The Social and Non-Social Determinants of Comparison-Oriented Coping Efficacy in Occupational Stress Contexts

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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.

KARL MARX (1818–1883)
Social Comparison Theory

Seminal Developments

“(Social Comparison is) the process of thinking about information about one or more other people in relation to the self.”

WOOD, 1996

Original Formulation
Proposed first systematic theory. Comparisons occur in the absence of objective, non-social feedback.

1954
Leon Festinger

Expansion into Stress
Individuals have a heightened need to affiliate in uncertain situations to gauge appropriateness of one’s reactions.

1959
Stanley Schacter

Self-Serving Comparison
Downward comparisons with less fortunate others to preserve or defend positive self-view.

1981
Thomas Wills
Comparison-Oriented Coping

Coping Process Model

(LAZARUS & FOLKMAN, 1984)

PROBLEM-FOCUSED
Comparing UPWARDS to learn from on a focal dimension of interest (e.g. abilities, behaviours, etc.)

EMOTION-FOCUSED
Comparing DOWNWARDS by selecting a comparison target in a self-serving way.

WORKPLACE STRESSOR
COGNITIVE APPRAISAL
COPING STRATEGY
STRESS RESPONSE OUTCOME
Research Objective

Why study SCT in organisations?

Social Comparison Theory

- Comparison-oriented coping has been predominantly studies in clinical contexts (i.e. terminal illness)
- Past studies typically use experimental designs. More naturalistic and exploratory studies are required.

Occupational Stress and Coping

- Stress and social comparison processes are socio-psychological (theoretical congruency).
- Organisation → rich networks of social interaction.
- SCT offers unique merit in advancing knowledge.

“[There are] no unified efforts to explain organizational behaviour from the perspective of social comparison processes.”

GREENBERG, ASHTON-JAMES & ASHKANASY, 2007

Objective

To explore how, why and when comparison-oriented coping is used by nurses in the context of coping with occupational stress”
Methodology & Sample
Phenomenology & Nurses

Qualitative Approach
- Occupational stress and social comparisons are socio-psychological processes. **Context matters.**
- Knowledge of comparison-oriented coping in organisations is **patchy** and **under-developed**.

- **Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA)** used to describe common meaning of lived experience; to **make explicit the implicit structure** an meaning of human experience.
- This is the **first study** undertaken to **qualitatively explore** comparison oriented coping in work contexts.

Research Site
- Large metropolitan hospital
- Sample
  - 13% (2) Males
  - 87% (13) Females
(The) three comparison mechanisms describe and distinguish the various means through which participants obtained information about comparative referents. The finding suggest that the process of deriving information can be achieved through talking, watching and thinking.

CHIA & ALLEN, 2014
Major Themes in the Findings
Organizational / Contextual Factors

- **Clinical Stressors:**
  Patient condition, near misses, clinical outcomes.

- **Non-Clinical Stressors:**
  Staff interaction, professional performance.

**TYPE OF WORK STRESSORS**

- Clinical Stressors
  Patient condition, near misses, clinical outcomes.

- Non-Clinical Stressors
  Staff interaction, professional performance.

**ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE**

- Type of Culture:
  Cost/Benefit evaluation of info. exchange (i.e. mechanics).

**TEAM DEMOGRAPHICS**

- Age Diversity within Team:
  Cost/Benefit evaluation of mechanics.

"I think as a nurse, you have to portray an image of strength... if a patient dies, there is an expectation that it’s part of the job and so I don’t think people are open to discussing it."

Callum, Clinical Educator

"The incident was a long time ago and I gave a child the wrong dose of a drug... I know of an incident where a child was given the wrong strength of dextrose via infusion and ended up brain damaged, now if I had done that, I would question whether I would carry on nursing..."

Heather, Nurse Unit Manager
Major Themes in the Findings

Individual Differences

STRESS-INDUCED EMOTIONS

- Emotions of Self-Deprecation:
  Guilt, shame, embarrassment
- Emotions of Angst:
  Anxiety, insecurity, uncertainty

Fear & Anger: “he was very impulsive... he tried to strangle me and then he threw a table at me... I was furious and angry... I went off to cool down, walked around the block, bought a coffee and came back to work... It’s just too busy not to come back to work...”

Hilary, Oncology Nurse

PERCEPTUAL FACTORS

- Target Relevance:
  Objectively relevant target is a theoretical notion.
  Focal characteristic of importance
- Perceived trustworthiness
- Perceived consequences

He runs and he reads... He’s relevant: He’s similar to me in personality and values. He’s very quiet, keeps to himself... he studies like hard core... He does his reading while on the treadmill at the gym... I do that when I’m waiting for my fitness class and I’m reading stuff on my iPad... So we have similar behaviour... I know if I apply myself I could do what he’s doing... Very easily.

Rachel, Psych. Nurse

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- Clinical Experience
  Influences appraisal of clinical stressor but not for non-clinical stressors.
Major Themes in the Findings

Individual Differences

Limitations & Challenges
- Specific to nursing context
- Inherent complexity in the study of social comparison
- Social desirable in participant responses

Findings
- Mechanism for comparison information
- Stress-induced emotions vs. state of psychological state
- The influence of organisational factors

Implications
- Stress-induced emotions vs. state of psychological state
- Without other learnt coping strategies, nurses may revert to social comparison which is not the most effective strategy for coping.
- Advance the theories on social comparison, especially with regard to how it relates to occupational stress.
Thank you for your attention

QUESTIONS?