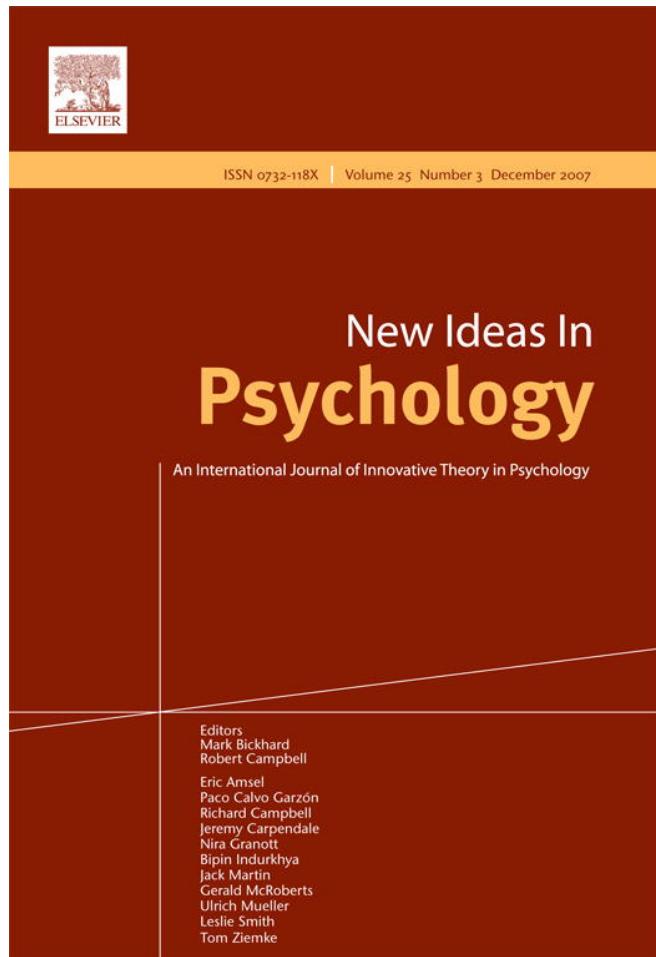


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Toward mindful social comparison: When subjective and objective selves are mutually exclusive

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Abstract

Although mindless evaluations typically accompany social comparisons, they are not necessary, and may be costly. We describe how mindlessness enters the social comparison process at two points. First, during the social comparison both self and other are mindlessly de-contextualized, through (1) biased selection of relevant behaviors, (2) biased selection of criteria along which behaviors are compared, (3) lack of knowledge of intent behind behavior, (4) lack of knowledge about representativeness of behavior, (5) lack of knowledge about typicality of future behavior as moderated by learning, (6) improper understanding of the meaning of behavior, and (7) lack of knowledge about motivations generating the comparisons. Second, the affective results of the social comparison are often mindlessly generalized to the global self, while the breadth and complexity of the network of attributes that constitute to the ‘self’ is ignored. Global-self-evaluative social comparisons forfeit the potential of gaining accurate and usable information about personal attributes.

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1. Introduction

Festinger’s (1954) first formulation of social comparison, a process whereby individuals learn about their own abilities and skills by comparing themselves to others, emphasizes a

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need for accurate self-perception as a driving force behind social comparisons. This emphasis on accuracy in understanding attributes of self makes sound evolutionary sense. Festinger (1954) hypothesized that inaccurate perception of one's attributes and abilities can be "punishing or even fatal in some situations" (p.117). One can easily see how overestimating one's ability (of strength in a bar brawl, of skill in deep-sea diving) can be life threatening, or how underestimating oneself (in terms of attractiveness or intellect, for example) can lead to less successful outcomes in personal and professional realms.¹ Yet, very soon after Festinger's original formulation, many researchers moved away from issues surrounding accuracy and toward work that focuses on motivational forces and evaluative outcomes of the social comparison process.

While Festinger (1954) pointed out that social comparisons with similar individuals will yield most information about one's own attributes or opinions, research showed that individuals were as likely to compare themselves to nonsimilar individuals, yielding gains (and sometimes losses) in positive affect or self-esteem (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). Wood (1989), in her review of research on social comparison in the three decades following Festinger's original formulation, suggested that in addition to the goal of accurately evaluating one's attributes, social comparisons are as likely to serve goals of self-improvement and self-enhancement. It turned out that individuals wanting to feel better about themselves may employ downward social comparison strategy, comparing themselves to those who are comparatively worse on a certain trait or ability (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & LaPrelle, 1985; Reiss & Gibbons, 1993; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992; Wills, 1981; Wood & VanderZee, 1997). Those engaging in upward social comparison (Wheeler, 1966)—comparing themselves with those better than they are on some trait—might feel better or worse, depending on whether the achievement of those others seems attainable and on whether we are comparing those achievements with our own 'best' or just 'ordinary' selves (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, 1999). If the achievement of others seems attainable, and if we compare their extraordinary achievements with our 'usual' rather than 'best' selves, then we feel better, for there is still hope for perhaps reaching similar heights of achievements. If their achievements seem unattainable, particularly when compared with our 'best' selves, then we are likely to feel worse. Despite the fact that upward social comparisons may yield negative outcomes in terms of affect or self-esteem, Collins (1996) showed that individuals often engage in them (as in downward social comparisons) for self-enhancing purposes.

An implied assumption of much research on affective consequences of social comparison is that thinking oneself as having more or less value than others as a consequence of downward or upward social comparisons of attributes is a *necessary* result of individuals encountering social information relevant to self. We shall argue, on the other hand, that *global-self-evaluative outcomes accompanying social comparisons are not necessary, but rather, common outcomes of mindless processing of social information about the attributes in question.*

¹While some have argued that accuracy in self-perceptions is not necessary for optimal well-being, and that it is overly positive but essentially inaccurate understanding of oneself and environment that leads to most positive outcomes (Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994), this view has been seriously challenged (Colvin & Block, 1994; Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Shedler, Mayman & Manis, 1993). Thinking that one is or will be better than average on some attribute does not necessarily indicate an error in self-perception (Gigerenzer, Hoffrage, & Kleinbölting, 1991). In a similar vein, if someone feels that they have control over their future health outcomes, and actually come to be healthier than others, it is likely that they indeed *had* the control, rather than an 'illusion' of control.

We propose there exist, in effect, two modes of social comparison processes, mindless and mindful, the former resulting in global self-evaluations with affective consequences, and the latter in a more accurate understanding of one's attributes. The traditional research on social comparisons assumes a single mode, one that in this paper we call 'mindless' social comparison. Our argument concerning mindless social comparisons is two partite. First, an attempt at social comparison of attributes in question is often rendered inaccurate and therefore uninformative by the mindless de-contextualization of one's own and others' attributes and experiences. Second, social comparison processes often involve a mindless generalization of affective consequences from particular attributes to a global self, a process we will show is detrimental to gaining accurate understanding of attributes in question. Both kinds of mindless processing of social comparison information are linked with overidentifying oneself with the past narrative and experiential component of self—'Me' (an object), rather than continually emerging, contextually complex agent, 'I' (a subject). After defining mindfulness, and placing it in the context of other self-as-subject/object theoretical frameworks, we shall expand on these arguments, expose a paradox they contain, and propose an alternative—what we call a 'mindful' social comparison.

Mindfulness, as defined by Langer (e.g. Langer, 1978, 1989, 1997, 2005), is a state of awareness in which cognitive distinctions about objects of awareness are continually made, with the environment (and self) thus continually treated as emerging and novel. The result of mindful awareness is that these continually emergent aspects of the immediate context take experiential precedence over the categorizations that have been useful in the past. While mindfully aware, one does not deny the relevance of categories derived from past experience—it is only that they are experienced as flexible and permeable enough to be susceptible to change in response to new information. Mindless awareness, on the other hand, overutilizes categorizations made in the past, keeps them rigid and impermeable, making new social comparison information obscured, and thus ineffectual. It must be kept in mind that mindful/mindless dichotomy does not map directly onto the difference between effortful and automatic processing, nor between paying attention and not paying attention (the common connotation of 'mindless' being absent minded or inattentive). One can mindlessly pay close attention to rigid categories, and automatically (effortlessly) perceive one's environment (and self) as continually emerging.

When experiencing self, a temporal distinction can be made: mindful, 'real-time'² experience of self as a continually emerging agent, an agent that stands in an interactive relationship with one's past experiences and narratives of oneself, and mindless experience of self as frozen in time (necessarily past time), including an overidentification and rigidity of interpreted categories of past and future selves. The more we experience self as a 'subject', ever-newly-emerging experiencer, the less this same self can be an 'object', an impermeable and unchanging past construction. Our subject/object distinction is similar to the distinction of James's (1902) between 'I', self-as-knower, and 'Me', self-as known. He took care to observe that it is in the nature of 'I' not to be able to observe all of itself ('I' paradoxically being always one step ahead of itself), and that thus only 'Me' part of the self can be subject to psychological study. The fact, however, that we can never perceive (and thus evaluate) self, *in toto* (including its 'I' component), does not mean that we should not aim toward enhanced perception of those parts of self that are within the domain of perception and understanding.

²We would like to thank Mihnea C. Moldoveanu for the idea of 'real-time' process.

Additionally, our usage of self as including subject ('I') and object ('Me') needs to be distinguished from what Duval and Wicklund (1972) and Silvia and Duval (2001) call 'objective' and 'subjective' self-awareness. According to their theory, objective self-awareness is a state in which attention is focused on the self (thus one is the 'object' of one's own awareness), while subjective self-awareness results when attention is focused away from the self, when "the person experiences himself as a source of perception and action" (Duval & Wicklund, 1972, p.2). It follows from this view that the only path to comparing oneself with others is a mindless one, that of viewing the self (and other) as an object, the Jamesian 'Me', and resulting in evaluation of global self. We propose that there is a second, mindful, path to this process where self and the other, in the process of comparison, are seen not as rigid repositories of personal history, but as continually emerging and therefore necessarily only partially known subjects (Jamesian 'I').

Mindfulness, by definition, promotes the experience of self as a continually changing subject, while mindlessness promotes the experience of self as passive, stable, and reactive object. We shall show why mindless experience of self as an object is inferior to mindful experience of self as a subject with respect to what Festinger (1954) considered a proper aim of social comparison—accurate self-perception.

Now we turn to two components of the social comparison process that are often engaged with mindlessly, thus reducing the possibility of accurate self-perception: First, mindless de-contextualization of both self and other during the comparison; and second, mindless generalizing of the relative evaluation of the attributes as implicating the whole 'self'. We shall deal with each in turn.

2. Mindless de-contextualization of self and other

Experiencing one's self and others' selves as impermeable and unchangeable categories (as objects) during the process of social comparison have important consequences. The heuristic of quick categorization of individuals as objects (for example, treating some students as 'good' and some as 'bad'), placing them in stable categories, minimizes the necessity for considering contextual complexities of their actions and the outcomes that follow. This is not a trivial problem. We take a 'good' student to be the one who got correctly 90 out of 100 questions on a multiple-choice exam. We take a 'bad' student as the one who got 65 out of 100 questions on a multiple-choice exam. The fact that the latter's student's grandmother might have died a week before, or that she just broke up with her boyfriend the previous night, rarely enters our equations. This tendency of observers toward underestimating situational influences and overestimating dispositional influence upon others' behaviors has been dubbed the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977), and is one general problem characterizing mindless social comparison. We blithely compare ourselves to others, and we compare others to each other, unaware that most of our comparisons do not take into account important contextual detail, and are therefore often inaccurate. This problem of mindless downplaying of the continually emergent context is reflected in manifold ways.

- (1) Social comparisons often involve a biased selection of behaviors that could reflect a relevant attribute on which we are seeking comparative information. We might observe a romantic couple on a streetcar and rate their relationship as much more positive than our own. Yet, the behaviors we have observed are likely to constitute a trivial subset of

- all possible behaviors we could observe to get a more accurate representation of the quality of their relationship.
- (2) The criteria along which we compare ourselves to others are often arbitrary. There is rarely consensus, even among experts, about what aspects of behavior or activity or products in question are more important than others. What is more important for a ‘good’ essay—the precision of expression, the logic, or the playful movement of ideas? What constitutes a ‘good’ short story? Casserole? Parent? Many art critics cannot even agree on what art is, let alone what constitutes ‘good’ art. Mindless reliance on ‘experts’ will not be of help, being that they often differ radically about the content of their expertise.
- (3) We do not necessarily know the intent behind the behavior. I might think I am putting up a good fight against my mother in a game of chess, while she has, in the meanwhile, been withholding an easy check-mate move so as to not discourage my fledgling attempts at this sedentary sport. Is the person we are observing walking fast because he cannot run, or is he choosing to walk instead? The problem of intent, thus, contributes towards inaccuracy of social comparison information. We often erroneously rush to judge other’s behavior as ‘stupid’ or ‘incompetent’, blind to the possibility that their behavior corresponds rather well to their intent (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2002).
- (4) Is the behavior, by whatever criteria we choose, representative of the person’s performance? Distribution of behaviors, as we know, is mostly normal, and we are bound to experience peak performance days, no matter what our performance is, as well as days when it seems better not to have gotten out of bed. Someone not knowing how typical or atypical our behavior is will likely be left with an inaccurate conclusion, if the comparison is a one-time event.
- (5) A related problem is that of judging whether by engaging in a particular behavior the target person has learned something new, thus changing representativeness or typicality of the same behavior in the future. If learning did take place, the skill thus improved on through a one-time behavior will automatically become more representative in the future than if learning did not take place. With every new portrait I draw I might get better (or not), and the person comparing his portrait-drawing skills to mine at any particular moment might not know which of the two is the case.
- (6) Often, it is impossible to know how others construe the meaning of the behavior we are engaging in. Let’s say a woman drops a cane, and we rush to pick it up for her. We might construe ourselves as very helpful, yet the woman, who might have been pre-empted in picking it up herself by our hastiness, might consider us insensitive or even encouraging her helplessness and disability. Therefore, it is not only not knowing other people’s intent that can be a source of error (as in point 3), but also knowing our own intent (to be helpful, in this example).
- (7) The selection of both relevant behaviors and criteria along which they are evaluated is often motivated. Our attention will be often drawn to those behaviors, and their relevant criteria, that stand out to us in some subjective way. An unconfident violin player might notice her colleague’s confident bowing technique, but fail to remember that her own *vibrato* is comparatively superior to her colleague’s. If we have been told enough that we are just not that smart, we might ignore the A we get in fine arts, and attend to the Cs we get in statistics. If we have been told the reverse, that we are very smart, our attention would likely be reversed. We bring our own subjectively

motivated, and thus objectively arbitrary, criteria to the table, making accurate social comparisons highly unlikely.

This motivated arbitrariness of which behaviors are used as evidence, and criteria along which the behaviors are evaluated, supports stereotypes and prejudices. If we want to consider ourselves better than others, it will not be difficult to seek out particular behaviors, and the particular aspects of those behaviors, that are subjectively perceived to be inferior. Language assists this process in that we can turn even those criteria with positive content into something inferior by giving it a negative label. One can be ‘grim’ or ‘serious’, they can be ‘spontaneous’ or ‘impulsive’, and so on (see Langer, 1989). The problem with social comparison, then, is that in this sense it is not social at all—comparisons are motivated in both the collection and interpretation of information, they are filtered through a comparer’s single-minded perspective.

Indeed, researchers have shown that individuals process information relating to self selectively, in accordance with their present motivations. Reimann and McNally (1995) observed more Stoop interference when the Stroop stimuli words were related to participants’ current concerns, whether they were positive (goals, interests) or negative (personal worries). The effect of motivation on processing of self-relevant information can be particularly impactful in subpopulations suffering from self - enhancing biases. Individuals prone to egoistic biases (Paulhus & John, 1998) suffer memory distortions when presented with fake feedback of their personality (Djikic, Chan, & Peterson, 2007; Djikic, Peterson, & Zelazo, 2005). They simply remembered their personality feedback as having fewer negative attributes than was actually the case.

Even when the social comparison information is unsolicited rather than self-generated, it is the motivation that will determine the outcome of the process. A student who is ardently motivated to believe in excellence of his writing skills, will dismiss the professor’s negative commentary on his essay as a sign of the professor’s grouchiness, nitpicking, or incompetence. On the other hand, lack of explicit praise may send a more insecure student down the path of self-despair.

These points can perhaps be best summarized in the following example. If we were to attempt to mindfully compare our tennis ability with someone else’s, we would have to be acutely aware of the continually emerging, changing, and temporarily obscured aspects of both ourselves, and our opponents. We would be concerned with (1) Which tennis playing behaviors should we observe—overheads, ground strokes? (2) What aspect of any particular shot should we consider—speed, placement, form? (3) If I am playing a tennis game against my teacher, is she purposely playing weaker shots, to engage my playing a bit more? Or is she playing full strength? (4) Are those repeated aces representative, or is she just being lucky today? (5) Is she learning something new every time she plays a backhand, thus changing the typicality of the current level of her backhand performance, or not? (6) Is she construing my determination to return every single one of her serves as a sign her serves are weak? Is the lack of confidence due to this construal affecting her serving, or not? (7) Are we motivated to choose behaviors and criteria selectively such that we only see superior (inferior) performance comparatively to our own? We might be shamed by the comparison of the player’s drop shot in relation to ours, yet it will not occur to us that our own serve outperforms theirs.

Ignoring these questions leads to learning very little about one’s own tennis abilities. Yet one cannot ask them as long as one mindlessly considers his subject of comparison to be a

static object, thus turning a continually emerging, learning, capriciously complex tennis opponent into a statue frozen in time and space. And we should not suppose that the comparer can do for others what he cannot do for himself. For, mindfully comprehending one's own self as a continually emerging agent removes the treat of being locked into the current evaluation of one's attributes, and does the same for our vision of others, allowing the rich network of contextual information to emerge. So, at a conclusion of our imaginary tennis match, we might leave the court with vague presuppositions of being 'worse' or 'better' than our opponent, and this tidbit of generalized information of questionable accuracy (and its affective fallout) would lead us no closer to understanding why we can never return his serve, or why he can never get his backhand volley over the net. On the other hand, we might allow both ourselves and the opponent the benefit of considering the match an experiential slice of a much larger contextually rich pie, and perhaps learn a few, but precise, bits of information about our own game in relation to that of our opponent. In treating the self and others mindlessly as objects we hold still what is a moving target, extinguishing the context, and depriving ourselves of what Festinger (1954) suggested should be the fruit of the social comparison: an improved knowledge of one's attributes.

3. Mindlessness of evaluative generalizations

The dependent variable in much of social comparison research is a sense of self-worth, or self-esteem. Individuals making social comparisons often feel better or worse about their 'selves' as a consequence of social comparisons of particular attributes (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). Research in the field of self-esteem indicates why this would be the case. Crocker and Wolfe (2001) show that contingencies of self-worth (domains or categories of outcomes on which a person has staked their sense of self-esteem) are hierarchically organized; are spread over a few or many categories; and vary in ease of accessibility and potential for stable global self-esteem outcomes. For example, basing one's sense of worth on perceived opinions of others will lead to more self-esteem fluctuations than basing one's self-esteem on something more stable, such as self-perceived intelligence. In both cases, a person will not feel valuable unless their contingencies of self-worth are satisfied, yet the former person will have much more trouble in satisfying these contingencies in a consistent manner than the latter one (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). In both cases, a person will feel that their comparative standing on the respective attributes determines their overall 'worth'.

However, the extent to which self-esteem is based on the previously described contingencies is an individual difference variable in itself (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis & Waschull, 1995). For some individuals, the feelings of whether one is valuable as a person and whether one's attributes are 'good' are more independent than they are for others. While some argue this independence creates 'unwarranted' self-esteem (Baumeister, 1999; Seligman, 1998) (potentially leading to pitfalls of narcissism, and lack of motivation for self-improvement), we lean towards the view of Deci and Ryan (1995) which favors noncontingent global self-esteem.

Individual differences in the level of contingency of one's self-worth can be mapped directly onto the extent (and perhaps speed) of generalization from attribute to global-self-worth during social comparisons. For individuals whose self-worth is less contingent, it is easier to observe one's relative standing on the attribute as information *about* the attribute,

rather than information about the overall self. For individuals whose self-worth is highly contingent on attributes, the step between the relative standing on an attribute and the overall sense of worth is likely to be much swifter.

Mindful consideration of self (and others) as continually emerging agents seems incompatible with contingent self-esteem and globalization of attributes to global-self during social comparisons. Value is necessarily determined with reference to particular goals—things are ‘good for’, and ‘bad for’, rather than just good or bad. My tallness might be good for reaching a jar from the top shelf and bad for keeping the center of balance while skating. If self is considered to be a static object, a sum of static attributes, then the global, overall value of an individual is determined by a simple arithmetic of summing comparative success on contingent attributes. Social comparison of relevant attributes becomes a battlefield on which one’s worth as a human being has to be continually reaffirmed (and if this is not done successfully, there are grave affective consequences). Social comparison then becomes a tool not of self-knowledge, as Festinger suggested, but of maintaining self-worth. Feeling worthwhile as a person in response to one social comparison is bought at the price of feeling worthless during another, less-flattering comparison. On the other hand, if self is considered as a subject, or agent, a discussion of overall value attains somewhat absurdist undertones (see ‘A paradox’ Section below). Continually emerging human agents have continually emerging sets of goals, since experience is given precedence over previous categorizations. Even if the goals are static (which they rarely are), understanding complex, continually changing networks of attributes that constitute the self make each of them individually less crucial for overall sense of self-worth. This mindful disengagement of attributes from overall sense of self-worth allows for the better focus on the attributes themselves during the comparative process. Even the negative information can be processed, given that one’s overall value is not continually at stake.

Given that social comparisons are most often engaged mindlessly (thus making the affective and self-esteem outcomes appear almost *necessary*), it is likely that individuals whose need for maintaining self-worth is strong will make more social comparisons (or rather, the comparisons will be more conspicuous due to their affective outcome—“I felt *better* after seeing my serve is better than his”). The sheer frequency of such affect-laden comparisons appears to have potentially adverse psychological effects. In a recent study (White, Langer, Yariv, & Welch, 2006), we found that the social comparison process itself, no matter whether people temporarily felt better or worse as a result of a comparison, had a number of detrimental correlates. Participants who reported making more social comparisons (irrespective of its upward or downward direction) were more likely to experience more guilt, blame, and procrastination, and liked themselves less, than individuals who engaged less in social comparison. Similarly, Lyubomirsky and Ross (1997) found that happy individuals are less responsive to social comparison information than unhappy ones. The results of both studies, however, are only suggestive given they are potentially confounded with sense of self-worth, and myriad of other variables that might causally impact both proneness toward social comparison and the negative outcomes associated with it. Even if this was the case, one defeating outcome remains: a social comparison on some attribute, if motivated by a need to maintain self-worth, will focus more on maintaining self-worth and less on the attribute. In short, the loss is that of potential self-knowledge.

4. A paradox

In the previous section, we argued that contingent self-esteem, whereby overall sense of value of a person is calculated by the summing of the values of contingent attributes, leads to mindless social comparisons. Yet, the question remains, if self-esteem is noncontingent, how *should* overall human value be determined? If a person, a self, is not the collection of its attributes, what is it? As it turns out, this problem encompasses not only humans, but other experiential phenomena as well.

Hegel, and later Heidegger, described this quandary in the following way (Rychlak, 1968). A rock has attributes—size, color, weight, shape, etc. On the basis of this description, can we say that the essence of the rock can be captured by its attributes? After all, if we were to strip a rock of its attributes, we would not have a rock any longer. Yet, can the essence of the rock be described by saying it weighs seven kilograms, has oblong shape, or that it is of gray color? We can add our own question: Can the essence of a person be captured by saying that she weighs 65 kilograms, or that her hair color is brown, or that her IQ is 142? In both cases, the answer would be no. The paradox still stands, and we cannot claim to know the attributes *constituting* the self (according to which we could value ourselves overall as a *person*) just as we cannot claim to know attributes constituting the rock lying in our garden.

This very paradox has been brought to life within the self-esteem literature. On the one hand, it appears reasonable that a person should judge their sense of worth by how successfully they compare on various attributes that are seen as socially valued. On the other hand, bringing this view to its logical pedagogical conclusion, that we should teach our children that if they are less intelligent, or athletic, or thin, or extraverted than others, they really *are* less valuable as persons, seems abhorrent (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

And so the paradox remains. There is no *logical* reason why we should find human beings *inherently* valuable, rather than '*valuable for x or y*'. Yet we do. We do not kill off (actively or by indifference) the sick, or the mentally challenged, but rather strain to make their lives longer, more comfortable, and fulfilling. While an evolutionary feeling of value based on superiority of attributes is a fact, so is a fact that, oddly enough, we find value in humans, no matter what their attributes. As odd and unexpected that fact is, it remains, and is worthwhile recording in discussions of sense of worth derived from social comparisons.

It is a very fortunate fact that knowing what is the essence of self is not a necessary precondition to knowing something informative about one's attributes. Mindlessly overidentifying with any particular attribute (through highly contingent self-esteem), on the other hand, leads us away from gaining accurate information about it. Mindful understanding of self as a complex, complicated, and continually emerging collection of attributes, none of which hold a central position in experience of self, may lead to a deeper appreciation of each of the attributes in question.

4.1. Toward mindful social comparisons

While it is unclear whether and under what circumstances frequent social comparisons can contribute to improved accuracy of knowledge of one's attributes,³ field and diary

³Some would argue that the opposite might be the case—that many social comparison evaluations are prone to a systematic bias (Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991).

studies show their effects on affect and self-esteem are common, everyday outcomes that permeate our personal and professional lives (Buunk, Zurriaga, Peiró, Nauta, & Gosalvez 2005; Locke & Nekich, 2000; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). Given that human judgment appears to be comparative in its nature (Mussweiler, 2003), we cannot envision the world in which social comparisons of attributes relevant to self do not exist. Is it reasonable to hope that, despite the ubiquity of de-contextualization of attributes and automaticity of the attribute-to-self evaluations, individuals might engage in social comparisons sensitive to the complexity of the continually emerging reality? Can we envision a social comparison process that is not used as a measuring stick for the overall sense of worth?

Two related arguments would encourage a positive answer to this question. Crocker and Wolfe (2001) have clearly shown that evaluation of attributes on which self-esteem is not contingent should have less impact on self-esteem than evaluation of attributes which are central to the self. So, every individual has experienced making social comparisons on attributes that does not result in a cascade of overall feelings of worthlessness or greater value. For example, we might observe other people do a much better job of washing their dishes, or have more intelligible handwriting, and not be affectively (and globally) impacted, given that doing dishes well or having an intelligible handwriting are not central to our experience of self-worth. So it is possible to notice the difference between ourselves and others and do not feel worthless (or superior) as a result, but simply *informed*. The result is that, oddly enough, we might have better knowledge of our attributes that are less subjectively important to us. But this process can extend to the ‘important’ attributes through reducing the automatic link of these attributes to the overall self-worth. There are individual differences in the contingency of self-esteem itself (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis & Waschull, 1995). The less contingent the self-worth is, the less central *all* attributes will be to the sense of overall self-worth, and more frequent the mindful, informative, social comparison of the attributes. Encouraging the mindful perception of ourselves (and others) as increasingly complex, and continually changing system of attributes will lead to the less static snapshots of each particular attribute as being central to the experience of self, and to social comparisons through which self-knowledge, rather than overall self-worth, is expanded.

We hope this paper will encourage experimental work that examines the effects of training individuals to mindfully think of themselves (and others) not as stable, unchanging, de-contextualized objects, but rather agentic, context-dependent, continually reemerging subjects. We would argue this mindfulness training would lead not only to less fluctuations in self-esteem, and less negative affect if the comparison is unflattering, but more importantly, to more accurate perceptions of one’s attributes when compared to those of others, and consequently, better behavioral outcomes. For example, we could divide a tennis team into two groups, half of which are encouraged to think of themselves as subjects (“while playing, keep in mind that the playing skills of both yourself and your opponent are continually changing”), the other half being encouraged to think of themselves as objects (“while playing keep in mind that both you and your opponent have a stable set of playing skills”), and have them to compare their shots to those of their teammates. We would argue that that the group trained in mindfulness would be more accurate (as rated by independent judges) in the accuracy of comparisons, and more importantly, that as a consequence of these observations, their game would improve more relative to that of the comparison group.

Mindfully thinking of oneself as a subject, as we suggested, should make us more knowledgeable about our attributes, and better able to change them, if we so desire. We should keep in mind, however, that motivational obstacles to this process are great, given the common unwillingness to give up the occasional positive reinforcement of mindless social comparison—self-elevation. Who, we might ask, receives a compliment understanding that it gives more information about the complimenter than himself? And even if they do *understand* it, who does not feel flattered by it, still?

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