

# Comparing to Friends and Enemies

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## Introduction

Comparing oneself to others (friends, strangers, family members, etc...) is something that most people do on a day-to-day basis. Yet, what happens when people are given the choice of who they would like to compare themselves to? Wheeler et al (1969) ran a study where participants were given a test on either on a positive or negative trait and were asked to rank order which other scores or persons they would like to compare themselves to. The authors found that, in the positive case participants chose a higher score and in the negative case they chose a lower score. However, research has yet to examine what would happen in this case if some of the referent others were liked and others were disliked.

We predicted that a cross-over interaction would occur such that people would prefer upward over downward social comparisons for friends (liked other) but downward over upward comparisons for enemies (disliked other).

This prediction was tested by having participants describe a liked and a disliked other and then having them imagine a hypothetical scenario in which they received ambiguous feedback related to their performance. They then were given an opportunity to rank-order comparison targets from "most want to compare to" to "least want to compare to".

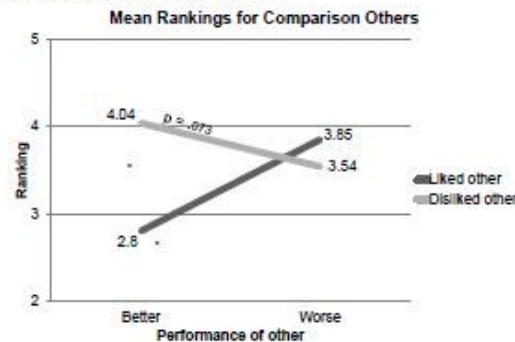
It was predicted that participants would prefer to compare to a friend who typically does better than a friend who typically does worse than oneself whereas participants would prefer to compare to an enemy who typically does worse than one who typically does better than oneself.

## Methods

- 1) Self-Attribute Questionnaire (SAQ; Pelham & Swann, 1989)
    - o Measure relevance of both domains
  - 2) Write about a close friend and a disliked other (order counterbalanced)
    - o Liking, similarity and closeness of each person measured
  - 3) Comparison task
    - o Rank order from "most want to compare to" – "least want to compare to"
- Close friend who typically does better than you
  - Close friend who typically does worse than you
  - Close friend who typically does the same as you
  - Disliked other who typically does better than you
  - Disliked other who typically does worse than you
  - Disliked other who typically does the same as you

## Results

- Analyses revealed a significant overall effect of the rankings,  $F(1, 92) = 5509.829$ ,  $p = 0.000$ .
- As predicted, participants ranked a liked other who did better significantly higher than a liked other who did worse ( $p = 0.000$ ).
- There was a trend in the predicted direction such that participants ranked a disliked other who did worse higher than a disliked other who did better ( $p = .073$ ).
- Participants also ranked liked others who did better significantly higher than disliked others who did better ( $p = 0.000$ )



## Discussion

The results of this study suggest that people prefer upward comparisons over downward comparisons when comparing with a liked other but they prefer downward over upward when comparing with a disliked other. Participants preferred upward comparisons with a liked other perhaps because they would be able to bask in the reflected glory of the other. However, this effect was found in both relevant and non-relevant conditions which is counter to what social comparison theory would predict. Participants also preferred downward comparisons when in regards to a disliked other perhaps because it allows the participants to engage in schadenfreude (i.e. pleasure in another's pain/failure).

Future research should expand on this finding in multiple ways. For example, the relevant and non-relevant domains can be pretested to ensure that the participants find the selected domains relevant or non-relevant respectively. Also, future research should use actual performance feedback instead of relying on a hypothetical scenario.

## References

- Pelham, B. W., & Swann, W. B. (1989). From self-conceptions to self-worth: On the sources and structure of global self-esteem. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 57(4), 672.
- Wheeler, L., Shaver, K. G., Jones, R. A., Goethals, G. R., Cooper, J., Robinson, J. E., ... & Butzine, K. W. (1989). Factors determining choice of a comparison other. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 5(2), 219-232.