Social Comparison

Why do we compare ourselves with others?

- We come to know ourselves by comparing ourselves to other people.
- We compare ourselves to others to learn about our feelings, traits, and abilities.
- According to Leon Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory, we have a need to evaluate our opinions and abilities, to figure out our strengths and weaknesses, in order to have an accurate view of ourselves.

Why don’t we use objective criteria?

- We will use objective criteria, when available.
  - How tall am I?; How much do I weigh?; How fast did I run?
- But, there are many things about ourselves that don’t have objective criteria or measurements.
  - How attractive am I? How good of a cello player am I? Do I weigh too much? How empathic am I? How conservative are my political opinions? How smart am I?

Two Important Questions

- When do we engage in social comparison?
• With whom do we choose to compare ourselves?

When do we engage in social comparison?

• We are more likely to engage in social comparison when
  o there are no objective standard to measure our attitudes and skills
  o we are uncertain about ourselves in a particular domain

• Example:
  o Suls & Fletcher (1983). Natural science publications authors thank fewer people than do social sciences authors.
    ▪ Physicists & Chemists: 0.5; Psychologists: 1.2; Sociologists: 2.0.
    Why?

With whom do we socially compare?

• Festinger (1954) -- With others who are more similar to us on the relevant dimension.

• Gilbert et al (1995). We initially compare ourselves to everyone.
  o After quick assessment of how our performance compares to that of others, we then decide how appropriate that comparison is
  o Appropriate = similar on attribute or dimension

Other reasons for social comparison

• To motivate ourselves

• To feel better about ourselves

For these reasons, we sometimes make different sorts of comparisons

• Upward comparisons
  o more likely to motivate us to achieve more
• **Downward comparisons**
  - more likely to make us feel better about ourselves
    - contrast principle, relative deprivation

**Wheeler’s work on event-contingent diaries of social comparisons**

• Looks at social comparisons outside the laboratory, during everyday life.

• **Examines questions such as:**
  - How often do we make social comparisons?
  - With whom do we make them?
  - How do they make us feel?

**Rochester Social Comparison Record**

• **Through what mode did you socially compare?**
  - social interaction, visual, telephone, brief contact, day thought

• **On what dimension did you socially compare?**
  - academic matter, personality, abilities, life style, social skills, physical appearance, wealth

• **With whom did you compare?**
  - Close friend, ordinary friend, acquaintance, stranger, imaginary person, family member, oneself, famous person.

**Rochester Social Comparison Record**

• **Target sex**
  - female, male, unknown

• **Similarity (Comparison dimension)**
  - inferior <-> similar <-> superior

• **Feeling?**
Social comparison applied to groups

- Within groups, we compare ourselves to others to establish status within groups
  - This explains why status hierarchies emerge so readily in groups

- Not only do we compare ourselves to others, but we compare our groups to other groups

- Also make upward and downward group social comparisons

Summary

- We make social comparisons when we are:
  - uncertain about our opinions and abilities
  - we desire validation (information-seeking)

- We choose to compare with:
  - others similar to us on dimension

- But, we also socially compare:
  - to make ourselves feel better
    - in which case, we choose to compare downward
  - to motivate us
    - in which case, we engage in upward comparisons

- Groups do it too