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Tainted recommendations: The social comparison bias

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ABSTRACT

The present analysis reveals the *social comparison bias* – a bias that emerges from the social comparison process and taints recommendations. We hypothesize that people who have high standing on a relevant dimension (e.g., *quantity* of publications) begin to protect their social comparison context by making recommendations that prevent others, who might surpass them on the relevant dimension, from entering their comparison context. Studies 1 and 2 instantiate this effect in both hypothetical and real decision situations, showing that people tend not to recommend individuals who surpass them on the relevant dimension on which they have high standing. Finally, Study 3, in a sample of real employees, links the effect to one's concern for protecting self-esteem. Theoretical and organizational implications are discussed.

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Introduction

Seasoned scholars who tend to publish in top tier journals will tend to think that such an achievement is *the* mark of academic distinction. Of course, seasoned scholars who are especially prolific may well think that the total number of publications is *the* mark of academic distinction – whether their work is in top tier outlets or not. One interesting consequence, however, is that people who have high standing on a particular dimension begin to make recommendations that prevent a potential counterpart with similar qualities from entering their comparison context. Thus, for example, high *quality* scholars in a particular field will tend to prefer a job candidate with a higher level of publication *quantity* relative to a candidate with a higher level of publication *quality* than themselves. Drawing upon findings from the social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Garcia, Tor, & Gonzalez, 2006; Pillutla & Ronson, 2005; Tesser, 1988; Tesser, Campbell, & Smith, 1984) and self-esteem literatures (Crocker, 2002; Tesser, 1988), the present analysis introduces the *social comparison bias*: people's tendency to make recommendations that prevent similar others from surpassing them on relevant dimensions on which they have high standing.

In addition to highlighting a new and important phenomenon in organizational life, the theoretical contribution of the present analysis brings social comparison processes to the conflict of interest literature (e.g., Bazerman & Watkins, 2004; Cain, Loewenstein, &

Moore, 2005; Davis & Stark, 2005). Indeed, the *social comparison bias*, which we all arguably recognize, can affect our abilities to offer impartial recommendations, potentially undermining greater organizational goals. At the same time, the present analysis contributes to the social comparison literature by instantiating an important and remarkably surreptitious way that individuals make self-interested recommendations in order to protect their comparison contexts. Moreover, because the comparison context is so often embedded within a group setting, decisions tainted by the *social comparison bias* resemble social dilemmas (e.g., Weber, Koppelman, & Messick, 2004) to the extent that an individual group member might benefit at a cost to the large group.

Shaping the comparison context

The pursuit of status is a common motivation of individuals in the organization, and this pursuit has been widely discussed in the psychological and sociological literatures (De Botton, 2004; Hollander, 1958; Podolny, 2005; Ridgeway, 1982). Whereas broader theories of status might emphasize that high status is conferred on CEOs, the wealthy, or even top tier Wall Street firms (Podolny, 2005), social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) is principally focused on how individuals self-construe their own standing by comparing themselves to others on a variety of self-relevant dimensions, from popular performance dimensions such as one's salary to more idiosyncratic ones such as one's ability, say, to needlepoint well. Driven by the “unidirectional drive upward” (Festinger, 1954), namely the basic motivation to improve one's standing on any self-relevant dimension, social comparison processes offer a psychological lens toward interpreting the dynamics of status-seeking behaviors.

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The context in which we make social comparisons can greatly affect the types of social comparisons we make, and the more palpable and personal the context, the greater the social comparison concerns (Locke, 2007). Research in the social comparison literature has established that people actively shape comparison contexts by choosing comparison counterparts who do not make themselves look bad on self-relevant dimensions in the social context. For instance, Tesser et al. (1984) found evidence of selectively creating a comparison context by examining the dynamics of performance and friendship choice. They wondered whether people choose friends who performed better or worse than themselves on an important dimension. Indeed, they found that children tended to select as friends classmates who excelled on performance dimensions that were of less importance and who were somewhat inferior on performance dimensions that were important. Thus, individuals shaped the comparison context in their choice of friends.

Advancing this research, Pillutla and Ronson (2005) asked a related question about whether or not people choose to be around people who are better or worse than they in explicitly competitive situations. In a clever study, Pillutla and Ronson (2005) helped answer this question with data collected from the television game show “Weakest Link.” They found that people tend to eliminate others who perform extraordinarily better or worse than themselves and that these dynamics are moderated by the size of the reward pool and the strength of the player. For instance, as the size of the pool increases, people begin to eliminate top performers. Illustrating the *producer-competitor dilemma*, Pillutla and Ronson (2005) show that competitive circumstances can indeed affect strategic choice about whether to keep or cut a particular competitor in an organization. Thus, people are also sensitive about the comparison contexts in which they find themselves, at least in explicitly competitive situations, and they often make choices that shape the comparison context.

Comparison concerns in the proximity to a standard

While research shows that people help create their comparison contexts because of social comparison concerns (e.g., Pillutla & Ronson, 2005; Tesser et al., 1984), recent findings have shown that social comparison concerns on relevant dimensions intensify in the proximity of a standard (Garcia & Tor, 2007; Garcia et al., 2006). Using rankings to vary individuals' proximity to a standard, an acknowledged measure of achievement (e.g., the #1 rank, bottom rank, or a qualitative threshold), researchers showed that commensurately ranked individuals report an *increase* in social comparison concerns and competitive feelings when in the proximity of a standard (i.e., classmates ranked #2 and #3 or ranked #499 and #500 in a class of 500) and a *decrease* when far away from a standard (i.e., classmates ranked #102 and #103). We also note that this pattern also emerges in absence of any payoff or implication thereof. Thus, standards impact social comparison concerns; people are more prone to compare themselves to each other when they are close to a standard.

With these findings, we posit in the present analysis that people are particularly likely to experience an increase in social comparison concerns on relevant dimensions on which they are highly ranked (proximate to a standard). On the other hand, social comparison concerns should diminish when people's performance is average or intermediate (far from a standard). Hence, we can then deduce that concerns about the comparison context are likely to be greater when an individual has high standing on a relevant dimension than when an individual has intermediate standing. As a result, individuals exhibiting the *social comparison bias* should be more likely to protect their comparison context in the former case

by expressing unfavorable recommendations about potentially threatening targets.

Why the comparison context matters: self-esteem

While the literature suggests that people actively shape comparison contexts and that concerns about the comparison context should be greater in the proximity of a standard, an important question is why does the comparison context even matter in the proximity of standard? Put differently, what is the mechanism that underlies the *social comparison bias*? The answer rests in the fact that the relevant dimensions on which people have high standing are tied to people's general sense of self-esteem (Beach & Tesser, 2000; Crocker & Park, 2004; Tesser, 1988; Tesser & Campbell, 1983).

While self-esteem was originally suggested as a general conception of self and identity (for review, see Crocker & Park, 2004), more recent research on contingencies of self-worth suggests that people's self-esteem is contingent upon specific domains such as appearance, academic successes, virtue, and different people can stake their self-worth on different domains (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003). People strive for self-validation only in the domain on which their self concept is staked (Crocker & Park, 2004). As a result, a person's self-esteem fluctuates only when people experience threats to the domains on which contingencies of self-worth are staked and not on the domains where self-worth is not at stake (Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002). That said, if there is a level of domain specificity in self-esteem, then what are the domains that a person values?

In most cases, the relevant dimensions naturally emerge as a function of the social context. For instance, in the hiring of employees, compensation, job title, and job responsibilities are perennially relevant dimensions. Still, even among a set of relevant dimensions, some dimensions may be given more or less weight. Research on motivationally reasoning (Kunda, 1987) demonstrates that people differentially assign importance to relevant dimensions according to which relevant dimensions the self has higher standing (e.g., Audia & Brion, 2007). In sum, not every relevant dimension is equally important to one's sense of self, and one may particularly strive to protect one's standing on the dimension on which one's self-esteem is staked (Crocker & Park, 2004).

The social comparison bias

Merging research on comparison contexts, comparison concerns in the proximity of a standard, and the self-esteem underpinnings of the comparison context, the present analysis introduces a phenomenon that can emerge in the recommendation process – the *social comparison bias*. More specifically, we hypothesize that people tend to protect their comparison contexts by making recommendations that prevent others from surpassing them on relevant dimensions on which they have high standing, because such dimensions are especially important to their self-esteem.

Study 1 instantiates the *social comparison bias* by using an experimental decision-making methodology. It focuses on two relevant dimensions so as to manipulate whether individuals have high or intermediate standing. Analogous to Study 1, Study 2 replicates the effect in a real decision situation. Study 3 replicates the effect using a sample of real employees and links this effect to a self-esteem mechanism.

Study 1: recommending whom to hire

Study 1 attempts to instantiate the *social comparison bias*. To accommodate motivated reasoning, Study 1 focuses on two relevant dimensions – number of publications and quality of publica-

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