When Social Comparison Is Demotivating For Goal Achievement

Barbara Briers, Tilburg University, The Netherlands
Elaine Chan, Tilburg University, The Netherlands

While the social comparison literature has mostly discussed the positive role of upward social comparison on motivation, this research provides new insights and shows that holding the distance between the self and the superior others the same, observing a superior other achieving the goal can be demotivating.

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Elaine Chan, Tilburg University, The Netherlands
Barbara Briers, Tilburg University, The Netherlands

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People often compare themselves with superior others when striving for a goal. Research has shown that upward social comparison motivates people to improve oneself in order to close the gap between themselves and the superior others (Van de Ven et al. 2011). Similarly, goal literature has demonstrated that comparison to superior others signals a lack of goal progress and hence increases motivation to engage in goal-congruent action (Fishbach et al. 2006). In this stream of research, upward comparison is usually described as any situation in which one is outperformed by others. This research, however, posits that holding the relative distance between the self and others constant, people are less motivated when they perceive that the superior others have already achieved the goal. Objectively though, the others’ goal attainment should have no negative consequences for their own goal attainment.

We propose that a decrease in motivation when observing others’ goal attainment (compared to when superior others are simply performing better), is caused by feelings of being beaten. Consistent with this explanation, we predict that people are less likely to become demotivated if they focus more on their own progress. In addition, this feeling of being beaten and hence the subsequent demotivation should also decrease if the other person achieving the goal is someone close (i.e., close friends). We also examine how observing others’ goal attainment influences performance in a subsequent task. We predict that it may ironically motivate people to perform better, as the subsequent task provides a new opportunity to outperform the superior others. However, such effect should only happen when the subsequent task is related to the focal task, because performing better than the others in an unrelated task does not help to reduce the gap between themselves and the superior others on the considered dimension.

Three experiments tested these hypotheses. Experiment 1 used a 2 (priming: self vs. other) x 3 (other’s goal attainment: goal attained-low self progress vs. goal attained-high self progress vs. goal unattained-low self progress) between-subjects design. Participants first conducted a story-writing task about themselves versus another student to induce self-other focus (Goukens et al. 2009). Next, participants imagined joining a loyalty program offered by a café. In the program, they could receive one stamp for each coffee purchased. After accumulating 10 stamps, they could enjoy a free coffee. Participants imagined meeting another student who joined the same program. In the goal unattained-low self progress condition, the other student supposedly had accumulated 8 stamps (no free coffee yet), while they only had 6 stamps. In the two goal attained conditions, the other student already had 10 stamps (free coffee), while they only had 8 stamps in the high self-progress condition and 6 stamps in the low self-progress condition respectively (hence the 3 goal attainment conditions are 8-6 vs. 10-8 vs. 10-6). After the scenario, participants indicated how likely they would go to that café (compared to a café closer on their way to campus). As expected, in the other-focus condition, the likelihood to visit the café was lower when the other student already attained the goal versus not, regardless of high or low self progress. In contrast and in line with the goal gradient research (Kivetz et al. 2006), those in the self-focus condition reported higher likelihood to visit the café when they themselves had high progress (8 stamps) compared to low progress (6 stamps), regardless of the other student’s goal attainment.

Experiment 2 used a 3 (priming: self vs. friend vs. co-worker) x 2 (other’s goal attainment: attained vs. unattained) design to identify another boundary condition for the demotivating effect of the other person’s goal attainment. Similar to Experiment 1, participants were asked to first write a story either about themselves, a friend or a co-worker. Participants then took part in a task that purportedly tested their mathematical skills in two parts (Huang and Zhang 2011). If they reached 100 points in total, they could enter a lottery to win €50 coupon. After Part I, participants received feedback about their own and another (anonymous) participant’s performance, in which we manipulated the other’s goal attainment. In the goal attained (unattained) condition, participants were told that they earned 80 (60) points, while the other earned 100 (80) points. After the feedback, participants started Part II, which included math questions that were unsolvable. Time spent on the task was used as an indicator of motivation. Results showed that in the co-worker condition, participants spent less time on the task when the other achieved the goal vs. not, thus replicating the previous findings. More importantly, when friend was primed, the time spent did not differ regardless of the other’s goal attainment. Finally, when self was primed, participants spent more time in the goal attained (vs. unattained) condition similar to Experiment 1.

Finally, Experiment 3 examined whether the negative effect on motivation transferred to a subsequent task. This study used a 2 (other’s goal attainment: attained vs. unattained) x 2 (task relatedness: unrelated vs. related) between-subjects design. Similar to Experiment 2, participants were first asked to write a story about a co-worker. Next, they worked on a separate task that tested their verbal skills in two parts. After Part I, they again received feedback about their own and another (anonymous) participant’s performance. This study held the performance feedback constant across conditions, but manipulated whether the other’s performance was equal to the end goal or not. In both goal attainment conditions, participants were told that they obtained 60 points, whereas the other participant obtained 80 points. Only in the goal attained condition, it was added that 80 points is also the amount of points required to be labeled “a qualified expert in verbal skills”. In the goal unattained condition, no further information about the end goal was provided. After the feedback, participants filled in Part II of the verbal test. We used the number of solutions attempted as a measure of motivation. Next, participants were asked to take part in another study, a proofreading task. We manipulated the task relatedness by highlighting whether the previous verbal task and the proofreading task involved related or unrelated psychological processes. We examined the number of correct answers as an indicator of performance. Replicating the previous findings, the number of attempted solutions in Part II of the focal task was lower in the goal attained condition than in the goal unattained condition. In the goal attained condition, performance was better in the subsequent task when it was related (vs. unrelated) to the focal task. Conversely, participants in the goal unattained condition did not differ in performance regardless of the task relatedness.

Taken together, results from our studies show that not all upward social comparisons have the same effect on motivation. Holding relative distance the same, the perception of someone else who already achieved the goal can be demotivating, although it might also have positive influences on other related tasks.
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