



The relationship between affective response to social comparison and academic performance in high school

Maïke J.P.W. Wehrens^{a,*}, Abraham P. Buunk^b, Miranda J. Lubbers^c, Pieterneel Dijkstra^{d,*}, Hans Kuyper^d, Greetje P.C. van der Werf^d

^a Department of Organizational Psychology, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

^b Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

^c Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

^d Groningen Institute for Educational Research, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The goal of the present study was to study the relationship between affective responses to social comparison and test scores among high school students. Our analyses showed that three types of responses to social comparison could be distinguished: an empathic, constructive, and destructive response. Whereas girls scored higher on empathic response, boys scored higher on destructive response. In addition, students who had a high social comparison orientation (SCO) scored higher on all three types of responses than students who expressed a low SCO. Multilevel regression analyses indicated that, after controlling for previous performance, a destructive response was negatively related to performance on tests for reading comprehension and mathematics. An empathic response was positively related to performance on reading comprehension only whereas a constructive response compensated the negative relationship between destructive response and reading comprehension. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

At school, the typical classroom is characterized by a strongly evaluative atmosphere, because both teachers and parents are concerned with academic accomplishments. The evaluation of a student's performance at school partly depends on how well his or her classmates are doing. That is, a high grade is not outstanding anymore when many classmates receive a high grade or an even higher one. Because of the evaluative atmosphere and the dependence of evaluation outcomes on the performance of classmates, comparisons of grades between students are very common (Dijkstra, Kuyper, Van der Werf, Buunk, & Van der Zee, 2008; Levine, 1983; Pepitone, 1972). Students know fairly well how their performance relates to that of classmates since grades are usually made known in class. Both children at primary school (e.g., Dumas, Huguet, Monteil, Rastoul, & Nezelek, 2005) and secondary school (e.g., Blanton, Buunk, Gibbons, & Kuyper, 1999; Huguet, Dumas, Monteil,

& Genestoux, 2001; Huguet et al., 2009; Wehrens, Kuyper, Dijkstra, Buunk, & Van der Werf, *in press*) have been shown to compare their grades and performances to those of classmates. Social comparisons such as these, help students make appraisals of their abilities and opinions and, as a result, may profoundly affect students' self-concepts and self-esteem, in both positive and negative ways (e.g., Huguet et al., 2009; Marsh & Parker, 1984). Social comparisons are not merely a matter of choice (Huguet et al., 2009; Levine, 1983). Due to the structure of the classroom and its strong evaluative nature, many comparisons are 'forced' upon children, as are its consequences. Even in individualized classrooms explicitly designed to minimize grade competition by allowing children to move at their own pace and to work at tasks within their own level of competence, a good deal of these social comparisons occur (Crockenberg & Bryant, 1978; Levine, 1983).

1.1. The development of social comparison in the classroom

Evidence has been found that children as young as preschoolers are capable of comparing themselves with classmates (e.g., Chafel, 1984; Masters, 1969). In general, however, studies show that children's ability-related self-evaluations are little affected by social comparisons until age 7 or 8 (e.g., Cremeens, Eiser, & Blades, 2007; Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loebl, 1980; Schoeneman,

* Corresponding authors. Addresses: Department of Social and Organizational Psychology, University of Groningen, Grote Kruisstraat 2/1, 9712 TS Groningen, The Netherlands. Fax: +31 50 363 4581 (M.J.P.W. Wehrens), Groningen Institute for Educational Research, University of Groningen, Grote Rozenstraat 3, 9712 TG Groningen, The Netherlands (P. Dijkstra).

E-mail addresses: M.J.P.W.van.der.Vlugt@rug.nl (M.J.P.W. Wehrens), dijkstra@planet.nl (P. Dijkstra).

Tabor, & Nash, 1984; Veroff, 1969). From that age on, children become increasingly receptive to social comparisons. More specifically, Keil, McClintock, Kramer, and Platow (1990) reported that 42% of second graders used social comparisons to make self and other evaluations, whereas 56% of fourth graders, 68% of sixth graders, and 76% of eighth graders did. Similar findings have been reported by Aboud (1976), Bear, Minke, Griffin, and Deemer (1998), Boggiano and Ruble (1979), Feld, Ruhland, and Gold (1979), Ruble, Eisenberg, and Higgins (1994), Spear and Armstrong (1978), Stipek and Tannatt (1984), and Xiang, Lee, and Williamson (2001). Pupils' attention to social comparisons as a means of self-evaluation increases even more upon entry to secondary school. Following a school transition, students usually re-evaluate their scholastic competence, given their new reference groups. In addition, the shift from elementary to (junior) high school is usually associated with an increase in whole class task organization, between-classroom ability grouping, and an external emphasis on academic performance; practices that increase the salience of social comparison information (Feldlaufer, Midgley, & Eccles, 1988; Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992). In general, therefore, secondary schools are more performance-focused (i.e., oriented at achieving well in comparison with others) and less mastery-focused (i.e., oriented at achieving well for the sake of competence only; Kumar, 2006).

The present study examined social comparisons in the classroom of high school students in grade 9 (age about 15 years). As pointed out above, at this age, the need for social comparison is high. In addition, because, at this age, adolescents develop their identity (Kramer, Ingledew, & Iphofen, 2008), social comparisons at this age may have relatively profound effects on students' self-evaluations, self-concept, motivation and performances (e.g., Ryan & Pintrich, 1998). Therefore, studying social comparisons and their consequences among secondary school students seems a highly relevant undertaking.

1.2. Affective consequences of social comparison

As noted before, social comparisons in the classroom may have both negative and positive consequences. In general, social comparisons with classmates make students feel and think more negative about themselves (e.g., Levine, 1983). Illustrative is the widely observed Big-Fish-Little-Pond-Effect (Marsh, 1991), i.e., the finding that pupils in higher ability schools show substantially lower academic self-concept than equally intelligent and performing pupils in lower ability schools, and that negatively influences academic performance. Likewise, social comparison with classmates may evoke evaluative anxiety, especially when the academic standard in the classroom is high (Bossong, 1985; Butler, 1989; Gröbel & Schwarzer, 1982; Zeidner & Schleyer, 1999). Research, however, also shows that, although students may feel and think worse about themselves, comparisons with better performing others, may lead to better performances later in the school year (e.g., Blanton et al., 1999; Huguet et al., 2001; Huguet et al., 2009; Wehrens et al., in press). In their review on social comparisons in the classroom, Dijkstra et al. (2008) conclude that especially social comparison (with those who perform better) seems to be a two-edged sword: although they may lead students to *do* better, it makes them *feel* and *think* worse about themselves. Recently, studies have confirmed the co-existence of these two contradictory effects of social comparisons (Huguet et al., 2009; Seaton et al., 2008).

One type of consequences of social comparisons are students' 'affective responses'. In general, students' emotions may have far reaching influences on students' attention, the way they organize information, their efforts to learn, their motivation, their interests, their interactions with peers and teachers, their achievements and their self-concepts (e.g., Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2009; Schutz & Pekrun, 2007). It has, for instance, been found that whereas negative

emotions, such as anxiety and boredom, are negatively related to motivation and achievement, positive emotions, such as enjoyment and pride, are positively related to motivation and achievement (e.g., Ahmed, in preparation; Pekrun et al., 2009). Despite the importance of emotions in the classroom, students' affective responses to social comparisons in the classroom have only been scarcely the topic of study (for an overview, see Dijkstra et al., 2008). Both Smith (2000) and Buunk, Kuyper, and Van der Zee (2005) propose a model of affective responses to social comparisons in the classroom in which they distinguish between twelve (Smith, 2000) respectively eight (Buunk et al., 2005) affective responses.

These models are both based on three underlying dimensions of the social comparison process. First, the specific affective response that is evoked by social comparisons in the classroom depends on the direction of the comparison. In general, it is assumed that downward comparison (i.e., comparison with a worse performing target) will make individuals realize that they are better off than the target and, as a result, evoke a positive response (e.g., Gibbons, 1986; Wills, 1981). In contrast, individuals will usually interpret upward comparison (i.e., comparison with a better performing target) as evidence that they are worse off than the target and, as a result, evoke a negative response (e.g., Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988). However, according to Buunk, Collins, Taylor, Van Yperen, and Dakof (1990), the affective reactions people show to social comparisons are not merely intrinsic to its direction: a comparison can be interpreted in different ways, resulting in different responses. Therefore, the second dimension underlying the models of Buunk et al. (2005) and Smith (2000) is the interpretation of social comparison information. Learning that another is better off than oneself, provides at least two pieces of information: (a) that one is not as well off as everyone and (b) that it is possible to be better than one is at present. Those who contrast themselves with a better off target, thinking, for instance, that they will never be able to do as well as the target, may feel worse about themselves. In contrast, those who identify with the better off target, thinking, for instance, that they may become as good as the target, may feel better about themselves. In a similar vein, learning that someone else is worse off provides at least two pieces of information: (a) that one is not as badly off as everyone and (b) that it is possible to get worse. Individuals who contrast themselves with someone who is worse off, thinking, for instance, that they are totally different from the target and will never end up like him or her, may feel better about themselves. In contrast, those who identify with the worse off target, thinking that they themselves may become just like him or her, are likely to feel worse about themselves. The third dimension in the models of Buunk et al. (2005) and Smith (2000) is students' focus: students may focus either on themselves, the comparison target or take a dual perspective. Depending on their focus, students may experience different types of affect (see Table 1).

In sum, both Buunk et al. (2005) and Smith (2000) propose a model in which affective responses to social comparisons are a function of direction, interpretation and focus. Although there are some differences between both models in the labels of the affective responses, and Smith's model also includes emotions that result from taking a dual focus (i.e., focus on both self and other), whereas Buunk et al.'s model does not, the two models are highly similar. As noted before, social comparisons in the classroom may have far reaching consequences: the way in which students respond to social comparisons with their classmates may affect students' motivation and satisfaction, and, as a consequence, their performances (e.g., Buunk et al., 2005). The second goal of the present research is therefore to examine the extent to which affective responses to social comparison information are related to actual performances.

The present study will examine the affective responses, that according to these models, high school students may experience

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