



Referent status neglect: Winners evaluate themselves favorably even when the competitor is incompetent[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Participants learned that they ranked better or worse than a competitor.
- Participants learned that the competitor ranked above average or below average.
- Losers evaluated themselves more favorably when the competitor was above average.
- Winners evaluated themselves favorably even when the competitor was below average.

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ABSTRACT

People evaluate themselves more favorably when they outperform a referent (downward comparison) than when they underperform a referent (upward comparison). However, research has yet to examine whether people are sensitive to the status of the referent during social comparison. That is, does defeating a highly skilled referent yield more favorable self-evaluations than defeating an unskilled referent? Does losing to an unskilled referent yield less favorable self-evaluations than losing to a skilled referent? To address these questions, participants learned that they performed better or worse than another person (social comparison) who ranked above average or below average (referent status). Social comparison information had a more pronounced influence on self-evaluations than referent status information. Furthermore, consistent with self-enhancement theories, participants selectively highlighted referent status information when it had favorable implications for the self. These findings demonstrate that people neglect referent status information, leading winners to evaluate themselves favorably even when the competitor is incompetent.

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Scholars have long recognized that thoughts and feelings about the self are in part determined by how one stacks up in comparison to relevant peers (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989). These social comparisons are a ubiquitous and perhaps automatic component of everyday experience. For example, social comparisons occur among classmates, coworkers, and teammates, as well as friends, family, and intimate partners. Among the most common types of social comparisons are those that pertain to ability judgments (Alicke, Zell, & Guenther, 2013). Although there are some exceptions, people typically desire superior abilities. That is, self-evaluations are elevated upon learning that one's performances rank superior to others (downward

comparison), and self-evaluations are deflated upon learning that one's performances rank inferior to others (upward comparison).

Numerous studies have supported the basic proposition that upward comparisons typically yield less flattering self-perceptions of ability than downward comparisons (Markman & McMullen, 2003; Mussweiler, 2003). However, this focus on comparison direction (upward, downward) neglects a core component of the comparison process. Not only do people know whether they are better or worse than a competitor, but they may also have insight into the ability of the competitor more generally. In some contexts, people rank better or worse than a competitor that places at the top of the performance distribution (e.g., a star athlete). In other contexts, people rank better or worse than a competitor that places at the bottom of the performance distribution (e.g., a struggling athlete). We refer to knowledge specifying the general position of the competitor as *referent status information*.

Surprisingly, despite enormous empirical attention granted to upward and downward social comparisons over the last several decades

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(Fiske, 2011; Guimond, 2006; Suls & Wheeler, 2000), researchers have largely ignored whether people are sensitive to referent status information. In a relevant study, college students who outperformed an adult on an intelligence test felt better about themselves than students who outperformed a 10-year old; similarly, students who underperformed a 10-year old felt worse about themselves than students who underperformed an adult (Webster, Powell, Duvall, & Smith, 2006). These findings provide initial support for the notion that people are sensitive to aspects of the referent during social comparison, such as age. Nonetheless, research to our knowledge has not systematically varied referent status information to examine whether it moderates social comparison effects.¹

Theoretical framework

Logically, one would assume that people *should* be highly sensitive to the status of the referent. Outperforming a strong referent should yield more favorable self-perceptions than outperforming a weak referent. Similarly, underperforming a weak referent should yield less favorable self-perceptions than underperforming a strong referent. However, we propose that people's reactions to referent status information may defy logical prescriptions. Specifically, we utilize prior research on the dominance of local comparisons (Zell & Alicke, 2010) as well as self-enhancement (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009) to propose that people will largely neglect referent status information but selectively highlight it when it serves ego-enhancement needs.

Along these lines, previous research on the local dominance effect indicates that self-evaluations of ability are more sensitive to one's rank in immediate local groups (i.e., local comparisons) than one's rank in larger, more representative groups (i.e., general comparisons). For example, learning that one ranks best or worst among a group of five competitors has a stronger influence on self-evaluations than learning that one ranks better than 84% or 32% of 1500 previous test takers, when people receive both feedback types (Zell & Alicke, 2009). In addition, learning that one ranks better or worse than a single competitor has a stronger influence on self-evaluations than learning that one ranks above average or below average, when people receive both feedback types (Buckingham & Alicke, 2002). The interpretation of these findings is that people are highly tuned to social comparisons with competitors in immediate local environments, but that people are less affected by pallid statistical information indicating one's rank in larger samples. Extrapolating from local dominance research, we argue that social comparison information indicating one's position in comparison to a referent may have a stronger influence on ability self-evaluations than broader, contextual information indicating the status of the referent.

Importantly, however, referent status information is unique from general comparisons studied in prior research, in that it does not directly pertain to the self. Rather than informing people that *their performance* ranked above average or below average (e.g., Buckingham & Alicke, 2002; Zell & Alicke, 2009), referent status information specifies that a *competitor's performance* ranked above average or below average. Thus, referent status is distinct from other types of general comparison in that it does not directly reflect one's own performance. Further, another unique aspect of referent status information is that it serves to augment the meaning of local comparisons. Outperforming a high status competitor should yield altogether different reactions than outperforming a low status competitor. However, it remains to be seen whether people take into account the status of the referent when estimating their ability.

Beyond the contribution of local and general comparison processes, reactions to referent status information may also be colored by desires to maintain a positive self-image. According to a robust literature on self-enhancement and self-protection (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008), a variety of construal processes can be employed to salvage a positive self-image in the context of self-evaluative threat. Thus, one might anticipate that people will selectively highlight referent status information when it has favorable implications for the self. This selective attention to referent status might be especially pronounced following upward comparison than downward comparison, because people often seek flattering information about themselves following upward comparison as a coping mechanism (Taylor & Lobel, 1989).

Indirect support for our position can be found in recent research demonstrating that people who win a prize are happy regardless of the prize amount (i.e., \$3 vs. \$7), but people who lose a prize are less bothered when the prize amount is low as opposed to high (Kassam, Morewedge, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2011). Negative experiences, such as losing a prize, presumably trigger more complex attributional processes, leading people to consider additional standards beyond the most salient ones. Although social comparisons with peers in the local environment are highly salient, statistical information specifying referent status is more abstract. By this logic, we propose that people should be more sensitive to referent status information following upward comparison than downward comparison. That is, winning a contest should yield relatively favorable self-evaluations regardless of whether the competitor is competent or incompetent, yet losing a contest should yield more favorable self-evaluations when the competitor is competent as opposed to incompetent.

Overview

The current study examined whether referent status moderates the effect of social comparison information on self-evaluations. Participants completed a lie detection test and received manipulated feedback about their performance. Social comparison was manipulated by telling participants that their test performance ranked better (downward comparison) or worse (upward comparison) than the last participant to complete the study. Additionally, referent status was manipulated by telling participants that the last participant ranked above average or below average; participants in control conditions did not receive referent status information. We anticipated that social comparison information would have a more pronounced influence on self-evaluations than referent status information. Furthermore, we anticipated that referent status information would have a greater influence on self-evaluations of participants in the upward comparison conditions than participants in the downward comparison conditions.

Method

Participants were 194 introductory psychology students (153 female, $M_{age} = 19.01$) at a university in the Southeastern United States who participated in groups of one to six students for course credit. The racial/ethnic composition of the sample was as follows: 60 African American, 8 Asian, 104 Caucasian, 9 Hispanic, and 6 other race/ethnicity. Most participants were born in the USA (178) and most grew up in the USA (184). To provide adequate statistical power, data were collected until at least 30 participants were obtained in each of the 6 experimental groups. Data were not analyzed until the entire sample was obtained. No participant was excluded from the statistical analyses reported below. Experimental stimuli and questionnaires were presented to participants by computer using MediaLab (Empirisoft, 2010). Participants completed study measures in private, isolated booths.

Upon arrival, participants were told that the purpose of the study was to measure the lie detection ability of students at their university.

¹ Although referent status and social comparison both contain rank information, they are by definition independent standards. That is, although referent status information indicates whether the referent ranks better or worse than most others in general, it does not indicate whether the referent ranks better or worse than the self.

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