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## Social Comparisons (Upward and Downward)



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(Festinger 1954; Gibbons and Buunk 1999; Lyubomirsky and Ross 1997). A critical element involved in social comparison is the motivation to better understand the self in relation to others. Indeed, motivation is at the center of one of the most highly celebrated social-psychological theories, first proposed in a seminal paper by Leon Festinger (1954), under the name social comparison theory.

## Synonyms

Self/other evaluations; Social comparison theory; Upward/downward social comparisons

## Definition

Social comparison refers to the processes by which individuals evaluate their own abilities, opinions, attitudes, feelings, physical features, accomplishments, or any other self-aspect in relation to other individuals and/or groups.

## What Is Social Comparison?

Social comparison refers to the processes by which individuals evaluate their own abilities, opinions, attitudes, feelings, physical features, accomplishments, or any other self-aspects in relation to other individuals and/or groups

## Social Comparison Theory

In his now classic work, Festinger laid out nine hypotheses that described the conditions under which individuals are more or less likely to compare themselves with others, as well as the targets and the outcomes of those comparison processes. In describing the role of motivation, Festinger emphasized that individuals have an innate drive to form accurate appraisals of themselves, often preferring to rely on objective, nonsocial means for this purpose.

Comparisons made using objective, nonsocial means typically involve using established professionals as a benchmark against which to evaluate one's abilities or performance. For example, an aspiring singer, writer, or athlete might compare themselves against an experienced professional in a relevant domain, gauging their ability and/or performance in relation to that of the more established professional.

However, in cases where objective, nonsocial means are unavailable, Festinger proposed that individuals will seek to make comparisons with similar others. That is, in the absence of opportunities to make objective comparisons, individuals will attempt to identify others who are similar on dimensions such as gender, age, experience, and so forth, evaluating themselves against these similar others using more subjective criteria. Later research clarified that individuals preferred to compare themselves with others who were similar in terms of characteristics both related to and predictive of performance for the specific dimension under evaluation (Goethals and Darley 1977; Miller 1982), and secondary dimensions including the target's level of experience, and whether they are a professional or an amateur (see Wood 1989 for a review). Importantly, Festinger (1954) noted that one's motivation to draw subjective comparisons with others tends to decrease as the differences between abilities, beliefs, and performance become more significant. Indeed, a substantial body of evidence indicates that in certain contexts people are motivated to exaggerate differences with others, particularly when highlighting these differences either protects or enhances self-esteem (Taylor and Lobel 1989; Wood et al. 1985). In other words, by exaggerating these differences and conceptualizing potential comparison targets as dissimilar to the self, individuals can protect themselves from hurt feelings by making the comparison less meaningful. Thus, contrary to Festinger's (1954) view that accurate self-evaluation was the purpose of social comparison, research suggests that in certain contexts social comparison can assume a biased, self-serving function.

## Upward and Downward Social Comparisons

In the years following the introduction of social comparison theory, a wealth of research expanded Festinger's (1954) initial framework in several important ways. Underlying much of this research was a focus on the direction of comparison (upward vs. downward) and the various

antecedents and consequences of social comparison in either direction. Given the ubiquitous role of social comparison in our day-to-day lives, it is possible that you have already engaged in comparisons in either one or both directions several times today. For example, you may have noticed that your romantic partner is outpacing you in your household chores or that you are outshining your peers in the workplace. These examples highlight two basic types of social comparison. Upward social comparison refers to the processes by which individuals evaluate themselves against those perceived to be superior on a given dimension (as in the romantic partner example). This type of comparison is often made in an effort geared toward self-improvement, in that identifying others who outperform us may provide valuable information that in turn can help improve our own performance. Upward comparisons can also serve a self-enhancement function through assimilation with the target (Collins 1996; Taylor and Lobel 1989; Wood 1989). Identifying similarities (assimilation) between oneself and the target of an upward social comparison has been linked to feelings of positive affect. In contrast, downward social comparison refers to the processes by which individuals evaluate themselves against those perceived to be inferior on a given dimension (as in the peers example). When performing this type of comparison, often the focus is on self-enhancement in an effort to feel better about one's standing relative to others by contrasting oneself with an inferior target (Wood et al. 1985; Wood 1989; Wills 1981). That is, highlighting how one is superior to a target can enhance subjective perceptions of well-being.

Although in his original conception of social comparison theory, Festinger (1954) did not discuss self-improvement as a motivational force driving upward social comparisons, this idea is wholly consistent with his hypothesis that individuals possess a unidirectional drive upward with respect to evaluating their abilities against those of others. Despite this, early social comparison research often either assumed or predicted that, at least under conditions of psychological threat, downward comparisons were preferred and that upward comparisons were avoided due

to their negative impact on self-esteem, subjective well-being, and mood (see Wills 1981, for a review).

However, later research indicated that these negative effects were moderated by one's expectations regarding the degree of perceived similarity to the target of comparison (Buunk et al. 1990). That is, the extent to which one appraised themselves as either different from (contrast effect) or similar to (assimilation effect) a superior other was shown to be an important determinant of whether upward social comparisons led to positive versus negative outcomes on measures including self-esteem and mood (Buunk et al. 1990; Collins 1996).

In sharp contrast with early views regarding a preference for downward comparison among those facing psychological threat, Taylor et al. (1993) revealed that cancer patients indicated a clear preference for contact with and information about fellow cancer patients whose health was better rather than worse than their own. Moreover, the opportunity to hear stories about those in better health was found to have positive effects (e.g., feelings of happiness and optimism), whereas negative effects (i.e., anxiety, threat) were reported when hearing stories from less fortunate others. Similar patterns were found among patients enrolled in a cardiac rehabilitation program (Helgeson and Taylor 1993). This clearly suggests that upward social comparisons can have a positive impact on self-esteem, subjective well-being, and mood, even among those particularly sensitive to psychological threat.

Positive outcomes associated with upward social comparisons have also been documented in those seeking to lose weight. Research by Rancourt et al. (2015) found that overweight young-adult women reported increased diet- and exercise-related thoughts when making weight-focused comparisons against both thinner (upward comparisons) and heavier (downward comparisons) targets. Importantly, comparisons against thinner (but not heavier) targets also increased healthy exercise behaviors. Taken together, a growing body of evidence suggests that, contrary to earlier views regarding the negative consequences of upward social comparison,

this form of self-other evaluation can sometimes generate positive outcomes. Whereas evidence indicates that upward social comparisons typically stem from both self-improvement and self-enhancement motives, considerable evidence suggests that the psychological processes underlying downward social comparisons rely primarily on self-enhancement motives (Buunk et al. 1990; Collins 1996; Wills 1981; Wood et al. 1985). The basic premise is that individuals can enhance their subjective well-being by contrasting some dimension related to the self against that of an inferior or less fortunate other. Research suggests that this form of comparison is elicited in response to negative affect, which is frequently invoked when individuals feel their self-esteem or subjective well-being is threatened (Taylor and Lobel 1989; Wills 1981; Wood et al. 1985). Indeed, under conditions of psychological threat, individuals often spontaneously compare themselves with disadvantaged or inferior others in an effort to bolster self-esteem.

For example, while conducting interviews with cancer patients, Wood et al. (1985) discovered that the overwhelming majority instinctively highlighted how their situation, although unfortunate, was preferable to those in a more advanced stage of the disease. However, although Buunk et al. (1990) replicated the tendency to make self-enhancing downward comparisons in a separate group of cancer patients, their data revealed that comparisons in this direction resulted in more negative affect than when patients made upward comparisons. As one might expect, the negative effect of downward comparisons on affect occurred more frequently for those with low (vs. high) self-esteem, and low (vs. high) perceived control. A separate study by Buunk et al. (1990) revealed similar patterns among individuals high in marital dissatisfaction. Taken together, these data suggest that the effects of downward social comparisons on self-esteem and affect can lead to either positive outcomes (via contrast effects) or negative outcomes (via assimilation effects) depending on how one appraises the situation (perceived control) and their level of self-esteem.

## The Selective Accessibility Model

In the previous sections, we discussed assimilation and contrast effects and noted how several aspects of personality and motivation can influence these forms of social comparison. For example, recall that upward (downward) social comparison is more likely to be a negative (positive) experience when contrasting rather than assimilating with a superior (inferior) target.

Contrast effects are more likely when individuals have low self-esteem, feelings of psychological distance from the target, and/or use a comparison standard that is not readily attainable (whereas the opposite of each variable predicts assimilation; Mussweiler 2001a). Although these moderators may seem disparate and disconnected, various theorists have raised ideas about how a common psychological mechanism might connect many moderators of social comparison.

For example, Mussweiler (2001b) proposed a model of selective accessibility to explain why contrast or assimilation would be more likely in certain situations, or given certain personality traits. Selective accessibility explains social comparison moderators by distilling them down to their effects on how people seek to test propositions that they consider.

Mussweiler argued that assimilation or contrast occur through a cognitive judgment of whether the self is like or unlike the comparison target and that these judgments are biased towards whatever information is currently accessible and salient. Because people are inclined to seek confirming rather than disconfirming evidence for their hypotheses, they are more likely to find evidence for (rather than against) whatever hypothesis they are testing. Thus, if they are seeking to test the proposition “I am like the target,” they will tend to be biased towards finding similarity, and assimilation occurs. The opposite is true if they test the proposition “I am unlike the target”; thus, contrast occurs. For example, because high self-esteem individuals tend to have highly accessible, positive self-information, they are more likely to think “I am like the target” if the target is an excellent performer, thus assimilating during upward social comparison. Feeling

psychologically distant from a target leads to increased thoughts about dissimilarity, in which case contrast occurs because people test the proposition “I am unlike the target.” Thoughts about dissimilarity also lead to contrast if a comparison standard seems unattainable. Thus, Mussweiler’s approach can provide an elegant theoretical explanation for these seemingly disparate moderators, unifying them within a single framework based on whether the self is like or unlike the comparison target.

## Conclusion

Identifying perceived similarities and differences between the self and others is a ubiquitous social phenomenon that allows individuals to better understand not only themselves, but also others, and thus more successfully navigate their social world. This brief overview of the social comparison literature provides an introduction to a theory that, although having undergone many revisions over the years, at the core remains true to Festinger’s (1954) original goal: identifying the processes by which individuals reduce uncertainty regarding some aspect of the self through making social comparisons with others.

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