Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 59 (2015) 60–66

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

Self-evaluative effects of dimensional and social comparison

Jason E. Strickhouser, Ethan Zell *

University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Participants learned that they performed better or worse than other people (social comparison).
- Participants learned that they performed better or worse in one domain than another domain (dimensional comparison).
- Both comparison types significantly influenced self-evaluations and affective reactions.
- The influence of social comparison was significantly stronger than dimensional comparison.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 2 December 2014
Revised 11 March 2015
Available online 23 March 2015

Keywords:
Social comparison
Dimensional comparison
Self-evaluation
Self-concept

ABSTRACT

During self-evaluation, people compare their performance in one domain to their performance in other domains (dimensional comparison). Additionally, people compare their own performance to the performance of relevant peers (social comparison). Most experimental research on self-evaluation has investigated the effects of *either* dimensional comparison or social comparison, despite the fact that people often evaluate themselves in the context of *both* standards. To address this gap, the current research examined the interplay of dimensional and social comparison during self-evaluation. Participants received manipulated feedback indicating that they performed better or worse in one domain than another domain, and better or worse than other people. Both comparison types significantly influenced self-evaluations and affective reactions; however, the effect of social comparison was significantly stronger than dimensional comparison. These findings support prior theories on the important roles of dimensional and social comparisons in self-evaluation, but also suggest that social comparison is more impactful.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Julie receives her GRE scores and is deciding whether or not to pursue graduate study in a math-related field. Her math and verbal scores are significantly above average; however, her verbal score is significantly better than her math score. How should Julie evaluate her math performance? Should she be pleased that she ranked above average in comparison to her peers? Or should she be disappointed that she performed worse in math than in verbal? This example illustrates two fundamental processes that occur when people receive feedback about their performance, namely, social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Mussweiler, 2003) and dimensional comparison (Marsh, 1986; Möller & Marsh, 2013). According to social comparison research, people compare their own performance to the performance of relevant peers; people who outperform their peers (downward comparison) typically feel better about themselves than people who underperform their peers (upward comparison; Alicke, Zell, & Guenther, 2013). According to dimensional comparison research, people compare their performance in a given domain (e.g., math) to their performance in other domains (e.g., verbal); people typically feel better about their performance in the target domain when it ranks superior (downward comparison) as opposed to inferior to their performance in a standard domain (upward comparison; Pohlmann & Möller, 2009).

Educational theories, such as the Internal/External Frame of Reference Model, have long argued that dimensional and social comparisons are fundamental determinants of self-evaluations (Marsh, 1986; Möller, Retelsdorf, Köller, & Marsh, 2011). In support of this position, numerous studies conducted by educational psychologists demonstrate the effects of dimensional and social comparison information on self-evaluations (see Chiu, 2012; Möller, Pohlmann, Köller, & Marsh, 2009), but only a few of these studies are experimental in nature. Conversely, social psychologists have conducted numerous experiments demonstrating the causal effects of social comparison information on self-evaluations and affective reactions following performance (see Fiske, 2011; Suls & Wheeler, 2000), but as of present, few social psychologists have recognized the possibility of dimensional comparison effects. As illustrated in our example above, people often have access to both standards, and daily diary studies support the notion that dimensional and social comparisons both occur regularly in everyday life (Möller & Husemann, 2006; Summerville & Roese, 2008). Thus,

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, PO Box 26170, Greensboro, NC 27402, USA.
E-mail address: e_zell@uncg.edu (E. Zell).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2015.03.001
0022-1031/© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

it is critical to understand the causal effects of *both* dimensional and social comparison on self-evaluations.

In the present report, we introduce dimensional comparison theory (Möller & Marsh, 2013) to social psychology in effort to address two primary questions regarding self-evaluation. First, we examine whether dimensional and social comparisons can exert simultaneous effects in the same experimental context. In other words, if people receive feedback that provides both dimensional and social comparison information, do both standards exert significant effects? Research addressing this question would contribute to a growing body of scholarship on how people evaluate themselves in the context of multiple standards and whether social comparison effects continue to occur in the presence of other standards (Wood & Wilson, 2003). Along these lines, previous research indicates that social comparisons influence self-evaluations even when people also have objective information (Klein, 1997) or temporal comparison information (Zell & Alicke, 2009). The current study contributes to this literature by examining whether social comparisons influence self-evaluations even when people also have dimensional comparison information.

Second, we examine the relative size of dimensional and social comparison effects. Although both standards have long been regarded as important determinants of self-evaluations, our novel approach allowed for the first test of whether one standard has a more potent influence on self-evaluations and affective reactions than the other. Such knowledge would be of important theoretical and practical value, given that self-evaluations of competence in specific domains predict important life choices such as the selection of academic majors and careers (e.g., Ehrlinger & Dunning, 2003). Emerging research indicates that social comparisons are more strongly associated with self-evaluations than dimensional comparisons (see Möller et al., 2009 for a meta-analysis), but it remains unclear whether social comparisons have a stronger causal influence on self-evaluations than dimensional comparisons.

Previous research

To our knowledge, only two published experiments have examined how people evaluate themselves in the context of both dimensional and social comparison. In one study (Pohlmann & Möller, 2009, Study 3), participants received social comparison information indicating that they ranked above average, average, or below average on a word analogies test (downward, lateral, and upward social comparison), and average on a figure analogies test. The result of this feedback was that their performance on the figure analogies test ranked worse, about the same, or better than their performance on the word analogies test (upward, lateral, and downward dimensional comparison). Participants in the downward dimensional comparison condition evaluated themselves more favorably and felt better about their performance than participants in the lateral and upward dimensional comparison conditions, despite the presence of social comparison information. However, the potential simultaneous effect of social comparison information was not assessed in this experiment.

A related study provided initial evidence suggesting that dimensional and social comparison simultaneously influence self-evaluations and affective reactions (Möller & Köller, 2001, Study 3). Participants received social comparison information indicating that they performed above average, average, or below average on a figure analogies test (upward, lateral, and downward social comparison), and dimensional comparison information indicating that their figure analogies performance ranked better or worse than their performance on a word analogies test (downward and upward dimensional comparison). Participants in the downward social comparison conditions evaluated themselves more favorably and felt better about their performance than participants in the upward social comparison conditions. Similarly, participants in the downward dimensional comparison conditions evaluated themselves more favorably and felt better about their performance than participants in the upward dimensional comparison conditions. However, this study did not examine whether social comparison had a stronger influence than dimensional comparison. Thus, additional research is needed to explore the simultaneous and relative effects of dimensional and social comparison in self-evaluation.

The current research

We conducted two experiments to address these critical gaps in the self-evaluation literature. In both experiments, participants completed brief tests of quantitative and verbal reasoning skills. Then participants received manipulated dimensional and social comparison feedback. Social comparison in both studies was manipulated by informing some participants that they ranked 30 percentile points better or worse than average in the target domain. Similarly, dimensional comparison was manipulated by telling some participants that they ranked 30 percentile points better or worse in one domain (verbal reasoning) than another domain (quantitative reasoning). Thus, the absolute size of social and dimensional comparison manipulations in the present research was largely equivalent (i.e., 30 percentile points). On the basis of prior theories specifying that dimensional and social comparison yield simultaneous, independent effects (Marsh, 1986; Möller et al., 2011) as well as preliminary experimental evidence (Möller & Köller, 2001, Study 3), we anticipated that both standards would exert significant effects on self-evaluations and affective reactions.

Furthermore, we proposed that social comparisons would have a more potent influence on self-evaluations and affective reactions than dimensional comparisons. Success in a variety of contexts (e.g., athletics, school, and work) is typically defined by one's social status, that is, how well one is performing in relation to others (Fiske, 2011; Frank, 1985). Additionally, obtaining high social status confers numerous benefits, including better physical (Akinola & Mendes, 2014; Kraus, Adler, & Chen, 2013) and mental health (Boyce, Brown, & Moore, 2010) as well as increased respect, admiration, and influence in important social groups (Anderson, Kraus, Galinsky, & Keltner, 2012). Conversely, performing better in one domain than another domain may not necessarily reap social and material rewards, especially if one's performance in both domains is below average. Thus, although social and dimensional comparison may be useful sources of information that people consider during self-evaluation, the influence of social comparison should be substantially stronger than dimensional comparison.

Study 1

Our initial test of dimensional versus social comparison adopted several elements from a related study (Pohlmann & Möller, 2009, Study 3). Specifically, participants completed two tests and received manipulated feedback about their performance on the first test, while feedback on the second test was held constant. Social comparison information indicated how well participants performed on the first test in comparison to relevant peers. Next, the dimensional comparison implications of the feedback were highlighted, by stating how well participants performed on the second test in comparison to the first test. As in the prior study, dependent measures were administered following the second set of feedback to assess self-evaluative and affective reactions to *dimensional comparison*. However, unlike the prior study, dependent measures were also administered following the first set of feedback to assess self-evaluative and affective reactions to *social comparison*. Thus, our design not only served as a conceptual replication of a key study conducted previously on dimensional comparison (Pohlmann & Möller, 2009, Study 3) but also included additional measures that allowed for a novel test of whether social comparison is more influential than dimensional comparison.

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/947707

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/947707

Daneshyari.com