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Soliciting unfavourable social comparison: Effects of self-criticism

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Abstract

Despite the large number of studies investigating the link between depression and social comparison, little research has examined how depressive vulnerability factors, such as dependency and self-criticism, influence social comparison behavior. Participants in this study ($N = 102$) were able to solicit social comparison feedback, which was favourable, unfavourable or ambiguous, after completing an ego-involving reaction time search task. Results showed that individuals high on self-criticism continued to make social comparisons more than individuals low on self-criticism, but only when comparisons were unfavourable, which diminished performance satisfaction ratings. Results provide some understanding of how self-critical individuals may actively contribute to situations that maintain their self-critical beliefs and how vulnerability factors can influence the kinds of behavioral strategies individuals adopt to deal with threats to self-worth. © 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Depression vulnerability; Self-criticism; Social comparison; Unfavourable feedback; Threats to self-worth

1. Introduction

According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), there exists in each of us a drive to evaluate ourselves, particularly when performance is ambiguous. Studies examining the antecedents

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and consequences of social comparison are numerous and several reviews have appeared (Exline & Lobel, 1999; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wills, 1981; Wood, 1989, 1996). Theorists have argued that unfavourable social comparison can dispose individuals to depressed moods, which may ultimately lead to depressive episodes (Ahrens & Alloy, 1997; Swallow & Kuiper, 1993; Weary, Elbin, & Hill, 1987). Although some research has examined the link between depression and social comparison (Alloy, Albright, & Clements, 1987; Swallow & Kuiper, 1993), few studies have examined the extent to which vulnerability factors, like dependency or self-criticism, can influence the extent to which we seek out or avoid potentially harmful comparisons (Buss, 1987; Giordana, Wood, & Michela, 2000).

There are good theoretical and empirical reasons for investigating the impact of individual differences variables, such as self-criticism, on social comparison behavior. Self-critical individuals are characterized by feelings of unworthiness, inferiority, and harsh self-scrutiny. They are believed to have a chronic fear of disapproval and criticism from others along with a fear of losing the approval or acceptance of significant others (Blatt, Quinlan, Chevron, McDonald, & Zuroff, 1982; Blatt & Schichman, 1983). Self-criticism belongs to a group of related personality variables believed to dispose individuals to depressive cognitions (Blatt et al., 1982; Nietzel & Harris, 1990; Zuroff & Mongrain, 1987), which have also been linked to depressive cognitions (Ahrens & Alloy, 1997; Alloy et al., 1987; Swallow & Kuiper, 1993; Weary et al., 1987).

Recent research has also shown that depressive vulnerability factors, such as self-criticism, can exert considerable influence over the manner in which individuals respond to events that threaten self-worth. Evidence suggests that self-critical women will contest threats to status, withhold praise from friends who challenged them, and will not minimize disagreement with disagreeing friends (Santor, Pringle, & Israeli, 2000; Santor & Zuroff, 1997, 1998). In this regard, self-critical individuals may attempt to protect themselves when self-worth was threatened by retaliating against their friends and partners (Santor et al., 2000; Santor & Zuroff, 1997, 1998). It is not clear from these studies whether self-critical individuals would also protect themselves by avoiding unfavourable feedback, or whether self-critical individuals, when faced with unfavourable feedback, would continue to solicit unfavourable feedback.

1.1. Social comparison research

Previous research examining depressed mood and social comparison has suggested that individuals with negative self-views tend to act in ways which elicit unfavourable or negative feedback (Swann & Read, 1981; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992). In a study by Swann and his associates (Swann et al., 1992, Study 4), individuals with positive or negative self-concepts were provided either favourable or unfavourable performance feedback on a speech they delivered. Participants were then given the opportunity to solicit either unfavourable or favourable feedback. Results showed that participants with negative self-concepts solicited feedback on topics that highlighted the negative aspects of themselves (e.g., “Why this person would have trouble getting along with others”, p. 300) more often than they solicited feedback on topics concerning the positive aspects of themselves (e.g., “Why this person would be fun to be with”, p. 300). On the basis of this and other research, Swann has argued that people with negative self-views (i.e., those who are dysphoric or have low self-worth) are motivated to confirm their negative self-views. In this regard, social interactions are opportunities for individuals with a negative self-view to verify and confirm their negative self-concepts.

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