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Mirrors and reflections

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CHAPTER 4

Feeling similar to others:

Effects of SCO on the perception of dimensional and psychological closeness

Although it is assumed that social comparison is a general human mechanism, some individuals have a stronger need for social comparison, or, in other words, individuals differ in the tendency to compare themselves with others. Gibbons and Buunk (1999) constructed a scale to detect these individual differences in what they labeled as *social comparison orientation* (SCO). This scale has been used in over seventy studies in the past decades (Buunk, & Gibbons, 2006). On the basis of correlations between SCO and various personality characteristics, Buunk and Gibbons (2006) characterized the typical individual high in SCO by three features: a strong activation of the self (public and private self-consciousness), a strong interest in the feelings of others (interpersonal orientation), and a tendency to have low self-esteem and to be high in neuroticism. There is considerable evidence that individuals high in SCO respond more strongly to social comparisons. For example, Van der Zee, Oldersma, Buunk and Bos (1998) conducted an experiment in which cancer patients could select as many (bogus) interviews with upward and downward comparison information as they wanted. Those high in SCO selected more interviews, spent more time reading these interviews, and were more positively and negatively affected by the interviews than those low in SCO.

The result of this study seems to suggest that those high in SCO are not only more interested in the stories of other cancer patients, but that they also perceive the information of the patients as more comparable to themselves than those low in SCO did. Furthermore, those high in SCO seem to compare themselves more often with others and are more affected by comparison information as those low in SCO do. The fact that comparison information in general affects those high in SCO more

than those low in SCO suggests that those high in SCO do not only respond more strongly to social comparison with peers and friends, but that those high in SCO (versus low in SCO) do compare themselves with a wider *range* of comparison others. Given the fact that some perception of similarity is a necessary condition in social comparison (Festinger, 1954), comparisons with a wider range of comparison others imply the perception of similarity with a wide range of targets. To be more specific, the central hypothesis examined here is that those high in SCO, when confronted with a series of women varying in attractiveness, will perceive themselves as relatively more similar to these targets, than those low in SCO will.

Similarity has been a core construct in social comparison theory since Festinger's (1954) pioneering work. According to Festinger, a basic condition for social comparison of one's abilities is being similar to another in abilities. We refer to this type of similarity as *dimensional* closeness, i.e., similarity on the dimension of comparison. When I am trying to find out how well I am doing in playing tennis, it is most informative to compare myself to other players that are not far from my level. When I judge their skills and I know that I am doing better or worse, I have concrete information about my standing. Another type of similarity that has been suggested as fostering social comparisons, is *psychological* closeness (i.e. Tesser et al., 1988; Tesser, & Campbell, 1982). In this study, we focused on dimensional and psychological closeness as two important types of similarity:

Dimensional closeness

Festinger (1954) argued that comparer and comparison target need to be dimensionally similar, that is, not too distant in their standing on the comparison dimension. Without *dimensional closeness*, according to Festinger, the comparison information is useless. If you want to compare yourself with someone else to estimate your intelligence level, the information that you (Ph.D.-student, highest educational level) are more intelligent than a hairdresser (lowest educational level) is useless. As indicated by differences in education, a higher intelligence level for the Ph.D.-student could be expected. Comparing your intelligence level to other Ph.D. students will provide more useful information.

There is considerable evidence that individuals compare themselves more with targets similar in standing. In a pioneering study, Wheeler (1966) examined the comparison choices of participants with the rank order paradigm. Participants were given their own scores and a rank order of the scores of the other 6 participants. Each participants was told that he or she was the middle score (Rank 4 out of 7). They were told that the middle 3 participants (Rank 3, 4, 5) had quite similar scores. The anchors for Rank 1 and Rank 7 were given. Then, the participants had to choose which score of the other six participants they wanted to see. Wheeler found among others that the majority of the participants chose to see the score of the participants with a score most similar to their own (Rank 3 and 5). Subsequent studies have confirmed these findings (e.g., Wheeler, 1969; Wheeler, & Koestner, 1984). Specifically relevant to the present research is the finding that dimensional closeness in attractiveness tends to foster social comparison processes on other dimensions (Miller, 1982). Participants chose to compare themselves on their performance or personality with others who were similar to them in physical attractiveness, though attractiveness seems irrelevant to dimensions such as performance or personality.

Psychological closeness

The construct of psychological closeness is frequently used in the field of social comparison research. According to the Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model (Tesser et al., 1982), psychological closeness is a strong moderator in the social comparison process. Anything that links individuals to another may increase feelings of closeness, and thus the tendency to compare oneself with others, for example physical proximity, similarity in age, background, group membership or status (Heider, 1958). Kernis and Wheeler (1981) showed that people are more likely to perceive psychological closeness with others when they were made to believe that these others are friends rather than strangers. Even trivial similarities may evoke feelings of psychological closeness that result in a stronger tendency to compare oneself with others. For example, Brown, Novick, Lord and Richards (1992) found that sharing attitudes with the upward comparison target (Study 2) and sharing the same birthday with an attractive comparison other (Study 3 and 4) resulted in increased social

comparison effects, to be precise, in higher self-evaluations of attractiveness after upward comparisons.

For both types of similarity –dimensional closeness and psychological closeness - , we hypothesize that individuals high in SCO will consider others to be more similar to themselves than those low in SCO will do. There is indeed some indirect evidence that those high in SCO perceive more dimensional closeness with a wider range of others. For example, Michinov and Michinov (2001) found that those high in SCO felt attracted to both those with objectively similar and those with objectively dissimilar attitudes, whereas those low in SCO felt attracted only to others with similar attitudes. Given the fact that the perception of similarity is very important for the onset of feelings of liking, the liking of another individual with objectively dissimilar attitudes in those high in SCO may imply that those high in SCO tend to perceive some type of similarity even with others with dissimilar attitudes.

Indirect evidence that those high in SCO will perceive higher levels of psychological closeness with others, than those low in SCO do is suggested in high correlation between SCO and interpersonal orientation (Swap, & Rubin, 1983) and communal orientation (Clark, Oullette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987) indicating that those high in SCO have a strong interest in others and may perceive others in general as psychologically closer than those low in SCO do. In addition, in a study among socio-therapists, Buunk, Ybema, Gibbons and Ipenburg (2001) found that burned out individuals high in SCO identified themselves to a greater degree with a better performing comparison target than burned out individuals low in SCO. In a similar vein, Buunk (2005) found that those high in SCO showed a higher level of identification with a happily married couple than those low in SCO.

Our main hypothesis that those high in SCO will perceive more easily similarity with comparison others may suggest that those high in SCO have a general activated similarity testing mind set. When a similarity testing mindset is active, the focus is on similarities, resulting more easily in the perception of similarity between the two targets (see Mussweiler, 2003; Stapel, & Suls, 2004). According to Mussweiler (2003), every comparison starts with a general holistic similarity testing process that is an unconscious cognitive process. Indeed, when comparing two objects - as shown in chapter 2 - those high in SCO tend to report more similarities than those low in SCO. One would therefore expect that those high in SCO would

also view more similarities when comparing two other individuals. However, the nature of SCO seems to imply that individuals high in SCO will perceive especially similarities with others when they compare themselves with these others, more so than when they just compare these others with each other. To obtain useful information in social comparisons –which seems the function of the comparison tendency characteristic of those high in SCO– it is necessary that the comparison targets are perceived as similar to oneself, and this motivational effect will not apply so much when those high in SCO just compare two other individuals with each other.

Overview

The main hypothesis of this research is that those high in SCO will report more similarity with targets varying in attractiveness than those low in SCO do. Two related constructs of similarity were tested: dimensional closeness and psychological closeness. In Study 4.1, before testing out main hypothesis, we explored with which others those high in SCO compared themselves more than those low in SCO. In Study 4.1 the results of this exploration are reported. Furthermore, in this study, the effect of SCO on dimensional closeness with targets varying in attractiveness was examined. In Study 4.2, we tested the effect of SCO on dimensional closeness as well as psychological closeness with targets varying in attractiveness. In Study 4.3, we explored if the those high in SCO also perceive other individuals as similar when they compare these individuals with each other. In addition to our main question, we explicitly examined if those high in SCO do consider themselves more similar to comparison targets of a specific standing than those low in SCO, and will, consequently compare themselves more with specific others. It may be argued that those high in SCO will consider themselves especially more similar than those low in SCO to attractive others. Indeed, as noted above, those high in SCO tend to identify themselves more than those low in SCO with better-off targets, and in Chapter 2 we found that those high in SCO showed more positive responses after exposure to an attractive target than those low in SCO. Thus, it seems likely that with increasing levels of SCO, individuals will not only consider themselves more similar to others,

but will do specifically with respect to attractive others. In a similar vein, the level of comparison with more attractive others may increase with increasing levels of SCO.

STUDY 4.1

Introduction

In most of the previous studies on SCO, participants were exposed to just one comparison target. The aim of this study was to examine the tendency to compare with seven comparison targets of varying attractiveness levels. We expected those high in SCO to compare themselves overall more with all targets than those low in SCO, and might do so especially with more attractive targets. All participants were exposed to seven photographs of females from a different attractiveness level in a random order.

Method

Participants. Hundred and twenty-six female students volunteered to participate in this study. They were recruited in the cafeteria's of several departments of the University of Groningen and the Hanzeschool for Higher Education. The mean age was 20.6 year ($SD = 2.12$).

Procedure and materials. The recruited participants were guided to a silent corner, where they complete the paper and pencil experiment. The cover story for this experiment was that the experiment consisted in two parts. The first part was about effects of self-views on word formation. The filler task was a word formation task. The second part was presented as a separate study on impression formation.

First, the SCO-scale was completed to detect individual differences in social comparison orientation (Gibbons, & Buunk, 1999). Examples of items are: "I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do", "If I want to find out how well I have done something, I compare what I have done with how others have done". Participants could answer on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). A word scrambling task was completed as filler task between the SCO-scale and the part with the photographs.

Next, without any further instruction, photographs were presented of the faces of seven very different young females aged between eighteen and twenty-five years. In a pilot-study with 20 photographs, the attractiveness of each of the depicted women was assessed on a scale from 1 (*not at all attractive*) to 7 (*very attractive*). The mean of the twenty attractiveness ratings varied from 2.2 to 5.8. Seven photographs were chosen that represented all levels of the attractiveness dimension with about the same distance between every photograph. Each photograph was presented on a different page, with two questions on the next page, i.e., “Did you compare yourself with the woman on the photograph?” scored on a 7-points scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) and “To what extent do you think you look like the person on the photograph?” (dimensional closeness). The order of the two questions varied randomly: half of the participants started with the question about comparison and half of the participants with the question about the dimensional closeness.

Results

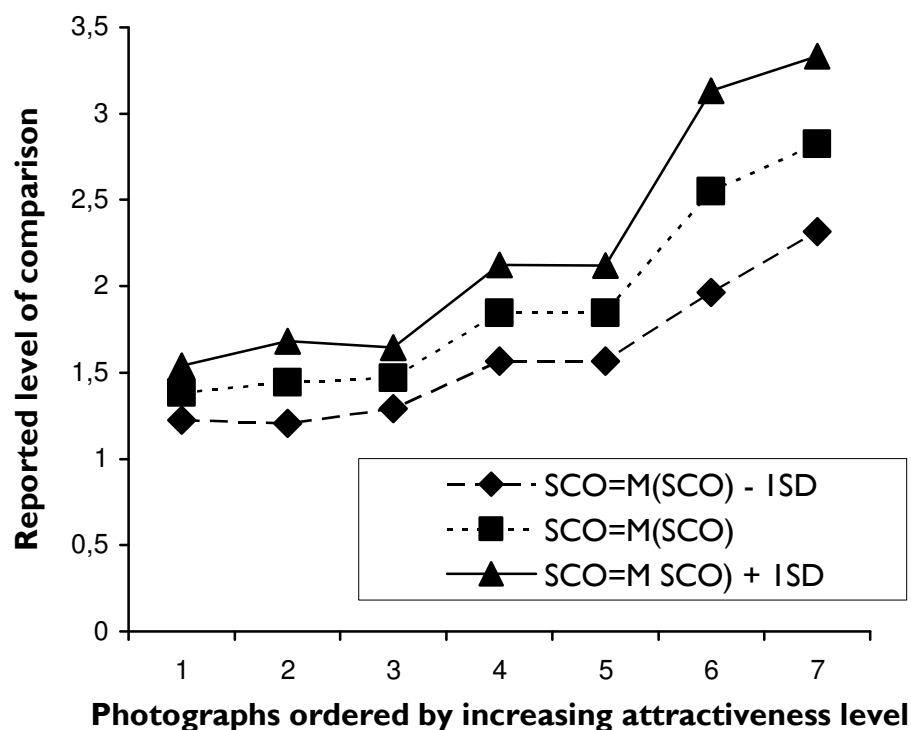
To test the hypothesis that those high in SCO will compare themselves more than those low in SCO with targets of different attractiveness level, and to examine a possible interaction between SCO and target attractiveness, a repeated measures analysis was used. Seven photographs represented the whole attractiveness dimension with about the same distance between every photograph. The level of attractiveness was used as a within subject factor, whereas the SCO-scale was used as an independent continuous variable. The eleven items of the SCO were summed and divided by the number of questions. The final SCO score was standardized ($\alpha = .86$, $M = 3.35$, $SD = .60$).

Social comparison. A main effect of SCO was found, $F(1, 124) = 18.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .13$. Overall, those high in SCO compared themselves more with the seven targets than those low in SCO, regardless of the attractiveness of the target. Figure 4.1⁵ shows the reported level of comparison for those low ($M_{SCO-1SD}$) and high ($M_{SCO+1SD}$) in SCO. For all seven photographs representing seven different standings on the attractiveness dimension, the level of comparison of those high in SCO exceeded the

⁵ All figures are based on the parameter estimates for high SCO ($M_{SCO+1SD}$) and low SCO ($M_{SCO-1SD}$) in the repeated measures analysis.

level of those low in SCO. In addition, the analysis revealed a main effect of attractiveness, $F(6, 119) = 48.71, p < .001, \eta^2 = .28$. The level of comparison increased with the level of attractiveness of the target. The more attractive the target, the more participants were inclined to compare themselves with the target. The level of comparison increased with the level of attractiveness of the target. The more attractive the target, the more participants compared themselves with the target. The within-subjects contrasts showed a significant linear trend, $F(1, 124) = 101.03, p < .001, \eta^2 = .45$. There was also a significant quadratic trend, $F(1, 124) = 24.08, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$, indicating that the linear trend was reversed for the lowest attractiveness levels, and that individuals compared themselves relatively more to the less attractive than to the moderately attractive targets. Furthermore, the interaction between attractiveness and SCO was also significant, $F(6, 119) = 2.35, p = .035, \eta^2 = .11$. The within-subjects contrasts showed a significant linear trend, $F(1, 124) = 6.82, p < .01, \eta^2 = .05$.

Figure 4.1. Level of comparison with the seven photographs (Study 4.1)

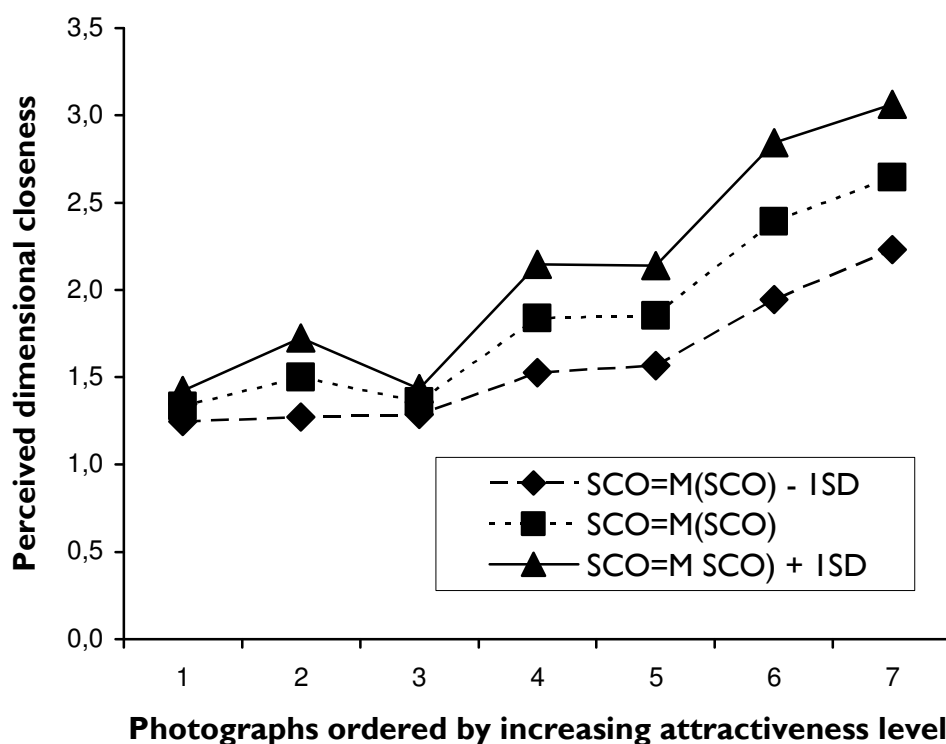


Although those low and high in SCO showed both an increase in comparison level with increasing attractiveness of the targets, the line for those high in SCO was

steeper than for those low in SCO. That is, more so than those low in SCO, those high in SCO compared themselves more with the target as the attractiveness of the target increased.

Dimensional closeness. A main effect of SCO was found, $F(1, 124) = 14.32, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$. Overall, those high in SCO felt more dimensionally close to the seven targets than those low in SCO, regardless of the attractiveness of the target. Figure 4.2 shows the reported level of dimensional closeness for those low ($M_{SCO} - 1SD$) and high ($M_{SCO} + 1SD$) in SCO. For all seven photographs representing seven different standings on the attractiveness dimension, the perceived dimensional closeness among those high in SCO exceeded the level of those low in SCO. In addition, the analysis revealed a main effect of attractiveness, $F(6, 119) = 20.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = .50$.

Figure 4.2. Perceived dimensional closeness to the photographs (Study 4.1)



The perceived dimensional closeness increased with the level of attractiveness of the target. The more attractive the target, the more dimensionally close participants felt to the target. The within-subjects contrasts showed a significant linear trend, $F(1, 124) = 100.39, p < .001, \eta^2 = .45$. There was also a significant quadratic trend, F

(1,124) = 18.16, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .13$, indicating that the linear trend was reversed for the lowest attractiveness levels, and that individuals felt relatively more similar to the less attractive than to the moderately attractive targets. Furthermore, the interaction between attractiveness and SCO was also significant, $F(6, 119) = 2.90$, $p = .017$, $\eta^2 = .12$. The within-subjects contrasts showed a significant linear trend. $F(1,124) = 11.64$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Although those low and high in SCO showed both an increase in dimensional closeness with increasing attractiveness of the targets, the line for those high in SCO was steeper than for those low in SCO. That is, more so than those low in SCO, those high in SCO perceived more dimensional closeness with the target as the attractiveness of the target increased.

STUDY 4.2

Introduction

In Study 4.1 was found that those high in SCO compared themselves more with the different targets and felt more dimensionally close to them than those low in SCO. Interestingly, the higher dimensional closeness with the targets experienced by those high in SCO was especially pronounced with respect to the more attractive targets. In Study 4.2, we wanted to replicate this finding, and, in addition, to assess if those high and low in SCO differed with respect of the perceived *psychological* closeness with the targets.

Method

Participants. Ninety-four female undergraduate students at the University of Groningen and the Hanzeschool for Higher Education volunteered to participate in this study (mean age = 20.32, $SD = 2.43$). They received € 7 for their participation.

Procedure and materials. On entrance, the recruited participants were guided to separate computer cubicles. This experiment was the first of three unrelated experiments. The other two experiments were from different researchers. The materials were identical as those in Study 4.1, and 4.2. First, the SCO-scale was completed (Cronbach's alpha = .84). The SCO scale and a word scrambling filler task

were presented separate studies. Next, the same seven photographs were presented as in Study 4.1. Each photograph was presented on a different screen. The dimensional closeness was measured by the same question as in Study 4.1: “To what extent do you think you look like the person on the photograph?” (dimensional closeness). To assess the psychological closeness, participants had to indicate the distance between themselves and the persons depicted on the photographs by means of the IOS scale with seven options to choose (seven pairs of circles with varying overlap (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). The IOS scale was constructed to assess feelings of personal bonding in between self and other. The instruction of the IOS in this study was: “Please mark the circles below that best describes your relationship between you and the woman depicted on the photograph”. The order of the two questions varied randomly: half of the participants started with question about dimensional closeness and half of the participants with the IOS scale.

Results

Dimensional closeness. A main effect of SCO was found, $F(1, 90) = 5.45, p = .017, \eta^2 = .06$. Overall, those high in SCO felt more dimensionally close to the seven targets than those low in SCO, regardless of the attractiveness of the target.

Figure 4.3. Perceived dimensional closeness to the photographs (Study 4.2)

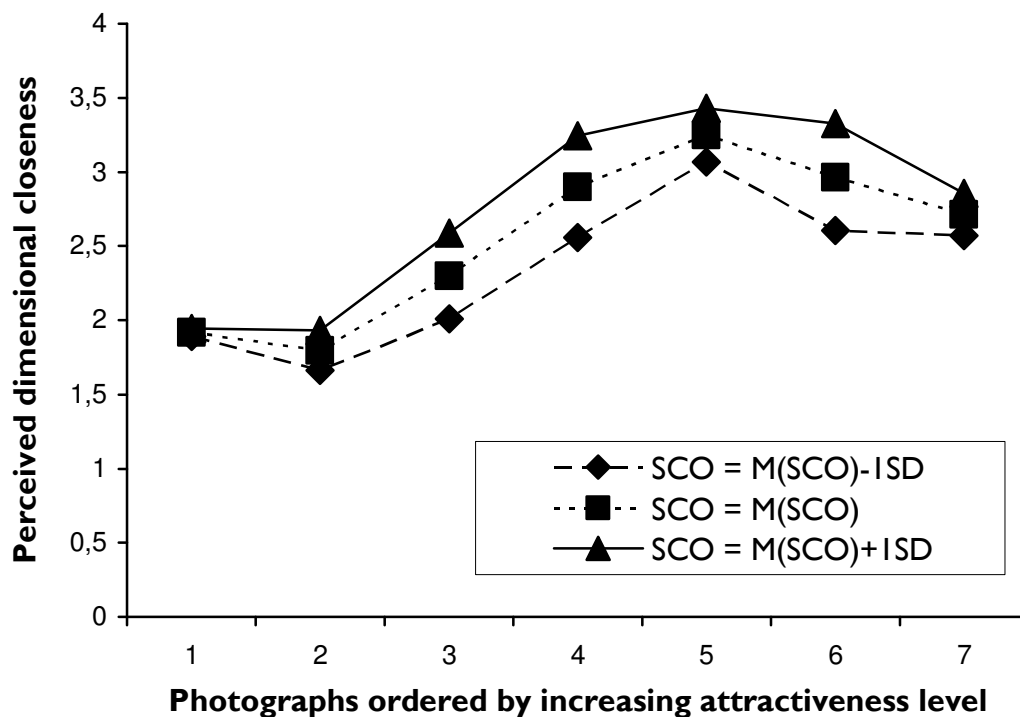
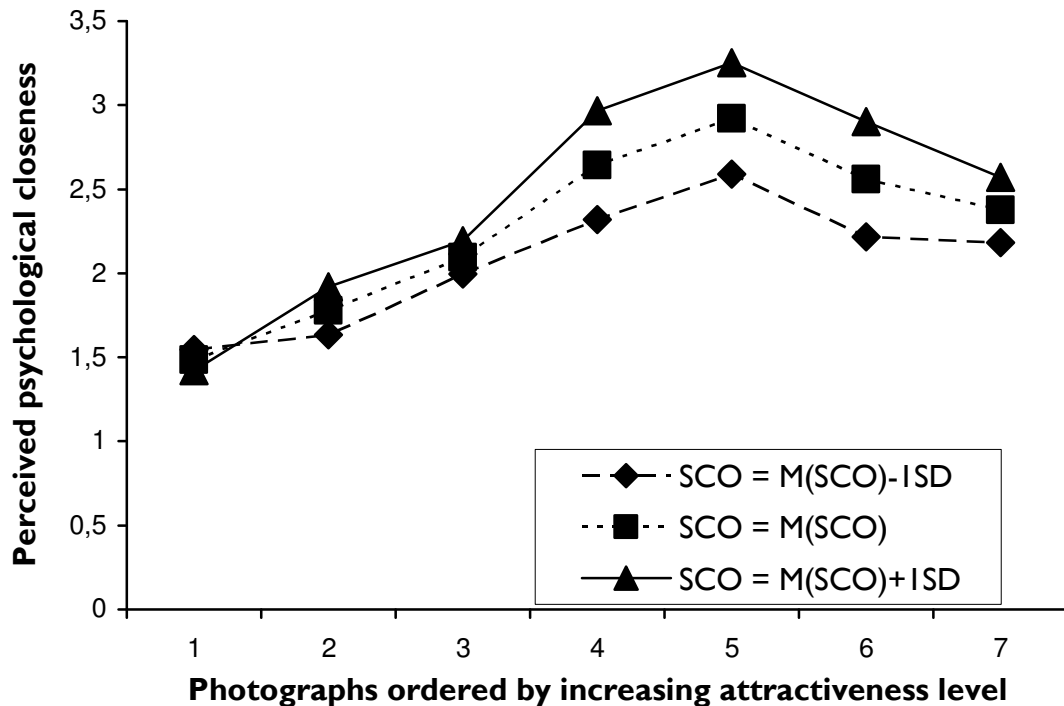


Figure 4.3 shows the reported level of dimensional closeness for those low ($M_{SCO} - ISD$) and high ($M_{SCO} + ISD$) in SCO. For all seven photographs representing seven different standings on the attractiveness dimension, the perceived dimensional closeness among those high in SCO exceeded the level of those low in SCO. In addition, the analysis revealed a main effect of attractiveness, $F(6,85) = 19.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .58$. The perceived dimensional closeness increased with the level of attractiveness of the target. The more attractive the target, the more dimensionally close participants felt to the target.

The within-subjects contrasts showed a significant linear trend, $F(1,90) = 45.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .33$. There was also a significant quadratic trend, $F(1,90) = 19.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$, indicating that the linear trend was reversed for the highest attractiveness levels, and that individuals felt less similar to the very than to the moderately attractive targets. Furthermore, the interaction between attractiveness and SCO was not significant, $F(6, 85) = 0.58$, $p = .74$.

Figure 4.4 Perceived psychological closeness to the photographs (Study 4.2)



Psychological closeness. A main effect of SCO was found, $F(1, 90) = 10.66, p = .002, \eta^2 = .11$. Overall, those high in SCO felt more dimensionally close to the seven targets than those low in SCO, regardless of the attractiveness of the target. Figure 4.4 shows the reported level of psychological closeness for those low ($M_{SCO-ISD}$) and high ($M_{SCO+ISD}$) in SCO. For all seven photographs representing seven different standings on the attractiveness dimension, the perceived psychological closeness among those high in SCO exceeded the level of those low in SCO. In addition, the analysis revealed a main effect of attractiveness, $F(6, 85) = 25.82, p < .001, \eta^2 = .65$. The perceived psychological closeness increased with the level of attractiveness of the target. The more attractive the target, the more psychologically close participants felt to the target.

The within-subjects contrasts showed a significant linear trend, $F(1, 90) = 56.40, p < .001, \eta^2 = .56$. There was also a significant quadratic trend, $F(1, 90) = 35.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = .29$, indicating that the linear trend was reversed for the highest attractiveness levels, and that individuals felt less similar to the very than to the moderately attractive targets.

Furthermore, the interaction between attractiveness and SCO was also significant, $F(6, 85) = 2.41, p = .034, \eta^2 = .15$. The within-subjects contrasts showed a

marginally significant linear trend, $F(1,90) = 2.82$, $p < .096$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Although those low and high in SCO showed both an increase in psychological closeness with increasing attractiveness of the targets, the line for those high in SCO was somewhat steeper than for those low in SCO. That is, more so than those low in SCO, those high in SCO perceived more psychological closeness with the target as the attractiveness of the target increased.

STUDY 4.3

Introduction

As suggested in the introduction, one might argue that those high in SCO apply a general similarity testing strategy in all sort of comparisons and that the results in the previous studies are the effect of such a general similarity testing strategy among those high in SCO. In Study 4.3, we explored if individuals high in SCO perceived the targets employed in the previous studies as more similar to each other than individuals low in SCO.. The participants compared all the target with the mean attractiveness levels with all other targets.

Method

Participants. Thirty female undergraduate students at the University of Groningen and the Hanzeschool for Higher Education volunteered to participate in this study (mean age = 18.3, $SD = 4.01$).

Procedure and materials. On entrance, participants were guided to separate computer cubicles. This experiment was the first of two unrelated experiments. The other experiment was from a different researcher. They received € 6 for participation in the four separate experiments.

As in the previous studies, the SCO-scale was first completed to detect individual differences in social comparison orientation (Gibbons, & Buunk, 1999). The SCO-scale and a word scrambling filler task were presented as a separate study.

Next, the same seven photographs as used in the previous studies were used, but in this experiment, the participants had to indicate the similarity between the

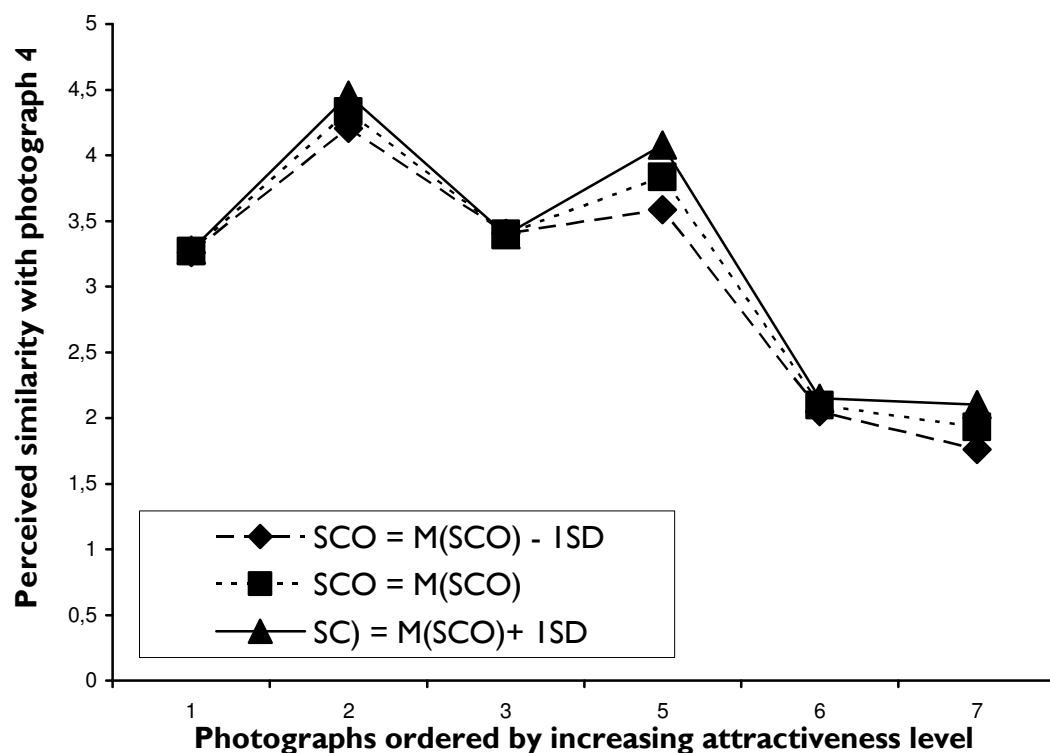
photograph that was at the mean of the attractiveness dimension in the previous studies (rank 4) and the remaining six photographs (rank 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7), making six pairs. Every pair (4-1, 4-2, 4-3, 4-5, 4-6, 4-7) was presented on a different screen, randomly ordered. Participants had to answer the question: “How similar are these two persons?”, scored on a 7-points scale from 1 (*not at all similar*) to 7 (*very similar*).

Results

As expected in our hypothesis in this study, the main effect of SCO on level of similarity was not significant, $F(1,28) = 0.40, p = .534, ns$. Those high in SCO and those low in SCO reported the same similarity level for all six pairs. The lines in Figure 4.5 show no differences for the different levels of SCO.

Furthermore, the main effect of level of attractiveness was significant, $F(5, 140) = 20.46, p < .001, \eta^2 = .42$, indicating that, not surprisingly, the level of attractiveness of the comparison targets influenced the perceived similarity to the reference target.

Figure 4.5. Perceived similarity with the average photograph (Study 4.3)



Inspection of Figure 4.5 shows that participants perceived the less attractive targets (1, 2 and 3) as more similar to the reference target than the more attractive targets (5, 6 and 7).

DISCUSSION

The present research suggests those high in SCO do consider themselves more similar to comparison targets of a specific standing than those low in SCO, and will, consequently compare themselves more with specific others. Indeed, the results of Study 4.1 indicate that those high in SCO compared themselves more with others varying in attractiveness than those low in SCO did. In addition, the results from the first three studies provided clear support for the hypothesis that those high in SCO perceived more similarity with targets varying in attractiveness than those low in SCO do. Those high in SCO perceived more dimensional closeness as well as psychological closeness with targets varying in attractiveness, than those low in SCO did. However, those high SCO did not report higher levels of similarity than those low in SCO when they compared sets of two photographs of women with each other. These findings suggest that SCO has a specific self-related meaning in that it induces a tendency to see oneself as similar to others, but not a tendency to see others as similar to each other. Indeed, in the first two studies of this chapter, we showed that those high in SCO reported more similarity between themselves and others than those low in SCO (self-other comparison), but in the last study of this chapter, we did not that women high in SCO perceived more similarities between two other women (other-other comparison). To my knowledge, the difference in comparisons of the type self-other and other-other has not been studied in the social comparison literature. These are the first empirical results that showed differences in response patterns between the two types of comparisons. Remarkably, other-other comparisons seem to be different from comparisons of objects, as in Chapter 2 it was found that in such comparisons those high in SCO tend to perceive relatively more similarities.

Interestingly, those high in SCO did consider themselves especially more similar than those low in SCO to attractive others. This is in line with research by Bätzner and Kuiper (2006) and Van der Zee and colleagues (1998) showing that those

high in SCO seem inclined to identify themselves more than those low in SCO with better-off targets, and with the finding in Chapter 2 that those high in SCO show more positive responses after exposure to an attractive target than those low in SCO. Thus, our results suggest individuals high in SCO, do not only consider themselves in general more similar to others, but do specifically with respect to others of a high standing. This is an important finding that may explain discrepant findings in the social comparison literature, and that is in line with research by Miller (1982) showing that feelings of dimensional closeness in attractiveness foster social comparison processes

The present findings are important, but the studies had limitations that demand additional research. Although different forms of similarity seem to be easily separated in the literature, it was difficult to separate the constructs in this research. In all studies, the perception of different types of similarity to a set of seven photographs was measured. In all studies, the participants were exposed to photographs. It is possible that there was an underlying construct or variable that is related to all the types of similarity that affected the different perceived similarity measures. Looking at a photograph may unintentionally have evoked feelings or thoughts, that was not measured afterwards, but may have probably influenced the type of similarity that was measured. For example, simply feelings of liking (resemblances of a real life friend) may increase feelings of dimensional closeness. Although all types of similarity were tested separately in this research, interdependency of different types of similarity can not be ruled out. However, the finding that those high in SCO perceived more similarity with the photographs –tested with different methods and definitions of the similarity–, suggests that those high in SCO generally perceive more similarity in a comparison between self and others than those low in SCO, and especially when it concerns attractive others.

The core variable in this research was similarity. In all studies, the assessment of the different types of similarity had the format of: “How much do you resemble X in ...”, except the measurement of psychological closeness: in the IOS scale, the frame of comparison stayed rather implicit. There is research showing that individuals are more inclined to perceive similarity between themselves and others when the assessment has the format “How much does X resemble you”, than when the format is “How much do you resemble X” (Tversky, 1977). In our experiments, we did not

vary the format of the question, because the format was not part of the research question. However, some personality characteristics have been found to affect the responses to the two different formats of comparison, such as self-monitoring and private self-consciousness (Holyoak, & Gordon, 1983; Srull, & Gaelick, 1983), both related to SCO (Gibbons, & Buunk, 1999). Further research is needed to examine if SCO moderates the responses of the two different types of framing. It is not possible without further research to rule out that some of the results we found are due to the format of the similarity testing in this chapter.

The findings in studies 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 on SCO are quite robust. In all figures, the line for those high in SCO exceeds the line for those low in SCO. However, inspection of the figures shows that in some cases the effect of the attractiveness of the targets deviates from the general trend, which may be due to the fact that other characteristics of the depicted women such as hair color have in some way affected the responses of the variable that was measured. Furthermore, the perception of the two most attractive women differed between Study 4.1 and 4.2. In Study 4.1, the more attractive the women were, the higher the reported similarity, but in Study 4.2 this line drops down for the two most attractive women. The method in both studies was identical, which makes it difficult to explain this difference. This difference between Study 4.1 and 4.2 suggests that other factors may influence response patterns when participants are exposed to photographs of other women. Among other factors, a possible resemblance of themselves to the others may have guided the responses. The stimuli that were selected in these studies included women who differed in hair color, eye color, skin color and BMI. As no data on the hair color, eye color, skin color nor BMI of the participants is available, it is hard to interpret any of the differences between the responses to the different photographs.

A limitation of this research is that dimensional closeness was assessed by one subjective measure. Our intention was to measure *feelings* of dimensional closeness. However, it could have been informative to have an objective measure of dimensional closeness as well. An objective measure of dimensional closeness could have been calculated using attractiveness evaluations of the persons on the photographs and self-evaluations of attractiveness. In this research, we did not ask participants to give attractiveness evaluations of the depicted women to avoid

inducing undesired effects, like attractiveness comparisons and activation of the attractiveness dimension, with uncontrollable responses.

The findings of this research are the first that suggest that those high in SCO are more prone to perceive similarity with others than those low in SCO, and only when the self is involved in the comparison. There is one study that may clarify in what way self-involvement affects the perception of similarity. Van Dijk and Zeelenberg (2005) examined the moderating role of SCO in the feelings of regret after a missed prize. They told the participants that all participants received a prize, but that one half of the participants won a better prize, than they did. Feelings of regret were the dependent variable. The better prize was either comparable (from the same category) or non-comparable (from a different category). Participants felt less regret when a missed prize was not comparable (from another category), but this was only true for those low in SCO. For the missed prize from a different category, those low in SCO felt less regret than those high in SCO. Those low in SCO perceived both prizes as dissimilar and therefore as non-comparable, whereas those high in SCO perceived both prizes as similar and therefore as comparable. Those high in SCO seem not to focus on the dissimilarity in the category of the prize as those low in SCO seem to do, but seem to focus on the similarity with the other that simply received a better prize than they did. Probably as a result of the perception of similarity with the other person, those high in SCO perceive the prizes as more similar. This is in line with our findings, in which those high in SCO perceived the targets as more *similar to themselves* than those low in SCO did, but in which those high in SCO did not perceive the pairs of targets as *more similar to each other* than those low in SCO did.

To conclude, the results of the current studies demonstrate that those high in SCO perceive more similarity with the comparison others than those low in SCO, and especially with more attractive targets. The perception of similarity in those high in SCO may influence the comparison outcomes. Therefore, it would seem important to take the perception of similarity and the moderating role of SCO into account in future social comparison research.

