When psychologists think of social comparison theory, they initially recall Leon Festinger’s classic paper on a theory of social comparison processes. However, in the three decades since the publication of this work, social comparison theory has evolved in several ways. First, there have been many restatements and amendments to the theory, some connecting it with other theories current in social psychology. Second, several discrete areas of empirical investigation have flourished that are closely connected to the theory. A modern theory of social comparison draws on both these developments for its formulation.

In this chapter we first make a few historical comments about the origins of the theory, next present what we take to be an adequate revised statement of the theory, and finally turn to developing its implications for various group processes and behaviors.

The Origins of Social Comparison Theory

Two related propositions comprise what most psychologists would regard as the core of the original theory of social comparison processes: (1) Individuals evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparing them with the opinions and abilities of other people. (2) In order to do this, they chose similar others with whom to compare. Obviously, then, social comparison is an interpersonal process, in that one person evaluates his or her own opinion or ability by comparing it with the opinions expressed or abilities displayed by other people. However, in this formulation, social comparison is not a group process; the focus of the theory is on the individual engaged in self-evaluation. This is not accidental. Festinger made several contributions to experimental social psychology, and one of the major ones was to take many of Lewin’s theoretical formulations, which wavered between the individual and the group level, and ground them unambiguously at the
individual level. This made them accessible to empirical verification using the experimental procedures so ingeniously developed by Festinger himself, by Schachter, and by their students.¹

However, that many of the ideas in Festinger’s formulation of social comparison theory had their origins in considerations of group processes becomes clear when one examines the work Festinger had been engaged in just before the development of the theory. The 1954 theory of social comparison processes had its roots in two research areas that had concerned Festinger prior to 1954. The first involved the determinants of group members’ aspirations for their level of performance on various ability-related tasks, and particularly the ways in which group standards affected individual levels of aspiration. The second, theoretically summarized in the 1950 paper on informal social communication, reviewed studies showing that people seek opinion uniformity in groups in order to establish a social definition of reality against which to validate their opinions. Interestingly, the processes discussed in both the 1950 and the 1954 papers are similar, but the papers differ as to their implied levels of analysis of the phenomena. The 1950 paper proposed that groups strive for opinion uniformity in order to establish a social reality. The 1954 paper argues that individuals are attracted to groups in which the members have opinions similar to their own so that they can evaluate their own opinions with precision. In both cases the end result is the same, preference for groups that are homogeneous with respect to opinion. In the 1950 theory this opinion uniformity serves the group’s requirements, it is a prerequisite for “group locomotion” (a term taken from Lewin). In the 1954 theory, the same uniformity serves the individual’s requirements.

Other examples of this move away from the group level and toward the individual level of analysis could be cited, but the implication for the present chapter is clear. The theory of social comparison processes exists at the level of the individual, but because of its historical origins, can be expected to have a number of implications for group process. These implications will need to be made explicit, and that is the purpose of the present chapter.

¹One of the consequences of Festinger’s grounding of social comparison theory at the individual level was that researchers were led away from studying group processes. To this day research done on social comparison processes at the group level has lagged behind research done at the individual level. Yet writing in 1959, in his The Psychology of Affiliation, Schachter reported that the only empirical support for the major propositions of social comparison theory came from Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter’s (1956) book on When Prophecy Fails. This book reported a case study of group processes. Ironically, most social psychologists remember this book as the origins of a new construct at the individual level, cognitive dissonance. Thus in yet another way were researchers, Festinger included, led away from research at the group level and, in this instance, from research on social comparison processes.