Despair or Repair? Exploring the Value of Social Comparison as a Coping Strategy in Organisations

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“A house may be large or small. As long as the surrounding houses are equally small, it satisfies social demands for dwelling. But let a palace reside beside the little house, and it shrinks from a little house to a hut”

- Quoted by Karl Marx (1818 – 1883)

- Introduction
- Theoretical background
- Research objectives
- Research method
- Findings
- Conclusion
Organizations are ideal for studying social comparison:
- Social environment (people, diversity)
- Social interactions (relationships, exchanges)
- Social structure (teams, hierarchy, power)

Occupational stress
- Socio-psychological process
- Perceptual in nature
- Stress responses differ between individuals
For this study, social comparison is defined as:
“...the process of thinking about information about one or more other people in relation to the self” (Wood, 1996)

- **Original Theory (Festinger, 1954)**
  - People prefer objective feedback (i.e. non-social)
  - ‘Similar others’ are used to gather social information
  - Unidirectional drive upwards (i.e. desire to improve)
Application of SCT to Stress
- Fear-affiliation → evaluate appropriateness of emotional responses (Schacter, 1959)
- Heightened need for social information under uncertainty
- Problem-focused comparisons → source of stressor
- Emotion-focused comparisons → consequence of stressor

A “Masterpiece of Ambiguity”
- Target selection → similar or dissimilar other?
- Motivations → improvement or enhancement?
- Direction → upwards or downwards?
“No unified efforts to explain organizational behavior from the perspective of social comparison processes”

**Practical relevance**
- Deleterious effects of stress;
- Burnout and retention;
- Occupational health and safety.

**Theoretical contribution**
- Understanding bi-directional influence environment and individuals;
- SCT and stress predominantly studied in clinical contexts.
Our research questions:

RQ 1: How do individuals who engage in comparison-oriented coping derive information on dimension/s of interest about comparative referent/s?

“Information” & “Referents” ➔ Comparing for self-evaluative purposes

“Dimensions” ➔ Ability, behaviors, outcomes, etc.

RQ 2: What forms of value are provided by comparison-oriented coping in relation to occupational stress?

“Comparison-Oriented Coping” ➔ Social comparison trigged by stressor

“Value” ➔ emotion-focused, problem-focused, self-enhancing, self-improving
▪ **Research Participants**
  - 15 nurses based at a large metropolitan hospital in Australia
  - Purposive sampling using snowball recruitment
  - Semi-structured interviews

▪ **Method of Analysis**
  - Interpretative phenomenology analysis (IPA)
  - Smith & Osbourne (2008) IPA approach
  - Coding and thematic analysis
FINDINGS & DISCUSSION
General Overview

- Social comparison as a coping strategy
  - One of many coping responses
  - Coping responses aren’t mutually exclusive
  - Conscious and unconscious (e.g. “come to think of it”)

- Space and Time
  - May occur without the physical presence of “comparison other”
  - May occur during or after experiencing the stressor
  - Speak, Watch, Think

- The Professional Self
  - Stressors serve as potential threats to professional self-concept
  - SC may affirm, restore or improve professional self-concept
**Conferred Comparison (Talk)**
- Speaking with various people or comparison target
  - Two-way exchange of information about dimension/s of interest

  “I know I wasn’t the only one feeling frustration because I would speak to the other nurses and most of them would share the same view… speaking with other nurses just provided the validation that I wasn’t the only one…” (Clinical Education Nurse)

**Observed Comparison (Watch)**
- Watching comparative referent about dimension/s of interest
  - One-directional & Perceptual

  “You look at how other nurse managers talk in meetings… how they bring the conversation together… you kind of go ‘oh my god, they’re so good at that. I’m never got be that good at doing that’…” (Nurse Unit Manager)
Recalled Comparison (Think)

- Recalling mental impression of ‘inaccessible other’ on dimension of interest.
- Ex-colleagues, busy boss, etc.

“There was one girl that used to work with us and she’s like the best nurse I’ve ever met… we called her the Mini Matron because she’s just phenomenal at her job… in my own patient care I often think, ‘What would she do in this situation?’ What would the Mini Matron do if she was looking after this patient?  
(Acute Medical Nurse)
### Affirmation

- SC to affirm self-assessment of a dimension of interest
- E.g. appropriateness of emotions, adequacy of skills

> “Even though I knew I was right, I just needed somebody else to tell me I was doing the right thing.” (Palliative Care Nurse)

### Restoration

- SC to restore positive self-assessment of a dimension of interest
- E.g. appropriateness of emotions, adequacy of skills

> “Oh that’s okay’. Look, she’s made a mistake and probably even worse than I have… Just hearing that someone had made a mistake just as bad or worse, it did make me feel a lot better.” (Palliative Care Nurse)
Inspired Behavioral Modeling

- Mentally recalling specific behaviors and attributes
- Only identified in non-clinical participants
- Comparative referent tended to be superiors (i.e. managers)

“She [the comparative referent] is amazing at managing HR [Human Resource] situations and because I’ve never been in this situation that was more challenging because she was on leave and I didn’t have her as my go to person…I thought of how [she] would have dealt with it and thought of how things have been dealt with in the past…” .” (Nurse Unit Manager)
CONCLUSION

- **Limitations**
  - Specific to nursing context
  - Inherent complexity in studying social comparison
  - Social desirability

- **Theoretical Implications**
  - Theory building → mechanisms and coping value
  - Theory testing → clinical vs. non-clinical inconsistencies

- **Practical Implications**
  - Culture
  - Team composition
  - Feedback
Thank you for your attention

QUESTIONS?