CHAPTER 1

General Introduction

In daily life, people make comparisons to obtain more information about themselves. When an individual says that he or she is for instance, attractive or unattractive, slim or fat, he or she is making evaluations in relation to some specific standard. As it often happens, this standard is based on other individuals. Since Festinger (1954) assumed that individuals compare themselves with others especially when no objective standards are accessible much research has had an interest in this issue. In fact, 962 scientific publications are cited when social comparison is written as key-word in PsycInfo database. Social comparison has been studied with respect to a wide variety of issues, including satisfaction in romantic relationships (Buunk & Ybema, 2003), the quality of life among cancer patients (Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 2003), social phobia (Antony, Rowa, Liss, Swallow, & Swinson, 2005), and smoking cessation (Gerrard, Gibbons, Lane, & Stock, 2005). Recent research has applied social comparison theory even as a way of understanding aspects of the well-known work of Van Gogh, by analyzing his network of social and professional encounters that influenced his development as a creative artist (Brower, 2005).

Social comparisons may be especially manifest in situations in which success is highly appreciated and underperformance is not accepted. Indeed, the academic and work spheres are major areas of life in which individuals may attain prestige, recognition, and self-esteem. Therefore, in the present dissertation we examine the importance of social comparison to understand the positive and negative consequences of the way individuals compare themselves with others. We focus on social comparison from the perspective of the identification-contrast model (Buunk & Ybema, 1997), which assumes that upward (better-off comparison) as well as downward comparison (worse-off comparison) may be interpreted in a positive or negative way, depending on whether individuals contrast or identify themselves with others.
In the present chapter, we first define social comparison and discuss classic social comparison research. Second, we describe the identification-contrast model as the framework of the present dissertation. Third, we address how social comparison as conceptualized in the identification-contrast model is positively and negatively related to specific psychological processes in a variety of contexts. Fourth, we describe how social comparison responses are related to self-efficacy in the academic context. More specifically, we examine how goal orientation may influence social comparison and self-efficacy. Fifth, we address how social comparison responses and coping may have an independent impact on burnout over time. Finally, we examine how social comparison responses may influence identification with and attachment to the organization in two European countries with different features, The Netherlands and Spain. Moreover, we address the issue that individuals may interpret social comparison in a different way in two cultures. We assume that differences in individuals’ self-construal may not only explain cultural, but also context and gender differences in basic aspects of social comparison, including comparison direction, comparison dimensions and comparison choice.

**Social comparison**

“Judgments of adequacy involve social comparison processes” (Bandura, 1997, pp. 360).

Since Festinger (1954) postulated his assumption that in humans there exists a drive to evaluate his opinions and abilities by comparison with the opinions and abilities of others, much theoretical and empirical research has been done with consistent as well as contradictory findings. In particular, social comparison refers to relating one’s own characteristics to those of other similar individuals (e.g. Wood, 1989). By doing so individuals gain information that they can use to evaluate, enhance, verify, and improve themselves (see Taylor & Lobel, 1989).

Classic research on social comparison has generally shown that individuals tend to prefer comparisons with others who are thought to be slightly better off (e.g., Miller & Suls, 1977). In particular, when a motive for self-improvement is activated, individuals tend to prefer to engage in comparisons with others who are doing better, assumedly because they
may learn from such others (Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Buunk, Collins, Taylor, Van Yperen, & Dakof, 1990; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Lockwood, Dolderman, Sadler, & Gerchak, 2004). However, when individuals are threatened on a particular dimension, they may prefer to compare themselves with others who are thought to be worse than themselves on that dimension, presumably to feel better about themselves (Buunk & Ybema, 2003; Gibbons, et al., 2002; Hakmiller, 1966; Wills, 1981).

Furthermore, expanding the scope of social comparison research, the identification-contrast model proposed by Buunk and Ybema (1997) assumes that upward as well as downward comparisons may be interpreted in a positive or negative way, depending on whether one contrasts or identifies oneself with the comparison target. In the case of upward identification, individuals focus on the similarities between themselves and better-off others, recognize themselves in the others and perceive the other’s situation as attainable for themselves. For instance, among cancer patients upward identification has been positively related to direct coping strategies (Van der Zee, Buunk, Sanderman, Botke, & Van den Bergh, 2000), and among elderly people it has been positively related to life satisfaction (Frieswijk, Buunk, & Steverink, 2004). In the case of upward contrast, individuals view the other as a sort of competitor who has beaten them, which will generate negative feelings by reminding them that they are inferior. Indeed, upward contrast has been positively related to palliative coping strategies among cancer patients (Van der Zee, et al., 2000), and negatively related to treatment adherence among individuals with HIV (Bogart, Gray-Bernhardt, & Catz, 2002). In the case of downward comparison, identification may imply that individuals view themselves as similar to others who are functioning in a worse way, or that they view the situation of worse-off others as a possible future for oneself, which will generally induce negative feelings. Presumably as a result of identification, negative affect from downward comparison has been found to be related to burnout (Buunk, Ybema, Gibbons, & Ipenburg, 2001). In addition, downward identification has been found to be positively related to low performance among students (Buunk, Kuyper, & Van der Zee, 2005). In the case of downward contrast, one may distance oneself from a worse-off other, by viewing the other’s position as avoidable, or by viewing the other as someone who one has been beaten. This will generally evoke a positive, though not always socially desirable,
response (e.g. Brickman & Bulman, 1977). For instance, downward contrast has been positively related to judgments of the quality of life among elderly people (Beaumont & Kenealy, 2004) and positively related to self-esteem among students (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993).

Although previous research has found some indirect evidence for the occurrence in identification and contrast in social comparison, little research has examined these processes directly from the identification-contrast model (Buunk & Ybema, 1997). On the basis of this model, four scales were developed in a study among cancer patients as indicators of the four social comparison strategies i.e., upward identification and contrast, downward identification and contrast (Van der Zee, et al., 2000). In the present dissertation, we use adaptations of these scales to examine how identification and contrast in upward and downward comparison are related to positive and negative self-perception processes in the academic and work areas.

**Self-efficacy**

“Self-belief does not necessarily ensure success, but self-disbelief assuredly spawns failure” (Bandura, 1997)

How many times has one asked the question “Can I really do it?” We believe that how self-confident an individual perceives himself or herself in a specific area may help to achieve a specific task or performance. Self-efficacy is described as “people’s judgment of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (Bandura, 1986, p. 345). Individuals with high self-efficacy in a specific domain set personal goals that they estimate they can reach, are more likely to attain the goals they aim for achieving success, approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided, set themselves challenging goals, maintain a strong commitment to those goals, and persist in their efforts in the case of a failure. Such individuals quickly recover their sense of efficacy after failures or setbacks and attribute failure to insufficient effort or to deficient knowledge and skills that are acquirable (Bandura, 1977, 1982, 1997; Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Bandura & Locke, 2003; Brown & Inouye, 1978; Schunk, 1981; Moritz, Feltz, Fahrbach, & Mack, 2000). Through which sources do many individuals achieve a high self-efficacy?
According to Bandura (1986), self-efficacy is based upon information from four main sources: mastery experiences (personal performance accomplishments), vicarious experiences (the observation of other people’s performance attainments), social persuasion (the support one receives from significant others for engaging in particular activities) and physiological and affective states (emotional and physical reactions to personal experiences).

In chapter 2, we focus on social comparison as a type of vicarious experience that is related to self-efficacy and subsequently to performance. We assumed that through social comparison (e.g., Wood, 1989) individuals may focus on positive (upward comparison) and negative (downward comparison) role models who may influence their self-views when they engage in identification and contrast processes. However, we assumed that the salience of specific goal may also influence self-efficacy. According to regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) two kinds of goal orientation are distinguished: (1) a focus on aspirations and accomplishments (i.e., promotion focus) and (2) a focus on responsibilities and safety (i.e., prevention focus). These two foci are assumed to develop since childhood and to underlie individuals’ perspectives about what they consider significant in their lives. In particular, previous research has demonstrated that promotion-focused individuals are most inspired by positive role models, who highlight strategies for achieving success, and that prevention-focused individuals are most motivated by negative role models, who highlight strategies for avoiding failure (Lockwood, Jordan & Kunda, 2002). Therefore, in chapter 2, we address whether each of the social comparison strategies mediates the relationship between goal orientation and self-efficacy, and whether this affects performance.

Burnout

“The reason burned out people find it so hard to be happy is that they always see the past better than it was, the present worse than it is, and the future less resolved than it will be” (Marcel Pagnol, 1895-1974)

Burnout is a phenomenon that occurs in different groups of the population regardless of occupation, income or educational level. Burnout could affect every area of life, family, work and friend relationships. One may lose interest in everyone and everything. There simply is not enough
energy available for others or for activities beyond those required for survival. Summarizing several well-known definitions of burnout (Buunk & Schaufeli, 1993; Freudenberger, 1980; Maslach, 1982; Veninga & Spradley, 1981) we define burnout characteristics as a debilitating psychological condition brought by unrelieved work stress, resulting in a depletion of energy, emotional exhaustion, lower resistance to illness, an increased depersonalization in interpersonal relationships, increased dissatisfaction and pessimism, and an increased absenteeism and work inefficiency. Burnout may occur among workers from many different professions; however it is more prominent among professions that involve taking care of others such as nurses, doctors, teachers, and social workers. In Chapter 3, we examine the relationship between burnout and social comparison among teachers. Several studies have shown that approximately 60% to 70% of all teachers repeatedly show symptoms of stress, and a minimum of 30% of all educators show distinct symptoms of burnout (Antoniou, Polychroni, & Walters, 2000; Borg & Falzon, 1989; Capel, 1992; Kyriacou, 1980; Lale, 2001; Rudow, 1999). Therefore, burnout may be considered as a societal factor, which affects teachers’ well-being and subjective health across Europe (Verhoeven, Maes, & Kraaij, 2003). However, few studies have focused on whether the perception of one’s performance as a teacher may influence the development of burnout. In particular, we assume that individuals’ performance perceptions are developed in relation to the perception of other individuals’ performance. Indeed, it has been shown that the feelings evoked by social comparisons are related to burnout (Buunk, Schaufeli, & Ybema, 1994; Buunk, Ybema, Gibbons, et al., 2001; Buunk, Ybema, Van der Zee, Schaufeli, & Gibbons, 2001). However the specific processes of social comparison, considered here, i.e., identification and contrast, have not been directly studied in this context. In addition, no longitudinal research has examined the relationship between social comparison processes and burnout over time. Therefore, in Chapter 3, we examine in a sample of teachers the relationship between identification and contrast in social comparison and burnout over time. Furthermore, we examine how identification and contrast are related to coping. Coping has been defined as the ways that individuals cognitively and behaviorally manage environmental demands in their lives (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and it has been suggested that differences in “the extent and strength of individual’s coping resources
may mitigate the strain produced by occupational stress” (Pithers, 1995; pp. 390). Numerous studies have shown that differences in the way individuals cope with stressful situations are associated with occupational stress and burnout (Pithers, 1995; Whitehead & Ryba, 1995). For example, recent studies have found that emotion-focused coping is associated with higher burnout and more somatic complaints, whereas problem-focused coping is positively associated to personal accomplishment and well-being (e.g., Ben-Zur, & Yagil, 2005; Pomaki, & Anagnostopoulou, 2003). The major reason to examine the role of coping was that it has been suggested that social comparison may be a form of coping with stressful situations (Wills, 1987; Taylor, Buunk & Aspinwall, 1990; Van der Zee, et al., 2000). Therefore, we examine the relationship between social comparison processes and coping styles over time in relation to burnout.

Organizational commitment and identification

“You’re not obligated to win. You’re obligated to keep trying to do the best you can every day” (Marian Wright Edelman, 1992)

During the past 30 years, organizational identification and commitment have been examined as relevant factors related to workers’ attitudes to the organization. Organizational identification and commitment are related, but distinct concepts (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). In general terms, organizational commitment is defined as ‘a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization’s goals and values, a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization, and a definite desire to maintain organizational membership’ (Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian 1974, p. 604). On the other hand, in line with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), organizational identification can be viewed as a specific form of social identification, i.e. as the ‘reflection of the perceptions of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization in which he or she is a member’ (Mael & Asforth, 1992; p. 104). Organizational identification is described as self-referential, that is as perceiving organizational characteristics as one’s own characteristics, whereas organizational commitment is described as more attitudinal and stable (see Gautam, Van Dick, & Wagner, 2004). Therefore, in Chapter 4 we examine organizational
commitment and identification as two separated but related concepts. Overall, previous research has shown a positive relationship between organizational commitment and performance (e.g., Angle & Lawson, 1994; Meyer, Paunonen, Gellatly, Goffin, & Jackson, 1989; Riketta, 2002), and between organizational identification and performance (Benkhoff, 1997). We assume that when individuals compare their performance with other colleagues they may acquire positive or negative self-information which may affect their self-views and may influence their levels of attachment to the organization. That is, upward identification and downward contrast would be positively related and downward identification and upward contrast would be negatively related to organizational commitment and identification. However, we expected culture differences in the relationship between social comparison and organizational commitment and identification. Therefore, in Chapter 4, we examine the differences in identification and contrast in social comparison between two countries, The Netherland and Spain, and we study the relationship between these social comparison processes and organizational commitment and identification. In addition, we examine whether country differences might moderate the relationship between social comparison processes and organizational commitment and identification.

Social comparison: culture, context and gender differences

“By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart”
(Confucius, 500 BC)

Previous research has shown that there are different ways of conceptualizing the self. For instance, according to Markus & Kitayama (1991), individuals may have a more salient independent or an interdependent self-construal. In Chapter 5, we assume that different cultural backgrounds, context and gender may be viewed as characterized by different self-construals which may influence one’s cognitions, emotions and relationships with the social world. We address the question whether there are cultural, context and gender differences in three basic aspects of social comparison as direction (upward and downward), dimensions of comparison (inputs and outcomes), and target choice comparison (men and women).
Culture

Among individuals with an independent self-construal, one’s thoughts, feelings, goals, and behaviors are seen as distinct from that of others, and among individuals with an interdependent self-construal, one’s thoughts, feelings, goals, and behaviors overlap with that of others. We assume that different cultural backgrounds may be viewed as characterized by different self-construals (see Aron, Aron, & Tudor, 1991; Brewer, 1991; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Stapel & Koomen, 2001; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; Triandis, 1989; Turner, 1987), which may influence one’s cognitions, emotions and relationships with the social world. There is evidence that collectivistic countries in areas as Asia, Africa, East and Southern Europe, and South America sustain the development of an interdependent self (Bond, Leung, & Wan; De Vos, 1985; Leung, 1997), whereas individualistic countries in areas as North America, North and Western Europe, and Australia sustain a more independent self (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Cahoone, 1996; Lewis, 1995; Triandis, 1995; Triandis & Suh, 2002). In particular, Dutch culture ranks worldwide as the one of the most individualistic countries (Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004) characterized by a self-confident attitude and relatively loose bonds between individuals. Compared to Dutch culture, Spanish culture falls in the medium range on the individualism dimension, and scores lower in individualism than Dutch culture (Hofstede, 1980). According to Fiske (1992) the Spanish are collectivistic in that they tend to establish harmony in their interpersonal relationships as a sense of belonging to a social group.

Organizational context

We assume that also the organizational context may influence the way individuals perceive themselves in relation with others at work. One type of organizational context that has been previously investigated is whether an organization based on its characteristics is included in the private or public sector (Rawls, Ulrich, & Nelson, 1975; Solomon, 1986). Organizations in the private sector operate in a competitive and dynamic environment, in which profitability is the ultimate criterion of success; these organizations are responsive to the market and to customer demands. We assume that in private organizations the more prominent
aspects as competition, autonomy and self-attributes reliance might favor the salience of an independent self. In contrast, in the public sector, organizations are more focused on maintaining constituencies, seeking multiple and cooperative goals, and obtaining funding through a process which is susceptible to political influences (Porter & Van Maanen, 1970; Solomon, 1986). We assume that in public organizations aspects as cooperation, dependency and ability to adjust and maintain harmony are more appreciated and might favor the salience of an interdependent self.

**Gender**

Research has shown that men describe themselves as more independent than women do, whereas women describe themselves as more interdependent than men do (Cross & Madson, 1997; Kemmelmeier & Oyserman, 2001). That is, women view themselves more in terms of their relationships and connectedness with others and strive to develop self-defining relationships and to maintain connectedness, interdependent-self. In contrast, men tend to be characterized more by an independent self-construal. That is, men view themselves more as separated from others and strive to maintain a sense of autonomy. Men are in general characterized as more agentic, i.e. as independent, assertive, initiating, and as following their own wishes and desires, whereas women are characterized as more communal, i.e. as caring, emotionally expressive, responsive to others, and as seeking harmonious relationships (Deaux & LaFrance, 1998).

**Social comparison direction**

Recent research has shown differences in social comparison between cultures. White and Lehman (2005) found that students from collectivistic cultures engaged more often in upward comparison than students from individualistic cultures, reflecting an interdependent self, and indicating a stronger motivation for adjusting the self to the context resulting in a self-improvement motive. In contrast, students from individualistic cultures engaged more often in downward comparison, reflecting an independent self, and indicating a stronger motivation for validating their internal attributes. We therefore expected that the Dutch will compare themselves
downward more often than the Spanish, and that the Spanish will compare themselves upward more often than the Dutch.

In addition, regarding organizational context, we assume that in private organizations the more prominent aspects as competition, autonomy and self-attributes reliance might favor the salience of an independent self, which may induce a downward comparison process. In public organizations aspects as cooperation, dependency and ability to adjust and maintain harmony are more appreciated might favor the salience of an interdependent self, which may induce an upward comparison process.

Regarding gender, we expect that men, who have a more salient independent-self, may compare themselves more often downward, and that women, who have a more interdependent-self, may compare themselves more often upward.

Social comparison dimensions
In Chapter 5, we examine the work dimensions on which individuals may compare themselves more often with others. In particular, according to Tornow’s conceptualization (1971), work dimensions are described as ‘inputs’, that is, factors that individuals believe to make a contribution to the job, e.g., work effort and performance; and ‘outcomes’ described as factors that individuals believe that derive from the situation and are perceived as worthy, e.g., salary and career opportunities.

We assume that the Dutch may, given their more independent self, compare more frequently their inputs (performance, social skills and capacities) than their outcomes (salary, work conditions, and career opportunities) in order to validate their internal attributes and to show that they contribute more to the organization than other colleagues. In contrast, the Spanish may, given their more interdependent self, compare more frequently their outcomes (i.e., salary, work conditions and career opportunities) than their inputs (performance, social skills and capacities) in order to perceive the communal similarities with other better-off colleagues’ organizational conditions.

In a similar vein, we assume that individuals from different organizational contexts as private and public organizations may differ in the work dimensions they frequently prefer to compare themselves at. That is, for workers in public organizations, given their more
interdependent self, an important consideration will be to obtain a relatively stable income and job position; therefore they may be more focused on outcomes than on inputs. In contrast, workers in private organizations will, given their more independent self, pay more attention to inputs as they will be more oriented towards competition. That is, they will be more oriented towards performing, and they will therefore tend to compare more frequently on what they contribute to their job. Regarding gender, we expect that women will focus more on outcome comparison than men, and that men will focus more on input comparison than women.

Target choice comparison
We also examine the choice of comparison target among men and women. In line with Festinger’s assumption (1954) there is a preference for comparison with similar others on relevant dimensions, an assumption that has garnered considerable empirical support (e.g., Gastorf & Suls, 1978; Tyler, Kramer, & John, 1999). In particular, there is evidence for a preference for comparisons with others of the same gender over others of the opposite gender (e.g., Feldman & Ruble, 1981; Miller, 1984). Additional research has extended these findings indicating that females compare themselves more often with female than with male targets, and that females identify themselves more with a female than with a male successful target (Buunk & Van der Laan, 2002). Therefore, we expect that compared to men, women will compare themselves more often with women, and compared to women, men will compare themselves more often with men. However, individuals’ cultural background may influence whether individuals compare themselves with women and/or men. Although no previous research has specifically examined this question, research on culture and gender role attitudes has shown a tendency to more liberal gender role attitudes or sex-role ideology in countries that emphasized individualism and de-emphasized authoritarian power structures (Williams & Best, 1990). Furthermore, collectivist cultures tend to held more traditional gender attitudes than individualistic cultures. Therefore, we expected that compared to the Spanish, the Dutch will compare themselves more often with women, and compared to the Dutch, the Spanish will compare themselves more often with men. Regarding dimensions of comparison, we did not formulate
specific hypotheses.

Overview of the chapters

To summarize, in the present dissertation we investigate identification and contrast derived from social comparison among students and workers. An additional issue of this dissertation was the examination of culture, context and gender differences in the way individuals compare themselves to others. A brief summary of each chapter is described as follows.

Chapter 2: In this chapter we examine whether social comparison strategies are related to the development of burnout over time, and how these processes are related to coping.

Chapter 3: This chapter investigates the relationship between goal orientation, social comparison processes, self-efficacy and the subsequent academic performance.

Chapter 4: This chapter focuses on the question whether social comparison strategies may affect organizational commitment and identification, and whether this relationship might differ between Spanish and Dutch workers.

Chapter 5: This chapter addresses the question if there are cultural, contextual and gender differences in three basic aspects of social comparison as direction (upward and downward), dimensions of comparison (inputs and outcomes), and target choice comparison (men and women).

Chapter 6: This chapter integrates and discusses the main findings of every chapter in this dissertation. More precisely, theoretical and research contributions are addressed as well as the practical implications of the studies.