SOCIAL COMPARISONS AND CONTENTMENT

Exploring the Psychological Costs of the Gender Wage Gap

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This study explored the role of social comparison processes in fostering contentment among those who are objectively disadvantaged. We focus on how comparisons can produce gender differences in personal entitlement, perceptions of one's own performance, and pay satisfaction. We hypothesized that individuals would base judgments of entitlement, performance, and pay satisfaction more on comparisons with ingroup (same-sex) than outgroup (cross-sex) others, even when both types of comparison information were equally available, unavoidable, and made clear the disadvantaged status of the ingroup. As predicted, the amount students felt they were entitled to be paid, how well they thought they had performed (women only), and how satisfied they were with their pay were all influenced more by same-sex than cross-sex comparison information. The implications of these results for the tolerance of injustice among disadvantaged groups are discussed.

Individuals who are objectively deprived or disadvantaged often report contentment and satisfaction with their circumstances (e.g., Martin, 1986; Nagata & Crosby, 1991). Theories of justice, such as relative deprivation

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(Crosby, 1976, 1982; Stouffer, Suchman, DeVinney, Star, & Williams, 1949) and equity theory (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978) suggest that this paradox may occur because satisfaction and contentment are relative. Often these judgments are based on comparisons with others, rather than on an individual's assessment of her or his objective status.

Social comparisons are considered central to perceptions of justice and satisfaction, in part, because they affect what a person feels she or he deserves or is entitled to receive (Bylsma & Major, 1992; Crosby, 1982; Major, 1987). Entitlement can be defined as an expectation with normative force, a perception that one should receive a certain outcome (Singer, 1981; see also Major, 1994).

Because comparison processes are central to theories of social justice, it is important to understand how individuals select and use social comparisons to determine the extent to which they are content or deprived. Most studies of social comparisons in this domain have focused exclusively on comparison choices (e.g., Major & Forcey, 1985). Individuals choose either a member of the ingroup or outgroup with which to compare their wages. The important consequence of this choice is that only information about the ingroup is encountered. For example, if women choose to compare their wages with other underpaid women, they may feel entitled to relatively low wages and subsequently content with their own low wages (Major & Testa, 1989).

We were specifically interested in the consequences of exposure to information about the outcomes of both ingroup and outgroup members, particularly when this information was conflicting. To examine these issues, we conducted a study in which individuals did not choose comparative referents but were exposed to information about both ingroup and outgroup members. We predicted: (a) that judgments of entitlement would be higher when comparison information revealed that ingroup (i.e., same-gender) others were paid more than outgroup (cross-gender) others, and lower when comparison information revealed that ingroup members were paid less than outgroup members; and (b) that judgments of pay satisfaction would show the reverse pattern. We predicted that participants would be less satisfied with their pay when ingroup members had been paid more than when ingroup members had been paid less than outgroup members. We also explored the relationship between comparison information and an individual's perceptions of her or his performance. Information about the wages of similar others may be used to infer how one is likely to perform (see Bierhoff, Buck, & Klein, 1986).

**METHOD**

A 2 (Sex of Participant) × 3 (Comparison Information) between-subject factorial design was used.¹ The comparison conditions were: (a) same-sex
paid more than other-sex, (b) other-sex paid more than same-sex, (c) no comparison information provided.\(^2\)

Participants and Procedure

One hundred one (50 female and 51 male) introductory psychology students participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Students participated in groups of up to six and were seated at individual work stations. Each work station contained a bogus cash receipt form posted in clear view of the participant throughout the experiment. For two thirds of participants, these cash receipt forms contained the names, social security numbers, and amounts earned by five male and five female students who had ostensibly participated in the experiment the day before. In addition, the total earnings and the average amount earned were presented separately for each sex. For the remaining one third of participants, the cash receipt forms were blank. Students were randomly assigned to one of three comparison conditions based on the information contained on the cash receipt forms. In one condition, totals and averages indicated that same-gender others had earned more than the cross-gender others ($4.45 vs. $2.55); in a second condition, information indicated that same-sex others had earned less than cross-sex others ($2.55 vs. $4.45). In the third comparison condition, the cash receipt forms were blank.

After being seated at a work station corresponding to one of the above comparison conditions, participants were told that the experiment was being conducted as part of an evaluation of the university's training program for admission officers. The experimenter explained that the task involved looking over applications from high school seniors and making predictions about how successful or unsuccessful they would be in college. This task is similar to one used by Major and Testa (1989) and Major and Forcey (1985) and is perceived as gender-neutral in the absence of a gender-linked label (Kahn, Nelson, & Gaeddert, 1980; Major & Adams, 1983). Participants were told that they would be paid between $2.00 and $5.00 for their work and that the actual amount they earned would depend on how accurate their predictions were compared to how well the applicants had actually performed in college.

After receiving instructions for completing the application-processing task, participants worked for 10 min. The experimenter then collected their completed materials, ostensibly to score them and to determine their pay. At this point, the experimenter apologetically explained that she or he had left some questionnaires in another room. Participants were asked to add their name and social security number to the cash receipt forms while the experimenter retrieved the “forgotten” questionnaires. The blank lines where participants added their names were directly below the totals and averages calculated for the previous male and female (bogus) students. Upon returning, the experimenter distributed a questionnaire containing the crucial dependent measure. It asked participants to indi-
cate how much they felt they deserved to be paid for their work on the application-processing task and contained a question assessing how well they thought they had performed on the task (1 = very poorly, 7 = very well).

While participants completed this questionnaire, the experimenter visibly compared their predictions (from the application-processing task) to an answer key and put money in an envelope marked with their participant identification number. When the questionnaires had been completed, the experimenter handed each participant an envelope containing $3.50. They were asked to record the amount they received on the cash receipt form next to their name, then the experimenter collected the receipt forms. A final questionnaire was then distributed asking participants to indicate: (a) how satisfied they were with their payment (1 = very dissatisfied, 7 = very satisfied), (b) the average amount earned by men for working on the application-processing task, and (c) the average earned by women for working on the task. When this was complete, participants were debriefed and allowed to keep the $3.50 payment.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

To ascertain whether participants perceived differences in the amount of money other women and men had earned, a 2 (Sex of Participant) × 3 (Comparison Information) × 2 (Sex of Target) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor was performed on the average amounts that participants thought women and men had earned in the past. A significant 3-way interaction was obtained, $F(2, 92) = 72.84$, $p < .001$, and simple effects $F$ tests revealed a significant Comparison Information × Sex of Target interaction for both men, $F(2, 48) = 41.40$, $p < .001$, and women, $F(2, 48) = 32.35$, $p < .001$. Newman-Keuls comparisons showed that when the comparison information indicated that their own sex had earned more than the other sex, male participants recalled that other men ($M = $4.02) had earned significantly more than women ($M = $3.15). Female participants recalled that other women ($M = $4.08) had earned significantly more than men ($M = $3.12). Similarly, when the comparison information indicated that their own sex had earned less than the other sex, male participants recalled that other men ($M = $2.83) had earned significantly less than women ($M = $4.01). Female participants recalled that other women ($M = $2.58) had earned significantly less than men ($M = $3.65).

Entitlement

Consistent with our first prediction, a 2 (Sex of Participant) × 3 (Comparison Information) ANOVA performed on the amount of money that
participants felt they deserved to be paid revealed the predicted main effect for comparison condition, $F(2, 81) = 5.84, p < .01$. Newman-Keuls comparisons showed that women and men assigned to conditions in which their own sex was paid more than the other sex said they deserved significantly more money ($M = $3.37) than did participants who saw that their own sex was paid less than the other sex ($M = $2.61), $p < .05$. Participants in the no-comparison information condition said they deserved an intermediate amount ($M = $3.29, see Table 1). The sex of Participant $\times$ Comparison Information interaction was not significant ($F < 1$). Consistent with past research (e.g., Major et al., 1984; Major & Forcey, 1985), in the absence of comparison information, men felt they deserved significantly more ($M = $3.59) than women felt they deserved ($M = $2.90), $t(32) = 2.01, p < .05$.

**Satisfaction**

Consistent with our second prediction, a $2 \times 3$ ANOVA performed on students’ satisfaction with the money they earned revealed a significant main effect for comparison information, $F(2, 89) = 3.96, p < .05$. Newman-Keuls comparisons showed that both women and men were significantly more satisfied ($M = 6.59$) with their $3.50$ payment when their own sex had been paid less than the other sex in the past than when their own sex had been paid more than the other sex ($M = 5.82), p < .05$. Students in the no-information condition showed an intermediate level of satisfaction ($M = 6.0$, see Table 1).

**Perceived Performance**

Analyses performed on posttask, prepayment perceptions of performance revealed a significant main effect for sex, $F = 4.07, p < .05$, indicating
that men rated their own performance higher \((M = 5.0)\) than did women \((M = 4.58)\). A significant main effect for comparison information was also obtained, \(F = 6.14, p < .01\). Newman-Keuls comparisons revealed that students in the same-sex > other-sex condition rated their own performance significantly higher \((M = 5.21)\) than did those in the other-sex > same-sex condition \((M = 4.28, p < .05)\). Performance estimates in the no-information condition were intermediate \((M = 4.86)\), but were only significantly different from estimates in the other-sex > same-sex condition (Table 1).

These main effects were qualified by a significant Sex \(\times\) Comparison Information interaction \(F(2, 95) = 3.64, p < .05\). Newman-Keuls comparisons showed that women who saw that other women had been paid more than men thought they themselves had performed significantly better \((M = 5.39)\) than did women who saw that other women had been paid less than men \((M = 3.94)\). In contrast, men’s perceptions of their own performance did not differ significantly as a function of whether other men were paid more \((M = 5.00)\) or less \((M = 4.63)\) than women. The direction of the means, however, was the same as that observed for women. In the no-comparison information condition, men’s performance evaluations were significantly higher \((M = 5.30)\) than women’s \((M = 4.31, p < .05)\).

**DISCUSSION**

Past research suggests that group differences observed in perceptions of personal entitlement and outcome satisfaction are related to individuals’ preference to *acquire* information about ingroup (e.g., same-gender) others (Major & Forcey, 1985). The present study extends this analysis. It shows that even when an identical amount of information about both ingroup and outgroup members was available and unavoidable, women’s and men’s judgments of entitlement and satisfaction were influenced more by information about ingroup than outgroup members.

In addition, we found that women’s, but not men’s perceptions of personal performance were significantly influenced by wage comparison information. This gender difference is consistent with Lenney’s (1977) conclusions that women’s self-confidence is more vulnerable to situational influences than men’s. It is also consistent with Roberts’s (1991) conclusion that women’s self-evaluations are more responsive to the evaluative feedback they receive than are men’s.

The results of this research underscore the psychological implications of the gender wage gap and suggest that its effects are far reaching and may not be easily countered. Due to a general tendency to regard same-gender information as more relevant and informative, women may disregard in-
formation about men's earnings, even when it is readily available. Given these powerful biases in social comparison processes, the ultimate problem continues to be the gender wage gap. So long as women are underpaid, the social comparison processes we have outlined increase the likelihood that they will feel entitled to relatively low outcomes and report satisfaction with objectively lower wages. It is important to note that this is a general process, not one specific to women. However, women are more vulnerable to its deleterious effects due to their disadvantaged status in the workplace.

The relationship observed among same-gender comparison information and perceived performance among women in this study suggests an insidious process that may operate within any disadvantaged group. Based on how their group's outcomes compare to those of other groups, group members may make inferences about their own performance or ability. Members of consistently disadvantaged groups may conclude that they actually possess less ability than other members of society. This in turn may lead them to feel entitled to, and satisfied with, less than others. In this manner, societal inequalities may fuel the tolerance of injustice among disadvantaged groups. If individuals feel that the lower outcomes they receive are fair and just, attempts to better their standing or to make others aware of their disadvantage may be greatly reduced.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that this study involved college students working for a very short period of time. Clearly this situation and task were much less complex and involved than are real jobs and work settings in which comparative referents may be more variable, and less obvious, and in which feelings of deprivation may be much more influential. In addition, the situation faced by our participants may have been ambiguous and somewhat artificial (in terms of what one might deserve to be paid). For experienced workers in a real work setting, many factors other than social comparisons (e.g., past history of pay and performance) would be available on which to base judgments of entitlement. As a result, the influence of comparison information may have been somewhat stronger in our experimental situation where other sources of information were minimal. Nonetheless, we believe that this study demonstrates a general process by which comparative referents can influence what an individual feels she or he deserves and how satisfied they are with what they receive.

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NOTES

1. In addition to these three comparison conditions, one additional independent variable was manipulated. One half of the participants were told that gender was related to perfor-
mance (i.e., being male or female may affect performance on the task), whereas the other half were given no information about the relatedness of gender to task performance. The relatedness manipulation, however, had no effect on participant's responses and all analyses are collapsed across this variable.

2. We chose the no-information condition primarily because we wished to replicate the results of other studies in this area by examining gender differences in the absence of comparison information. As the crucial comparison in the present study involves the relative differences between the other two comparison conditions, the absence of an equal pay condition is not critical to the primary issue addressed in this research.

3. Note also that the comparison information did not significantly influence the extent to which gender was perceived to be related to task performance, compared to the no-information condition, $t(98) = 1.46, p > .05$, two-tailed. Overall, participants perceived that gender was only moderately related to task performance ($M = 4.25/7.0$).

REFERENCES


