



How temporal and social comparisons in performance evaluation affect fairness perceptions

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ABSTRACT

In the context of performance evaluations, temporal comparisons inform people how well they are doing relative to how they have performed in the past. Social comparisons inform people how well they are doing relative to others. The present research examined the effects of temporal and social comparisons on the fairness perceptions of those who receive the evaluations. In four studies using different methodologies, temporal evaluations were perceived as adhering more to principles of procedural and interpersonal fairness than social evaluations. The effects of temporal versus social evaluations on fairness perceptions were mediated by perceptions of receiving individualized treatment.

1. Introduction

Performance evaluations involve comparison to standards, and the characteristics of the standards determine the consequences of the evaluations (Locke & Latham, 2002). For example, other people's performance is frequently used as a standard to assess the focal individual's achievement (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989). This process of social comparison has been shown to exert significant effects on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the individuals receiving the evaluations (Tesser, 1988). In fact, social comparison information may even outweigh the effects of objective performance information in determining individuals' reactions (Klein, 1997).

Noting this possibility, researchers have examined the effects of social comparisons in the context of performance evaluations. For example, upward social comparisons (e.g., "You're doing worse than your peers") have been shown to reduce affective trust in peers whereas downward social comparisons (e.g., "You're doing better than your peers") reduce cognitive trust in peers (Dunn, Ruedy, & Schweitzer, 2012). In negotiation contexts, it has been shown that the type of social standards (the counterparts of the negotiations vs. other negotiators in similar situations) can have significant effects on negotiators' satisfaction (Novemsky & Schweitzer, 2004). Specifically, comparisons with the counterparts' outcomes were more likely to decrease negotiators' satisfaction by focusing their attention on the portion they failed to claim. These findings suggest that *to whom they are compared* can significantly influence people's experiences of and reactions to performance evaluations.

Another important type of performance standards is how well the individual has done in the past. When one's own past performance is used as a standard, the nature of the evaluation is temporal (i.e., me now vs. me in the past) rather than social (i.e., me vs. others). Since Albert's (1977) cogent analysis of temporal comparisons, researchers have tended to consider temporal and social comparisons as alternatives to one another. For example, Wilson and Ross (2000) examined how frequently temporal and social comparisons were used as a basis of self-evaluations. They showed that individuals' desires to obtain enhancing (i.e., positive) versus accurate information about themselves served as the fundamental motives underlying the use of temporal versus social comparisons, respectively.

An important aspect of previous research that compared the effects of temporal and social comparisons is that it has largely been confined to situations in which people were evaluating *themselves* (Robinson-Whelen & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1997; Suls, Marco, & Tobin, 1991; Wilson & Ross, 2000; Butler, 1998). In contrast, there has been a lack of research on how temporal and social comparisons differentially influence people when those comparisons are used *by others* to evaluate them. This omission is unfortunate because people often receive evaluations from others in a variety of settings, such as schools and workplaces (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979).

There are two noteworthy exceptions. First, Levine and Green (1984) examined the interactive effect of temporal and social comparison information (from others) on children's attention to their peers. Their findings suggested that children reduced their attention to their peers when they were told that their own performance was decreasing,

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especially when they were also being outperformed by their peers. Second, Zell and Alicke (2009) demonstrated that individuals' self-perceptions of competencies were affected by how their performance changed over time (i.e., temporal comparisons) whereas external observers' perceptions of competencies were largely shaped by how individuals fared against others (i.e., social comparisons).

Nevertheless, much needs to be learned about how people respond to performance evaluations made by others as a function of temporal and social comparisons. First, prior research (e.g., Levine & Green, 1984; Zell & Alicke, 2009) has mainly focused on the *valence* of comparisons (i.e., whether people are doing better or worse than temporal and social standards). In contrast, relatively little is known about how the utilization of temporal versus social comparisons in and of itself influences those who are evaluated. This is important to examine, because individuals who are receiving the evaluations may make different inferences about how they are being treated depending on the type of comparisons (Lind & Tyler, 1988). For example, people may consider a temporal evaluation to be more individualized because it focuses only on them, whereas a social evaluation includes information about other people. As we hypothesize below, being treated in a more individualized fashion may induce people to consider that they are being dealt with in a more dignified and respectful way. Furthermore, believing that the evaluators have taken into account detailed information about their performance, employees who receive temporal evaluations may also consider the evaluation processes as more accurate and unbiased.

We investigate how temporal versus social comparisons shape employees' judgments related to the evaluation process. More specifically, we examine whether temporal versus social comparisons lead to different perceptions of procedural and interpersonal fairness (Colquitt, 2001; Colquitt, Greenberg, & Zapata-Phelan, 2005). We further explore the psychological mechanism that explains the differential effects of temporal versus social comparisons on fairness perceptions.

It is worth examining whether the type of comparisons influences fairness perceptions, because performance evaluations are likely to have more positive effects when employees receive them well (e.g., openly rather than defensively; Ilgen et al., 1979). Performance evaluations are designed to help employees assess how they are doing their jobs and ultimately, to motivate them to perform better (Mayer & Davis, 1999). For these positive effects of performance evaluations to be realized, they need to be accepted by the individuals on the receiving end. A cardinal principle in the organizational justice literature is that people are more likely to accept information and decisions that are accompanied by a fair process (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Lind & Tyler, 1988). Therefore, the positive consequences of performance evaluations are more likely to be realized when the evaluations are seen as adhering more to principles of procedural and interpersonal fairness (Leung, Su, & Morris, 2001).

2. Temporal comparisons, social comparisons, and fairness

The distinction between temporal and social comparisons has proven meaningful in a variety of literatures such as achievement goals (Elliot & Thrash, 2001), health management (Suls et al., 1991), and aging (Robinson-Whelen & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1997). For example, researchers have suggested that individuals with learning (or mastery) goals typically make temporal comparisons to evaluate their achievement whereas those with performance goals are more apt to use social comparisons (Ames & Ames, 1984; Elliot & Thrash, 2001). However, as noted above, prior research has mainly examined why people use temporal versus social comparisons when they are evaluating themselves, rendering less clear how individuals react to temporal versus social comparisons coming from others. This is partially due to a lack of research on the effects of temporal comparisons. As Zell and Alicke (2009) put it, "Compared to the hundreds of studies that fly under the social comparisons banner, research on temporal comparisons is sparse"

(p. 224). The present research attempts to extend previous work by examining how temporal versus social comparisons made by others differentially affect people's perceptions along a dimension known to have ubiquitous effects on work attitudes and behaviors: fairness.

The vast literature on organizational justice (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2005) has distinguished between the fairness related to (1) the outcomes that employees receive (distributive fairness; Adams, 1965), (2) the decision-making process associated with the outcomes (procedural fairness; Leventhal, Karuza, & Fry, 1980), and (3) the behavior of the parties who plan and implement decisions (interactional fairness; Bies, 1987). Interactional fairness has further been subdivided into interpersonal and informational fairness, the former capturing the extent to which individuals are treated in a respectful manner and the latter reflecting how effectively relevant information has been communicated (Shapiro, Buttner, & Barry, 1994). The present research focuses on how temporal versus social comparisons affect perceptions of procedural and interpersonal fairness, because the temporal/social distinction is conceptually linked to these two dimensions of fairness. Nevertheless, for purposes of comprehensiveness, we also examine perceptions of distributive and informational fairness. Next, we provide the theoretical rationale for the prediction that employees' judgments of procedural and interpersonal fairness will be higher when they receive a performance evaluation that is based on temporal than social comparisons.

3. The effects of temporal and social comparisons on fairness perceptions

A temporal comparison uses employees' own past performance as the standard to evaluate their current performance. Therefore, in temporal comparisons, employees receiving the evaluations are the only individuals being considered during the appraisal process. This conveys to employees that the evaluations have focused on them and that the evaluators have devoted attention to the particular evaluations they are receiving (Sluss & Thompson, 2012). Thus, employees may infer that the evaluator has taken into account the details of their performance.

In contrast, a social comparison evaluation discusses employees' performance relative to other people's performance, which may elicit a perception of being viewed as *another face in the crowd*. When employees receive a social evaluation, it is implied that other people are also receiving the same type of evaluations. Employees may thus think that the evaluators' effort to conduct the evaluations has been distributed across multiple parties (self and others), giving them the impression that less attention was devoted to their own appraisal. In this situation, employees are less likely to think that the evaluators have considered information specific to their performance.

Thus, we predict performance evaluations that emphasize temporal rather than social comparisons are more likely to lead employees to believe that their evaluators have incorporated specific details of their performance. We refer to this reaction of employees as perceptions of individualized treatment. This construct is distinct from related concepts such as leader-member exchange (LMX; Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982; Liden & Maslyn, 1998) and feedback specificity (Goodman, Wood, & Chen, 2011). Particularly, LMX focuses on employees' perceptions describing their relationships with the leaders, and thus it encompasses broad domains of interpersonal dynamics (e.g., "How would you characterize your working relationship with your immediate supervisor?"; Liden & Graen, 1980). Therefore, LMX does not appear to capture what employees experience specifically in the context of performance evaluations. On the other hand, feedback specificity directly deals with performance evaluation settings. However, it does not reflect the social dynamics between the evaluators and employees. Feedback specificity instead pertains to objective rules governing performance evaluations (e.g., "I was given specific feedback about my performance"; Goodman et al., 2011). Therefore, LMX and feedback specificity may not be suitable constructs to capture interpersonal dynamics in performance evaluations. Moreover, neither of

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