

The Effect of Referent Status in Social Comparison on Children’s Performance Perceptions

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Introduction

Previous Research

Social comparison occurs when people use another person’s (“referent’s”) outcomes in a particular domain to inform their thoughts or feelings about their own outcomes (Festinger, 1954).

- ◆ In downward social comparison, the referent has worse outcomes than the self; this generally results in more favorable appraisals of the self (Wills, 1981)
- ◆ In upward social comparisons, the referent has better outcomes than the self; this generally results in less favorable appraisals of the self (Mussweiler, 2003)

Characteristics of the referent can influence the impact of the comparison. For example, adults’ evaluations of their own and a referent’s performance are influenced by the referent’s status (above or below average) in comparison to others (Zell, Alicke, & Strickhouser, 2015):

- When adults make a downward social comparison:
- ◆ they rate themselves more favorably, regardless of the referent’s status; this is known as referent status neglect
 - ◆ they rate the referent less favorably

- When adults make an upward social comparison:
- ◆ they rate themselves less favorably, especially when comparing to a low status referent rather than a high status referent
 - ◆ they rate the referent more favorably

Regardless of comparison direction, adults rate high status referents more favorably than low status referents.

Present Research

Starting around 7 to 8 years old, children use social comparison information to make judgments about themselves and others (Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loebl, 1980)

How do children use referent status information in their social comparisons to inform:

- ◆ perceptions of their own performance?
- ◆ predictions about their own future performance?
- ◆ perceptions of the referent’s performance?

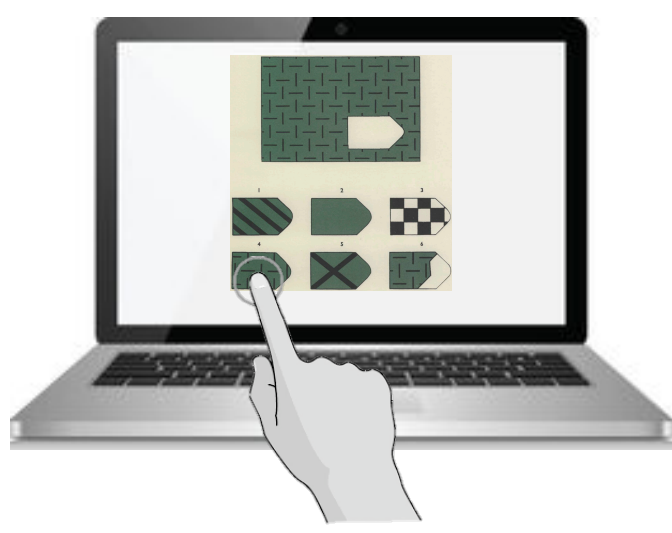
Participants

64 children (34 females, $M_{age} = 8.96$ yr, $SD = .656$ yr) tested at school programs or a university laboratory in North Carolina

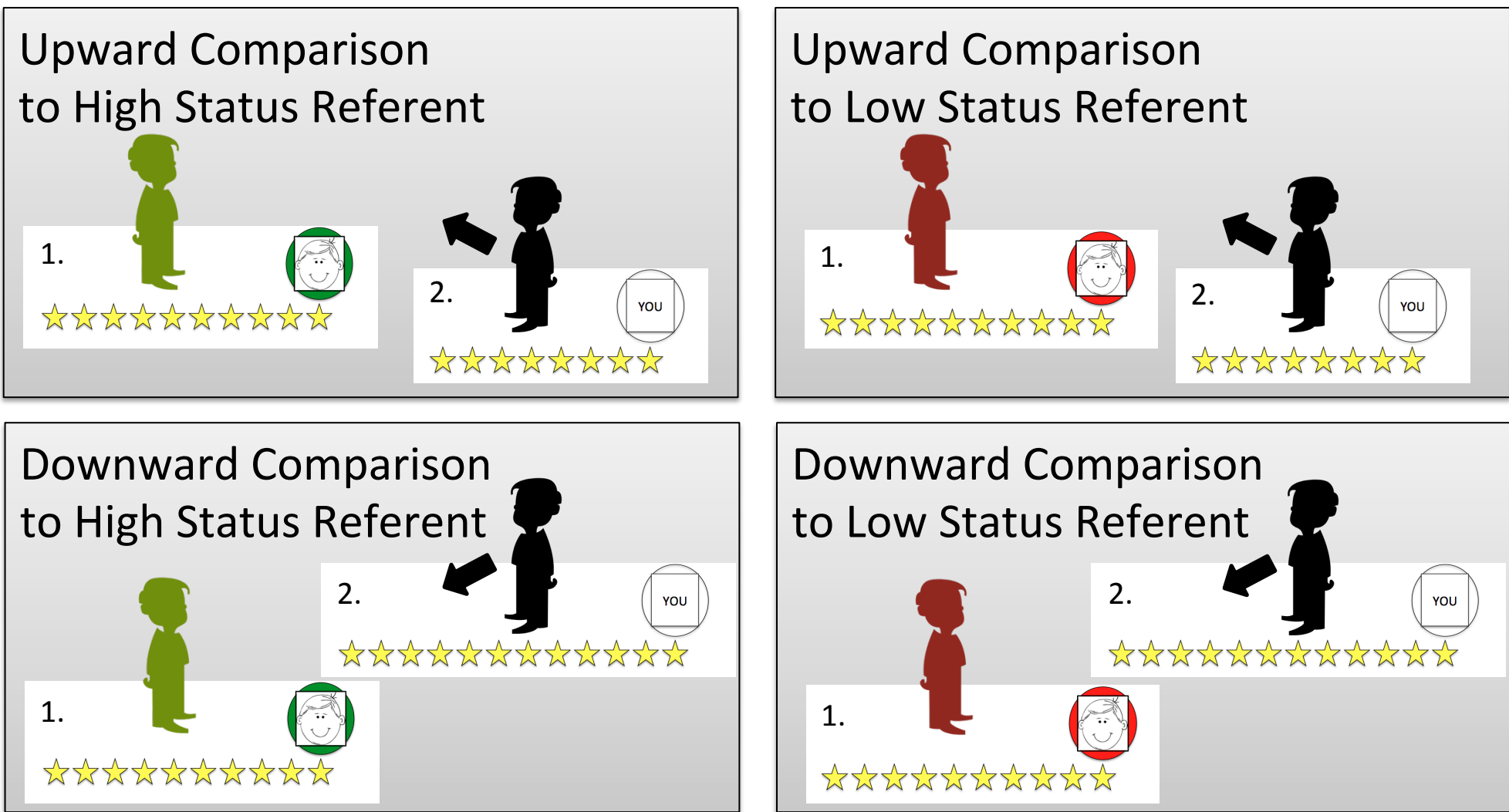
Procedure

Task 1: Raven’s Colored Progressive Matrices

Fluid intelligence task
Told they were scored based on accuracy and speed



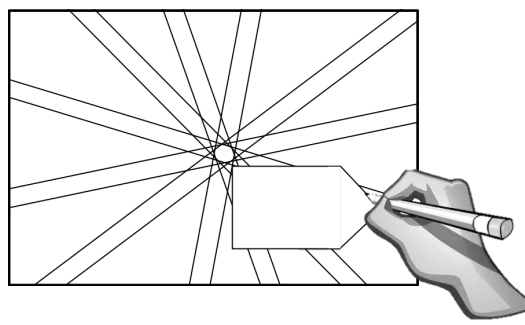
Social Comparison Feedback – Told Scores and Other Child’s Status



Shown other child’s score
Told that icon color shows whether that child did better or worse than “most other kids who played this game”
Green = better than most other kids (high status)
Red = worse than most other kids (low status)
Shown own score

Task 2: Puzzle Drawing Task

Told they were scored based on accuracy only



Outcome Measures

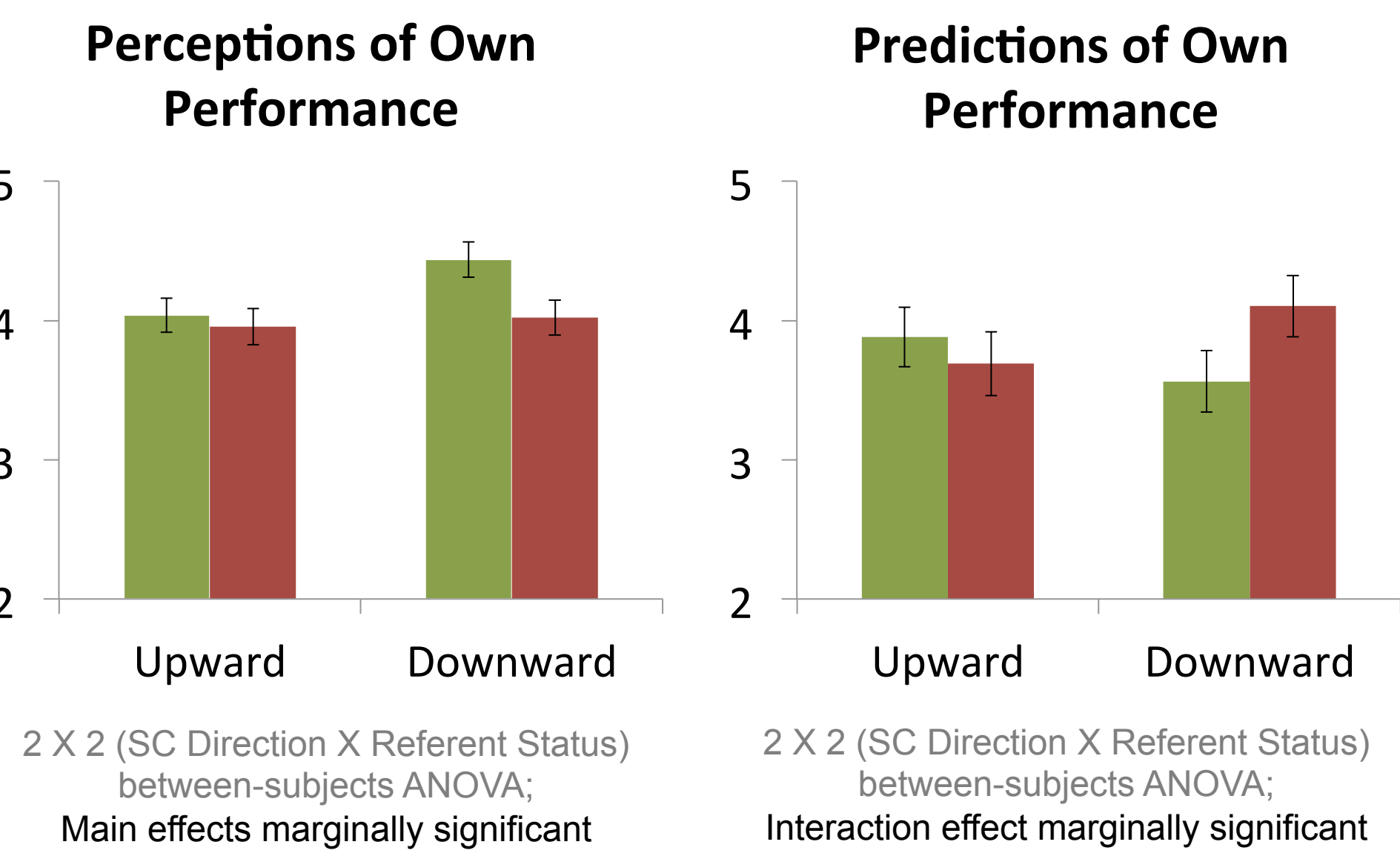


Perceptions of own [and referent’s] score on Task 1:
Which face shows how good you think your [the other boy/girl’s] score was?
Which face shows how good of a job you think you [he/she] did?
Which face shows how good you think you are [he/she is] at this kind of game?

Predictions about own score on Task 2:
Same judgment questions as above, framed hypothetically

Results

Perceptions and Predictions of Own Performance



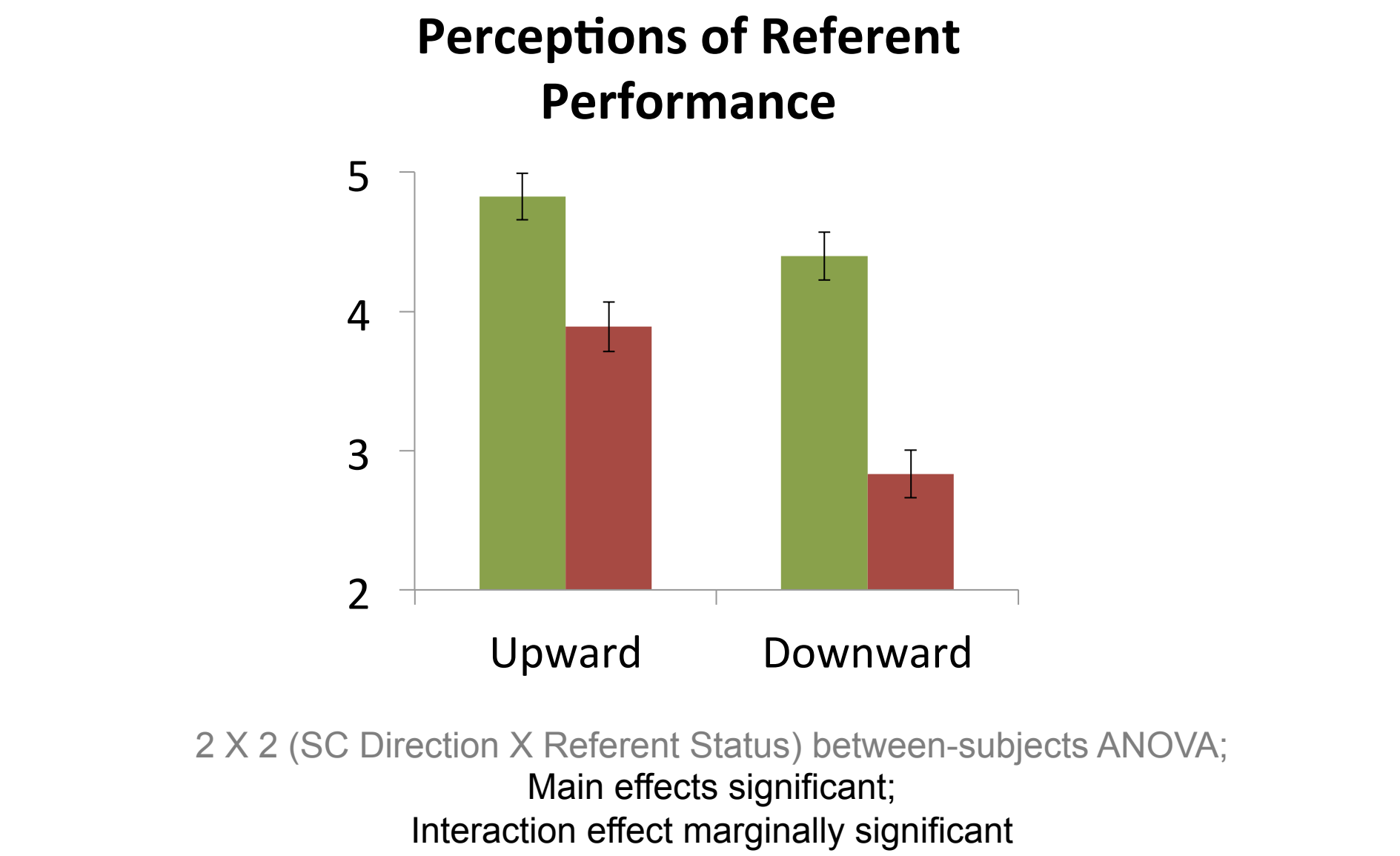
Children perceived their own score marginally more favorably when:

- ◆ Children outperformed the referent (downward comparison) $F(1, 60) = 3.312, p = .07, \eta^2_p = .052$
- ◆ Children (especially females) compared to a high rather than a low status referent $F(1, 60) = 3.858, p = .05, \eta^2_p = .060$
Sex X Referent Status: $F(1, 56) = 2.780, p = .10, \eta^2_p = .047$

Children predicted that their own score would be more favorable when:

- ◆ they had previously outperformed (downward comparison) a low rather than a high status referent, $p = .09, \eta^2_p = .048$
Comparison Direction X Referent Status: $F(1, 60) = 2.763, p = .10, \eta^2_p = .044$

Perceptions of Referent Performance



Children perceived the referent’s score more favorably when:

- ◆ the referent outperformed them (upward comparison) $F(1, 60) = 18.672, p < .000, \eta^2_p = .237$
- ◆ the referent was high rather than low status $F(1, 60) = 52.923, p < .000, \eta^2_p = .469$
- ◆ Comparison direction (upward or downward) influences perceptions of low status referents’ scores more than those of high status referents’ scores, $p = .000, \eta^2_p = .234$ vs. $p = .078, \eta^2_p = .051$
Comparison Direction X Referent Status: $F(1, 60) = 3.346, p = .07, \eta^2_p = .053$

Discussion

Perceptions and Predictions of Own Performance

Like adults, children perceive their own performance more favorably when they compare downward rather than upward (Keil, McClintock, Kramer, & Platow, 1990), and when they compare to a high rather than a low status referent. Thus, children take both comparison direction and referent status into account.

Unlike adults, children use referent status to inform perceptions of their own performance in the same way when comparing upward as when comparing downward. Interestingly, this fits with logical usage of the comparison information: it is better to underperform a referent who is above average rather than below average, and also to outperform a referent who is above average rather than below average.

However, for future predictions, children (especially females) demonstrate referent status neglect for previous upward comparisons but use referent status information from previous downward comparisons (predicting that their future performance will be more favorable when they have previously compared downward to a low rather than a high status referent).

For children, perhaps downward comparisons to a low status referent boost predictions of future scores because outperforming a low status referent is perceived as both positive and attainable. In contrast, outperforming a high status referent, although still positive, may be seen as less attainable.

Perceptions of Referent Performance

Like adults, children perceive referents’ scores more favorably when they compare upward rather than downward, and when they compare to a high rather than a low status referent. Again, children take both comparison direction and referent status into account.

Unlike adults, who show no interaction of comparison direction and referent status, children’s perceptions of a low status referent diminish significantly when children outperform the referent, whereas perceptions of a high status referent only diminish slightly when children outperform the referent. Thus, children judge high status others more leniently than low status others.

References

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