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# Toward mindful social comparison: When subjective and objective selves are mutually exclusive

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## Abstract

Although mindless evaluations typically accompany social comparisons, they are not necessary, and may be costly. We describe how mindlessness enters the social comparison process at two points. First, during the social comparison both self and other are mindlessly de-contextualized, through (1) biased selection of relevant behaviors, (2) biased selection of criteria along which behaviors are compared, (3) lack of knowledge of intent behind behavior, (4) lack of knowledge about representativeness of behavior, (5) lack of knowledge about typicality of future behavior as moderated by learning, (6) improper understanding of the meaning of behavior, and (7) lack of knowledge about motivations generating the comparisons. Second, the affective results of the social comparison are often mindlessly generalized to the global self, while the breadth and complexity of the network of attributes that constitute to the ‘self’ is ignored. Global-self-evaluative social comparisons forfeit the potential of gaining accurate and usable information about personal attributes.

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## 1. Introduction

Festinger’s (1954) first formulation of social comparison, a process whereby individuals learn about their own abilities and skills by comparing themselves to others, emphasizes a

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need for accurate self-perception as a driving force behind social comparisons. This emphasis on accuracy in understanding attributes of self makes sound evolutionary sense. Festinger (1954) hypothesized that inaccurate perception of one's attributes and abilities can be "punishing or even fatal in some situations" (p.117). One can easily see how overestimating one's ability (of strength in a bar brawl, of skill in deep-sea diving) can be life threatening, or how underestimating oneself (in terms of attractiveness or intellect, for example) can lead to less successful outcomes in personal and professional realms.<sup>1</sup> Yet, very soon after Festinger's original formulation, many researchers moved away from issues surrounding accuracy and toward work that focuses on motivational forces and evaluative outcomes of the social comparison process.

While Festinger (1954) pointed out that social comparisons with similar individuals will yield most information about one's own attributes or opinions, research showed that individuals were as likely to compare themselves to nonsimilar individuals, yielding gains (and sometimes losses) in positive affect or self-esteem (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). Wood (1989), in her review of research on social comparison in the three decades following Festinger's original formulation, suggested that in addition to the goal of accurately evaluating one's attributes, social comparisons are as likely to serve goals of self-improvement and self-enhancement. It turned out that individuals wanting to feel better about themselves may employ downward social comparison strategy, comparing themselves to those who are comparatively worse on a certain trait or ability (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & LaPrelle, 1985; Reiss & Gibbons, 1993; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992; Wills, 1981; Wood & VanderZee, 1997). Those engaging in upward social comparison (Wheeler, 1966)—comparing themselves with those better than they are on some trait—might feel better or worse, depending on whether the achievement of those others seems attainable and on whether we are comparing those achievements with our own 'best' or just 'ordinary' selves (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, 1999). If the achievement of others seems attainable, and if we compare their extraordinary achievements with our 'usual' rather than 'best' selves, then we feel better, for there is still hope for perhaps reaching similar heights of achievements. If their achievements seem unattainable, particularly when compared with our 'best' selves, then we are likely to feel worse. Despite the fact that upward social comparisons may yield negative outcomes in terms of affect or self-esteem, Collins (1996) showed that individuals often engage in them (as in downward social comparisons) for self-enhancing purposes.

An implied assumption of much research on affective consequences of social comparison is that thinking oneself as having more or less value than others as a consequence of downward or upward social comparisons of attributes is a *necessary* result of individuals encountering social information relevant to self. We shall argue, on the other hand, that *global-self-evaluative outcomes accompanying social comparisons are not necessary, but rather, common outcomes of mindless processing of social information about the attributes in question.*

<sup>1</sup>While some have argued that accuracy in self-perceptions is not necessary for optimal well-being, and that it is overly positive but essentially inaccurate understanding of oneself and environment that leads to most positive outcomes (Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994), this view has been seriously challenged (Colvin & Block, 1994; Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Shedler, Mayman & Manis, 1993). Thinking that one is or will be better than average on some attribute does not necessarily indicate an error in self-perception (Gigerenzer, Hoffrage, & Kleinbölting, 1991). In a similar vein, if someone feels that they have control over their future health outcomes, and actually come to be healthier than others, it is likely that they indeed *had* the control, rather than an 'illusion' of control.

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