

The man who wasn't there: Subliminal social comparison standards influence self-evaluation[☆]

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Abstract

Life provides an endless stream of social comparison information. Because opportunities to compare with others are so abundant, social comparison theory traditionally assumes that people are selective in their comparison activities and primarily compare with deliberately selected standards. Recent research, however, demonstrates that social comparisons often occur spontaneously, even if no standard is explicitly provided or deliberately selected. We examined whether comparisons are so spontaneous that they are even engaged if people are fleetingly exposed to a potential standard—so fleetingly that they remain unaware of the standard. In three studies, participants were subliminally primed with moderate versus extreme, high versus low standards during self-evaluation. Results demonstrate that self-evaluations are influenced by subliminally presented standards. Specifically, self-evaluations are assimilated towards moderate standards and contrasted away from extreme standards. These self-evaluative consequences of subliminal standards, however, were only obtained if participants engaged in self-reflection during standard exposure. These findings emphasize that social comparisons are truly ubiquitous processes that are engaged even for fleeting exposure to standard information.

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In their daily routines, people are constantly confronted with information about the abilities, fortunes, and weaknesses of others. In fact, life provides such an endless stream of social comparison opportunities that people may have a hard time to relate all of this information to themselves. It is thus little surprising that one of the cornerstones of social comparison theory and research is the notion that people are selective in their social comparison activities (Festinger, 1954). People are

not assumed to compare themselves with any potential standard. Rather, they are taken to select those standards for comparison that promise to provide valuable information because they are similar to the self (Festinger, 1954; Goethals & Darley, 1977; Miller, 1982; Suls, Gastorf, & Lawhon, 1978; Wheeler, 1966). Social comparisons are thus typically seen as involving a deliberate standard selection process in which different standards are considered and the most appropriate one is selected. Supplementing this traditional view, recent research suggests that comparisons may not always be deliberate processes that are strategically engaged. Oftentimes, social comparisons simply happen. In fact, people spontaneously compare themselves even with clearly irrelevant standards (Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995). This suggests that social comparisons may be so natural and effortless that they are carried out even if the comparison offers little valuable information.

What are the limits of this inclination to spontaneously compare with others? Are potential standards already used for comparison, if social judges are only fleetingly exposed to them? Imagine, for example, that

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while reflecting on your athletic abilities on your way to the gym you hear somebody mention the name of Michael Jordan? Does such a fleeting exposure to a potential comparison standard influence self-evaluations of your athletic abilities? In the present research, we pushed this question a little further and examined whether a standard to whom exposure was so fleeting that—phenomenologically—he was not even there, is used for comparison. Do people compare themselves with a standard who was not consciously perceived because he was presented outside of awareness? To find out, we subliminally primed participants who were engaging in self-evaluation with the names of potential social comparison standards. If such subliminal standards are indeed used for comparison, then this would be apparent in an influence on subsequent self-evaluations. Comparisons with others change the way we see and evaluate ourselves (Morse & Gergen, 1970) so that changes in self-evaluation can be used as an indicator of social comparison activities.

In fact, the direction of these self-evaluative comparison consequences appears to be highly variable in that sometimes self-evaluations are assimilated toward a given standard and sometimes they are contrasted away from the standard (e.g., Brewer & Weber, 1994; Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakof, 1990; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, 2002; Pelham & Wachsmuth, 1995; for an overview and theoretical integration, see Mussweiler, 2003). One of the critical moderators that determine whether assimilation or contrast results as a comparison consequence, is standard extremity. We have recently demonstrated that in deliberate social comparison self-evaluations are assimilated towards explicitly provided moderate standards and contrasted away from extreme standards (Mussweiler, Rüter, & Epstude, in press). This is the case, because for both types of standards people seek and activate different subsets of self-knowledge during the comparison process (Mussweiler, 2003). Comparisons with moderate standards involve a comparison process of similarity testing which increases the accessibility of knowledge indicating that self and standard are similar. In comparing their athletic abilities to a moderate standard like Bill Clinton, for example, participants consider the possibility that they are as athletic as the former US president and selectively search for information that is consistent with this assumption. Comparisons with extreme standards, however, involve a comparison process of dissimilarity testing which increases the accessibility of knowledge indicating that self and standard are different. In comparing their athletic abilities to an extreme standard like Michael Jordan, for example, considering the possibility that one may be as athletic as the former basketball professional makes little sense, so that people instead selectively search for

information indicating that their athletic ability is different from Michael Jordan. Consistent with this assumption, we have recently demonstrated that judges assimilated self-evaluations of their athletic abilities to the moderate standard Bill Clinton, and contrasted away from the extreme standard Michael Jordan (Mussweiler et al., in press). As is true for social judgment in general (e.g., Herr, 1986), self-evaluations were thus assimilated to moderate standards and contrasted away from extreme standards. Would this influence of standard extremity on the direction of comparison consequences also hold for subliminal standards? We examined these questions in three experiments. Studies 1 and 3 focus on the effects of moderate subliminal standards. Study 2 examines the effects of moderate and extreme standards.

Study 1

If subliminally presented standards are used for social comparison, then this would be apparent in their influence on subsequent self-evaluations. Comparisons with moderate standards typically yield assimilative self-evaluative consequences, so that the self is evaluated to be higher on the critical dimension after a comparison with a moderately high rather than a moderately low standard (see, Mussweiler, 2003; Mussweiler et al., in press; Mussweiler & Strack, 2000). In Study 1, participants were subliminally primed with either a moderately high or low standard of aggressiveness while evaluating themselves on this dimension.

Method

Participants

We recruited 32 students at the University of Würzburg as participants. They were contacted over phone, asked to participate in a series of unrelated experimental studies that would last for a total of 1 h, and offered a compensation of Euro 6.

Materials and procedure

Upon arrival in the lab, participants were led to individual booths and seated in front of computer monitors. Instructions informed them that their task was to engage in a series of self-evaluations. Specifically, they would be asked to evaluate their aggressiveness by making a series of judgments. Before making these judgments they were instructed to first reflect on their aggressiveness and consider how aggressive they were for about 1 min. To ostensibly help them concentrate on this question, we instructed participants to focus their attention on a letter string that was presented in the center of the screen. This fixation string was presented for 3000 ms and was replaced by the name of the social

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