

Preferred changes in power differences: Effects of social comparison in equal and unequal power relations

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Abstract

Efforts to change power differences with others who are equal and unequal in power were examined. According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Rijsman, 1983), people prefer slight superiority in power over comparison others. In Experiment 1, 93 participants imagined working with two others in a group. Group members varied in hierarchical rank and on exact power scores. Participants indicated their preferred changes in power differences. Social comparison theory was supported regarding rank differences, but not regarding power scores. In Experiment 2, 145 participants imagined a similar group setting. Group members were equal, unequal, or very unequal in power. Social comparison theory was supported regarding ranks: power differences with an equally powerful person were increased more often than with a less powerful person. Power scores again yielded no effects. This suggests that social comparisons of power are based on rank and not interval information.

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Power differences can be found in any setting where people interact. Sometimes these differences are visible, as in the hierarchies of work organizations; sometimes they are more hidden, as in relationships and informal groups. The importance of power and power differences for understanding a large number of interpersonal and intergroup processes is clear (e.g., Brewer & Brown, 1998; Fiske, 2001; Ng, 1980; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1985, 1991). For instance, Depret and Fiske (1993) and Fiske (2001) report a series of studies showing the effects of power differences on stereotyping of subordinates by power holders and the individuation of power holders by subordinates. Not only does a power advantage lead to stereotyping, it can also lead to discrimination. In a minimal group setting, a power advantage is more predictive of out-group discrimination than is a status advantage (Sachdev & Bourhis, 1991).

Power differences are not necessarily stable. This aspect of power in groups and organizations has received scant research attention. Nevertheless, investigating instability in power differences is important because changes in power differences can cause conflict, loss of effectiveness and other detrimental effects if group or organization members have incompatible power preferences. These incompatible preferences can be an effect of people's motivations to have power. Possessing or exercising power can be appreciated because it is instrumental in reaching desired ends, such as wealth or status (e.g., Hollander, 1985; Ng, 1980). Power can also be valued as an end in itself (e.g., Bruins & Wilke, 1992, 1993; Kipnis, 1974; Mulder, 1977; Mulder, Veen, Hijzen, & Jansen, 1973; Ng, 1977).

The aim of the present research is to extend our understanding of when and how people want to change existing power differences by applying social comparison theory. Social comparison theory states that people often compare valued attributes, and depending on the comparison outcome, attempt to change positions on the comparison dimension (e.g., Wood, 1989). Power can be considered a valued attribute, although it is not

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as stable and personal as mathematical ability or a personality characteristic. People have a specific amount of power over specific others in specific situations (e.g., Depret & Fiske, 1993; Emerson, 1962, 1964; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Ng, 1980). Yet the power that people have in some situation (e.g., a work organization) is usually stable. Therefore, people are likely to compare their own power with that of others.

We applied social comparison theory to the effects of three group characteristics on efforts to change power differences. The first characteristic is the *rank difference* between hierarchical levels. For instance, is someone higher in the hierarchy more inclined to decrease the power difference with the top rank than someone lower in the hierarchy? The second characteristic is the power difference between *adjacent hierarchical levels*. Are group members whose direct superior has little power over them, for example, more inclined to decrease the power difference with that person than are group members whose superior has more power over them? The third characteristic is *equality in the power* of group members. Do people want to increase power differences with other group members of the same rank? And are these efforts comparable to efforts to change power differences with group members at different ranks? Social comparison theory has been applied to such problems before, but the predictions were restricted in scope, because they were limited to efforts to decrease power differences with the highest ranked person (Ng, 1977), or to change power differences with others at different ranks (Poppe, 1996; Van Dijke & Poppe, 2000). Moreover, the procedures were limited because (as we will show) they did not allow for independent tests of effects associated with all three of the group characteristics that we believe are important.

The key assumption of social comparison theory, as originally formulated by Festinger (1954), is that people evaluate their opinions and abilities. When physical criteria are absent, people make these evaluations by comparing themselves with others. Evaluation results in efforts to decrease the difference between oneself and the comparison other(s) on the relevant dimension. Unlike opinion comparison, comparison of abilities results in a drive to move upward on the comparison dimension. However, not everyone is equally likely to be chosen as a comparison other. Comparison with others who are more different yields less accurate information, so people are less inclined to compare themselves with specific others as the difference between their own opinions or abilities and those of others increases.

Our understanding of social comparison processes has increased considerably since Festinger's original formulation. Several studies have shown that people prefer to compare with others who are similar on the comparison dimension (e.g., Wheeler, 1966), but people do sometimes compare with dissimilar others instead, to help define that dimension (e.g., Wheeler et al., 1969). In

addition, people compare with others who are similar on related dimensions, to better understand their standing on the comparison dimension (e.g., Goethals & Darley, 1977). People sometimes compare with others who are similar on dimensions that are not even related to the comparison dimension (e.g., Tesser, 1986). And in addition to the evaluation motive, people may compare themselves to others for self-enhancement and self-improvement. These motives lead people to choose different comparison others, depending on the situation (see Suls & Wheeler, 2000; Suls & Wills, 1991; Wood, 1989, 1996 for overviews).

Importantly, social comparison is not restricted to abilities and opinions. People compare a variety of personal attributes. For instance, in a study by Wheeler (1966), the participants compared a valued personality characteristic. Rijsman and Poppe (1977) and Poppe (1980) report studies showing that choices in experimental games are affected by social comparisons. In these studies, participants compared their own position with that of others on a dimension made salient by the experimental situation.

In line with Festinger's (1954) original propositions, Rijsman (Rijsman, 1974, 1983 Rijsman & Poppe, 1977; see also Huguot, Dumas, Monteil, & Genestoux, 2001; Seta, 1982; Seta, Seta, & Donaldson, 1991) investigated the effects of given comparison others on tendencies to move towards or away from these others on a dimension on which an ability is compared. According to Rijsman (1974), social comparison produces pressure to move towards the comparison other on the comparison dimension. This so-called *uniformity pressure* is stronger if the difference between the self and the comparison other is larger, whether this difference is caused by a large inferiority or a large superiority. In a situation where an ability (or any valued attribute) is compared, there is also a pressure towards *positive distinctiveness*. This results in efforts to move upwards on the comparison dimension, unless one is very superior. Because this pressure is aimed at positive distinctiveness, it is stronger as one is more inferior to the comparison other.

The uniformity pressure and the upward mobility pressure both affect movement on a comparison dimension. These two pressures can thus be added. The two pressures together create a strong tendency to move upward on the comparison dimension if someone is inferior, because both pressures are directed upwards. If someone is equal to a comparison other, then it is not possible to increase uniformity; but the person could still want to be positively distinct from the comparison other. The result would be upward movement on the comparison dimension. If someone is superior to the comparison other, then the two pressures oppose one another. The uniformity pressure pushes the person down the comparison dimension, towards the comparison other, while the positive distinctiveness pressure

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