

# Social comparison: The end of a theory and the emergence of a field

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Received 26 July 2005

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## Abstract

The past and current states of research on social comparison are reviewed with regard to a series of major theoretical developments that have occurred in the past 5 decades. These are, in chronological order: (1) classic social comparison theory, (2) fear-affiliation theory, (3) downward comparison theory, (4) social comparison as social cognition, and (5) individual differences in social comparison. In addition, we discuss a number of expansions of research on social comparison as they are currently occurring, and we outline what we see as likely and desirable future directions, including an expansion of areas, methods, and conceptualizations, as well as a stronger focus on cognitive, neuroscientific, and evolutionary aspects of social comparison.

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*Keywords:* Social comparison theory; New developments; Theory evolution

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It has been widely acknowledged that social comparison is a central feature of human social life. Even more so, according to Gilbert, Price, and Allan (1995), the need to compare the self with others is found in many other species as well, and has evolved as a very adaptive mechanism for sizing up one's competitors. With respect to humans, theorizing and research on social comparison can be traced to some of the classic contributions to Western philosophy (Suls & Wheeler, 2000). In the social sciences, the notion that comparisons with others play an important role in evaluating and constructing social reality goes back to the seminal work of Sherif (1936), who showed that two individuals who face the same unstable situation together develop through a process of mutual social influence a single characteristic reference point. Comparison processes were also highlighted in the sociological research on reference groups that was prompted by the work of Hyman (1942), who demonstrated that the assessment of one's own status on such dimensions as financial position, intellectual capabilities,

and physical attractiveness is dependent on the group with whom one compares oneself.

Nevertheless, it was not until Festinger's (1954) classic paper that the term social comparison was proposed and a detailed theory on social comparison that included specific propositions and corollaries was outlined. As suggested by Mettee and Smith (1977), this theory is about "our quest to know ourselves, about the search for self-relevant information and how people gain self-knowledge and discover reality about themselves" (pp. 69–70). As social comparison theory states, this quest for self-knowledge is fulfilled not just by obtaining objective information but also by comparing oneself with others. Although Festinger's original theory on social comparison had a somewhat restricted focus on the comparison of abilities and opinions, over the past 5 decades, work on social comparison has undergone numerous transitions and reformulations, and, in the process, has developed from a focused theoretical statement on the use of others for self-evaluation into a lively, varied, and complex area of research encompassing many different paradigms, approaches, and applications (e.g., Buunk & Gibbons, 1997, 2000; Suls & Wheeler, 2000; Wheeler, 1991). Current

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research on social comparison uses many different methods, including interviewing people about their comparison habits and preferences and confronting individuals with vivid social comparison information. Moreover, the theory has come out of the lab and looks at social comparison in relation to issues—getting cancer, eating disorders, the task division at home, or job satisfaction, for example—that no researcher would have considered during the early years of the theory. In the present article, we discuss current work in social comparison in the context of a series of major theoretical developments that have occurred in the past 5 decades in the following chronological order: (1) classic social comparison theory, (2) fear-affiliation theory, (3) downward comparison theory, (4) social comparison as social cognition, and (5) individual differences in social comparison. Finally, we describe a number of expansions of research on social comparison as it is currently occurring and outline what we see as likely and desirable future directions.

### Classic social comparison theory

According to Festinger (1954), individuals are driven by a desire for self-evaluation, a motivation to establish that one's opinions are correct and to know precisely what one is capable of doing. Festinger believed that individuals generally prefer objective information to evaluate their standing on a given attribute but will, when such information is not available, turn to others for social information. He emphasized the interpersonal consequences of social comparison, by suggesting, for example, that people will seek out the company of others similar to themselves and will try to persuade others who are dissimilar. Although Festinger's original theory stemmed to a large extent from theorizing and experiments on opinion convergence in groups, as noted by Suls (2000), actually, very little research has been done on this topic. Suls recently provided an interesting expansion of Festinger's work, however, by suggesting that there are three types of opinion comparison that can be conceptualized with regard to three basic questions: (1) preference assessment (do I like X?), (2) belief assessment (is X true?), and (3) preference prediction (will I like X?). As Suls notes, there are many important implications of theorizing and research on opinion formation that have yet to be explored, a primary example being the ways in which new ideas and beliefs spread within a population.

#### *The upward comparison of abilities*

In the first decade, some research was done on the other cornerstone of Festinger's original paper, the comparison of abilities. Wheeler's (1966) rank order paradigm, in which participants were presented with the rank

order of the scores of others in their group and then asked with whom they wanted to compare their score, was an important impetus to research in this area. Research in this tradition has shown that individuals generally prefer to compare with others who are thought to be slightly better off, providing support for Festinger's well-known notion of "upward drive" (e.g., Miller & Suls, 1977). However, subsequent research has suggested that the strength of this upward drive depends on a number of factors. First, experimental studies have shown that the tendency to compare upward is stronger when the comparison can be made privately than when one anticipates actual contact with the comparison other (e.g., Gibbons et al., 2002a; Smith & Insko, 1987; Wilson & Benner, 1971; Ybema & Buunk, 1993). A number of survey studies have also found that when social comparison does not require people to reveal their inferiority to the other and does not involve the risk of the other looking down on them, comparison preferences are more upward than when one has to affiliate with the other (Buunk, 1995; Buunk, Schaufeli, & Ybema, 1994). Second, some studies in recent years have shown that the upward preference is found only when the motive of self-improvement is salient, that is, when individuals have an interest in doing better. For example, Smith and Sachs (1997) offered participants the option of seeing the scores of another individual on a test that they had completed. Participants who were told that the experimenter was interested in how well they could predict their own score on a second test chose to see the score of another who had performed at the same level, whereas participants who were told that the experimenter was interested in how they could improve their scores chose to see the score of someone who had performed better (for comparable findings, see Ybema & Buunk, 1993).

Given these and similar findings, and consistent with Festinger's (1954) "unidirectional drive upward," a number of recent perspectives have emphasized the utility and adaptive function of upward comparisons (e.g., Aspinwall, 1997; Collins, 1996). For example, in a recent study, Buunk, Kuyper, and Van der Zee (2005) found among high school students that the most frequently mentioned goal of social comparison was the hope that in the future they might receive grades that were similar to those of students who were currently performing better than they were. More importantly, there is some work indicating that upward comparison choice can indeed have significant effects on performance in important, real-world settings (e.g., Nosanchuk & Erickson, 1985). For example, Blanton, Buunk, Gibbons, and Kuyper (1999) found that high school students who compared academically with students who were doing well in school—as indicated by the actual GPAs of their preferred targets—had the highest grades at the end of the semester, controlling for their grades at the earlier assessment. These findings were replicated and extended

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