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## You never compare alone: How social consensus and comparative context affect self-evaluation

**Abstract:** Three studies address the role of social consensus on evaluative standards in different comparative contexts. Previous research has documented that self-categorisation at the individual or group level changes social comparison effects in terms of assimilation and contrast. With regard to self-ratings of physical attractiveness, the present studies show that people who focus on group membership can benefit from including outstanding others in their reference group, whereas people who focus on their individual attributes run the risk of self-devaluation. It is argued that high consensus strengthens the association between evaluative standards and group membership and renders the inclusion of outstanding others more likely. Study 3 shows that the need to protect self-esteem moderates the influence of perceived consensus. Stressing the individual self led participants who received negative feedback to exclude outstanding others when consensus was low. Stressing the social self, however, led participants to include outstanding others when consensus was high.

**Key words:** Social Comparison, Self-Categorisation, Stereotypes, Physical Attractiveness

Although comparison feedback almost inevitably affects people's self-evaluations (cf. Mussweiler, Rüter, & Epstude, 2004), it is surprisingly difficult to predict how evaluations of comparison others affect people's self-evaluations. One reason lies in the fact that people tend to distort comparison feedback in a self-serving manner (e.g., Tesser, 1988). Comparing with attractive others, for instance, can lower satisfaction with physical attractiveness (e.g., Kenrick, Montello, Guiterres, & Trost, 1993; Patrick, Neighbors, & Knee, 2004; Thornton & Moore, 1993) and perceivers therefore often deny the importance of physical attractiveness to avoid self-denigration (e.g., Henderson-King, Henderson-King, & Hoffman, 2001; Miyake & Zuckerman, 1993; Richins, 1991). Another reason lies in the fact that self-evaluation depends both on which aspects or characteristics of the self are rendered accessible during comparison and on how comparison information is encoded (e.g., Dijksterhuis, Spears, & Lépinasse, 2001; Haddock, Macrae, & Fleck, 2002; Mussweiler, 2003). Furthermore, comparison outcomes depend upon how the perceiver and comparison others are categorised (e.g., Blanton, 2001; Brewer & Weber, 1994; Schmitt, Silvia, & Branscombe, 2000; Schwarz & Bless, 1992).

The present research examines how social consensus on evaluative standards influences people's self-evaluations.

Social consensus is assumed to strengthen the association between evaluative criteria and group membership (Sechrist & Stangor, 2001; cf. Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997) and to alter mental representations of the social category to which the comparer and others belong (Schwarz & Bless, 1992; 2007). By social consensus, we do not mean that one's own beliefs are shared by others but that many other people share a particular belief or judgment. Consensus on evaluative standards renders comparison feedback more informative and more relevant for self-evaluation. If most women think a given actor is highly attractive, the particular features that the actor has may become more relevant for other men's self-evaluation. Above and beyond this informational function, however, social consensus on evaluative standards may also determine how comparison others are categorised. More precisely, consensus should determine whether comparison others are included or excluded in a perceiver's reference group. Consensus on evaluative standards is thus conceived as a contextual variable that affects the mental representation of social categories, but not necessarily evaluations of comparison others.

When and how does social consensus affect the mental representation of social categories? We argue that consensus renders group-based expectancies more

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salient and that consensus information should be more influential in situations where perceivers share some social or psychological characteristics with the comparison other (e.g., Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Goethals & Darley, 1977). In such contexts, perceivers may spontaneously ask how well a comparison other represents a social category, particularly if the comparison other is markedly different from the perceiver. Prototype-models of stereotyping suggest that comparison others can shift the central tendency of a category and the perceived variability within groups. Whether or not this happens, however, depends on whether the comparison other is included in or excluded from the reference group (Blanton, 2001; Maurer, Park, & Rothbart, 1995; Park, Judd, & Ryan, 1991; Park, Ryan, & Judd, 1992; Schwarz & Bless, 1992, 2007; Smith & Zárate, 1992). If the perceiver and the comparison other belong to the same social category, inclusion/exclusion inevitably affects perceptions of the self-inclusive category. Inclusion/exclusion, in turn, should depend on how perceivers categorise themselves and on how strongly evaluative criteria are associated with group membership.

One factor that should determine inclusion/exclusion of extreme exemplars is self-categorisation. Previous research has documented that the same comparison standard can provoke contrast effects if the distinctiveness of the self is salient, but assimilation effects if the collective self is activated. In other words, the comparative context can render either individual or collective self-definitions more salient and self-categorisation then determines how people respond to comparison information (e.g., Blanton, Christie, & Dye, 2002; Brewer & Weber, 1994; Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, 2002; Schmitt et al., 2000). Activating the social self shifts attention from interpersonal to intergroup differences and self-evaluations typically echo evaluations of the self-inclusive category when group membership is salient (Miller, 1986; Rothgerber, 1997; Simon, Pantaleo, & Mummendey, 1995; Suls, Gaes, & Gastorf, 1979; Tajfel, 1978; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). People who focus on group membership are concerned with favourable evaluations of the group and should be inclined to perceive outstanding others as part of the group. Conversely, people who focus on their individual attributes are concerned with individual self-esteem and should thus be less inclined to perceive outstanding others as part of the group. Thus, in situations where people strive to maintain positive self-regard, perceived social consensus has different implications for the self-evaluation of people who focus either on their social or on their individual self.

The way in which social consensus influences comparison outcomes should further depend on whether people focus on the central tendency or upon the perceived variability within a reference group. Schwarz and colleagues suggested that inclusion/exclusion of extreme group members affects perceptions of the particular group member and the group as a whole (Bless, Schwarz, Bodenhausen, & Thiel, 2001; Schwarz & Bless, 2007). Our prediction that an inclusion of outstanding others elevates self-evaluations of individuals who define themselves through group membership but lowers self-evaluations of individuals

who focus on their individual characteristics is based on the premise that perceivers focus primarily on the central tendency. If, however, perceivers focus on the variability among group members, high consensus should diminish the impact of comparative context. If an outstanding other in fact increases the perceived variability, this group member becomes less threatening to comparers who define themselves in terms of individual characteristics, since the relative distance between a perceiver's standing and the central tendency of a category diminishes with increasing variability. For the same reason, people who define themselves through group membership would benefit less from inclusion if they focus on variability rather than on the central tendency. One's standing on an evaluative dimension could determine whether one focuses on variability rather than on the group's central tendency. In contexts where personal identity is salient, people who are dissatisfied with their standing should emphasise variability within groups.

We thus argue that a comparison standard is often perceived as a particular exemplar of a social category to which the perceiver belongs and that comparison outcomes depend on whether consensus alters mental representations of the reference group. But why should social consensus facilitate the inclusion of extreme exemplars into a social category? In the realm of social stereotyping, social consensus has been shown to enhance the association between an evaluative standard and a category and thus to increase the likelihood that out-group members are perceived and treated more stereotypically (e.g., Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds, & Turner, 1999; Sechrist & Stangor, 2001). By analogy, we argue that social consensus on evaluative standards determines whether evaluative criteria are relevant for self-evaluation. We further posit that high consensus fosters inclusion of comparison others whereas low consensus fosters exclusion. Other in-group members who conform to normative expectations and reflect positively on the group are more likely to be included in the reference group, at least when inclusion serves a group member's dominant self-motive (e.g., to hold a positive self-view). Furthermore, the strength of the association per se may determine whether comparison others are perceptually included as long as the perceiver and the comparison other share some social or psychological characteristics (e.g., gender; cf. Brown et al., 1992).

Indirect support for this latter hypothesis stems from stereotyping research. Stereotypical expectations enhance stereotype conformity particularly in situations where conformity is rewarding and where strong stereotypical expectations do exist (e.g., Baeyer, Sherk, & Zanna, 1981; Christensen, Rothgerber, Wood, & Matz, 2004; Fazio, Effrein, & Falender, 1981; Jennings, Geis, & Brown, 1980). Generally, increasing the perceptual salience of category-membership renders group characteristics more relevant for self-definition (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Onorato, 1999). Furthermore, group members' self-perceptions do tend to be in line with clear-cut (stereotypical) expectations, even if the people do not endorse the stereotypes concerning their own group (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003; Crocker, Luhtanen, & Sommers, 2004;

Lalonde & Silverman, 1994; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Reicher & Levine, 1994; Tajfel, 1978). Thus, agreement on how a particular in-group member is appraised should render that person more relevant for social comparison in contexts where evaluation standards are associated with group membership (e.g., Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Park & Rothbart, 1982).

Further support for the notion that consensus determines inclusion/exclusion is provided by studies showing that normative expectations of reference groups are internalised in the form of self-evaluative standards (e.g., Higgins & Silberman, 1998). People typically seek inclusion in reference groups in contexts where the in-group is distinguished from a relevant out-group. Moreover, people tend to maintain positive self-regard and to avoid social disapproval through conforming to the expectations of important reference groups (e.g., Blanton & Christie, 2003; Leary & Downs, 1995; Jones & Gerard, 1967; Kelley, 1968). Thus, although socialisation does not inevitably instil self-evaluative standards in its targets, the more others agree on normative expectations, the more relevant those expectations become for self-evaluation. Together, then, research from social stereotyping and normative influence provides some support for the notion that perceived consensus strengthens the association between evaluative criteria and group membership. The stronger this association is, the more likely it is that outstanding members are included in the category, at least if one assumes that group members who reflect positively on the group are evaluated more positively than negatively deviant group members (cf. Bettencourt, Dill, Greathouse, Charlton, & Mullholland, 1997; Biernat, Vescio, & Billings, 1999; Eidelman & Biernat, 2003; Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988).

### Overview and Predictions

Participants in the present studies were exposed to a highly attractive same-sex other and were then asked to rate their own physical attractiveness. Prior to social comparison, the comparative context was manipulated by inducing competition either within same-sex participants or between opposite-sex participants (cf. Hogg & Turner, 1987; Krebs & Adinolfi, 1975; Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1991). Participants were then exposed to pictures of attractive same-sex others and were led to believe that these individuals were either consensually rated as highly attractive or not. Consensus thus referred to global evaluations and not to the presence or extremity of particular features. The first study tests the hypothesis that social consensus renders evaluative criteria more relevant for self-definition and thus moderates the influence of self-categorisation. If high consensus really renders evaluative criteria more relevant, it should enhance self-evaluations in an intergroup comparison context but erode them in an interindividual comparison context.

Study 2 examined how multiple standards affect self-evaluations. More precisely, the comparison other was embedded in a series of less attractive same-sex others who ostensibly participated in the same study. Presenting an extreme exemplar against a homogeneous group of people who share the same group membership should render

this deviant exemplar perceptually salient. Furthermore, the central tendency of the category should shift towards the extremes if the deviant exemplar is included in the category. Hence, if consensus fosters inclusion, self-evaluations should decrease in situations that provoke intragroup competition but increase in situations that provoke intergroup competition. And if low consensus fosters exclusion, this effect should be eliminated or even reversed in contexts where evaluations do not converge. Alternatively, as the inclusion of extreme in-group members increases the perceived variability within a reference group, comparison effects should be diluted in situations where people focus on variability. Group members who focus on individual attributes can benefit from perceptually excluding outstanding others. Study 3 thus examined whether self-enhancement needs moderate group members' inclination to include or exclude outstanding others. Participants received feedback on their physical attractiveness and were then exposed to a highly attractive comparison other. Negative feedback should lead group members to include outstanding others in the group, particularly if consensus is high. Emphasising individual attributes, however, should lead people who receive negative feedback to exclude outstanding others, particularly if consensus is low. This influence of social consensus should diminish in situations where people receive positive feedback and thus feel no strong need to protect or enhance their self-view (cf. Tesser & Cornell, 1991).

## STUDY 1

### Participants and Design

A total of 120 university students (60 women, age: 22.7 years) were assigned to one of the conditions of the 2 (comparison orientation: within-group, intergroup) by 2 (social consensus: low, high) between-subjects design.

### Procedure and Measures

The study was run in four-person mixed-sex groups. Four seats were arranged so that two monitors were in parallel and two other monitors vis-à-vis on the same table. Participants were informed that they would first have an opportunity to get to know each other. The experimenter then started a computer game and explained that their task would be to navigate a mouse through a maze as quickly as possible (participants had 2 minutes to play the game). To induce *interpersonal* (intragroup) competition, the experimenter went on to say that the two female participants should sit together on one side of the table and the two male participants at the other side of the table. Without any further explanation, the experimenter told participants that they should try to do their best and to defeat their respective neighbours. In the *intergroup* competition condition, participants were similarly arranged but the experimenter told participants that they should try to do their best to defeat the other group (sex).

Before they started, they were asked to complete a brief questionnaire. After indicating their age, college major, and sex, participants indicated on 7-point scales (1, *does not apply at all*; 7, *perfectly applies*) whether they felt close to the same-sex other, whether they wanted to find out if they were better than same-sex others, whether they could imagine that men and women differ in their computer skills, and whether they believed that sex is predictive of success or failure in regard to this computer game. The first two items assess intragroup competition and the remaining two items intergroup competition. As the answers to these four questions were homogeneous after recoding the first two items (Cronbach's alpha = .88), they were averaged into a measure of perceived intergroup competition (a principle component analysis revealed a single-factor solution). High scores on this measure thus indicate an intergroup comparison orientation and low scores an intragroup comparison orientation. After performing the game, participants were made aware that they had been filmed by a web cam that was unobtrusively placed nearby the monitor.

Participants were then asked to move to separate cubicles where they should complete a questionnaire on "social perception". More specifically, the cover story informed participants that the experimenters were interested in how people form impressions about same-sex others who are considered as advertising models and whether they think that customers would appraise a certain product as better or worse if the model advertised the product. Participants were then presented a full-body colour image (2x5 inches) of a same-sex other who was unambiguously rated as being attractive in a pilot study involving male and female participants ( $M_s = 5.97$  to  $6.02$  on a scale ranging from 1 to 7). To make the cover story more convincing, they were then presented an ad displaying an electric tooth-brush. Pilot testing had revealed that men and women evaluated this product similarly. Participants were then asked to form an impression of the target in terms of his or her qualification as a professional model. They then rated the physical attractiveness of the comparison other on two scales (1 *not at all beautiful/no sex-appeal*; 7, *very beautiful/strong sex-appeal*;  $r = .72, p < .001$ ).

Next, participants in the *high consensus* condition learned that among those (of the *opposite* sex) who had already participated in this study, more than 86 percent rated the target person as "highly attractive". In the *low consensus* condition, participants learned that only 14 percent rated the target person as highly attractive. To render this latter information more credible, it was said that the experimenters had so far used different pictures to test their predictions and that a low consensus could simply mean that the preferences of the opposite sex vary considerably. Participants then rated their satisfaction with their own physical attractiveness on a 7-point scale (1, *not at all*; 7, *very much*) with items such as: "I am satisfied with the way I look", "I like myself", and "I think that I am attractive" (Cronbach's alpha = .90). Several other items were included but they are not relevant for the present purposes.

## Results

Sex of participants had no effects and did not interact with any of the independent variables. A 2 (comparison orientation) x 2 (social consensus) ANOVA on the composite measure of comparison orientation showed main effects for comparison orientation and consensus. As expected, participants who were instructed to compete with their same-sex interaction partner were more concerned with intragroup than with intergroup comparison,  $M = 4.69$  vs.  $M = 5.37, F(1, 116) = 15.08, p < .001$ . Please recall that high scores indicate an intergroup orientation. In addition, participants in the high consensus condition were more concerned with intergroup than with intragroup comparison,  $M = 5.25$  vs.  $M = 4.81, F(1, 116) = 6.46, p < .02$ . Another 2 x 2 ANOVA regarding the comparison others' attractiveness showed no significant effects. However, self-ratings of attractiveness were significantly affected by the manipulations. Self-ratings of attractiveness in the high consensus condition were lower as compared to the low consensus condition,  $M = 4.43$  vs.  $M = 4.83, F(1, 116) = 3.92, p = .05$ .

As Table 1 shows, however, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction between consensus and comparison orientation,  $F(1, 116) = 16.64, p < .001$  ( $d = .44$ ). With regard to the intergroup comparison condition, simple contrast analyses showed that high consensus led to more positive self-evaluations than low consensus. Furthermore, participants in the low consensus condition rated themselves more positively when they adopted an intragroup rather than an intergroup comparison orientation.

**Table 1. Self-rated physical attractiveness following upward comparison, Study 1**

	Level of Self-Categorization			
	Individual		Collective	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Social Consensus				
Low	5.00 <sub>a</sub>	(0.95)	3.86 <sub>b</sub>	(1.02)
High	4.58 <sub>a</sub>	(1.01)	5.08 <sub>a</sub>	(1.24)

*Note.* Responses were on 7-point scales (1 to 7); means with different subscripts differ at  $p < .05$ .

## Discussion

Overall, the pattern of means supports the hypothesis that consensus information moderates the influence of comparative context. However, support for the prediction that consensus strengthens the association between group membership and evaluative criteria and thus renders these criteria more important for self-evaluation is mixed. The comparative context was more influential when consensus was low. In this condition, participants who adopted an intergroup comparison orientation rated themselves more negatively and those who adopted a

within-group comparison orientation rated themselves more positively (in relative terms, because a control group was not included). Thus, although speculative, participants who emphasised their individual attributes (intragroup orientation) uplifted their self-perceptions in a situation where high standards were disputed. In addition, adopting an intergroup orientation may render other evaluative dimensions than physical attractiveness more relevant to self-definition (e.g., abilities, temperament, social skills, etc.). This reasoning seems plausible because consensus information referred to out-group members' opinions. Exposure to out-group opinions about the in-group may automatically activate other group attributes that are relevant for self-definition (cf. Oakes, Turner, & Haslam, 1991; Turner et al., 1994).

The results are nevertheless promising since they support the notion that social comparison outcomes depend on whether evaluative standards are consensually shared or not. Social consensus referred to how many members of the opposite sex rated the target as highly attractive. Although pilot testing showed that both sexes rated the comparison standards similarly, in-group vs. out-group consensus may have quite different implications for self-evaluation, especially when in-group and out-group opinions do not converge (cf. Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). If perceptions converge, group members may evaluate outstanding in-group members even more positively and unfavourable in-group members more negatively if group identity is at stake or if people strongly identify with their in-group (cf. Biernat et al., 1999; Marques et al., 1988). Although we do not expect that social comparison on physical attractiveness fosters in-group favouritism (because men and women do not compete on physical attractiveness across the sexes), social consensus in Study 2 was manipulated by informing participants about the ratings of other in-group members. High consensus regarding the attractiveness of an outstanding group member should enhance evaluations of the group as a whole, and this favourable evaluation should then carry over to group members who adopt an intergroup comparison perspective. In contrast, high consensus should lower self-evaluations of group members who define themselves in terms of individual attributes.

## STUDY 2

We proposed two mechanisms that may determine how consensus influences self-evaluations. First, inclusion/exclusion of the standard alters the perceived variability within a group. If people focus on variability, the impact of comparative context should diminish at low levels of consensus. Second, inclusion/exclusion alters perceptions of the in-group prototype. Inclusion of an outstanding exemplar shifts the central tendency towards the positive endpoint. Hence, emphasising individual attributes should lower self-evaluations if an outstanding individual is included in the category, whereas emphasising one's group membership should enhance self-evaluations through more favourable evaluations of the group. In order to test

this prediction, we exposed each participant to a same-sex other who was embedded in a group of other same-sex persons. They were physically less attractive than the comparison other. If perceivers focus more on normative standards rather than on variability, adopting an intragroup comparison orientation should result in less favourable self-evaluations than adopting an intergroup comparison orientation, provided that high consensus in fact fosters inclusion of the comparison other in the group. And if low consensus fosters exclusion, this effect should be reversed.

## Participants and Design

Seventy-two university students (36 women, age: 23.4 years) were assigned to one of the conditions of the 2 (comparison orientation: within-group, intergroup) by 2 (social consensus: low, high) between-subjects design.

## Procedure and Measures

The procedure was largely identical to the one adopted in Study 1, with two exceptions. First, social consensus referred to other in-group members' judgments of the comparison other. Second, the comparison target (different from the one employed in Study 1) was embedded in a group of same-sex others. Similarly to Study 1, participants first saw the target person alone. The target person was displayed in the upper panel (centred). After 30 seconds, however, four pictures of same-sex others were presented below the target person (the size of all pictures was 1.5 x 3 inches, approximately). Participants were informed that those four pictures (each showing a face and parts of the torso) depicted other participants who had been randomly selected by the computer to provide a backdrop for target evaluations. They were also informed that "... evaluating a single person might be facilitated by comparison information" and additionally reminded that all participants had been filmed by a web cam during the computer game. In fact, however, those portraits were prepared in advance. Pilot testing showed that men and women rated the four backdrop targets as moderately attractive (3.82 to 4.27 on a scale ranging from 1 to 7, whereas the female and male comparison others were rated much more positively: 6.12 and 5.98). Participants then rated the attractiveness of the comparison other on two items ( $r = .73, p < .001$ ; see Study 1), also indicating the perceived variability among the five targets (the comparison other plus the four backdrop targets) on a scale ranging from 1 (*very similar*) to 7 (*highly dissimilar*). Finally, participants rated their own physical attractiveness on three scales (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ; see Study 1). Like in the previous study, participants indicated their comparison orientation on four items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ) before they performed the computer game.

## Results

Sex of participants did not interact with any of the independent variables. However, there was a main effect for sex of participants in regard to the physical attractiveness of

the comparison other. Female participants rated the target as more attractive than male participants. This main effect is of minor importance here. A 2 (comparison orientation)  $\times$  2 (social consensus) ANOVA on perceived attractiveness of the comparison other did not show any significant effects (see above). Similarly, perceived variability was unaffected by the experimental manipulations. A 2  $\times$  2 ANOVA showed that participants in the within-group condition were more concerned with intragroup comparison than participants in the intergroup competition condition,  $M = 3.22$  vs.  $M = 4.78$ ,  $F(1, 68) = 24.08$ ,  $p < .001$ . With regard to participants' ratings of their own physical attractiveness, a 2  $\times$  2 ANOVA only showed the predicted two-way interaction between comparative context and consensus,  $F(1, 68) = 7.55$ ,  $p < .01$  ( $d = .40$ ). As Table 2 shows, consensus moderated the influence of comparative context on self-evaluations. With regard to the high consensus condition, simple contrast analyses showed that participants who focused on their individual attributes evaluated themselves more negatively than participants who focused on their group membership. Low consensus diminished this difference. In addition, consensus affected self-evaluations in the condition in which participants adopted a within-group comparison orientation. Low consensus led to more favourable self-evaluations than high consensus. Furthermore, although the respective contrast was not significant ( $p < .08$ , two-tailed), low consensus undermined self-evaluations in the condition in which participants adopted a between-group comparison orientation.

### Discussion

This pattern of means is consistent with the hypothesis that the influence of comparative context is stronger in situations where evaluative standards are relevant for self-evaluation. Consensus appears to have strengthened the association between group membership and evaluative criteria and these criteria were then applied to self-judgments. The findings are also consistent with the hypothesis that consensus fosters inclusion of extreme exemplars and that inclusion alters perceptions of the central tendency within a social category. Alternatively, if participants had focused more on the variability within groups, the effect of comparative context should have diminished in the high consensus condition, since variability blurs evaluations of the in-group and also one's standing relative to other in-group members. Briefly stated, variability prevents extreme evaluations of a category and this circumstance undermines group-enhancement as well as self-devaluation in situations where outstanding group members are included in the category. (see Table 2.)

Perceived variability in this study was not significantly correlated with self-evaluations, although people may systematically distort perceived variability to enhance either individual or collective self-esteem (cf. Doosje, Spears, & Ellemers, 1995). As we have assessed neither the attractiveness of the target after presenting less attractive group members nor perceived "groupness", we cannot definitely answer the question whether consensus

really affected inclusion/exclusion of the target. Ideally, one should assess perceived variability prior to and after presenting an outstanding group member, also assessing the perceived typicality of the comparison other with regard to the social category to which he or she belongs. We did not adopt this strategy here because placing strong emphasis on evaluations of same-sex fellow students could have evoked defensive processing of comparison information (cf. Tesser, 1988). The fact that perceived variability was unaffected by the manipulations and that upward comparison in the individual self condition lowered self-evaluations seems to justify our concerns in retrospect. Nevertheless, a shortcoming of this study is that perceived typicality of the comparison other was not assessed. Thus, it remains speculative whether consensus in fact determined inclusion/exclusion of the comparison other.

**Table 2. Self-rated physical attractiveness following upward comparison, Study 2**

	Level of Self-Categorization			
	Individual		Collective	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Social Consensus				
Low	4.56 <sub>a</sub>	(1.20)	4.22 <sub>a</sub>	(1.19)
High	3.67 <sub>b</sub>	(1.53)	5.00 <sub>a</sub>	(1.21)

*Note.* Responses were on 7-point scales (1 to 7); means with different subscripts differ at  $p < .05$ .

### STUDY 3

One aim of Study 3 was to show that consensus affects the perceived typicality of the comparison other (inclusion/exclusion). Another aim was to show that the influence of consensus depends on how well inclusion/exclusion serves an individual's need for positive self-regard. Individuals who focus more on their individual attributes than on group membership should respond differently to social consensus information. As positive group evaluations are likely to carry over to group members in situations where group attributes are more salient than individual characteristics, people who adopt an intergroup orientation should be particularly inclined to include outstanding group members in the reference group after receiving *negative* personal feedback. In contrast, people who focus on their individual characteristics should feel particularly threatened by outstanding members who are included in the reference group. In this situation, people typically seek downward social comparison (cf. Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wills, 1981). Thus, low consensus should lead individuals who focus on their personal self to exclude outstanding others after they had received negative personal feedback. Providing positive feedback, however, should diminish this effect, because people who receive self-affirming feedback should feel no strong need to enhance their self-esteem.

## Participants and Design

Eighty-eight (44 women) university students (age: 22.9 years) were assigned to one of the conditions of the 2 (comparison orientation: within-groups, intergroup) by 2 (social consensus: low, high) by 2 (feedback: positive, negative) between-subjects design.

## Procedure and Measures

The procedure was identical to the one of the previous study, with one exception. Before the program started and participants could see the attractive comparison other, the experimenter asked participants if they had ever had the chance to act as a model. All participants negated this question, and the experimenter in the *negative* feedback condition casually stated that "... this is understandable, since one needs to comply with certain requirements". This feedback was kept rather vague, since the experimenter did not want to compromise participants. The experimenter thus went on to say that "... modelling is a job that not everyone wants to do. You need to be resilient and outgoing, I suppose". In the positive feedback condition, the experimenter instead said that "... I was wondering, since you seem to comply with certain requirements". The study was run with only one female experimenter who switched from one cubicle to the other during that phase of the experiment, so that some participants had to wait several minutes till the procedure continued. Controlling for this delay (sequence) did not change the results.

Similar to the previous study, participants first saw the comparison other and then (after 30 seconds) four other backdrop targets. The physical attractiveness of the comparison other was rated first ( $r = .62, p < .001$ ), then, the perceived variability with regard to physical attractiveness (1, *very similar*; 7, *very dissimilar*). Next, participants indicated whether they think that the comparison other (the model) is representative of their own sex-category (1, *not representative of my sex at all*; 7, *definitely representative of my sex*) and whether they perceived this person as someone who "... is characteristic of your sex" (1, *does not apply at all*; 7 *perfectly applies*). These two items ( $r = .47, p < .01$ ) were designed to assess the degree to which the comparison other was perceptually included in participants' own sex-category. Finally, participants rated their own physical attractiveness on three items (Cronbach's alpha = .85) and indicated their current mood (1, *sad*; 7, *joyous*). Participants were debriefed about the feedback manipulation at the end of the session.

## Results

Sex of participants affected the perceived typicality of the comparison target and self-evaluations but did not interact with any independent variable. Sex of participants was thus not included as an additional factor. Female participants perceived the outstanding other as more typical and rated themselves as less attractive than their male counterparts. Although speculative, women may

generally hold stronger expectations than men with regard to physical attractiveness, or their self-esteem may be more contingent on favourable feedback. However, because sex differences are of minor importance here, these differences are not further discussed. A 2 (comparison orientation) by 2 (social consensus) by 2 (feedback) ANOVA on comparison orientation showed that participants in the intergroup competition condition were more concerned with intergroup comparison than participants in the intragroup competition condition,  $M = 4.18$  vs.  $M = 3.46, F(1, 80) = 9.86, p < .01$ . Perceived variability was unaffected by the manipulations. A 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVA on the inclusion/exclusion measure revealed a marginal effect for consensus. The comparison other was perceived as being more representative of the sex-category in the high than in the low consensus condition,  $M = 4.73$  vs.  $M = 4.33, F(1, 80) = 3.68, p < .06$ . Evidence for the assumption that consensus affects symbolic inclusion/exclusion of others is thus not extremely convincing. With regard to the mood item, a 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVA revealed main effects for feedback and for consensus. Participants felt happier in the positive feedback than in the negative feedback condition,  $M = 5.12$  vs.  $M = 4.67, F(1, 80) = 5.77, p < .02$ . In addition, participants in the high consensus condition felt less happy than participants in the low consensus condition,  $M = 4.74$  vs.  $M = 5.08, F(1, 80) = 3.80, p < .06$ .

**Table 3. Self-rated physical attractiveness following upward comparison, Study 3**

	Level of Self-Categorization			
	Individual		Collective	
<i>Negative Feedback Condition</i>				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Social Consensus				
Low	5.33 <sub>a</sub>	(1.13)	4.42 <sub>a</sub>	(1.09)
High	4.11 <sub>b</sub>	(1.18)	5.39 <sub>a</sub>	(1.39)
<i>Positive Feedback Condition</i>				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Social Consensus				
Low	5.01 <sub>a</sub>	(1.07)	5.23 <sub>a</sub>	(0.82)
High	4.67 <sub>b</sub>	(0.86)	5.38 <sub>a</sub>	(1.08)

*Note.* Responses were on 7-point scales (1 to 7); means with different subscripts differ at  $p < .05$ .

To test the hypothesis that consensus moderates the influence of the comparative context on self-evaluations in situations in which people receive negative personal feedback and thus strive to enhance their self-esteem, self-rated physical attractiveness was subjected to a 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVA. In this analysis, a two-way interaction between comparison orientation and consensus emerged,  $F(1, 80) = 6.22, p < .02$  ( $d = .34$ ). Simple contrast analysis showed that participants who focused on their individual attributes

evaluated themselves more negatively in the high as compared to the low consensus condition. Furthermore, participants in the high consensus condition evaluated themselves more favourably when they focused on group membership rather than on their individual attributes. However, this pattern of means, which supports the hypothesis that consensus moderates the influence of comparison context, has to be interpreted in light of a significant three-way interaction,  $F(1, 80) = 4.57, p < .04$ . The Context  $\times$  Consensus interaction was decomposed for the positive and negative feedback conditions. As Table 3 shows, consensus had virtually no effect in the positive feedback condition. However, consensus clearly moderated the impact of comparative context in the negative feedback condition,  $F(1, 40) = 9.23, p < .01$ . This finding supports the hypothesis that consensus on evaluative criteria is more influential in situations where people strive to protect or enhance their personal or group-based self-esteem.

This conclusion is further substantiated by a mediation analysis with regard to the negative feedback condition. If the influence of consensus on self-evaluation is in fact determined by whether outstanding others are included in the reference group, perceived typicality should mediate the influence of consensus on self-evaluations in contexts where people strive to maintain a positive self-view. To test this prediction, scores in the intragroup comparison condition (within-sex) were reversely scored. Consensus (low: -1; high: +1) then predicted self-evaluations ( $\beta = .63, p < .001$ ) and typicality ( $\beta = .33, p < .05$ ). Typicality, in turn, predicted self-evaluations ( $\beta = .31, p < .05$ ). When self-evaluation was regressed simultaneously on consensus and perceived typicality of the comparison other, the direct effect of consensus was significantly reduced (Sobel-Test:  $Z = 2.17, p < .01$ ), whereas the relationship between typicality and self-evaluation remained significant ( $\beta = .27, p < .05$ ).

### Discussion

As a matter of fact, evidence for the hypothesis that social consensus on evaluative criteria fosters inclusion of extreme others in the social category to which both the perceiver and the comparison other belong is mixed at best. One shortcoming of this study (and the previous ones) is that perceived consensus was not assessed when it was clear whether the other participants agreed with one's judgment of the comparison other. Thus, we cannot test directly whether consensus increased or decreased the perceived typicality of the comparison other. The main reason why we did not include a measure of perceived consensus is that such a measure would probably be distorted by self-enhancement needs and should thus mirror to a strong degree an individual's actual self-evaluation. Future studies should nevertheless try to assess perceived consensus unobtrusively, also showing that perceived consensus is not distorted in situation where people do not engage in social comparison processes. Another shortcoming is that the typicality measure was anything but perfect. One could have asked participants to indicate whether they perceived any similarities between the comparison other and the other

four backdrop targets. Another possibility would have been to assess evaluations of the four targets and to examine the correlations between them and the outstanding comparison other. A positive correlation would have indicated inclusion of the comparison other (or an assimilation effect). Recall that the four randomly chosen targets were rated similarly on physical attractiveness and the comparison other should thus be perceived as different from the group.

The merit of this study lies in the fact that it provides a starting point for exploring the interplay between different self-motives (e.g. self-enhancement) and perceived social consensus. Self-enhancement needs were manipulated by giving participants either positive or negative feedback on their eligibility as professional models. The type of feedback that the participants received then determined how social consensus influenced social comparison outcomes. Ironically, the consensus manipulation did not mention any particular feature that defines physical attractiveness. The consensus information merely conveyed the degree to which others' appraisals of the comparison other converged. We deliberately avoided mentioning particular features (e.g., body weight, facial symmetry, hair colour, etc.) because perceivers can easily distort the relevance of specific attributes, a defensive process that helps to come to terms with negative comparison feedback. Strictly speaking, consensus information referred to evaluations and not to the existence or extremity of particular features. Hence, consensus did not affect perceived feature overlap between the self and another group member but the strength of the association between group membership and some abstract evaluation criterion.

### General Discussion

This research examined how perceived consensus on evaluative criteria influences one's self-evaluations in different comparative contexts. Evidence exists that the comparative context (self-categorisation) determines how people respond to evaluative comparison information (e.g., Brewer & Weber, 1994; Schmitt et al., 2000). The present studies add to this literature that social consensus moderates social comparison effects. Social comparison with superior in-group members enhances self-evaluations if people define themselves through group membership and associate themselves with favourable others. However, outstanding group members only contribute to a positive group evaluation if they are perceptually included in the reference group. As consensus strengthens the association between evaluative criteria and group membership, consensus should also determine whether others are included in the reference group. Similarly, superior others only impose a threat to individual self-regard if perceivers who focus on personal identity include superior others in the reference group. Self-categorisation thus determines how people process comparison information and consensus is one factor among others that determines whether comparison information in fact influences self-evaluations.

The present findings are consistent with the notion that social consensus on evaluation standards (or evaluations

*per se*) strengthens the association between the standards and group membership (cf. Sechrist & Stangor, 2001) and that the strength of this association determines whether others are included in the reference group. However, direct evidence for this latter notion was mixed at best. Inclusion/exclusion can be operationalised in multiple ways and assessing perceived typicality or the latencies of typicality ratings may not be the best way to solve this problem, last but not least because typicality is normally assessed in reference to a relevant out-group (cf. Krueger, Hasman, Acevedo, & Villano, 2003; Turner & Onorato, 1999). Future studies may assess the strength of association directly (cf. Sechrist & Stangor, 2001) and then relate it to evaluations of the target and the perceived variability within groups. Despite these ambiguities, the results obtained in Study 3 support the notion that inclusion/exclusion has different implications for self-evaluation in contexts where people strive to maintain a favourable self-view. Perceivers in the negative personal feedback condition who defined themselves in terms of group membership preferred to include an outstanding other in the reference group when consensus was high. Conversely, perceivers who focused on their individual self preferred to exclude an outstanding other when consensus was low. It seems evident from these data that the impact of perceived consensus is susceptible to self-enhancement needs and that perceivers are inclined to handle or distort perceived consensus in a way that serves their self-motives best.

Studies 2 and 3 addressed the role of multiple standards. More precisely, the outstanding group member was perceived against four other group members who were similar to each other and thus served as a homogeneous backdrop. We decided to present a homogeneous group because we wanted to examine whether inclusion of an outstanding other increases the perceived variability and whether people focus more on variability than on the central tendency within their reference group. As we understand it, the findings clearly show that people focus more on the central tendency. Otherwise, increased variability (through the inclusion of extreme exemplars) should have diminished social comparison effects in both self-categorisation conditions. One could argue that variability had no effects here because presenting the comparison other prior to less attractive others simply augmented evaluations of the comparison other via perceptual contrast (cf. Schwarz & Bless, 2007). If this argument is correct, the designs of Studies 2 and 3 did not offer an optimal test of the hypothesis that variability undermines social comparison effects. The main goal of this research, however, was not to show that judgments of targets are relative but to demonstrate that social consensus determines the self-evaluative implications of outstanding others. Someone is perceived as outstanding if he or she is contrasted away from "ordinary" others. Overall, the data suggest that individuals who focused on their individual attributes "overlooked" the increased variability but focused on the self-threatening characteristics of the outstanding other. The data do not suggest, however, that individuals who focused on their individual attributes distorted perceptions of the outstanding other. Instead, they

judged the outstanding other as less characteristic of the reference group.

Inclusion/exclusion may be trivial in regard to stereotypical standards since stereotypes evoke evaluation standards that are specific to the category and thus hard to escape (e.g., Biernat & Kobryniewicz, 1997). Consensus may have a weaker impact on self-evaluations when stereotypic evaluation standards are repudiated (e.g., Barreto & Ellemers, 2003; Branscombe et al., 1999; Deaux & Eithier, 1998). However, physical attractiveness is distinct from other stereotypic evaluation standards inasmuch as benign intergroup relations typically provoke conformity to these expectations (cf. Kenrick et al., 1993; Krebs & Adinolfi, 1975). Generally, we expect consensus to play an important role in contexts where evaluation standards are strongly associated with group membership and where people expect social approval for meeting these standards. In such contexts, perceived variability can protect an individual's self-regard. On the other hand, perceived variability within groups undermines intergroup differences, and group members thus benefit less from including extreme exemplars in their own category in situations where group distinctness or group status are important.

Perceived variability has yet another implication for social comparison processes since variability determines whether one perceives oneself as similar or dissimilar to other in-group members. As inclusion increases the variability of the category, one is more likely to detect similarities between oneself and other group members (e.g., Park & Rothbart, 1982; Schwarz & Bless, 2007). In-group variability is assumed to determine whether people categorise themselves as group members or not, particularly when group memberships, or at least the importance of group memberships to self-definition, are rather flexible. In such contexts, perceived social consensus and an individual's desire to maintain a positive self-view should have a strong influence on inclusion/exclusion of the self in the reference group.

Research on social comparison has devoted relatively little attention to factors that determine how perceivers categorise themselves and others. It is known that increasing the accessibility of individual relative to group characteristics renders contrastive comparison effects more likely (Brewer & Weber, 1994). Moreover, the fear to conform to negative group perceptions can lead group members to adopt an interpersonal comparison orientation and to dissociate themselves from unfavourable others (Blanton, 2002; Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005). We suggest that perceivers may ask themselves spontaneously how well comparison others fit into the reference group. Knowing which factors govern inclusion/exclusion has thus important implications for social comparison at the interpersonal and intergroup level. Perceived consensus and the comparative context, among other factors, determine how people respond to comparison information and these factors also seem to determine whether other group members are seen as representative of the in-group to which the perceiver belongs. Understanding these bidirectional relationships can

help to solve the puzzle why self-evaluations are sometimes hard to predict from evaluations of comparison others.

In the present studies, we did not assess whether inclusion of outstanding others affects evaluations of the group as a whole because we wanted to prevent a strong activation of gender stereotypes and pertinent beauty standards. Unlike feedback on attractiveness, group members often do not endorse category-based expectations and judgments by out-groups but emphasise a self-definition that is different from the one social stereotypes convey. Consensus across groups has quite different implications for intragroup consensus on evaluative standards. Disaccord at the group level may pave the way for in-group favouritism as it renders group membership and group norms more salient. Disaccord may also invite group members who strongly identify with their in-group to derogate unfavourable in-group members in contexts where intergroup relations appear antagonistic. Although it is difficult to imagine “two mutually exclusive dichotomous social categories having more contact with one another than men and women” (Park & Rothbart, 1982; p. 1058), there are undeniably situations in which men and women perceive social relations between the sexes as competitive. We suggest that intragroup consensus on evaluative standards should be more strongly associated with group evaluations in such contexts and thus renders upward comparison less threatening. In other words, when social relations between the sexes are competitive, the beauty is not a beast but a boon.

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