

Group membership and everyday social comparison experiences

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Abstract

In two everyday experience studies, we examined the degree to which everyday social comparisons are framed by group membership. In the first study, 30 undergraduates attending a public university in the United States completed short questionnaires about their social comparison experiences whenever they were signalled. In the second study, 34 ethnic minority undergraduates from the same university completed similar questionnaires about their social comparison experiences. Across both studies, comparisons in which participants viewed themselves as an ingroup member in comparison to an outgroup comprised less than 10% of the comparison experiences reported by participants. However, minorities in the second study who reported closer identification with their ethnic group reported more comparison experiences in which they mentioned their own or the comparison target's ethnicity. Copyright © 2004 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

The process of social comparison is believed to be central to achievement motivation, feelings of injustice, depression, jealousy and people's willingness to remain in relationships or jobs (for reviews see Buunk & Gibbons, 1997; Suls & Wheeler, 2000). However, researchers rarely investigate whether people actually make social comparisons during their everyday lives (see Frey & Ruble, 1985; Ross, Eyman, & Kichchuk 1986; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992; Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985 for exceptions). Even when researchers have investigated people's everyday comparison experiences, they have focused almost exclusively on interpersonal comparisons (see Brown & Haeger, 1999). The purpose of this paper is to explore comparison experiences when people think of themselves (or those with whom they compare) as group members rather than as individuals. How often do these sorts of comparisons occur? Are they about different topics? What sorts of groups are relevant to social comparison? This paper reports two studies that use a signal contingent everyday experience approach (Wheeler & Reis, 1991) to explore these questions.

Although most contemporary research focuses on individuals' comparisons to other individuals (for recent reviews see Buunk & Gibbons, 1997; Suls & Wheeler, 2000), there has been a long-standing

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concern for the role of group membership in social comparison (see Hyman, 1942; Pettigrew, 1967). For example, reference group theory (for a review see Merton, 1968) and models of social stigma (for a review see Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998) view group-based social comparisons as central to people's psychological experience. In particular, group-based comparisons form the centrepiece of two different theories that are central to the study of group life: relative deprivation theory and social identity theory.

Relative deprivation theory proposes that people can feel *personally* deprived when comparing themselves as an individual to a better off individual. The theory also proposes that people can feel *group* deprived when comparing themselves as a group member to a member of a relevant outgroup (for a review see Walker & Smith, 2002). Group relative deprivation should promote political protest and active attempts to alter the *group's* deprived position. In contrast, personal relative deprivation should be related to personal reactions to disadvantage such as quitting one's job, juvenile delinquency or psychological depression. Somewhat differently, social identity theory (Ellemers, Doosje, Van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1992; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1999) views intergroup comparison as a motivation for prejudice and discrimination against other groups. It is argued that comparisons to inferior outgroups help confirm a group's positive distinctiveness and can contribute to a group member's sense of self-worth (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). At the intragroup level, social identity theory proposes that group norms and influence occur through the social comparisons that individual group members make to fellow members of their reference group (for a review see Turner, 1999).

Although the phenomenon of group-based comparison is central to both relative deprivation and social identity theories, few studies have examined people's everyday experiences with it. The few cross-sectional field investigations of intergroup comparisons suggest that their frequency might vary widely (Brown & Haeger, 1999). For example, when factory workers were asked if they ever compared their workgroup with other workgroups, 67% reported that they did not (Brown & Williams, 1984). In contrast, 82% of higher education lecturers interviewed in a different study identified an outgroup with whom they compared (Bourhis & Hill, 1982). Finally, when students of six different European countries evaluated their country, 20% of these respondents spontaneously mentioned another country in their descriptions (Brown & Haeger, 1999). This great variation in the frequency of intergroup comparison suggests that this issue is in need of further study.

Using a naturalistic everyday experience (or 'diary') method, we examine undergraduate students' social comparison experiences. Unlike previous questionnaire or experimental studies, this approach enables us to collect natural and spontaneous comparison experiences over time (Wheeler & Reis, 1991). Signalling participants to record their social comparisons throughout the day for a number of days reduces the danger of retrospection biases inherent with recalling events at a single point in time. The approach also enables an assessment of the prevalence and content of group-based social comparisons for these participants. The primary question is whether and how often people think of themselves as members of a group when making comparisons to other individuals or groups.

STUDY ONE

Method

Participants

Four male and 26 female students at a mid-sized western university in the United States participated. The average age was 28.9 (ranging from 20 to 61 years). Twenty-four of the participants were European Americans, three were Latino, and three were Asian American/Pacific Islander.

Procedure

At small organizational meetings, the researcher read to each participant the following description (adapted from Wheeler & Miyake, 1992):

Although in many situations, a social comparison is fairly self-explanatory, social comparison is usually defined as comparing oneself or one's group to another person, group, idea or experience. For example, you might make a comparison if you are riding your rusty bike in the rain and you see a peer whiz by in a brand new BMW, and suddenly you are overcome with feelings of resentment, anger and envy. This could be perceived as a comparison about you and another person concerning wealth and social status, or a group comparison between you as one of many struggling students and them being one of a group of wealthy snobs. Or, say you are coming out of a grocery store with a cart full of food and you notice a homeless mother holding a sign that says, 'will work for food,' and it evokes feelings of empathy, sadness or gratitude for what you have. This could also be perceived as an individual comparison—you to the homeless person or as a group comparison between yourself as one of the employed and the homeless. Many of us make social comparisons, but are largely unaware of them. It is the goal of this project to bring those experiences to your conscious awareness and record them on the questionnaire. Often we might notice people who are different than us, but that does not constitute a social comparison. A true social comparison must involve not only noticing another group or individual, but include some psychological reactions.

During this meeting, participants completed a first questionnaire which included a measure of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979); a global measure of perceived stress (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), a measure of group identification based on a self-selected 'most important group' and a measure of social comparison tendencies (Leach et al., 2003). These measures will not be discussed further.

We instructed each participant about the use of an electronic pager that we provided. We asked participants to wear the pagers during all waking hours. Every time they were contacted, participants completed the single-page social comparison questionnaire described below. Participants were paged three times a day for seven days. Pages were delivered at random during morning, afternoon, and evening blocks of time.

At the end of the week, each participant met with a researcher to return his or her materials and complete a brief post-experimental question (see Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). Debriefing interviews at the end of the study confirmed our sense that participants enjoyed wearing the pagers and rarely had difficulty with their operation.

Materials

Comparison Target Questionnaire. The comparison target questionnaire was an adapted version of Wheeler and Miyake's (1992) Rochester Social Comparison Record. As in the original measure, participants were to rate any meaningful comparison that might have occurred since the previous time that they were contacted. Given our specific interests, we added two questions to the diary measure. First, we asked participants to indicate whether they thought of themselves as an individual or group member while making their comparison. Second, we asked participants to indicate whether they thought of the comparison target as an individual or a group. These two questions were designed to examine whether group membership was salient to participants during their social comparison. Participants also recorded the sex of the comparison target if relevant, their relationship to the

participant, the subject of comparison, and the type of contact they had with the target. In a final section, participants rated their present and future similarity to the comparison target as well as how they felt before and after the comparison. Because these measures are not relevant here, they will not be discussed further (see C. W. Leach & H. J. Smith, 2003).

Results

Frequency of Comparisons

The first question is how often, if ever, did participants make comparisons in which they thought of themselves as group members. Participants described 386 comparisons (70% of the time, participants reported a comparison experience when they were contacted). For each comparison, participants could indicate that they thought of themselves as an individual or as a group member, and whether they thought of the comparison target as an individual or an entire group. As shown in Table 1, participants most frequently reported comparisons in which they thought of themselves as an individual (75.4%). For example, many participants thought of themselves as an individual and compared to a close friend. Comparisons in which participants thought of themselves as a group member were much less frequent (24.6%).

Explicit intergroup comparisons occurred 6.7% of the time. For example, female participants described themselves as women comparing themselves to men. 17 of the 30 participants described at least one such intergroup comparison. Older participants were more likely to mention intergroup comparisons than were younger participants, $r(28) = 0.42$, $p < 0.05$. Age was not reliably correlated with any other type of comparison.

Participants also described two other types of group-based comparisons. In one type, they reported thinking of themselves as a group member when comparing to an individual (17.4%). For example, they described themselves as a church member and they described the comparison target as a peer. Twenty-one of the 30 participants reported at least one of this type of comparison. Finally, participants reported comparing themselves as an individual to an entire group (9.1%). That is, participants compared themselves as individuals to groups such as 'mothers' or 'Victoria's Secret models.' Sixteen of the 30 participants described at least one of this type of comparison.

Table 1 also includes two categories of temporal comparisons. Fourteen participants described comparisons between themselves at the present moment and themselves in the past or future (5.4% of all reported comparisons). Two participants described comparisons between themselves as a member of a group (for example, as a class member) and the same group in the future (0.5% of all reported comparisons).

Table 1. Frequency of social comparisons—Study 1

| I thought of myself as: | With whom did you compare? | | | Total |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|-------|
| | Entire group | Another individual | Self at another point in time | |
| An individual | 35 (9.1%) | 235 (60.9%) | 21 (5.4%) | 291 |
| A group member | 26 (6.7%) | 67 (17.4%) | 2 (0.5%) | 95 |
| Total | 61 | 302 | 23 | 386 |

Content and Context of Group-based Comparison Experiences

When participants mentioned a group membership as being salient to them during a comparison, they most often mentioned their membership in a family (26.4%), occupational group (including student, 22.6%) or student organization (13.2%). Ethnic group was mentioned once, gender was mentioned three times, nationality was mentioned once, and a particular age group (e.g. adults) was mentioned seven times. The most frequently mentioned comparison groups were student groups (36.1%), occupational groups (13.1%) and other families (11.5%). An ethnic group was mentioned twice, the other gender was mentioned once, another age group was mentioned twice (e.g. young adults, children), another religion was mentioned once and another social class was mentioned twice.

In Table 2, we present the categories that participants checked as representing the context and content of their comparison experiences. Across the four social comparison categories, comparisons most frequently occurred in the context of a conversation (55.8%). The content of comparisons differed slightly for different comparison categories. Interpersonal comparisons were most frequently described as being about money and lifestyle (24.2%). Comparisons in which participants thought of themselves as a group member in comparison to an individual were most frequently about intelligence and abilities (29.2%). Comparisons in which the person compared him or herself to an entire group were most frequently about relationships and families (29.4%). Finally, participants described intergroup comparison experiences most frequently as including more than three content categories (47.1%).

Discussion

One advantage of contacting participants three times a day at random is that we have a sense of how often people could describe a relevant comparison experience. Although they could not supply a

Table 2. The content and context of selected comparison experiences—Study 1

| I thought of target as: | I thought of myself as: | | | |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| | Individual | | Group member | |
| | Individual (n = 235) | Group (n = 35) | Individual (n = 67) | Group (n = 26) |
| Comparison context: | | | | |
| Conversation | 127 (54.2%) | 21 (58.8%) | 52 (77.1%) | 20 (76.5%) |
| Observation | 81 (34.4%) | 8 (23.5%) | 13 (18.8%) | 3 (11.8%) |
| Mass media | 22 (9.2%) | 4 (11.8%) | 1 (2.1%) | 2 (11.8%) |
| Daydream, memory | 5 (2.3%) | 2 (5.9%) | 0 (0.0%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| Other (no answer given) | 0 (0.0%) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (2.1%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| Comparison content: | | | | |
| Intelligence, talent, ability | 52 (22.0%) | 6 (17.6%) | 20 (29.2%) | 3 (11.8%) |
| Relationships, family | 32 (13.6%) | 10 (29.4%) | 15 (22.9%) | 6 (23.5%) |
| Popularity, social status | 25 (10.6%) | 6 (17.6%) | 1 (2.1%) | 2 (5.9%) |
| Personality, social skills, life experience | 14 (6.1%) | 0 (0.0%) | 3 (4.2%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| Opinion | 7 (3.0%) | 0 (0.0%) | 3 (4.2%) | 2 (5.9%) |
| Physical appearance | 11 (4.5%) | 2 (5.9%) | 0 (0.0%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| Health | 12 (5.3%) | 4 (11.8%) | 4 (6.3%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| Possessions, lifestyle, money | 57 (24.2%) | 4 (11.8%) | 6 (8.3%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| More than three categories checked | 25 (10.6%) | 2 (5.9%) | 3 (4.2%) | 12 (47.1%) |

Note: Respondents often checked more than one content category.

comparison experience every time they were contacted, participants did describe a comparison 70% of the time. Conscious social comparisons may not be constant, but they do not appear to be unusual.

Participants most frequently compared themselves as an individual to another individual. Intergroup comparisons were less frequent, although most participants made at least one such comparison. Most participants also reported experiences in which they thought of themselves as an individual in comparison to an entire group such as a family, mothers who work, and attractive models, as opposed to clear intergroup comparisons in which they thought of themselves as members of an ingroup in contrast to an outgroup.

Given our interest in intergroup comparisons, we designed a second study in which we could target undergraduate students who might be more likely to make intergroup comparisons. The majority of the participants in the first study were European American, the ethnic majority at this particular university. Group membership is likely to be less salient for majority members than for minority members, and as a result, members of majority groups may make relatively few group-based comparisons (Doise, 1988; McGuire & McGuire, 1988). The possibility that minority status might be associated with more intergroup comparisons is suggested by the fact that older respondents, a numerical minority in this particular university setting, reported more intergroup comparisons. Given the possibility that people in a numerical minority might be more likely to make intergroup comparisons, the second study focuses on the comparison experiences of ethnic minority students. To increase the likelihood that participants were sensitive to intergroup dynamics, we solicited students from ethnic student organizations and ethnic studies classes.

STUDY TWO

Method

Participants

Thirty-four (nine men, 25 women) ethnic minority students at a mid-sized western university in the United States were recruited through public advertisements, word of mouth, visits to campus student ethnic organizations and ethnic studies classes. They were offered payment in exchange for their participation. Sixteen participants identified as Latino, five as African American, and 12 as Asian American/Pacific Islander. One participant who reported a mixed heritage was excluded from analysis because she identified more strongly as European American. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 33 years, with a mean of 23.

For this particular academic year, 20.8% of the student population identified themselves as an ethnic minority (11.4% of this population identified themselves as Latino/Mexican American). Thus, participants were members of ethnic groups that were in a clear minority on this campus.

Materials

Participants completed the same set of measures described in Study 1 during the initial meeting with the researchers. However, in this study, participants also rated how much they identified with their particular (self-defined) ethnic group. Group identification was measured with three items from the identity sub-scale of Luhtanen and Crocker's (1992) collective self-esteem scale. Participants indicated their agreement with the statements from (1) 'disagree strongly' to (7) 'agree strongly.' The measure of group identification was reliable, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.68$ ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.52$).

We made several changes to the diary measure. First, we added a question asking participants to write in the ethnicity of the person with whom they compared. Second, we made it clearer to participants that we would like them to choose one content category to describe their comparison experience. Finally, we added the pairs 'insecure-confident', 'anxious-calm', and 'bad-good' to the original adjective pairs of 'discouraged-encouraged' and 'depressed-happy'.

Results

Frequency of Comparisons

The first question is how often, if ever, did participants make comparisons in which they thought of themselves as group members. Participants described 379 comparisons (67% of the time, participants reported a comparison experience when they were contacted). As shown in Table 3, participants most frequently reported comparison experiences in which they thought of themselves as individuals (74.4%). Comparisons in which participants thought of themselves as group members were less frequent (25.6%).

Twenty-one of the 34 participants reported at least one explicit intergroup comparison, representing 7.7% of the total comparison experiences. Eighteen participants reported a comparison in which they thought of themselves as a group member in comparison to another individual, 16.9% of the total comparison experiences. In 4.7% of all social comparisons, participants reported thinking of themselves as an individual in comparison to an entire group (always another family). Fifteen of the 34 participants reported making such a comparison at least once. Fourteen participants described comparisons between themselves at the present moment and themselves in the past or future (5.8% of all comparisons). Three participants described comparisons between themselves as a member of a group and the same group in the future (1.1% of all comparisons).

Content and Context of Group-based Comparison Experiences

When participants mentioned an ingroup membership as being salient to them during a comparison, they most frequently mentioned their ethnic group membership (25.8%), their family (18.2%), or an occupational group (15.2%). The most frequently mentioned comparison groups were another ethnic group (15.6%; most often European Americans) and groups of television or movie actors (15.6%). The next most frequently mentioned comparison groups were other occupations (13.3%) and other groups of students (13.3%).

In Table 4, we present the categories that participants checked as representing the context and content of their comparison experiences. Participants described intergroup comparisons as occurring most often during conversation (29.1%). Interpersonal comparisons occurred most often during

Table 3. Frequency of social comparisons—Study 2

| I thought of myself as: | With whom did you compare? | | | Total |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|-------|
| | Entire group | Another individual | Self at another point in time | |
| An individual | 18 (4.7%) | 242 (63.9%) | 22 (5.8%) | 282 |
| A group member | 29 (7.7%) | 64 (16.9%) | 4 (1.1%) | 97 |
| Total | 47 | 306 | 26 | 379 |

Table 4. The content and context of selected comparison experiences—Study 2

| I thought of target as: | I thought of myself as: | | | |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| | Individual | | Group member | |
| | Individual (n = 242) | Group (n = 18) | Individual (n = 64) | Group (n = 29) |
| Comparison context: | | | | |
| Conversation | 74 (30.7%) | 1 (5.6%) | 9 (13.8%) | 8 (29.1%) |
| Observation | 79 (33.0%) | 3 (16.7%) | 22 (34.5%) | 8 (29.0%) |
| Daydream, memory | 64 (26.8%) | 7 (38.9%) | 20 (31.0%) | 3 (10.1%) |
| Mass media | 25 (10.2%) | 6 (33.3%) | 13 (20.7%) | 6 (20.3%) |
| Other (no answer given) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (5.6%) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (1.4%) |
| Comparison content: | | | | |
| Intelligence, talent, ability | 45 (18.5%) | 2 (12.5%) | 12 (18.2%) | 5 (20.7%) |
| Relationships, family | 44 (18.1%) | 1 (6.3%) | 8 (12.1%) | 2 (6.9%) |
| Popularity, social status | 12 (5.0%) | 0 (0.0%) | 5 (7.6%) | 4 (13.8%) |
| Personality, social skills, life experience | 33 (13.5%) | 2 (12.5%) | 18 (27.3%) | 4 (13.8%) |
| Opinion | 12 (5.0%) | 1 (6.3%) | 1 (1.5%) | 1 (3.4%) |
| Physical appearance | 34 (13.9%) | 4 (18.8%) | 4 (6.1%) | 1 (3.4%) |
| Health | 7 (2.7%) | 1 (6.3%) | 2 (3.0%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| Possessions, lifestyle, money | 49 (20.1%) | 5 (25.0%) | 12 (18.2%) | 6 (20.7%) |
| Demographic categories | 6 (1.9%) | 2 (12.5%) | 3 (4.5%) | 1 (6.9%) |
| Politics | 3 (1.2%) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (1.5%) | 3 (10.3%) |

observation (33.0%) as did comparisons in which participants thought of themselves as a group member in comparison with another individual (34.5%). Comparisons between participants and an entire group most often occurred when they were remembering or daydreaming (38.9%).

Participants described interpersonal and intergroup comparisons as being most frequently about money and lifestyle (20.1 and 20.7% respectively). Comparisons in which they thought of themselves as an individual in comparison to a group also were most frequently about money and lifestyle (25.0%). Comparisons in which participants thought of themselves as a group member and the target as an individual were most frequently about personality traits and social skills (27.3%).

Ethnic Group Identification

Did students higher in ethnic group identity report more social comparisons that involved ethnic group membership? For each participant, we calculated the percentage of social comparisons in which (a) they mentioned their own ethnic group membership as being salient and (b) they mentioned the ethnicity of the comparison target. Participants higher in ethnic group identification more often reported that they thought of their own ethnic group membership when comparing to others, $r(32) = 0.36$, $p < 0.05$. In addition, those higher in ethnic group identification more often reported comparing themselves to a member of another ethnic group, $r(32) = 0.53$, $p < 0.05$.

Discussion

As in the first study, intergroup comparisons in which participants viewed themselves as an ingroup member compared to an outgroup comprised less than 10% of the reported comparison experiences.

Also, as in the first study, group-based comparisons frequently involved families, student groups or occupational groups. However, as one might expect, ethnicity also explicitly framed some of the social comparisons reported by these participants. More specifically, participants who reported higher ethnic group identification reported more social comparisons in which their own, or the comparison target's, ethnicity was salient. As has been shown in numerous laboratory experiments, field studies and surveys, the level of identification with one's membership group shapes people's interpretations of the situation (see Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999 for a review). In this study, we show how identification with a particular membership group can shape people's comparison experiences across time.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In two separate studies, we find that intergroup comparisons comprised less than 10% of the reported comparison experiences, even when we ask ethnic minority participants to track their comparison experiences. However, intergroup comparisons were not completely absent. Fifty-nine per cent of the participants reported at least one comparison experience in which they thought of themselves as an ingroup member compared to an outgroup. It is important to note, however, that other than the ethnic group memberships mentioned frequently by ethnic minority participants in the second study, participants rarely mentioned demographic or other broad social categories. Instead, participants most frequently described group-based comparisons in terms of families, occupational groups and student-based groups. The results from the second study also show that participants who reported identifying closely with their ethnicity described more comparison experiences in which ethnicity was salient than did participants who were less strongly identified with their ethnicity. This suggests one way in which psychological identification with a group can shape people's everyday experiences.

Of course, our data might reflect the communicative context the research task created (Bless, Strack, & Schwarz, 1993). Participants may have been more likely to think of themselves as individuals rather than group members because answering checklists and questionnaires is, by nature, an individual activity.¹ Participants also were not selected because of a shared group membership (even in the second study, ethnic group membership was not an explicit criteria for participation). However, we gave participants clear examples of intergroup comparisons in the instructions, we asked participants to rate their identification with a group important to them (Study 1) or their ethnic group (Study 2) in the first questionnaire and we included questions relevant to group-based comparisons on the checklist (beginning with whether they thought of themselves as a group member or an individual).

Our data might also reflect the social and cultural context for these participants. First, traditional-age university students (the focus of most social comparison research) are more likely to be focused on interpersonal and individual challenges than are people in other contexts. Developmental psychologists propose that the development tasks for this age centre around building interpersonal relationships and constructing one's unique individual identity (e.g. Erikson, 1982). In the first study, older participants were significantly more likely to mention intergroup comparisons than were younger participants. Traditional academic environments also emphasize individual achievement and recognition. If traditional-age university students are less likely than others to pay attention to group-based comparisons, it suggests future investigations of group-based social comparison experiences should include older participants outside of university contexts.

¹We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out these features of the research situation.

Second, participants' comparison experiences may reflect the current political climate on this particular campus. At the time that we collected these data, there was no raging intergroup conflict on campus, nor was there any pressure to evaluate the context in structural terms. If a particular intergroup conflict was salient, or if campus opinion leaders interpreted important student issues (perhaps increased student fees) in clear structural terms, we might expect many more intergroup comparisons. Third, participants' comparison experiences might reflect a general cultural emphasis on individualism within the United States. As shown by Jetten, Postmes, and McAuliffe (2002), for groups with individualistic norms, group-oriented behaviour will look individualistic even if it reflects close identification with the group. Similarly, participants in our study might be reporting group-based comparisons in individual terms. If most of the group memberships salient to these participants could be characterized as organic social identities in which group members view themselves and other members as clearly differentiated from each other (Haslam, 2001), we would not expect participants to report many comparison experiences in which they thought of themselves as a group member—even if group membership was shaping their experiences. Still, the second study includes a majority of Latino and Asian American participants who are members of cultural groups identified to be significantly more collectively oriented than European Americans (Tyler, Lind, & Huo, 2000).

Even with these contextual limitations, we think our signal contingent diary approach reflects the relative frequency of intergroup comparison experiences for these participants. However, this method also required us to rely on participants' judgments about what is a comparison and what is not. In contrast, experimental manipulations of comparison opportunities offer much more control. However, experiments do not capture the immense choice in selection and interpretation people have under ordinary circumstances (Wood, 1989). We think it is extremely important to complement current experimental research on intergroup comparisons with peoples' reports of their everyday comparison experiences.

Although interesting, we do not mean to suggest that the relatively low frequency of intergroup comparisons is a theoretical problem. Social identity, self-categorization and relative deprivation theories all assign intergroup comparisons a key role for promoting group-based behaviour, but they make no predictions as to how frequently they might occur. One highly charged intergroup comparison may be all that is required to promote the desire to collectively challenge the situation. On the other hand, these data once again raise the causal relationship between intergroup comparisons and group-based behaviour. It is quite possible that disadvantaged intergroup comparisons may be the consequence of political activism, not the cause (see Kelly & Breinlinger, 1996 for a review). Further, intergroup comparisons need not be explicit to shape behaviour. Although participants in the second study did not always view themselves in terms of their ethnic group membership, we have found that ethnic group membership of their comparison target shaped their interpretations of the comparison (see C. W. Leach & H. J. Smith, 2003). For example, participants viewed comparisons to fellow ethnic minorities as suggesting future improvement to a greater extent than comparisons with members of the ethnic majority.

Finally, these data suggest two ways in which people's everyday comparison experiences might differ from how social identity and relative deprivation researchers propose. First, participants in both studies described experiences in which they viewed themselves as unique individuals in comparison to an entire group. We did not expect these types of comparisons and it raises the question of how explicit a group membership must be before it frames group members' attitudes and behaviour. If the comparison target is viewed as an outgroup, is it an intergroup comparison? Or, are these broad, reference categories that serve as societal prototypes (e.g. Gibbons & Gerard, 1995; Turner, 1999)? Similarly, if people view themselves as group members and the comparison target as an individual, do

these comparison experiences represent within-group comparisons or could the individual target represent an outgroup prototype? We feel both these questions deserve further research.

Second, participants frequently mentioned small structured role-based groups (e.g. families, student organizations, work groups) as both their membership and the target group. Early research investigations of intergroup behaviour (e.g. Sherif, 1966) recognized this complexity, but many recent intergroup investigations do not (see Levine & Moreland, 1998). Although some of our conclusions must remain speculative, to our knowledge, this is the first investigation of how group membership shapes everyday comparison experiences. Group-based comparisons may not be frequent, but they do occur and they occur more frequently when people view the group as central to their identity.

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