A series of recent experiments on definite plurals in comparative constructions involving the stubbornly distributive predicate *big* has revealed a collective interpretation for *big* in terms of the average size of the relevant pluralities; a plurality X is judged bigger than a plurality Y just in case the average size of X is greater than the average size of Y. Following Schwarzschild (to appear), stubbornly distributive predicates are assumed to apply only to single-participant events; we show that the collective reading in terms of an average arises when we view the relevant plurality as a complex individual.

When presented with red and blue dots of varying sizes in random positions, along with the question “Are the red dots bigger than the blue dots?”, people answer YES when the average size of the red dots is larger than the average size of the blue dots. That is, they first infer an aggregate statistic (average size) from each plurality, and then compare those two values. Strategies involving point-wise comparisons between individual members of the pluralities (i.e., quantification over individuals or individual degrees) do not successfully predict people’s behavior. Assuming a semantics for comparison which states that a plurality X is bigger than a plurality Y just in case the degree to which X is big is larger than the degree to which Y is big, we necessitate a mode of collective predication in which X and Y may stand in the *big* relation to single degrees. That *big* should exhibit such collective predication is surprising, given the fact that it has previously been analyzed as “stubbornly distributive”.

Schwarzschild (to appear) shows that certain predicates disallow collective interpretations (specifically, in terms of sums of degrees, cf. Scha, 1984). He claims that (1) can be taken to mean that the total weight of the boxes is great and be true in a situation in which no individual box is heavy, whereas each box must be large in order for (2) to be true.

(1) The boxes are heavy.
(2) The boxes are large.

“Stubbornly distributive” predicates (stubbs) like *large* are said to be so because they are predicates of events (Higginbotham & Schein, 1989) and they require that their events have only single participants. Thus, when they combine with a plurality they force quantification over multiple events, one for each member of the plurality, so that each of these events has a single participant. Collective readings arise when multiple individuals share a single role in a single event (e.g., being heavy to a single degree). By requiring single-participant events, stubbs preclude situations in which many individuals participate in a single event, and thus preclude collective interpretations in which a plurality participates in a single event.

Assuming that *big* (or other predicates such as *long, tall*, etc.) is in fact a stubb, we cannot explain the collective interpretation people demonstrate in plural comparison in terms of multi-participant events (in which many individuals together participate in being a given size).
Collective interpretations in terms of an average also arise in positive constructions and equatives. Imagine a context in which the average sizes of the red dots and blue dots are equal, and qualify them as big. In this context, both (3) and (4) have an interpretation under which they are judged true.

(3) The red dots are big.

(4) The red dots are as big as the blue dots.

Introducing an abstract group noun retains this collective interpretation; both (5) and (6) are true in the same context as above under an average interpretation.

(5) The group of red dots is big.

(6) The group of red dots is as big as the group of blue dots.

That (5–6) allow a collective interpretation for big is unsurprising; we are saying that the group, and not the plurality of dots, participates in the relevant big events. Thus, the requirement that big have single-participant events is met.

We see that collective average predication is allowed whenever an overt group noun would support it (note that introducing group nouns into a plural comparative also preserves the availability of collective average interpretations). Thus, we take the interpretation to arise whenever a plurality is viewed as a complex individual, or group. We then require that under these collective average interpretations, definite plurals themselves refer to complex individuals (cf., e.g., Schwarzschild, 1996; Landman, 1996), so that only one individual participates in the events that the stubbs range over.