

Social comparison processes in organizations [☆]

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Abstract

We systematically analyze the role of social comparison processes in organizations. Specifically, we describe how social comparison processes have been used to explain six key areas of organizational inquiry: (1) organizational justice, (2) performance appraisal, (3) virtual work environments, (4) affective behavior in the workplace, (5) stress, and (6) leadership. Additionally, we describe how unique contextual factors in organizations offer new insight into two widely studied sub-processes of social comparison, acquiring social information and thinking about that information. Our analyses underscore the merit of integrating organizational phenomena and social comparison processes in future research and theory.

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*I'm bored to extinction with Harrison.
His limericks and puns are embarrassing.
But I'm fond of the bum,
For, though dull as they come,
He makes me feel bright by comparison.*

Anonymous

What this poet (sic) apparently lacks in expressive talent appears to be eclipsed, at least somewhat, by his or her keen insight into human social behavior. That people acquire personal insight by comparing themselves to others goes beyond the stuff of lame lyrical lucidity. Indeed, social scientists know a great deal about the pro-

cesses governing people's comparisons with one another—so-called, *social comparisons*. For this, we are indebted to Festinger (1954), whose influential theory of social comparison introduced over a half century ago subsequently gave rise to more refined conceptual developments (e.g., Mussweiler, 2003; Wood, 1989, 1996), resulting in a massive contemporary literature on social comparison processes (e.g., Suls & Wheeler, 2000). As chronicled by the insightful contributions to the present issue of this journal by Moore (2007) and by Buunk and Gibbons (2007), research has shed considerable light on the general processes by which people compare themselves to others in the course of everyday social interaction (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992).

A highlight of this literature has been its capacity to explain social behavior in a variety of specific situations and contexts, such as judging health and illness (e.g., Tennen, McKee, & Affleck, 2000), gossiping with others (e.g., Wert & Salovey, 2004), and performing family chores (Grote, Naylor, & Clark, 2002). In view of this,

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we find it curious that social scientists have not made more extensive use of work on social comparison processes in studying behavior in one of the most popular settings for investigating human behavior, the workplace (for some exceptions, see Goodman, 1977; Steil & Hay, 1997; Tenbrunsel & Diekmann, 2002; Van Yperen, 1992). Our reaction is predicated on the observation that social comparison appears to be embedded deeply into the fabric of organizational life. For example, social comparison occurs in both planned activities, such as when supervisors evaluate subordinates' performance relative to others (Mumford, 1983), and on naturally occurring occasions, such as when employees discover by happenstance how their own pay compares to that of others (Blysmá & Major, 1994).

Despite these connections, we are aware of no unified efforts to explain organizational behavior from the perspective of social comparison processes. As we suggest here, however, such an endeavor may prove worthwhile—both insofar as it promises to shed light on our understanding of various forms of workplace behavior and on social comparison processes themselves. With this in mind, we undertake such an analysis in the present article. Specifically, we review various workplace practices and processes into which insight has been provided by application of social comparison processes. In this respect, although social comparison processes are embedded in most social interactions, we have identified six particular topics of interest to organizational psychologists that are especially germane: (1) organizational justice, (2) performance appraisal, (3) virtual work environments, and (4) affective behavior in the workplace, (5) stress, and (6) leadership. All of these topics continue to attract active research interest in I/O psychology, and involve social comparisons at varying levels. Connections between these topics and social comparison processes range from well-researched interrelationships (as in the case of organizational justice) to sets of logically derived propositions (as in the case of virtual work environments). At the end of each section, we provide a brief summary of the key conclusions that flow from our analyses. Finally, after analyzing these connections, we conclude with an overall assessment of the unique insight into various sub-processes of social comparison derived from examining them in organizations.

Organizational justice

In his novel, *Woman in Love*, British author, Lawrence (1921) commented that, "One man is not any better than another, not because they are equal, but because...there is no term of comparison" (p. 247). This observation squares with the widely accepted social scientific dictum that when people judge how fairly they are treated they take into account the manner in which oth-

ers are treated (Cohen, 1986). This is applicable to all three forms of organizational justice (for a review, see Colquitt, Greenberg, & Zapata-Phelan, 2005)—*distributive justice* (the perceived fairness of the distribution of outcomes), *procedural justice* (the perceived fairness of the procedures used to determine those outcomes), and *interactional justice* (the perceived fairness of the interpersonal treatment used in the course of explaining procedures and outcomes).

Distributive justice comparisons

The comparative nature of justice is fundamental to distributive justice as articulated in Adams's (1965) equity theory. This is not surprising given that equity theory is predicated on Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) exchange theory, and Homans's (1961) theory of distributive justice—three conceptualizations in which social comparison processes feature prominently. Specifically, Adams (1965) stipulates that for a state of equity to be perceived as existing between two parties, they must receive some normatively appropriate rate of return in a social exchange. This is defined in terms of the ratio of benefits one receives (i.e., outcomes) relative to the contributions one has made (i.e., inputs) as compared to the corresponding ratio of some referent other. With respect to the exact nature of this "other", equity theory fails to specify either the precise nature and form of these comparison standards or when they are used—an omission to which Adams later would admit as being a limitation of his theory (Adams & Freedman, 1976).

Acknowledging the fundamental nature of social comparison in promoting justice, various theorists have considered the comparative nature of fairness assessments in their own analyses of equity (e.g., Austin, 1977). Indeed, research has shown that equity judgments are based more strongly on social comparisons than on general expectations (Austin, McGinn, & Susmilch, 1980). In addition, people tend to place considerable weight on social comparisons, even when they have objective information suggesting that they are doing "better than average" (Seta, Seta, & McElroy, 2006). In the workplace, moreover, where comparative information generally is available, it is recognized that judgments of fairness stem from several referent sources (for a summary, see Table 1), although most of the research and theorizing focuses on two categories—internal comparisons and external comparisons.

Internal comparisons

Equity judgments may be based on comparisons between one's own outcomes and inputs relative to those of relevant others in one's organization, such as coworkers, with whom one is in a relationship. This is

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