

Application of Social Comparison Theory in the Family Environment

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Abstract: Taking the social comparison theory as its framework, this paper identifies a lack of sufficient research applying this theory to family studies and explores its application through empirical evidence and cases. First, it elaborates on the theory's comparison types, motivations, and impacts. Then, it analyzes the specific application of the theory in three types of family relationships—parent-child, spousal, and sibling relationships—and the effects of different comparison methods. Next, it identifies the limitations of applying this theory in families, such as the tendency to trigger irrational cognition. Subsequently, it proposes optimization strategies, including guiding a rational comparison mindset. Finally, the article summarizes the dual impacts of the theory on families, emphasizes the significance of its rational application, and specifies directions for future research. This study aims to address the existing gap in research on the application of social comparison theory within family contexts and to provide evidence-based recommendations for promoting harmonious family interactions.

Keywords: Social comparison theory; Family environment; Parent-child relationship; Spousal relationship; Sibling relationship

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1. Introduction

Since Festinger proposed the theory of social comparison in 1954, this theory has become an important reference for us to understand individual psychology and social interaction. Simply put, when people do not have clear and objective standards to judge themselves, they tend to compare themselves with others to determine their own value ^[1].

Family, however, is an important place for us to grow up and obtain emotional support. The way of interaction within a family is also very unique. In this process, social comparison has a significant impact on the psychology and behavior of family members. Although social comparisons have been studied quite extensively in the workplace and at school, there are pitifully few comparative studies within the family. For instance, when parents compare their children's academic performance or when couples argue over who takes on more responsibilities at home, such inappropriate comparisons often lead to family conflicts ^[2].

Therefore, based on the fundamental principles of social comparison theory, this study, through practical investigations and case analyses, examines how this theory works within families, what specific impacts it has, and puts forward some suggestions for improving family relationships. Our goal is to fill this academic gap and provide guidance for building harmonious family relationships ^[3].

2. Core connotation of social comparison theory

2.1. Classification of social comparison types

According to the relationship between the objects being compared and ourselves, social comparison can be divided into three types: upward comparison, downward comparison and parallel comparison^[4].

Upward comparison means that we compare ourselves with those who do better and have more favorable conditions in a certain aspect. For instance, when seeing other people's children doing well academically, one might compare their child with them.

Downward comparison means comparing a person with those who perform worse than themselves and have relatively poorer conditions. Just like sometimes feeling that although one's own family is not rich, it is still better than some families with extremely difficult economic conditions, this is downward comparison.

Parallel comparison means that we compare ourselves with those who are at a similar level and have similar conditions. Just like among classmates, if their academic performance and family background are similar, it's easy for them to compare with each other.

In a family, all three ways of comparison will occur and have different impacts on the psychology and behavior of family members.

2.2. Motivations and impacts of social comparison

The motivations for individuals to engage in social comparison are complex and diverse, including both cognitive motivations (such as acquiring self-cognition and clarifying self-positioning) and emotional motivations (such as pursuing self-improvement and safeguarding self-esteem).

Reasonable social comparison can stimulate individuals' positive mindset and motivation for progress. For example, a child may develop the desire to improve academic performance by comparing themselves with an outstanding sibling. However, inappropriate social comparison may trigger negative emotions: excessive upward comparison between spouses, for instance, may lead to feelings of inferiority and anxiety, and even damage the family relationship^[5].

3. Specific application scenarios of social comparison theory in the family environment

The family is the closest social interaction venue for individuals. In the interaction between different family members, the application of social comparison theory presents distinct characteristics and impacts. The following analysis will be carried out from three core scenarios: parent-child relationship, spousal relationship, and sibling relationship^[6].

3.1. Parent-child relationship

The parent-child relationship is the most fundamental relationship in the family environment. Social comparison between parents and children is mainly reflected in two aspects: parents' expectations and evaluations of their children, and children's reference to and imitation of their parents^[7].

From the perspective of parents, they tend to compare their own children with other people's children, and this kind of comparison is mostly upward comparison. For example, parents will pay attention to the academic performance, interests and specialties of the neighbor's child, or the career development and living status of a relative's child, and use these as standards to evaluate their own child's performance^[8].

Table 1 presents the results of a questionnaire survey on "Parent-Child Comparison Behavior and Children's Psychological State" conducted by a research institution among 300 parents. The data show that among parents who excessively engage in upward comparison, the proportion of their children experiencing inferiority and rebellious emotions is significantly higher than that in other groups.

Table 1. Survey on the correlation between parents' parent-child comparison types and children's psychological state ($n = 300$)

Type of parental comparison	Sample size (Person)	Proportion of children with an inferiority complex (%)	Proportion of children with rebellious feelings (%)	Proportion of children with positive and optimistic performance (%)
Frequent upward comparison (often comparing with "more excellent" children)	98	45.9	38.8	22.4
Moderate parallel comparison (comparing with children of similar level)	126	18.3	15.1	68.2
Occasional downward comparison (comparing with "underperforming" children)	76	12.1	8.0	79.5

Data source: Survey conducted by a social psychology research team in 2025; questionnaires targeted parents of school-aged children across multiple regions.

These data suggest that excessive upward comparison by parents tends to harm children's psychological well-being, whereas moderate or parallel comparison fosters positive attitudes and motivation. From the perspective of children, during their growth process, they will unconsciously take their parents as comparison targets, especially in the stage of forming values and behavioral patterns. If a child engages in long-term upward comparison and believes that their parents are "inferior to others" in a certain aspect, they may develop an inferiority complex; however, reasonable parallel comparison or downward comparison helps children understand their parents' efforts and enhance their sense of family belonging^[9].

In addition, parents' social comparison of themselves will also indirectly affect the parent-child relationship. For instance, if parents often compare their career achievements and living conditions with those of others and develop anxiety, this negative emotion may be transmitted to their children, leading the children to form an excessively competitive mindset. On the contrary, if parents can view the differences between themselves and others with a calm attitude and conduct social comparison rationally, they can set a positive example for their children and promote the harmony of the parent-child relationship.

3.2. Spousal relationship

Table 2. Survey on the correlation between spousal social comparison focus and marital satisfaction ($n = 200$ couples)

Marital comparison anxiety	Sample size (Couples)	Proportion of high marital satisfaction (≥ 8 points, full score 10) (%)	Proportion of moderate marital satisfaction (5–7 points) (%)	Proportion of low marital satisfaction (≤ 4 points) (%)
Excessive focus on external upward economic comparison	72	20.8	44.4	34.8
Focus on parallel comparison of spouses' personal abilities	68	55.9	36.8	7.3
Focus on internal change comparison between spouses (e.g., progress before and after marriage)	60	73.3	25.0	1.7

Data source: Survey conducted by a social psychology research team in 2025; participants were married couples with at least 3 years of marriage.

As shown in **Table 2**, the subjects who made upward comparisons in terms of internal change reported the highest marital satisfaction, and those who made upward comparisons in terms of external economy showed the lowest, indicating that upward comparisons in terms of external change that are growth-oriented and self-referential are more conducive to keeping the wife-husband relationship harmonious.

In terms of family responsibilities, spouses may make upward social comparisons in terms of housework, educating children, and taking care of the elderly. If one spouse always thinks he/she is “taking on more responsibilities than the other,” and the other spouse is “less responsible than others in their own and other families,” there will definitely be marital conflicts, resulting in quarrels, cold wars, etc.

For example, if the wife always complains “Other husbands do their housework well; you do nothing at all”, this kind of upward social comparison will certainly let the husband feel that he is negated in his husband role. This will definitely damage the subject couple’s communication and trust in each other ^[10].

If both husband and wife can adopt a parallel comparison mindset, encouraging each other and supporting each other, moving forward together and growing together, then they can understand each other better and offer more support to each other, and the quality of their marriage will naturally improve.

3.3. Sibling relationships

The relationship between siblings is the closest “partnership” in a family. During the process of growing up together, siblings would compare themselves with each other a lot, and it was very direct, happening every now and then. It mainly comes down to academic performance, who each parent loves more, and what their own strengths and advantages are. These comparisons have a huge impact on the formation of their personalities and how they interact with others in the future ^[11].

3.3.1. Academic performance comparison

If we talk about what siblings love to compete for the most, it must be academic performance, especially when they are still in school. Parents are always particularly concerned about their children’s academic performance. With such attention, they unconsciously make this comparison even more intense. For instance, if there is a child with outstanding academic performance in the family, the parents might always take him as a role model and constantly remind other children, “Look at your elder brother/sister. You’ve put in so much effort!” You have to learn from others!” Those children who are slightly inferior in their studies might feel like they are nothing upon hearing this, constantly worrying and grumbling in their hearts.

If the competition is too fierce, siblings are very likely to develop jealousy, and the desire to outdo each other in their hearts will be extremely strong. Sometimes, this can even make their relationship tense.

However, if this competition is handled just right, it can also become a driving force. This kind of positive comparison can actually make everyone study harder and make progress together.

3.3.2. Personal strengths comparison

Comparisons between siblings in personal strengths also influence the development of each other’s interests. For example, if an older brother is good at painting and often receives praise from parents and others, the younger sister may choose to learn painting through comparison in an attempt to gain the same recognition. Alternatively, she may give up painting and turn to other fields because she thinks, “I’m not as good at painting as my brother.” The outcome of such comparisons depends on the child’s mindset and parental guidance. If parents encourage their children to develop unique strengths instead of blindly comparing them with their siblings, they can help their children identify their own advantages and build self-confidence ^[12].

4. Limitations and optimization strategies of social comparison theory in family applications

Although the theory of social comparison is quite common in families and has a considerable impact on the psychology and behavior of family members, when it comes to practical application, due to the different cognitive levels and mindsets of family members, social comparison also has its imperfections and may even bring about negative effects. So, we need to think of some appropriate ways to make the social comparison work better within the family and bring out all its good effects.

4.1. Limitations of social comparison theory in family applications

When family members make social comparisons, it is very easy for them to fall into the trap of “only looking at one side”. That is to say, only focusing on the good aspects of the comparison object without noticing one’s own shortcomings. Or they only focus on the results of a certain aspect without considering the overall situation. For instance, when comparing children’s academic performance, parents might only notice that “other people’s children got full marks,” without realizing that their own children have special talents in sports or art. When comparing the economic conditions of their families, couples may only focus on “others living in big houses and driving nice cars,” without realizing that their own home is actually quite warm and stable. This irrational idea of comparison can lead family members to have wrong views of themselves or others, and then it is easy to have negative emotions^[13].

4.2. Intensifying internal family competition and conflicts

If social competition goes too far, the atmosphere at home will become very tense, and there will be more competition and conflicts among family members. For instance, in the relationship between siblings, if they compete too fiercely in academic aspects, the children might turn from “good friends” into “rivals.” They keep their learning methods hidden from each other and are reluctant to share resources. In a marital relationship, if the competition in terms of economy goes too far, both sides may fall into the trap of “comparison” and be unable to get out. In pursuit of “living a better life than others,” they might not care about what their families actually need, and might even quarrel or have cold wars over this matter.

4.3. Neglecting individual differences and unique values

Every family member is unique, with different personalities, abilities, interests, and the speed of growth. However, when making social comparisons, family members often measure each other by the same standards, without noticing that everyone is different and has their own unique value. Just like, parents might only judge the quality of two children based on their “academic performance,” but fail to notice that the child with poorer grades is actually quite good at making friends and hands-on skills. Between husband and wife, they might only evaluate who contributes more to the family based on “who earns more,” but overlook the efforts made by the one who earns less in taking care of the family and raising children. This way of comparison makes the unique value of family members not recognized, which in turn affects their sense of self-identity and happiness.

4.4. Strategies to optimize the application of social comparison in family settings

Family members should understand that social comparison objectively exists and is also necessary. They should emphasize that “comparison is for making oneself better, not for denying oneself.” For instance, parents should guide their children to think about “Why can others do it so well?” instead of “Why can’t I do it as well as others?” and then look for ways to improve together. Between husband and wife, the focus should be on “how we can become better together” rather than “where we are worse than others”, turning comparison into positive actions.

We should encourage everyone to compare from multiple aspects instead of just focusing on one aspect. For instance, when evaluating a child, one should look at their academic performance, moral character, hobbies and interests, as well

as their ability to make friends. When evaluating a partner, one needs to consider their earning capacity, responsibility to the family, emotional support provided, and personal qualities. This helps family members see each other's strengths and weaknesses, avoiding only looking at one side.

Comparing oneself with people outside (external comparison) can easily lead to a sense of comparison, but comparing oneself with family members or one's past (internal comparison) can help one better understand one's own growth and value. In parent-child relationships, comparing yourself with your last exam and seeing how much progress you have made or what new skills you have learned can boost your confidence. In a marital relationship, reviewing the challenges encountered and the changes in the family together can make both sides more satisfied. In a sibling relationship, paying attention to each other's progress can make everyone support and care for each other more.

Parents are the key to creating a family atmosphere, so they should set an example of rational comparison. They should not always compare themselves with people outside in front of their children, nor should they pass on negative emotions. They should pay fair attention to and evaluate each child, without favoritism, recognize the unique contributions of both the partner and the child, and cultivate a family culture of "respecting differences, supporting each other, and growing together."

If someone in the family shows negative emotions (such as low self-esteem, anxiety, or jealousy), others should offer timely support. For instance, parents can remind their children of their own unique strengths, and couples can analyze the family situation together and offer each other some comfort and support ^[15].

5. Conclusion

Our research applied the theory of social comparison to the family, and the result showed that this theory has a dual effect in parent-child relationships, marital relationships, and sibling relationships. If one is more rational, it can promote personal growth, make family members understand each other better, and also enhance the cohesion of the family. However, if the comparison is too excessive or the way of comparison is inappropriate, it is easy to cause negative emotions and trigger family conflicts. In this matter, the role of parents is crucial. They can play a good guiding role by establishing a healthy way of comparison, recognizing the differences of each child, and paying more attention to the emotional needs of children. We also need to encourage everyone to appreciate each other's progress more. When evaluating a person, don't just look at one aspect. Things like emotional support and personal development should also be taken into consideration. In this way, comparison can become the driving force for the whole family to grow together. Future research may explore diverse family structures and cultural contexts to deepen theoretical understanding and guide practical strategies.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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