# Introduction

## Communion in social comparison – Back to the roots

### Zlatan Križan & Frederick X. Gibbons

### COMMUNAL FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL COMPARISON: AN INTRODUCTION

In 1954, Leon Festinger published "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes," the first formal treatment of the psychology underlying individuals' tendencies to compare with one another. This ambitious work (which contained no less than nine hypotheses, eight corollaries, and eight derivations thereof) initiated a highly productive and influential line of conceptual development and psychological research. In his seminal paper, Festinger described social comparison as a key tool that enables individuals to evaluate the accuracy of their opinions and the extent of their abilities. Since then researchers have tested, expanded upon, and supplemented these insights with hundreds of empirical studies, new theoretical proposals, and, from time to time, important alternatives to Festinger's original views. The depth, breadth, and import of research on social comparison for social psychology are evident in the consistent stream of edited volumes dedicated exclusively to this topic. Notable among these are the first volume on social comparison edited by Suls and Miller in 1977 and the handbook of social comparison theory and research by Suls and Wheeler published in 2000. Several other volumes provide timely or topical analyses of social comparisons and its relevance for other psychological phenomena and related subdisciplines (e.g., Buunk & Gibbons, 1991; Guimond, 2005; Smith, 2008; Suls & Wills, 1991).

These discoveries have positioned social comparison as a key psychological process in self-evaluation and the regulation of social behavior. Individuals look to similar others to evaluate their abilities and opinions (e.g., Goethals & Darley, 1977; Martin, 2000), look to those better than them for inspiration and guidance (e.g., Collins, 1996; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), and evaluate others depending on their similarities and distinctions with the self (e.g., Dunning, 2000; Fiske, 2011). In addition, they evaluate their own position in life with

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reference to others' positions (e.g., Crosby, 1976; Wills, 1981), look to others for information about social norms and for clues about how to behave (e.g., Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991), and experience feelings toward others based on implications of mutual differences for their relationship (e.g., Tesser, 1988). These insights reveal just how critically important other individuals are for our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Moreover, they suggest that the way we see ourselves, evaluate our lot in life, and decide which paths to pursue all depend on how we see and react to others. Put simply, it all depends on how we *compare* with other people and social groups.

### On the "Social" in Social Comparison

However, these findings also expose the fact that the focus of social comparison research has traditionally been on functions that comparisons have for the individual and his or her sense of self. Throughout these pages we argue that the emphasis on self-oriented processes reflects a critical imbalance in understanding of social comparison. In short, we propose that a predominant focus on the functions that comparisons serve for the *individual* neglects the other side of the coin – the functions that social comparisons serve for the *community*, including other important individuals in one's life, one's own social groups, and the broader society. The purpose of this volume is to address this imbalance. While empirical evidence obviously reveals how important comparisons are for the way I see *myself*, the way *I* feel, and how *I* behave, what do they mean to *us* as a collective?

We argue that social comparisons are tools that are just as important to the functioning of societies as they are to the functioning of individuals. As many great social thinkers of the 20th century have recognized, how we construe individuals and the society in which they live is mutually dependent. Our notion of the self is dependent on how we are viewed and treated by others, and our views of social groups always depend on how we view their constituent individuals (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Furthermore, regulation of individual behavior is central to a proper functioning of a society. As a result, social comparisons should be just as important to understanding the community as they are for understanding the individuals who operate within it. Examining the communal functions of comparisons, their theoretical treatment, and their empirical manifestations are the central purposes of this volume. In it we gathered an eclectic cross-section of theoretical and empirical work within social psychology that addresses the role that social comparisons play in enabling social coordination, development of social bonds, and adaptation to the society at large. In short, we examine the *communal*

and *affiliative*, rather than self-oriented, functions of social comparison. Ultimately, both of these functions are mutually dependent, and can both reinforce and impede one other, as the chapters gathered here reveal. Finally, by focusing on the *social* in social comparison, we hope this volume brings psychologists closer to integrating the understanding of the individual and the group.

### Back to the Roots (of Social Comparison Theory)

It is often overlooked (or forgotten) that communal considerations were at the root of social comparison theory. A key lead-in to Festinger's (1954) now-classic treatment of the topic was his 1950 *Psychological Review* paper on informal social communication (Festinger, 1950). As a direct precursor to his work on social comparison, this analysis stressed that people within a group desire to achieve uniformity of opinion not just because consensus promotes confidence in one's own opinion, but also because it facilitates coordination of group goals. Thus, this analysis explicitly recognized the two "masters" of social comparison: the individual and the group. Moreover, this paper, together with his other early work on social influence (e.g., Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950; Festinger & Thibaut, 1951), is generally viewed as stressing the power of the group and the role of the collective in shaping individual behavior.

Unfortunately, the focus on the collective stops about there; the addition of abilities to treatment of social comparison in the 1954 paper signaled a clear shift toward a goal of understanding how individuals use social comparison information, and how this information serves self-oriented goals (e.g., evaluating abilities; see Suls & Wheeler, 2000, p. 4). Even the early work on affiliative aspects of comparisons emphasized the function they serve for the individual (e.g., Schachter, 1959). As we mentioned earlier, this focus has dominated research on social comparison to this day. Although contemporary researchers recognize that social comparison serves many more goals than simply enabling accurate self-evaluation (such as promoting self-esteem, improvement, and self-verification; see Helgeson & Mickelson, 1995), the focus has remained on goals in service of the *individual*, not the collective. There are important exceptions, of course, and it is the goal of the present volume to highlight these exceptions, integrate their contributions, and describe how the communal functions of social comparisons intersect with their self-oriented functions.

We will now provide an overview of the chapters contained herein and their organization, and highlight key points they address. As a collective (no

pun intended), we hope these analyses balance the scales and bring a focus on the community back into social comparison research.

## Overview of Contributions

We begin the volume by drawing basic theoretical and empirical distinctions between communal and self-oriented functions of social comparisons. As will become apparent, these functions can be mutually reinforcing, but they can also come in conflict.

### Part I: Core Considerations

In Part I, three chapters expand on this distinction and the phenomena critical to the communal role of social comparisons. First, Kenneth D. Locke explicates two different aspects that social comparisons have: an *agentic* aspect, which considers quantitative distinctions between individuals on particular dimensions (status, ability, or personality), and a *communal* aspect, which considers qualitative aspects of similarity or connectedness. Whereas most of social comparison research has focused on the former, the communal aspects of social comparisons prove critical for understanding both when agentic comparisons take place and what impact they will have. This distinction is crucial for understanding the nature of social comparisons, as well as their function for facilitating relationships and building social cohesion.

In Chapter 2, Jan E. Stets and Peter E. Burke focus on Identity Theory and the role of social comparisons therein. Drawing on a sociological perspective, these authors describe a critical perspective within *sociological* social psychology that explicitly considers how comparison processes enable verification of personal, role, and social identities. By focusing on identities at varying levels of abstraction, as well as how comparisons serve a function of verifying these identities, this perspective directly connects the individual with the collective. Furthermore, this perspective emphasizes how the meaning of individual behavior depends on comparison with broader normative meanings, and explicates the diversity of these meanings and their consequences. Critically, the chapter emphasizes the shared nature of these meanings, the communal aspect of their verification, and the reinforcement of social connectedness (or, in the authors' own words, "we-ness") they entail. Finally, it provides a distinct sociological perspective on the theme of group identity more explicitly addressed in Part III of the volume.

To conclude the opening section, in Chapter 3 Zlatan Križan and Richard H. Smith focus on tensions between agentic and communal aspects of social comparison, highlighting the origin of this tension and its consequence for

societies. Specifically, the authors describe when social differences and inequalities undermine social cohesion, why they do so, and how societies and individuals mitigate this threat. Whereas the opening two chapters focus on mutual coexistence and interaction of social differences and connections, Križan and Smith emphasize how social inequalities often undermine relationships, a sense of social connectedness, and group solidarity. However, the authors also describe how individuals and societies mitigate these threats with the aim of protecting social groups and the community as a whole. Taken together, these opening chapters stress the social nature of social comparisons, emphasize the role they play in connecting the individual to the collective, and explicate both the conflict and the synergy that arise from this interaction.

### Part II: Individual Level

The chapters comprising Part II expand on communal processes involving comparisons between *single* individuals. Specifically, they highlight how comparisons are used to promote others' well-being and describe the role comparisons play in close relationships with significant others. First, in Chapter 4, Anne E. Zell and Julie Juola Exline outline how people's awareness of the impact that social comparisons have on others leads people to spare individuals' emotions or enhance feelings of solidarity, often by manipulating comparison information of interest to them. The authors outline a variety of strategies individuals engage in to make others feel better: lowering themselves within a given comparison domain, downplaying the relevance of that domain, boosting others' standing within the domain, or creating a common identity that ensures shared benefit from a given individual's superiority. Considered together, these strategies reveal a distinctly pro-social goal of managing social comparisons, and identify the importance of comparisons for ensuring smooth relationships.

In Chapter 5, Penelope Lockwood and Rebecca T. Pinkus focus on the role of comparison in perhaps the most important type of relationships most of us will ever have: the one between us and our romantic partners. This kind of a relationship, perhaps more than any other, illuminates the relevance of social comparisons for maintaining social connection. The standard logic suggests that comparisons with others who are better off make us feel worse. However, Lockwood and Pinkus present evidence that this logic often fails when applied to romantic relationships. Specifically, the authors argue that individuals are often happier and emboldened by their partner's superiority or success, basking in their reflected glory, reaping mutual material benefits, and experiencing their partner's successes as one's own. Comparisons within

romantic relationships are one of the best examples of the interaction between self-oriented and affiliative functions of social comparisons.

### Part III: Group Level

Part III brings the importance of the social group directly into focus. It emphasizes how affiliating with others and belonging to groups is critical for learning who we are and protecting our identities. In this vein, the two chapters in this part directly emphasize the interaction between self-oriented concerns and group considerations. Both analyses reveal that processes seemingly motivated by self-centered concerns actually facilitate affiliation and group cohesion. Although this may pit some groups against others, this work reveals dynamics central to how we negotiate membership in diverse social collectives. First, in Chapter 6, Michael A. Hogg and Amber A. Gaffney describe the role social comparison processes play in Social Identity Theory, outlining their role in facilitating normative behavior, supporting group leadership, and reducing uncertainty about oneself through group identification. These authors stress that comparisons both *within* groups and *between* groups impact how we manage our complex social identities. Furthermore, their analysis reveals an often noted ironic impact of groups on self-definition and collective action: groups often seem to bring us together mainly by keeping us apart (from other groups)!

In Chapter 7, Hart Blanton, Melissa Burkley, and Edward Burkley pick up on this dynamic and focus on how shared threats (i.e., threats that impact yourself as well as other members of your group) promote in-group solidarity. Specifically, the authors describe three key responses to such threats. First, they describe *bonding*, which is affiliating with one another to provide social support and manage shared fear or anxiety. Second, they describe *hiding*, which involves taking refuge in a particular group membership to deflect threats to self. Third, they describe *promoting*, which involves identifying with superior group members to protect one's group's or one's own identity. Together, the two chapters in this section highlight the diverse roles that social comparisons play in managing personal and group identities, often involving contrasts between different sections of society we may or may not belong to.

### Part IV: The Sociocultural Level

Chapters in the final part of the book focus on broader cultural constructions that are key to operation of social comparison processes in general, highlighting the relevance of the larger community for social comparison. They reveal that even the most personal aspects of social comparisons involve deep cultural considerations that derive from centuries of communal life. First, in

Chapter 8, Serge Guimond and Armand Chatard expose gender as a core, often unnoticed force behind social comparison processes. The authors suggest that gender is a key determinant of motivations to engage in social comparisons. They also suggest that the consequences of social comparisons depend on gender in important ways, and that the construction of gender is largely based on comparative considerations. This chapter raises important questions about the meaning of gender, as well as the universality of affiliative comparison processes.

Chapter 9, the final chapter of this volume, by Joni Y. Sasaki, Deborah Ko, and Heejung S. Kim, examines an issue of central importance to social comparison, yet one that has received attention only recently, namely the role of culture in shaping social comparison processes. All social comparisons occur within a cultural framework, and neglecting the impact of culture has probably been one of the central omissions of research on social comparisons (cf. Guimond, 2005). In their chapter, Sasaki and colleagues highlight the dynamics between cultural frames and self-worth. They show how distinct cultural construals shape engagement in and reactions to social comparisons, but they also highlight how such comparisons allow individuals to live according to prescriptions of their given culture. As did the chapter that preceded it, this chapter gives equal due to the role the collective plays in construction of the self and to the role managing self-concept plays in facilitating a collective existence.

## CONCLUSION

In their totality, these chapters highlight the key role communal processes play in the initiation of social comparison processes, their manifestation, their consequences, and their role in enabling group existence. They provide an eclectic mix of contemporary theory and empirical research that highlights an aspect of social comparison neglected since the inception of formal social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), namely the communal and affiliative functions that social comparisons play. Perhaps more than anything else, the chapters reveal humans' truly social nature and expose a complex and enduring dynamic – often a tension – between the individual and the multitude of collectives to which they belong.

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PART I

CORE CONSIDERATIONS