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Frequent Social Comparisons and Destructive Emotions and Behaviors: The Dark Side of Social Comparisons

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Social comparisons may seem to serve several positive functions, including self-enhancement. Frequent social comparisons, however, have a dark side. Two studies examined the relationship between frequent social comparisons and destructive emotions and behaviors. In Study 1, people who said they made frequent social comparisons were more likely to experience envy, guilt, regret, and defensiveness, and to lie, blame others, and to have unmet cravings. In Study 2, police officers who said they made frequent social comparisons were more likely to show ingroup bias and to be less satisfied with their jobs. The dark side of frequent social comparisons was not associated with self-esteem. Results are discussed in terms of the role of individual differences in social comparison processes.

KEY WORDS: social comparison styles; well-being; self-esteem.

> Will I ever be rich, successful, and famous? I had spent my entire high school career constantly comparing myself to others. I played sports, made the grades, was in the "popular" crowd...but none of this was good enough, because I was never satisfied with who I was.... Five years later, I am still comparing myself to my old high school friends and striving for that kind of success. (Koehn, 2000)

Many people say they constantly compare themselves to others and they tend to say they are unhappy. According to classic social comparison theory, people who make frequent social comparisons should be happy if they believe they are better off than the people to whom they compare themselves (Wills, 1981; Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985). An emerging literature on individual differences in social comparison styles (Buunk & Gibbons, 2000; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999), however, is beginning to find stable differences that link frequent social comparisons with negative affect (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997; Lyubomirsky, Tucker, & Kasri, 2001; VanderZee, Buunk, & Sanderman, 1996).

In this paper, we hypothesize that making frequent social comparisons has a dark side. While other researchers have considered the relationship between frequency of social comparisons and unhappiness in the laboratory (Swallow & Kuiper, 1992), we take a different approach. We find that people who spontaneously make frequent social comparisons experience more destructive emotions and behaviors. Further, an individual's self-esteem does not predict destructive emotions and behaviors as well as his or her frequency of social comparison.

SOCIAL COMPARISONS AND WELL-BEING

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) posits that individuals compare themselves to others when they need an external standard against which to judge their abilities or opinions. A long line of theory and research has since developed that shows that

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people use social comparisons to serve other functions: as a coping mechanism (Wills, 1981; Wood et al., 1985), to manage negative affect (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Wood, Giordano-Beech, & Ducharme, 1999), for self-enhancement (Wood, Giordano-Beech, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994), or to affiliate upward (Collins, 1996). In daily life, people use social comparisons to serve many or all of these functions (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992).

Diener and Fujita (1997) suggest that social comparisons are not only a way of coping with bad news and managing negative affect, but also of enhancing well-being. Well-being is a state in which one is happy, in which one experiences many pleasures and few pains, or has many positive and few negative emotions, in which one is well satisfied with one's life (Diener, 2000). According to this view, people use social comparison in a simple, straightforward fashion: if they are better off than similar others (downward social comparison), they feel satisfied, if they are worse off than similar others (upward social comparison), they feel dissatisfied. Kleinke and Miller (1998), for example, found a linear relationship between how much better off people thought they were than others, and well-being. While social comparisons can increase well-being, a growing body of evidence suggests that this effect is temporary and that frequent social comparisons may actually decrease well-being.

THE DARK SIDE OF FREQUENT SOCIAL COMPARISONS

Unhappy people, not happy people, may be the ones who actually make spontaneous frequent social comparisons (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997; Lyubomirsky et al., 2001). In one study (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997), happy and sad people had the opportunity to compare themselves to a better or worse peer. Sad people felt worse when paired with a better performer, and better when paired with a worse performer. Happy people had less affective vulnerability to the available social comparison information; they simply did not pay as much attention to how well others were doing. Similarly, Giordano, Wood, and Michela (2000) found that unhappy people make more frequent social comparisons, and Swallow and Kuiper (1992) found that mildly depressed people made more frequent social comparisons. Gibbons and Buunk (1999) found the tendency to seek social comparison information is correlated with low self-esteem, depression and neuroticism. This suggests that people who make frequent social comparisons are not only likely to be unhappy, but also they are more vulnerable to an affective response—more positive affect when they make a downward social comparison, but also more negative affect when they make an upward social comparison.

People make social comparisons when they need both to reduce uncertainty about their abilities, performance, and other socially defined attributes, and when they need to rely on an external standard against which to judge themselves. The implication is that people who are uncertain of their self-worth, who do not have clear, internal standards, will engage in frequent social comparisons. Although self-esteem has been found to correlate with positive aspects of well-being (Diener & Diener, 1995), there is some evidence that clarity of the self-concept, rather than high self-esteem *per se*, contributes to well-being (Campbell, 1990; Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000). Self-esteem may not be as good predictor of negative aspects of well-being as frequency of social comparisons.

A Cycle of Frequent Social Comparisons and Destructive Emotions and Behaviors

Festinger (1954) claimed that we make social comparisons because we have a drive to evaluate ourselves, yet research suggests it is precisely this evaluative aspect that is problematic. In order to compare oneself to an external standard, one must view one's self objectively, as an object to be judged, rather than experience one's self subjectively (Langer, in press). Frequent social comparisons should therefore be associated with *objective self-awareness* (Duval & Wicklund, 1972), a state in which one's attention is focused on one's self as an object, and indeed they are (Silvia & Duval, 2001). Furthermore, a state of objective self-awareness leads to more frequent social comparisons (Stapel & Tesser, 2001). Add to this cycle the link between self-focused attention and negative affect (Langer, 1989, 1992; Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson, & Grayson, 1999; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987), and the drive to evaluate ourselves can put us on the road to chronic dissatisfaction. Indeed, Mor and Winquist's (2002) meta-analysis found a significant relationship between objective self-awareness and negative affect.

Even though social comparisons can reduce uncertainty and affect well-being, these consequences must be temporal. Moreover, the consequences of social comparisons could act as reinforcement to

teach the individual to make more, and more frequent, social comparisons, leading the individual to become dependent on social comparisons; in particular, on meeting external standards such as being better than others (e.g., Crocker, 2002; Kohn, 1980) to renew a sense of well-being. People who tend to make spontaneous social comparisons, therefore, tend to be unhappy, more vulnerable to the affective consequences of such comparisons, and more likely to get caught in a cycle of constantly comparing themselves to others, being in a self-focused state, and consequently being unhappy. More social comparisons, rather than serving a useful, coping function, merely serve to reinforce the cycle tying social comparisons to diminishing well-being.

Individual Differences in Social Comparison Styles

People who make frequent social comparisons may be more likely to experience specific destructive emotions and behaviors, especially those that at least implicitly rely on social comparison processes, such as envy, guilt, regret, blame, and lying. Though some have claimed some of these destructive emotions have a positive interpersonal outcome (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994), frequent occurrences of these emotions and behaviors are generally considered to be unpleasant and therefore to detract from well-being. Gibbons and Buunk (1999) have measured individual differences in social comparison style with a self-report measure that focuses on seeking social comparison information. Here, we use a measure that focuses on attention to available social comparison information. We propose that frequency of social comparisons, and not self-esteem, predicts well-being. In two studies, we examine whether people who make frequent social comparisons are more likely to experience destructive emotions and behaviors than those people who do not make frequent social comparisons. We look also at whether self-esteem is correlated to frequency of social comparisons and whether it can predict who experiences these destructive emotions and behaviors.

STUDY 1

Do people who frequently compare themselves to others experience more destructive emotions and behaviors? In Study 1, we asked a sample of adults how frequently they compared themselves to others, and whether they experienced specific personal and interpersonal destructive emotions and behaviors: guilt, blame, regret, lying, feeling defensive, envy, having unmet cravings, and procrastinating. Self-report can be an unreliable measure of social comparison (Wood, 1996). In this study, however, respondents were not asked to distinguish between upward and downward social comparisons, thus obviating demand characteristics that might otherwise have been associated with reporting social comparisons. In addition, our sampling method allowed us to access a broader sample of adults than are usually represented in experimental research, allowing us to generalize our findings to a broader population.

In Study 1, we examined the relationship between frequency of social comparisons and destructive emotions and behaviors. We predicted that people who make frequent spontaneous social comparisons would experience more destructive emotions and behaviors than people who make less frequent social comparisons.

Method

Design and Participants

A total of 64 adults (29 men and 35 women) aged 18–52 (M = 26.2, SD = 6.6) were approached in airport lounges and laundromats and agreed to complete a questionnaire.

Frequency of Social Comparisons

Respondents indicated how often they compared themselves to other people on five dimensions: attractiveness, intelligence, wealth, physical fitness, and good personality. Questions were worded as follows: ''How often do you notice [italics in original] whether you are more or less [attractive] than other people?'' Answers were on a 6-point scale with text anchors *several times a day*, *a few times a day*, *a few times a week*, *a few times a month*, *a few times a year*, and *virtually never*.

Destructive Emotions and Behaviors

Respondents reported how often they did the following on 6-point scales (0 = *virtually never*, 5 = *several times a day*) the anchors were reversed from the previous items): feel envy, feel guilt, feel defensive, feel regret, lie to protect the self, lie to protect others, have unmet cravings, blame others and procrastinate.

Positive Emotions and Behaviors

Using 5-point scales (0 = *not at all*, 4 = *a lot*), respondents answered the questions *How much do*

you like yourself?, In general, how happy are you?, and how much they agreed with the statement. *Although outcomes can make me feel good or bad, I never question my self-worth.*

Self-Esteem

Respondents completed the Rosenberg (1965) scale of self-esteem.

Results

Frequency of Social Comparisons and Self-Esteem

The five items on the social comparison measure had an alpha of .81. We summed participants' estimates of how often they noticed comparing themselves to others across these five dimensions. The summed scores ranged from 3 to 25, $M = 11.9$, $SD = 5.4$. Participant's scores on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale ranged from 22 to 40, $M = 34.0$, $SD = 4.8$. The correlation between individual social comparison and self-esteem, marginal and positive, $r(62) = .22$, $p = .07$.

Destructive Emotions and Behaviors

The nine destructive emotion and behavior items had an alpha of .83. We combined them into a single measure. Participants' scores on this single measure ranged from 0 to 37, $M = 22.0$, $SD = 7.2$. Frequency of social comparisons positively predicted destructive emotions and behaviors, $\beta = .47$, $p < .001$, while self-esteem had a marginal, negative correlation, $\beta = -.20$, $p = .08$, in a simultaneous regression analysis. To follow-up, partial correlation coefficients were computed between frequency of social comparison and each emotion and behavior. Controlling for self-esteem, frequency of social comparisons was reliably ($p < .05$) correlated with feelings of envy, $r = .48$, guilt, $r = .41$, defensiveness, $r = .26$, and regret, $r = .29$, with lying to protect others' feeling, $r = .36$, and lying to protect one's self, $r = .33$, and with having unmet cravings, $r = .34$. The partial correlations between frequency of social comparisons and the tendency to procrastinate, $r = .20$, and blame others, $r = .12$, were positive but not reliable. To illustrate the differences between people who make frequent social comparisons and people who do not, we categorized participants according to median splits as making more frequent ($N = 31$) or less frequent ($N = 33$) social comparisons and as having low self-esteem ($N = 31$) or high self-esteem ($N = 33$). Table I displays the raw and adjusted means for high and low comparers and high and low self-esteem.

Positive emotions and behaviors

The three items measuring positive emotions had an alpha of .67. We analyzed these items separately. Frequency of social comparisons did not predict how much respondents reported they liked themselves, felt happy, or had stable self-worth (see Table II). Self-esteem did, however, predict each of these positive emotions. This finding is consistent with the assumption that self-esteem is related to positive attitudes toward the self, and also to be expected given the semantic similarity of these measures and items in the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (e.g., *I take a positive attitude toward myself; I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others*).

Discussion

Frequency of social comparison positively predicted feelings of envy, guilt, defensiveness, regret,

Table I. Median Splits of Frequency of Social Comparisons Versus Self-Esteem in Determining Destructive Emotions and Behavior

	Low		High	
Grouping variable	*M*	Adjusted *M*	*M*	Adjusted *M*
Frequency of social comparisons[a]				
Envy	1.7	1.8	2.7	2.7
Guilt	2.1	2.1	3.1	3.0
Defensiveness	2.3	2.3	2.8	2.8
Regret	2.3	2.4	2.9	2.8
Lie to protect yourself	1.5	1.5	2.1	2.1
Lie to protect someone's feelings	2.0	1.9	2.4	2.4
Have unmet cravings	2.3	2.4	3.1	3.0
Blame others	1.9	2.0	2.5	2.4
Procrastinate	3.2	3.3	3.5	3.5
Self-esteem[b]				
Envy	2.4	2.3	2.0	2.1
Guilt	3.0	3.0	2.1	2.2
Defensiveness	2.7	2.6	2.5	2.5
Regret	2.7	2.7	2.5	2.5
Lie to protect yourself	2.0	1.9	2.0	1.7
Lie to protect someone's feelings	2.0	2.0	2.3	2.4
Have unmet cravings	3.0	3.0	2.3	2.4
Blame others	2.2	2.2	2.1	2.1
Procrastinate	3.5	3.6	3.1	3.1

Note: Higher means reflect more frequent behavior.
[a]Adjusted means for frequency of social comparisons have self-esteem as covariate.
[b]Adjusted means for self-esteem have frequency of social comparisons as covariate.

Table II. Simultaneous Regression Analyses of Positive Emotions and Behaviors on Frequency of Social Comparison (FSC) and Self-esteem ($N = 64$)

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Like self			
FSC	.02	.01	.12
Self-esteem	.10	.02	.68***
Happy			
FSC	.00	.02	.03
Self-esteem	.08	.02	.53***
Self-worth			
FSC	.02	.02	.11
Self-esteem	.09	.03	.40**

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

having unmet cravings, and behaviors of lying to protect the self and lying to protect others. These results confirm our prediction that frequent social comparisons are associated with destructive emotions and behaviors. Frequent social comparisons did not predict positive emotions and behaviors; these were predicted by self-esteem. Self-esteem, in turn, did not predict destructive emotions and behaviors. These findings support our hypothesis that frequent social comparisons have a dark side.

STUDY 2

Study 1 examined the relationship of frequency of social comparison to destructive emotions and behaviors at the personal and interpersonal level. We conducted Study 2 to determine whether the dark side of frequent social comparisons would extend to destructive emotions and behaviors at the intergroup level, particularly to prejudice toward an outgroup. While low self-esteem has been blamed for many forms of deviant behavior, including prejudice, research has failed to support the connection between self-esteem and prejudice (Crocker & Schwartz, 1985; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987). High self-esteem, in fact, is linked to greater ingroup bias (Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000). People who make frequent social comparisons, on the other hand, must depend on external sources of comparison to support a sense of self-worth. Since ingroup bias is a source of self-worth based on intergroup comparisons (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we expect people who make frequent social comparisons will show greater ingroup bias in the form of a more favorable evaluation of the ingroup relative to an outgroup, on group-relevant traits (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Thompson & Crocker, 1990).

In addition to intergroup bias, we chose a destructive emotion specific to our sample in Study 2. Job satisfaction has been linked to well-being (Judge & Locke, 1993), particularly in police officers (Kirkcaldy, Cooper, Shephard, & Brown, 1994). Specifically, we predict that frequency of social comparisons will positively predict officers' ingroup bias and negatively predict job satisfaction.

Design and Participants

A total of 23 police officers agreed to complete a questionnaire of police work attitudes. Participants included 17 patrol officers and 6 sergeants.

Method

Participants first compared the ingroup, police officers, with an outgroup, security guards, on eight group-related traits or attributes: physical exercise, intelligence, honesty, volunteerism, professionalism, involvement in important safety issues, concern for community safety, and concern for doing their job well. Questions were either of the form *Compared to the average security guard, the average police officer is* with scale endpoints of 0 (*less* [likely to volunteer]) and 10 (*more* [likely to volunteer]), or of the form *the average police officer is* [more professional] *than the average security guard* with scale endpoints of 0 (*do not agree at all*) to 10 (*agree completely*). On these scales, a response above 5 represented a more favorable evaluation of the ingroup than the outgroup, and was thus considered an expression of ingroup bias. Higher numbers signified greater bias.

Participants also completed two items related to job satisfaction, *How satisfied are you with your work?* and *Compared to the average officer of your precinct, how would you rank your satisfaction with your work?* with scale endpoints of 0 (*not at all* or *much worse*) and 10 (*very much* or *much better*). After these questions, participants completed the same measures of social comparison frequency and self-esteem as was used in Study 1. (In Study 1, the measure of social comparison frequency preceded measures of destructive emotions and behaviors; in Study 2 this order is reversed.)

Results

Frequency of Social Comparisons and Self-Esteem

The alpha for the five social comparison items was .86. We summed officers' responses to create a social comparison score for each officer, ranging from

2 to 23, $M = 8.9$, $SD = 5.1$. Officers' scores on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale ranged from 30 to 40, $M = 36.5$, $SD = 3.2$. Social comparison and self-esteem were not reliably correlated, $r(21) = .14$, $p = .54$.

Ingroup Bias

The eight items measuring ingroup bias had an alpha if .77. We combined them to form a composite bias score for each officer, ranging from 27 to 79 ($M = 50.3$, $SD = 12.8$). In a simultaneous regression, frequency of social comparisons positively predicted ingroup bias, $\beta = .45$, $p = .03$. Self-esteem did not reliably predict ingroup bias, $\beta = .29$, $p = .14$.

To illustrate the difference between officers who made frequent social comparisons and those who did not, we categorized officers based on median splits as making few social comparison ($N = 12$) or frequent social comparison ($N = 11$), and as having high self-esteem ($N = 11$) or low self-esteem ($N = 12$). To test whether participants showed ingroup bias, we compared their responses to the items comparing police officers and security guards against the scale midpoint of 5. The results are summarized in Table III. Police officers who made more frequent social comparisons showed ingroup bias on judgments of intelligence, professionalism, involvement in important safety issues, concern with doing the job well, and concern for community safety. Officers who made less frequent social comparisons showed ingroup bias on involvement in safety issues, and showed outgroup bias on likely to do volunteer work.

Job Satisfaction

The correlation between the two job satisfaction items was $r = .73$, $p < .001$. We summed these items to create a composite job satisfaction measure. In a simultaneous regression, social comparison frequency negatively predicted composite job satisfaction, $\beta = -.50$, $p = .02$. Self-esteem did not predict job satisfaction, $\beta = .18$, $p = .38$.

Discussion

Frequency of social comparison positively predicted ingroup bias among a sample of police officers with respect to the outgroup, security guards. Based on a median split, officers who made more frequent social comparisons showed ingroup bias on five dimensions. Officers who made less frequent social comparisons showed ingroup bias on only one

Table III. Frequency of Social Comparisons Versus Self-Esteem in Determining Ingroup Bias, Based on Median Splits

	Low		High	
Grouping variable	*M*	Adjusted *M*	*M*	Adjusted *M*
Frequency of social comparisons[a]				
Physical exercise	5.9	6.0	6.5	6.4
Intelligent	6.5	6.5	7.3[b]	7.3
Honest	3.5	3.6	6.1	5.9
Likely to do volunteer work	4.2[b]	4.2	6.3	6.3
Professional	6.2	6.2	9.0[b]	8.9
Involved in important safety issues	7.8[b]	7.9	9.3[b]	9.2
Concerned with doing job well	5.3	5.3	7.3[b]	7.2
Concerned with community safety	3.6	3.7	6.7[b]	6.6
Self-esteem[b]				
Physical exercise	5.7	5.7	6.7[b]	6.7
Intelligent	6.3	6.4	7.5[b]	7.4
Honest	4.4	4.5	5.1	5.1
Likely to do volunteer work	5.0	5.1	5.5	5.3
Professional	6.5	6.6	8.6[b]	8.5
Involved in important safety issues	7.9[b]	8.0	9.2[b]	9.1
Concerned with doing job well	6.2	6.2	6.3	6.2
Concerned with community safety	4.4	4.5	5.8	5.7

Note: Higher means reflect greater ingroup bias.
[a]Adjusted means for frequency of social comparisons have self-esteem as covariate.
[b]Regular means with superscript [b] on intergroup bias items are significantly different than scale midpoint of 5 ($p < .05$, two-tailed).
[c]Adjusted means for self-esteem have frequency of social comparisons as covariate.

dimension, and actually showed outgroup bias on one dimension. Participants who made more frequent social comparisons also reported lower job satisfaction than participants who made less frequent social comparisons.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Two studies found that frequent social comparisons were associated with a range of destructive emotions and behaviors, including those directed at the self, such as guilt, those directed at others, including lying, and those directed at an outgroup, in the form of ingroup bias. Self-esteem predicted positive attitudes toward the self, but did not predict destructive emotions and behaviors, with the exception of guilt (Study 1). Our results are consistent with other studies of individual differences in social comparison styles that associate frequency with negative personality traits or personal outcomes (Chou & Chi, 2001; Giordano et al., 2000) and complement the experimental research on frequency of social comparisons and negative affect (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997; Lyubomirsky et al., 2001; Swallow & Kuiper, 1992).

We interpret these results as evidence that frequency of social comparisons has negative implications for personal well-being as well as for interpersonal and intergroup relations. It is possible that people who make frequent social comparisons choose their targets and dimensions of comparison in order to enhance well-being or to cope with a threat to self-esteem. Wheeler and Miyake (1992) and Suls, Lemos, and Stewart (2002) found that people with high self-esteem do in fact tend to do this. Yet frequent comparers are more likely to experience destructive personal and interpersonal emotions. Is this the price they pay for using social comparisons as a source of well-being?

In our view, the relationship between frequency of social comparison and well-being is reciprocal and interactive. A limitation of the data presented here, however, is that they cannot address the question of causality. In exchange for experimental control, we gained access to a subject pool not normally exploited in social psychology—the population at large (Study 1) and working adults (Study 2). Future research conducted in a more controlled setting will be necessary to address the direction of causality in the relationship between frequency of social comparisons and destructive emotions and behaviors. A second limitation is the use of self-report to measure social comparison frequency. Again, this limitation is associated with access to the populations we sampled. There is reason to believe, however, that people are aware of and willing to report whether and how they compare themselves to others (e.g., Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Hemphill & Lehman, 1991; Kleinke & Miller, 1998), just as they are capable of reporting whether or not they are happy (e.g., Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997). We would predict the same relationship between frequent social comparisons and destructive emotions and behaviors would emerge if these constructs were measured with a different methodology.

In this paper, we have not posed hypotheses about the antecedents of frequent social comparisons. Why might some people make more spontaneous social comparisons than others? One idea is that people who make frequent social comparisons have low self-respect, or no stable sense of self-worth (Kernis et al., 2000), or perhaps they are insecure (Maslow, Hirsh, Stein, & Honigmann, 1945), or their sense of self is contingent on the results of comparisons with others (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995). Another view is that people simply learn to make frequent social comparisons (Bandura, 1977, 1978), and become dependent on them. We should remember that some people with high self-esteem have a stable, non-contingent sense of self-worth, while others are dependent on external confirmation, most likely in the form of downward social comparisons, in order to achieve and maintain high self-esteem.

A mindfulness (Langer, 1989) perspective offers an interpretation of our results. Langer (1989, 1992), has argued that viewing one's self objectively cuts one off from mindful experience, resulting in mindlessness. Not only are we holding the self still, in order to view it objectively, but also we are holding still the dimension on which we are making the comparison. In a mindless state, a person automatically accepts the positive or negative consequences of a social comparison (e.g., a downward social comparison improves well-being and an upward social comparison decreases well-being). Mindlessness therefore increases the likelihood of negative affect, and the frequency of social comparisons; making social comparisons can also result in mindlessness. In a mindful state, the same social comparison information can have a completely different meaning (e.g., spontaneous rather than impulsive), and thus different consequences (Langer, 1989, 1992).

In some sense we are proposing what Baumeister and colleagues (Baumeister & Scher, 1988; Tice &

Baumeister, 1997) have argued, that people choose destructive behaviors for short-term benefit, ignoring the long-term cost. Frequent social comparisons may, in the short-term, provide reassurance, but in the long-term they may reinforce a need to judge the self against external standards. For young people in particular, those standards are increasingly made salient by media, and promoted by advertisers. Research on eating disorders, for example, points to external standards of body size and shape in the media as factors in individual pathology (Harrison, 2001; Stice, Spangler, & Agras, 2001).

Whether it is in the pursuit of importance, superiority, or an increase in well-being or self-esteem, the tendency to compare ourselves with others is ubiquitous. Nevertheless, there is great variability in our tendency to make social comparisons. If we as individuals were aware that constantly comparing ourselves to others is part of a cycle of destructive emotions and behaviors, perhaps we would be less tempted to measure ourselves against other people.

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