SUMMARY

Social comparison is an automatic and daily process through which individuals acquire information about themselves. Since Festinger (1954) postulated his assumptions on social comparison, extensive research has focused on understanding and explaining the social comparison process. In particular, the motives for social comparison direction have been widely investigated by researchers. 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. Nevertheless, 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. In addition, in line with the identification-contrast model, we assume that upward as well as downward comparisons may be interpreted in a positive or negative way, depending on whether an individual contrasts or identifies oneself with the comparison target.

The purpose of this dissertation was twofold: 1) to deepen our understanding of the relationship between social comparison from an identification-contrast perspective and specific psychological processes in the academic and work areas; and 2) to contribute to the literature exploring cultural differences in the identification and contrast processes, and expanding not only cultural, but also context and gender differences in basic aspects of social comparison including direction, dimensions and target choice of comparison.

In Chapter 2, in a study among university students, we examined how goal orientation, social comparison responses, self-efficacy and academic performance were related. In this chapter, the data were analyzed by employing structural equation modeling. The results showed that individuals with a promotion goal orientation had positive self-efficacy perceptions, whereas individuals with a prevention goal orientation had negative self-efficacy perceptions. In addition, individuals who contrasted themselves with better-off others
had negative self-efficacy perceptions. Finally, the results revealed that upward contrast was a mediator between prevention goal orientation and self-efficacy, and next, that self-efficacy was positively related to academic performance. These findings support the idea that goal prevention orientation may directly influence self-efficacy perceptions, and also indirectly through an upward contrast process, and next this may undermine academic performance.

In Chapter 3, we examined the independent role of social comparison responses and coping styles with respect to burnout over time. We conducted a longitudinal study among 558 teachers in primary and secondary schools. The results showed that identifying oneself with worse-off others and contrasting oneself with better-off others was positively related to burnout. Identification with worse-off was also associated with an increase in burnout over time. In addition, individuals with a more direct coping style experienced less burnout, whereas individuals with a palliative coping style experienced more burnout. Moreover, the results showed that a direct coping style was associated with more downward identification, more upward contrast, and less upward identification. These findings suggest that there is an independent relationship between social comparison responses and coping styles with respect to burnout.

In Chapter 4, we investigated among Dutch and Spanish workers the relationship between social comparison responses and organizational commitment and identification. Data were collected in private and public organizations with 404 respondents from The Netherlands and Spain. The results showed cultural differences in the social comparison responses. In particular, compared to the Dutch, the Spanish engaged more in upward and downward identification, whereas the Dutch engaged more in downward contrast. In addition, there was a relationship between social comparison responses and organization commitment and identification. However, culture moderated this relationship. That is, upward identification was related to organizational commitment and identification among the Spanish, but not among the Dutch. In addition, upward contrast was negatively
related to organizational commitment among the Dutch, and positively related to organizational commitment and identification among the Spanish.

In Chapter 5, we focused on studying not only cultural, but also organizational context and gender differences in basic aspects of social comparison such as direction, dimension and target choice. The results showed that the Spanish compared themselves more often upward than the Dutch, that workers in private organizations compared themselves more often downward and upward than workers from public organizations, that Spanish women compared themselves upward more often than men, and that Dutch men compared themselves upward more often than women. Men in private organizations engaged more frequently in upward comparison, whereas women in public organizations engaged more often in upward comparison. Regarding the social comparison dimensions, we found that workers in private organizations were the most focused on both inputs (e.g., performance) and outcomes (e.g., salary) dimensions of comparison, and that compared to the Dutch, the Spanish compared more often their outcomes than their inputs. Particularly, Spanish women in the private organization were the most focused on outcomes dimension of comparison. Finally, the results evidenced 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. Thus, these results support the idea that individuals may present differences in social comparison depending on which culture individuals live in, which context they work in and if they are men or women.

In the last chapter, we highlighted that identification and contrast responses in social comparison are relevant in the academic and work areas. After discussing the major weaknesses and strengths of the present dissertation, we conclude that we have shown how the positive and negative responses derived from identification and contrast are related to functional processes as self-efficacy, coping, organizational commitment and identification; and to dysfunctional
processes as burnout. Further, we suggest that the present dissertation contributes to the literature on social comparison by showing evidence for cultural, context and gender differences in the direction of social comparison, the dimensions of social comparison, and the choice of comparison targets. Finally, we conclude on the basis of the identification-contrast model, that social comparison is a relevant factor to explain individuals’ interaction with the social world.