after they were exposed to the star entertained higher hopes for themselves than did participants who had generated their hoped-for achievements before they were exposed to the star. This finding lends support to our interpretation of results obtained for self-ratings and motivation in this study as well as in the earlier studies. Participants who had generated their highest hopes before their exposure to the star must have been subsequently unable to generate the more spectacular hopes that the star otherwise inspired. As a result, they ended up with less positive self-views and less rosy expectations about their ability to match the star’s achievements than did participants who had generated their hopes only after they were exposed to the star. These latter participants remained free to envision themselves as gaining higher achievements than they might have envisioned had they not been exposed to the star and, therefore, expected their own future achievements to be almost as high as the star’s.

Study 4: High Self-Esteem Can Undercut Inspiration by a Role Model

Taken together, Studies 1–3 suggest that temporary increases in the salience of one’s best selves can undercut one’s ability to be inspired by a star role model and can even lead one to be discouraged instead. In Study 4, we aimed to obtain convergent evidence for these findings by showing that people whose best selves are likely to be chronically accessible—namely, those who are high in self-esteem—will be similarly unable to gain inspiration from a star. The self-views of high self-esteem people are not only more positive but more accessible, more confidently held, more internally consistent, and more temporally stable than those of low self-esteem individuals (e.g., Baumgardner, 1990; Campbell, 1990; for a review, see Campbell & Lavallee, 1993). If the best selves of high self-esteem individuals are, indeed, both clearly defined and chronically accessible, then these individuals should be constrained by these best selves; they will consequently be prevented from generating still better selves that are as accomplished as the star, much like the individuals whose best selves were made temporarily accessible in Studies 1–3. We therefore expected that high self-esteem individuals would be unable to draw inspiration from an outstanding role model. In contrast, low self-esteem individuals, whose best selves are likely to be less accessible, should be free to generate better selves when confronted with a superior other, and so should be inspired.

We recognize that these expectations are somewhat counterintuitive. In many ways, high self-esteem people are more skilled than low self-esteem people at making the most of opportunities to boost their self-views and at minimizing any threats to the self. For example, high self-esteem individuals are more likely than low self-esteem individuals to make self-serving attributions, to react in self-serving ways to feedback from others, and to attempt to rid themselves of negative moods (e.g., Smith & Petty, 1995; for a review, see Blaine & Crocker, 1993). Yet, despite the substantial self-enhancing benefits of high self-esteem, there is also reason to believe that high self-esteem can sometimes put people at psychological risk. High self-esteem individuals are particularly disturbed by ego threats (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996) and may be especially likely to be troubled by dissonance arising from discrepancies between their own actions and the high standards that they set for themselves (Stone, in press). If one’s high self-regard is always salient, one may be keenly aware of any inconsistencies between this self-regard and anything that challenges it (cf. McGregor et al., in press). A clearly superior other may provide such a challenge for high self-esteem individuals, undermining the inspiration that a superior other might otherwise spark.

A handful of experiments have examined how self-esteem affects reactions to upward comparisons, but their results are difficult to interpret because most lacked crucial no-comparison controls (cf. Collins, 1996). Moreover, these studies have yielded conflicting findings. In different studies, high self-esteem individuals were found to respond to a superior other more positively (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989), less positively (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Study 4), or no differently (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993) than did low self-esteem individuals. One reason for this inconsistency among studies may be that, under some conditions, high self-esteem individuals may have been able to construe the target as similar rather than superior to themselves (Collins, 1996). This may have been the case when the intended superior other was a peer who was coping well with college life (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989). By construing this target as similar to the self, high self-esteem individuals may have been able to avoid the potentially negative implications of such a comparison. In contrast, when an outstanding other was unambiguously superior, high self-esteem individuals may have been unable to avoid the realization that they themselves were inferior and therefore experienced the upward comparison as more painful. This may have been why, after exposure to a photo of an extremely attractive person, low self-esteem individuals perceived themselves to be more attractive, whereas high self-esteem individuals experienced no such self-enhancement (Brown et al., 1992, Study 4). We therefore predicted that a role model of the sort used in our earlier studies—an individual who is clearly superior to just about anybody in the all-important domain of academic achievement—would exert a negative impact on the self-views and motivation of high self-esteem individuals, but would inspire low self-esteem individuals. These predictions were examined in Study 4.

Method

Participants

Participants were 49 male and female University of Waterloo undergraduates enrolled in introductory psychology who participated for course credit. Six participants were excluded because they were uncertain about or had changed their academic major since the testing and thus read about a target in a nonrelevant major. Altogether, 43 participants were included in the analyses.
Pretesting

At the beginning of the term, participants filled out a lengthy prescreening measure that included the Self-Ratings Scale (Fleming & Courtney, 1984), a measure of self-esteem. This scale is made up of 36 items related to self-esteem in domains ranging from academics (“How often do you have trouble understanding things you read for class assignments?”) to physical attractiveness (“Do you often wish or fantasize that you were better looking?”) to general self-regard (“How often do you dislike yourself?”). Participants rated themselves on a 7-point Likert-type scale with end-points ranging from very often to practically never. We randomly selected participants from among those who had completed this scale and subsequently used their scores on this measure to divide them into high and low self-esteem groups on the basis of a median split. We also assessed participants’ academic major in this pretesting questionnaire.

Procedure

Two to 10 weeks after completing the pretesting questionnaire, participants were invited to take part in a study on the effect of journalistic styles on social perception, and they participated individually in a laboratory setting. The experimenter was unaware of participants’ self-esteem scores. Participants were randomly assigned to either the star-target or the no-target condition. As in Studies 1–3, participants in the *star-target* condition read a bogus newspaper article about an outstanding graduating student of the same gender and major as their own. They then rated the target and themselves on the success-related items and completed the measures of motivation. Participants in the *no-target* condition completed the self-ratings and the motivation measures without first reading the article about the target. After completing the questionnaire, participants were probed for suspicion and debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Prior Self-Esteem

The reliability of the Self-Ratings Scale was high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .95$). Participants were divided into high (HSE) and low (LSE) self-esteem groups based on a median split of their scores on the Self-Ratings Scale. This resulted in sample sizes ranging from 9 to 12 in the four cells of the $2 \times 2$ (self-esteem) design.

We conducted a $2 \times 2$ ANOVA to ensure that star-target and no-target participants within each self-esteem group did not differ in their prior self-esteem. Indeed, there were no effects for condition or for the interaction (both $p > .25$). Not surprisingly, prior self-esteem was substantially higher for HSE participants ($M = 5.11$) than for LSE participants ($M = 3.51$), $F(1, 39) = 46.47, p = .0001$.

Ratings of Target

Success-related items were averaged into a single index of the target’s success after first reversing the negative items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .78$). HSE ($M = 9.83$) and LSE ($M = 10.01$) participants did not differ in their ratings of the target, $F < 1$. Both groups rated the target as highly successful.

Self-Ratings

Self-ratings were averaged into an index of success, as target ratings had been (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .77$). There was no main effect for target type ($F < 1$), but there was a significant main effect of self-esteem. $F(1, 39) = 4.37, p = .04$, with HSE individuals rating themselves more positively than did LSE individuals. However, this main effect was qualified by a significant Self-Esteem $\times$ Target Type interaction, $F(1, 39) = 7.26, p = .01$, indicating that the star’s impact on participants’ self-views depended on their self-esteem (see Figure 5). Planned comparisons revealed that LSE individuals were clearly enhanced by their exposure to the target; those who were exposed to the target rated themselves more positively than those who were not, $F(1, 39) = 4.35, p = .04$. In contrast, HSE individuals were deflated by the target; those who were exposed to the target rated themselves less positively than those who were not, and this contrast was marginally significant, $F(1, 39) = 2.96, p = .09$. Note that the different impact of the star on the two self-esteem groups was powerful enough to wipe out the initial differences among HSE and LSE participants. Although, in the absence of a target, HSE participants had higher self-views than LSE participants, $F(1, 39) = 11.79, p = .001$, the two groups did not differ after their exposure to the target, $F < 1$. In sum, as predicted, LSE participants were enhanced by the star, but HSE participants experienced no such enhancement and, instead, tended to be deflated by the star.

Motivation Ratings

Each item from the two motivation scales was standardized; all items were then combined to form a single index of motivation (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .72$). As can be seen in Figure 6, exposure to the star led to an increase in motivation for LSE participants but to a decrease in motivation for HSE participants, and this Self-Esteem $\times$ Target Type interaction was significant, $F(1, 39) = 10.09, p = .003$. Neither the target type nor the self-esteem main effects were significant (both $Fs < 1$). The impact of the target on motivation ratings paralleled that obtained for self-ratings. Planned comparisons revealed that among LSE participants, those who were exposed to the star indicated greater motivation to work than those who were not, $F(1, 39) = 6.37, p = .02$. In contrast, among HSE participants, those who were exposed to the star indicated lower motivation than did those who were not, $F(1, 39) = 3.84, p = .06$. Thus, as predicted, the star motivated LSE participants but discouraged HSE participants.

As in Studies 1 and 2, overall motivation ratings were positively correlated with self-ratings ($r = .44, p = .003$). This was true among HSE individuals ($r = .42, p = .05$) as well as among LSE individuals ($r = .59, p = .01$). As before, it appears that fluctuations in self-views went hand in hand with fluctuations in motivation.

In sum, exposure to a superior student had a positive impact on individuals with low chronic self-esteem, leading to both enhanced self-views and a greater motivation to achieve. In contrast, exposure to the same high-achieving student had a negative impact on individuals high in self-esteem, leading to diminished self-perceptions and a reduced motivation to succeed.

On the face of it, the finding that LSE individuals were more positively affected by their exposure to the star than were HSE

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1 Across all items, two scores were excluded because they were outliers in that each deviated more than 4 standard deviations from the mean for that item.

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Figures 5 and 6. Self-ratings of individuals low and high in self-esteem who were and who were not exposed to a star target (Study 4).

Summary and Meta-Analyses of Results

Across the four studies, we found systematic patterns of responses to the star target: Participants were inspired under normal circumstances but self-deflated when their best selves were temporarily or chronically accessible. However, in several cases, the expected effects were weak; in particular, the planned comparisons testing the self-deflation effect were marginal or nonsignificant ($p = .09$, Studies 2 and 4; $p = .16$, Study 1). To determine whether these studies, as a group, lend support to our hypotheses, we conducted a series of meta-analyses using the method of adding $p$ values (Rosenthal, 1991). We first looked at those conditions in which we expected inspiration to be undermined (i.e., those in which best selves were salient): the success-prime condition in Study 1, the future-ideal-self condition in Study 2, and the HSE condition in Study 3. Although none of the studies yielded significant self-deflation alone, together they show a significant self-deflation effect when best selves were salient ($z = 2.76, p = .003$).

We conducted a similar meta-analysis for the conditions in which we expected to find inspiration: the neutral-prime condition in Study 1, the neutral- and present-actual-self conditions in Study 2, and the No Target condition in Study 3. Using the method of adding $p$ values, we found a significant inspiration effect when best selves were not salient ($z = 2.56, p = .011$). These results lend converging evidence to the results obtained in Studies 1–3. When confronted with an outstanding superior other, individuals chronically high in self-esteem suffered the same consequences as individuals whose self-views had been boosted temporarily through reminders of their best past or hoped-for selves; they were unable to experience the inspiration enjoyed by other participants and experienced self-deflation and discouragement instead. A focus on one’s best self, be this focus chronic or temporary, makes it difficult to imagine a self as successful as the superior role model and thereby undercuts the inspiration that this role model would otherwise spark.
and the LSE condition in Study 4. Here the individual studies each yielded significant or near significant inspiration results; not surprisingly, when combined, this effect was highly significant ($z = 3.97, p < .0001$).

Our motivation data were also consistently in the predicted direction but were not always strong. In Study 2, in particular, the effects on motivation were weak. Here, too, meta-analyses revealed that, when combined, the studies provide strong evidence that the star provoked a reduction in motivation when best selves were salient ($z = 2.52, p = .006$) but boosted motivation when best selves were not salient ($z = 2.76, p = .003$). These findings support our hypothesis that, under normal circumstances, individuals exposed to a star target will experience enhanced self-evaluations and motivation, but when best selves are made temporarily or chronically accessible, individuals’ self-evaluations and motivation will drop.

**General Discussion**

Exposure to a superstar can result in self-enhancement and increased motivation or in self-deflation and discouragement. One’s response to a superstar will be determined in part by the accessibility of one’s highest hopes and achievements. In all of our studies, individuals who were not temporarily or chronically focused on their best selves were positively affected by an outstanding other. This replicates our earlier finding that, under normal circumstances, a model of attainable excellence in a relevant domain can be self-enhancing and inspiring (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). In all of our studies, this inspiration was undercut for individuals whose best selves were temporarily or chronically accessible. Participants who were asked to reflect on their best past selves (Study 1) or on their hoped-for future selves (Study 2) and participants chronically high in self-esteem (Study 4) did not experience inspiration; indeed, viewed across these studies, the star’s impact was negative.

We also found that a star inspired people to generate more spectacular hopes and achievements than they would have generated otherwise (Study 3). We believe that increasing the accessibility of one’s best selves undercuts inspiration because it interferes with one’s ability to generate the spectacular future selves that the star normally inspires. When one’s relatively modest best selves are accessible, they set limits on the positivity of the future selves that one can realistically envision. To be inspired by a star, one must be able to view the star’s success as attainable (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). When the increased accessibility of one’s best selves prevents one from constructing future selves that are as successful as the star, the star’s success appears unattainable, and inspiration is undercut.

These findings add to a growing literature showing that inconsistent cognitions are disturbing only if they are accessible at the same time (for a review, see McGregor et al., in press). Whereas earlier research showed that one attempts to bring one’s current attitudes and behaviors in line with one’s past reactions when these are made accessible, our research suggests that one may also attempt to keep one’s imagined future selves in line with one’s existing best selves when these are made accessible. Our studies suggest that people may be able to entertain hopes and aspirations that are inconsistent with their knowledge about the limits of their own abilities only if they are not reminded of these limits.

Our findings also lend support to our earlier conclusions that a superior other who excels in a highly self-relevant domain can have a positive impact on individuals, provided that they view the other’s success as within their own reach (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). These conclusions run contrary to the self-evaluation maintenance model proposed by Tesser and his colleagues (Tesser, 1988; Tesser & Campbell, 1983). According to this model, a highly self-relevant superior other is bound to be so threatening as to provoke only negative consequences for the self. In our view, this threat can be averted if, even as one realizes that one’s current self falls short of the superior other, one can imagine a future self accomplishing comparable achievements. Under such circumstances, one can be inspired by the superior other.

Note that the inspiration we find in these studies is quite different from the concept of reflection discussed by Tesser and other theorists, which refers to basking in the reflected glory of a close other (Brewer & Weber, 1994; Claidini et al., 1976; Tesser, 1988; Tesser & Campbell, 1983). Reflection is expected to occur when a close other excels on a dimension that is not highly self-relevant and when one is focusing on one’s association with the high achiever rather than on one’s own personal identity; in such circumstances, one can be proud of one’s connection to the successful other without experiencing a threat to the self. Inspiration, in contrast, is expected to occur precisely when the superior other’s domain of excellence is most self-relevant. Such a superior other can raise one’s aspirations to achieve goals that one cares deeply about and boost one’s motivation to excel. In these studies, we ensured that the star’s domain of excellence would be highly self-relevant—academic success at participants’ own major—so as to produce such inspiration and increased motivation.

We found clear evidence that exposure to superior others can affect individuals’ achievement motivation. Although the stars’ impact on participants’ motivation was not as strong and consistent as their impact on self-views, the obtained effects on motivation were all in the predicted directions. The star boosted motivation only in conditions expected to induce inspiration, namely, when participants’ best selves were unlikely to be accessible, as was the case for low self-esteem individuals and for participants who had not been reminded of their best selves. We also found that the star led to a decrease in motivation only in conditions expected to provoke discouragement, namely when participants’ best selves were temporarily or chronically salient. Moreover, meta-analyses revealed that when these studies were combined, the expected boost and decline in motivation were both significant.

It has long been assumed in popular culture that role models, individuals who excel in a particular field, will encourage those around them to strive to achieve a similar degree of success. However, this possible outcome has been largely ignored in the social comparison literature. A handful of theorists have recognized the possibility that upward comparisons might serve self-improvement motives (Aspinwall, in press; Major et al., 1991; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wood, 1989; Wood & Van der Zee, in press). However, our studies are the first empirical investigations of the effects of outstanding others on motivation.

It is important to note that we found self-enhancement and motivation effects to be positively correlated. One might imagine that a superior other could make individuals feel badly about their inferior achievements and, at the same time, spur them on to overcome their inferior status and achieve future success. We
found no evidence for this: Upward comparisons that had a negative impact on the self-view were associated with decreased motivation, whereas those that had a positive impact on self-perceptions were associated with increased motivation. Moreover, in all of our studies, motivation was positively correlated with the positivity of participants’ self-ratings. This finding diverges from the pattern of results hypothesized in previous self-improvement theories, in which it was suggested that individuals may use upward comparisons to self-improve but that self-enhancement could be derived only from downward comparisons (Taylor & Lobel, 1989). In contrast, we found that self-improvement and self-enhancement can result from the same upward comparison.

The finding that motivation and self-image go hand in hand has important practical as well as theoretical implications. In particular, it seems unlikely that upward comparisons can shame individuals into bettering themselves. The parent who demands of a child, “Why can’t you be more like your brother?” will not only promote a sense of inferiority but may also shut down any will to self-improve. An attempt to motivate individuals to work harder by highlighting their inferiority to others might, in fact, be counterproductive. It may be more productive to choose role models that promote a positive self-image because they are also likely to inspire one to strive for higher goals.

Upward comparisons are ubiquitous in daily life. Our studies suggest that attempting to ward off the negative implications of an upward comparison by reminding people in advance of their own past successes may prove counterproductive. In interviews, sporting events, and other competitive situations, individuals are frequently encouraged to focus on their strong points, to self-aggrandize as a means of boosting self-confidence. Such a strategy may indeed enhance self-assurance; however, if these individuals are shortly thereafter outperformed on the very dimension that was the source of their personal pride, the consequences may be devastating. By activating their most positive self, these individuals may in fact be setting themselves up for a fall.

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