

Social Comparison Processes in Social Phobia

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This study used diaries to investigate social comparison processes in 59 individuals with social phobia (SP) and 58 nonclinical controls. Although groups did not differ on the total number of comparisons made during the 2-week study period, those with SP made significantly more upward comparisons (i.e., comparisons where the individual assesses him- or herself as not measuring up to others) and significantly fewer downward comparisons (i.e., comparisons where the individual assesses him- or herself as superior to others) relative to controls. SP was also associated with comparisons on a greater number of dimensions or attributes and more comparisons on particular dimensions. Those in the SP group tended to experience greater changes in affect following social comparisons than those in the comparison group. For example, upward comparisons tended to lead to increased anxiety and depression, particularly for the socially anxious participants. Implications for these findings are discussed.

SOCIAL PHOBIA (SP) is associated with an extreme and persistent fear of social or performance situations in which an individual might be exposed to scrutiny from others (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Examples of situations feared by individuals with SP include meeting new people, conversations, public speaking, parties, and other social situations in which a person might feel embarrassed or humiliated. Cognitive formulations of SP (e.g., Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997) assign a central role to negative self-evaluations in the maintenance of the interpersonal

discomfort experienced by socially anxious individuals. These negative beliefs about oneself can manifest as concerns about being evaluated negatively by others or, alternatively, may emerge in the form of self-critical thoughts related to themes of personal inadequacy, incompetence, unattractiveness, and inferiority, particularly in the presence of others (Norton & Hope, 2001; Rapee & Lim, 1992; Stopa & Clark, 1993; Strahan & Conger, 1998; Wallace & Alden, 1995). Indeed, the relationship between SP and negative self-appraisal appears to be extremely robust, emerging in a wide range of studies, conducted in different settings and with different populations.

Taken together, a growing body of research now points to an association between SP and negative self-appraisal. Somewhat less clear is the nature of the social cognitive mechanisms involved in mediating this association. One such putative mechanism relates to social comparison. Comparisons between oneself and others represent a foundational source of self-evaluative information—particularly in the absence of objective evaluative criteria (Festinger, 1954). Furthermore, research has shown that social comparison is a ubiquitous feature of social relating, both between individuals (Wood, 1989) and between groups (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1994). As such, it seems reasonable to consider the potential involvement of social comparison processes in the negative self-appraisals characteristic of socially anxious people.

The notion that social comparison processes may be involved in the tendency to evaluate oneself negatively is not new. The last decade has witnessed considerable interest in the link between negative self-appraisal and social comparison. However, this interest has focused almost exclusively on individuals experiencing dysphoric or depressed mood (for a review, see Wood & Lockwood, 1999), with evidence that social comparison processes may serve to maintain or even exacerbate the negative self-appraisals associated with dysphoric mood (e.g., Swallow & Kuiper, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1993). Because of their potential relevance to the

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present study, we will briefly review the findings on social comparison and low mood. More detailed reviews are available elsewhere (e.g., Ahrens & Alloy, 1997; Suls & Wheeler, 2000).

Research on the relationship between the motivation for social comparison and low mood (e.g., dysphoria, low self-esteem) has yielded inconsistent results (for a review, see Collins, 1996). Whereas some studies find that individuals who are dysphoric or have low self-esteem report greater motivation to engage in social comparison behavior (e.g., Heidrich & Ryff, 1993; Swallow & Kuiper, 1990), other studies, based on monitoring with a naturalistic diary procedure, have found that dysphoric individuals make fewer social comparisons than nondysphoric individuals (Giordano & Wood, 2002; Giordano, Wood, & Michela, 2000).

Experts disagree about the potential relationship between one's view of oneself and the types of social comparison behavior used by an individual. For example, Wills (1981) hypothesized that individuals with low self-esteem might be more likely to engage in *downward* social comparisons (i.e., comparing oneself with others who are perceived as worse off on a particular dimension) in order to boost their self-esteem. In contrast, Swallow and Kuiper (1988) have theorized that *upward* social comparisons (i.e., social comparisons with others who are perceived as better on a particular dimension) may lead to, or maintain, negative self-views, suggesting that perhaps depressed individuals engage more frequently in upward social comparisons. Findings from studies support both these views (e.g., DeVellis et al., 1990; Gibbons, 1986; Swallow & Kuiper, 1993; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992).

A number of studies have examined the effects of social comparison behavior on subsequent depressive affect. In general, individuals report an improvement in affect following downward comparisons and a worsening in affect following upward comparisons (Ahrens & Alloy, 1997; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). The improvement in affect following downward comparisons may be particularly marked for individuals who are dysphoric, or who were unhappy before the comparison (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Gibbons, 1986; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989; Gibbons & McCoy, 1991; Giordano & Wood, 2002; cf. Lyubomorsky & Ross, 1997). In addition, dysphoric individuals (Giordano et al., 2000), neurotic individuals (Olson & Evans, 1999), and individuals with low self-esteem (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992) may be particularly disheartened following upward social comparisons.

There are several reasons to study the relationship between social comparison processes and SP. First, social anxiety shares many features with depression and dysphoric mood, which, as reviewed earlier, seem to be related to social comparison processes. For example, SP and depression often co-occur in the same individuals (Brown, Campbell, Lehman, Grisham, & Mancill, 2001; Zimmerman, Chelminski, & McDermut, 2002). SP and depression also share cognitive features, including a tendency to experience negative self-evaluative thoughts (Clark, Beck, & Alford, 1999; Cox et al., 2000; Stopa & Clark, 1993) and perfectionistic thinking (Antony, Purdon, Huta, & Swinson, 1998; Brown & Beck, 2002).

A second reason to study the relationship between social comparison and SP is the fact that social anxiety is associated with excessive concern about how one is being evaluated by others, as well as a tendency to evaluate oneself negatively (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Because of this concern, socially anxious individuals might be expected to engage in more frequent social comparisons (and perhaps different types of social comparisons) than people who are less concerned about negative evaluation from others. In addition, social anxiety tends to be associated with biases to attend selectively to information that is consistent with this negative view. Winton, Clark, and Edelman (1995) found that social anxiety is associated with a bias to view other people's emotional expressions as negative. Similarly, people who are high in social anxiety seem to attend selectively to social-evaluative threat cues in studies of information processing (e.g., Asmundson & Stein, 1994). Moreover, people high in social anxiety tend to underestimate the quality of their performance (Stopa & Clark, 1993) and appear to show a positive bias when appraising the performance of others (Alden & Wallace, 1995).

Although few, if any, studies have systematically investigated the relationship between social anxiety and social comparison, a study by Mahone, Bruch, and Heimberg (1993) touched on the topic. In this study, a thought-listing paradigm was used to study the effect of negative self-thoughts and perceptions of a partner's positive attributes on subsequent anxiety. After controlling for negative self-thoughts, perceived positive attributes in the partner were related to heightened behavioral signs of anxiety. It is likely that these perceptions arose from some sort of comparison made by participants. This finding is consistent with the notion that social comparison may contribute to anxiety in people who are socially anxious.

The present study used methods similar to Wheeler

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