

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Bill and Arlene Miller were a happy couple. But now and then they felt they alone among their circle had been passed by somehow, leaving Bill to attend to his bookkeeping duties and Arlene occupied with secretarial chores. They talked about it sometimes, mostly in comparison with the lives of their neighbors, Harriet and Jim Stone. It seemed to the Millers that the Stones lived a fuller and brighter life. The Stones were always going out for dinner, or entertaining at home, or travelling about the country somewhere in connection with Jim's work.

From *Neighbors*, a story by Raymond Carver (1976).

In *Neighbors*, Raymond Carver introduced a once happy couple that encounters the potentially negative consequences of social comparison. Clearly, Bill and Arlene feel bad about themselves and feel discouraged and depressed when they compare their own situation with that of the Stones. In fact, they are faced with the inferiority of their own relationship by perceiving their neighbors' relationship to be more fulfilling and satisfying than their own. In this short story, Raymond Carver clearly shows how individuals may compare their own relationship to that of others, and how they may draw conclusions from such comparisons about the quality of their own relationship. Comparing one's own standing on a dimension to the standing of others on that same

dimension is the subject of the current thesis.

DOWNWARD SOCIAL COMPARISON: A MIXED BLESSING?

Every now and then, we all reflect and think about where we stand and how we are doing. For that purpose, one might form an opinion about oneself by using *objective information* that consists of nonsocial standards. For instance, a professor wishing to evaluate her achievement can count her number of publications, a basketball player can obtain an objective verification of his height in an exact number of centimeters by using a tape measure, and a student can assess her academic performance on the basis of her grades. However, although some properties can be considered in objective terms, much more can be learned when the professor, the basketball player, and the student compare their properties with those of other professors, basketball players, and students. Thus, when nonsocial touchstones are trivial or unavailable, *social comparison information* may help people to evaluate their own abilities and opinions by relating their standing to the standing of similar individuals around them. For instance, the aforementioned professor may learn that her number of publications does not keep pace with that of the fellow professors in the same department, the basketball player may learn that he stands literally head and shoulders above his teammates, and the student may discover that her grade F does not match the level A grades of her friends at all.

In the course of years, many social psychologists have acknowledged that comparisons with others may play a significant role in people's self-evaluations (see Buunk & Gibbons, 1997; Collins, 1996; Suls & Miller, 1977; Suls & Wills, 1991; Wood, 1989, for reviews). According to the original formulation of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954a), people utilize social comparison information principally because they are driven by a need for accurate perceptions of their abilities and opinions. People do so, as postulated by Festinger, because they aim to avoid potential disillusionment resulting from inaccurate assessments of these abilities and opinions. However, as will be outlined later on, people not only have a desire to evaluate the accuracy of their abilities and opinions, they also appear to be fundamentally motivated to feel good about themselves and to maintain and develop a positive self-evaluation. Indeed, contemporary social psychologists acknowledge the notion that people in general tend to explain information about themselves in ways that are favoring the self and it is hardly surprising then, that when asked to compare themselves to people in similar situations, most individuals show a predominant disposition to see themselves as superior to others. Moreover, the tendency to look at oneself in a manner that will place oneself in the best possible light seems to promote

one's psychological well-being and adjustment to misfortune and negative feedback (see Hoorens, 1993; Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994, for reviews).

Research efforts over the foregoing decades have mainly addressed the issue of which factors influence individuals' social comparison desires and preferences (cf. Kruglanski & Mayseless, 1990; Wills & Suls, 1991; Wood, 1989). However, in recent years social comparison research has more strongly focused on the effects of social comparison on individuals' self-evaluation and their subjective well-being (see Suls & Miller, 1977; Suls & Wills, 1991; Wood, 1989, for reviews). Furthermore, even though several authors noted the potential importance of social comparison in intimate relationships (Surra & Milardo, 1991; Titus, 1980), only a few studies have explored social comparison processes regarding an intimate relationship in general, and even fewer have examined the consequences of social comparison for the evaluation of the quality of a relationship. Following the central notion in Wills' (1981) downward comparison theory, the present thesis focuses on the effects of engaging in downward social comparison (i.e. comparison with other people who are involved in intimate relationships that appear to fare badly) upon the perceived quality of the relationship. More precisely, this thesis attempts to examine experimentally whether cognitive downward comparison can improve the perceived quality of the relationship. Such cognitive downward comparison is expected to be a particularly beneficial strategy for people who experience discontentment in their relationship with their partner to reevaluate their situation, resulting in an increased level of relationship satisfaction and commitment to the relationship. Additionally, it is explored whether cognitive downward comparison exerts a stronger positive effect on relationship quality for individuals high in social comparison orientation, that is, for those who display a personality disposition to compare their own situation to that of others.

However, the potentially beneficial consequences of downward social comparisons notwithstanding, the reactions to discussing *overtly* such comparison may be considerably less positive. Usually, when someone else publicly discusses his or her good fortune, such disclosures may lead to a paradoxical situation in which social practices and social structures dictate that we (i.e., as observers of such behaviors) must rejoice at someone else's success whereas privately our feelings may be those of annoyance and envy (cf. Smith, Parrott, Ozer, & Moniz, 1994). It could become even worse when people speak highly of themselves and brag about their own success by suggesting that they are better off than others. Brickman and Bulman (1977) were among the first to suggest that many people find others annoying when they make explicit social comparisons and that could engender an antipathy to someone who

engages in explicit downward social comparison activities. Thus, it can be assumed that positive statements made about accomplishments in a way that deprecates others' achievements or characteristics will irritate other people and evoke an antipathy for the individual who makes boastful self-evaluations at the expense of others. More specifically, such overt downward social comparison may be considered as socially inappropriate and undesirable. Indeed, evidence suggests that people made fewer downward, but not fewer upward, social comparisons and reported less positive affective consequences when they considered social comparison as more socially inappropriate (Hemphill & Lehman, 1991). Therefore, in addition to investigating the effects of downward comparison on the perceived quality of the relationship, in this thesis the reactions to someone who engages openly in downward social comparison are also examined to further explore the notion that social comparison in general, and downward comparison in particular, is socially undesirable.

Overall, this line of reasoning suggests that comparison of one's own situation with that of others who are doing worse in the same situation may be a mixed blessing. The present thesis sought to explore both *positive* consequences of cognitive downward comparison for individuals' well-being on the one hand, and the possible *negative* reactions to downward comparison activities when they are made in public on the other hand. Prior to discussing the present series of studies in more detail, I would like to first introduce the social comparison literature. Next, the potential significance of downward comparison for the evaluation of relationship quality will be addressed. In addition to these positive consequences for the perceived quality of the relationship, possible negative reactions to those people who openly engage in downward social comparison will also be addressed. Further, the notion of individual differences in social comparison orientation is introduced and the possibility that such individual differences may exert an influence on the consequences of cognitive downward comparison and also on the reactions to overt downward comparisons will be considered. In the final section of this introductory chapter, I will give a brief outline of the present thesis.

A THEORY OF SOCIAL COMPARISON PROCESSES

As noted previously, the seminal paper "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes" of Festinger (1954a) outlined in particular the information-seeking aims of social comparison. Festinger (1954b) assumed that individuals strive "to hold *correct*

opinions, beliefs and ideas about the world in which [they live]" and are motivated "to know *precisely* what [their] abilities enable [them] to do in this world" (italics in the original, p. 194). When the accuracy of individuals' opinions and the level of their capabilities could not be appropriately tested against physical or objective standards, it was proposed that comparison with other similar individuals would provide people with useful information to obtain a subjective feeling of accuracy in their self-evaluations. Whereas Festinger emphasized that social comparisons are aimed at making accurate self-evaluations, in the decades following Festinger's pioneering work a growing body of literature revealed other motives for social comparison.

Hakmiller (1966) and Thornton and Arrowood (1966) were the first to suggest that social comparison may also serve the purpose of *self-enhancement*, the need of "sustaining or reasserting the favorability of the individuals self-regard" (Hakmiller, 1966, p. 37). Subsequently, research on social comparison has acknowledged self-enhancement as a second major reason to engage in social comparison (see Wayment & Taylor, 1995; Wood, 1989, for reviews). This motive has gained increasing attention since Wills' (1981) influential paper on downward comparison theory in which he proposed that specifically when people experience a threat to their psychological well-being, the need for self-enhancement will prevail over that of self-evaluation. In his model of downward social comparison, Wills (1981) reasoned that people can enhance their subjective well-being through downward comparisons, that is, by comparing themselves to others who are doing worse on the same dimension under evaluation. According to this model, contrasting oneself with others worse off will reveal one's own superiority over others, thus enabling individuals to feel better about their own situation. In addition, Wills (1987) discussed several specific cognitive responses that serve the purpose of making people feel comparatively fortunate. Although such downward comparisons may be achieved in various ways, such as taking advantage of encounters with inferior comparison targets, according to Wills (1987), downward comparisons often consist of a process in which individuals cognitively construct downward comparison targets, or derogate others' abilities and personal attributes. Similar cognitive strategies were previously put forward in a *selective evaluation model* as proposed by Taylor, Wood, and Lichtman (1983). Based on the research on cognitive adaptation of breast cancer patients, Taylor et al. proposed various cognitive strategies which people could use in an attempt to minimize their negative self-images and to reduce the consequent threat to their well-being. Although this model does not provide an exhaustive list of possible responses to stress (cf. Wood & Taylor, 1991), it does provide a worthwhile

model to show a general tendency for distressed individuals to evaluate their own situations in such a way that it becomes cognitively more bearable.

Indeed, correlational studies have shown that the perception of doing better than others is a better predictor of overall life satisfaction and positive affect than objective measures (e.g., number of friends, grade point average; Emmons and Diener, 1985). In addition, a number of studies have provided evidence for the relation between cognitive downward comparison and improvements in subjective well-being (see Taylor & Brown, 1988, for a review), or what according to Gibbons and Gerrard (1991) might simply be called general satisfaction (cf. Emmons & Diener, 1985). That is, the realization of one's own superiority over others may lead to improvements in mood states, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and optimism (see Gibbons & Gerrard, 1991; Wills, 1981, 1991a, for reviews). Research has shown that presentation of information about worse-off individuals improves the mood of depressed individuals and those with low self-esteem (Gibbons, 1986; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989). For instance, in a study by Reis, Gerrard, and Gibbons (1993) among undergraduate women who listened to taped statements of a college woman who related using contraceptive methods, comparison with a downward, more ineffective target resulted in greater self-esteem improvement than comparison with an upward, more effective target, particularly among women with low self-esteem.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF COGNITIVE DOWNWARD COMPARISON FOR THE PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

The propensity to see the self as better than others also seems to pervade the way people think about themselves as a relationship partner. Research has shown that a majority of people believe that they are above average as a spouse and as a parent (Headey & Wearing, 1988). Given the tendency towards self-enhancement, it is noteworthy that individuals do not only tend to see their relationship partners as more positive than *others*, but sometimes even tend to see their partner as better than *themselves*. For instance, Brown (1986, Experiments 2 and 3) demonstrated that people rate their best friends more favorably and less negatively than most other people. Similarly, Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, and Elliot (1998) found that closely related individuals refrain from self-enhancement. In two experiments, members of relationally distant dyads took more credits for dyadic success than for its failure, whereas close participants did not differ in their attributions for dyadic success or

failure. The inclination to appraise close others in a more positive fashion than other people is also displayed when romantic partners evaluate each other. For instance, Hall and Taylor (1976; see also Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976) found that intimate partners tended to idealize each other and to evaluate their partner more positively than they do themselves. Schütz and Tice (1997) demonstrated that both low and high self-esteem individuals used an indirect form of self-enhancement by describing their romantic partners positively. Further, low self-esteem individuals were more strongly inclined to describe their partner more positively than themselves whereas high self-esteem individuals tended to present themselves as superior to their partners. According to Murray and Holmes (1993, 1994, 1997), people adhere to have positive, or even idealized perceptions of their romantic partners, and will minimize information that challenges these positive perceptions. For instance, Murray and Holmes (1993) created experimentally a threat to the relationship by turning a partner's positive qualities into potential faults. After that, participants tended to ignore or discount such apparent shortcomings, for instance through accentuation of their partners' positive qualities and through partner-enhancing attributions that minimized the partner's responsibility for this fault. Especially individuals who are satisfied with their relationship, relative to those in distressed relationships, seem to make partner-enhancing attributions, that is, they are more likely to attribute their intimate partners' positive behaviors to personal qualities, while they tend to see their partners' negative behaviors as situationally caused (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 1988; Fincham, Beach, & Baucom, 1987; Fletcher, Fincham, Cramer, & Heron, 1987; see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990, for a review). Hence people may evaluate their intimate partners as superior to themselves, thus engaging in partner-enhancing rather than in self-enhancing social comparison.

Overall, these studies suggest that in a close relationship people may engage in *partner-enhancing* social comparisons to achieve and maintain a positive, superior image of their romantic partners. Specifically in areas of low self-relevance, individuals tend to admit being outperformed by their partners (Pilkington, Tesser, & Stephens, 1991). Additionally, the self-evaluation maintenance model (Tesser, 1988; see for an extension to close relationships, Beach & Tesser, 1993, 1995) states that a person's self-evaluation may be bolstered by his or her partner's superiority over oneself, because that person can bask in reflected glory of the partner's success (cf. Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloanet, 1976; see also Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Cialdini, & De Nicholas, 1989; Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1989). As such, partner-enhancement can be considered as an indirect means of self-enhancement (cf. Schütz & Tice, 1997; see also Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988;

Cialdini, Finch, & De Nicholas, 1989). However, it must be noted that when evaluating characteristics high in self-relevance, the reflection process will be discouraged and a process of comparison will be prompted which might be self-enhancing when the partner is outperformed, but which might threaten one's self-evaluation by outstanding accomplishments of the partner (cf. Tesser, 1988; Feather, 1994). For instance, people show negative emotions when they are outperformed on a dimension in which they want to excel themselves (Tesser & Collins, 1988; Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988; Salovey & Rodin, 1984). Feather (1994; see also Smith et al., 1996) showed that comparison with a high achiever on a self-defining dimension might engender feelings of envy, and that individuals may sometimes rejoice at a high achiever's misfortune. Likewise, individuals who are outclassed in an area of high self-relevance by someone whom they are close to, tend to withdraw from an activity with that friend or relative, thus reducing the interpersonal closeness toward that other (Pleban & Tesser, 1981).

In addition, social comparison may play an important role in the way individuals evaluate their close relationships (see Van Yperen & Buunk, 1994, for a review). That is, people in general seem to be inclined to engage in *relationship-enhancing* social comparison and to see their relationship in superior terms (i.e. perceived relationship superiority). For instance, evidence is accumulating that people tend to appraise the quality of their own relationship (Buunk & Van Yperen, 1989, 1991; Buunk & Van den Eijnden, 1997; Helgeson, 1994; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995) and the future of their relationship (Baker & Emery, 1993; Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1995; Buunk, 1998; Heaton & Albrecht, 1991; Helgeson, 1994; Murray & Holmes, 1997; Schriber, Larwood, & Peterson, 1985; Weinstein, 1980; Wigboldus & Van Lange, 1993) more positively and less negatively than the relationships of others. For instance, Buunk and Van Yperen (1989, 1991) demonstrated that most individuals felt that their marriage was in terms of inputs and outcomes superior to most other marriages, and Helgeson (1994) found that most people tend to perceive their own relationships as more satisfying than that of others. Van Lange and Rusbult (1995) asked participants to list the positive and negative qualities that spontaneously come to mind when thinking about their own and others' relationships, and found that people hold a greater number of positive beliefs and fewer negative beliefs about their own relationships than about other relationships.

In accordance with Taylor and Brown's (1988, 1994) perspective, there is substantial evidence that such perceptions are positively related to perceived relationship quality, that is, perceiving one's relationship as better than the relationship of most others is related to an enhanced satisfaction with, and stability of

one's own relationship. For instance, Buunk and Van den Eijnden (1997) demonstrated that most individuals tend to perceive their own relationship as superior to the relationships of most others or the relationship of the average other. In addition, Buunk and Van den Eijnden found that the perception of superiority of the relationship over that of others was more pronounced among individuals who were happy in their relationships. In a similar vein, Martz et al. (1998) found positive relations between the tendency to evaluate one's own relationship more favorably than their best friend's relationship on the one hand, and relationship satisfaction and commitment to the relationship on the other hand.

Although the greater part of these findings were correlational, Rusbult and Buunk (1993; see also Rusbult, Drigotas & Verette, 1994) suggested that comparison of the relationship with other relationships may be employed as a means of relationship evaluation, that is, greater perceived relationship superiority may "feed back" on satisfaction, which in turn may lead to stronger feelings of commitment to the relationship. According to Rusbult (1980, 1983), relationship satisfaction is one of the key factors in predicting commitment to the relationship, which is the "psychological state that globally represents the experience of dependence on the relationship" (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993, p. 180). Highly committed individuals feel attached to their partners and intend to continue their relationship even in times of adversity, and develop a variety of maintenance mechanisms to sustain a healthy long-term relationship. In line with this argument, Buunk, Collins, Taylor, Van Yperen, and Dakof (1990) found that those who experience high levels of marital satisfaction felt better following comparison of their own marital relationships with other marital relationships than those experiencing low levels of marital dissatisfaction.

The above findings suggest that particularly downward social comparison may play an important role in achieving and maintaining a positive image of the romantic partner and the relationship, and in attaining and maintaining commitment to the relationship. However, even though researchers have become increasingly interested in the role of social cognitive processes in relationships (for reviews, see Clark, Helgeson, Mickelson, & Pataki, 1994; Fletcher & Fincham, 1991; Fletcher & Fitness, 1996), experimental studies on the role of social comparison in the development and maintenance of relationship quality are, as far as we know, virtually non-existent, although studies by Buunk (1996, 1998; also Buunk & Van den Eijnden, 1997) are recent exceptions. The present research sought to explore whether cognitive downward comparison is a successful strategy for people who face relationship problems to reevaluate their situation and to make them feel relatively good about their own relationship. More specifically, the current thesis addresses the question

whether comparison of their own relationship with other relationships, that are qualitatively inferior, might result in a more positive evaluation of the relationship, and a higher commitment to the relationship among individuals who are discontented with their close relationship, than among those contented with the relationship.

**RESPONSES TO OTHERS' OVERT
DOWNWARD SOCIAL COMPARISON ACTIVITIES**

Despite the increasing evidence that social comparison may play a significant role in people's self-evaluations and in the way they may evaluate their close relationship, participants in social comparison research frequently display a reluctance to admit that they actually compare themselves with others. Sometimes, participants may even deny that they consider their own characteristics relative to those of others (see for instance, Helgeson & Taylor, 1993; Schoeneman, 1981; Schulz & Decker, 1985; Taylor, Aspinwall, Giuliano, Dakof, & Reardon, 1993; Wayment & Taylor, 1995; Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985; Van der Zee, 1996; and Wood, 1996, for a review). Consistent with the logic of the introduction, a possible reason for the aforementioned reluctance is that explicit downward social comparisons may lead to negative responses on the part of those who observe others engaging in social comparison behaviors. For instance, someone who engages in downward social comparison may take advantage of encounters with inferior comparison targets or, according to Wills (1987), may cognitively construct downward comparison targets. This person thus perceives that his or her own situation differs in some respects and is better than that of someone else. Accordingly, when the person openly discusses his or her conclusion of such social comparison with worse-off others (i.e. one perceives oneself as superior), he or she risks disapproval of fellow-discussants. Observers may feel that this person is bragging about his or her own relative success by making explicit mention of less fortunate others. The observers, in turn, may feel bad about themselves as the conclusion of the overt downward comparison may also refer to the observers' situation that is considered as inferior. Thus, overt downward social comparison behavior might cause pleasure for the individual who engages in social comparison but pain in the observer of such behavior when the observer feels that his or her achievements are devalued by the comparisons (cf. Brickman & Bulman, 1977; also Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988). Apparently, such a painful and stressful experience may even evoke a desire to avoid social comparison with superior others if

possible (cf. Brickman & Bulman, 1977; see also Friend & Gilbert, 1973; Nosanchuk & Erickson, 1985; Smith & Insko, 1987). Thus, downward social comparison may not be appreciated by others who observe it as it shows a lack of appropriate empathic concern for the other in the given circumstances, and as a consequence may sometimes lead to quite uncomfortable situations.

Indeed, as outlined by Wood (1996), several researchers have suggested that downward social comparison is viewed as socially undesirable (e.g., Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Hemphill & Lehman, 1991; Wills, 1981; Wood, 1996). For instance, Brickman and Bulman (1977) suggested that social norms may restrict and prohibit social comparison. Especially when an individual is exhibiting the self in a superior manner, and taking a pleasure in the inferiority of someone else, the impression made will not be favorable. Hence social comparison in general, and downward comparison in particular, will not be considered as socially appropriate. In conformity with this line of reasoning, Van der Zee, Buunk, and Sanderman (1996) found that individuals' tendency to give socially desirable responses was related to a lower need to compare themselves with others (Studies 1 and 2) and to assess how they were doing relative to others (Study 1).

In view of the fact that normative considerations may play a part in people's social comparison activities, it is noteworthy that little research has addressed the responses to the way other people overtly concede their social comparison activities and publicly claim their superiority over others. Therefore, as the evidence on this issue is limited, the current thesis will explore the reactions to others who display downward social comparison. As noted previously in this thesis, the tendency towards self-enhancement appears to extend well beyond the self to psychologically close others. That is, people in general seem to be inclined to evaluate their own intimate partner as superior to others, sometimes even including themselves, thus engaging in partner-enhancement rather than in self-enhancement (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Hall & Taylor, 1976; Murray & Holmes, 1997; Schütz & Tice, 1997; Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976). Moreover, circumstantial evidence suggests that most people see it as normal and desirable to present their own relationship, and especially their intimate partner, in a positive light (for instance, see Fitness & Fletcher, 1993; Fehr, 1988, 1993; Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987; Argyle, Henderson, & Furnham, 1985). It was presumed that a social norm exists that specifies what most people do (i.e. *descriptive norm*) and what ought to be done (i.e. *injunctive norm*; see Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991; Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). Assuming that people will be motivated to conform to the prevailing social norms by displaying a socially desirable self-image (Baumeister, 1982), it can be anticipated that it will be

more acceptable and desirable to publicly describe one's own intimate partner as superior than to describe oneself (as a partner) as above average. Therefore, it was explored whether partner-enhancing downward comparison will be considered as more socially desirable than self-enhancing downward comparison.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL COMPARISON ORIENTATION

Other plausible explanations for the fact that people frequently deny or hesitate to acknowledge their own social comparison activities is that people are possibly oblivious of the fact that they make comparisons (cf. Brickman & Bulman, 1977). Further, this reluctance may result from problems in selectivity, recall, and aggregation (cf. Helgeson & Taylor, 1993; Wood, 1996). Other reasons might be that individuals truly lack an interest in social comparison information or that they seldom do engage in social comparison. Thus, there may be individual differences in the tendency to compare oneself with others. Indeed several researchers have already theorized that people may differ in their disposition to compare themselves with other people (e.g., Brickman and Bulman, 1977; Hemphill & Lehman, 1991; Taylor, Buunk, Collins, & Reed, 1992; Wills, 1981). For instance, Hemphill and Lehman (1991) mentioned "the need for researchers to include measures of social comparison that acknowledge the fact that people may not wish to compare with others to an equal extent" (p. 390). Possibly, when people explain their difficulties with social comparison questionnaires and declare that they never compare themselves to others, this may mean that they truly lack an interest in social comparison information, and thus are indeed not disposed to assess their own situation against that of others.

Recently, Gibbons and Buunk (1999) proposed the concept of *social comparison orientation* to refer to the personality disposition of individuals who are strongly oriented to social comparison, who have a tendency to relate what happens to others to themselves, who are interested in information about others' thoughts and behaviors in similar circumstances, and who concern themselves with their own standing relative to others. In a series of studies, Gibbons and Buunk (1999) demonstrated that social comparison orientation is related, among others, positively to self-consciousness, neuroticism, an anxious avoidant attachment style, and negatively to self-esteem, but not to social desirability (see also Helgeson & Taylor, 1993). In addition, comparison orientation is characteristic of individuals high in exchange

orientation (i.e., a quid-pro-quo attitude) *and* high in communal orientation (i.e., an inclination to respond to other persons needs, and to expect others to do likewise). According to Gibbons and Buunk, these findings suggest that individuals high in social comparison orientation are characterized by a heightened uncertainty about themselves, accompanied by a relatively strong dependency upon other people. Evidence for the external validity of the scale comes, among others, from a laboratory experiment showing that individuals high in social comparison orientation are more interested in the scores of others after having learned their own score (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). From research among cancer patients it has been shown that patients high in social comparison orientation, when given the opportunity, were more inclined to attend to and select information about fellow patients' disease-related experiences, and that they respond more strongly to such information (Van der Zee, Oldersma, Buunk & Bos, 1998).

The current research explored the role of social comparison orientation by examining the extent to which the consequences of cognitive downward comparison and the reactions to overt downward comparison behavior are moderated by individuals' orientation toward social comparison. That is, because individuals high in this orientation are more uncertain about themselves and seem to use the standing of others as a basis for evaluating their own characteristics, it was assumed that downward comparison would have a stronger positive effect on individual's evaluation of the relationship and on commitment to the relationship the higher the individuals' orientation to social comparison. More specifically, it was expected that the positive effect of downward comparison would be moderated by social comparison orientation in such a way that cognitive downward comparison will exert a stronger effect upon perceived relationship quality the higher the social comparison orientation. Furthermore, the impact of social comparison orientation on individuals' reactions to others engaging in public downward comparison was explored. That is, it was examined whether downward social comparison would be regarded as more socially inappropriate and undesirable by individuals high rather than low in social comparison orientation.

THE CURRENT THESIS

Firstly, in Chapter 2, three experiments are reported which examined whether cognitive downward social comparison may operate as a relationship-enhancing

mechanism. In three studies, a new paradigm was employed that induced participants to actively engage in cognitive downward social comparison. The blessings of cognitive comparison with worse-off others in the domain of close relationships were examined by experimentally examining the beneficial consequences of downward comparison for perceived relationship quality, that is relationship satisfaction and commitment to the relationship. Moreover, it was investigated whether the impact of downward comparison was moderated by discontent with the partner and by social comparison orientation.

Individuals' reactions to others engaging overtly in downward comparison activities are examined in Chapter 3. More precisely, the hypothesis was tested that self-enhancing downward comparison would be considered as more socially inappropriate and undesirable than partner-enhancing downward comparison. Research will be reported that examined the responses to someone else engaging in self- and partner-enhancing downward comparisons. In three experimental studies, participants were presented with a short fragment supposedly derived from a group discussion. They were asked to indicate, among others, the extent to which they considered the verbal statements as social undesirable. In the final study, the possible moderating role of individual differences in social comparison orientation was explored by examining the extent to which reactions to someone engaging in self- and partner-enhancing downward comparison was moderated by participants' orientation toward social comparison.

Chapter 4 summarizes the research and findings of the studies as reported in this thesis. The potential beneficial consequences of cognitive downward comparison as well as the possible negative reactions to downward social comparison are discussed. Furthermore, the implications of these findings for research on social comparison processes as well as for the literature on relationship quality are elaborated in the final chapter.