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Mirrors and reflections

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CHAPTER 5

General discussion

The association between social comparisons and evaluations of attractiveness is often quite manifest in our language. For example, it is often said: "Her natural beauty toned down the appearances of her friends" to indicate that even the presence of a single attractive individual may make look others less attractive. And women who are dieting may look worried at thicker women and say: "I hope I'll never get her size!". The present thesis focused upon these types of social comparisons, i.e. social comparisons in the domain of physical attractiveness. In so doing, the present thesis limited itself to social comparisons among women. As noted in the introduction section, being physically attractive is especially important for women. Moreover, physical attractiveness is one of the most important domains, perhaps even the most important domain, in which women compare themselves with other women. Numerous studies have indeed shown that especially women compare their body and appearance to those of same-sex individuals, and often feel jealous or inadequate as a consequence (e.g., Buss, 1994; Joseph, 1985; Wade, & Abetz, 1997).

Although social comparisons are a universal mechanism, individuals differ in the degree to which they engage in social comparisons in their lives. In other words, individuals differ in what has been labeled as Social Comparison Orientation or SCO (Gibbons, & Buunk., 1999). Until the present thesis, no experimental research had been conducted on the association between SCO and self-evaluations of attractiveness in women. In the present thesis, three different processes in which SCO may play an important role, were examined, i.e. (1) responses to social comparisons of attractiveness, (2) the range of momentary self-evaluations of attractiveness, and (3). perceptions of similarity in attractiveness.

SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THE EMPIRICAL CHAPTERS

SCO and responses to comparisons with attractive and less attractive women.

In Chapter 2, the basic question we aimed to answer was whether a high SCO is associated with a focus on similarity, and how this focus may influence responses to comparisons with other women varying in their degree of attractiveness. Three different experiments were conducted to answer these questions. In the first experiment, the assumption was tested that those high in SCO are, in general, more focused on perceiving similarity between stimuli. To test this assumption, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they thought two different sketches were similar to each other. This task assessed to what degree participants focused on similarities. As expected, it was found that those high in SCO perceived a higher level of similarity between the two sketches than those low in SCO. Thus, support was found for the assumption that a high SCO is associated with a general similarity focus in comparisons, i.e. with a tendency to perceive two unrelated stimuli as more similar to each other, even when the two stimuli are not social in nature.

In the other two experiments, the implications of this similarity focus among those high in SCO were tested. It was argued that high levels of similarity testing should result in an assimilative response to social comparisons. Thus, confronted with upward comparisons, I expected those high in SCO, i.e. those focusing on similarities in attractiveness comparisons, to respond with a relatively positive mood and to show relatively positive self-evaluations of attractiveness. On the other hand, confronted with downward comparisons, I expected them to respond with a decrease in mood and lowered self-evaluations. In the second experiment, participants were presented with an interview, either accompanied with a photograph of an attractive woman or a less attractive woman. Results of second experiment showed that women high in SCO responded assimilatively, but only in mood. The self-evaluations of attractiveness did not change significantly. In the third experiment, the attractiveness manipulation consisted of exposure to five photographs of either attractive women or less attractive women. Presented with

this manipulation, in the attractive condition, compared to those low in SCO, those high in SCO responded relatively more assimilatively, reporting more positive self-evaluations of attractiveness. That is, women high in SCO showed more positive self-evaluations of attractiveness after exposure to attractive targets than after exposure to less attractive targets. Women low in SCO tended to show contrastive responses, reporting more positive self-evaluations in the less attractive condition compared to the attractive condition.

The results of these studies suggest that those high in SCO are more focused on similarity and tend to respond more assimilatively to upward (attractive condition) and downward comparisons (less attractive condition) than those low in SCO.

SCO and the range in momentary self-evaluations of attractiveness.

In research on social comparisons of attractiveness, studies on the flexibility of self-evaluations of attractiveness are scarce. However, it seems likely that there are boundaries to momentary self-evaluations that mark an individual's range of self-evaluations in a specific domain. In Chapter 3, I examined the association between SCO and the range of momentary self-evaluations of attractiveness. I was interested in this range, because a broader range of self-evaluations of attractiveness may be indicative of a stronger inclination to compare one's own attractiveness with those of others and vice versa.

In Chapter 3, the association between SCO and the range of momentary self-evaluations was examined in four experiments. In all of the four experiments, participants rated their most attractive self-evaluation and their least attractive self-evaluation, by marking two points on a vertical line (representing the attractiveness dimension). Chapter 3's experiments differed slightly in their instructions for the participants. Nonetheless, the results remained comparable. The results of all four experiments showed that those high in SCO had a wider range of momentary self-evaluations of attractiveness. In addition, the fourth experiment showed that this wider range could not be attributed to differences in self-esteem. These findings indeed suggest that those high in SCO have lower levels of self-clarity and have less well-defined self-views (Campbell et al., 1996).

SCO and the perception of similarity

Chapter 4 examined a process that may underlie Chapter 2's finding that those high in SCO perceive more similarity between two sketches and show more assimilative responses to social comparisons than those low in SCO. That is, I examined if those high in SCO perceive others that are very different from the self in attractiveness to be more close and similar to themselves than those low in SCO.

I argued that similarity testing (Mussweiler, 2003) has restrictions because a strong similarity mind set may also impose costs, such as the loss of information. Although viewing others as similar to the self may facilitate finding relevant comparison targets, it may decrease the amount of relevant information per target. As a result, I expected women high in SCO not to differ from women low in SCO when they compare two possible comparison targets.

In this chapter, two different types of similarity were examined, i.e., perceptions of similarity of attractiveness, and perceptions of psychological distance to others. In the experiments described in Chapter 4, participants were all presented with the same set of seven photographs of young women representing all levels of the attractiveness dimension with about the same distance between each pair of photographs. The aim of the first experiment was to examine whether women differed in the tendency to compare themselves with all seven stimuli. Those high in SCO indeed reported that they had compared themselves more with all seven targets than those low in SCO, indicating that those high in SCO are less selective in their comparison choice than those low in SCO. The second purpose of the first experiment was to test whether women high in SCO perceived the seven stimuli to be closer to their own level of attractiveness than women low in SCO, regardless of the attractiveness level of the stimulus. Indeed, higher levels of perceived similarity in attractiveness was found among those high in SCO than among those low in SCO.

In the second experiment, participants had to indicate which distance between two circles best reflected their psychological closeness to the same set of comparison targets. Again, those high in SCO perceived less distance to all seven targets than those low in SCO did. Thus, those high in SCO tend to perceive more psychological closeness with targets of various attractiveness level than those low in SCO.

In Chapter 4's last experiment, participants rated the similarity between the photograph of the target of medium attractiveness, i.e. in the middle of the attractiveness scale, and each of the remaining six photographs. No difference was found between similarity ratings for different levels of SCO. This indicates that, although those high in SCO have a strong similarity mindset, this similarity mind set is not active when they compare two photographs of women with each other. It seems to become active only when women compare themselves with a target.

In addition, it must be noted that the attractiveness of the target played a role as well in all experiments: both women low and high in SCO felt more psychologically close to attractive than to unattractive targets.

Chapter 4's results show that those high in SCO perceive more similarity between themselves and others than those low in SCO. It also shows that their relatively strong similarity mind set is not a *general* mindset, but one that is activated when women high in SCO compare themselves with other women. These findings are interesting, although it is not clear what the causal relationship is. Do women high in SCO compare themselves more often with different targets, because they feel similar to them, which would imply that those high in SCO have different views of their own standing? Or does the fact that they compare themselves with different targets make them feel more similar, without having many implications per se for their self-views? I would like to argue that the first is the case: as previous studies have suggested, the self-view of those high in SCO is not clearly defined. As a result, they may more easily identify and feel similar to others with whom they are confronted.

Links between the three empirical chapters

It is highly likely that the findings of the three empirical chapters are related to each other. The broader range in momentary self-evaluations of attractiveness in those high in SCO found in Chapter 3 may facilitate perceptions of similarity between oneself and targets of varying levels of attractiveness levels. This heightened perception of similarity may result in a more assimilative response after exposure to an upward or downward comparison target. Further research is needed to examine the effect of a broader range in momentary self-evaluations in attractiveness and the

perception of similarity on the response following upward and downward comparisons.

To conclude, those high in SCO are relatively more focused on similarity when they compare themselves with others and therefore, respond more assimilatively to those comparisons than those low in SCO. Furthermore, those high in SCO perceive more similarity to others, showing more similarity with other women, compared to those low in SCO. This high perceived similarity could possibly be explained by a lack of self-clarity. The finding that women high in SCO show a wider range of self-evaluations of attractiveness supports this interpretation.

It is interesting to compare the findings of the three empirical chapter with each other, although the method and design in the chapter is very different. In Chapter 2, those high in SCO responded similar to both upward and downward comparisons. However, in Chapter 3, those high in SCO seem to respond more strongly to the upper part of the comparison dimension. The findings in Chapter 4 seem to suggest the opposite: the effect of the difference in range between those low and high in SCO seem to be based on differences in the lower boundary. Further research is needed to explore why the different methods and designs throughout this thesis resulted in apparently opposite responses.

EMBEDDING IN AND CONTRIBUTION TO THE LITERATURE

Our finding that individual differences, in this case individual differences in SCO, affect responses to upward and downward comparison is in line with other research. Previous studies have shown several individual difference variables to be related to responses to upward and downward comparison, such as neuroticism and the tendency to respond defensively when confronted with self-esteem threats (e.g., Nussbaum, & Dweck, 2008). More specifically, research on social comparisons of attractiveness has focused relatively strongly on the potentially negative consequences of upward attractiveness comparisons. Studies in this research line have shown that comparisons with attractive others often have a negative effect on self-evaluations of attractiveness, mood and body satisfaction (Cash, Cash, & Butters,

1983). Socially comparing one's own body is even assumed to be a risk factor for the development of clinical problems, such as depression and eating disorders (e.g., Dijkstra, Gibbons, & Buunk, in press).

More recently, a more fine tuned picture is emerging from this field of study. That is, in line with the larger field of social comparison research, more recent studies show that responses to upward comparison targets are, for a large part, driven by individual differences and not by the exposure to attractive targets per se. Research shows that a contrastive response to highly attractive targets is especially found in women with high levels of internalized body dissatisfaction. Compared to other women, these women respond with contrast, i.e. with decreased mood and increased levels of body dissatisfaction, to upward comparisons of attractiveness (Posavac, Posavac, & Posavac, 1998; Trampe, Stapel, & Siero, 2007). In a similar vein, there are individual differences that seem to predict assimilative responses to upward comparisons of attractiveness, such as restrained eating and perceptions of similarity. For instance, when restrained eaters are exposed to attractive and thin targets, their mood improves and their food intake increases (e.g., Joshi, Herman, & Polivy, 2004).

The present thesis shows that SCO can be added to the list of individual difference variables that moderate the effect of social comparisons of attractiveness on mood and self-evaluations of attractiveness. More specifically, the present thesis showed that, as women are higher in SCO, their self-evaluations are more easily affected by social comparisons of attractiveness. This may have both positive and negative consequences, depending on the direction of the comparison. More specifically, compared to other women, the present thesis showed that, in response to highly attractive comparison targets, women high in SCO reported higher self-evaluations of attractiveness and more positive affect. Compared to other women, in response to relatively unattractive comparison targets, these women tended to report lowered self-evaluations of attractiveness and more negative affect.

However, more than just being another individual difference variable that moderates the effects of social comparison information on self-evaluations of attractiveness, the present study confronts us with an intriguing disagreement in findings. Previous studies have shown that especially women suffering from low self-esteem tend to interpret comparisons with highly attractive women in a self-destructive and negative manner (e.g., Posavac, Posavac, & Weigel, 2001; Schemer,

2007). Although SCO has been found to be negatively related to self-esteem (e.g., Gibbons, & Buunk, 1999), showing that women high in SCO often suffer from low self-esteem, the present research suggests that, when confronted with a highly attractive comparison target, a high SCO seems to constitute a strength rather than a vulnerability. A possible explanation is that, under these conditions, social comparisons are not guided by feelings of low self-esteem, but by levels of low self-clarity. In the introduction section I have already discussed the fact that, in addition to self-esteem, SCO is also related negatively to levels of self-clarity (Butzer, & Kuiper, 2006): as individuals have higher SCO, they have lower self-clarity. Self-clarity and self-esteem are, however, two very different concepts. Whereas low self-esteem refers to *negative* perceptions of the self, low self-clarity refers to an *unclear* view of the self. Therefore, it is very well possible that, regardless of their relatively low levels of self-esteem, women high in SCO may show an improvement in mood and self-evaluations when confronted with a highly attractive comparison target. Our finding that women high in SCO have a broader range of self-evaluations of attractiveness supports this explanation. The present thesis showed that, compared to other women, women high in SCO see themselves as both relatively more unattractive and more attractive: in response to social comparison information, they more easily shift their self-view from more to less attractive or vice versa than other women. It seems highly likely that this broader range of self-evaluations (or lack of self-clarity) guides the social comparisons, and thus self-evaluations, of women high in SCO, and not their relatively low self-esteem.

An alternative, related explanation is that the negative consequences of having a low self-esteem are outweighed by the positive consequences of increased levels of psychological closeness and similarity that women high in SCO experience when confronted with an attractive comparison target. In line with Brown et al. (1992), the present thesis showed that, more than other women, women high in SCO experience higher levels of psychological closeness with other people, regardless of the level of attractiveness of the specific comparison target. In other words, they have a relatively strong similarity mind set. Having such a mind set may help women high in SCO to create a more well-defined self because it encourages them to seek information that may be used to define the self. In contrast, women low in SCO, who already have a well-defined self-view, and, as a result, a more limited range of self-

evaluations of attractiveness, may feel less of a need for information to define themselves, and as a consequence, may be more selective in their choice of self-relevant information.

The present thesis found that, although, when confronted with relatively attractive comparison targets, a high SCO may be a strength, when confronted with relatively unattractive comparison targets, a high SCO seems to be a vulnerability. More specifically, the present thesis found women high in SCO to respond with assimilation to downward comparisons of attractiveness. That is, when confronted with an unattractive target, women high in SCO tended to evaluate their attractiveness more negatively than other women and experienced more negative affect. A possible explanation may again be found in the relatively low levels of self-clarity and relatively high perceptions of similarity of women high in SCO. Whereas other women may feel downward comparison targets are not relevant to their self-definition, because of their strong similarity mind set, women high in SCO may not be able to devalue this type of social comparison information as irrelevant and suffer as a consequence. According to Tesser, Millar and Moore (1988) being close to others may bring “pain and pleasure”, a statement our findings seem to confirm.

More in general, the present thesis’ findings underline the importance of individual difference variables when researching the effect of social comparisons of attractiveness on self-evaluations of attractiveness. It is important to know that not everyone responds the same to ideal images of beauty. Having a high or low SCO can make women vulnerable to the potentially negative consequences of social comparisons of attractiveness. This conclusion may have several practical implications, a topic I will discuss in the next section.

Practical implications

In the introduction section of this thesis, I pointed to the possibility that women high in SCO may respond more vigilantly to comparisons with beauty ideals, and develop more negative self-evaluations of attractiveness and body dissatisfaction as a consequence. Fortunately, the present thesis showed this scenario to be unfounded. Moreover, the opposite is true: women high in SCO seem to respond more positively than other women to society’s images of beauty. They may feel they look

good too or feel inspired to become as attractive as the comparison target. In itself this is good news. Media images of beauty are omnipresent and our society is drenched with the idea that being physically attractive is important for women. The present thesis shows that women high in SCO appear not to suffer negative consequences of the societal ideal of beauty, even though this ideal is highly unrealistic and unattainable.

Nonetheless, our present thesis suggests that SCO is an important individual difference variable in the study and treatment of the negative consequences of media images of beauty. Although women high in SCO may feel better about themselves when confronted with highly attractive comparison targets, they suffer when they are confronted with unattractive same-sex targets. They may feel even more unattractive than they actually are and become distressed about their appearance. In addition, the broad range of self-evaluations of women high in SCO (in other words, their lack of self-clarity) may catch these women in a never ending cycle of cognitive activity that may be tiring and not very constructive. That is, the more these women try to define and evaluate themselves, the more they compare themselves with others, the more different momentary self-evaluations they will have, and the broader their range of self-evaluations will be. To close the circle, this broad range of self-evaluations, and thus the lack of self-definition, may be a strong motivator for even more social comparisons. Although, as explained above, social comparisons of attractiveness may not necessarily be a negative phenomenon, too much thinking about the self and one's attractive and unattractive qualities or body parts, may lead to body objectification, rumination, and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Grabe, Hyde, & Lindberg, 2007).

Our study suggests that, in order for women high in SCO to feel better about themselves, they should be helped to develop a more defined self-view. A more well-defined view of themselves may limit the range of women's momentary self-evaluations and, as a result, the comparison targets women find relevant to compare themselves with. Although women will then show less of a tendency to assimilate with unattractive targets, a possible drawback of this strategy is that women will also be less inclined to assimilate to highly attractive targets, and as a result, may respond more negatively to society's images of beauty. It is very well possible, however, that this drawback is outweighed by the advantages of having a well-defined self-view and

by breaking the never ending circle of thoughts about the self and one's appearance. Feeling less of a need to compare the self to everyone one meets or sees, may create more inner peace and happiness in general.

The ultimate challenge, however, would be to help women high in SCO to preserve their ability to assimilate with upward targets and feel inspired by them, while helping them to contrast themselves with downward comparison targets. This goal may be reached by helping women, in addition to creating a well-defined self, to gain a *positive view* of the self as an attractive woman. A positive, well-defined self-image may cause women to identify with upward targets, because they will see these targets as relevant to the self. They may then automatically contrast themselves with unattractive targets, because those are no longer seen as relevant or similar to the self.

Limitations

As any research, the present thesis suffered from limitations. First, the samples in the present research consisted of female undergraduates only. Conclusions are therefore limited to young, intelligent and psychologically healthy women. It is possible that SCO has a very different effect on self-evaluations of attractiveness in older or clinical populations, for instance, among women who suffer from an eating disorder. It seems highly relevant to study the role of SCO in self-evaluations of attractiveness in these samples. Especially for people suffering from negative self-evaluations of attractiveness or extreme body dissatisfaction, research on the effect of SCO on self-evaluations of attractiveness may create additional avenues for the development of interventions aimed at improving body image.

By studying females only, we know nothing about the role SCO may play in the self-evaluations of attractiveness among men. However, previous studies have already shown men to be less competitive with regard to their physical appearance than women (e.g., Joseph, 1985; Wade, & Abetz, 1997). As a result, men can be expected to view their attractiveness as a less important aspect of the self and to compare themselves less often with regard to their attractiveness. In contrast, several studies suggest that status and success are more important determinants of men's self-views and, as a result, more important dimension on which to compete and compare the

self (e.g., Dijkstra, & Buunk 1998; Townsend, & Levy, 1991). Nonetheless, it seems wise for future studies to examine the role of SCO in the self-evaluations of attractiveness of men. In that case, it seems wise to include sexual orientation as a moderator, since several studies have shown physical attractiveness to be more important for homosexual than heterosexual men (e.g., Buunk, & Dijkstra, 2001).

Finally, the present research restricted itself to social comparisons in the domain of attractiveness. It remains unknown whether SCO plays the same moderating role in other domains of social comparison. I hope the present research inspires others to examine the potentially moderating role of SCO in other interesting and potentially important domains of social comparison, such as the domain of success and status I described above.