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Self-determination and the consequences of social comparison

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Abstract

The present research examined the consequences of social comparison as a function of individual differences in self-determination. Competing hypotheses were made regarding whether the effects of social comparison would be determined more by the tendency toward pressure and ego-defensiveness (higher controlled orientation), by the absence of choice and unconditional positive self-regard (lower autonomy orientation), or both. A forced comparison was created in which 79 college students completed a word finding task and received feedback about their performance along with that of a better or worse performing confederate. Autonomy orientation moderated comparison consequences such that less autonomous individuals experienced increased negative changes in affect and decreased self-esteem when paired with a better performing other. This was especially true, for affect, when participants had been told that the task was related to intelligence. Results provide preliminary support for integration of self-determination and social comparison theories.

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1. Introduction

Both self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985b, 1987, 1991, 2000) and social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) address how one's performance, in combination with feedback from one's environment, impacts the self. Given the amount of attention that has been devoted to each of these theories, it is somewhat surprising that previous empirical work has not directly addressed the conceptual overlap between

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these theoretical traditions. The present research represents an initial step toward this objective by examining the consequences of social comparison as a function of individual differences in self-determination.

Self-determination theory focuses on motivations and intentions for engaging in behavior and assumes that individuals have innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985b, 2000). From this perspective, motivation is viewed as multifaceted rather than as a unidimensional quality. For example, while one individual may be motivated to engage in an activity out of interest or because the activity is personally valued, another individual may be equally motivated to engage in the same activity to procure a reward, avoid punishment or rejection, or as an attempt to live up to perceived expectations. Individual differences in self-determination are thought to emerge over time as a function of individual predispositions combined with exposure to factors in the environment that serve to either control behavior or support autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985b).

Environmental factors that typically result in positive emotional consequences and more self-determined motivation include provision of choice (Swann & Pittman, 1977; Zuckerman, Porac, Lathin, Smith, & Deci, 1978), and support of autonomy (Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981a; Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981b). In contrast, controlling factors such as rewards (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999), threats and deadlines (Amabile, DeJong, & Lepper, 1976), surveillance (Lepper & Greene, 1975; Plant & Ryan, 1985), and evaluation (Benware & Deci, 1984; Harackiewicz, Manderlink, & Sansone, 1984) typically result in reduced self-determination. Ryan (1982), for example, found that manipulating the salience of evaluative implications for task performance by telling some students that the task was related to intelligence subsequently reduced their intrinsic motivation for the task.

1.1. Causality orientations

Individual differences in self-determination have frequently been examined by assessing causality orientations (Deci & Ryan, 1985a). Causality orientations have been described as three general motivational orientations: autonomy orientation, controlled orientation,¹ and impersonal orientation. The autonomy and controlled orientations are both positively associated with level of motivation. Being higher on either of these indicates more motivation, although they differ distinctly in quality. The impersonal orientation focuses on a relative absence or lack of motivation and was not of interest in the present study. While autonomy and controlled orientations each address independent aspects of self-determination, autonomy can generally be thought of as a positive indicator of self-determination whereas controlled orientation can be thought of as a negative indicator of self-determination.

¹ While originally termed control orientation (Deci & Ryan, 1985a, 1985b), we have chosen the term controlled orientation in an effort to help reduce confusion of this orientation with the numerous other “control” constructs (see Skinner, 1996 for a review of this issue). Also, note that Ryan and Deci (2002) use the term controlled orientation.

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