CHAPTER 5

Social Comparison at Work: 
Culture, Type of Organization and Gender Differences

Abstract
The present study examined the role of social comparison among workers in private and public organizations in The Netherlands and Spain. Social comparison involves positioning the self relative to other individuals on specific dimensions. The need for and the outcomes of social comparison may differ between individuals with independent and interdependent selves. Therefore, we expect differences in social comparison for people from more individualistic cultures (e.g., Dutch) and more collectivistic cultures (e.g., Spanish), between more competitive work contexts (e.g., private organizations) and more cooperative contexts (e.g., public organization), and between men and women. Aspects of social comparison such as direction (downward and upward), work dimensions (e.g., salary, performance), and specific target choices (e.g., men and women) were assessed in four field studies among 182 Dutch workers and 222 Spanish workers. Main results showed that the Spanish compared themselves more often upward than downward, individuals in private organizations compared themselves both upward and downward, and women in private organizations compared themselves more often with men than women in public organizations. These data suggest that the salience of an independent or interdependent self - as involved in different cultures, different work contexts and gender - is related to the social comparisons people make.

Individuals may compare themselves with others when they are with family, friends, or colleagues. They may make comparisons on characteristics such as intelligence, competence, and attractiveness; they may also make comparisons on other features such as salary, career opportunities, and

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benefits. Social comparison refers to relating one’s own characteristics to those of other similar others (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989), and it may provide individuals with information that they can use to evaluate, enhance, verify, and improve themselves (see Taylor & Lobel, 1989). Social comparisons may be especially manifest in work situations in which achieving success is highly appreciated and underperformance is not accepted. Indeed, the work sphere is a major area of life in which people may attain prestige, recognition, and self-esteem. Because the subjective assessment of such features is to an important extent based upon comparisons with others, employees may frequently engage in comparisons with their coworkers. However, individuals differ in the extent to which they engage in social comparison at work (e.g., Goodman, 1977). In the present research, we examined how social comparison processes within organizations may differ between Spain and the Netherlands, between private and public companies, and between men and women. We focused on three aspects of social comparison: the direction, the dimensions, and the choice of targets.

A basic assumption in the present research is that social comparison processes differ depending on the type of self that is salient in a particular context. Most researchers agree that social comparison refers to “the process of thinking about information about one or more other people in relation to the self” (Wood, 1996, pp. 520-521). However, the self may take different forms. According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), individuals may have an independent or an interdependent self-construal. Among individuals with an independent self-construal, one’s thoughts, feelings, goals, and behaviours are seen as distinct from that of others. Among individuals with an interdependent self-construal, one’s thoughts, feelings, goals, and behaviours overlap with that of others. That is, “the individuated or independent” self represents a self-concept that differentiates the self from others, whereas the “relational or interdependent” self represents a self-concept that reflects integration and inclusion of the self in the social world. Activating independent or interdependent self-related cognitions may differentially affect the way information about others is processed (cf. Brewer & Gardner, 1996). We assume that differences between the Dutch and the Spanish,
between private and public organizations, and between men and women, reflect in part differences in the type of self that is salient.

**Cultural differences**

Research shows that individuals of different cultural backgrounds may be characterized by different self-construals, which may influence their cognitions, emotions and relationships with other people (see Aron, Aron, & Tudor, 1991; Brewer, 1991; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Stapel & Koomen, 2001; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; Triandis, 1989; Turner, 1987). There is evidence that people in collectivistic cultures tend to have a more interdependent self, whereas people in individualistic cultures tend to have a more independent self. Also, collectivistic cultures tend to value cooperation, whereas individualistic cultures tend to value competition (Triandis, 1995; Triandis & Suh, 2002). In particular, according to Hofstede’s classic study (1980) as well as the GLOBE study of 62 societies (Gelfand, Bhawuk, Nishii, & Bechtold, 2004), Dutch culture is among the most individualistic in the world. Relative to people of many other cultures, Dutch people have higher self-confidence and looser bonds with others. Individual pride and respect are highly valued, and degrading another person is strongly disapproved. In addition, there is tolerance for a variety of opinions, a tendency to accept change easily and a moderate emphasis on following rules. Equality and opportunity for everyone are stressed, reflecting a low appreciation of differentiation.

Spanish culture differs in a number of aspects from Dutch culture. According to Hofstede (1980), Spanish culture falls around the middle on individualism, lower than Dutch culture. Recent research has shown that Spanish culture is more collectivist than individualistic (Gouveia, Clememte, & Espinosa, 2003). In particular, Spanish culture might be best described as a culture sharing Latin (i.e., hierarchical organizations) and European (i.e., equality at work) features. According to Fiske (1992), we assume that the Spanish have collectivistic features in that they tend to establish harmony in their interpersonal relationships as a sense of belonging to a social group. Both inequalities of power and wealth, as well as equality and opportunity are to a moderate degree accepted within the Spanish society (Hofstede,
1980). In particular, previous findings suggested that at work the Dutch value the ‘Equality and Utilitarian involvement’ dimension, and prefer coaching leaders; in contrast, the Spanish value the ‘Hierarchy and Loyal Involvement’ dimension and prefer directing leaders (Smith, 1997; Zander, 1997). To summarize, there are important differences between these two cultures. In particular, Spanish individuals seem to have a more interdependent self-construal, and Dutch individuals seem to have a more independent self-construal.

**Differences between private and public organizations**

Organizational context may also influence the way individuals perceive themselves in relation to others. 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). Walmsley and Zald (1973) noted that one difference between private and public organizations may be due to the different patterns in ownership and funding. That is, organizations in the private sector operate in a competitive and dynamic environment, in which profitability is the ultimate criterion of success; they are responsive to the market and to customer demands. 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). No previous studies have investigated whether differences between private and public organizations may influence ways in which individuals perceive themselves in relation to others at work. We assumed that in private organizations the more prominent aspects as competition, autonomy and self-attributes reliance are more appreciated and might favor the salience of an independent self, and 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 differences
Previous 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, 2001b). 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. 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. According to Cross and Madson (1997), these self-representations function “…. as lenses for the perception and interpretation of social information and social interactions” (p. 9). For example, women tend to make more references to close relationships than men when they are asked to describe themselves spontaneously (Rosenberg, 1989; Thoits, 1992), and women are more motivated to maintain relationships than are men (Cross & Madson, 1997). The literature on gender differences in agency and communion is also consistent with these notions. 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
As described above, a common distinction between Dutch and Spanish culture, between private and public organizations, and between men and women may be the extent to which the independent or interdependent self is salient. Accordingly, we expected differences in social comparison tendencies between these groups.

Classic research on social comparison direction has generally shown that individuals tend to prefer comparisons with others who are thought to be slightly better off, consistent with Festinger’s notion of ‘upward drive’ (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 (i.e., upward comparison) to become inspired (Brickman
& Bulman, 1977; Buunk, Collins, Taylor, Van Yperen, & Dakof, 1990; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). 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 (i.e., downward comparison), presumably to feel better about themselves (Hakmiller, 1966; Wills, 1981). In the present research, we hypothesized that the preferred direction of comparison depends in part on the self that is salient (Kemmelmeier & Oyserman, 2001a), and therefore may differ according to culture, type of organization, and gender. Recent research has indeed shown differences in social comparison between cultures. White and Lehman (2005) found that students from collectivist 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 (hypothesis 1) and that the Spanish will compare themselves upward more often than the Dutch (hypothesis 2).

Furthermore, we assume that the type of organizational context may affect the social comparison direction in a similar way. In particular, in a work-context in which social comparison might be daily relevant, some work-related aspects may be more prevalent than others. For instance, competition, autonomy, and self-attributes reliance may clearly be more valued aspects in private than in public organizations, whereas aspects as cooperation, dependency, ability to adjust, and maintain harmony may be more valued in public than in private organizations (Pradhan, Kumar, & Singh, 2004). We assume that in private organizations, where the independent self will be more salient, the salience of competition and being successful may induce individuals to demonstrate that they are doing better than their worse-off colleagues. In public organizations, however, where the interdependent self will be more salient, individuals may focus on self-improvement, paying more attention to others who are doing better than they are. Thus, we
expected that upward comparison will be more prominent among individuals in public than in private organizations (hypothesis 3) and downward comparison will be more prominent among individuals in private than in public organizations (hypothesis 4).

In addition, previous research has shown that men and women differ in how they define themselves regarding different aspects as autonomy and connectedness to others (Bakan, 1966; Cross & Madson, 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Helgeson, 1994; Lykes, 1985; Markus & Oyserman, 1989). Men with a more independent than interdependent salient self tend to focus on personal uniqueness, self-determination and personal agency. This focus may lead them to have a major tendency to self-enhance (Kemmelmeier & Oyserman, 2001b). Women with a more interdependent than independent salient self tend to focus on their relationships, on paying more attention to others, and being more responsive to others’ feedback (Cross & Madson, 1997). Moreover, women may also concern with sharing standard and norms with others, and may therefore focus on self-improvement in order to not falling behind others rather than on self-enhancement. Thus, we expected that upward comparison will be more prominent among women than men (hypothesis 5) and downward comparison will be more prominent among men than women (hypothesis 6).

Comparison work dimensions
As previous research has shown, individuals’ perceptions of which dimensions such as values, type of leadership, attitudes and goal-setting they more value at work may differ among individuals with different cultural backgrounds (for a review see Brodbeck et al., 2000; O’Connell & Prieto, 1998; Shenkar & Ronen, 1987; Smith, 1997; Smith, Dugan, & Trompenaars, 1996; Trompenaars, 1993). According to Tornow’s conceptualization (1971), work dimensions may be 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 individuals with different cultural backgrounds may compare different work aspects which may be related to
factors as outcomes and inputs. We assumed that the Dutch may, given their more independent self, compare more their inputs (performance, social skills and capacities) than their outcomes factors in order to validate their internal attributes and to self-enhance by showing that they contribute more to the organization than other colleagues. In contrast, the Spanish may, given their more interdependent self, compare more their outcomes (i.e., salary, work conditions and career opportunities) than their input factors in order to perceive the extent to which the organization is interested in the workers. Thus, we expected that the Dutch will compare inputs more often than the Spanish (hypothesis 7) and the Spanish will compare outcomes more often than the Dutch (hypothesis 8).

In a similar vein, we assume that individuals from different organizational context may differ in the work dimensions they 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 will therefore tend to compare what they contribute to their job. Thus, we expected that workers from public organizations will compare more their outcomes (hypothesis 9), whereas workers from private organizations will compare more their inputs (hypothesis 10).

Gender choice comparison
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). Further research has extended these findings indicating that females compare themselves more often with female than with male targets, identify themselves more with a
female than with a male successful target, perceive the situation of the female targets as more likely future for themselves, and experience more positive effect in response to female than to male successful targets (Buunk & Van der Laan, 2002). Therefore, we expected that compared to men, women will compare themselves more often with women (hypothesis 11), and compared to women, men will compare themselves more often with men (hypothesis 12).

However, culture may also influence whether individuals tend to compare with women and men. Although no previous research has specifically examined this question, research on culture and gender role attitudes has shown more liberal gender role attitudes or sex-role ideology in countries that emphasized individualism and de-emphasized authoritarian power structures (Williams & Best, 1990). Furthermore, collectivistic cultures tend to held more traditional gender attitudes than individualistic cultures. For instance, American women, characterized by a desire for independence and autonomy, tend to show more liberal attitudes about gender roles, and Ukrainian women, characterized by interdependence features, tend to show more conventional male-female relations with an emphasis on traditional conceptions of men as “masculine” (i.e., strong, in charge) and women as “feminine” (i.e., passive, dependnet), (Shafiro, Himelein, and Best, 2003). Applying this to the differences between Spain and The Netherlands, we expected that compared to the Spanish, the Dutch will compare more often with women (hypothesis 13), and compared to the Dutch, the Spanish will compare more with men (hypothesis 14). In addition, we expected differences among men and women in these two cultures. In the Dutch culture, there will be few or no differences between men and women in the frequency of comparison with other men or women targets (hypothesis 15), whereas in the Spanish culture, we expected that men and women will compare themselves more often with men (hypothesis 16).

Method
Participants
Four hundred and four workers from private organizations (57.4% Spanish and 42.6% Dutch) and from public organizations (53% Spanish and 47%
Dutch) participated voluntarily in the study. Both private organizations were multinational manufactory companies, from the automobile sector and from the appliance sector. And the public organizations were libraries in both cultures. In the private organizations, the Spanish sample was composed by 101 workers (75.3% males and 24.7% females) and the Dutch sample consisted of 75 workers (62.2% males and 37.8% females). In the public organizations, the Spanish sample was composed by 121 workers (25.6% males and 74.4% females) and 107 workers in the Dutch sample (12.1% males and 87.9% females). Of the Spanish participants, the 0.4% was younger than 21 years, the 27.4% was between 21-36 years, the 58.4% was between 37-55, and the 13.3% was older than 55 years old. In the Dutch sample, the 0.5% was younger than 21 years, the 23% was between 21-36, the 65.6% was between 37-55, and the 10.9% was older than 55 years old. Overall, the access to the organizations that participated in the survey was arranged by their respective human resources sections. All the employees completed the survey administered by a researcher and without the presence of managerial personnel. Employees were told that the questionnaires would be kept completely anonymous and that the management would not be able to identify the individual respondents.

Measures

**Social comparison direction.** To assess the frequency with which individuals compare themselves with others, we used a two-item measure that has been used in previous research (Buunk, Zurriaga, González-Romá, & Subirats, 2003). One question asked about upward comparisons: “How often do you compare yourself with others who are performing better than you are?” A second question asked about downward comparisons: “How often do you compare yourself with others who are performing worse than you are?” Responds were provided on 5-point scales, with points labelled *never* (1), *seldom* (2), *sometimes* (3), *regularly* (4), and *often* (5).

**Work dimension comparisons.** To measure the frequency with which individuals compare themselves with other on specific work-content dimensions, eight questions were formulated: “How often do you compare your (salary, work conditions, career opportunities, performance, social skills,
work effort and capacities) with other colleagues?” According to Tornow’s classification (1971), these eight items were grouped in two factors, Inputs (related to the worker) and Outputs (related to the organization), through a factor analysis involving the eight items. Exploratory principal component analyses were conducted on the 8-items, and two factors were extracted in these analyses, one with an eigenvalue of 3.82 and the other with an eigenvalue of 1.16; these factors explained 54% and 16% of the variance, respectively. A varimax rotation was then performed. The first factor, comprising four items (performance, social skills, capacities, and work effort), was labelled “Inputs or related to the worker”; these items had a Cronbach’s alpha of .86. The second factor, comprising three items (salary, career opportunities and work conditions), was labelled “Outcomes or related to the organization”; these items had a Cronbach’s alpha of .80. The item regarding work effort had low loading and thus was deleted. Results showed that the items could be grouped in two factors as we had expected.

**Target choice comparison.** To measure the frequency with which individuals compare themselves with men and women, two questions were formulated: “How often do you compare yourself with men?” and “How often do you compare yourself with women? A 5-point scale was used, with points labelled (1) “never” to (5) “often”.

**Results**

The intercorrelations between the study variables are shown in Table 1. In addition, to test the hypotheses, we performed Univariate Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) to examine the effects of nation, type of organization, and gender on the overall social comparison measures (direction, dimensions and choice comparison).
### Table 1. Intercorrelations between the Study Variables

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<td>5 Downward comparison</td>
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<td>9 Women comparison</td>
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<td>.41***</td>
<td>.34***</td>
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Note. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

**Social comparison direction**

Regarding downward comparison, there were no main effects of nation and gender (hypothesis 1 and 6). In line with Hypothesis 4, workers in private organizations compared themselves more often downward ($M = 2.40, SD = .87$) than workers in public organizations ($M = 2.17, SD = .80$), $F(1, 379) = 4.27, p < .05$. That is, in private organizations, which are often more competitive than public organizations such as libraries, workers may tend to self-enhance to show they are better-off and boost their self-esteem.

As regards upward comparison, the results supported Hypothesis 2, $F(1, 376) = 4.95, p < .05$. The Spanish tended to compare themselves upward more often.
(M = 2.47, SD = .85) than the Dutch (M = 2.35, SD = .74). Thus, the Spanish tend to focus on others who are doing better to improve themselves at work. In addition, a main effect of type of organization on upward comparison was found, F(1, 377) = 8.31, p < .01. However, it was not in the expected direction as specified by Hypothesis 3: Workers in private organizations compared themselves more often upward (M = 2.57, SD = .80) than workers in public organizations (M = 2.30, SD = .79). This finding suggests that workers in private organizations are involved in a more competitive context which leads them to pay more attention to successful others than workers in public organizations. Regarding Hypothesis 5, there was no main effect of gender on upward comparison. However, consistent with the hypotheses, two significant interaction effects were found. First, as shown in Figure 1, results showed an interaction effect between gender and nation, F(1, 377) = 4.19, p < .05. Spanish women compared themselves upward more often (M = 2.48, SD = .82) than Dutch women did (M = 2.24, SD = .68). In contrast, Dutch men compared upward more often (M = 2.59, SD = .81) than Spanish men did (M = 2.46, SD = .89). Second, as shown in Figure 2, there was an interaction effect between gender and type of organization was found, F(1, 377) = 4.39, p < .05. In private organizations, men engaged more frequently in upward comparison (M = 2.64, SD = .84) than women (M = 2.42, SD = .67), whereas in public organizations, women engaged more often in upward comparison (M = 2.34, SD = .78) than men (M = 2.13, SD = .83).

**Work dimension comparison.** We performed two ANOVA’s to examine the effects of nation, gender, and type of organization on the two work dimensions of comparison: inputs and outcomes (Hypothesis 7-10). For the inputs dimension (i.e., performance comparison), we did not find any effect of nation (hypothesis 7). However, in line with hypothesis 10, a significant main effect of type of organization was found, F(1, 398) = 6.78, p < .01. That is, workers from private organizations (M = 2.78, SD = .81) compared their inputs more often than workers from public organizations (M = 2.53, SD = .80).

For the outcomes dimension (i.e., salary comparison) our expectations were partially confirmed (hypothesis 8 and 10). Two significant main effects were found, one of nation, F(1, 394) = 56.51, p < .001 and the other of type of
organization, $F(1, 394) = 5.42, p < .05$. That is, the Spanish focused more on outcome comparisons, ($M = 2.88, SD = .88$) than the Dutch ($M = 2.24, SD = .71$). Moreover, workers from private organizations focused also more on outcomes comparisons ($M = 2.71, SD = .90$) than workers from public organizations ($M = 2.51, SD = .84$). Unexpectedly, as shown in Figure 3, a three-way interaction effect between nation, type of organization and sex was found for outcomes dimension $F(1, 394) = 3.70, p < .05$. Spanish women in private organizations tended to compare most frequently the outcomes dimension at work.

*Figure 1. Interaction effect of gender and nation on upward comparison.*

![Diagram](image1.png)

*Figure 2. Interaction effect of gender and type of organization on upward comparison.*

![Diagram](image2.png)
**Target choice comparison**

Social comparisons with women. Regarding comparisons with women, the results showed a significant main effect of gender as expected in Hypothesis 11. Women compared themselves more often with other women ($M = 2.19, SD = .92$) than men ($M = 1.96, SD = .86$), $F(1, 392) = 9.48, p < .01$. We did not find a main effect of culture on comparison with women. However, two interaction effects between gender and type of organization, and between culture and type of organization were found. As shown in Figure 4, compared to men in private and public organizations, women in private organizations compared themselves more often with women ($M = 2.58, SD = .95$) than women in public organizations ($M = 2.09, SD = .89$), $F(1, 392) = 4.23, p < .05$. Moreover, especially in public organizations the Dutch ($M = 2.24, SD = .89$) compared themselves more often with women than the Spanish ($M = 1.88, SD = .88$), $F(1.392), 5.53, p < .05$ (see Figure 5).

Figure 3. *Interaction effect of gender, type of organization and culture on outcomes dimension of comparison.*
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Figure 4. Interaction effect of gender and type of organization on comparison with women.

Figure 5. Interaction effect of culture and type of organization on comparison with women.

Figure 6. Interaction effect of gender and culture on comparison with men.

Figure 7. Interaction effect of gender and type of organization on comparison with men.
Social comparisons with men. There were no main effects of culture and sex on comparison with men, as it was expected in Hypothesis 12 and 14. Nevertheless, an interaction effect between gender and type of organization $F(1, 392) = 5.59, p < .01$, and between gender and culture, $F(1, 392) = 4.78, p < .01$ were found. As shown in Figure 6, women in private organizations compared themselves more often with men ($M = 2.41, SD = 1.04$) than women in public organizations ($M = 1.79, SD = .80$). In addition, as shown in Figure 7, in line with hypothesis 16, Spanish women compared themselves more often with men ($M = 2.02, SD = .97$) than Dutch women ($M = 1.83, SD = .81$).

Discussion

The present study examined the effects of nation, type of organization, and gender on specific aspects of social comparison such as direction, dimensions, and target choice comparison. Overall, we assumed that individuals may present differences in social comparison depending on which culture individuals live in, in which context they work and if they are a man or a woman. Regarding social comparison direction, our expectations were partially confirmed. First, the Spanish compared themselves more often upward (self-improvement orientation) than the Dutch (self-enhancement orientation). This finding is in line with a recent study in which Asian Canadians showed more upward than downward comparisons (White & Lehman, 2005). Second, workers in private organizations compared more often downward and upward than workers from public organizations. Individuals in private organizations are encouraged to compete showing both a need for self-improvement and for self-enhancement, this result may be partially in line with Stapel and Kooren (2005) who demonstrated that “… competition activates a differentiation mindset in which self-other differences are emphasized more—with contrast as the likely result” (p. 1036). Thus, a competitive mindset and context may lead individuals to self-enhance. Third, we found evidence that the impact of culture differs for women and men in the social comparison direction. Among the Spanish, women compared upward more often than men. In contrast, among the Dutch, men compared
upward more often than women. These findings may extend previous research on culture, gender, and social comparison direction (Kemmelmeier & Oyserman, 2001a, b; White & Lehman, 2005). Regarding gender and organizational context, our findings suggest that upward comparison is perceived differently by men and women. Men in private organizations engaged more frequently in upward comparison and women in public organizations engaged more often in upward comparison.

Regarding work comparison dimension, some evidence for the hypotheses was found. Workers in private organizations were the most focused on inputs and outcomes dimension comparison. Specifically, these findings suggest that in competitive contexts, the need for social comparison and for becoming successful is higher than in public contexts. Are these preferences for comparison different across cultures? First, results showed that compared to the Dutch, the Spanish compared more often their outcomes. This finding provides support for the interpretation that the Spanish prefer to compare aspects related to standard norms (i.e., salary) which benefit them than to validate their internal attributes. However, gender differences were found across these two cultures. In particular, results suggested that Spanish women in the private organization were the most focused on outcomes dimension comparison. This finding may reflect the actual Spanish society in which differences between women and men in aspects such as salary and career opportunities are prominent at work, especially in private organizations. Consistent with these findings, the results showed that women in private organizations compared themselves more often with men than women in public organizations, and that Spanish women compared themselves more often with men than Dutch women.

The present results are in line with the assumption that there is a strong influence of context and culture on which part of the self is salient (see also Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Turner, 1987). Therefore, future research might further examine the extent to which individuals’ competition orientation and self-construal (independent and interdependent self) affect how individuals compare themselves with other colleagues at work. We suggest that self-construal salience might be an important determinant of
whether social comparison shows self-enhancement and self-improvement motives.

Considering the practical implications of the present findings, our results suggest that there are differences among individuals who feel threatened when seeing their colleagues performing worse and individuals who feel inspired when seeing other colleagues performing better. These differences might be taken into account in order to study further interventions concerning the relationship between positive and negative effects of social comparison and well-being in different cultures, organizations and between men and women.