

Upward, Downward, and Horizontal Social Comparisons in Teachers: Effects on Adjustment and Student Engagement

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Introduction

There exists a problem amongst teachers with regards to motivation and persistence, with approximately 40% of teachers estimated to leave the teaching occupation within their first five years (Rones, 2011). Research on burnout further suggests that such attrition may be due to of psychological resources required to persist when the difficulties of one's work become excessive (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). Burnout has been also identified as an outcome of occupational stress (Antoniou, Polychroni & Vlachakis, 2006; Blase, 1982; Kokkinos, 2007, Kyraicou, 1987; Manassero et al., 2006; McCormick, 1997; McCormick & Shi, 1999).

Previously researched motivational predictors of burnout in teachers have generally fallen into two categories focusing on perceived competence or expectancy (e.g., self-efficacy, Woolfolk Hoy et al., 2009) and value-related constructs such as goals (e.g., mastery vs. ability; Butler & Shibaz, 2008), intrinsic motivation (Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007), and specific instructional objectives (e.g., disciplinary mastery vs. social responsibility; Banville, Desrosier, & Genet-Volet, 2002). Whereas these research efforts are consistent with a traditional expectancy-value perspective on achievement motivation (see Wigfield, Tonks, & Klauda, 2009), research exploring role of higher-order motivational constructs in predicting burnout, such as motivational self-regulation strategies, is presently lacking. Given prior research with students underscoring the importance of motivational strategy use (Pintrich, 1999; Wolters, 2003) as well as volition in educational settings (e.g., Kuhl, 1996; Ottingen & Gollwitzer, 2009), it stands to reason that higher order, self-regulatory strategies should also predict critical outcomes in teachers over and above more fundamental motivational constructs.

As a prominent theory of motivational self-regulation from the developmental psychological literature, Heckhausen et al.'s (2010) motivational theory of life-span development attempts to explain how individuals regulate their motivation in response to situational opportunities and constraints, using three general classes of motivational strategies. The first class involves *goal engagement* and refers to attempts to achievement of desired outcomes through effort, adaptive help-seeking, value enhancement, and minimizing distractions. Generally speaking, engagement oriented strategies overlap directly with constructs involving both expectancy and value that have been previously addressed in teacher motivation research. In contrast, the second class of strategies involve *goal disengagement* that instead involves downgrading the importance of a chosen goal. This strategy is predominantly maladaptive in achievement settings and has been evaluated as a consequence of demotivation in teachers (i.e., intentions to quit; Klassen & Chui, 2011).

Finally, the third class of *self-protection* motivational strategies involves compensating for the motivation impact of negative events. Whereas self-protective strategies have recently been found to predict better health (Hall et al, 2006a), motivation to succeed (Hall, 2008), and academic achievement in students (Hall et al., 2006c), these strategies are generally underexplored in educational settings due to their explicit focus on well-being, as opposed to achievement, and have yet to be investigated in teachers. One specific self-protective strategy previously explored in prior research based on Heckhausen's theory are social comparisons that, according to Festinger (1954), typically involves comparing oneself with worse-off others. Whereas the psychological benefits of this approach have been evaluated with older adults (e.g., Chipperfield & Perry 2006; Hall et al., 2010; Heckhausen, 1999), no research to date has explored the effects of this strategy among teachers. Moreover, there exists no published research with teachers exploring social comparisons of any type as a motivational strategy for dealing with classroom challenges including downward (worse off others), horizontal (similar others), or upward (role models) comparison.

A large body of research has typically found downward comparisons to be more beneficial for psychological well-being as compared to upward comparisons (Locke, 2003; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Stapel & Koomen, 2001). Downward social comparisons are further hypothesized to protect psychological resources when the likelihood of accomplishing one's goal is low (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Stewart et al., 2012). However, downward comparisons have been found to produce negative self-evaluations (Buunk et al., 1990) as well as weak effects on psychological adjustment when faced with health challenges (e.g., Hall et al., 2010). Upward comparisons have been associated with greater motivation, particularly when the goal is self-improvement (Corcoran, Crusius & Mussweiler, 2011), and are assumed to provide hope and ambition (Wood, 1989) in allowing individuals to believe that their success is attainable (Bailis & Chipperfield, 2006; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Finally, horizontal comparisons have been indirectly examined in the context of Heckhausen's theory highlighting the benefits of collective self-efficacy in older adults (Bailis & Chipperfield, 2006; Bailis, Chipperfield, & Helgason, 2008) as well as in recent research with teachers (e.g., Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; see also teacher relatedness in Klassen, Perry, & Frenzel, 2012). Thus, given the importance of social comparisons as self-protective motivational strategies that predict both adjustment and future behavior (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002), the present study aimed to investigate the effects of three forms of social comparisons specifically in teachers (downward, horizontal, upward) on measures of burnout, intentions to quit, job satisfaction in teachers, as well as perceived student engagement.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Practicing teachers ($N = 536$, 85% female) were recruited from Quebec and Ontario via mass emails from school principals and teaching union representatives to complete a web-based questionnaire consisting of demographic items as well as measures related to teaching-related motivation, emotions, and self-regulation.

Measures

Social Comparisons. Items evaluating social comparisons were selected and adapted from an established questionnaire by Heckhausen and colleagues (Optimization of Primary and Secondary Control, OPS; Hasse et al., 2008). The three 2-item measures measured intentional social comparisons with respect to downward comparisons ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 1.0$, $r = .51$, $p = .14$; e.g., "When I experience teaching setbacks, I remind myself that I am better off than other teachers in many ways"), horizontal comparisons ($M = 3.3$, $SD = .89$, $r = .38$, $p < .001$; e.g., "When I have difficulties with my students, I keep in mind that other teachers are struggling too"), and upward comparisons ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 0.92$, $r = .63$, $p < .001$; e.g., "When I experience teaching difficulties, I remind myself of successful teachers who overcame similar setbacks"). Participants responded on a scale of 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Burnout. Burnout was assessed using three subscales from the 22-item, 6-point Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1986) to evaluate emotional exhaustion (9 items; $M = 12.6$, $SD = 1.3$, $\alpha = .91$, e.g., "I feel emotionally drained from my work"), personal accomplishment (8 items; $M = 4.8$, $SD = .74$, $\alpha = .74$; e.g., "I can easily understand how my students feel about things"), and depersonalization (5 items; $M = 1.7$, $SD = .97$, $\alpha = .93$; e.g., "I feel students blame me for some of their problems"; 0 = *never* to 6 = *everyday*). The measure was adapted from the original to refer more specifically to "students" as opposed to "recipients."

Job Satisfaction. A 5-item scale by Moe et al. (2010) was employed to assess job satisfaction ($M = 5.1$, $SD = 1.4$, $\alpha = .89$). Each item was ranked on a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., "In most ways my job is close to my ideal"; 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*).

Intention to Quit. A 3-item scale by Hackett et al. (2001; Occupational Commitment Scale) was used to assess teachers' intentions to quit ($M = 1.8$, $SD = .98$, $\alpha = .86$). Anchors for this 5-point measure ranged from 1 = *very unlikely* to 5 = *certain* (e.g., "I intend to move into another profession/occupation).

Student Engagement. A newly developed 25-item measure by Skinner et al. (in press) was used to measure teacher's perceptions of behavioral and emotional engagement in their students with respect to behavioural engagement (5 items, $M = 3.0$, $SD = .49$, $\alpha = .78$; e.g., "In my class, students tend to work as hard as they can"), emotional engagement (5 items, $M = 3.4$, $SD = .50$, $\alpha = .88$; e.g., "In my class, my students are enthusiastic"), behavioural disaffection (5 items, $M = 2.2$, $SD = .57$, $\alpha = .80$; e.g., "In my class, my students tend to come unprepared"), and emotional disaffection (10 items, $M = 1.6$, $SD = .47$, $\alpha = .91$; e.g., "In class, my students seem unhappy"). Participants responded on a scale of 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Analyses

Regression analyses were conducted to explore the potential benefits of social comparison as motivational strategies on psychological adjustment and behavioral intentions in teachers. More specifically, multiple linear regressions were conducted including covariates in the first step, followed by summed scores for each social comparison measure in the second step. The covariates assessed included teachers' age, gender, highest level of education, grade level of instruction, and years of experience to control for potential confounds between background variables and the motivational predictor variables as well as outcomes assessed.

Results

As presented in Table 1, the regression results showed upward social comparisons to positively predict job satisfaction ($\beta = .238$, $p < .001$), personal accomplishment ($\beta = .213$, $p < .001$), as well as perceived behavioral engagement ($\beta = .171$, $p < .05$) and emotional engagement ($\beta = .167$, $p = .001$) in their students. Upward comparisons were also found to negatively predict teachers' intentions to quit ($\beta = -.204$, $p < .001$), emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.200$, $p < .001$) and depersonalization ($\beta = -.161$, $p < .05$). In contrast, although horizontal comparisons were found to predict lower job satisfaction ($\beta = -.284$, $p < .001$), unanticipated negative effects of this strategy were also found on intentions to quit ($\beta = .131$, $p < .05$), emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .243$, $p < .001$), personal accomplishment ($\beta = -.161$, $p < .05$), and depersonalization ($\beta = .175$, $p < .05$). Finally, although downward social comparisons were found to positively predict job satisfaction in teachers ($\beta = .135$, $p < .05$), and perceived behavioral engagement ($\beta = .129$, $p < .05$) in their students, it was not found to predict any other outcome measures in this study.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between social comparisons as motivational strategies used by teacher to cope with classroom challenges and critical indicators of psychological adjustment, behavioral intentions to quit, and perceived engagement in students. Inconsistent with previous research, upward comparisons were by far the most effective motivational strategy across the outcomes assessed, and were the only types of social comparison strategy to predict lower attrition intentions in teachers. These results are nonetheless consistent with theoretical assertions that self-efficacy in teachers can be facilitated through vicarious experience, which entails watching others teach in skilful ways (Bandura, 1977; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998; see also Kunter et al., 2011). Horizontal comparisons were also found to predict greater job satisfaction consistent with previous research showing teachers' feelings of belongingness to be positively associated with job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Similarly, downward comparisons were also found to predict better job satisfaction; however the effectiveness of this strategy was limited to this outcome. However, in contrast to the aforementioned benefits of social comparison strategies for teachers, horizontal comparisons were found to be particularly maladaptive for teachers in predicting poorer levels on most outcomes assessed, including job satisfaction. Overall, the present findings illustrate the importance of evaluating the types of

social comparisons made by teachers as motivational strategies in highlighting not only the benefits of generally underexplored upward comparisons, the limited gains associated with downward comparisons, and the surprisingly negative effects of horizontal comparisons. Future research aimed at promoting a focus on role models in instruction, and at differentiating horizontal comparisons (“misery loves company”) from other, more positive socially oriented motivational constructs (e.g., collective self-esteem, relatedness, and social goals in teachers; see Butler, 2012) is recommended.

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Table 1.

Relations between Social Comparison Strategies and Adjustment/Behavioral Outcomes

	Job satisfaction	Intention to quit	Emotional exhaustion	Personal accomplishment	Depersonalization
Upward social comparisons (β)	.238**	-.204**	-.200**	.213**	-.161*
Horizontal social comparisons (β)	-.284**	.131*	.243**	-.161*	.175*
Downward social comparisons (β)	.135*	.002	.056	.035	.003

Note: All regressions included gender, age, highest level of education, grade level of instruction, and practicing years as covariates.