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Social comparison processes in an organizational context: New directions

Paul S. Goodman *, Emily Haisley

Carnegie Mellon University, Tepper School of Business, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA

Abstract

The goal of this article is to frame some new directions to social comparison research in organizational settings. Four themes are developed. First, we examine the role of organizational variables in shaping the basic sub processes in social comparison, such as the selection of referents. The second theme focuses on the meaning of level of analysis in social comparison processes. The third theme develops how time can enhance our understanding of social comparison. Lastly, we explore some methodological issues inherent in the three prior themes.
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The goals of this paper are to build on some themes in this issue, particularly the three invited papers, and to frame directions for future research on social comparison processes in organizational settings. There has been a long, incremental stream of research since Festinger's seminal paper (1954). Our focus will be to suggest some themes that provide newer research directions and opportunities, as this research continues to evolve. We selected four themes particularly relevant for understanding social comparison processes in organizations:

- the role of organizational variables
- the role of levels of analysis
- time as a dimension in social comparison
- methods in social comparison research

We have selected meta-themes—ones that should transcend a particular problem or population. For example, Greenberg, Ashton-James, and Ashkanasy (2007) explore new problem areas, such as leadership and stress, where social comparison can be applied. This is a useful way to identify new research directions. Alternatively, one could identify underrepresented populations (e.g., blue-collar or service workers) to focus new research on social comparisons. We identify research areas that cut across problems, populations, or for that matter, disciplinary orientations.

A number of factors motivated us to select these themes. First, we think they are important topics in understanding social comparison processes. Second, they are underrepresented in the body of this research. Some have been selectively addressed by papers in this Special Issue, while others have not. Third, there are many well-rehearsed topics in the social comparison literature, such as the selection of upward or downward comparisons (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007) or "Better-than-Average Effects" (e.g., Moore, 2007). As we look toward the next 10 years of research, we expect work will continue in these two example areas but, at the same time, we see the need to diversify the range of topics

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* Corresponding author.
  E-mail addresses: pg14@andrew.cmu.edu (P.S. Goodman), ech@andrew.cmu.edu (E. Haisley).

and to focus on new theoretical approaches in order to gain a better understanding of social comparison processes.

This paper is organized by four themes. We begin with the rationale and basic argument for exploring a theme. Then we present some definitions, selectively discuss some relevant studies, and explore some directions for future research. In this last point, future research, our intention is to relate the theme to some basic social comparison questions, rather than providing a laundry list of research topics.

Theme 1—organizational factors

We spend a good deal of our lives in an organizational setting. Most of our waking hours are spent in work organizations, or in interactions with various organizations for the purpose of obtaining goods or services. Social comparison processes unfold in these organizational settings. However, there is not a well-developed theory or empirical body of research about how organizational factors influence, and are influenced by, social comparison processes. Our goal is to build an effective research strategy for linking organizational factors to social comparison processes.

Let's start by clarifying the meaning of organizational factors. Basically, these factors are features of an organization. They include (1) the organization's task and technology infrastructure; (2) the organizational structure, composed of authority, communication, decision-making, reward systems, etc.; (3) the social infrastructure, including culture, norms, and informal networks; and (4) the unique qualities of the workforce in terms of distributions of knowledge, skills, and abilities. These organizational factors exist independently of any individual, have relatively stable properties, and shape or affect individual behavior.
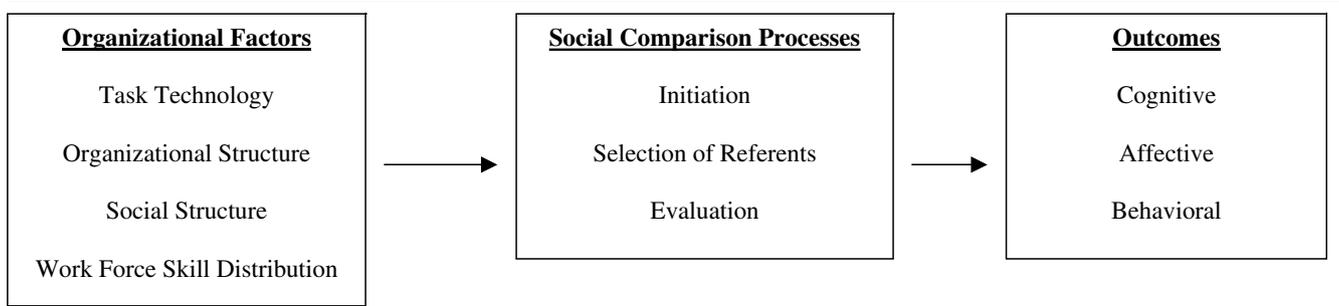
Our thesis is that these variables influence social comparison processes. If one individual works in a face-to-face office setting, while another works in a distributed environment, the availability and specificity of social comparison referents should be different for these two individuals (Greenberg et al., 2007). For example, the former setting should offer greater verbal and nonverbal information, which should in turn affect that individual's social comparisons. Or, let's assume you are in a hospital recovering from surgery. A relevant activity is to make sense of your rate of recovery. This is a basic social comparison question. How does the organizational context, such as your access to other potential comparisons referents at different stages of recovery influence your self-assessment? Additionally, the interaction patterns of health care givers and the norms about open communication within the hospital all may influence how you evaluate your rate of recovery and your subsequent well-being.

There are three premises in our argument about organizational variables. First, organizational variables are pervasive in our lives. Questions about how good are one's grades, what are one's promotion prospects, is one making a speedy recovery from surgery, did one get a fair price on one's house sale, did one's children get a good college education, are all evaluated in an organizational setting. Second, the types of organizational variables vary considerably. They can range from complicated technological environments to small, informal social networks. The fundamental idea is that these different organizational variables affect how people make social comparison judgments about different objects.

The third premise—central to this discussion—is to build the theoretical linkages between organizational variables and key social comparison processes. Table 1 shows the four basic classes of relevant organizational factors. While there are a number of ways to classify social comparison processes, we identify initiation, selection of referents, and an evaluation process. Finally, we examine three potential outcomes or consequences. To illustrate our linkage approach we will focus on the process of selecting referents. The new research question becomes: how do organizational factors affect referent selection, and what are the key mediating mechanisms? Table 2 is a visual representation of this question. Before

Table 1
Organizational factors and social comparison processes

Organizational Factors	**Social Comparison Processes**	**Outcomes**
Task Technology	Initiation	Cognitive
Organizational Structure	Selection of Referents	Affective
Social Structure	Evaluation	Behavioral
Work Force Skill Distribution		