



## Romantic jealousy as a social comparison outcome: When similarity stings

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Received 26 August 2002; revised 20 August 2003

### Abstract

Two studies examined the role of perceived self-rival similarity in the experience of romantic jealousy, which is assumed to reflect threats to self-evaluation. Self–other similarity is one factor that determines whether social comparison yields assimilation or contrast. Based on the premise that people want their romantic partners to see themselves positively, it is predicted that people experience greater jealousy when comparing with an attractive rival in terms of similarities because similarity challenges one's positive distinctiveness. People should also experience greater jealousy, however, when they compare themselves with an unattractive rival in a manner that renders their own weaknesses salient during the comparison process. The results support the 'distinctiveness hypothesis,' but are inconsistent with cognitive models of social comparison, which posit that people see themselves more positively either when their self-evaluations are assimilated to superior others or contrasted away from inferior others.

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*Keywords:* Social comparison; Self-esteem; Distinctiveness; Jealousy

A central tenet of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) is that people evaluate themselves by comparing with others. In doing so, people preferably compare themselves with similar others because it is more informative to gauge one's own standing relative to similar others than to exceptional others (e.g., Blanton, 2001; Goethals & Darley, 1977; Miller, 1984). Festinger (1954) also emphasized that doing well in comparison with others has important motivational consequences. The early social comparison literature is replete with evidence for evaluative contrast. Morse and Gergen (1970), for instance, showed that social comparison with superior others can lower self-evaluation whereas social comparison with inferior others can elevate self-evaluation. However, the self-evaluative implications of social comparison are not intrinsic to its direction (upward vs. downward) but depend on whether self-appraisals are displaced toward or away from the comparison other (Blanton, 2001; Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Collins, 1996; Taylor & Lobel,

1989). Generally speaking, assimilation and contrast can both yield a positive (negative) self-evaluation.

Basically, an assimilation effect denotes that self-evaluation is displaced toward the evaluation of another person whereas a contrast effect denotes that self-evaluation is displaced away from the evaluation of the comparison other (cf. Blanton, 2001). More positive self-evaluations can thus be expected either when self-evaluation is assimilated to superior others or when self-evaluation is contrasted away from inferior others. More negative self-evaluations result, however, when self-evaluation is assimilated to inferior others or contrasted away from superior others. One factor that tips the balance between assimilation and contrast is the perceived similarity between self and comparison other (e.g., Buunk & Ybema, 1997; Collins, 1996). Importantly, similarity is not confined to the comparison dimension but refers to any information that characterizes the comparer and the comparison other. Someone else can be similar to the comparer either on the evaluative dimension itself or on surrounding dimensions such as age, gender, or conditions of living. A study by Brown et al. (1992), for instance, showed that people tend to

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assimilate their appraisals of attractiveness to the attractiveness of others when the comparison other holds similar attitudes or shares the comparer's birthday but contrast their appraisals away from others when these attributes are not matched.

Concerning the role of self–other similarity, the selective accessibility (SA) model (Mussweiler & Strack, 2000) posits that assimilation is put forth by an increased accessibility of knowledge suggesting that the self is similar to the comparison other. On the other hand, the self-evaluative consequences are likely to be contrastive in nature when the comparative information is processed in terms of dissimilarities. Stated differently, assessing one's position along a judgmental dimension relative to a comparison other yields contrast when the comparison other serves as a reference point for self-evaluations. By manipulating comparison information and salience, Mussweiler (2001) showed that self-appraisals of academic competence are assimilated to the comparison other when the features of the comparison other are salient but that self-appraisals reflect evaluative contrast when the features of the self are salient. The notion that self–other similarity depends upon the salience of shared and distinct features of the self and the comparison other is the core of the feature matching model's focusing hypothesis (Holyoak & Gordon, 1983; Srull & Gaelick, 1983; Tversky, 1977). Research drawing on the focusing hypothesis has shown that salience is determined by the focus of comparison (e.g., “How competent are *you* compared to others?” vs. “How competent are *others* compared to yourself?”).

Cognitive models of social comparison thus propose that assimilation becomes more likely when shared attributes are salient (Brown et al., 1992; Miller, 1984; Tversky, 1977) or when people process social comparison information selectively in terms of potential similarities between self and comparison other (Manis, Biernat, & Nelson, 1991; Mussweiler, 2001). On the other hand, contrastive reactions to comparison information become more likely with increasing salience of one's own distinctive characteristics. These propositions were examined in context of romantic jealousy, where the self as a unique partner is challenged by a real or imagined rival. More specifically, jealousy arises when another person “poses a threat to what one perceives to be valuable in oneself” (Harris, 2003; p. 119), that is, attributes that are particularly important to the self (see also Beach et al., 1998; Bush, Bush, & Jennings, 1988; DeSteno & Salovey, 1996). Romantic jealousy should therefore reflect perceived threats to self-evaluation (Salovey, 1991; Salovey & Rodin, 1986).

Importantly, the self-concept literature suggests that people often perceive their traits and abilities as rare and unique (e.g., Alicke, 1985; Ditto & Griffin, 1993). People are normally motivated to feel good about themselves and they tend to see themselves in more positive terms

than most other persons, particularly with respect to desirable attributes (Brown, 1986; Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991; Kernis, 1984; Tesser, 1988; Wood, 1989). Stated differently, similarity is by no means desired in every situation. Assuming that close partners strive to appear unique in the eyes of their partners, an attractive rival should evoke greater jealousy when similarities between oneself and the rival are stressed. Similarity in this context should be experienced as threatening because a rival can challenge one's own positive distinctiveness. Others become rivals when they attract one's partner's attention, thereby increasing the concern that one might be abandoned by the partner. Fitting well with that, research has shown that people tend to derogate a rival's qualities if these qualities are also relevant to their own self-definition (e.g., Schmitt, 1988).

Apparently, the assumption that a rival who outdoes the comparer on self-relevant dimensions evokes greater jealousy when similarities between the self and the rival are stressed appears incompatible with the prediction derived from cognitive social comparison models (Mussweiler & Strack, 2000; Tversky, 1977). These models suggest that people experience less jealousy when they assimilate their self-evaluations to an attractive rather than to an unattractive rival. The notion that people tend to stress their unique characteristics and to see themselves in positive terms, however, suggests a different role of self–other similarity. When similarities are stressed, a rival who is superior on self-relevant dimensions should be experienced as more threatening than a less attractive rival. In fact, it seems intuitively reasonable that inferior rivals are less threatening than superior ones. However, the ‘distinctiveness hypothesis’ also suggests that inferior rivals evoke greater jealousy when discrepancies rather than similarities between the self and the rival are accentuated. Suspecting that one's partner is attracted to a rival, self-evaluation is threatened to the extent that one's own weaknesses become salient, thereby highlighting a rival's distinctive qualities.

To summarize, the extent to which social comparison with potential rivals evokes romantic jealousy should depend on the relative salience of unique characteristics of the self and the rival. This assumption is based on the premise that jealousy reflects people's self-evaluative concerns. Given that people want their romantic partners to see themselves as positively distinctive, similarities between oneself and an attractive rival should be threatening, especially when the challenged attributes are central to self-definition. When comparing with a less attractive rival, however, dissimilarities between oneself and the rival should evoke greater jealousy if one's own weaknesses become salient during comparison. Noteworthy, the predicted role of self-rival similarity appears incompatible with popular models of social comparison.

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