

Antecedents and consequences of the frequency of upward and downward social comparisons at work [☆]

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Abstract

The current paper examines the dispositional and situational antecedents, as well as the attitudinal and behavioral consequences, of the frequency of upward and downward social comparisons. We predicted social comparison frequency would be influenced by uncertainty-related antecedents, and that social comparisons in organizations would be characterized by contrast, not assimilation, effects. A large and occupationally diverse sample of 991 employed adults was surveyed at three separate points in time over a 12–16 week period. Our results, based on structural equation modeling, indicated that (a) role ambiguity, task autonomy, and core self-evaluations were significant predictors of upward social comparison, (b) upward social comparison was significantly negatively related to job satisfaction and affective commitment, (c) downward social comparison was significantly positively related to job satisfaction and affective commitment, and (d) upward and downward social comparisons had significant positive and negative indirect effects on the frequency of job search behaviors, respectively. The findings are discussed in terms of their general implications for understanding the importance of directional social comparison processes in organizational settings.

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The process of comparing oneself to other people is a basic aspect of human experience, one that helps to reduce uncertainty and create meaning (Suls & Wheeler, 2000; Wood, 1996). In fact, social comparisons may be an “almost inevitable element of social interaction” (Brickman & Bulman, 1977, p. 150). As such, it is not surprising that social comparison pro-

cesses have been considered by psychologists investigating a wide variety of areas of human functioning (e.g., Adams, 1965; Crosby, 1976). Despite early calls to investigate social comparison processes in the workplace (Goodman, 1977), outside of the organizational justice and fairness literature (e.g., Ambrose, Harland, & Kulik, 1991), social comparison processes remain largely neglected by organizational scholars. This oversight is surprising given the ubiquity of social comparisons in organizational life and the impact that social comparison processes can have on an individual’s motivation, attitudes, and adjustment (Goodman, 1977).

Extensive prior basic research has shown that when engaging in social comparisons individuals can either compare themselves to someone who is better off (i.e., upward social comparison) or to someone who is

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worse off (i.e., downward social comparison; Wood, 1996). Although everyone engages in both upward and downward comparisons over time, individual variability in the relative frequency of these directional social comparisons may have implications for understanding relevant organizational outcomes. To date, directional social comparisons have garnered considerable interest in social psychology, yet little is known about the possible antecedents and consequences of these comparison processes within an employment context (Buunk, Zurriaga, Peiro, Nauta, & Gosalvez, 2005). This is despite the fact that the work context represents both a source of uncertainty, which motivates social comparisons, and is also a competitive environment (Kay, Wheeler, Bargh, & Ross, 2004), which may have distinct implications for how social comparisons unfold (Collins, 2000; Stapel & Koomen, 2005).

In the current paper, we extend the extant organizational work on social comparison processes by simultaneously modeling possible antecedents and consequences of the frequency with which individuals engage in upward and downward social comparisons (see Fig. 1). In particular, because individual interest in social comparisons is oftentimes motivated by the need to reduce uncertainty (Festinger, 1954), we examine both situational (i.e., job ambiguity and autonomy) and dispositional (i.e., core self-evaluations) factors related to uncertainty as possible antecedents of how frequently individuals engage in directional social comparisons. In addition, we also examine whether relevant attitudinal (e.g., job satisfaction and affective commitment) and behavioral outcomes (e.g., job search behavior) are differentially related to the

frequency of these directional comparisons. Although prior work suggests that social comparisons play an important role in the formation of job attitudes (e.g., Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), whether the direction of social comparisons in organizational settings matters remains largely unknown.

As a framework for understanding our predictions, we will first consider the nature of social comparisons in general and at work in particular. Second, we present a model that outlines possible antecedents of social comparisons and the organizational consequences of these comparisons. Finally, we report the results from a large scale three wave longitudinal study that tested our proposed model.

Upward and downward social comparison

Social comparison refers to the “...process of thinking about information about one or more other people in relation to the self” (Wood, 1996, p. 520). In his seminal work, Festinger (1954) proposed that humans possess a fundamental drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities and that in the absence of objective physical standards individuals will evaluate themselves against similar others. Social comparisons can serve multiple broad categories of goals such as: self-evaluation/uncertainty reduction (the desire to have an accurate view of one’s abilities), self-improvement (the desire to improve) or self-enhancement (the desire to protect/enhance one’s attitude towards the self; Wood, 1989). These motives are not, however, mutually exclusive: the desire to self-improve implies obtaining an

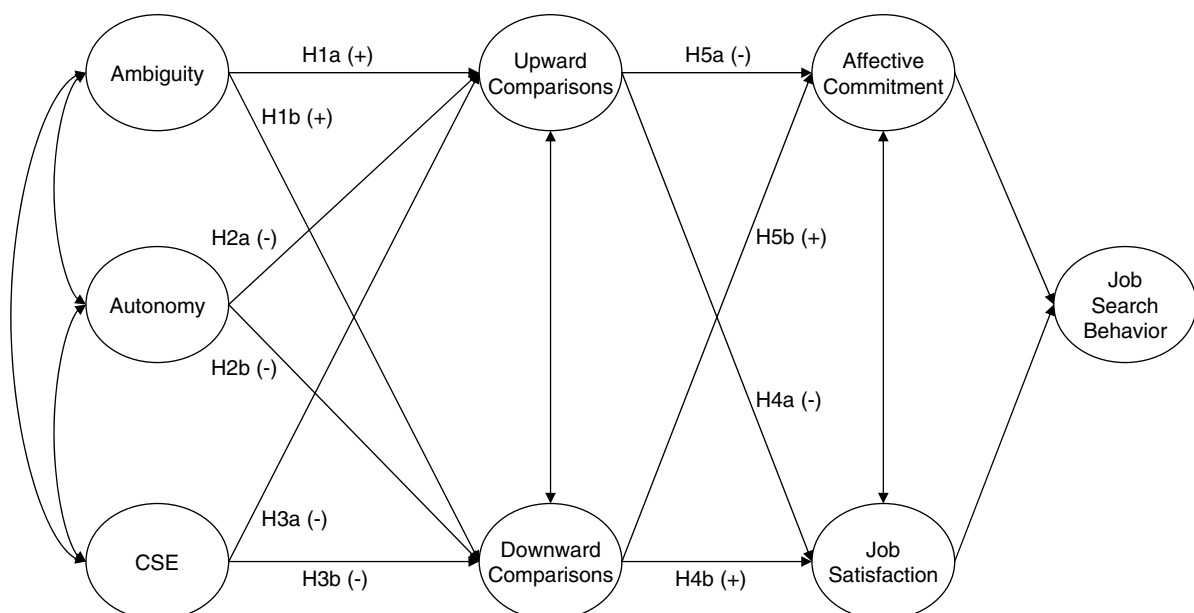


Fig. 1. Hypothesized Model.

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