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“Social Comparison: Ubiquity and Flexibility of a Basic Mechanism”

Social comparison is one of the most ubiquitous elements of social and organizational life. This fundamental human tendency to look to others for information about how to think, feel, and behave has provided us with the ability to thrive in a highly complex and interconnected social world. In fact, research to date has demonstrated just how ubiquitous social comparison is. At the same time, little is known about the flexibility and variability of social comparison activities. I will examine both of these aspects, the ubiquity as well as the flexibility of social comparison. First, I will present research demonstrating that social comparison is so ubiquitous, because it allows people to process information efficiently. I will further highlight how comparative thinking influences social behavior and decision-making across a variety of phenomena. Second, I will present research examining variability in social comparison by highlighting cultural differences. Specifically, combining experimental data from the lab with big data from the field (i.e., Google search data), this research shows that two prominent cultural dimensions, tightness–looseness and individualism–collectivism, uniquely explain variation in social-comparison proclivity across individuals, situations, and cultures. Together, both research streams demonstrate that social comparison is a ubiquitous psychological mechanisms that has adapted to its specific cultural and organizational context.

SHORT BIO

Thomas Mussweiler is a professor of Organisational Behaviour at London Business School. He is an expert on the psychological foundations of organisational behaviour. More specifically, his interests include trust and cooperation, judgment and decision making, negotiation and influence, the self, interpersonal processes and stereotyping. Much of Professor Mussweiler’s research focuses on social comparison processes – he examines how comparing with others changes people’s self-image, their motivation and performance.

Professor Mussweiler is the recipient of a series of prestigious national and international awards, including the European Young Investigator Award and the Gottfried-Wilhelm-Leibniz-Award, and is a member of the German National Academy of Sciences. He has published more than 70 scientific articles in a broad spectrum of the leading journals of his field, including the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Psychological Review, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, Psychological Science, and Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Making.

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