

Preference for Similarity in Higher and Lower Status Others

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In interactions between lower and higher status individuals, higher status subjects preferred lower status others who had dissimilar patterns of performance, while lower status subjects preferred higher status others who had similar patterns of performance.

The work of Byrne (1971) and Festinger (1950, 1954) indicates that people prefer to associate with and compare themselves to similar others rather than those who are dissimilar. Several studies, however, suggest exceptions to this general tendency (Novak & Lerner, 1970; Taylor & Mettee, 1971). These studies found that when the other was stigmatized or otherwise undesirable, individuals preferred the other more when he or she was dissimilar to themselves.

These divergent patterns have been integrated by Brickman and Janoff-Bulman (1977). They propose that the preference for similar or dissimilar others depends on the social and psychological costs and benefits implicit in the social comparison. As Brickman and Janoff-Bulman point out, benefits can involve either adaptive advantages, from information that promises to improve individuals' skills or increase their future access to resources; or hedonic advantages, from information that makes them feel better about their current skills and resources. Costs likewise can involve both threats to future resources, if social comparison suggests that these resources might be redistributed to the individual's disadvantage, and threats to psychic well-being or self-esteem. Comparisons may involve costs for relationships (since the relationship may suffer if either party feels disadvantaged or threatened by the comparison) as well as for the self-esteem of individual parties. Individuals will prefer social comparisons that minimize potential costs and maximize potential benefits.

The present study further investigates when similar or dissimilar others are preferred by examining the preference for similarity in interactions between

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lower and higher status individuals. Many everyday interactions, e.g., teacher-pupil, supervisor-worker, embody a status differential between the individuals. According to social comparison theory and Byrne's attraction paradigm, individuals in these interactions would be expected to prefer and compare themselves to similar others. But is this always the case?

Based on Brickman and Janoff-Bulman's work, we see that in interactions marked by status differentials, the costs and benefits involved in social comparisons differ for lower and higher status individuals. Lower and higher status individuals would thus be expected to have different feelings about comparisons with similar or dissimilar others of unequal status. Specifically, we would predict that individuals would prefer a similar other when the other is of higher status, provided there is some prospect that individuals can improve their own status in the future. This can be seen as a case of the individual comparing himself "upwards," as proposed by Festinger. By comparing oneself to a similar higher status other, the lower status individual may gain useful information on how to improve, and so entertain the hope of becoming like the higher status other.

On the other hand, we would predict that individuals would prefer a dissimilar other when the other is of lower status. Though the comparison is flattering and favorable to the high status person, it involves potential costs that the person will prefer to avoid. If the two are similar, either party may start to question the legitimacy of the status differential, and the relationship may thus become uncomfortable for the higher status person (see also the literature on status incongruence, e.g., Sampson, 1969, and on victim derogation, e.g., Lerner, 1975). The higher status individual can minimize these costs by comparing to a lower status other who is dissimilar.

The present study tested this reasoning in interactions between lower and higher status persons where the similarity itself was neutral in value, involving another person whose overall ability was the same as the subject's, but whose pattern of performance was either identical or opposite to the subject's. Thus, the study can be conceptualized as a 2×2 factorial which varied the status of the subject relative to the other (higher or lower), and the subject's pattern of performance relative to the other (similar or dissimilar).

METHOD

Subjects

Thirty-two male and thirty-two female undergraduates served as subjects. They were randomly assigned to conditions.

Procedure

Each subject was individually led into a room where the comparison other, a male confederate, was seated. The experimenter explained they were participating in a study that tested consumer bargaining ability and consumer product judgment, but before beginning he needed some background information.

The status differential between participants was manipulated via the confederate's background. The higher status confederate wore a suit, and revealed that he was 27 years old, a Ph.D. in marketing, and bought a new car last year. The lower status confederate was slovenly dressed, and revealed that he was a 17-year-old high school junior, and bought a new baseball mitt as his major purchase of the past year. The status was reaffirmed by bogus scores the participants received publicly on a preliminary "consumer profile test" which purportedly measured consumer characteristics. It consisted of 35 yes/no questions such as "most of my clothes are more than two years old," "I would like to be a stock broker." The higher status confederate scored in the highest 20%, while the lower status subject scored in the lowest 20%. The lower status confederate scored in the lowest 20% while the higher status subject scored in the highest 20%.

The participants were then given a 40-item multiple choice test which supposedly measured two specific consumer behavior dimensions: consumer bargaining ability, and product judgment. False public feedback on these two dimensions was used to establish similar or dissimilar patterns of performance. In the Similar pattern of performance condition, the subject and confederate both scored in the highest 20% on the first dimension and in the lowest 20% on the second dimension. In the Dissimilar pattern of performance condition, the confederate scored in the highest 20% on the first dimension, while the subject scored in the lowest 20% on the first dimension. On the second dimension, the scores were reversed.

After the "testing," the participants were given a questionnaire which asked about their impression of the other. Responses were measured by 7-point unipolar scales. Finally, the subjects were debriefed.

RESULTS

Separate 2×2 analyses of variance, with subjects' relative status and relative pattern of performance as the two factors, were performed on the questions: "How much would you like to work together in the future with the other person?" and "How much would you like the other person as a friend?"¹ Significant status by pattern of performance interactions were found for the preference to work with the other in the future, $F(1, 56) = 5.92, p < .02$; and on the liking of other as a friend, $F(1, 56) = 4.77, p < .03$. The interactions are presented in Table 1. As Table 1 shows, lower status subjects liked to work with and be friends with the higher status other when he was similar in his pattern of performance. On the other hand, the higher status subjects liked to work with and be friends with the lower status other when he was dissimilar in his pattern of performance.

DISCUSSION

The results showed that the relative status of interacting individuals affected the direction of the social comparison, thus pointing to limits in Festinger's

TABLE 1 Preference for Other as a Function of Subjects' Relative Status and Performance

| Similarity of Subject's Performance to the Confederate | Preference for Other | | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | As Worker | | As Friend | |
| | Similar | Dissimilar | Similar | Dissimilar |
| Confederate's Status | | | | |
| High | 3.44 | 2.44 | 3.19 | 2.69 |
| Low | 2.44 | 2.81 | 2.50 | 3.00 |

Note: N = 16 per cell. The higher the number, the greater the preference for the confederate. Scale values ranged from 0 to 6.

social comparison theory, and illustrating that similarity does not always lead to attraction. Further, the pattern of results is in keeping with Brickman and Janoff-Bulman, who suggest that social comparisons are made in such a way as to reduce the implicit and explicit psychological and social costs incurred. Higher status subjects, by preferring dissimilar lower status others, can be seen as minimizing the pressures of status incongruity and embarrassment present when comparing oneself to similar lower status others. Lower status subjects, by preferring similar higher status others, can be seen as preserving their belief that they can improve in the future.

This pattern of results suggests an important implication for interactions marked by status differentials. In these interactions, lower and higher status others would have some difficulty in getting to know and associating with one another, since higher status individuals would prefer dissimilar lower status others, while lower status individuals would prefer similar higher status others. This may be of particular relevance to a society such as ours, dedicated to the ideals of equality and equal opportunity. Further research is needed to investigate whether the obtained pattern generalizes to other dimensions of similarity (e.g. attitudes, values, ethnicity) and to interactions in which the status differential is more or less pronounced. Finally, attention should be paid to the context and intimacy of the interaction, which may affect the importance of the social comparison process in governing and maintaining relationships between individuals.

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NOTE

¹Tendency for engaging in or avoiding social comparisons can be inferred from the attractiveness of the other and desirability of maintaining further social contact with the other. (See Novak & Lerner, 1970; Senn, 1971; Taylor & Mettee, 1971).

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