

Agency and Communion in Social Comparison

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The aim of the current chapter is to clarify and illustrate how social motives and social comparisons shape each other and how their expression and implications are shaped by the social context.

Agentic and Communal Social Motives

Social motives—the motives that energize and direct social life—can be organized into two broad categories: agentic and communal (Hogan & Roberts, 2000; Horowitz et al., 2006; Locke, 2015). Agentic motives energize and direct efforts to “get ahead”—to enhance one’s skills, assets, achievements, status, prominence, or power. Communal motives energize and direct efforts to “get along”—to create and nurture solidarity with others based on mutual interests, affection, goodwill, kinship, and trust. The “Big Two” dimensions of agency and communion also shape social cognition, including how people perceive and describe themselves, other individuals, and groups (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008).

A substantial literature supports the premise that agentic (e.g., status; Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015) and communal (e.g., belongingness; Baumeister & Leary, 1995) motives are fundamental and universal. Expressing agentic and communal actions and fulfilling agentic and communal needs predict greater hedonic well-being (positive affective valence and self-esteem) and eudaimonic well-being (experiencing one’s life as meaningful and self-actualizing; Buchanan & Bardi, 2015; Church et al., 2013), and stimulate specific positive agentic or communal emotions such as pride and confidence or love and gratitude. Conversely, threats to communion (e.g., being disliked) or agency (e.g., being disrespected) can activate

cardiovascular and endocrine threat responses and undermine mental and physical well-being (Smith & Jordan, 2015).

Experiencing agency and communion may be inherently reinforcing and being denied agency and communion may be inherently punishing because—on average over our evolutionary history—such experiences predicted inclusive fitness. Fulfilling agentic motives (e.g., elevating and displaying one's abilities, accomplishments, attractiveness, and other assets) would typically help one attract mates and followers and deter threats and competitors. Fulfilling communal motives (e.g., forming relationships and demonstrating trustworthiness) would typically help one retain mates and participate in a network of mutual protection, support, and information exchange.

However, there are often costs to pursuing agency and communion. Of special relevance to this chapter, agentic and communal motives can be frustrated because agency and communion are limited resources. Agency is often a zero-sum game that allows for only one winner—for example, who wins the prize or position or promotion—and in the process the losers may suffer painful losses (e.g., diminished prestige, impaired health, foregone opportunities). Communion may superficially seem less competitive, but the same logic applies: Our emotional and physical intimacy and support is inevitably given to and thus received from certain select individuals and not others. Moreover, even the satisfaction of agentic and communal motives can have costs. People who are “getting ahead” can become the target of critical scrutiny, malicious envy, and debilitating rivalries (Križan & Smith, 2014). People who are “getting along” can get exposed to communicable diseases and shoulder social obligations that exhaust their time and resources (Kurzban & Leary, 2001).

Because agentic and communal motives can yield both costs and benefits, it is most adaptive to pursue them to the degree they are apt to be beneficial and eschew them to the degree they are apt to be costly. Thus, adaptively regulating social motives entails assessing the probable costs and benefits of pursuing particular agentic and communal goals. Making such assessments typically require making social comparisons.

Social Comparisons

A social comparison is a judgment of where an attribute of the self stands relative to a corresponding attribute of some target person or group (Wood,

1996). Some social comparisons are deliberate, while others are automatic. Some comparisons remain outside of awareness, while others receive careful consideration. Regardless, simply encountering information about others does not constitute a social comparison; a social comparison requires juxtaposing that information with relevant information about self.

There are four cardinal directions in which a social comparison can go: (a) if the target is judged to be similar or close to the self, then the comparison is *connective*; (b) if the target is judged to be dissimilar or far from the self (without being better or worse), then the comparison is *contrastive*; (c) if the target is judged to be superior to or above the self, then the comparison is *upward*; (d) if the target is judged to be inferior to or below the self, then the comparison is *downward*. Naturalistic studies of everyday social comparisons suggest that approximately half of spontaneous comparisons are “vertical comparisons” focused primarily on whether the target is above or below the self (e.g., “You ran faster/slower than I did”), and half are “horizontal comparisons” focused primarily on how close or distant the target is from the self (e.g., “We have similar/different religious beliefs”; Locke, 2003).

For some time there has been a tendency to use the term “social comparison” to refer exclusively to vertical comparisons. However, I can find no semantic, theoretical, empirical, or historical justification for this curious but widespread tendency. *Semantically*, the Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) defines “comparison” as “1. The action, or an act, of comparing, likening, or representing as similar.” There is no implication that comparisons necessarily involve judgments of superiority/inferiority. *Theoretically*, if (on average across persons and situations) agency and communion are equally powerful and pervasive motives, then (on average across persons and situations) vertical and horizontal comparison information relevant to assessing and fulfilling those motives should be equally salient and prevalent. *Empirically*, as noted, horizontal and vertical comparisons in fact are equally common and consequential in everyday life. Finally, *historically*, the early social comparison literature devoted considerable attention to horizontal comparisons of opinions and emotions, driven mainly by desires for consensus and validation (Festinger, 1954; Schachter, 1959).

The bend toward vertical comparisons may have begun with the development and dissemination of experimental procedures that allowed researchers to quantify and control the relative rankings of participants and targets (e.g., Hakmiller, 1966; Wheeler, 1966). Such studies had internal validity but—by focusing on vertical comparisons with strangers or imagined others along

quantitative dimensions such as test scores—sketched an unrepresentatively narrow picture of the situations in which social comparisons naturally arise. Studies of naturally occurring social comparisons (Locke, 2003, 2007; Locke & Nekich, 2000; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992) suggest that they frequently involve less readily ranked attributes (e.g., attitudes, preferences) and about half occur during interactions with the comparison target. Moreover, people compare with close others (friends, family) more than distant others (acquaintances, strangers) and usually have compared themselves with the target before and expect to do so again in the future. And, crucially, context matters. For example, comparisons made with close others or during interactions are more apt to be connective and to generate communal feelings than are comparisons made with distant others or in the absence of any interaction (Locke, 2003; Locke & Nekich, 2000). Consequently, though horizontal comparisons do not often appear in social comparison research, they appear quite often in our everyday lives.

Because social comparison information can help us to estimate the likelihood of achieving various agentic and communal goals, social comparison information can help us to selectively invest ourselves in those agentic and communal pursuits that promise to be fulfilling and divest ourselves from those that threaten to be frustrating. For example, estimating the likelihood of winning a competition is aided by making vertical comparisons (e.g., of one's training and accomplishments) with other competitors, and if the comparisons suggest that these targets are apt to frustrate our agentic motives, then we may redirect our agentic motives toward other competitions or other domains of achievement. Analogously, estimating the likelihood of forming a warm communal relationship is aided by making horizontal comparisons (e.g., of preferences, values, and lifestyles) with potential partners, and if the comparisons suggest that these targets are apt to frustrate our communal motives, then we may redirect our communal motives toward other potential relationships.

As the preceding examples suggest, when assessing the feasibility of agentic and communal goals, the most informative comparison targets are the particular individuals with whom we are considering—or are already—cooperating or competing. When we are considering competing—or are already—competing with others, we often want to know not just “Can I get ahead of others?” but “Can I get ahead of *you*?” (Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010). And when we are considering—or are already—cooperating with others, we often want to know not just “Can I get along with others?” but

“Can I get along with *you*?” Thus, surveys of naturally occurring comparisons found that *personalized comparisons*, which ask “How do I compare particularly with this one target person?”, were over twice as common as *generalized comparisons*, which ask “How do I compare generally with some set of others (of which the target is just an example)?” (Locke, 2007). Even when not assessing how we might fare with particular others, we tend to be most affected by comparison targets who are similar (e.g., in education, location, occupation) to ourselves (Wood, 1989), presumably because similar others clarify where we stand relative to the *types of people* with whom we can expect to cooperate or compete. Likewise, when people compare themselves with groups of individuals, the target groups are more often small, known groups (such as their family or team) than large, impersonal groups (such as their gender or ethnic group; Smith & Leach, 2004).

Horizontal Comparisons—Motivational Influences and Implications

Horizontal comparisons assess whether others are similar to us (e.g., share our interests, goals, values, preferences, attitudes, and opinions); consequently, horizontal comparisons can help us predict who is likely to satisfy or frustrate our communal motives (e.g., for mutual friendship, support, solidarity, and understanding). As described next, we tend to seek communion with others with whom we make connective rather than contrastive comparisons but also tend to make connective rather than contrastive comparisons with others with whom we seek communion.

Connective Comparisons Facilitate Communal Motives

An extensive corpus of research suggests that perceived similarities (connective comparisons) enhance and perceived dissimilarities (contrastive comparisons) undermine warm, positive, empathic, communal feelings toward others (Byrne, 1971; Locke, 2003; Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008). The effect of similarity on interpersonal attraction and benevolence is quite robust: It has been found not only when people share important or desirable qualities (e.g., core values) but also when people share seemingly unimportant qualities (e.g., birthdays or painting preferences; Miller, Downs, &

Prentice, 1998; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971) and even undesirable qualities (Locke, 2005). The link between perceived similarity and liking is probably innate and certainly emerges early; for example, infants preferred stuffed animals that appeared to share their food preferences (Mahajan & Wynn, 2012). Nonetheless, the positive affective consequences of connective comparisons are stronger in people with stronger dispositional communal motives (e.g., who say it is particularly important that others “understand me” and “support me”; Locke, 2003).

Multiple mechanisms may mediate the relationship between horizontal comparisons (i.e., implicit or explicit judgments of self-other similarity) and attraction. Balance theory posits that people will like others who like what they like and dislike people who do not (Heider, 1958). Relatedly, if people like themselves, then they should automatically like people like themselves (Jones, Pelham, Carvallo, & Mirenberg, 2004). Perceived similarity may also automatically activate kinship cognitions (Park & Schaller, 2005). Moreover, similar others validate and dissimilar others invalidate one's experiences and perspectives (Byrne, 1971). Finally, if people expect similarity to predict liking and benevolence, then they may preemptively reciprocate with liking and benevolence (Aronson & Worchel, 1966; Condon & Crano, 1988).

Communal Motives Facilitate Connective Comparisons

Communal motives can increase self-other similarity by encouraging us to become more like others to whom we wish to feel connected. For example, people who were motivated to feel close to their romantic partner tended to incorporate attributes of their partner into their own self-concept (Slotter & Gardner, 2009). In addition to aligning ourselves with specific significant others, we also tend to adjust our attitudes and behaviors in the direction of attitudinal or behavioral norms (Miller & Prentice, 2016). People are most apt to conform to individuals or groups with whom they can make connective as well as upward comparisons—that is, people who seem “like me” but who are also relatively successful and respected (Hilmert, Kulik, & Christenfeld, 2006). For example, people tend to compare and attune their own opinions and beliefs to the opinions and beliefs of higher-status targets with whom they share basic values (Suls, Martin & Wheeler, 2000). Conformity to high-status targets may satisfy both communal and agentic motives because

it helps us to be accepted by those high-status others (Forsyth, 2000) and to imagine ourselves as being “among the better ones” (Collins, 2000).

Even when they lack clear information about others’ attributes (e.g., opinions, experiences, dispositions), people are prone to make connective comparisons by simply presuming that others share their attributes, a phenomenon referred to as *social projection* (Krueger, 2007) or *assumed similarity* (Kenny, 1994). Social projection may be to some degree motivated. Multiple studies suggest that because people believe similarity promotes cooperation, people who are feeling more motivated to cooperate with others are more likely to engage in social projection (Riketta & Sacramento, 2008; Toma, Corneille, & Yzerbyt, 2012). Moreover, individuals who place greater importance on communion also engage in more social projection (Cross, Morris, & Gore, 2002; Locke & Christensen, 2007; Morrison & Matthes, 2011), at least with others with whom they would feel comfortable being interconnected, such as liked others and ingroup members (Locke, Craig, Baik, & Gohil, 2012).

For example, Locke et al. (2012, Studies 3 and 4) asked 865 Indian, Korean, and American university students to describe their personality and that of the typical university student in their country. Students with stronger communal motives were more likely to describe themselves and the typical student similarly. Importantly, though, their perceptions of self-other similarity were to some degree accurate: Perhaps because communal motives predict conformity, the self-descriptions of students with stronger communal motives in fact were more similar the average student’s self-description. However, even after controlling for the base rate or “normativeness” of each attribute, students with stronger communal motives continued to show more *distinctive assumed similarity* (Human & Biesanz, 2011) or *false consensus bias* (Krueger & Clement, 1994). Participants also described the typical undergraduate from a different country (e.g., Indian students described American students). Interestingly, distinctive assumed similarity with foreign students tended to be negatively associated with communal motives, suggesting that while communal social motives encourage connective comparisons with ingroups, they may sometimes encourage contrastive comparisons with outgroups.

Expressing contrastive comparisons with a rival outgroup can help affirm one’s identification with an ingroup (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Moreover, even when no outgroups are salient, if an ingroup is perceived to favor a particular position (e.g., attitude, opinion, lifestyle), then endorsing that position can

facilitate vertical (as well as horizontal) comparisons that meet agentic (as well as communal) goals. For example, if an ingroup with which one identifies on average shows mild support for raising the minimum wage, then expressing above-average support for raising the minimum wage can be the basis of both connective comparisons that satisfy communal motives (i.e., one stands with one's group) and downward comparisons that satisfy agentic motives (i.e., one stands out more firmly and bravely on the "correct side" of the issue). Indeed, research suggests that group members feel most comfortable and proud publicly expressing attitudes aligned with—but more extreme than—group norms (Morrison & Miller, 2008). Since a tendency to express attitudes that deviate from average in a particular direction will push the perceived group average in that direction, people must express increasingly intense support for their group's ideals in order for their support for those ideals to stand out. In this way, group members' motives to both match and exceed each other can contribute to *group polarization*, the tendency for groups' initial inclinations to become incrementally more pronounced over time (Myers & Lamm, 1976; Sunstein, 2002).

Vertical Comparisons—Motivational Influences and Implications

Vertical comparisons indicate our relative standing on attributes (such as physical, financial, intellectual, and social assets, abilities, and achievements) that predict our likelihood of accomplishing agentic goals (e.g., outperforming a rival, winning a race, getting an attractive job). These estimates enable us to selectively invest in competitions or domains of accomplishment where we can expect to stand out or get ahead and divest from those where we can expect to be reliably ignored or outperformed. The implications of vertical comparisons for self-evaluations of agency depend on whether we assimilate ourselves toward or contrast ourselves away from the comparison target (Buunk & Ybema, 1997; Collins, 2000; Lockwood, 2002; Mussweiler, Ruter, & Epstude, 2004). Downward contrast (low perceived likelihood of becoming as bad as the downward target) and upward assimilation (high perceived likelihood of becoming as good as the upward target) tend to boost confidence, optimism, and agentic ambitions. Upward contrast (low perceived likelihood of becoming as good as the upward target) and downward assimilation (high perceived likelihood of becoming as bad

as the downward target) tend to deflate confidence, optimism, and agentic ambitions.

Upward Assimilation

Upward assimilation appears to be particularly effective at stimulating agentic self-improvement motives. Dozens of studies of behavioral modeling (Bandura, 1986) suggest that people are most apt to emulate others who invite both upward comparisons (superior performance on the target behavior) and connective comparisons (sufficient similarity to suggest “you could do this too”). Especially when encountering an unfamiliar challenge (e.g., a calculus course), a target person who overcame that challenge can be an informative “proxy” for how well one might perform, assuming one performed similarly to the target on related tasks (e.g., an algebra course) and share other attributes predictive of performance (Wheeler, Martin, & Suls, 1997). For example, in one study, targets who had successfully mastered a transition to a novel environment or life phase inspired and increased the self-efficacy of participants who were facing similar transitions (Lockwood, Shaughnessy, Fortune, & Tong, 2012), and, in another study, diabetes patients who focused on similarities with target patients who were doing well emotionally and physically showed greater motivation to improve their own diabetes-related self-care behaviors (Arigo, Smyth, & Suls, 2015).

Upward Contrast

Upward contrast tends to not only undermine agentic feelings and motives but also undermine positive, communal feelings toward the upward comparison target (Locke, 2005). Upward contrast may even provoke feelings of resentment and malicious envy and efforts to disparage or undermine the superior other (Johnson, 2012; Lam, Van der Vegt, Walter, & Huang, 2011). People are particularly likely to exhibit hostility if the upward contrast threatens their self-worth (Tesser, 1988) or they perceive the contrast between themselves and the target as unfair or illegitimate (Križan & Smith, 2014). Those individuals who are most disposed to strong communal concerns and motives tend to be those most sensitive to how vertical

comparisons can undermine communion and be hurtful to everyone involved (Locke, 2003; Zell & Exline, 2014).

Upward contrast with someone one knows well or encounters regularly (e.g., a friend) can be more threatening than upward contrast with someone with whom one has little or no connection (Tesser, 1988). Therefore, distancing oneself psychologically or physically from the comparison target can ease the pain of being outperformed. However, in many circumstances distancing oneself may be impractical or undesirable (e.g., the upward target works in the same office or is a family member).

Upward contrast can also undermine communion via the “compensation effect” (Kervyn, Yzerbyt, & Judd, 2010): If people perceive other individuals or groups as superior in status or competence (i.e., more agentic), then they tend to perceive them as inferior in warmth and kindness (i.e., less communal). To counter the compensation effect, when interacting with individuals in lower-status positions, individuals in higher-status positions may downplay their own competence and instead emphasize their warmth (Swencionis & Fiske, 2016).

However, in competitive contexts people might do the opposite and assert or flaunt their superiority to demoralize their rivals or intimidate any potential challengers. For example, when anticipating a threat to their position, male gorillas might beat their chests and male humans might flex their muscles, socialites might “name drop” famous friends, and academics might mention their credentials. However, explicitly proclaiming one’s superiority is risky. Although such boasts (absent contrary evidence) can lead perceivers to conclude that an individual must indeed be relatively capable, if they encounter evidence that he or she is exaggerating, then such boasts can backfire and cause perceivers to conclude that the person is actually relatively incompetent (Heck, & Krueger, 2016).

Downward Comparisons

When others make downward comparisons with us, they tend to lose confidence that we can make valuable contributions and lose interest in becoming interdependent with us (Dunn, Ruedy, & Schweitzer, 2012). Therefore, most of us usually resent and resist being the target of downward comparisons. For example, when interacting with individuals in higher-status positions, individuals in lower-status positions downplayed their warmth and played up

their competence (Swencionis & Fiske, 2016).

On the other hand, others will not ask a destitute person for money or an incapable person for help; thus, for people who lack agentic and communal social motives and instead are misanthropically motivated to dissuade others from asking them for favors, feigning inferiority can be an effective strategy. Another Machiavellian reason to invite downward comparisons is to trick rivals into becoming overconfident. For example, in gambling contexts a “hustler” deliberately loses a few low-stakes games before readily routing his or her cocky competitors as soon as they take a big risk in a high-stakes game.

People may also make themselves the target of downward comparisons to escape conflicts or competitions that they expect to lose. When confronting a superior rival, individuals of many species employ behavioral signals (e.g., vulnerable postures, immature vocalizations) to essentially publicly proclaim: “I am submissive and not a threat to you, so please don’t hurt me!” In addition to these behaviors, humans can verbally communicate to rivals that they lack the capacity and desire to challenge them. People who deliberately make themselves the target of downward comparisons sacrifice their social status in the hopes of becoming the beneficiaries of sympathy or at least pity rather than animosity or rivalry (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008).

Eschewing agency can be adaptive as a temporary defense that helps a person “live to fight another day”. However, if—after external threats subside—the person keeps making upward contrasts that undermine agentic motivation (i.e., keeps presenting as a hopeless loser who will never positively stand out or get ahead), then the person can become mired in the syndrome of depression (Price, Sloman, Gardner, Gilbert, & Rohde, 1994). Indeed, research on individuals with persistent major depression or dysthymia suggests that they are distinguished by deficits in agentic motivation (Locke, Sayegh, Weber, & Turecki, 2018) and that enhancing their agentic and communal self-efficacy (“I can express myself and be influential with others”) predicts subsequent reductions in their depressive symptomatology (Locke et al., 2017).

In marked contrast to depressed individuals, narcissistic individuals are characterized by potent agentic motives, plus a lack of communal motives that might temper their agency (Findley & Ojanen, 2013; Locke, 2000; Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012). Narcissistic individuals’ “unmitigated agency” shapes the content of their social comparisons and their reactions to social comparisons. In terms of content, studies suggest that narcissistic individuals tend to make downward comparisons, but only for qualities that reflect

or predict agency (e.g., ability, status, attractiveness) and not for qualities that reflect or predict communion (e.g., warmth, generosity, compassion; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Križan & Bushman, 2011).¹ In terms of reactions, studies suggest that narcissistic individuals tend to denigrate or distance themselves from other people (including friends) who outperform them—that is, they are quite prepared to sacrifice solidarity in order to protect their sense of superiority (Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993; Nicholls & Stukas, 2011).

Social Contexts Shape Motives and Comparisons

Social contexts activate or deactivate social motives and thus also the social comparisons associated with those social motives. Contexts that highlight competition or differences in (e.g., intellectual, financial, physical, or social) status or achievement tend to stimulate agentic motives and vertical comparisons. Contexts that highlight opportunities to communicate, collaborate, or create a close relationship tend to stimulate communal motives and horizontal comparisons. Old friends sitting down for a conversation are likely to have communal motives and make connective comparisons. Rival chess champions sitting down for a match are likely to have agentic motives and make vertical comparisons. Two common types of relationships that exemplify how social contexts shape social motives and thus social comparisons are agentic partnerships and romantic partnerships.

Agentic Partnerships

When making decisions about whether or not to work together with others (e.g., as business partners or as members of a sports team), we typically have communal motives to partner with people who we get along with and who share our goals and our inclinations for how best to pursue and achieve those

¹ While writing this chapter I realized that this distinction between agentic and communal qualities might be relevant to my (Locke, 2009) finding that narcissism predicted ascribing more humanizing traits to the self than to others. Therefore, I repeated the analyses on each trait term separately and indeed found that narcissism predicted ascribing more of the humanizing traits that connoted agency (e.g., “ambitious,” “imaginative”) to the self than to others but not more of the traits that connoted communion (e.g., “sympathetic,” “helpful”).

goals. Therefore, we typically prefer partners with whom we make many connective and few contrastive comparisons. But we also typically have agentic motives to partner with people whose skills and resources will help us to realize our shared aspirations. Therefore, we typically prefer partners with whom we can make upward comparisons, at least outside of domains that we consider our own distinctive strengths.

Any complex collective effort creates opportunities for a division of labor, whereby different individuals can make unique contributions to collective success (e.g., “I’m the best pitcher; you’re the best batter”; “I’m the numbers person; you’re the people person”; or, to quote a Pet Shop Boys song, “I’ve got the brains, you’ve got the looks, let’s make lots of money”). If each partner contributes distinct, complementary skills and assets, then each partner can enjoy the rewards of being successful and feeling socially valuable without threatening the success and value of the other (Beach & Tesser, 2000; Leary & Cox, 2008). Thus, in the context of agentic partnerships, we typically desire partners who can make distinctive contributions toward shared aims. For example, in a longitudinal study of lab groups, individuals were most likely to offer advice and assistance to those lab partners who they believed best complemented their own strengths and weaknesses (Oosterhof, Van der Vegt, Van de Vliert, & Sanders, 2009). Accordingly, to be a desirable partner, we should make our shared attitudes and goals the target of connective comparisons and make our distinctive skills and resources the target of upward comparisons. One caveat is that people may not spontaneously follow the optimal strategy for forming teams; specifically, they may favor demographically similar partners over partners who have the complementary task-relevant skills that would better facilitate long-term team performance (Gompers, Mukharlyamov, & Xuan, 2016; Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007).

Romantic Partnerships

Long-term romantic relationships can also be framed as agentic partnerships. For example, romantic partners often work together to create a home and raise a family. Therefore, as in other agentic partnerships, romantic partners may seek status in different domains of accomplishment to prevent vertical comparisons from agitating competition or envy that could corrode the relationship (Beach & Tesser, 1995). However, romantic partnerships differ from other types of relationships or partnerships. For example, romantic partners

are more inclined to respond to each other's successes with pride rather than envy and to each other's failures with compassion rather than *schadenfreude* (Lockwood & Pinkus, 2014).

In a naturalistic study of spontaneous upward comparisons (Locke, 2011), following each comparison, participants estimated their own abilities and the target's abilities in the domain in which they had been outperformed by the target. Participants generally acknowledged that the target's abilities were superior. However, participants rated their own abilities much lower when outperformed by a spouse or long-term romantic partner than by a friend, relative, or coworker. Consequently, the perceived ability gap between the self and the target was greatest when comparing with romantic partners (and was smallest when comparing with ordinary friends or coworkers). In sum, people were most ready to admit that they were inferior and could not compete with someone who had outdone them when that someone was their romantic partner (Locke, 2011).

Agentic and communal motives help clarify the distinction between agentic and romantic partnerships. In romantic partnerships, communion (partners' mutual love and support) is unconditionally important. In contrast, in agentic partnerships, agency (partners' success) is unconditionally important, while communion (partners' connection) matters mostly to the degree that it helps partners to be successful. In agentic partnerships, a partner's value is conditional on contributing certain skills and resources; if they lose those skills and resources, they lose their value and are likely to be retired or fired. In contrast, in the idealized romantic partnership, a partner's value is not conditional on contributing specific skills and resources and thus is expected to endure: "for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health."

While agentic motives (and thus vertical comparisons) may be less critical to romantic partnerships, communal motives (and thus horizontal comparisons) may be more critical. Thus, vertical comparisons may be less likely to erode romantic partnerships than are contrastive comparisons in domains of interdependence (e.g., how one wants to parent children or spend one's finances or time together). Perhaps the contrastive comparison that is most lethal to a romantic partnership is recognizing a discrepancy in communal motives, such as confronting evidence that a person's partner is less loyal, devoted, and in love than he or she is. Perhaps for these reasons, comparisons with close others are more likely to be connective than are comparisons with distant others (Locke, 2003; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992), and romantic partners may be particularly keen to invite connective

comparisons of their investment in each other (e.g., verbally and nonverbally telling each other “I love you”).

Future Directions

Moving forward, many intriguing questions remain regarding the interrelationships between social motives and social comparisons. Because most are outside my scope of expertise (e.g., do testosterone and oxytocin mediate changes in social cognition associated with agentic and communal motivational states)—and perhaps because writing this chapter has primed me to notice opportunities for agentic self-promotion—the following examples are limited to two areas where I have conducted some exploratory research but that remain relatively understudied.

First, studies of social comparisons in non-Western countries remain limited, thereby limiting our understanding of how cultures shape comparisons. If the importance of communal motives to fit in and agentic motives to stand out varies across cultural contexts, then we might expect concomitant variations across cultural contexts in the salience and influence of specific social comparison directions. For example, Locke, Zheng, and Smith (2014) found that within small groups of acquaintances, Chinese students tended to express personality judgments that established commonalities among group members, whereas American students tended to express judgments that established how group members differed from each other, and these cultural differences were largely explained by differences in collectivistic and individualistic values. On the other hand, once activated, social motives may shape social comparison processes similarly across cultures. For example, the association between communal motives and social projection (mentioned earlier in the section on horizontal comparisons) was as strong in India and Korea as in the United States (Locke et al., 2012).

Second, the literature reviewed in this chapter concerned agentic or communal goals for the *self* and comparisons of the *self* to others. However, people can also have agentic or communal goals for *ingroups* (groups with which they identify) and make comparisons of *ingroups* to other groups. For example, Locke (2014) assessed the importance that US citizens placed on the United States being agentic (e.g., “we are assertive”), unagentic (e.g., “we not make them angry”), communal (e.g., “we understand their point of view”), or uncommunal (e.g., “we keep our guard up”) when interacting with

other countries and then asked them to compare the United States to another country. The results showed that individuals who wanted the United States to be more agentic and less communal with other countries also tended to make and relish intergroup social comparisons that framed the United States as positively differentiated from other countries. Moreover, different patterns of intergroup comparisons and motives predicted supporting different candidates in the US presidential election; for example, supporters of the more conservative candidate expressed more agentic motives and made more downward comparisons with other countries. Given that intergroup attitudes can have societal and global repercussions, elucidating how intergroup comparisons and intergroup motives influence each other may prove a worthwhile focus for future research.

Summary and Conclusions

Communal motives entail cooperating and connecting with others (e.g., joining a social group). Horizontal social comparisons of attributes (e.g., shared interests, values, opinions, and goodwill) relevant to satisfying communal motives are important determinants of communal feelings and motives. Specifically, connective comparisons (e.g., “they share my interests”) tend to amplify communal motives, while contrastive comparisons (e.g., “they do not share my interests”) tend to dampen them.

Agentic motives entail outcompeting and outperforming others (e.g., being promoted to an upper-management position). Vertical social comparisons of attributes predictive of success (e.g., managerial training, experience, and accomplishments) are important determinants of agentic feelings and motives. Specifically, upward assimilation (e.g., similar training as a successful superior) and downward contrast (e.g., better training than someone who was fired from a managerial position) tend to increase confidence and investment in agentic pursuits, whereas upward contrast (e.g., inferior training than a successful superior) and downward assimilation (e.g., similar training as someone who was fired from a managerial position) tend to decrease confidence and investment.

When deciding whether to compete or connect with others, we may focus on comparisons that help us to accurately assess how well we can compete or connect. After deciding to compete or connect, to remain a good competitor or good partner we may focus more on comparisons that help us to sustain

and nurture our agentic and communal motivation. For example, individuals who have or want a cooperative relationship with others are prone to project their qualities onto those other individuals and vice versa, both of which facilitate connective comparisons. We may also communicate information that leads others to make comparisons that affect their motives toward us; for example, self-enhancing or self-derogating can lead others to conclude that we are either too superior or too inferior to be worth challenging.

Moreover, our motives may rarely be solely agentic or solely communal. For example, ongoing interdependent relationships (such as business or romantic partnerships)—in which we typically desire partners who we both like and respect and who like and respect us in return—are built on and bolstered by a complex blend of connective comparisons and vertical comparisons in complementary domains of skill or accomplishment. Such social comparisons, by promoting both liking and respect, may also invite us to appreciate others as fully human individuals (Fiske, 2013). More generally, as multifaceted humans, our social lives are energized and shaped by the pervasive, interacting motives to experience liking, belonging, and solidarity (i.e., communion) and to experience respect, success, and status (i.e., agency); consequently, the vertical and horizontal comparisons that assess our prospects and monitor our progress toward agentic and communal goals are pervasive, interacting elements of our social cognition.

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