

# Detoxing Academic Culture: Lessons from Corporate Misconduct

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Presentation at the Structural Flaws In the Science System Conference,  
Technische University Dresden, January 13, 2022



# Understanding academic integrity problems



## Hardly thinking about others: On cognitive busyness and target similarity in social comparison effects

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Received 2 February 2004; revised 4 May 2005  
Available online 5 August 2005

### Abstract

Two studies were undertaken to investigate the impact of other-self similarity on the outcomes of social comparison effects when people are cognitively busy versus non-busy. Results demonstrate that when perceivers are able to devote sufficient cognitive resources to the comparison process, extremely similar others lead to assimilative self-evaluations, whereas moderately similar others lead to contrastive self-evaluations and dissimilar others lead to null effects. When perceivers are cognitively busy, however, both extremely and moderately similar others yield assimilation effects, whereas dissimilar others yield contrast effects.  
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**Keywords:** Social comparison; Self; Similarity; Cognitive busyness; Contrast

Social comparisons are primarily used to gain knowledge about the self by relating emotions, thoughts, and behaviors to those around us (see Blanton, 2000; Wood, 1989). Indeed, over the 50 years since Festinger's seminal paper on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) countless experiments have been conducted on the outcomes of the comparison process. These experiments have shown that social comparison can lead to contrast (I feel stupid because my colleague is an excellent chess player), assimilation (I feel smart because my sister won the Pulitzer prize), as well as null effects (I do not feel less attracted to the new car because of Cindy Crawford because she is a professional model and I am a psychologist).

Reviews of the relevant literature have identified a number of moderators of whether social comparisons yield contrast or assimilation (for reviews see e.g., Mussweiler & Strack, 2000; Stapel & Suls, 2004).

Interestingly, even though studies on the self-evaluative consequences of social comparisons abound, the vast majority of these studies have focused on the impact of social comparisons in situations that allow for relatively mindful and effortful processing (see Markman & McMullen, 2003; Suls & Wheeler, 2000; Taylor & Lobel, 1989). Only recently have studies been published that explicitly investigate and compare more versus less controllable social comparison effects (e.g., Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995; Pelham & Wachsmuth, 1995; Stapel & Blanton, 2004). Hence, we do not know much about the possible similarities and differences between social comparisons that are made when people *think hard* versus when people (can) *hardly think* about the social comparison information. Some have argued that when people are cognitively busy, assimilation is more likely (Pelham & Wachsmuth, 1995), whereas others have shown that contrast is more likely (Stapel & Blanton, 2004).

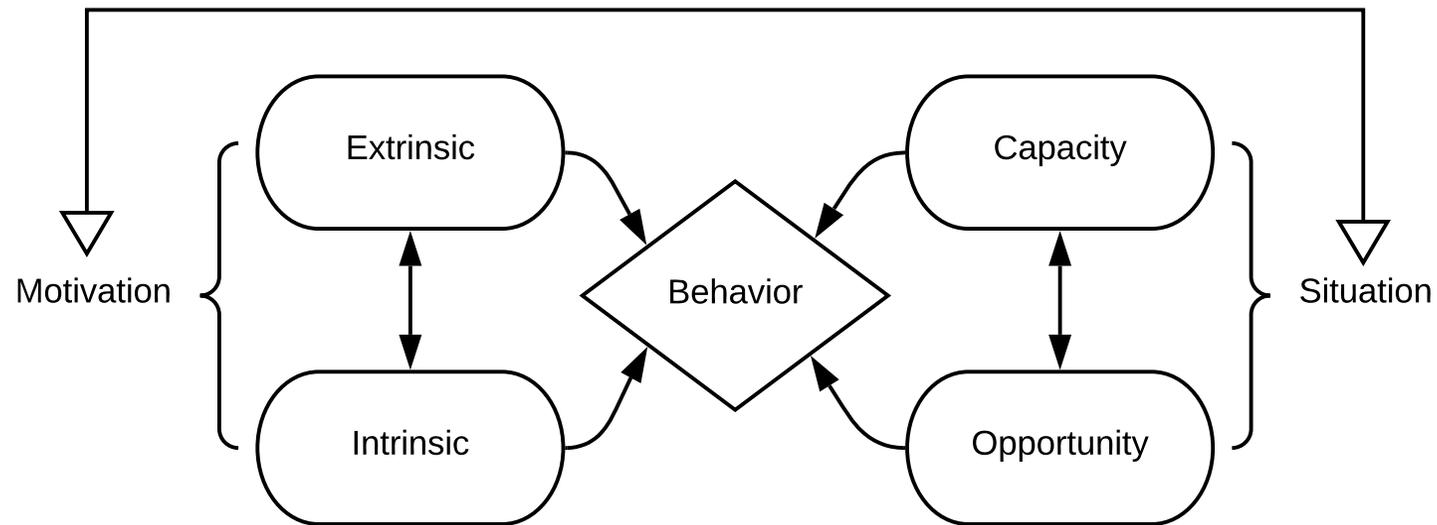
\* Research and writing was supported in part by a "Pionier" grant from the Dutch Science Foundation (Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek) and a research grant from the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Groningen, awarded to the first author.

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# Understanding academic integrity problems



# Understanding Organizational Misconduct



**We**  
**Save the**  
**Children**  
**Will you?**

The logo for Save the Children, featuring a white silhouette of a child with arms raised, set against a red, torn-edge background.

# What is organizational culture?

<i>Level</i>	<i>Aspects</i>		
<b>1. Structures</b>	Rules	Targets and Incentives	Hierarchy
<b>2. Values</b>	Explicit Shared Values	Injunctive Social Norms	Hidden Assumptions
<b>3. Practices</b>	Visible common behavior	Unaware Common Behavior	Situational Norms

Adapted from (Schein 2010)



# Three cases



# Goals and strategies

- Ambitious targets
- External pressures and resource shortage
- Insufficient means to achieve such targets
- Risk prone means to achieve targets
- Strong pressure to meet targets



# Goals and strategies

- Leads to **strain** that obstructed rule following (cf. Agnew et al. 2009)
- In the structures (incentives) and can move deeper to values and practices (cf. Schein 2010)



# Management and Employee Responses to Goals and strategies

Why is there no successful pushback against unrealistic targets?



# Management and Employee Responses to Goals and strategies

- Obstructed internal communication
- Limited flow upward: filtering and ignoring
- Limited job security and high stress
- Intimidation and repression of speech
- Extra difficult within social hierarchies



# Management and Employee Responses to Goals and strategies

- Can result in **social norm** not to speak out (cf. Schultz et al. 2007)
- Create an **opportunity** for rule breaking to occur (cf. Clarke 2013)
- Lead to more **strain** (cf. Agnew et al. 2009), and undermine support to comply



# Rule Breaking and Wrongdoing and Responses to It

What happens when people start breaking the rules?



# Rule Breaking and Wrongdoing and Responses to It

- Limited responses to rule breakers
- Shifting blame to individual (bad apple) and not looking at the organization (bad barrel)
- Limited internal discussion on what went wrong
- Focus on managing liability rather than prevention
- At worst, condoning rule breaking and retaliation against internal complainants



# Rule Breaking and Wrongdoing and Responses to It

- Creates **descriptive negative social norm** (Schultz et al. 2007)
- Leads to **normalization of deviancy** (Vaughan 1997), and
- **Evasion of detection** creates **Opportunity** for further offenses (Clarke 2013).



# Responses to Exposure

What happens when the wrongdoing and violations becomes public?



# Responses to Exposure

- Reputation and liability management result in denying injury, harm or responsibility
- Further and more elaborate blame shifting
- Obstructing external investigations



# Responses to Exposure

- Result in different forms of **neutralization**, (Cf. Sykes and Matza 1957, Maruna and Copes 2005)
- Strengthening the **normalization of deviancy** (cf. Vaughan 1997).
- Neutralization occurs in a context of strain and **fear of legal liability** and **loss of reputation**



# Mixed messages

What difference is there between leadership messages and everyday practices on the workflow?



# Mixed messages

- Disconnect between what leaders and official policy states and what happens in practice
- Without true reform and follow through the disconnect between what is said and what is done will continue and expand
- Worsens after major scandals



# Mixed messages

- Results in **corporate cognitive dissonance**
- Difference between preached values and actual social norms
- Will **undermine** the **authority** and **legitimacy** of internal rules and ethics
- And create more rule breaking (cf. Keijzer et al. 2011)
- Undermines trust in leadership should it truly want to change culture



# 7 Elements of Toxicity



# Implications

- When organizations structurally engage in unethical conduct, there is more at play than individuals
- The existing focus on liability, discipline, and punishment may make toxic cultures worse
- In the worst cases we need a forensic ethnography to understand what organizational elements need to change
- In other cases we need a toxicity risk assessment to address negative elements before a full negative culture develops



# Specific aspects in to address in academic institutions

Look at the deeper underlying causes of academic misconduct:

- Create realistic university ambition, targets, and workload
- Recognize the inherent problem of assessing quality in academic work
- Reduce formal and social hierarchies
- Empower staff to speak out and against
- Taking organizational responsibility also for individual misconduct
- Create a transparent way to discuss and learn from misconduct
- Ensure that leadership and policy matches everyday reality



# General lessons for academia

- Integrity is part and parcel of the overall organization and thus the organizational ambition, targets, workload, HR policies and social safety policies
- More rules and complaints mechanisms will not work when toxic organizational elements are at play
- Training values or practicing moral dilemma's similarly will not be sufficient alone
- Deeper staff empowerment and transparency in addressing misconduct is vital



Thank you!

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