Cognitive Mechanisms of Social Inference: Anchoring and Adjustment and the Biasing Role of Self

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Abstract: To understand how humans make social inferences under conditions of insufficient information, we investigated the biasing role of self-information, in the cognitive mechanism Anchoring and Adjustment. Participants judged how applicable 240 statements were to themselves, and to a similar or dissimilar other. Adjustment was quantified as the absolute difference between self and other-judgments, for each statement. Since adjustment is a serial process, greater adjustment away from a self-anchor should require greater response time for other-judgments. To test for adjustment from the self-anchor during other-judgments, we manipulated RT constraints and block order. Regression analyses showed that self-anchoring depends on the accessibility of self-information. When self-judgments come first, self-information is highly accessible. Subjects anchor on previous self-judgments and then adjust away for similar others, and to a lesser degree for dissimilar others. When other-judgments precede self-judgments, accessibility of self-information decreases, and self-anchoring is not evident.