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Relationships between the frequency of social comparisons and self-concept clarity, intolerance of uncertainty, anxiety, and depression

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Abstract

Previous work has highlighted the importance of uncertainty in motivating social comparison. We extended this approach by focusing on the frequency of social comparisons and four uncertainty-related constructs, namely, self-concept clarity, intolerance of uncertainty, anxiety, and depression. Participants were 166 undergraduates who completed measures for each construct, as well as measures of their own frequency of general, upward, and downward social comparisons. Initial correlational analyses indicated that higher self-concept clarity was related to a lower frequency of general and upward social comparisons; whereas higher intolerance of uncertainty was related to a higher frequency of general, upward, and downward social comparisons. Depression and anxiety were also related to increased general and upward comparisons. Of particular interest, however, were the findings associated with two path analyses. The first analysis indicated that when all four uncertainty-related constructs were considered together, intolerance of uncertainty emerged as the most important predictor of general, upward, and downward comparisons. In contrast, lower self-concept clarity and increased depression played a much more limited role, and anxiety was not a significant predictor. In turn, the second analysis showed that self-concept clarity and intolerance of uncertainty fully mediated the relationships between depression, anxiety, and general and upward social comparison.

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1. Introduction

Festinger (1954) proposed that individuals compare themselves with others when they are *uncertain* about their opinions and abilities, particularly when objective standards are lacking. Consistent with this proposal, researchers have shown that individuals who are more uncertain about various aspects of their lives, such as the perceived impact of government policies, their marriage, their job, or their causal understanding of events, are more likely to engage in social comparisons (Buunk, 1995; Buunk, Schaufeli, & Ybema, 1994; Buunk & VanYeperen, 1991). Similarly, Weary, Marsh, and McCormick (1994) found that individuals who were less certain about their own judgments or opinions were more motivated to engage in social comparison. Furthermore, individuals who are lower in need for cognition and who have a reduced sense of mastery and control over their own lives have also been found to be more interested in engaging in social comparison (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Across these different studies, uncertainty has been conceptualized in diverse ways, suggesting that further clarification of the potential relationships between uncertainty and social comparison would be informative and useful.

Accordingly, we have conceptualized self-uncertainty in terms of several broad constructs that derive from other theoretical approaches and research literatures. We first considered the potential impact of overall *level* of uncertainty of the self-concept on the frequency of engaging in social comparisons. This facet of uncertainty was examined by utilizing the construct of self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996). In addition, we also considered the possible impact of an individual's *tolerance* of their level of uncertainty on their reported frequency of social comparisons. This facet was examined by focusing on the construct of intolerance of uncertainty (Freeston, Rheume, Letarte, Dugas, & Ladouceur, 1994). Furthermore, we also considered uncertainty in terms of the construct of *anxiety*. Anxiety has often been conceptualized in terms of a heightened level of uncertainty, engendered by increased perceptions of future threat and harm (e.g., Dugas, Freeston, & Ladouceur, 1997). Finally, we also included consideration of depression on social comparisons, with a particular emphasis on the heightened levels of uncertainty that accompany depression (Swallow & Kuiper, 1992).

Self-concept clarity is defined as “the extent to which the contents of an individual's self-concept (e.g., perceived personal attributes) are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable” (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 142). To illustrate further, one individual may have a high level of self-concept clarity, meaning she is relatively confident about the various aspects of her self-concept; whereas another individual may be low on self-concept clarity, meaning he is much less certain about the content and stability of his self-concept. When considered in light of Festinger's (1954) original formulations of uncertainty, we proposed that higher levels of self-concept clarity would be related to lower levels of social comparison, as individuals who are more certain regarding their overall self-concept may feel much less compelled to compare themselves with others.

Previous research has also not considered the possible role of intolerance of uncertainty on social comparison. Intolerance of uncertainty is defined as “a predisposition to react negatively to an uncertain event or situation, independent of its probability of occurrence and its associated consequences” (Ladouceur, Gosselin, & Dugas, 2000, p. 934). In other words, individuals who are high in intolerance of uncertainty would view uncertain and ambiguous situations as being highly aversive; whereas individuals who are low in intolerance of uncertainty would not view these same

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