

Comparison and Competition: Essential Detriment?

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Last year, the World Cup football was held in Qatar. This year, the World Cup cricket was hosted by India. Next year, the Olympic Games will be held in Paris, France. These are global events participated by a huge number of countries from around the world. Athletes and teams compete with one another for victory, and fans support their teams, rejoicing in wins and becoming sad at losses. Probably, no one would be found who does not support home teams or athletes. Sometimes, because of unexpected losses, people become frustrated with the performance of their players and even angry. It's as if somebody entrusted with the responsibility to fight for us has betrayed us.

It's not only in the sports and athletics. We compete in education, career, wealth, lifestyle, and more as individuals. Competition is also there at organisational and national levels. Companies compete with one another for more market share and profit, countries compete for economic superiority and hegemony. Competition is everywhere.

The Journal article "The Psychology of Competition: A Social Comparison Perspective" published in the

Perspectives on Psychological Science in 2013 suggests that our tendency to compare ourselves with others is a significant source of competition. In fact, there is a Social Comparison Theory originally offered by American Social Psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954 which proposes that people evaluate themselves in terms of their abilities or wealth by comparing with others.

Imagine this scenario: The boss of Mr. A comes to his desk and gives him the good news that he received a performance bonus of 500 company shares. After work, Mr. A takes his family to a top restaurant for dinner to celebrate his achievement. Everyone is happy. The next day, upon entering the office, he learns that his peer and friend, Mr. B, was granted a bonus of 600 shares. Mr. A's happiness evaporates; a deep anguish takes its place. The joy of obtaining something is contingent on others not acquiring it or receiving a comparatively smaller share.

We always compare ourselves with others in the domains of success, wealth, job, intelligence, attractiveness, etc. We don't do that only to assess our relative position but to make sure that we stand out among the lot, we have more than the others.

In a research article titled "Is more always better?: A survey on positional concerns" published in the Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization, the authors observed that an individual's concern for the relative position in society in terms of wealth is more than the concern for absolute possession of wealth. They conducted a survey where the respondents were asked to choose between two worlds where they would prefer to live. In the first world, the respondent will have more than others in the society, and in the second world the respondent will have more than he had in the first world but all others will have even more. Over half of the respondents opted to live in the first world although they will have less than the second world.

Comparison and competition are also influenced by political or economic systems and culture. In a capitalist economy, competition is a fundamental necessity. Businesses compete for customers, and individuals compete for jobs and opportunities. These competitions drive innovation, efficiency, and economic growth. Capitalist societies are essentially impelled by consumerism and materialism. People compare themselves based on their material wealth, possessions, and social status. On the other hand, in socialist or communist systems, there is much lower economic competition as businesses are controlled by the state or collective entities. Social comparison is also relatively low because of the ideology of equality, shared responsibility, and a sense of community.

We sow the seeds of comparison in the minds of our children at a very early age. Parents ask their children questions like how much your friend X got in today's homework. Or, was your friend Y wearing new shoes? Questions of these sorts teach the child to compare and eventually compete.

Upward comparison or comparison with those who we believe to be in a relatively higher position than us on the subject of comparison can make us jealous, and insecure, and competition with them can even lead us to resort to corruption. Downward comparison can make us arrogant and overconfident.

What if we don't compare and compete? There will be no bullying in schools, no war between nations, no corruption, and so on. The world will be a very peaceful place. There will of course be no sports, no elections either. How will democracy work? How will the employers select candidates for employment? How will the fallen find the motivation to stand up? Looks like comparison and competition have to be there.

Comparison and competition don't necessarily entail solely negative consequences. Children learn through comparison and develop through competition. Competition serves as a driving force behind innovation and technological advancements. If we engage in competition to advance and excel rather than to dominate and control, and if we use comparison to discover our shortcomings and improve ourselves instead of chasing after wealth to catch up with those who have more, then we could have a nice and peaceful society to live in. Also, we may try to be more inclined to cooperate and collaborate for mutual benefit than pursue a win-loss approach.

The writer is a former corporate professional and academic