

Concept Paper Form

Provisional Paper Title: High-rate Criminal Offenders Rate Themselves as Average on Offending: Is it Adaptation or Misinformation?
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Please describe your proposal in 2-3 pages with sufficient detail for helpful review.

Objective of the study:

In the town of Lake Wobegon, everyone is above average. Everyone is prettier than the average person, they're smarter, and they have lower-than-expected social problems. Although Lake Wobegon is a fictional place, psychologists have identified a "Lake Wobegon effect", which highlights the human tendency to overstate one's abilities and achievements when compared to others. This observation has been so consistent that nearly 30 years ago, Myers (1998, p. 440) wrote: "...for nearly any subjective and socially desirable dimension ... most people see themselves as better than average."

Although we have a general understanding that humans see themselves through rose-tinted glasses, it is not clear how widely cast that "tint" will be. Do we only tend to overstate our abilities on "good" qualities? Or does it also extend to behaviors and qualities that fall outside the socially accepted boundaries? More specifically, do humans tend perceive themselves as being "normal" or "average" when it comes to things like their involvement in crime? At present, we do not know. No study of which we are aware has assessed whether the Lake Wobegon Effect will hold when people are asked about their involvement in criminal behavior.

It could be that the general pattern will hold—that people will see themselves as *less* criminally involved than their peers. But there are at least two arguments that could be made to suggest criminal behavior is a unique domain—that it does *not* get caught by the tides that flow into Lake Wobegon. First, it could be that because criminal behavior is stigmatized, criminal offenders are well aware that their behavior is not typical. In essence, social messaging around criminal behavior might be clear enough that this domain of human behavior could be an exception to the rule.

Second, it could be that a person's self-rating of their involvement in criminal activity will be highly correlated with their peer group's involvement in crime and delinquency. If a person hangs with a group of friends who are heavily involved in crime and delinquency, they may (accurately) rate themselves as *below* average if they do not partake in many of the acts.

In order to sort it out, this study will assess the Lake Wobegon effect for criminal behavior.

Data analysis methods:

The analysis for study will unfold in three steps:

1. Descriptive statistics will be produced for the two primary variables: 1) *self-rating of illegal acts* and two measures of offending 2a) *self-reported offending* and 2b) *official conviction*.
2. Bivariate analyses will be conducted between the two primary variables (*self-rating of illegal acts* and *offending*). Analyses will include:
 - a. Scatterplots
 - b. Bivariate correlation statistics
 - c. Bivariate regression of *offending* on *self-rating of illegal acts*
 - d. Calculating mean scores of *offending* and *self-rating of illegal acts* across different offending groups (e.g., mean score of *self-rating of illegal acts* for participants who are relatively low in offending; and a mean score of *self-rating of illegal acts* for participants who are relatively high in offending)
3. The last step of the analysis will assess the participants who were identified as "high-rate offenders", but who rated themselves as "normal" when compared to their peers. We will produce descriptive statistics that can help us paint an image of what these peoples' lives are like: what was their childhood background like and what types of personalities do they have?

Variables needed at which ages:

- slfcn18 (self-rating comparison illegal act freq @18)
- self-reported offending (frequency and variety)
- official conviction up to age 18
- sex
- SESchildhd
- MPQ
- *p*
- peer delinquency (during adolescence)

Significance of the Study (for theory, research methods or clinical practice):

This project sits at the intersection of criminology and psychology and, as such, will contribute to theoretical development in criminology and in evolutionary psychology,

specifically the psychology of self-deception. Results could inform human decision-making research. Results might also have practical importance as they could inform intervention efforts by identifying the thought-patterns of high-level criminal offenders. We may be able to identify a potential barrier to treatment: if high-level criminal offenders think they are normal, then they will be less receptive to intervention/treatment because they will not be convinced that they have a problem worth addressing.

References cited:

Myers, D. G. (1998). *Psychology* (5th ed.). New York: Worth.