



## Social comparison orientation as related to two types of closeness

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### ABSTRACT

Two studies examined the relationship between social comparison orientation (SCO) and two types of closeness (dimensional closeness and psychological closeness) in the context of appearance-related comparisons among women. A pilot study showed that these two types were relatively independent constructs, and provided evidence for the differential validity of the constructs. Consistent with our expectations, women high in SCO perceived more dimensional closeness with other women in terms of appearance (Study 1,  $n = 94$ ) and perceived more psychological closeness with other women (Study 2;  $n = 126$ ) than women low in SCO. Overall, women, but especially women high in SCO, reported most dimensional closeness in response to the most attractive women and most psychological closeness in response to women of medium levels of attractiveness.

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### 1. Introduction

Theorizing and research on social comparison can be traced to some of the classic contributions to Western philosophy and to pivotal work in social psychology and sociology, including work on the self, adaptation level, reference groups, and social influence (Suls & Wheeler, 2000). However, the term social comparison was first proposed by Festinger (1954) and is currently assumed to refer to any process in which individuals relate their own characteristics to those of others (Buunk & Gibbons, 2006). Although people in general tend to assume that comparing oneself with others is something one should avoid (Wood, 2000), social comparison is an important, if not central, characteristic of human social life. From an evolutionary perspective, Gilbert, Price, and Allan (1995) suggested that the need to compare one-self with others is phylogenetically very old, biologically very powerful, and recognizable in many species, because of the adaptive value of adequately sizing up one's competitors.

Although the tendency to engage in social comparison would appear to be a universal human characteristic, several researchers have theorized that people may differ in their disposition to compare themselves with others. For instance, Diener and Fujita (1997) suggested, "... making any comparisons at all, may often be a function of one's personality". (p. 349; see also Hemphill & Lehman, 1991). Indeed, it has become increasingly clear that there are important *individual differences* in the extent to which people compare themselves with others and in the way social comparison

information is interpreted. According to Gibbons and Buunk (1999), the *extent* to which, and the *frequency* with which people compare themselves with others varies considerably between individuals. Gibbons and Buunk coined the term *social comparison orientation* (SCO) to refer to such individual differences. There is substantial evidence that those high in SCO seek out more comparisons, spend more time engaging in comparisons, and experience more emotional reactions from comparing themselves with others. SCO has been shown to affect a wide variety of outcomes, including for example one's personal risk perceptions, the perception of one's relational future, the development of occupational burnout and the quality of life of cancer patients (for a review, see Buunk & Gibbons, 2006).

#### 1.1. The 'typical' person high in SCO

Many personality characteristics have been shown to correlate with SCO. On the basis of these findings, the "typical" social comparer (defined here as a person high in SCO) may be characterized by at least three features. First, those high in SCO seem to have a high chronic activation of the self. They tend to be conscious of their own thoughts and of the way they are perceived by others. Evidence of this is the fact that SCO is quite strongly related to public and private self-consciousness (Buunk & Gibbons, 2006; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Neff & Vonk, 2009). A second main feature of SCO is its relation with negative affectivity and uncertainty of the self, including low self-esteem, neuroticism and a relatively unstable self-esteem (e.g. Buunk, Nauta, & Molleman, 2005; Neff & Vonk, 2009). In general, neuroticism is associated with a higher social comparison orientation, with correlations between SCO and neuroticism mostly reaching around .30 (e.g. Buunk, Van der

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Zee, & Van Yperen, 2001; Buunk et al., 2005). A third, and for the present research particularly relevant feature is that individuals high in SCO tend to be characterized by a strong interest in what others feel, a strong empathy for others, and a general sensitivity to the needs of others. This may at first sight seem odd, because, as suggested by Gardner, Gabriel and Hochschild (2002), social comparison would seem to be associated with a sense of independence that is oriented toward differentiating oneself in a competitive way from others. Several studies have indeed shown that SCO is moderately positively related to competitiveness (Buunk & Fisher, 2009; Darnon, Dompnier, Gilliéron, & Butera, 2010). For instance, the N-effect, that is, the phenomenon that competition increases as the number of competitors decreases, has been found to be especially strong among individuals high in SCO and especially weak among individuals low in SCO (Garcia & Tor, 2009). There is, however, also evidence that SCO is different from competition, and refers more to a pro-social orientation and to an interdependent self. Indeed, in the pioneering studies by Gibbons and Buunk (1999) one of the strongest correlates of SCO was interpersonal orientation, a construct that includes an interest in what makes people tick, as well as a tendency to be influenced by the moods and criticism of others, and an interest in mutual self-disclosure – all aspects that are characteristic of individuals with a high interdependent self (Swap & Rubin, 1983). In a similar vein, individuals high in SCO have been found to show more empathy with others in need (Wehrens, Buunk, Lubbers, Dijkstra, Kuyper, & Van der Werf, 2010), and to score higher on the Communal Orientation Scale of Clark, Ouellette, Powell, and Milberg (1987); see Gibbons & Buunk, 1999), which measures sensitivity to the needs of others, and a willingness to help others in need. In sum, those high in SCO are characterized by a combination of a high awareness of the self, some degree of negative affectivity and self-uncertainty, and an interest in, and empathy with, what others feel and think.

### 1.2. The role of similarity

Since Festinger (1954) pioneering article, similarity has been assumed to be a basic condition for social comparison to occur (see Suls & Miller, 1977). Mussweiler (2003) has argued and demonstrated that, when socially comparing themselves, individuals primarily look for similarity between themselves and the comparison target (see also Bosch, Buunk, Siero, & Park, 2010). According to Mussweiler (2001, 2003) perceptions of similarity determine both how a comparison is carried out as well as what consequences it is likely to produce, with increased perceptions of similarity leading to more assimilation in self-evaluation and judgments. We would therefore like to propose that the high chronic tendency to compare themselves with others implies that, overall, individuals high in SCO will notice more similarities between themselves and others than individuals low in SCO.

Indirect evidence for this expectation can be derived from studies that show that individuals high in SCO tend to assimilate in their responses to comparison targets more than individuals low in SCO. This seems to apply to upward as well as downward comparison targets. For instance, individuals high in SCO have been found to experience more negative affect in response to a description of a burned out individual (a downward target) than individuals low in SCO (Buunk, Ybema, Gibbons, & Ipenburg, 2001). More recently, Bosch et al. (2010; Studies 2 and 3) found that women high in SCO assimilated the self-evaluations of their attractiveness more to both attractive (i.e. upward comparison) targets and unattractive (i.e. downward comparison) comparison targets than women low in SCO. That is, following exposure to attractive targets, SCO was related positively to women's self-evaluation, whereas, following exposure to a not attractive targets, SCO was related

negatively to women's self-evaluation. However, although these studies suggest that individuals high in SCO tend to perceive more similarities between themselves and others than those low in SCO, the relationship between SCO and perceptions of similarity has merely been assumed (e.g. Bosch et al., 2010). The present study therefore explicitly examined the extent to which individuals high in SCO perceive more similarities between themselves and others who vary in their standing than those low in SCO do. We focused on social comparisons in the physical attractiveness domain among women. Physical attractiveness is a highly valued attribute among women, one that often evokes spontaneous social comparisons (e.g. Dijkstra & Buunk, 2002). Due to attractiveness related social comparisons, women, more than men, experience ups and downs in their self-evaluations of attractiveness and body satisfaction (e.g. for an overview see Dijkstra, Gibbons, & Buunk, 2010).

### 1.3. Two types of closeness

We would like to suggest that what usually is referred to as 'similarity' in the social comparison literature may better be defined as *closeness*, and that there are two distinct types of closeness. The first type of closeness we refer to as *dimensional* closeness, that is, the extent to which individuals perceive the self as close to the comparison target on a specific dimension, such as, intelligence, academic competence or physical attractiveness (see for instance Huguet & Kuyper, 2008). This type of closeness has been the focus of many studies, especially in the early years of social comparison research (Suls & Miller, 1977). Recent research also suggests that individuals tend to compare themselves in terms of athleticism and likeability with others who are close to them on these dimensions (e.g. Kuyper, Dijkstra, Buunk, & Van der Werf, 2011), and that when evaluating their performance, individuals often prefer comparing their performances in school or work with those who, in general, perform about equally well (e.g. Smith & Sacks, 1997; Vrugt, Oort, & Zeeberg, 2002). The second type of closeness that has often been the focus in social comparison research is *psychological* closeness (see for instance Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988). This concept refers to a feeling of interpersonal connectedness with others. Characteristic of a high level of psychological closeness is a strong identification with someone else as a person and a lack of differentiation between the self and the other (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). As is the case with dimensional closeness, research has shown that, in general, individuals prefer to compare themselves with psychologically close others (e.g. Lubbers, Kuyper, & Van der Werf, 2009).

We expected women high in SCO to perceive more psychological and dimensional closeness with other women than women low in SCO. There are several, rather indirect, indications that indeed individuals high in SCO may feel more psychologically and dimensionally close to others than individuals low in SCO. For example, Buunk et al. (2005) found that those high in SCO showed a higher level of identification with happily married couples than those low in SCO. In addition, Wehrens et al. (2010) found that individuals high in SCO are more likely to respond with empathy to others in need. Empathy reflects a strong orientation towards others, especially those in need (e.g. Batson, 1991), suggesting that individuals high in SCO may be more inclined than individuals low in SCO to see the self connected to others. Michinov and Michinov (2001) found that individuals high in SCO felt attracted both to individuals who are and who are not dimensionally close in their attitudes and opinions, whereas individuals low in SCO felt attracted only to others who are dimensionally close in their attitudes and opinions. Also from a theoretical point of view one may expect perceptions of dimensional closeness to be positively related to SCO. If indeed individuals, when comparing themselves, primarily look for similarities between themselves and the

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