

New directions in social comparison research

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Abstract

This article notices that social comparison theory has developed from being a focused theoretical statement on the use of others for self-evaluation into a lively and varied area of research encompassing many different paradigms, approaches and applications. A recent ‘renaissance’ in social comparison theory is described in which links were established with social comparison work from before Festinger’s (1954) classic paper, and in which various new methods and theoretical models were developed. More recently, an ‘enlightenment’ of social comparison theory seems to occur in which an integrative effort is made to link social comparison processes to more general principles that underlie our psychological functioning. Four trends in this enlightenment are described: (1) the movement of social cognition to the centre stage of social comparison research; (2) the interest in more biological perspectives, including evolutionary theory; (3) the focus on the role of individual differences such as social comparison orientation (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) in moderating the responses to social comparison; and (4) an emphasis on the social context of social comparisons, in particular the influence of social groups and social identity. Copyright © 2001 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

THE ROOTS OF SOCIAL COMPARISON

In its broadest sense, the concept of social comparison—relating one’s own features to those of others and vice versa—is an important, if not central, characteristic of human social life. According to Gilbert, Price, and Allan (1995), because of the adaptive value of adequately sizing up one’s competitors, the need to compare self with others is phylogenetically very old, biologically very powerful, and recognizable in many species. Scholars have long recognized the importance of social comparison for human adaptation and survival. As Suls and Wheeler (2000) have noted, theorizing and research on social comparison can be traced to some of the classic contributions to Western

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philosophy, and to pivotal work in social psychology and sociology, including work on the self, adaptation level, reference groups, and social influence. Nevertheless, it was not until Festinger's (1954) classic paper that the term *social comparison* was introduced and an elaborate theory on social comparison processes was outlined.

Remarkably, in the first decade after the formulation of the theory, research on social comparison was relatively scarce. In fact, most initial research did not focus on the comparison of opinions and abilities that was the concern of Festinger's theory, but on affiliation in response to stress and uncertainty, a line of research instigated by the pioneering work by Schachter (1959). It was not until 1966 that Wheeler introduced the rank order paradigm to allow the examination of one of the central tenets of Festinger's (1954) theory, the existence of a so-called *drive upward*, implying that individuals have a preference to compare their performance with that of slightly better others.

EXPANSION, DEVELOPMENT AND REVIVAL OF SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY

While the original work on social comparison had a rather restricted focus on the choice of comparison targets, over the past decades, social comparison theory has undergone numerous transitions and reformulations, and in the process, has developed from being a focused theoretical statement on the use of others for self-evaluation into a lively and varied area of research encompassing many different paradigms, approaches and applications (e.g. Suls & Wheeler, 2000; Buunk & Gibbons, 1997, 2000). In this development, a number of pioneering studies were particularly influential. For instance, in a chapter entitled 'Pleasure and Pain in Social Comparison' Brickman and Bulman (1977) took issue with Festinger's basic assumption that comparison choice will typically be oriented toward superior others. Brickman and Bulman made a convincing argument that comparison with others who are thought to be doing better, though potentially informative, can also be threatening. For this reason, such comparisons are often avoided, especially by persons who feel threatened. Instead, comparisons with others who are thought to be worse off may be sought (see also Wilson & Benner, 1971). This line of reasoning was expanded in the now-classic paper by Wills (1981) on downward comparison theory. Wills argued that in situations that produce a decrease in well-being, individuals will often compare with others who are thought to be worse off in an effort to improve their well-being, particularly when instrumental action is not possible. The notion of downward comparison as an active, motivated process aimed at self-enhancement, was further underlined in Taylor, Wood, and Lichtman's (1983) research with women with breast cancer. In particular, this work showed that the vast majority of these women had engaged in some kind of downward comparison with other cancer victims, no matter how serious these women's problems were. The pioneering work by Wills (1981) and Taylor *et al.* (1983) led to an upsurge of research in the social comparison processes among victimized populations (for a review, see Tennen & Affleck, 2000), and, eventually, to the recognition that in such populations also upward comparisons may play an important role for coping by providing one with positive role models, and by giving inspiration and hope (Collins, 1996; Taylor & Lobel, 1989).

Particularly noteworthy is the theoretical impetus that originated from the work by Wills (1981) and Taylor *et al.* (1983), among others, by putting the *effects* of social comparison on the research agenda. Buunk and Gibbons (2000) labelled the paradigm shift that occurred about two decades ago as a 'renaissance' of social comparison theory. In this renaissance, conceptual links were reestablished with classic approaches that had previously not been considered as being in the realm of social comparison theory, but that were essentially concerned with social comparison in its broadest sense, such as the classic paper of Hyman (1942). In this paper it was shown that the assessment of one's own status on such

dimensions as financial position, intellectual capabilities, and physical attractiveness, is dependent on the group with whom one compares oneself. The renaissance was foreshadowed in the pioneering study by Morse and Gergen (1970), which focused attention on the potential negative consequences of upward comparison, and positive consequences of downward comparison, and it was visible in the influential Suls and Miller (1977) book several years later. During this renaissance period, social comparison theory underwent a vital 'rebirth' in which much broader, not just different, perspectives on social comparison developed (Buunk & Gibbons, 2000). These new perspectives considered basic comparison motives other than self-evaluation, namely self-enhancement and self-improvement, and included a variety of ways of engaging in social comparison, including the social construction of comparison targets (e.g. Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991). This approach used very different methods and paradigms, including interviewing people about their comparison habits and preferences, and confronting individuals with vivid social comparison information. In addition, it took the theory out of the lab, and looked at social comparison in populations—cancer patients and individuals in smoking cessation clinics, for example—that no researcher would have considered before this.

AN 'ENLIGHTENMENT' IN SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY: ESTABLISHING LINKS TO GENERAL THEORIZING

Although many of these characteristics still apply to current social comparison research, yet another shift in the focus of research attention appears to be taking place. In fact, a period of "enlightenment" (Buunk & Gibbons, 2000) in which an integrative effort is made to link social comparison processes to the more general principles that underlie our psychological functioning may be dawning. This quest for a more fundamental understanding of social comparison in terms of its basic underlying principles, promises to shed more 'light' in the next decade or two on many little understood phenomena and inconsistent findings in this field. Indeed, recent social comparison research and theorizing introduces a number of novel perspectives on this classic domain of social psychological research.

(1) It moves the *social cognition* of social comparison to centre stage. Although social comparison theory has been influenced in various ways by work on social cognition (e.g. prototypes, false consensus, attribution, cf. Buunk, Gibbons, & Reis-Bergan, 1997; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1997; Goethals & Darley, 1977), it is surprising that not until very recently, methods and models of social cognition and social judgment research found their way into social comparison research (e.g. Mussweiler, 2001; Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, in press; Mussweiler & Strack, 2000a,b; Stapel & Koomen, 2000). The overarching objective of such a social cognition perspective is to link social comparison processes to the cognitive bases that characterise our psychological functioning in any situation. Consistent with the basic tenets of social cognition research (for an overview, see Higgins, 1996; Wyer & Srull, 1989) this approach takes an informational perspective on the social comparison process. In particular, it is assumed that to understand the consequences social comparisons have for self-evaluation and self-perception, one needs to examine what self-knowledge is rendered accessible during the comparison, and how this knowledge is later used to judge and evaluate the self. For example, in their selective accessibility model, Mussweiler and Strack (2000a,b) argue that in many situations social comparison involves a selective search for evidence indicating that one is similar to the comparison other. This selective search typically increases the accessibility of such standard-consistent self-knowledge so that self-evaluations are often assimilated towards the standard. In a related vein, Dunning (2000, Dunning & Hayes, 1996) has demonstrated that individuals give quicker responses about their own characteristics after judging others on these characteristics, supposedly because judging others on certain dimensions makes the same characteristics in oneself salient and cognitively accessible—i.e. induces

social comparison. The fact that social comparison might not only induce contrast with the comparison target, but also assimilation (e.g. Brown, Novick, & Kelley, 1992; Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakoff, 1990; Collins, 1996; Mussweiler & Strack, 2000a; Stapel & Koomen, 2000), makes links to the social judgment literature particularly obvious. It seems likely that in the coming years our insight in social comparison processes will be greatly enhanced by employing techniques and models developed in the social cognition and social judgment literature. In the present issue this perspective is most obvious in Mussweiler's paper on the antecedents of assimilation and contrast in social comparison. Based on the assumption that the direction of the self-evaluative consequences of social comparison depends on the nature of the activated self-knowledge, he demonstrates that self-evaluations are assimilated to a given standard under conditions in which judges focus on similarities between themselves and the standard. In situations in which judges focus on differences, on the other hand, contrast is more likely to occur.

(2) A very similar metatheoretical goal characterises social comparison research with a *biopsychological* focus. In one line of research, the objective is to link social comparison processes to *physiological* responses that may function as markers for implicit reactions during the comparison. In the present issue, the paper by Mendes, Blascovich, Major, & Seery examines reactions to comparisons with similar versus dissimilar standards and in doing so demonstrates that taking a biopsychological approach promises to be a fruitful path of analysis for social comparison research.

A different biopsychological perspective is provided by models that try to understand social comparison from an *evolutionary perspective*. According to some authors, such a perspective has the potential to provide an unifying and overarching focus on social comparison (e.g. Gilbert, 1990; Gilbert, Price, & Allan, 1995). For example, Beach and Tesser (2000) have suggested that the mechanisms outlined in the self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) model developed as elaborated mechanisms to prevent competition in groups on the same dimensions, and to enhance cohesion because too much specialization could lead to downfall for the group. Buunk and Brenninkmeyer (2000) have suggested that many contradictory findings regarding the comparison activity of depressed individuals can be interpreted when depression is viewed as a type of involuntary subordination, that results from the perception of having a low rank in the group. In the present issue, Buunk and Brenninkmeyer refer to this perspective when presenting their study on the affective responses to formerly depressed individuals.

(3) It has become increasingly clear that there are important *individual differences* in the extent to which people compare with others and in the way that comparison information is interpreted. Among the many personality variables that influence social comparison processes and outcomes (for an overview, see Wheeler, 2000), self-esteem appears to play a particular prominent role and has consequently received the most empirical attention (e.g. Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Buunk *et al.*, 1990; Gibbons & McCoy, 1991; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). More recently, Gibbons and Buunk (1999) proposed the concept of *social comparison orientation* to refer to the personality disposition of individuals who are prone to comparison, and developed a scale assessing such differences. In general, people who are high on this scale have a tendency to relate what happens to others to themselves, and to be interested in information about others' thoughts and behaviors in similar circumstances. An increasing number of studies show how high and low comparers focus on and interpret comparison information differently (e.g. Buunk, Ybema, Gibbons, & Ipenburg, 2001c; Buunk, Oldersma, & de Dreu, 2001a; Buunk, van der Zee, & VanYperen, 2001b; Van der Zee, Oldersma, Buunk, & Bos, 1998). In general, then, it would seem important to include individual difference variables when examining the cognitive processes involved in social comparison, as well as reactions to it. In fact, this is done by various papers in this special issue. Building on the initial work by Gibbons and Buunk (1999), in this issue both the paper by Michinov and Michinov, as well as the one by Buunk and Brenninkmeyer, show that individuals high and low in social comparison orientation differ in

important ways in their responses to others. For one, Michinov and Michinov show that for those high in social comparison orientation, the well-established link between attitude similarity and attraction is considerably weaker than among those low in social comparison orientation, supposedly because high comparers are more interested in reducing uncertainty rather than in validating their attitudes. In doing so, the authors give the topic of opinion comparison, which, in marked contrast to its initial importance for social comparison theory has been relatively neglected (Suls, 2000) a new twist.

Buunk and Breninkmeyer, on the other hand, show that the way individuals respond to others who have overcome their depression depends strongly on one's social comparison orientation. Although it often is assumed that individuals facing some kind of distress may benefit from exposure to targets who take an active coping stance, Buunk and Breninkmeyer show that this may not be true when individuals are high in social comparison orientation. That is, among depressed individuals, with increasing levels of social comparison orientation, exposure to a target who had worked hard to overcome his or her depression, evokes a relatively negative mood change, while exposure to a target who had overcome his or her depression without much effort, evokes a relatively positive mood change. Among nondepressed individuals, the opposite pattern is found: with increasing levels of social comparison orientation, it is the actively coping target that evokes a relatively more positive mood change.

The paper by Lyubomirsky, Tucker, and Kasri (this issue) examines another individual difference. In particular, Lyubomirsky *et al.* focus on differences between chronically happy and unhappy people and examine how both groups react to hedonically conflicting social comparison information, i.e. how unhappy and happy individuals respond to *individual* comparative feedback after receiving *group* comparative feedback. They demonstrate that unhappy individuals are more sensitive than happy individuals to feedback that their group has lost, and to feedback that not only their group had lost, but also that they placed last in their group. However, unhappy individuals who learned that their group has lost are also more sensitive to positive comparative feedback about their own position. In that sense, in line with Wills's (1981) downward comparison theory, learning that one is doing better than others seems to alleviate the setback experienced by learning that one's group is doing poorly. Even more so, Lyubomirsky *et al.* show that positive individual feedback may make unhappy individuals 'immune' to negative group feedback.

Whereas the factors affecting comparison *choice* were the major focus of early research that grew out of Festinger's (1954) original theory, this topic lost some of its prominence in contemporary social comparison research. Nevertheless, there is some recent work indicating that comparison choice can have significant effects on performance in important, real-world settings. In one such study, Blanton, Buunk, Gibbons, and Kuiper (1999) found that high school students who compared academically with students who were doing well in school—as indicated by the actual GPAs of their preferred targets—had the highest grades at the end of the semester, controlling for their grades at the earlier assessment. In the present issue, Huguet, Dumas, Mouteil and Genestoux present a study that builds upon the research by Blanton *et al.* (1999), and expands this research in a number of important ways. Among others, they provide evidence that children compare upward with close friends with whom they identify as a means to self-improve, and that such identification is more likely when children perceive control over their standing relative to their peers.

(4) Enlightened social comparison research also emphasises the fact that social comparisons are typically situated in a social context that extends well beyond the dyade of the self and the standard. One respect in which the role of the social context of a comparison becomes particularly important, is the influence of social groups and social identity. In fact, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1975) shares a social comparison perspective and was actually in part based on Festinger's (1954) original theory. Although this theory was absent in earlier volumes on social comparison (Suls & Miller, 1977), it now seems to be moving toward a well-deserved place in the center of social

comparison theory. This development began with a chapter by Luhtanen and Crocker (1991), and culminated in its prominent place in the recent *Handbook of Social Comparison* (Suls & Wheeler, 2000) in the excellent chapter by Hogg (2000). Social identity theory rests on the assumption that groups compare their situation with that of other groups; in many ways, it reads as a group version of recent formulations in social comparison theory. In fact, social identity theory gave self-enhancement—or rather group enhancement—a central place long before Wills's (1981) seminal paper on downward comparison theory. Moreover, recent developments in social comparison theory have highlighted other important parallels with social identity theory. For example, the emphasis on permeability of group boundaries in fostering upward comparisons is conceptually similar to the emphasis on the role of control in recent versions of social comparison theory (e.g. Major, Testa, & Bylsma; 1991; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Also, the importance of social comparisons in shaping one's identity is recognized in social identity theory, an emphasis that developed in social comparison theory only decades after the original formulation (e.g. Tesser, 1980). Building on this theoretical proximity, recent social comparison research has begun to further examine the roles group membership and social identity play in the social comparison process (e.g. Brewer & Weber, 1994; Brown *et al.*, 1992; Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, in press; Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000). This research suggests that the consequences of social comparisons critically depend on the relative group membership of the self and the standard (e.g. Brewer & Weber, 1994; Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, in press). In fact, comparisons with ingroup versus outgroup standards appear to involve clearly differentiable psychological processes and involve different types of self-knowledge (Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, in press). In the current issue, the role of identity and group membership is examined in the paper by Finlay, Dinos, & Lyons. These authors demonstrate in a study among people with schizophrenia that the fact that we are simultaneously members of different social groups and consequently have multiple social identities allows for a flexible construction of the comparison process. In fact, this flexibility may often be used in a self-protective manner. (see Mussweiler *et al.*, 2000).

In addition to providing the raw material for group membership and social identity, the social context may influence social comparison processes in yet another way. In particular, people do not carry out social comparisons in social isolation. Rather, comparisons are situated in a social context in which they are perceived and evaluated by others. As Exline and Lobel demonstrate in this issue, for example, the fact that comparison standards compare back and may consequently suffer from being the target of self-enhancing comparisons may constitute an important determinant of comparison consequences.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the present issue testifies to the major developments that social comparison theory has undergone in the past decades, from a specific, well-defined theory, to a broad field of research in which increasingly links are established to a wide variety of other areas in social psychology, most notably methods and models from social cognition, but also approaches such as physiological psychology, evolutionary psychology, personality psychology and social identity theory. Remarkably, until not so long ago, social comparison was generally recognized as an important social psychological phenomenon, but this wide recognition was by no means matched by a concomittant research endeavor. In fact, until the mid eighties, research on social comparison was a peripheral phenomenon within social psychology, and few social psychologists were devoting their career to understanding the origins, motives, and consequences of social comparison. The present issue is one indication that this

situation is rapidly changing, and that social comparison is receiving the attention it seems to deserve as one of the basic phenomena underlying human social life.

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