

## Shifting Social Identities as a Strategy for Deflecting Threatening Social Comparisons

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Results of three studies suggest that the multifaceted nature of identity provides a strategic basis for reducing the threat involved in upward social comparisons. After performing worse than a comparison standard, people may strategically emphasize aspects of their identity that differentiate them from the standard, thereby making the standard less relevant for self-evaluation. On the basis of previous research showing that persons low in self-esteem are less likely to make effective use of self-protection strategies, we hypothesized that this strategy of deflecting the threat involved in upward comparison (i.e., decreasing perceived comparability by emphasizing an unshared social identity) would be used primarily by persons who are characteristically high in self-esteem. This pattern was confirmed in three studies. Moreover, use of the strategy was associated with relatively more positive affect following threatening upward comparisons.

I began to see clearly in every psychological phenomenon the striving for superiority. . . . Whatever premises all our philosophers and psychologists dream of—self-preservation, pleasure principle, equalization—all these are but vague representations, attempts to express the great upward drive. (Adler, 1930, p. 398)

Virtually all of the psychological concepts that we use to characterize ourselves (e.g., intelligence, attractiveness, sensitivity) involve qualities that only acquire meaning in a comparative context (Festinger, 1954). In a world in which relative standing on such dimensions determines access to education, wages, social status, admiration, and even the affection of others, there can be little doubt that the experience of inferiority is likely to be generally aversive. Indeed, the cornerstone of Adler's (1927) social psychological theory of personality was the view that striving for superiority is the central human motivation and that feelings of inferiority are at the root of neurotic dysfunction. Yet even the least neurotic and most well-adjusted people are likely to find themselves, at least periodically, in situations of relative inferiority. Whether on the tennis court, in the classroom, or in the boardroom, we all at least occasionally confront the situation of being outperformed by others. At face value, the self-evaluative implications of this state of affairs are disheartening at best. The present research was undertaken with the goal of better understanding how individuals can deflect or minimize the psycholog-

ical sting of such situations by actively reconstruing the meaning and relevance of the comparative context.

In many situations, comparison-based self-evaluations are beneficial in that they provide useful information about the self that can help guide future behavior (e.g., Trope, 1986). At the same time, however, social comparisons—especially those that involve upward standards (i.e., standards that are superior to oneself on the critical dimension)—can also be painful and reveal unfavorable information about the self (Brickman & Bulman, 1977). Being shown up by others can result in negative affect and diminished self-esteem (e.g., Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995; Morse & Gergen, 1970).<sup>1</sup> For example, Morse and Gergen (1970) found evidence of diminished self-esteem among job candidates who were asked to wait in the company of an impeccable rival who displayed a supercompetent appearance. Similarly, being confronted with a very attractive person can lead one to doubt one's own physical attractiveness (Cash, Cash, & Butters, 1983).

The fact that social comparisons may constitute a threat to the self seems especially troublesome because unfavorable comparisons are frequently forced on us and difficult to avoid (Reis, Gerrard, & Gibbons, 1993; Wood, 1989). Although social comparison research has traditionally emphasized the active role individuals play in seeking comparison information and has intensively investigated which standards are actively chosen (e.g., Wheeler, 1966), life may not always afford much of a choice. Only the rarest, most superior being could hope to escape the fate of occasionally being confronted with relevant comparison persons who are doing better than one is doing oneself. Clearly, such comparisons can challenge the positive self-perceptions that most people are motivated to entertain (Taylor & Brown, 1988). How do people deal with these challenges? What self-protective strategies

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<sup>1</sup>Although in some situations upward comparisons may have "inspiring" properties (e.g., Collins, 1996; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Mussweiler & Strack, 2000), they nevertheless often threaten people's self-images.

are used to ward off the threat posed to the self by such involuntary social comparisons?

### Deflection Strategies in Upward Social Comparison

Social comparison research has identified a number of strategies that can be used to protect the self from unfavorable yet unavoidable comparisons (Wood, 1989; Wood & Taylor, 1991). One obvious strategy is simply to ignore the superiority of the comparison standard. Consider the hypothetical case of Mary, an ambitious law student who is angling for a clerkship on the U.S. Supreme Court. If Mary discovers that she has been outperformed by Virginia in her international law class, she might minimize the threat involved by convincing herself that there was no real difference between Virginia's performance and her own. Indeed Schwartz and Smith (1976) found that individuals sometimes do forestall the potentially negative effects of being outperformed by asserting that their performance is actually similar to that of the comparison person. Similarly, one may downplay the performance of an upward standard and thus reduce his or her distance above the self. In one demonstration of this strategy, participants who practiced inefficient birth control and were confronted with a standard who was very efficient because she used "the pill" conscientiously, lowered their opinion of the pill, thus undermining the superiority of the standard's performance (Reis et al., 1993).

Alternatively, one may redefine the importance of the comparison dimension itself. To return to our hypothetical example, law student Mary may decide that international law is a relatively less important legal domain and may instead emphasize the importance of constitutional law or some other subject in which she was not outperformed by others. Along these lines, it has been demonstrated that participants who were outperformed in a social sensitivity task reacted to this threat by lowering their evaluation of the importance of the tested ability (e.g., Tesser, 1988; Tesser & Campbell, 1980). Clearly, being outperformed in a task one does not really care about anyway is less of a problem than coming up short in an important task.

An additional deflection strategy exploits the fact that comparisons with dissimilar others are subjectively less diagnostic and hence seen as less relevant to the self than comparisons with similar others (Festinger, 1954). For a social comparison to provide information that is relevant for self-evaluation, the standard has to be similar on attributes that are related to the critical dimension (Goethals & Darley, 1977). If this is not the case, the standard's performance provides little diagnostic information and is thus unlikely to be a threat for the self. For example, the fact that another person scored higher on a social sensitivity task may be less threatening if one finds out that this person had additional helpful information available (Gilbert et al., 1995). Because such a comparison standard differs on a critical attribute (i.e., amount of information available), he or she does not constitute a relevant comparison standard. By the same token, being confronted with a very attractive person who is a professional model may entail little threat to the self, because one may expect people of this profession to be more attractive anyway. In this case, the fact that the standard belongs to a different social category (i.e., model) than oneself (e.g., student) undermines his or her relevance as a standard (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992).

The fact that dissimilar others can be viewed as a less relevant standard for social comparison provides the basis for a strategy that can be used to protect the self from threatening social comparison information. Specifically, focusing on the ways in which the standard differs from the self can undermine the relevance of a superior standard and may thus have self-protective value (Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Tesser, 1988; Wood, 1989; Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985). For example, consider two students in a statistics course, Matt and Rick. If Rick outperforms Matt on the final exam, Matt might feel less bothered by this state of affairs if he could convince himself that Rick is not a very relevant comparison standard because he belongs to some other group (e.g., Rick is a business major, whereas Matt is a psychology major). Although the two students share some identity dimensions (e.g., both are males, both are undergraduates), Matt may deemphasize these similarities and focus instead on their different academic majors ("What's really important is how I compare to other psychology students."). In this respect, focusing on the fact that the standard belongs to a different social category than oneself (even when other identity dimensions are shared) can serve as a self-protective strategy. That is, a selective focus on social category memberships that distinguish the self from the standard may be used to deflect threatening social comparisons (for a discussion of the benefits of chronically focussing on unshared identities as a strategy for deflecting stigma, see Crocker & Major, 1989).

### The Self as a Member of Multiple Social Categories

Luckily for individuals facing upward comparisons, this identity differentiation strategy is likely to be widely available, because every individual simultaneously belongs to an indefinite number of social categories and can thus be flexibly categorized in a multitude of ways. That is, people have a wealth of social identities they can focus on. For example, one can primarily think of oneself in terms of ethnic, gender, or occupational category memberships. Social psychological research has identified a number of different factors that determine which category is likely to achieve dominance in perceptions of the self and others (for a recent review, see Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1998). For one, contextually salient categories are likely to be particularly influential in perceptions of others (Biernat & Vescio, 1993; Macrae, Bodenhausen, & Milne, 1995; Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978) and the self (McGuire & McGuire, 1988). Thus, a European American woman might primarily think of herself as a woman if she is surrounded by a group of men, whereas her ethnic identity is likely to be in the foreground if she is surrounded by Asians. Moreover, priming research (Higgins, 1996; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991; Wyer & Srull, 1989) suggests that category dominance depends on the recentness and frequency of category use (e.g., Bargh, Lombardi, & Higgins, 1988; Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977; Srull & Wyer, 1979). Thus, our European American woman may be more likely to see herself as a woman if this social category is easily accessible because it is often activated or has just been activated in a previous situation.

Category salience and accessibility, however, are not the only determinants of category dominance. Rather, motivational factors are also likely to play a role. As Bruner (1957) notes, "the accessibility of categories... must not only reflect the environmental probabilities of objects that fit these categories, but also reflect the

search requirements imposed by my needs, my ongoing activities, my defenses, etc." (p. 132). Recent findings in social perception (e.g., Pendry & Macrae, 1996; Sinclair & Kunda, 1999; Spencer, Fein, Wolfe, Fong, & Dunn, 1998) speak directly to this possibility and demonstrate that the activation of a specific social category depends on the current goals of the perceiver. For example, participants who were motivated to enhance their feelings of self-worth because they had just failed an IQ test activated information about a target person's category membership even under circumstances that typically preclude category activation (i.e., cognitive busyness; Spencer et al., 1998). Consistent with Bruner's (1957) claim, these findings demonstrate that self-protective concerns may determine how another person is categorized.

In much the same way, categorizations of the self may also be made in ways that satisfy the motivation to keep up a positive self-image. As outlined above, focusing on category memberships or social identities that one does or does not share with a given standard can influence the relevance of this standard and can thus be used to control its influence on self-perceptions. Specifically, focusing on social identities one does not share with an upward standard minimizes the relevance of this standard and thus deflects the negative implications that the standard's superior performance would otherwise have for the self. For example, a European American woman who is outperformed by an Asian American woman may shift her social identity and primarily focus on her ethnicity, because doing so would allow her to see the standard as an out-group member whose performance is irrelevant for evaluations of herself. In this respect, flexibly focusing on a distinct versus shared social identity appears to be a potent strategy that allows for a self-protective or self-enhancing construal of social comparisons.

### Self-Esteem and Self-Enhancement

Because of the inherent multiplicity of social identity, the strategy of shifting social identities is a self-protective tool that, in principle, should be available to everyone. However, not everyone may be likely to actually make use of this strategy. Past research has demonstrated that people who are high versus low in self-esteem differ with respect to the self-protective strategies they use in the face of unfavorable feedback (e.g., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988; Brown & Dutton, 1995; Brown & Mankowski, 1993; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989; Reis et al., 1993; Sanna, Turley-Ames, & Meier, 1999; Schlenker, Weigold, & Hallam, 1990). In a nutshell, this body of evidence suggests that people high in self-esteem (HSEs) are generally more skilled at reconstructing threatening feedback in a self-protective way than are people low in self-esteem (LSEs; for a discussion of inconsistencies, see Taylor, Wayment, & Carrillo, 1996).

Research in a variety of different domains is consistent with this assumption. For example, HSEs are more likely to make self-serving attributions (e.g., Schlenker et al., 1990), see desirable attributes as descriptive of themselves (e.g., Alicke, 1985), generate downward counterfactuals (Sanna et al., 1999), and show in-group favoritism (Brown et al., 1988). In the specific realm of social comparison, HSEs more often engage in downward comparisons (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992), derive positive affect from them (Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakof, 1990; see

also Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993), and are more likely to question the superiority of an upward standard (Reis et al., 1993). These findings suggest that HSEs are also more likely than LSEs to shift social identities in a way that protects the self from threatening social comparison information.

### The Present Research

Taken together, the above analysis suggests that shifting social identities may be an effective strategy for deflecting threatening social comparisons. Focusing on social identities that one does not share with an upward standard reduces the subjective relevance of the standard's superior performance for the self. Consequently, self-evaluations may remain unaffected by the potentially negative implications of one's inferior performance. Furthermore, individuals high in trait self-esteem appear to be more likely to use this strategy than individuals low in trait self-esteem. The present research tested these implications. Specifically, Study 1 examined how meaningful social identities (gender and ethnicity) are shifted in the light of threatening social comparison information. Study 2 explored whether novel, experimentally created social identities may be used in similar ways for self-protective purposes. Finally, Study 3 examined the effectiveness of shifting social identities as a self-protective device.

### Study 1

We exposed European American women to social comparison information about an Asian woman. Specifically, we had our participants perform a bogus social perception task (e.g., Aronson & Carlsmith, 1962; Gilbert et al., 1995) for which they received false feedback. They were first "accidentally" informed about the performance of an Asian woman and were then given feedback about their own performance. Participants performed either better or worse than their comparison standard. If participants shift their social identities to protect themselves from the negative implications of being outperformed by the Asian woman, they should focus more on their (unshared) ethnic identity, and less on their (shared) gender identity, in those cases in which they performed worse than the standard.<sup>2</sup> This pattern, however, should be more likely to occur for participants high in self-esteem than for those low in self-esteem.

### Method

**Participants.** Forty-six female, European American undergraduates at Northwestern University participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. They were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions.

**Materials.** We measured trait self-esteem using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). The scale consists of 10 items (e.g., "I

<sup>2</sup>In principle, participants could also shift to a greater focus on a shared identity to maximize the self-enhancing implications of outperforming the comparative standard. Past research, however, has demonstrated that failure results in more cognitive activity than success (e.g., Koole, Smeets, van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999; McFarland & Ross, 1982; Wong & Weiner, 1981), so an identity shift may be more likely and/or necessary when participants are outperformed by the standard.

take a positive attitude toward myself") for which responses are given on 4-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*).

The social perception task consisted of 10 black and white photographs of male and female faces that were taken from a 1950 college year book. Each of the faces was presented for 3 s and was followed by three questions assessing participants' judgments about how satisfied with three different aspects of his or her life the depicted person is likely to have been in their later life. Using 8-point rating scales that ranged from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 8 (*very satisfied*), participants were asked to indicate how satisfied they thought the depicted person is likely to have been with his or her family life, career, and life in general.

We adapted three questions taken from the Identity subscale of Luhtanen and Crocker's (1992) Collective Self-Esteem Scale and one question from the Centrality subscale of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997) to assess the extent to which participants focused on their ethnicity vs. gender. The four questions were as follows: (a) "Overall, which has more to do with how you feel about yourself?" (b) "Which is a more important part of your self-image?" (c) "Which is more important to your sense of what kind of person you are?" and (d) "Which group do you have a stronger sense of belonging to?" Answers were given on 8-point rating scales that ranged from 1 (*definitely my gender*) to 8 (*definitely my ethnicity*).

**Procedure.** On arrival in the lab, participants were greeted by a female experimenter and led to individual rooms where they were seated in front of a personal computer. Participants were informed that the researchers would like to get some personal information about them before starting with the actual experiment. They were then given the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) along with two questions assessing their gender and ethnicity. After completion of the questionnaire, participants were informed that the experiment would be computer administered and were told to read instructions carefully. In the instructions, it was pointed out that the purpose of the study was to examine individual differences in two different tasks. The first task would assess person-perception skills by asking participants to make a number of judgments about 10 people whose pictures they would see. The second task would then ask them to evaluate the first one and to provide some demographic information about themselves.

Next, participants were told to proceed with the person-perception task. Before the first picture was presented, it was pointed out that person perception is an important ability for people in our society. It was explained that we live in a world in which we are in contact with a great many people for a very short time and we often need to understand a great deal about those people quickly, so person perception is an important skill for personal and professional success. The instructions further pointed out that we would assess person-perception abilities by presenting 10 photographs and asking participants to judge how satisfied each of the depicted persons was later in their life. It was explained that the ability to determine life satisfaction from photographs has been shown to be an accurate measure of person-perception abilities. Participants were then presented with the 10 pictures and judged the future satisfaction of the depicted persons.

After participants had given their final response, they were informed that their data had been transferred to the main lab computer and that the experimenter would provide them with feedback about their performance in a few minutes. About 1 min after participants had completed the task, the experimenter entered the lab room and gave them false feedback about their performance. Specifically, she consecutively gave participants two different feedback sheets that listed both the gender and ethnicity of the person whose score was ostensibly recorded and the score itself. The first sheet listed the score of a female Asian American. For half the participants the score of this social comparison standard was 82% correct answers, for the other half it was 32% correct answers. After having handed this first feedback sheet to the participant, the experimenter started to leave the room. When reaching the door, however, she hesitated, turned around, and explained that she had accidentally given them the wrong sheet. She

pointed out that this was not the score of the participant herself, but rather the one of the Asian woman who was in the room next door. She apologized for this mistake and handed the participant her "actual" feedback sheet on which both her gender and ethnicity and her ostensible score were noted. For all participants, this score was 52% correct answers.

After having received their scores, participants were instructed to proceed with the questions that ostensibly assessed their evaluation of the first task. It was pointed out that one of the purposes of this experiment was to validate the person-perception measure and to learn more about its relationship to a number of demographic variables. The instructions further explained that some researchers believed person-perception abilities to be related to gender and ethnicity and that we wanted to evaluate the validity of this claim. Participants received a total of 10 questions (e.g., "How enjoyable was the social perception task?"), including the four critical ones that assessed their current social identity focus.

Subsequently, participants received a set of three manipulation check questions that assessed whether they recognized the gender, ethnicity, and score of the social comparison standard correctly. The experimenter then debriefed participants and tested for suspicion about the false feedback manipulation. All participants stated that they believed in the validity of the feedback at the time. They were thanked for their participation and dismissed.

**Baseline conditions.** To assess the baseline identity focus in our participant population, 27 female European American Northwestern University undergraduates who did not take part in the main study were recruited for a brief study "assessing the individual importance of two specific group memberships." All participants answered the four identity focus questions along with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). We divided participants into high and low self-esteem groups on the basis of a median split using the median of the main study ( $Mdn = 34$ ; see below). An analysis of the combined identity scale (i.e., the mean for responses to the four items; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ) revealed that HSEs and LSEs differed in their baseline focus on their gender versus ethnic identity. In particular, HSEs focused more on their gender ( $M = 2.16$ ) than did LSEs ( $M = 3.09$ ),  $t(25) = 2.71, p < .01$ .

## Results and Discussion

**Preliminary analysis.** Inspection of the answers to the manipulation check questions revealed that a total of 7 participants were unable to specify the gender, ethnicity, or score of the comparative standard correctly. These participants were excluded from subsequent analyses, which are thus based on the responses of 39 participants.<sup>3</sup>

The reliability of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) proved to be high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ ). Scores (calculated after reversing scores for the five respective items) ranged from 16 to 40 with a median of 34 ( $SD = 5.7$ ). Participants were divided into high ( $N = 19$ ) and low ( $N = 20$ ) self-esteem groups on the basis of a median split.

**Identity focus.** Our central prediction was that European American women who had been outperformed by an Asian woman would selectively emphasize their ethnic identity, because this identity differentiated them from the superior performer, making her performance seem like a less relevant basis for self-evaluation. This pattern was expected to be more likely to occur for individuals who are generally skilled at the use of active self-protection strategies (i.e., HSEs).

<sup>3</sup>Including these participants in the analysis did not change the obtained pattern of results.

The four critical items assessing identity focus (ethnicity vs. gender) were averaged into one scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ), on which higher scores reflect a greater emphasis on the unshared identity dimension (i.e., ethnicity). Participants' mean identity focus is displayed in Table 1 as a function of whether they performed better or worse than the comparison target and of whether they were high or low in self-esteem. As inspection of Table 1 reveals, HSEs indeed focused relatively less on their gender (i.e., the shared identity) and more on their ethnicity (i.e., the distinguishing identity) when they did worse than the standard than when they did better than the standard. For LSEs, however, the reverse was the case. This group focused relatively more on their gender and less on their ethnicity when they did worse than the standard, compared with when they did better. This pattern of means produced a significant interaction effect in a 2 (high vs. low self-esteem)  $\times$  2 (worse vs. better performance) analysis of variance (ANOVA), with participants' values for the identity focus scale as the dependent variable,  $F(1, 35) = 4.71, p < .04$ . In this analysis neither of the main effects proved to be significant ( $F_s < 1$ ). Simple effect comparisons revealed that the difference in identity focus for the two feedback conditions did not reach significance either for HSEs,  $t(35) = 1.55, p < .13$ , two-tailed, or for LSEs,  $t(35) = 1.52, p < .14$ , two-tailed.

However, comparisons of the four critical cell means with the baseline identity focus for HSEs and LSEs, indicate that only the identity focus of HSEs who were outperformed differed significantly from the respective baseline,  $t(60) = 2.6, p < .02$ , two-tailed ( $t_s < 1.2, ns$ , for all other comparisons).

The results of Study 1 confirmed that relative to LSE participants, HSEs focused more on the aspect of their social identity that distinguished them from the standard, in cases in which they were outperformed. For LSE participants, however, their identity focus remained virtually identical to the baseline if they were outperformed. If anything, they showed a (nonsignificant) tendency to focus more on the unshared identity if they did better than the standard. Because this latter identity shift is likely to increase the relevance of the upward standard and decrease the relevance of the downward standard, it is unlikely to have self-protective benefits. This finding is consistent with previous research (e.g., Brown & Dutton, 1995; Reis et al., 1993; Sanna et al., 1999; Schlenker et al.,

1990) demonstrating that in conditions of ego threat, HSEs are more skilled in using self-protective strategies.

Most importantly, these data provide a first demonstration of the use of shifting social identities as a self-protective strategy in the face of threatening social comparison information. Study 2 was designed to further examine the use of this strategy and to extend these initial findings in an important way. In particular, we sought to determine whether these processes could be observed in the context of experimentally created identities. One might argue that in Study 1 HSE participants chose to focus more on their ethnic identity under threat because this identity (i.e., European American) is generally a positive, socially valued one (and not because it served to differentiate them from the comparison person). This self-affirmation hypothesis is perhaps a plausible alternative interpretation for the findings reported in the initial study. By focusing on novel identity dimensions in the subsequent studies, we could rule out the possibility that certain chronically valued aspects of identity are routinely emphasized during times of threat, regardless of whether the dimension serves to differentiate the self from the comparative source of the threat.

## Study 2

Study 1 examined how participants used their membership in meaningful social categories (gender and ethnicity) to deflect threatening social comparison information. Social comparison research, however, has demonstrated that even attributes that are clearly irrelevant for the critical dimension may be an important determinant of social comparison effects (e.g., Brewer & Weber, 1994; Brown et al., 1992). For example, Brown et al. (1992) demonstrated that the consequences of a comparison with an upward standard depended critically on whether participants believed themselves to share the same birthday with the standard. Although the critical dimension (physical attractiveness) was in no way related to the birthday, participants' self-evaluations were positively affected by exposure to an attractive standard that shared the same birthday. This finding suggests that membership in novel social categories might also determine how the superior performance of another person affects self-evaluations. Consequently, strategically focusing on a shared versus unshared category membership may be used as a self-protective device.

We examined this possibility using a minimal group paradigm (Tajfel, 1970). On the basis of their performance in two perceptual estimation tasks (estimating the number of dots on a screen and estimating the size of a presented area), participants were assigned to two orthogonal "minimal" categories (for a similar procedure, see Diehl, 1990). The situation was contrived such that participants shared one minimal group membership with the standard but differed from the standard in terms of the second group membership. We expected that—relative to LSEs—HSEs would be more likely to focus on the unshared group membership if they were outperformed by the standard.

## Method

**Participants.** Thirty-one female Northwestern University undergraduates participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. They were randomly assigned to one of two conditions.

**Materials.** We used a dot-estimation and an area-estimation task to manipulate minimal group memberships (Diehl, 1990). The dot-estimation

Table 1  
Identity Focus as a Function of Self-Esteem  
and Performance (Experiment 1)

| Performance          | Self-Esteem |      |
|----------------------|-------------|------|
|                      | High        | Low  |
| Worse than standard  |             |      |
| <i>M</i>             | 3.50*       | 2.92 |
| <i>N</i>             | 11          | 12   |
| Better than standard |             |      |
| <i>M</i>             | 2.47        | 3.91 |
| <i>N</i>             | 8           | 8    |
| Baseline             |             |      |
| <i>M</i>             | 2.16        | 3.09 |
| <i>N</i>             | 8           | 19   |

Note. Higher ratings reflect a greater focus on the unshared identity.  
\* Differs significantly from the respective baseline at  $p < .05$ .

task consisted of 10 clusters of dots that differed with respect to their shape as well as the number of dots they contained (about 100). Each of the clusters was presented for 1 s and was followed by a question that assessed participants' estimates of the number of dots contained in the cluster. The area-estimation task consisted of 10 shaded areas that differed in shape and size. They were also presented for 1 s and were followed by a question that assessed participants' estimate of the size of the shaded area (in  $\text{cm}^2$ ).

We constructed three questions to assess participants' identity focus. Because we used minimal groups in Study 2, we expected it to be difficult to assess this focus in a direct fashion. After all, minimal group memberships are completely novel, making questions pertaining to their importance (e.g., "Which group membership is a more important part of your identity?") potentially seem nonsensical. Thus, we assessed participants' social identity focus in a more indirect way. The three critical questions were the following: (a) "What group would you suspect your closest friend would also be a member of?" (b) "If you met a stranger, what do you think would be more informative to know about him?" and (c) "Which of the tasks do you suspect is more predictive of ability to make judgments in everyday life?" These questions were answered along 8-point rating scales ranging from 1 (*definitely dot evaluation or definitely dot overvaluer*) to 8 (*definitely area estimation or definitely area overestimator*).

*Procedure.* On arrival in the lab, participants were led to individual rooms and seated in front of a personal computer. They answered the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and proceeded with reading instructions on the computer. In the instructions it was pointed out that the purpose of the study was to examine individual differences in performance on a number of tasks. Specifically, participants would be asked to complete four different tasks. In the first task, they would be asked to estimate the number of dots in a field, in the second, they would be asked to estimate the size of some shaded areas. The third task would then test their person-perception abilities by asking them to make a number of judgments about 10 people whose pictures they would see, and the final task would ask them to evaluate the first three tasks.

Participants were then told to start with the dot-estimation task. They were informed that we would present them 10 different screens filled with dots and would ask them to estimate the number of dots on the screen. Each screen would appear for only 1 s, making it impossible to assess the exact number of dots. Participants were further instructed to give their best estimate of the critical number. Then, the first cluster of dots was presented, followed by the first estimation question. This sequence was repeated for the remaining nine dot clusters.

Subsequent to the tenth dot estimation, participants were informed that in the second task they would be shown 10 different screens, each displaying a shaded area, and would be asked to estimate the size of these areas. Again, each screen would be presented for 1 s so that it would be impossible to make an exact assessment of the size. Still, participants were told to try to provide their most accurate estimate. Then, the 10 shaded areas were presented and participants were asked to estimate the size of the areas in  $\text{cm}^2$ .

After completing the area-estimation task, participants received further information about the dot and area-estimation tasks. They were told that previous research had demonstrated that on the dot-evaluation task there is one group of people who tend to undervalue the number of dots (undervaluers) and another group who tend to consistently overvalue the number of dots (overvaluers). It was further pointed out that these differences had been found to be reliable and to reflect other important psychological parameters. In other words, overvaluers had been found to differ from undervaluers on important psychological dimensions.

They were further informed that performance on the area-estimation task had also been found to divide people into two separate groups, those who tend to underestimate the area of the shapes (underestimators) and those who tend to overestimate the area of the shapes (overestimators). These different groups were also alleged to differ on psychological parameters. Participants were also informed that, despite their similarity in methodol-

ogy, the two estimation tasks had been found to be unrelated and to predict different psychological characteristics. Being a dot over- or undervaluer thus meant something completely different from being an area over- or underestimator. Later in the experiment, participants would be able to learn to which of the groups they belonged. First, however, they would need to complete the third task.

Participants then proceeded with the person-perception task, which was identical to Study 1 and was also introduced in a similar fashion. Again, the importance of person-perception skills in our society was emphasized. Participants were then presented with the 10 pictures of male and female faces used in Study 1 and were instructed to indicate how satisfied they thought each of the depicted persons is likely to have been with his or her family life, career, and life in general.

After completion of the person-perception task, participants were informed that their data had been transferred to the main lab computer and that the experimenter would provide them with feedback about their performance on the three tasks in a few minutes. About 1 min after participants had finished the task, the experimenter entered the room and consecutively gave participants two feedback sheets in a similar way as in Study 1. The first feedback sheet was ostensibly given to participants by accident and included information about the performance of another participant (the standard); the second feedback sheet ostensibly contained participants' actual feedback. Both feedback sheets included information about participants' ostensible membership in the dot-valuing (i.e., over- or undervaluer) and area-estimation (i.e., over- or underestimator) groups—ostensibly determined on the basis of their performance in the dot- and area-estimation tasks—as well as their ostensible score in the person-perception task. The first "erroneous" feedback sheet (i.e., the standard's feedback) informed them that they were overvaluers in dot evaluation and underestimators in area estimation. For half the participants the score was 82% of correct answers, for the other half it was 32% of correct answers. The second feedback sheet (i.e., participants' "actual" feedback) informed participants that they were overvaluers in dot evaluation and overestimators in area estimation. Thus, participants belonged to the same dot-evaluation group and the opposite area-estimation group as their social comparison standards. For all participants, this second feedback sheet indicated a score of 52% correct answers for the social perception task, so that half the participants performed better than the standard to whose score they had been exposed "accidentally," whereas the other half performed worse than the standard.

After having received their feedback, participants were instructed to proceed with the final task. They were informed that one of the purposes of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the dot-evaluation and the area-estimation tasks as classification tools. To do so, we would like to assess their opinions about these tasks. Participants received a total of 12 questions (e.g., "How enjoyable was the dot-estimation task?"). The first two questions assessed to which dot-evaluation and area-estimation groups participants belonged. The subsequent questions included the three assessing on which of two group memberships participants focused.

Subsequently, participants received a set of three manipulation check questions assessing whether they recognized the group memberships and score of the social comparison standard correctly. They were then debriefed, tested for suspicion about the false feedback, thanked for their participation, and dismissed.

*Assessment of baseline identity focus.* To assess the baseline identity focus for the two minimal group memberships, we recruited a different group of 21 female Northwestern University undergraduates for a separate study. For the most part, the materials and procedures were identical to those used in the main study. Participants in the baseline assessment study, however, only received feedback about their own performance in the person-perception task (52% correct) and their membership in the two minimal groups. They did not receive any information about a comparison standard. Subsequent to the person-perception task, these participants received a similar set of 12 questions, including the 3 identity focus

questions of the main study. In this study, the baseline identity focus did not differ for people high ( $N = 11$ ) and low ( $N = 10$ ) in self-esteem,  $t(19) = .48, ns$ .

### Results and Discussion

**Preliminary analyses.** An analysis of the manipulation check questions revealed that all participants remembered the group memberships as well as the score of the standard correctly.

The reliability of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) again proved to be high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ). Participants' mean scores on the items ranged from 26 to 40 with a median of 34 ( $SD = 4.5$ ). Again, participants were divided into high ( $N = 16$ ) and low ( $N = 15$ ) self-esteem groups on the basis of a median split.

**Identity focus.** On the basis of the initial findings in Study 1, we expected to find evidence (even in a minimal group context) that participants facing the threat of an upward comparison selectively emphasize the elements of their identity that can serve to differentiate them from the superior performer. In the present context, this means focusing to a greater extent on the unique area-estimation identity rather than the dot-evaluation identity (which was shared with the comparative standard). Again, we expected this pattern to emerge principally among HSE participants.

Responses to the three critical items measuring identity focus were combined into one single score (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .55$ ), and mean values of this index are displayed in Figure 1 as a function of performance condition and level of chronic self-esteem. Inspection of Figure 1 confirms that HSEs focused more on their membership in the area-evaluation group (i.e., the distinguishing identity) than on the dot-estimation group (i.e., the shared identity) when they did worse than the standard, compared with when they did better. For LSEs, however, there was a (nonsignificant) tendency to focus more on their membership in the dot-evaluation group when they did worse than when they did better. This pattern

of means produced a significant interaction effect in a 2 (high vs. low self-esteem)  $\times$  2 (better vs. worse performance) ANOVA, with participants' mean responses on the identity focus scale as the dependent measure,  $F(1, 27) = 5.72, p < .02$ . In this analysis, the main effect for self-esteem failed to reach significance,  $F(1, 27) = 3.26, p < .08$ , as did the main effect for performance ( $F < 1$ ). Simple effect comparisons further revealed that the difference between the two feedback conditions was significant only for HSEs,  $t(27) = 2.21, p < .04$ , two-tailed, and not for LSEs ( $t < 1, ns$ ).

Moreover, comparisons of the four critical cell means with the relevant baseline identity foci for HSEs and LSEs revealed that, just as was the case in Study 1, only the identity focus of HSEs who were outperformed differed significantly from the respective baseline,  $t(46) = 2.25, p < .02$ , two-tailed ( $t_s < 1, ns$ , for all other comparisons).

The results of Study 2 demonstrate that HSE participants focused more on the unshared minimal identity when they did worse than the standard. For LSE participants, however, this was not the case. If anything, LSEs showed a (nonsignificant) tendency in the opposite direction and focused more on the identity they shared with the superior other. This finding replicates the results of Study 1 using minimal rather than socially meaningful group memberships. They indicate that HSEs may even use their membership in groups that have no general self-affirmation value to protect themselves from the potentially ego-deflating implications of being outperformed in a personally relevant task.

### Study 3

We have assumed so far that strategically shifting social identities protects the self from threatening social comparison information. If this is indeed the case, then the ego-deflating consequences of being exposed to a superior standard should be weaker

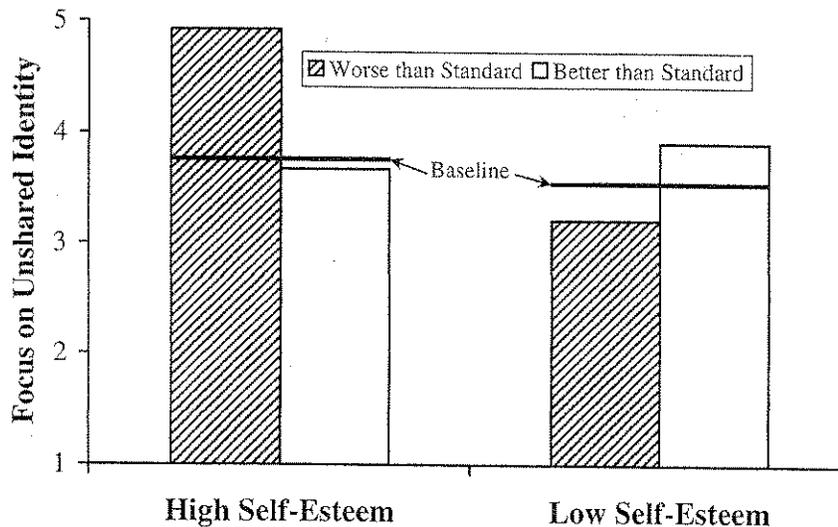


Figure 1. Identity focus as a function of self-esteem and comparative performance (Experiment 2). Baseline levels of identity focus, determined separately for participants high versus low in chronic self-esteem, are indicated by the solid black lines.

if participants have the opportunity to use this shifting identity strategy. Study 3 was designed to examine this possibility and directly investigate the extent to which the ability to focus on unshared identities provides a psychological "escape hatch" for avoiding unpleasant social comparisons. To do so, we manipulated the degree to which participants could freely shift their social identities. As in Study 2, we used a minimal group paradigm to assign participants to two orthogonal minimal groups. This time, however, all participants received unfavorable information about their performance on the person-perception task. For half the participants, the dot- and area-estimation tasks were portrayed as equally diagnostic for performance in a number of different tasks. The other half, however, was informed that the dot-estimation task (i.e., the task for which they shared group membership with the standard) was more diagnostic. Thus, whereas the first group could freely shift their social identity between two group memberships of equal importance, the second group was more restricted in doing so. That is, it was more difficult for the latter group to take the sting out of a threatening social comparison by strategically focusing on the unshared group membership, because they had been given "objective" evidence that the shared identity dimension was the more diagnostic one. As a consequence, these participants should suffer more and feel worse about themselves after being exposed to a superior standard. However, this pattern should be more pronounced for HSEs, because—as Studies 1 and 2 have demonstrated—these participants are more likely to apply the shifting identities strategy as a self-protective device.

### Pretest

Before examining the self-protective qualities of shifting social identities, we pretested our identity restriction manipulation and examined its effects on the identity focus of HSEs and LSEs. Study 2 demonstrated that—relative to LSEs—HSEs are more likely to place greater importance on an unshared identity when they are confronted with an upward comparison standard. Consequently, restricting participants' ability to shift social identities (by explicitly making the shared identity appear to be more psychologically significant) should affect the identity focus of HSEs to a greater extent than LSEs.

**Method.** For the most part, the materials and procedures of the pretest are identical to those of Study 2, so we will only describe deviations in detail. A total of 84 female Northwestern University undergraduates participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. They were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions.

Up to the tenth area-estimation task, participants went through the exact same procedures as described in Study 2. After completion of this task, however, half the participants (identity restriction condition) were informed that the dot-evaluation task is more psychologically diagnostic than the area-estimation task. Specifically, they were told that despite the similarity in methodology, the two tasks differ greatly in their reliability and validity and that the dot-evaluation task is a much better predictor of other psychological variables than the area-estimation task. For the other half (unrestricted identity condition), no specific mention of the relative diagnosticity of the two tasks was made. Then, participants proceeded with the social perception task and received false feedback in the same way as in Study 2. This time, however, all participants

discovered that they had performed worse than the standard. Subsequent to this feedback manipulation, we assessed participants' identity focus with the question that proved to be most sensitive in Study 2 ("Which group would you suspect your closest friend would also be a member of?" 1 = *definitely dot overvaluer*, 8 = *definitely area overestimator*). Finally, the same three manipulation check questions as in Study 2 were posed. On completion of these questions, participants were debriefed, tested for suspicion, thanked, and dismissed.

**Results.** An analysis of the manipulation check questions revealed that a total of 22 participants did not remember either the group memberships or the score of the standard person correctly. These participants were excluded from the subsequent analyses, which are thus based on the responses of 62 participants.<sup>4</sup> The reliability of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) proved to be high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ). Participants were divided into high and low self-esteem groups on the basis of a median split (using the same median as the main study,  $Mdn = 31$ ).

An analysis of the responses to the identity focus question revealed that the identity restriction manipulation successfully influenced the identity focus of HSEs. In particular, HSEs focused more on the unshared identity when they could freely shift the focus of their identity ( $M = 4.54$ ) than they did when the identity focus restriction was given ( $M = 3.41$ ). LSEs, however, remained uninfluenced by the identity restriction manipulation ( $M = 3.80$  vs.  $M = 4.18$ ). This pattern produced a significant interaction effect in a 2 (high vs. low self-esteem)  $\times$  2 (free vs. restrained focus) ANOVA, with participants' answers to the identity focus question as the dependent variable,  $F(1, 58) = 4.16, p < .05$ . Simple effect comparisons further revealed that the difference between the free and the restrained focus conditions was reliable only for HSEs,  $t(58) = 2.60, p < .01$ , two-tailed, and not for LSEs,  $t(58) < 1, ns$ .

These findings demonstrate the effectiveness of our identity restriction manipulation. Because—as Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated—HSEs are more likely to shift the focus of their identity when confronted with an upward standard, their identity focus is more strongly influenced by our restriction manipulation. Specifically, their tendency to shift their social identities toward the unshared group membership was effectively undermined by the restriction manipulation, confirming its suitability for the main study to be reported.

### Method

The materials and procedures of the main study are mostly identical to Study 2, so we will only describe deviations in detail.

**Participants.** Thirty-four female undergraduates at Northwestern University participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. They were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions.

**Materials.** We administered two principal measures to assess the consequences of the upward comparison. First, we used seven adjectives taken from the Multiple Affect Adjectives Checklist (Zuckerman & Lubin, 1965) to construct our primary mood measure. These adjectives were *hopeless*, *happy*, *discontented*, *secure*, *pleased*, *tense*, *dissatisfied*, and *discouraged*. The resulting items (e.g., "How hopeless do you feel right now?") were

<sup>4</sup>Including these participants in the analysis did not change the obtained pattern of results.

answered along 8-point rating scales ranging from 1 (*not at all hopeless*) to 8 (*very hopeless*).

Moreover, we assessed state self-esteem with the Performance subscale of the State Self-Esteem Scale (SSES; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). The seven items that form this subscale are (a) "I feel confident about my abilities," (b) "I feel frustrated or rattled about my performance," (c) "I feel that I am having trouble understanding things that I read," (d) "I feel as smart as others," (e) "I feel confident that I understand things," (f) "I feel that I have less scholastic ability right now than others," and (g) "I feel like I am not doing well." For each of these items, participants are instructed to indicate to what extent it characterizes them at the current moment. Answers are given along a 5-point rating scale (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *a little bit*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *very much*, 5 = *extremely*).

**Procedure.** Together with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), participants were asked to indicate their current mood ("How do you feel right now?") at the beginning of the study.

Up to the false feedback manipulation, the procedure is identical to the one described for the pretest. That is, participants' ability to shift the focus of their social identity was manipulated in the exact same way as in the pretest. After participants had been given false feedback, they received a series of questions concerning the relative importance of both minimal group memberships. Then, participants answered the seven affect items that were based on the Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist (Zuckerman & Lubin, 1965). The subsequent seven SSES items were preceded by the original instructions used by Heatherton and Polivy (1991), which informed participants that each of the questions pertained to the current moment and should be answered accordingly. Finally, the same three manipulation check questions as in the previous study were asked. After completing these questions, participants were debriefed, tested for suspicion, thanked, and dismissed.

## Results and Discussion

**Preliminary analyses.** An analysis of the manipulation check questions revealed that all participants remembered the group memberships as well as the score of the standard correctly.

The reliability of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) proved to be high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ). Participants' mean scores on the items ranged from 21 to 39 with a median of 31 ( $SD = 4.6$ ). Participants were divided into high ( $N = 18$ ) and low ( $N = 16$ ) self-esteem groups on the basis of a median split.

**Mood and state self-esteem.** The central predictions for Study 3 concern the affective sequelae of upward social comparison. If shifting one's focus toward unshared identities does indeed protect one from the hurtful feelings attendant to an inferior performance, then restricting the ability to strategically focus on an unshared identity dimension should result in more negative consequences for the self. This pattern, however, should be more pronounced for HSEs than for LSEs, because HSEs are more likely to make use of the shifting identities strategy in the first place.

The responses to the mood and the state self-esteem scales were substantially correlated ( $r = .59$ ), so all of the items were included in a combined situational well-being scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ) that provides a general measure of how participants felt subsequent to the comparison. To do so, the responses to each individual item were  $z$  transformed and then averaged across the items. Mean scores are provided in Table 2 as a function of identity restriction (present or absent) and level of self-esteem.

Inspection of Table 2 indeed confirms that HSEs felt greater situational well-being when they were able to freely shift the focus of their identity than they did when they were focused on their dot-evaluation membership (i.e., the shared identity). For LSEs,

Table 2

*Situational Well-Being as a Function of Trait Self-Esteem and Identity Restriction (Experiment 3)*

| Identity restriction | Self-Esteem |     |
|----------------------|-------------|-----|
|                      | High        | Low |
| Absent               |             |     |
| <i>M</i>             | .01         | .23 |
| <i>N</i>             | 8           | 8   |
| Present              |             |     |
| <i>M</i>             | -.49        | .34 |
| <i>N</i>             | 10          | 8   |

*Note.* Higher ratings reflect higher situational well-being.

however, this was not the case. In fact, for these participants there was even a (nonsignificant) tendency in the opposite direction, such that they felt relatively worse about themselves in free identity-focus conditions than in restrained identity-focus conditions. This pattern of means produced a significant interaction effect in a 2 (high vs. low self-esteem)  $\times$  2 (free vs. restrained focus) analysis of covariance, with participants' responses to the combined scale as the dependent measure and participants' mood at the beginning of the study as a covariate,  $F(1, 29) = 4.52, p < .04$ . In this analysis, the main effect for self-esteem failed to reach significance,  $F(1, 29) = 3.95, p < .06$ , as did the main effect for identity restriction,  $F(1, 29) = 1.19, p > .25$ . Simple-effect comparisons further revealed that the difference between the restrained and the free identity-focus conditions was significant only for HSEs,  $t(29) = 2.16, p < .05$ , two-tailed, and not for LSEs ( $t < 1, ns$ ).

The results of Study 3 provide direct support for the assumption that shifting social identities has self-protective value. HSEs who were able to freely shift their social identities felt greater situational well-being following exposure to a superior standard, compared with HSEs who were prevented from doing so. Thus, HSEs are more likely to focus on a minimal group membership that distinguished them from an upward standard, and doing so apparently takes the ego-deflating sting out of this comparison. Finally, the fact that only the affective response of HSE but not LSE participants depended on their ability to shift their identity focus further suggests that HSEs are more likely to engage in this strategy for self-protective purposes.

## General Discussion

As noted by Adler (1927) and reinforced by Festinger (1954) and many subsequent theorists, the experience of relative inferiority is generally noxious, so it stands to reason that people would develop an arsenal of strategies to deploy in seeking to stave off the unpleasant feelings that are attendant to being outperformed. The present set of studies examined shifting social identities as one such strategy for deflecting threatening social comparisons. Consistent with Festinger's similarity hypothesis, we assumed that focusing on an aspect of one's identity that differs from the standard decreases the standard's relevance and thus reduces the ego-deflating consequences of comparing with a superior other. We further expected HSE individuals, who are generally more

skilled in the use of self-protective strategies, to be more likely to use this strategy.

The present data provide substantial support for these assumptions. Using meaningful social identities, Study 1 shows that—relative to LSEs—HSEs focused more on the aspect of their identity that they did not share with the standard, when they performed worse than this standard. Study 2 replicated this effect using minimal-group identities, thereby eliminating alternative interpretations based on the chronic potential self-affirmational value of focusing on particular real-life identities. In contrast, LSEs do not appear to shift their social identities in a way that sets them apart from a superior other. If anything, they shift their identities in the opposite direction and focus more on the identity they share with an upward standard. Although this tendency was not reliably found over the three studies, it might be interpreted as indicating LSEs' inclination to "accentuate the negative," to dwell on the disconcerting implications of being outperformed by someone who shares an identity with them. There is ample evidence (e.g., Baumeister & Tice, 1985; Campbell, Chew, & Scratchley, 1991) that persons who experience chronic low self-regard are likely to ruminate on negative feedback, rather than work to discredit it.

Moreover, our data speak to the self-protective benefits of shifting social identities. Study 3 demonstrated that HSEs who were able to freely shift their social identity and focus on an identity they did not share with the upward standard, experienced higher levels of positive affect and state self-esteem than did HSEs who could not freely shift the focus of their identity. Thus, focusing on an identity that distinguishes oneself from an upward standard appears to be capable of significantly reducing the sting of such potentially ego-deflating social comparisons.

#### *Self-Enhancement and Self-Evaluation in Social Comparison*

The present research has identified one strategy that may be used to protect the self from threatening social comparison information (for a discussion of additional strategies, see Wood & Taylor, 1991). Thus, one way to fulfill a self-enhancement goal in social comparison has been established. Self-enhancement, however, is not the only goal that may underlie social comparison activities. In fact, Festinger's (1954) original formulation emphasized the importance of an alternative motive, namely self-evaluation. Specifically, he assumed that people engage in social comparisons primarily to obtain diagnostic feedback about their abilities. Consistent with this assumption, past psychological research has demonstrated that such self-evaluation concerns are a potent determinant of what self-relevant information is sought (for an overview, see Trope, 1986). As is suggested by Festinger's similarity hypothesis, diagnostic information may be best obtained through comparisons with similar others. Specifically, another person's performance is only informative for evaluations of the self if differences in performance cannot be attributed to differences on related attributes (Goethals & Darley, 1977). Thus, to fulfill self-evaluation motives, people have to focus on the ways in which they are similar to the standard.

This reasoning suggests that in many situations self-enhancement and self-evaluation motives require the search for opposing pieces of information. Whereas self-enhancement may

be best achieved by strategically looking for ways in which one is different from the other, as the present research suggests, self-evaluation may be best achieved by looking for similarities. Our participants—at least those high in self-esteem—clearly opted for self-enhancement. This may have been the case because they had been immediately threatened by having an upward comparison on a personally relevant dimension forced on them. In fact, failure, unfavorable feedback, and ego-threat are the very conditions in which self-enhancement concerns are believed to take precedence over concerns for veridical self-evaluation (e.g., Steele, 1988; Tesser, 1988). Thus, our participants may well have opted for a different kind of identity shift, if the implications of the social comparison information had been less threatening.

In this respect, however, it seems important to note that such situations in which threatening social comparisons are forced on us appear to be more the rule than the exception in everyday life. Typically, we do not actively search for information about how wealthy Michael Jordan is, how intelligent Stephen Hawking is, and how handsome Brad Pitt is, or how many papers a more successful colleague has published. In light of the fact that such news is often thrust on us, it is reassuring that our social identities are sufficiently complex and flexible to allow us to elegantly sneak out of such potentially ego-deflating situations.

#### *The Dynamic Nature of Self-Definition*

The present studies demonstrate that people show considerable flexibility in their identity focus. This fact has previously been noted by several theorists who emphasize the fluid and context-dependent nature of self-definition (e.g., Brewer, 1991; McGuire & McGuire, 1988; Simon, 1999; Turner, 1985). For example, McGuire and McGuire (1988) reviewed abundant evidence that people often define and describe themselves in ways that emphasize situationally salient and distinctive attributes (see also Brewer & Pickett, 1999). Self-categorization theory (e.g., Turner, 1985; Turner & Onorato, 1999) provides a particularly comprehensive framework for understanding the determinants of self-definition. Within this approach, it is assumed that the self can be categorized at different levels of inclusiveness, ranging from a focus strictly on one's personal identity to more encompassing group-based identities. Whether one focuses on a particular group identity is theoretically a function of "structural" or "comparative" fit, defined by the extent to which substantial similarities are seen among the members of a target group identity, relative to differences between this group and salient out-group(s). "Normative fit" is also an important consideration, reflecting the extent to which the differences perceived between the relevant groups are seen as meaningfully reflecting the perceiver's background knowledge about the groups and their norms (Oakes, Turner, & Haslam, 1991). The present findings suggest an additional, more motivational factor that can dictate the salience of particular social identities.

Social identity theorists have long been interested in the question of how people cope with threatening intergroup comparisons (e.g., Ellemers, 1993; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Being a member of a group that is inferior to a salient out-group is a situation that is generally analogous to the one that we have investigated in the present studies. The principal options in such a situation, according to the theory, are (a) individual mobility—actually leaving or disidentifying with the unsatisfactory group; (b) social creativity—

cognitively reconstruing the intergroup situation in a more in-group-favoring manner, for example by emphasizing different dimensions for comparison or focusing on a different out-group; and (c) social competition—engaging in activism designed to enhance the relative standing of the in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Alternatively, members of threatened groups may emphasize the heterogeneity of the group or focus on individual-level self-categorizations rather than on social identities (e.g., Lee & Ottati, 1995). The present findings indicate a dynamic relationship between the individual self and the social self, because they suggest that social identities may be actively recruited or strategically deemphasized in ways that function to protect the individual self from a situation of comparative interpersonal threat. Rather than conceiving of personal and social selves strictly as separate, autonomously functioning domains of identity, the present findings highlight the interplay between social facets of the self and individual identity and feelings of self-worth. Clearly, much more research is needed to understand the interactions between the different levels of self-categorization that have been extensively studied in recent years.

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