

# Enhancing Satisfaction through Downward Comparison: The Role of Relational Discontent and Individual Differences in Social Comparison Orientation

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Three experiments examined whether downward social comparison may enhance satisfaction in close relationships. In a thought-generating task participants were asked to generate features of their relationship in which they considered their relationship as *better than that of most others* (downward comparison condition) versus features that they considered merely as *good* (no-comparison condition). Experiment 1 and Experiment 3 found evidence that downward comparison resulted in more relationship satisfaction than merely generating good qualities of the relationship in both dating and marital relationships. Experiment 2 and Experiment 3 showed that engaging in downward comparison moderated the effect of relational discontent upon satisfaction, but only for those high in social comparison orientation. Moreover, after downward comparison, individuals had relatively shorter response latencies when answering questions about their relationship, suggesting that the comparison task made attitudes toward one's relationship cognitively more accessible. The differential effect of both conditions was not due to the fact that relatively more features were generated in the comparison condition or that these features were relatively more positive. © 2001 Academic Press

Do individuals who face problems in their close relationship view their relationship in a more positive light when they bring to mind the ways in which their relationship is better than that of others? And does this process of comparing oneself with others who are worse off help all individuals to the same extent? The notion that individuals may benefit from comparisons with others who are doing less well was put forward by

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Hakmiller (1966), who suggested that social comparison may serve the purpose of “sustaining or reasserting the favorability of the individual’s self-regard” (p. 37). This notion gained increasing attention when Wills’ (1981) published his *downward social comparisons theory*, in which he proposed that individuals who experience distress may improve their subjective well-being by engaging in comparisons with others who are doing worse than they are. The present research examines if individuals, particularly those experiencing discontent in their close relationship, may improve the evaluation of their relationship by comparing themselves with others doing worse. Moreover, we examined whether the beneficial effect of such downward comparison upon relationship evaluation occurs in particular among those with a dispositional tendency to base their self-evaluation on comparison with others.

## DOWNWARD COMPARISON

Downward comparison may occur in a variety of ways. For example, some studies have focused on downward

social comparison as a *reactive* process by examining how individuals feel after exposure to a description of a social comparison target who is worse-off than oneself (e.g., Gibbons & Gerrard, 1991; Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993). However, we were interested in a different type of process. As noted by Buunk (1994), among individuals facing some type of threat, downward comparison may take place without being exposed to a target and seems often to involve an *active*, motivated process. Studies among victimized populations suggest that individuals often bring to mind others in comparison with whom they look better, think about dimensions on which they are still better than others, or cognitively create worse-off comparison targets (e.g. Buunk & Ybema, 1995, 1997; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1997; Taylor, Wood, & Lichtman, 1983; Van der Zee, Buunk, & Sanderman, 1995; Wills, 1997). This type of downward comparison seems to have an effortful and possibly even intentional character, directed at making the perception of one's situation more acceptable by adopting a different standard of evaluation. That is, by contrasting themselves with others who are worse off, individuals may create a lower reference point to evaluate their own situation, in comparison to which their own situation looks better than it would have looked otherwise (cf. Klein, 1997; Mussweiler & Strack, 2001). There is some suggestive evidence that such a strategy may indeed contribute to a more favorable perception of one's situation among individuals facing distress (e.g., Van der Zee et al., 1995). For instance, Jensen and Karoly (1992) found that chronic pain patients who showed a stronger tendency to use downward comparison experienced lower levels of depression. In a sample of individuals covered by the Disablement Insurance Act, Buunk and Ybema (1995) found that individuals who engaged more frequently in comparison with others in worse situations evaluated their situation relatively more favorably 1 year later.

Theorizing on the role of downward comparison as a mechanism to cope with threatening events and circumstances would suggest that downward comparisons will work mainly or only for those experiencing some level of relationship distress (e.g., Buunk, 1994; Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakoff, 1990; Taylor et al., 1983; Tennen & Affleck, 1997; Wills, 1997). Individuals facing relational distress will be inclined to evaluate their relationship in a negative way and may, through engaging in downward comparison, enhance the evaluation of their relationship and conclude that their relationship is "not so bad after all." For such individuals, there is a threat in the sense that they feel that their relationship is in a comparatively poor state, and by changing the standard by which they evaluate their relationship, they may attain a more favorable evaluation of their relationship despite the problems they are facing. In contrast, for those who are happy with their relationship, downward comparisons would largely confirm the positive evaluation they already have of their relation-

ship and may therefore exert relatively minor effects on the evaluation of one's relationship. In general, there is considerable correlational evidence that those who experience high levels of happiness in their close relationship tend to think that their relationship compares favorably to most other relationships (e.g., Buunk & VanYperen, 1991; Buunk & Van den Eijnden, 1997; Heady & Wearing, 1988; Helgeson, 1994; Martz, Verette, Arriaga, Slovik, Cox, & Rusbult, 1998). Thus, we expected that those faced with relational discontent may particularly benefit from engaging in comparisons with others in worse situations.

#### INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL COMPARISON ORIENTATION

Not all individuals facing relationship threat will benefit from downward comparison. A central assumption in the present research was that the beneficial effects of downward comparison will occur in particular, or only, for individuals who have a strong dispositional tendency to use social comparisons as a basis for self-evaluation. Several researchers have suggested that people may differ in their disposition to compare themselves with others (e.g., Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Wills, 1981). For instance, Hemphill and Lehman (1991) mentioned "the need for researchers to include measures of social comparison that acknowledge the fact that people may not wish to compare with others to an equal extent" (p. 390). Recently, Gibbons and Buunk (1999) proposed the concept of *social comparison orientation* to refer to the personality disposition of individuals who are inclined to use social comparisons to evaluate their characteristics, who tend to focus on how they are doing in comparison with others, and who have a tendency to relate what happens to others to themselves. Individuals high in social comparison orientation are characterized by a sense of uncertainty about themselves as well as by a strong concern with their own motives and feelings, as apparent from substantial correlations of social comparison orientation with neuroticism, and with public and private self-consciousness (i.e., Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). Moreover, and particularly relevant here, individuals high in social comparison orientation are relatively low in intellectual autonomy (one of the Big Five dimensions) and tend to have a strong interest in how others are doing in order to evaluate their own characteristics, as apparent from the substantial correlations of social comparison orientation with the Attention to Social Comparison Information Scale (which appears to be a measure of other orientation and conformity; see Bearden & Rose, 1990), and with interpersonal orientation (Swap & Rubin, 1983). Evidence for the external validity of the scale comes from a laboratory experiment showing that individuals high in social comparison orientation are more interested in the scores of others after having learned their own score (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999)

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