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Social Comparisons and Deception Across Workplace Hierarchies: Field and Experimental Evidence

by [Benjamin Edelman](#) and Ian Larkin

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Abstract

We examine how unfavorable social comparisons differentially spur employees of varying hierarchical levels to engage in deception. Drawing on literatures in social psychology and workplace self-esteem, we theorize that negative comparisons with peers could cause either junior or senior employees to seek to improve reported relative performance measures via deception. In a first study, we use deceptive self-downloads on SSRN, the leading working paper repository in the social sciences, to show that employees higher in a hierarchy are more likely to engage in deception, particularly when the employee has enjoyed a high level of past success. In a second study, we confirm this finding in two scenario-based experiments. Our results suggest that longer-tenured and more successful employees face a greater loss of self-esteem from negative social comparisons and are more likely to engage in deception in response to reported performance that is lower than that of peers.

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