TO DISCOVER HOW A PERSON'S (P) SELF-CONCEPT IS AFFECTED
BY THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ANOTHER (O) WHO SUDDENLY APPEARS IN
THE SAME SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT, SEVERAL QUESTIONNAIRES,
INCLUDING THE GERGEN-MORSE (1967) SELF-CONSISTENCY SCALE AND
HALF THE COOPERSMITH SELF-ESTEEM INVENTORY, WERE ADMINISTERED
TO 78 UNDERGRADUATE MEN WHO HAD ANSWERED AN AD FOR WORK IN
PERSONALITY RESEARCH. THESE SUBJECTS WERE THEN CONFRONTED
WITH TWO OTHER JOB APPLICANTS, HALF WITH "MR. CLEAN"
(WELL-DRESSED, WELL-GROOMED, SELF-CONFIDENT), HALF WITH "MR.
DIRTY" (JUST THE OPPOSITE). THE SUBJECTS WERE THEN GIVEN THE
OTHER HALF OF THE SELF-ESTEEM INVENTORY AND A FINAL
QUESTIONNAIRE ASKING FOR THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF O AND OF THE
SITUATION. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA LED TO THE FOLLOWING
CONCLUSIONS--(1) IN ANY SITUATION (COMPETITIVE OR
NONCOMPETITIVE), AN O WITH SOCIALLY DESIRABLE CHARACTERISTICS
CAUSES A LOWERING OF P'S SELF-ESTEEM, AND AN O WITH NEGATIVE
CHARACTERISTICS CAUSES AN INCREASE, AND (2) IN ANY SITUATION,
SUBJECTS WITH A HIGH LEVEL OF INCONSISTENCY CHANGE THEIR
SELF-ESTEEM MORE THAN THOSE WITH A LOW LEVEL. THIS PAPER WAS
PRESENTED AT THE 1967 MEETING OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION (WASHINGTON, D.C.). (RD)

<u>note</u>

This is a slightly expanded version of a paper presented at the 1967 meetings of the American Psychological Association, in Washington, D.C. Slides were used in the A.P.A. presentation. Paragraph 1 of this paper refers to two of these slides. The first showed "Mr. Clean," who appeared well-groomed and was immaculately dressed. The second showed "Mr. Dirty." He appeared unshaven and wore a torn sweatshirt.

Social Comparison, Self-Consistency and the Presentation of Self[1]

Stanley J. Morse   Kenneth J. Gergen
University of Michigan   Swarthmore College

How would you feel if you found yourself seated opposite somebody like
this? Or, somebody like this? Would you compare yourself with him? If so,
what would this comparison do to your self-esteem?

Ever since Cooley (1964) hung up his picture of the "looking glass self"
and Mead (1934) figured out exactly how it worked (at least, theroetically!),
it has become almost a truism to social psychologists that an individual's
concept of himself is constructed by somehow assimilating the ways he thinks
others picture him. The windfall of theoretical and empirical studies gener-
ated by the works of Mead and Cooley has overshadowed another important way
in which an individual may evaluate himself; that is, by comparing himself
with others.

According to Festinger's (1954) theory of "social comparison," individ-
uals have a basic drive to test the validity of their notions about the world
and about themselves. Direct, physical tests are often either impossible
or very dangerous (as in the case of bombing China to see under what con-
ditions she will enter the Viet Nam war). As an alternative, individuals
will usually evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparing themselves
with others in their social environment.

The empirical literature on social comparison has had little to say, how-
ever, about how the characteristics of Others (O) might affect a Person's (P)
self-concept. The present study, therefore, focused on the way the positive or

negative attributes of an O who suddenly and accidently appears on the scene may alter P's feelings about himself.

When an average individual meets a person with very desirable characteristics, his own self-esteem may suffer. This is well-known to those who advertise grooming products on TV. A female viewer who watches the pretty blonde on her screen get all the men may well feel that she is a "loser" in comparison. To close the gap, she may immediately run out to buy the latest hair coloring product. On the other hand, when confronted with another person whose characteristics are considered undesirable in our society, an individual's self-esteem should be enhanced.

Our analysis thus far has ignored the problem of impression management. When a person describes himself he is not only evaluating his own self-esteem, but also presenting himself to an audience. Suppose that P and O are both applying for a job or vying for the hand of a fair maiden. In this case, P will try to present himself to the girl or to his prospective boss in as favorable a light as possible. If O has positive characteristics, these will pose a threat to P. He will then have to counteract them by showing that he has more of the quality in demand than O has. In a competitive situation, therefore, an O with desirable characteristics should cause P to present himself more favorably than he might actually feel. In a non-competitive situation, he may be free to define himself more honestly. Likewise, if O has negatively valued characteristics, P should have little need to boost his self-estimates, even if the two are competing.

In addition to O's characteristics and the nature of the situation in which P and O find themselves, P's personality may also play a part in determining the extent to which he modifies his self-image both overtly and covertly. Gergen and Morse (1967) have proposed that some individuals see the various

aspects of their self-concept as fitting together harmoniously, to form a subjectively unified whole. Others perceive a great deal of inconsistency between the various traits which make up their self-concept. Individuals with a high level of consistency should be loath to incorporate new and perhaps inconsistent pieces of information about themself into their already consistent self-concepts. On the other hand, those with a low level of perceived self-consistency should be more open to modifications.

In summary, we propose three hypotheses:

(1) In a non-competitive situation, an Other who has socially-desirable characteristics should cause a lowering of P's self-esteem, while one with negative characteristics should cause it to increase.

(2) In a competitive situation, the positive O should cause P to raise his _professed_ level of self-esteem to a greater extent than in the non-competitive situation. The negative O should cause no more self-enhancement than occurs in the non-competitive context.

(3) Highly self-consistent subjects should change their self-esteem _less_ than inconsistent ones, across all situations.

METHOD

Turning now to methodology, we wanted to create a high-incentive, "real life" situation, but one in which certain controls could be exercised. The 78 subjects used in this study were all undergraduate men who had answered an ad in the campus newspaper offering two jobs paying three dollars an hour for about 20 hours work in "personality research." When they arrived for their

job interview, all applicants were asked to complete several questionnaires
in addition to a three page application.

The secretary seated the subject at one side of a long table and gave
him the first set of forms. These contained the Gergen-Morse (1967) Self-
Consistency Scale and half the items from the Coopersmith (unpublished) Self-
Esteem Inventory.

On the self-consistency scale, respondents select the ten adjectives which
are most characteristic of them--five from a list of 17 positive traits, five
from a list of 17 negative ones. These can be seen at the top of this slide.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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These ten words are then listed down the side and across the bottom of
this matrix, so that all traits intersect one another. The respondent rates
the degree of inconsistency which he perceives between each pair of traits
at each intersection, using a six-point scale. This scale ranges from "the
two traits fit very well together" to "there is a great deal of inconsistency
between them." The respondent's self-consistency score is obtained by simply
summing these ratings; the higher the total score, the higher the level of
perceived inconsistency. A high score on this scale, for example, has been
correlated with low scores on the psychological well-being and tolerance
scales of the California Psychological Inventory (see Gergen and Morse, 1967).
For present analysis, subjects were split into high and low inconsistency
groups at the median on this scale.

When the subject had completed this first set of forms, the secretary
re-appeared to take these from him and to bring in another job applicant whom
she seated opposite him. Half the subjects found themselves confronted with

Mr. Clean, half with Mr. Dirty.

Mr. Clean was immaculately dressed and appeared very well-groomed and self-confident. When the secretary seated him behind his application, he immediately opened his attaché case, pulled out several sharpened pencils and began working on his forms in earnest. P could see that he also had a statistics book, a slide rule and a philosophy text in his case.

Mr. Dirty seemed just the opposite. He showed up in a smelly sweatshirt, wore no socks and seemed somewhat dazed by the whole procedure. He placed his copy of The Carpetbaggers on the table in front of him and after stareing aimlessly around the office for a few seconds, began looking for a pencil, which he finally found on the table. Once he began filling out his application, he would periodically stop, scratch his head and glance around the office as if looking for some guidance.

As we said before, we also wanted to vary the competitiveness of the relationship between P and O. To do this, half the subjects seated opposite Mr. Clean and half those seated opposite Mr. Dirty found that he was applying for the same job as they were. Half found that he was applying for a completely unrelated job--one in computer programming.

The subjects had nothing to do but look at O for about a minute and a half, after which the secretary returned with a second group of forms. These contained the remaining self-esteem items. The "pre" measure of self-esteem consisted of the 29 Coopersmith items which P completed before O was introduced, while the "post" measure comprised the 29 he completed afterward. Half the subjects in each condition received one set of items first and then the other set, while the remaining subjects completed these in the reverse order.

After returning these materials to the secretary, all subjects were given

a final questionnaire which asked for their perceptions of O and of the situation.

I should mention too that we did actually hire two of the applicants (not

necessarily the two who best confirmed our predictions!).

In summary, this study used a 2 by 2 by 2 factorial design. The indepen-

dent variables were (1) whether O's characteristics appeared desirable or

undesirable, (2) whether or not P was competing and (3) whether P had a high

or low level of perceived self-consistency.

RESULTS

First, did our manipulations work? How did subjects perceive Mr. Clean

and Mr. Dirty? On semantic differential items, they saw Mr. Dirty as sig-

nificantly more sloppy, less intellectual and more unconventional than Mr.

Clean. All of these differences were significant at the .001 level.

Unfortunately, our competitor - non-competitor manipulation was less

successful. Although subjects could correctly report which job O was applying

for, they did not rate him as significantly more of a competitor when he was

applying for the same job than when he was applying for a different one.

Turning to the results, we can first see how O's characteristics and

the competitiveness of the situation affected P's self-esteem. As we predicted,

and as Figure 2 shows, an individual's self-esteem rises when he is confronted

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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with a negative Other and drops when he encounters an O with positive charac-
teristics. The difference between self-esteem change in the two conditions
is significant at beyond the .05 level, using an analysis of variance. Con-
trary to prediction, these results hold whether O is competing with P or not.
The desirability of an Other's appearance does, then, seem to make a difference
in the way a person views himself in a situation.

We can now examine the effects of self-consistency upon social comparison.
If we combine the competitive and non-competitive conditions (and this is
legitimate since we found no difference between the two), we see that subjects
with a high level of inconsistency do indeed change more than those with a
low level. This can be seen in Figure 3. The self-esteem of highly incon-

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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sistent subjects shows a much sharper drop when faced with Mr. Clean and a
much larger increase when faced with Mr. Dirty than that of subjects with a
low level of inconsistency. Unfortunately, the analysis of variance did not
reveal a significant interaction between O's characteristics and level of
inconsistency.

However, we can look more closely at this relationship by examining the
correlations between inconsistency and change in self-esteem for each condition.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Table 1 shows that inconsistency is negatively correlated with positive change
in self-esteem in the Mr. Clean condition. That is, the higher a subject's
level of perceived inconsistency, the less his self-esteem changed in a positive

direction. When the competitive and non-competitive situations are combined, this correlation is significant at the .05 level. We find exactly the opposite relationship when Mr. Dirty is the stimulus person--a <u>positive</u> correlation between inconsistency and upward movement in self-esteem. This is significant at .05 for the non-competitive condition.

An equally important question is: How do these correlations between inconsistency and change in self-esteem for Mr. Clean and Mr. Dirty compare with each other? For the total groups, they are significantly different at the .03 level and for the non-competitive situation at .05.

In summary, then, there seems to be good support for our first hypothesis. In a natural setting, an individual is likely to compare himself with Others who happen to be present. If O's characteristics are highly desirable, P's self-esteem may drop. If they are undesirable, it may rise. This seems to occur whether O is a competitor or not, so our second hypothesis receives no support. Hypothesis 3 seems to hold. It was found that high inconsistency subjects showed larger shifts in self-esteem than low inconsistency ones. These results lend further validity to the self-consistency measure and show the importance of self-consistency in predicting various aspects of social behavior.

Before closing, we can, of course, raise the question of why we found no significant effects from the situational variable of competition. The most obvious answer is that our manipulation was not strong enough. Subjects correctly realized which of the two jobs O was applying for, but those in the competitive condition actually felt no more competition than those in the non-competitive one. In fact, on ratings of O, the only significant result was that subjects saw Mr. Clean as more competitive than Mr. Dirty, regardless of the particular situation. It seems as if the variations in O's character-

istics were sufficiently overpowering that the situational differences paled

in comparison. I suppose that that's the cue for the usual hackneyed expres-

sion, "more research is needed here."

Figure 1

(a) Traits Forming the Self-Consistency Measure

List I

Optimistic
Studious
Honest
Considerate
Reliable
Kind
Sincere
Friendly
Cautious
Independent
Practical
Happy
Sensitive
Tolerant
Idealistic
Adventurous
Intelligent

List II

Impatient
Worrier
Self-conscious
Moody
Rebellious
Immature
Quick-tempered
Easily influenced
Lazy
Gullible
Envious
often feel misunderstood
Disorganized
Guilt-ridden
Stubborn
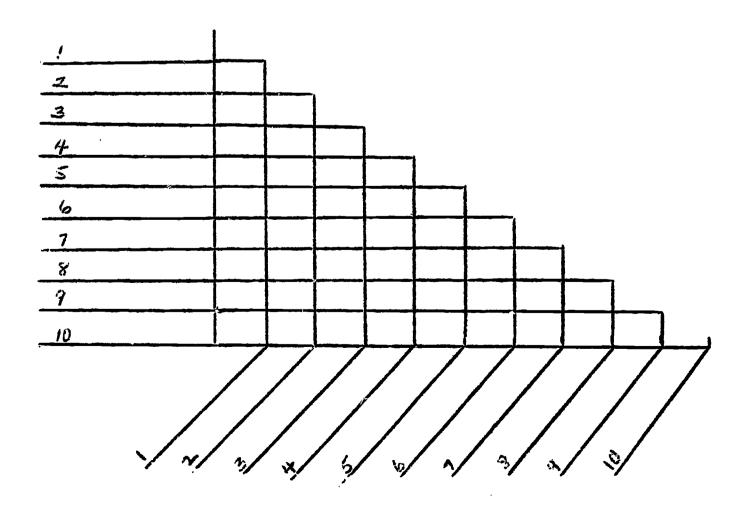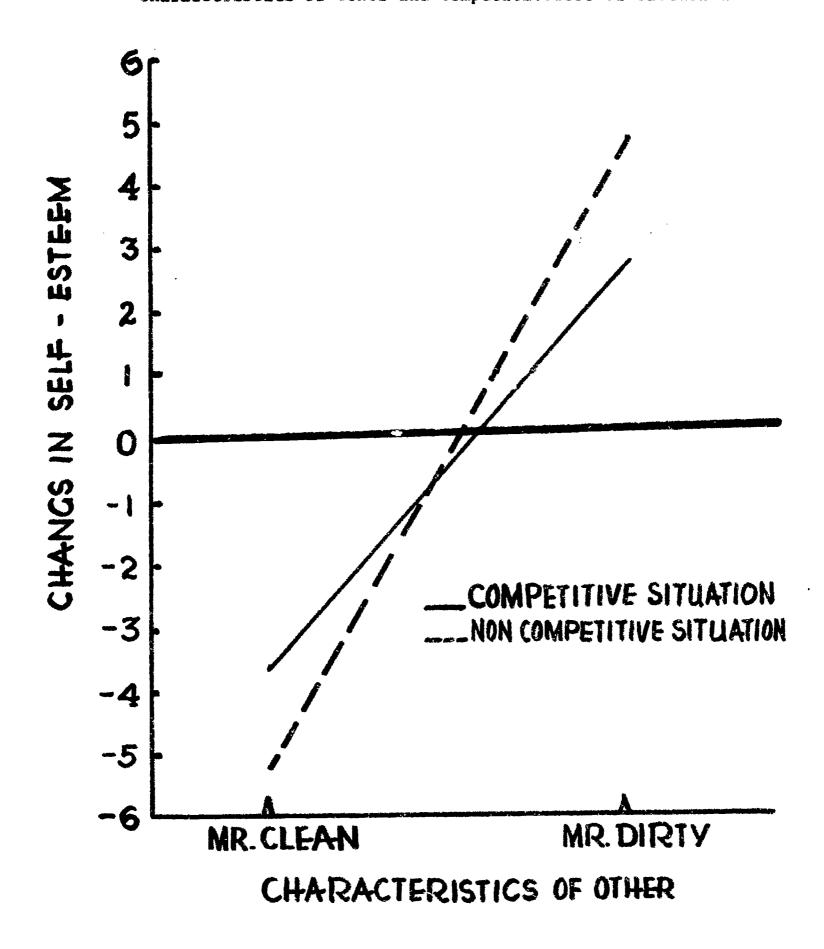Self-centered
Noisy

(b) Matrix for Self-Consistency Measure

Figure 2

Changes in Self-Esteem as a Function of
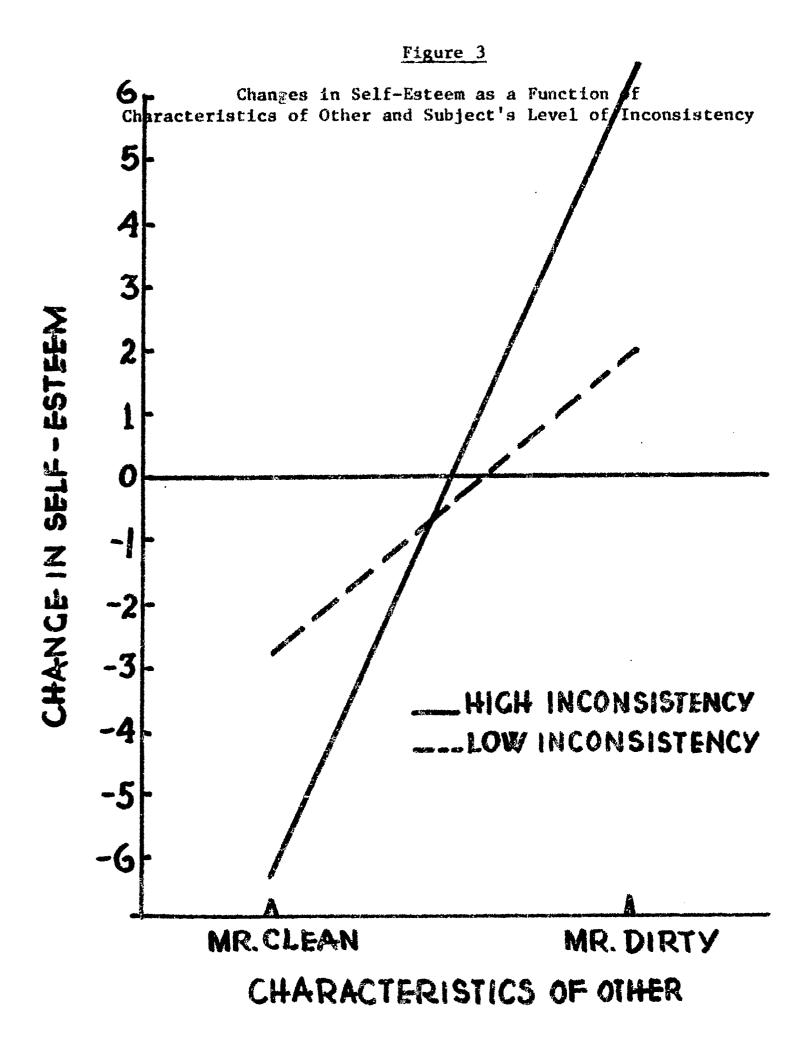Characteristics of Other and Competitiveness of Situation

Figure 3

Changes in Self-Esteem as a Function of
Characteristics of Other and Subject's Level of Inconsistency

Table 1

Correlations Between Self-Consistency and Change in Self-Esteem by Condition[+]

	Competitive Situation		Non-Competitive Situation		Total	
	_r_	_(n)_	_r_	_(n)_	_r_	_(n)_
Mr. Clean	-.27	(18)	-.11	(19)	-.35*	(37)
Mr. Dirty	.02	(18)	.38*	(23)	.16	(41)
p of difference between r's	n.s.		$p < .05$		$p < .03$	

[+] the higher the self-consistency score, the more perceived <u>inconsistency</u>

* $p < .05$

Footnotes

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in various ways with this study.

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