

University of Groningen

Mirrors and reflections

Bosch, A.Z.

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2010

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Bosch, A. Z. (2010). *Mirrors and reflections: Social comparison orientation and self-perception of physical attractiveness in women*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), Rijksuniversiteit Groningen]. s.n.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

CHAPTER 2

Assimilation or contrast?

Exposure to attractive or less attractive others and the role of Social Comparison Orientation¹

Most studies on the impact of social comparisons on self-evaluations of physical attractiveness have been conducted in female samples. Evolutionary theorists have argued that attractiveness is more important for women than for men, and that women compete more with other women in terms of physical attractiveness than men do (e.g., Fisher, 2004). Therefore, comparing with others in terms of physical attractiveness may affect the self-evaluations especially of women. In general, research suggests that when individuals compare themselves with others on evaluative dimensions, the psychological consequences may be positive or negative, depending on the direction of comparison (upward or downward) and on the interpretation of the comparison (assimilation or contrast). If the target individual is perceived as superior on the dimension (i.e., is more attractive than the perceiver), the outcome may be positive for self-evaluations if the perceiver assimilates with the target, but negative for self-evaluations if the perceiver contrasts with the target. On the other hand, if the target individual is perceived as inferior on the dimension (i.e., is less attractive than the perceiver), the outcome may be negative for self-evaluations if the perceiver assimilates with the target, but positive for self-evaluations if the perceiver contrasts with the target (Stapel, & Blanton, 2004; for a review see Mussweiler, 2003; Buunk, & Gibbons, 2006).

In the present research, we tested the hypothesis that social comparison orientation (SCO) moderates the effects of social comparison with respect to physical attractiveness. SCO refers to individual differences in the frequency of comparing oneself with others, the general tendency to engage in social comparisons,

¹ This chapter is based on Bosch, Buunk, Siero and Park (in press).

and the inclination to be affected by social comparisons (Gibbons, & Buunk, 1999). According to Buunk and Gibbons (2006) those high in SCO have strong activation of the self and tend to be particularly aware of their own thoughts and feelings when they are alone as well as when they are in the presence of others. Their tendency to compare themselves with others is also expressed in an interest in the feelings and needs of others. In addition, they tend to have somewhat higher levels of negative affectivity and uncertainty of the self (Buunk, & Gibbons., 2006). In general, when confronted with others, those high in SCO tend to relate the experiences and characteristics of others to the experiences and characteristics of themselves.

According to the Selective Accessibility Model (SAM) (Mussweiler, 2003), the default process in social comparisons is looking for similarities: testing for similarities between oneself and the target is a more common and natural process than testing for dissimilarities. Generally spoken, similarity testing will more likely result in an assimilative response rather than with a contrast response. Because searching for similarities is typical for social comparison, logically speaking, those who engage relatively often in social comparison should be characterized by a relatively stronger overall tendency to look for similarities. Mussweiler tested this tendency to search for general similarities by assessing the perceived similarity between two sketches. In the present research we tested with the same method if this tendency to search for general similarities differed for those high and low in SCO. When those high in SCO perceive the two sketches as more similar, it is plausible that those high in SCO will also look more for similarities with potential comparison targets and therefore respond more assimilative than those low in SCO.

This last prediction is not only in line with the SAM, but also with another recent model in the social comparison literature, the Interpretation Comparison Model (Stapel, & Koomen, 2000; Stapel, & Koomen, 2001; Stapel, & Blanton, 2004). In the SAM, no difference is formulated between responses to deliberate, explicit comparisons and to more implicit comparisons; according to the ICM, on the other hand, deliberate, explicit comparisons will activate a mindset of similarity testing between the characteristics of the target and the comparer resulting in assimilative responses (interpretation), whereas implicit comparison will not activate the similarity testing process resulting in contrast (comparison). Indeed, in one experiment, Stapel and Suls (2004) found assimilative responses when they asked the

participants to compare themselves with the target (explicit comparison), but contrastive responses when they instructed the participants to think about the target (implicit comparison). Social comparison orientation (SCO), in our view, refers to explicit comparisons, as the scale to assess this orientation asks for one's conscious awareness of making social comparisons. (Van der Zee, Oldersma, Buunk, & Bos, 1998). Although no research is done so far on how SCO affects the tendency to make implicit and explicit comparisons, we like to argue that the awareness of making comparisons in those high in SCO –with an highly activated self and strong interest in others– makes explicit comparisons more likely, whereas the lack of awareness of making comparisons in those low in SCO makes explicit comparisons less likely. Thus, also on the basis of the ICM, we hypothesized that those high in SCO will tend to assimilate more following social comparison than those low in SCO. As individuals low in SCO may be more susceptible to implicit comparisons, they may be more likely to contrast with targets as they focus on dissimilarities between themselves and the target.

Our predictions are not only in line with current theoretical models, but also with two lines of research. First, previous research on SCO suggests indeed that those high in SCO tend to show responses that seem to reflect assimilation, especially in downward comparisons (Gibbons, & Gerrard, 1995; Ouellette et al., 2005). For example, Buunk, Van der Zee and Van Yperen (2001) showed that most negative affect was found after downward comparison among nurses high in SCO, and Buunk, Ybema, Gibbons and Ipenburg (2001) found that individuals with high levels of burnout were most negatively affected by a downward comparison, but only when they were high in SCO. A second line of research relevant to the present predictions is the work by Brown, Novick, Lord and Richards (1992), who studied the effects of perceived similarity in a domain unrelated to attractiveness on the self-evaluation of attractiveness. Even trivial information highlighting similarity between self and target (e.g., sharing the same birthday) may affect perceived similarity and therefore evoke assimilative responses. In one set of studies Brown and colleagues found that women assimilate with attractive targets when they were told that they shared the birthday with the target.

Overview

To summarize, in the studies reported below, we tested the hypothesis that those high in SCO tend to focus relatively more on general similarities and will therefore respond more assimilative to social comparison than those low in SCO. To be more specific, Study 2.1 was designed to test differences between those high and low in SCO in a mindset towards seeing similarities. Studies 2.2 and 2.3 were designed to test the response to social comparison, and we expected that individuals high in SCO—due to the tendency to focus on similarities—are more likely to assimilate following social comparison. In these two studies, we presented participants with either attractive or less attractive comparison targets and assessed the impact on mood and self-evaluations. We also measured individual differences in SCO and tested the interactive effects of SCO and attractiveness of the target on mood and self-evaluations. In all three studies, the comparison domain was physical attractiveness. As physical attractiveness is a particularly relevant comparison dimension for women (Fisher, 2004) our studies were conducted with only female participants.

STUDY 2.1

Method

Participants and Procedure. Thirty-eight female undergraduate students from the University of Groningen participated voluntarily (mean age = 21.24, $SD = 3.11$).

Participants first completed an 11-item scale assessing 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” and “If I want to find out how well I have done something, I compare what I have done with how others have done.” Participants provided responses on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach’s alpha was .79.

Following completion of the SCO scale, participants performed an ostensibly unrelated “similarity task” (taken from Markman, & Gentner, 1996). For this task,

participants were instructed to look carefully at two sketches. One sketch depicted a woman leaning over a table holding a cup of coffee or tea; a Christmas tree with a few presents below and a fireplace were also depicted. The other sketch depicted a man standing in front of a table reaching for a bowl on the table; a bottle and a few glasses were also depicted on the table. This task has previously been used in other research as an experimental manipulation task with half of the participants instructed to list similarities between the two sketches and the other half instructed to list dissimilarities (Mussweiler, 2001). In this study, this task was used as a dependent variable to measure the diverging informational foci, with identical instructions as in Mussweiler, Ruetter and Epstude (2004) and Stapel and Suls (2004). Participants were asked to rate how alike these two pictures were, on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*). Words that may activate “similarity searching” or “dissimilarity searching” behavior were avoided in the instruction of this test. In Dutch, the answer to the instruction “how alike are the two pictures” can be given without any reference to similarities or dissimilarities. The anchors in this test were “not at all” and “very much”.

Results and Discussion

As hypothesized, scores on the SCO scale were positively correlated with the similarity ratings ($r = .34, p = .038$). Individuals with a greater tendency to compare themselves with others were more likely to notice or report similarities between the two pictures. This indicates that high comparers indeed focus on similarities more than do low comparers, even on a task that is completely unrelated to self–other comparisons. This finding provided a basis for the second hypothesis—that high SCO may be associated with a tendency to assimilate.

STUDY 2.2

Introduction

In Study 2.2, we tested the hypothesis that (as a consequence of their focus on similarities) high comparers will tend to respond with assimilation following social

comparison. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, i.e., being exposed to either an attractive target or a less attractive target, and their mood and self-evaluation were assessed. We tested the hypothesis that assimilative responses are positively related to SCO: (1) Following comparison with an attractive target, SCO positively predicts mood and self-evaluations, and (2) following comparison with a less attractive target, SCO negatively predicts mood and self-evaluations.

Method

Participants and Procedure. Seventy-two female undergraduate students from the University of Groningen participated in exchange for €4.50 (mean age = 20.21, SD = 2.76).

Participants completed the materials in separate rooms on computers. Participants first completed the SCO scale (Cronbach's alpha = .75). Then, a filler task was introduced to separate the assessment of SCO from the experimental procedure. Participants were told that the goal of the experiment was to assess abilities and skills that are necessary for students. They were then instructed to read a previously published interview involving a female student from the Faculty of Medicine in which she talks about her life as a student. This interview was in fact fictitious and contained neutral information. The interview was accompanied by a photograph of the female interviewee in the two experimental conditions. In the control condition that was added to the design for manipulation check purposes, participants were not exposed to a photograph. Participants just read the interview and gave the self-evaluation of attractiveness. Because we did not have specific hypotheses on SCO as related to this control condition, this condition was not included in the analyses to test the hypotheses. In the experimental conditions, there were two versions of the photograph: For participants assigned to the "attractive" condition, the photograph depicted the face of an attractive woman; among participants assigned to the "less attractive" condition, the photograph depicted the face of a less attractive woman. The interview text consisted of twelve computer pages with the photograph on every page. The two photographs were pre-tested by 25 female students on a scale from 1 (*not at all attractive*) to 7 (*very attractive*).

After reading the interview, participants' mood was assessed by the question "How do you feel at this moment?" Responses were given on a scale from 1 (very negative) to 9 (very positive). In addition, self-evaluations of attractiveness were assessed by the question "How attractive do you feel at the moment?" Responses were given on a scale from 1 (not at all attractive) to 7 (very attractive). Finally, participants answered two questions that served as a manipulation check: "How attractive is this student in your opinion?" and "How attractive is this student to others?" Responses were given on a scale from 1 (very unattractive) to 7 (very attractive). Furthermore, seven additional variables were tested, for explorative reasons for further research. The questions are listed in a footnote².

Results and Discussion

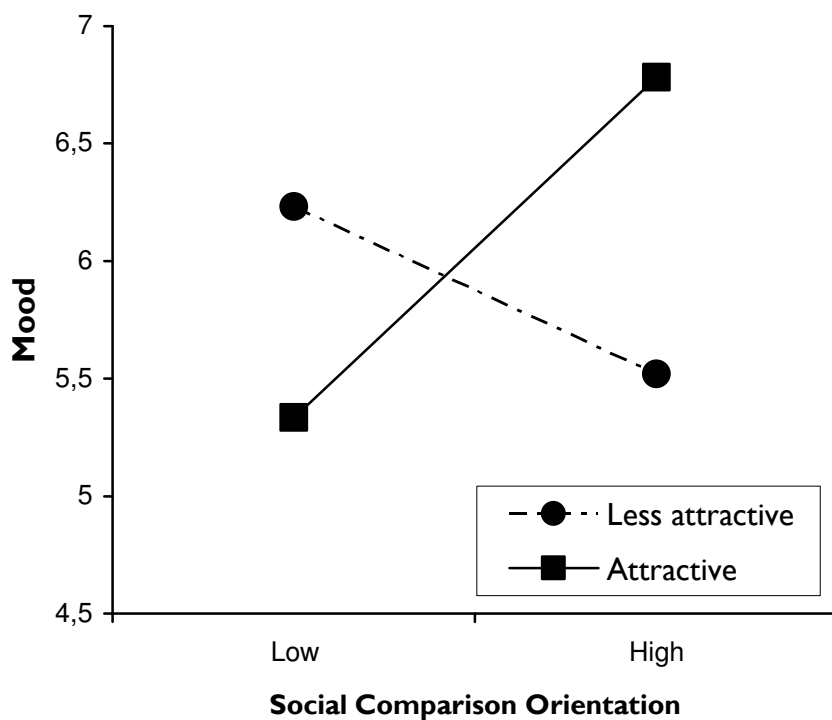
Manipulation check. Participants rated the photograph of the attractive female ($M = 5.70$, $SD = .77$) as more attractive than the photograph of the less attractive female ($M = 3.26$, $SD = .79$), $t(70) = 13.26$, $p < .001$. The average self-evaluation of attractiveness in the control condition ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.97$, $n = 41$) was significantly lower than the pretest rating of women in the "attractive" condition and higher than the pretest rating of the women in the "less attractive" condition (pre-test: $M = 5.76$, $SD = 0.70$, and $M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.85$, respectively). The manipulation check was also significant controlling for SCO, $F(1, 69) = 191.36$, $p < .000$ (main effect of SCO: $F < 1$, *ns*).

Effects of SCO and Attractiveness of the Target. To examine the effects of SCO and attractiveness of the target, two regression analyses were conducted in which mood and self-evaluations of attractiveness were dependent variables.

² "To what extent could you identify with the person in the interview?", "Did you get a clear picture about the kind of person the woman in the interview was?", "To what extent did you get actually information in this interview?", "To what extent did you get any information about what the person thinks and feels?", "How interesting did you think the interview was?", "How positive/negative was the interview in your opinion?" and "How appealing was the interview in your opinion?" Answers were given on a scale from 1 to 7, with anchors applicable to the question.

Mood. Figure 2.1 depicts the results of the analysis in which mood was the dependent variable. There was a marginal main effect of SCO. High comparers reported more negative mood than low comparers ($b = -0.36$, $t(68) = -1.68$, $p = .097$). The analysis revealed the hypothesized interaction effect of SCO and attractiveness of the target ($b = 1.08$, $t(68) = 2.71$, $p = .008$). Tests of simple main effects indicated that, among participants in the "attractive" condition, those high in SCO reported a relatively more positive mood ($b = 0.72$, $t(68) = 2.15$, $p = .035$). In contrast, among participants in the "less attractive" condition, those high in SCO reported a relatively more negative mood ($b = -1.44$, $t(68) = -2.65$, $p = .010$).

Figure 2.1. Regression lines depicting the interactive effect of SCO and attractiveness (Study 2.2)

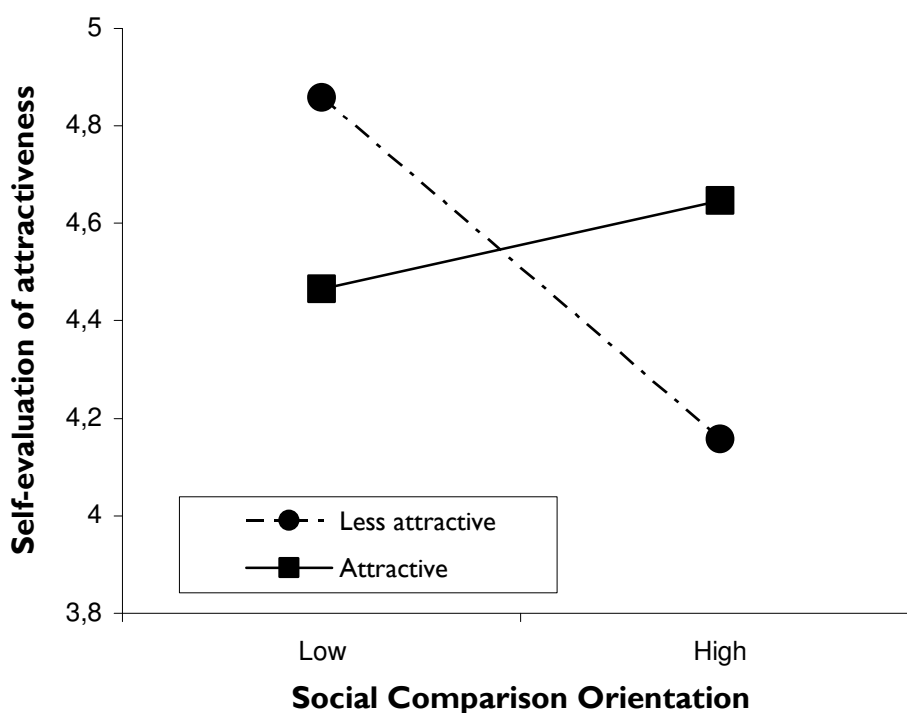


Tests of the remaining simple main effects showed that, among high comparers (+1 SD from mean), "attractive" comparison led to more positive mood than in the "less attractive" comparison ($b = 1.26$, $t(68) = 2.34$, $p = .022$); among low comparers (-1 SD from mean), the "less attractive" comparison tends to result in more positive mood than the "attractive" comparison ($b = -0.90$, $t(68) = -1.69$, $p = .096$). These results supported the key predictions: Following the "attractive" comparison, SCO

was positively associated with mood, and following the "less attractive" comparison, SCO was negatively associated with mood.

Self-evaluations of attractiveness. Figure 2.2 depicts the results of the analysis in which self-evaluations of attractiveness was the dependent variable. There was a main effect of SCO: High comparers reported lower self-evaluations ($b = -0.35$, $t(68) = -2.57$, $p = .012$). The results also revealed the hypothesized interaction effect of SCO and target attractiveness, although the effect was marginally significant ($b = 0.44$, $t(68) = 1.72$, $p = .090$).

Figure 2.2. Regression lines depicting the interactive effect of SCO and attractiveness (Study 2.2)



Tests of simple main effects showed that, among participants in the "less attractive" condition, SCO negatively predicted self-evaluations of attractiveness ($b = -0.35$, $t(68) = -2.57$, $p = .026$). All remaining simple main effects were not significant ($ps > .17$)³.

³ The remaining statistics were: In the "attractive" condition, no differences were found for low ($-1 SD$ from mean) and high ($+1 SD$ from mean) in SCO, $b = .09$, $t(68) = 0.42$, $p = 0.66$. Among those high in SCO ($+1 SD$ from mean) no difference was found in self-evaluations of attractiveness between attractiveness conditions, $b = .49$, $t(68) = 1.41$, $p = .17$. For those low in SCO ($-1 SD$ from mean), no difference was found in self-evaluations of attractiveness between the conditions, $b = -.39$, $t(68) = -1.15$, $p = .25$.

These results partially supported the predictions: Following the "less attractive" comparison, SCO was negatively associated with self-evaluations of attractiveness.

The statistics of the additional explorative analyses are added in a footnote.⁴

STUDY 2.3

Introduction

Although the pattern of results in Study 2.2 was consistent with the hypothesis that SCO moderates the tendency to assimilate or contrast oneself with others, the predicted effects on self-evaluations of attractiveness were not strong. In Study 2.3, we attempted to test the key predictions with respect to self-evaluations of attractiveness by introducing a stronger manipulation, consisting of five photographs with a cover-story to prevent suspicion among the participants. The cover-story for the experiment was that we wanted to check the lay-out of a brochure of a dating company. The choice for more than one photograph had two reasons. First, it was difficult to make a cover-story for presenting just one photograph without the interview, and a number of photographs were assumed to seem more acceptable. Second, there is evidence suggesting that in general using multiple photographs may

⁴ *Additional explorative analyses.* Seven additional variables were tested for explorative reasons after all experimental variables were completed. Five (marginally) main effect of SCO were found ("To what extent could you identify with the person in the interview?": $b = .34, t(68) = 1.72, p = .091$, "Did you get a clear picture about the kind of person the woman in the interview was?": $b = .46, t(68) = 2.57, p = .012$, "To what extent did you get actually information in this interview?": $b = .53, t(68) = 2.83, p = .006$, "How positive/negative was the interview in your opinion?": $b = .51, t(68) = 3.35, p = .001$, "How appealing was the interview in your opinion?": $b = .39, t(68) = 1.81, p = .075$). These main effects of SCO show that those high in SCO tend to identify more with the target, independent of the attractiveness of the target. Although the main effect was only marginally significant, the fact that those high in SCO tended to identify more than low SCO with both the attractive and the less attractive target, is theoretically consistent with the notion that those high in SCO engage more in assimilation. Furthermore, those high in SCO tended to perceive the interview as more informative than those low in SCO did.

In two of the seven variables an interaction between SCO and the experimental condition was found: "To what extent did you get actually information in this interview?": $b = -.85, t(68) = -2.44, p = .017$ and "How positive/negative was the interview in your opinion?": $b = -.65, t(68) = -2.26, p = .027$. Because we did not have specific hypotheses about the direction of this interaction, we did perform the additional analyses needed to interpret these findings.

In the two remaining questions no significant effects were found ("To what extent did you get any information about what the person thinks and feels?" and "How interesting did you think the interview was?").

be more effective than using a single photograph (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002), but that exposure to more than nine stimuli seems to decrease the effect. With the cover-story in mind, five photographs seemed to be a reasonable number of stimuli, i.e., not too many to create suspicion, but enough to evoke valid responses.

Method

Participants and Procedure. Fifty-three female undergraduate students from the University of Groningen participated voluntarily (mean age = 20.09, $SD = 1.85$).

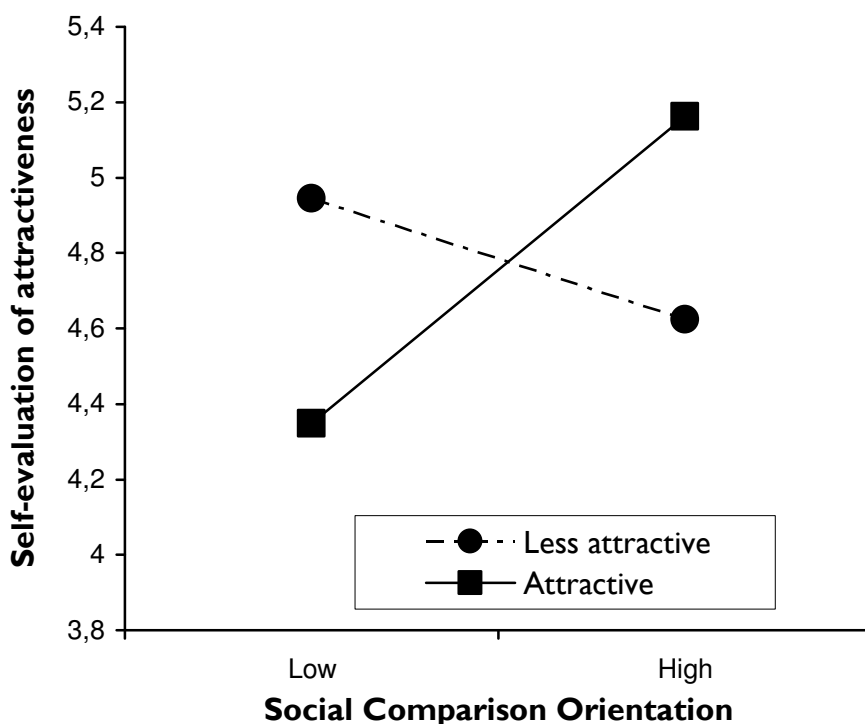
Participants completed the study sessions in groups. Students who assisted the experimenter gave each participant two booklets: one booklet with five photographs (of either attractive faces or less attractive faces) and a second booklet with questionnaires, with the following instruction: "We are students at the University of Groningen, and we were contacted by a dating company to do pre-testing for their brochures. Please give your opinion about the presentation and lay-out of this brochure. You will have to answer some questions about your personal characteristics as they can influence your judgment. We are interested in your personal opinion. Therefore, it is very important that you do not discuss these questions with others. Completing the questionnaire will take about twenty minutes." Within the second booklet, participants completed—in the following order—a question assessing the self-evaluation of attractiveness, various questions about the photographs lay-out, a manipulation-check question. The SCO scale and a filler task were completed just prior to this experiment and were presented as an unrelated study. (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$). To avoid suspicion about the purpose of the experiment, participants did not rate the attractiveness of every photograph separately. The manipulation check is based on one single question: "How attractive were the women on the photographs in your opinion?" Responses were given on a scale from 1 (*not at all attractive*) to 7 (*very attractive*). The women were chosen from a pre-tested sample. The women in the "attractive" condition scored above 7 on a scale from 1 to 10, whereas the women in the "less attractive" condition scored below 4.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check. Participants rated the photographs of the attractive females ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.14$) as more attractive than the photographs of the less attractive females ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.25$), $t(50) = 4.71$, $p < .001$. In this experiment, it was not possible to add a control condition -no photograph-, because the booklet consisted mainly of questions about the layout and photographs. In a control condition, the cover story would have been changed. Any change in the method would have created answers on the self-evaluation of attractiveness that are not comparable with the answers in the two experimental conditions.

Effects of SCO and Attractiveness of the Target. As in Study 2.2, we conducted a regression analysis to examine the effects of SCO and attractiveness of the target on self-evaluations of attractiveness. The main effect of SCO was non significant ($b = -0.16$, $t < 1$, $p = .41$), as was the main effect of condition ($b = -.029$, $t < 1$, $p = .91$). As depicted in Figure 2.3, the analysis revealed the hypothesized interaction effect ($b = 0.57$, $t(49) = 2.28$, $p = .027$).

Figure 2.3. Regression lines depicting the interactive effect of SCO and attractiveness (Study 2.3)



Tests of the simple main effects showed that, among participants in the “attractive” condition, SCO positively predicted self-evaluation of attractiveness ($b = 0.41$, $t(49) = 2.60$, $p = .013$). Among participants in the “less attractive” condition, SCO tended to predict self-evaluations of attractiveness negatively ($b = -0.73$, $t(49) = 1.75$, $p = .087$).

Tests of the remaining simple main effects showed that, among high comparers (+1 *SD* from mean), the “attractive” comparison tended to result into more positive self-evaluations than the “less attractive” comparison ($b = 0.54$, $t(49) = 1.55$, $p = .13$); among low comparers (-1 *SD* from mean), the “less attractive” comparison tended to result into more positive self-evaluations than the “attractive” comparison ($b = -0.59$, $t(49) = -1.72$, $p = .092$).

The pattern of results was generally consistent with the predictions. Following the “attractive” comparison, SCO was positively associated with self-evaluations of attractiveness, and following the “less attractive” comparison, SCO tended to be negatively associated with self-evaluations of attractiveness, although this latter effect did not reach statistical significance.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Results from three studies provided support for the hypothesis that social comparison orientation—as a consequence of its relation to the tendency to focus on similarities—moderates the relationship between the effects of the comparison with an “attractive” and a “less attractive” other, with those higher in SCO showing more assimilative responses. It is worth noting that the results across these studies revealed a consistent pattern, although some of them were significant and others only marginally significant: The psychological consequences of exposure to an “attractive” or “less attractive” target were moderated by SCO in the hypothesized manner. The results of Study 1 showed that high comparers are more likely to focus on similarities compared with low comparers. This particular finding has important implications for social comparison research, as it suggests that a general tendency to compare is associated with a general tendency to assimilate. Studies 2 and 3 provided evidence consistent with these implications. Following exposure to attractive others, SCO was positively associated with mood and self-evaluations of attractiveness. Following exposure to less attractive others, SCO was negatively associated with

mood and self-evaluations of attractiveness. Much research has investigated factors that influence the tendency to assimilate versus contrast; these are the first empirical results to show that individual differences in SCO may be one of these factors.

These findings are in line with previous research. The findings are also consistent with previous research suggesting that high comparers (high in SCO) tend to show patterns consistent with assimilation (Buunk, & Brenninkmeijer., 2001; Buunk, Van der Zee, & Van Yperen, 2001; Gibbons et al., 1995; Ouellette et al., 2005). Furthermore, the findings are relevant for the two recent models in social comparison research, the SAM and the ICM. First, the findings that those high in SCO—frequent comparers by definition—reported more general similarity between two sketches and responded assimilative to the attractiveness comparison, are consistent with the idea of SAM that the basic strategy in social comparison is similarity testing and the default outcome is assimilation. Second, our findings complement evidence showing that experimentally induced tendencies to compare oneself implicitly or explicitly with others may influence the tendency to assimilate or contrast (Stapel, & Suls, 2004). Although we do not have direct evidence for this, our findings suggest that the mindset in those high in SCO seems to resemble the mindset that is manipulated in explicit comparison. Those high in SCO tend to focus more similarities, compared to those low in SCO and therefore, those high in SCO respond more assimilative to social comparison than those low in SCO.

More broadly, the present findings contribute to the literature on the factors that may influence people's tendencies to assimilate with various target individuals. In the self-evaluation maintenance model (Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988), the focus was on the perception of the comparison dimension. In the study by Tesser et al., assimilation was only found when the comparison dimension was perceived as relatively unimportant. In our experiments, we focused on a characteristic of the comparer (SCO). Further research is needed to examine in what way the importance of the comparison dimension interacts with the effects of SCO.

The notion that individuals high in SCO—who tend to have low self-esteem—may profit from upward comparison might seem counterintuitive, but it is in fact consistent with previous research showing that low-esteem individuals enhance their self-worth by indirect self-enhancement techniques, such as assimilation with a superior target (Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988). Recently, Buunk (2006) showed

that individuals high in SCO felt more positive after reading a bogus-interview with happily married couples that put high effort in their relationship, than individuals low in SCO. The core content of the assimilative affective response in that study seemed to be inspiration.

Although the present findings are important, there are a number of limitations. First, the findings are confined to attractiveness comparisons, which may differ from other kinds of comparisons. Attractiveness is readily observable, and so attractiveness comparisons can be made after brief exposures to others. Furthermore, attractiveness comparisons may not entail as much direct competition as comparisons in performance domains. Another limitation of this line of research is that body image was not included in the questions or in the stimuli. It is possible that the outcome is restricted to comparison of attractiveness of faces and that body comparisons are driven by other processes.

Nevertheless, given the importance of social comparison—in social psychology as well as in everyday life—the present research makes an important contribution by highlighting the relevance of individual differences in SCO for current models on social comparison. Not only do individual differences in social comparison influences the way people react to actual social comparison situations, but as demonstrated by Jonas and Huguet (2008), these differences also regulate basic psychological phenomena (such as in time perception) in relation with expected social comparison events. We showed not only that some people are dispositionally more prone to assimilate following social comparison, whereas others are more prone to contrast themselves, but that such differences between individuals are captured by differences in SCO, suggesting that it is in general important to include SCO when testing hypotheses on the effects of social comparison.

