

Gender Differences in the Relationship of Downward Social Comparison to Self-esteem

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ABSTRACT

Research has defined the process of comparing ourselves to others as social comparison. Social comparison processes provide an opportunity to enhance or deflate self-esteem, and these self-esteem effects may vary between genders. The current study examined the effect that downward social comparison with a similar other had on self-esteem. Participants were 55 general psychology undergraduate students at UW-La Crosse. The participants were given a pretest of self-esteem, read a scenario, in which the individual is either similar or dissimilar to themselves, and then given a post-test of self-esteem to evaluate possible changes due to downward social comparison. We expected to find that women will have lower self-esteem than men because women tend to relate to others more automatically. However, our hypothesis was not supported.

INTRODUCTION

People frequently make comparisons between themselves and other individuals. Comparisons are made for a variety of reasons, including opportunities for self-enhancement. For example, students may compare their work to that of other students in order to assess how they are doing on a particular assignment relative to the other students. The *comparison other*, or the person being used as basis of comparison, can either be superior or inferior with regards to attributes or abilities, and thus have differing effects on self-esteem. When the *comparison other* is similar to an individual by means of personal characteristics (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, etc.), how does the similarity of the *comparison other* to the individual affect the self-esteem level of the individual? The purpose of this study is to examine how perceived similarities between a participant and a *comparison other* influence self-esteem when engaging in downward social comparison and examine gender differences in the process of downward social comparison.

The process of comparing oneself to another individual in order to assess one's own personal attributes in relation to another individual's attributes is called social comparison. Social comparison involves examining how accurate one's personal beliefs and attitudes are compared to other individuals (Forsyth, 1999). Festinger (1954) suggested that engaging in comparing oneself with another individual is a spontaneous response in which humans engage. Engaging in social comparison is more likely to occur when the *comparison other* performs very well or very poorly (Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995). Comparison to someone who is perceived to be superior to oneself is referred to as "upward social comparison," whereas comparison to someone who is perceived to be inferior to oneself is referred to as "downward social comparison."

The focus of our study is on downward social comparison. Downward social comparison provides an opportunity for assessing oneself compared to another individual and provides information or feedback about shortcomings of the self (Kimmelmeier & Oyserman, 2001). Tesser's self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) model helps understand how similarity and closeness to a *comparison other* influences an individual's reactions to social comparisons (McFarland, Buehler, & MacKay, 2001). The model predicts that a contrast effect will occur when individuals engage in social comparison with an individual who is close or similar to them on important dimensions. In other words, when a downward social comparison is made to someone who is similar, the self-esteem will increase (e.g. "In contrast to how I previously felt, now I feel better."). McFarland, Buehler, and MacKay's (2001) research on the other hand revealed that individuals who engage in a downward social comparison with a similar or close other were likely to see an assimilation effect. In other words, when a downward social comparison is made to someone who is similar, self-esteem will decrease (e.g. "It is hard to think of someone like me having difficulties."). Kimmelmeier and Oyserman (2001) found that personality and contextual characteristics of the *comparison other* can influence whether an assimilation or contrast effects will occur. They found that when downward social

comparison involved personality characteristics women were more likely to show assimilation effects (Kemmelmeier & Oyserman, 2001). On the other hand, when downward social comparison involved situational characteristics men were more likely to show contrast effects.

One particular variable that may influence an individual's reactions to downward social comparison is the closeness that the individual feels to the *comparison other* (McFarland, Buehler, & MacKay, 2001). A study conducted by McFarland, Buehler, and MacKay (2001) found that an assimilation effect most likely occurs in individuals who share a strong identity with a *comparison other*.

Gender may also play a defining role in the extent to which a downward comparison influences one's self-esteem. Men and women appear to differ in the extent to which they define themselves as unique individuals or see themselves as embedded and connected in relationships with others (Kemmelmeier & Oyserman, 2001). Markus and Kitayama (1991) explained these fundamental differences as variations in independence and interdependence. Men are relatively viewed as more independent; they see themselves as separate individuals. Women, on the other hand, are more interdependent, and define themselves in the context of their relationships with others. For example, women provide more self-definitions that include close relationships (Gabriel & Gardner, 1999). It is these differences in self-concepts that have implications for the variance in the interpretations of downward social comparisons, which in turn differently affect self-esteem.

How do these differences in independent and interdependent self-concepts affect the influence a downward comparison has on one's self-esteem? Since women often view themselves as being defined through their relationships, they are expected to emphasize and connect with a worse-off comparer other. Kemmelmeier and Oyserman (2001) found that women are not always able to avoid the negative implications of another person's failure on the self. Therefore, instead of enhancing self-esteem, as predicted by Tesser's SEM model, a downward comparison may actually decrease a woman's self-esteem. The connection to the comparer other, especially if perceived as similar to oneself, would result in a lower self-evaluation, indicating an assimilation effect.

Men, on the other hand, focus on their personal uniqueness and do not define themselves in the context of relationships. Cross and Madson (1997) concluded that men are more likely to overestimate their unique characteristics and degrade a *comparison other* in order to enhance their own self-esteem. Therefore, men should see a downward social comparison as an opportunity to self-enhance. This pattern should be found even if men view the comparer other as similar to themselves.

Similarity to the *comparison other* appears to affect the extent to which a downward comparison influences self-esteem. However, there may be gender differences in how men and women mentally process those similarities. We hypothesize that downward social comparison with a similar *comparison other* will influence self-esteem more than a downward comparison with a dissimilar *comparison other*. Also, due to the gender differences in independent and interdependent self-concepts, men and women will show different directions in their assimilation of the *comparison others'* failures. Women, who are expected to relate to the similar comparison other and assimilate their own competence into that of the *comparison other*, are hypothesized to decrease in self-esteem when faced with a downward social comparison. Men, who are not expected to assimilate another's failure into their own self-concept, are hypothesized to enhance their self-esteem when faced with a downward social comparison.

METHOD

Participants

Fifty females and five male college students enrolled in an introductory psychology course participated and were given extra credit points for voluntarily signing up to participate in this study. The subjects ages ranged from 18 to 25 years with a mean age of 18.70.

Procedure and Materials

Self-esteem was measured by the 10-item Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenburg, 1965). All participants completed two questionnaires. The first questionnaire was a collection of attitude and values questions in which the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was embedded. This assessed their baseline self-esteem. The participants were then randomly assigned to read one of two scenarios: (1) one in which an individual is similar in personal characteristics to themselves; or (2) one in which an individual is dissimilar in personal characteristics to themselves. Scenarios were piloted to assure that they were perceived as similar or dissimilar to the participants. All scenarios that the participants read contained an individual that was failing academically. The participants then completed the second questionnaire assessing how they felt about the student's situation and how similar they felt to the individual in the scenario. In these questions the self-esteem measure was repeated to comprise the post-test for the study. Males and females were tested separately.

RESULTS

Despite the few numbers of male participants we still tested the primary hypothesis. ANOVA analysis showed no significant main effects for either participants' gender or for the scenario condition on post-test self esteem (controlling for pre-test self-esteem). In addition, there were no interaction effects between the gender of the participant and the scenario condition of being similar or dissimilar (see Table 1). Due to the low number of male respondents, we also compared the change in women's self-esteem from pre to post evaluation with a paired samples t-test. There was no significant change.

Table 1. Gender of participant and condition status

Gender of participant	Condition Similar	Status Dissimilar
	Mean	Mean
Male	31.82	32.24
Female	31.42	32.56

DISCUSSION

Although the findings of this study were not significant, there are a number of explanations that can account for the lack of supporting evidence for the hypotheses. First of all, there may have been shortcomings with the methods in the current study. In research conducted by Kimmelmeier and Oyserman (2001) instead of reading a scenario about a hypothetical person, the participants in this study envisioned someone who was failing in some aspect of life and was someone they knew. This particular method used by Kimmelmeier and Oyserman (2001) could have made the downward social comparison more realistic and identifiable. The hypothetical aspect of either the similar or dissimilar scenarios may have not been personal enough for the participants to identify. For example, most individuals may already view themselves as warm, caring, and intelligent, but don't use these personal characteristics to identify with other people.

Another factor that may have contributed to the lack of supporting results may be explained by the age of the participants. The mean age was 18.87 years, which is relatively young. Being that the majority of the participants were late adolescents they may still be exhibiting characteristics of this developmental period. Participants may still be experiencing the egocentrism associated with this age; therefore, they may have difficulties relating to other individuals. Another possible explanation of why age may have played a factor in the results is the association with the "Freshmen Myth". Many freshmen assume that experiencing academic difficulties during their first year is the norm; therefore, these participants may not have viewed the scenarios used in this study as out of the ordinary. Instead of using the failure aspect to engage in a downward social comparison, the participants may have over identified with the scenarios and found it to be a normal phenomenon.

Finally, the failure aspect of the scenarios were not viewed by the participants as an opportunity to engage in a downward social comparison in order to enhance self-esteem. Overall, participants didn't show a significant increase in self-esteem from pre to post evaluation of self-esteem. This particular phenomenon is a discrepancy with general social comparison theories and research findings. Social comparison theories assume that engaging in a downward social comparison provides individuals with the opportunity for self-enhancement (Kimmelmeier and Oyserman, 2001). For example, theory would support that if an individual compared themselves to someone perceived to be "worse" off, the individual would make their own situation look more promising thus enhancing self-esteem. In the current study, participants did not identify with the failure aspect in the scenarios, therefore did not engage in any form of social comparison.

Further research may consider a few alternatives to improve upon this current study. First of all, future research may consider using a more realistic scenario either through the use of cognitively envisioning someone they know who is failing or by addressing more identifiable personal characteristics for which the participants can relate. Furthermore, future research may consider using an older participant population. An older population might help avoid possible egocentric tendencies associated with late adolescence. Finally, future research could examine the possibility that engagement in social comparison processes varies across age groups.

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