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Looking up or down on the social ladder: How socioeconomic comparisons shape judgments about monetary and time donations

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Abstract

The increasing inequality rate within countries worldwide makes social comparisons more evident. In seven experiments, we demonstrate that people comparing themselves to others in a superior socioeconomic position (upward comparison) judge that wealthier others should donate more time and money to charity. However, social comparison to others in an inferior position (downward comparison) does not always increase monetary donations. This discrepancy in prescriptions for monetary donations between those who make upward and downward social comparisons is driven by judgments about relative spare money; while people making upward comparisons believe that others have more spare money, people making downward comparisons only think they have more spare money, and should donate more, when reminded of their hierarchical position at the time of judgment. Low meritocracy beliefs exacerbate the difference between the prescriptions of how much oneself and others should donate given their socioeconomic position. This differential pattern among individuals making upward and downward social comparisons helps to propagate economic inequality. People making upward comparisons prescribe to wealthier others the responsibility to donate to charity, who in turn may not think they should donate more money. These findings have implications for charitable and non-profit organizations and contribute to research on social comparison, inequality, and judgments about monetary and time donations.

KEYWORDS

charitable giving, meritocratic beliefs, monetary donation, prosocial behavior, self-other evaluative perspective, social comparison, spare resources, time donation

1 | INTRODUCTION

Inequality of income within countries in the United States and worldwide has soared to unprecedented levels (Chancel &

Piketty, 2021; Lakner & Milanovic, 2013; Piketty et al., 2018). Inequality increases the salience of income discrepancy across people and drives socioeconomic comparisons as a result (Cheung & Lucas, 2016; Payne et al., 2017). Since socioeconomic

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disparities are related to consumers' judgments about the fairness of wealth distribution (Newman et al., 2015; Roth & Wohlfart, 2018), it is important to understand how judgments about charitable giving are influenced by socioeconomic comparisons.

This investigation examines how socioeconomic comparisons influence assumptions about self and other virtuous obligations. Thereby, we investigate how vertical comparisons, referred to as downward social comparison (when the target is inferior to the self) and upward social comparison (when the target is superior to the self; Locke, 2007), will shape charity prescriptions of how much money and time oneself and others in an inferior or in a superior socioeconomic position should donate.

Consumers in a superior socioeconomic position are frequently viewed with a higher responsibility to act prosocially by those who make an upward comparison. As a result, people in a lower social position may believe that wealthier others should not only give more money to charity, but also believe they should donate more time. Indeed, we find that those who feel poorer by being prompted to make upward social comparisons believe that wealthier others should donate more money and time to charity. However, those who feel richer by being prompted to make downward social comparisons do not always believe they should donate more money, when compared to others in an inferior socioeconomic position. This is because prescriptions of monetary donation are in part a function of perceived spare financial resources. Only when those who make downward comparisons are reminded of their superior hierarchical position at the time of making prescriptions of donations, they consider they have more spare resources and therefore believe they should donate more compared to others in an inferior socioeconomic position.

Past research shows that social class impacts charitable giving (Gong & Sanfey, 2017; Kraus & Callaghan, 2016; Molsenok & Ritov, 2021; Piff et al., 2010; Van Doesum et al., 2017), but little is known about how socioeconomic comparisons influence the prescriptions about how much money and time oneself and others should give to charity. While those in a lower socioeconomic position are more altruistic (Kraus & Callaghan, 2016; Piff et al., 2010), those in a higher socioeconomic position tend to be more concerned about protecting their money (Van Doesum et al., 2017). In addition, inequality increases support for redistribution among those at the bottom of the distribution (Cheung & Lucas, 2016; Newman et al., 2015; Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2017; Roth & Wohlfart, 2018), but little is known about how the contrast between those higher and lower in the socioeconomic ladder shapes charitable giving. Therefore, this research adds to the existing literature by connecting the research on the relations between social class and judgments regarding charitable giving (e.g., Kraus & Callaghan, 2016; Piff & Robinson, 2017; Starmans et al., 2017) and inequality and redistributive support (e.g., Chow & Galak, 2012; Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2017) to understand how socioeconomic comparisons make people infer self and other donation obligations toward charity.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Social comparison, self-other inferences, and prosocial behavior

Social comparisons are characterized by the use of information about others to facilitate accurate self-evaluation (Locke, 2005); an appraising process that is essential for individuals' interactions and assessments about their relative position (Gong & Sanfey, 2017; Schlosser & Levy, 2016).

Social comparisons can occur in horizontal and vertical directions (Locke, 2003). The horizontal comparison arises when individuals analyze whether others are similar to or different from themselves. Vertical comparison, also called status comparison, occurs when people compare their relative position in a certain domain (wealth, physical appearance, or income) to others (Locke, 2003; Locke, 2005). Thus, vertical social comparison is based on individuals' perceptions of being better-off or worse-off when compared to a benchmark (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Yip & Kelly, 2013). Specifically, a downward social comparison occurs when a person compares himself to others in a more disadvantaged position than one's own. Oppositely, an upward social comparison is characterized by a comparison to a target person that performs better than oneself (a benchmark in a superior condition; Locke, 2003; Locke, 2005). Essential to this research, a common comparison involves socioeconomic attributes such as income, revenues, possessions, and educational achievement (Belmi & Laurin, 2016; Gong & Sanfey, 2017; Payne et al., 2017).

Although previous research on social class and prosocial behavior suggests that low-income people are more generous than those who are high-income (Kraus & Callaghan, 2016; Molsenok & Ritov, 2021; Piff et al., 2010), income inequality will be more salient when individuals make an upward social comparison (Rucker et al., 2018), increasing their support for wealth redistribution (Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2017; Roth & Wohlfart, 2018). Individuals who make upward comparisons perceive that others in a superior social position have more leftover resources to donate, assuming that those in an advantaged situation should provide more money for charity. This idea is congruent with the arguments for tax progressivity (Diamond & Saez, 2011; Heathcote et al., 2017), in which those who earn more should be subject to higher tax rates on earnings as they spend more on nonessential goods.

Those prompted to make upward social comparison also expect higher earners to demonstrate more virtuous actions because of their privileged hierarchical position (Belmi & Laurin, 2016; Kraus et al., 2009). As a result, they prescribe to the wealthier higher responsibility for doing more for others, not only by donating more money but also by giving more non-monetary resources to charity, such as time. Past research demonstrates that individuals are especially sensitive and averse to inequality when in a disadvantaged position (Sharma et al., 2014), and that the fairness perceptions associated with a system might, in turn, impact judgments about moral responsibility. Sharma et al. (2014) show that financial deprivation shifts people's moral standards. The authors find evidence that when people feel that their financial position is

relatively inferior, they tend to judge others in a non-deprived situation more harshly. Therefore, those who are prompted to make upward social comparisons prescribe to others in a wealthier position to donate more money and more time to charity. Formally:

H1. Individuals prompted to make an upward social comparison believe that others in a superior socioeconomic condition should donate more money (*H1a*) and more time (*H1b*) to charity compared to how much they themselves should donate.

Although social comparison increases inequality perception, being in a superior social position may not necessarily foster more prosocial behavior (Côté et al., 2015; Dubois et al., 2015; Han et al., 2017). For instance, Côté et al. (2015) show conditions where high economic inequality reduces the generosity of those in an upper social position. Thinking about monetary resources is associated with more individualistic needs (Chow & Galak, 2012; Piff et al., 2010; Van Doesum et al., 2017), making wealthy individuals allocate their money to specific goals and expenses, and making they feel they may have neither financial slack nor money to spare. Consequently, under socioeconomic comparisons, wealthier individuals might be unlikely to give more financial resources to help those in need.

However, when inequality is high, individuals in a superior socioeconomic position are more likely to volunteer their time (Macchia & Whillans, 2021; Schmukle et al., 2019). Previous research shows that non-monetary donations can be viewed as the result of donors undertaking moral actions or community-based engagement (Jones, 2006; Liu & Aaker, 2008; MacDonnell & White, 2015). Reed et al. (2007) demonstrate that people judge time donations as more moral and self-expressive compared to monetary donations. Furthermore, past research shows that individuals prefer to make donations of time versus money, even when these donations are less effective (Costello & Malkoc, 2022; Olivola & Shafir, 2013). Volunteering time, contrasted with giving money, derives higher levels of warm glow because of the increased effort involved in the social action for this type of donation (Brown et al., 2018), leading individuals to behave more ethically (Gino & Mogilner, 2014). Therefore, time donations offer a good opportunity for those in a wealthier social position to compensate for heightened inequality.

While money is associated with current expenses and individual material needs, time is more closely related to the self-concept. Therefore, wealthy individuals may be more willing to give time, because giving time is more reflective of who they are (Gino & Mogilner, 2014; Mogilner & Aaker, 2009; Mogilner et al., 2018). Thus, those prompted to make a downward social comparison may not prescribe higher monetary donations to themselves, but they might donate more time to charity, compared to how much they think others in an inferior social position should donate. More formally:

H2. Individuals prompted to make a downward social comparison believe that they themselves do not need to donate more money (*H2a*), but that they should donate more time (*H2b*) to charity relative to how much they think others in an inferior socioeconomic condition should donate.

2.2 | Social comparison, spare money, and perceived social responsibility

Since inequality is perceived as unfair among those in an inferior position (Brandt, 2013; Newman et al., 2015; Van Doesum et al., 2017) and people overestimate how earning more income generates supplementary spare money (Berman et al., 2016; Zauberman & Lynch, 2005), those in an inferior socioeconomic condition will infer that others in a wealthier position have more left-over resources to give to charity (Berman et al., 2020). The sense of distributive fairness implies that higher earners should proportionally pay higher taxes, thus maximizing social welfare (Diamond & Saez, 2011; Heathcote et al., 2017), which allows those in an inferior condition to pass the obligation for virtuous actions to wealthier others (Belmi & Laurin, 2016; Kraus et al., 2009). Consequently, those who make an upward comparison believe that wealthier others should give more money to charity because they have more money to spare.

However, those in a wealthier position may not prioritize social welfare when deciding how to spend their money and might not increase the amount of charitable giving within the budget they have in mind. For instance, Sussman et al. (2015) demonstrate that people will not necessarily include charitable giving in their accounting because other common and more frequent expenses will have a greater impact on their budget planning. Therefore, when those in a superior socioeconomic position consider their own budget and individual needs while deciding how much to give to charity, they may not match the expectations of others regarding donating more money because they may feel they lack sufficient funds.

Thus, people prompted to make a downward social comparison may not feel they have more spare money available to donate compared to how much spare money others in an inferior socioeconomic position have. Consequently, they may display no differences in self-other prescriptions of monetary donations, and only consider they have more spare money, and should donate more money, than others in an inferior socioeconomic position when reminded of their superior position. Formally:

H3. Individuals prompted to make an upward social comparison believe that others in a superior socioeconomic condition should donate more money relative to how much they themselves should donate because they believe that others have more spare money (*H3a*); but individuals prompted to make a downward social comparison assign no differences between self-other money.

tary donation because they perceive no differences regarding spare money (*H3b*).

Nevertheless, those who make downward socioeconomic comparisons may not feel comfortable being in a more privileged condition while others are in a more difficult situation (Nunnari & Pozzi, 2022). Being in a superior position might increase the sense of responsibility to do more for others. Therefore, they may feel motivated to do something to compensate for this social disparity, increasing their prosocial behavior in a non-monetary spectrum. While monetary resources are associated with individual needs and less related to social welfare, spending time on others increases one's feelings of time affluence, which is boosted by a sense of self-efficacy (Mogilner et al., 2012). Also, because time donation is associated with moral values and triggers a more positive self-reflection (Gino & Mogilner, 2014), it might better compensate for the feelings of social disparity among those who make a downward social comparison.

In contrast, those prompted to make upward social comparisons will pass to those in a privileged hierarchical status the responsibility for virtuous actions (Belmi & Laurin, 2016; Kraus et al., 2009). This responsibility is not only related to monetary donations but also includes other types of prosocial behavior, such as non-monetary actions. Thus, we propose:

H4. Individuals prompted to make an upward (vs. a downward) social comparison believe that others (vs. they themselves) should donate more time to charity because they prescribe to others (vs. they themselves) higher responsibility to do more to compensate for social disparity.

2.3 | Social comparison, meritocratic beliefs, and monetary donations

Meritocratic beliefs can be understood as beliefs about the worthiness of social position (Davidai, 2018; McCoy & Major, 2007; Mijs et al., 2022; Son Hing et al., 2011; Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013), a system-justifying ideology associated with the legitimization of hierarchies used to explain why some people have a prosperous life while others live in poverty (Côté et al., 2015; Son Hing et al., 2011). Individuals' beliefs about redistribution are closely related to their meritocratic beliefs (Côté et al., 2015; Davidai, 2018; McCoy & Major, 2007; Mijs et al., 2022). Therefore, consumers with high and low levels of meritocratic beliefs may appreciate differently how much money they and others should donate when making social comparisons.

Consistent with research on social dominance where having a more powerful position in a hierarchy-enhancing environment decreases positive behaviors toward subordinate social groups (De Oliveira et al., 2012), high meritocratic beliefs can reduce support for redistribution given inequalities of wealth and, thus, lead higher-income individuals to be less generous (Côté et al., 2015; Winterich & Chang, 2014).

Meritocracy beliefs can legitimize power imbalances. Precisely, individuals may be triggered by the need to sustain social order and status-maintenance goals (Kim et al., 2018; Starmans et al., 2017), to demonstrate one's superiority over others (Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2018), and to justify the system (Son Hing et al., 2011). Among those making upward social comparisons, high meritocracy beliefs may reduce the support for redistribution while increasing the perception of self-responsibility to contribute to reducing social inequality. Since meritocracy beliefs induce individuals to be more favorable to inequality, sensitive to status maintenance, and supportive of social dominance, high meritocratic beliefs may reduce the effect of social comparisons on the difference in donation for oneself and others. Specifically, individuals with high meritocracy beliefs prescribe that they should donate the same amount as poorer (richer) others when making downward (upward) social comparisons.

In contrast, when individuals enact a sense of justice toward socioeconomic positions, those feeling richer help lower-class others given that their hardship may not be of their own causing (Galak & Chow, 2019; Park & Meyvis, 2019). For instance, when income inequality is described as the rich making more than the poor, people are more favorable to income redistribution as it may induce them to think that the rich are responsible for unjustified income disparities (Chow & Galak, 2012). Since low meritocratic belief elicits a sense of duty to consumers in a superior socioeconomic position, low meritocratic beliefs may increase the effect of social comparisons on the difference in donation prescriptions for oneself and others. Specifically, individuals with low meritocracy beliefs prescribe that they themselves should donate more than poorer (less than richer) others when making downward (upward) social comparisons. Therefore, we propose:

H5. Under low meritocratic beliefs, those prompted to make a downward (vs. an upward) social comparison prescribe that they themselves should donate more money relative to how much others in an inferior social position should donate (*H5a*). Under high meritocratic beliefs, individuals will assign no self-other differences in donations prescriptions when making social comparisons (*H5b*).

2.4 | The current research

Study 1 tests the interaction between social comparison and self-other evaluative perspectives on monetary donations. Respondents who are prompted to make an upward social comparison believe that others in a wealthier position should donate more money (*H1a*), whereas those who are prompted to make a downward social comparison assign no differences regarding monetary donations between self-other evaluative perspectives (*H2a*). Study 1 also shows that spare money perceptions drive these differences in the amount of monetary donation (*H3a* and *H3b*). The interaction

between social comparison and self-other perspective on monetary donation prescriptions is replicated in supporting information Studies 1A and 1B. One caveat of Study 1 is that participants' income was used to assign the social comparison conditions. Specifically, higher-income participants were assigned to make downward social comparisons, whereas lower-income participants were assigned to make upward social comparisons. This enabled us to test the interaction more realistically, but it introduced a potential confound that income (and not only social comparisons) could be driving the effects. We rule out this potential confound in supporting information Study 1B and in the subsequent studies in the paper by randomly assigning participants to the social comparison conditions regardless of their income.

Study 2 shows that the effect of social comparisons on the difference in monetary donation prescriptions for oneself and others is mitigated among those with high meritocratic beliefs and increased among those with low meritocratic beliefs (H5a and H5b). Study 2 also confirms the mediating effect of spare money (H3a and H3b). Finally, Study 2 reminds the participants of their socioeconomic position at the time of donation prescriptions and finds that people making downward comparisons think they have more spare money and should donate more. Supporting information Study 2 replicates the interaction among social comparisons, self-other perspective, and meritocracy beliefs on monetary donations.

Finally, Study 3 tests the interaction between social comparison and self-other perspective on prescriptions of time donation. Individuals prompted to make an upward (vs. a downward) social comparison judge that others (vs. they themselves) should give more time to charity (H1b and H2b). More importantly, this effect is driven by perceptions of responsibility for doing more for those in need (H4). The interaction between social comparison and self-other perspective on prescriptions of time donation is replicated in supporting information Study 3.

All the data, codes, and materials both from the manuscript and the supporting information studies are available at <https://osf.io/9fb3j>.

3 | STUDY 1: SOCIAL COMPARISON, MONETARY DONATIONS PRESCRIPTIONS, AND SPARE MONEY

Study 1 has two main goals. First, it tested the prediction that upward social comparison drives individuals to believe that others in a wealthier position should donate more money (H1a). We also expected that following a downward social comparison, there would be no differences between self-other evaluative perspectives on prescriptions of monetary donation (H2a). Second, it investigates the mediating influence of spare money to explain the differential pattern on prescriptions of monetary donation when people make social comparisons (H3a and H3b).

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants and design

This study employed a 3 (social comparison: upward vs. control vs. downward) by 2 (evaluative perspective: self vs. other) between-subjects experimental design. The sample was composed by 430 respondents from Prolific ($M_{\text{age}} = 33.14$, $SD = 17.29$; 49.8% female).

3.1.2 | Social comparison manipulation

To manipulate social comparison, we used respondents' annual household income to allocate them to the subjective social comparison conditions. Lower-income individuals (with income lower than \$48,000) were allocated to the upward social comparison condition, middle-income individuals (with income between \$48,000 and \$72,000) were allocated to the control condition, and upper-income individuals (with income greater than \$72,000) were allocated to the downward social comparison condition.¹ Thus, they read the following scenario: "Think in a ladder representing people distribution in your country. As presented in the figure below you are in an inferior (vs. in the same vs. in a superior) position than others in your social circle. Specifically, you are in the worst-off (vs. same-off vs. bestoff) position compared to those who have the most (vs. same vs. least) money, most (vs. same vs. least) education, and the most (vs. same vs. least) respected jobs. In particular, we'd like you to think about YOUR POSITION regarding THESE PEOPLE. Precisely, think about how these people are different from you in relation to income, educational background, and employment status, as the figure shows" (adapted from Piff et al., 2010 and Piff et al., 2012).

In the same page, the participants were exposed to a figure representing their allocated condition (Figure 1: panel A represents upward social comparison, panel B represents control condition, and panel C represents downward social comparison). After that, on a separate screen, respondents were asked to write down a vivid description of their lives in the provided condition compared to others in an inferior (for those in the downward comparison condition), in the same (for those in the control condition), or in a superior (for those in the upward comparison condition) socioeconomic situation, in a 10-line text. Asking about differences tends to increase contrast effects in comparative judgments and evaluations (Mussweiler & Strack, 1999). After that, the participants were randomly designated to one of the two evaluative perspective conditions of monetary donation prescriptions.

¹Based on the US Census, where about 33% of households receive less than \$40,000; 33% receive between \$40,000 and \$85,000; and 33% receive more than \$85,000. For further details about US income distribution: <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk>.

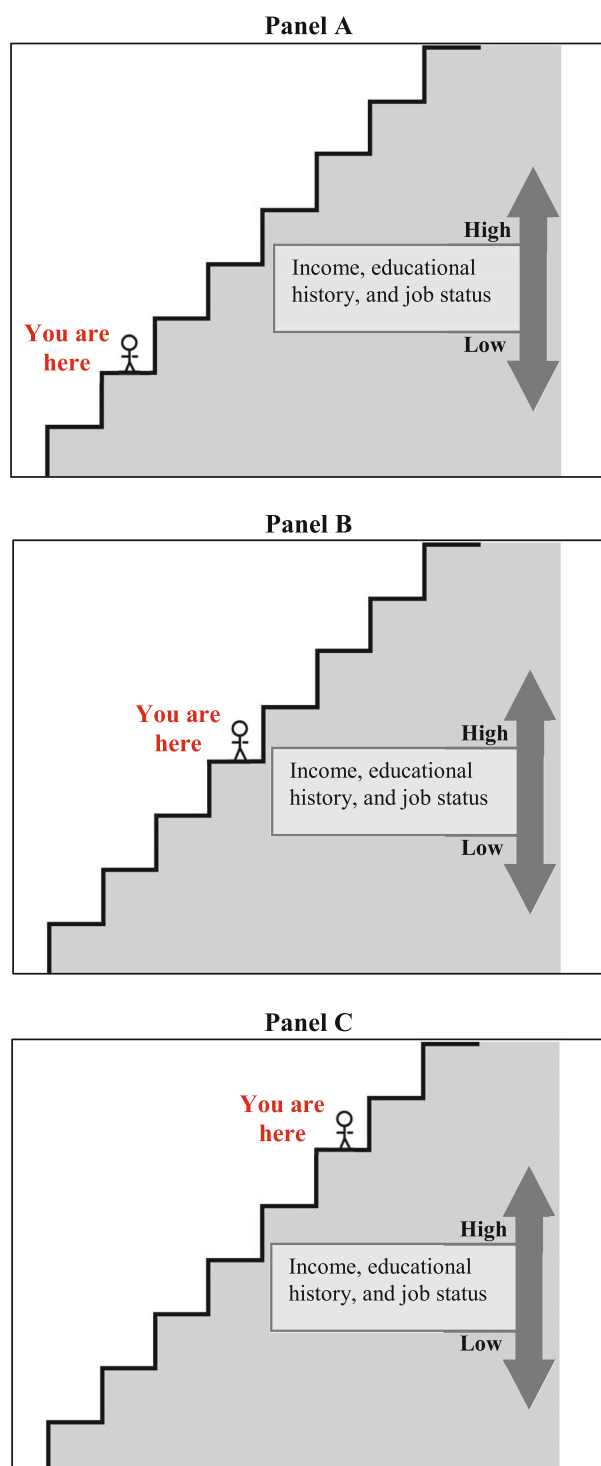


FIGURE 1 Social comparison manipulation

3.1.3 | Monetary donation prescription

Right after the subjective social comparison manipulation, as an unrelated study, the participants were exposed to an appeal from UNICEF, a fictitious charity advertisement collecting money for humanitarian causes (adapted from Duclos & Barasch, 2014; see Appendix A). Based

on the evaluative perspective conditions, the participants were randomly asked about their monetary donation intention to UNICEF from the self-perspective (“How much should you donate for this cause today?”) versus from the other-perspective (“How much do you think others in (an inferior vs. the same vs. a superior) condition than you should donate for this cause today?”), using a slider scale ranging from \$0 to \$100.

3.1.4 | Measured variables

Spare money was measured from the self-evaluative perspective by asking the participants how much spare money they have given their socioeconomic position. Those in the other-evaluative perspective were asked how much spare money others in an inferior, the same, or a superior position have. A slider scale was used ranging from 0% to 100% of household income to spare.

Social comparison manipulation check was adapted from Locke (2005). Respondents were asked “With regard to your social position, to what extent others in your social circle were:” in a 7-point scale (1 = “Worse off than you”; 7 = “Better off than you”). Finally, the respondents' demographic data were collected.

3.2 | Results

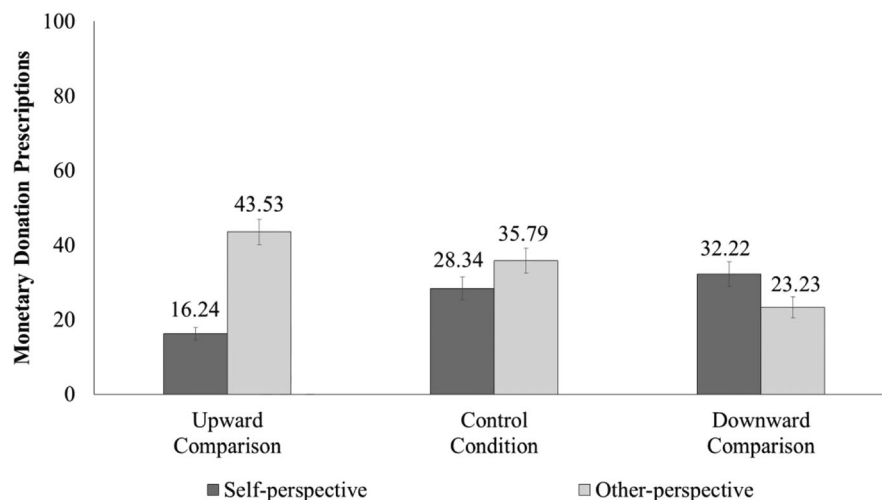
3.2.1 | Manipulation check

We conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with social comparison and evaluative perspective as the two between-subjects factors and the social position as the dependent variable. As expected, there was only a main effect of social comparison ($F [2, 424] = 55.406$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .207$). Participants requested to make the upward social comparison perceived others in a better-off social position ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.41$) when compared to those under both control condition ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.05$) and downward social comparison ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.40$). Specifically, there were differences between downward and control conditions ($F [1, 268] = 75.735$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .220$; $d = 1.05$), between upward and downward social comparisons ($F [1, 271] = 85.945$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .241$; $d = 1.14$), and between upward social comparison and control condition ($F [1, 309] = 4.573$; $p = .033$; $\eta_p^2 = .015$; $d = 0.24$).

3.2.2 | Monetary donation prescription

We conducted a two-way ANOVA with the three social comparison conditions (upward vs. control vs. downward) and the two evaluative perspective conditions (self vs. other) as predictors of monetary donation prescriptions. There was no significant main effect for social comparison ($F [2, 424] = .948$; $p = .388$) and a main effect for evaluative perspective ($F [1, 424] = 11.614$; $p = .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .027$). The expected interaction was significant ($F [2, 424] = 16.900$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .074$; see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 Monetary donation prescriptions as a function of social comparison (upward vs. control vs. downward) and evaluative perspective (self vs. other) (Study 1)



Participants prompted to make an upward social comparison prescribed to others in a wealthier position higher monetary donation ($M_{\text{other}} = 43.53$, $SD = 30.73$) compared to their monetary donation prescription for charity ($M_{\text{self}} = 16.24$, $SD = 14.94$; $F [1, 424] = 44.004$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .094$; $d = 1.13$). However, in both downward comparison ($M_{\text{self}} = 32.22$, $SD = 26.23$; $M_{\text{other}} = 23.23$, $SD = 21.85$; $F [1, 424] = 3.536$; $p = .061$) and control condition ($M_{\text{self}} = 28.34$, $SD = 25.97$; $M_{\text{other}} = 35.79$, $SD = 30.55$; $F [1, 424] = 3.209$; $p = .074$), there were no differences between evaluative perspective conditions.

There was also an effect of social comparison within the self-evaluative perspective condition ($F [2, 424] = 7.426$; $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .034$) and within the other-evaluative perspective condition ($F [2, 424] = 10.283$; $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .046$).

We also ran the analysis including income and gender as covariates, but neither significant effects nor changes were observed in the pattern of results.

These results support [H1a](#) and [H2a](#). Individuals prompted to make an upward social comparison prescribe to others in a superior socio-economic condition higher monetary donation ([H1a](#)). However, those prompted to make a downward social comparison do not prescribe higher monetary donation to they themselves ([H2a](#)). Two studies reported in the supporting information provide additional support for these hypotheses. As a preliminary test, we conducted the supporting information Study 1A using the same procedure of Study 1. To rule out the possibility that results could have emerged from the respondents' allocation based on their household income, we conducted supporting information Study 1B, in which the participants were randomly assigned to the social comparison conditions regardless of their household income. Both studies replicate the interaction between social comparison and evaluative perspective. To avoid social comparison conditions to be confounded with income, in the next studies social comparison was randomly assigned regardless of household income.

3.2.3 | Spare money

We conducted similar analyses to test the impact of social comparison and evaluative perspectives on spare money. The results showed no

main effect of social comparison ($F [2, 424] = 1.398$; $p = .248$) and a main effect of evaluative perspective condition ($F [1, 424] = 22.087$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .050$). The expected interaction was significant ($F [2, 424] = 7.875$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .036$).

Those in an upward social comparison perceive that others have more spare money compared to themselves ($M_{\text{others}} = 40.50$, $SD = 26.44$; $M_{\text{self}} = 16.17$, $SD = 13.74$; $F [1, 424] = 37.028$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .080$; $d = 1.15$). Within those under a downward social comparison ($M_{\text{self}} = 28.72$, $SD = 25.06$; $M_{\text{other}} = 36.21$, $SD = 27.48$; $F [1, 424] = 2.599$; $p = .108$) and control condition ($M_{\text{self}} = 31.25$, $SD = 26.85$; $M_{\text{other}} = 33.94$, $SD = 28.72$; $F [1, 424] = .4143$; $p = .506$), there were no differences between self-other perspective conditions.

There was an effect of social comparison within the self-evaluative perspective ($F [2, 424] = 7.729$; $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .035$) but not within the other-evaluative perspective ($F [2, 424] = 1.411$; $p = .245$).

3.2.4 | The mediating influence of spare money

To investigate the mediating impact of spare money on the interaction between evaluative perspective and social comparison on monetary donation prescriptions ([H3a](#) and [H3b](#)), we used the PROCESS macro (model 8; 10,000 samples; Hayes, 2018). Social comparison was coded as 0 = downward and 1 = upward. For evaluative perspective, the code was 0 = other and 1 = self. The results show a significant interaction of social comparison and evaluative perspective on spare money ($\beta = -16.8395$, $CI = -28.1057$ to -5.5733), and that spare money was significantly associated with a monetary donation prescription ($\beta = .3201$, $CI = .2025$ to $.4378$). The expected indirect effect of spare money was negative ($\beta = -5.3910$, $CI = -10.1029$ to -1.4425). Conditional indirect effects show a negative indirect effect of spare money on monetary donation prescription for the upward social comparison ($\beta = -7.7900$, $CI = -12.1946$ to -4.0140), and there was a non-significant conditional indirect effect of spare money on monetary donation prescription for the downward social comparison ($\beta = -2.3991$, $CI = -6.0490$ to $.06357$).

Participants who make upward socioeconomic comparisons perceive that others in a wealthier situation have a higher amount of spare money, seeing themselves as more financially constrained. However, those who make downward socioeconomic comparisons think that they have the same amount of spare money as those in an inferior position. Perceived spare money then drives monetary donation prescriptions. Together, these results provide support to the predictions that when individuals are prompted to make an upward social comparison, they judge that others in a superior socioeconomic position have more spare money, prescribing to them higher monetary donation to charity (*H3a*). Individuals prompted to make a downward social comparison perceive slight differences between self-other monetary donation prescriptions as they perceive they have no more spare money than others in an inferior socioeconomic position (*H3b*).

3.3 | Discussion

Study 1 shows that while the participants who make upward social comparison assign greater donation prescriptions for wealthier others, participants who make downward social comparisons assign no greater donation prescriptions for themselves (*H1a* and *H2a*). It also shows that the perceptions about spare money explain this interaction (*H3a* and *H3b*). In Study 2, we investigate whether meritocracy beliefs influence the impact of social comparison on monetary donation prescriptions for oneself and others. Study 2 tests the prediction that when individuals have low levels of meritocratic beliefs, the interaction between social comparison and evaluative perspective will be exacerbated (*H5a* and *H5b*).

4 | STUDY 2: SOCIAL COMPARISON, MONETARY DONATION PRESCRIPTIONS, AND MERITOCRATIC BELIEFS

The goal of Study 2 is to test *H5a* and *H5b* about how meritocratic beliefs interact with social comparison and evaluative perspective to explain prescriptions of monetary donation. This study also aims to confirm the role of spare money perceptions on judgments about monetary donation obligations (*H3a* and *H3b*). Finally, this study reminds the participants of their socioeconomic position at the time of donation to test whether downward comparisons would increase donation prescriptions for oneself.

4.1 | Method

4.1.1 | Participants and design

This study employed a 3 (social comparison: upward vs. control vs. downward) by 2 (evaluative perspective: self vs. other) between-subjects experimental design. The sample was composed by 376 MTurk workers ($M_{age} = 42.37$, $SD = 12.95$; 44.4% female).

4.1.2 | Social comparison manipulation

To manipulate social comparison, we used the same procedure of Study 1, except that the participants were randomly assigned to the conditions regardless of their income. Next, the participants were randomly designated to one of the self-other evaluative perspective conditions of monetary donation prescriptions.

4.1.3 | Monetary donation prescription

As an unrelated study, the participants were exposed to an appeal from the Habitat for Humanity, a non-profit institution that provides residence for poor people (adapted from Han et al., 2017; see Appendix B). Based on evaluative perspective conditions, the respondents were asked how much should be donated to Habitat for Humanity from the self-perspective ("How much money do you think you in (an inferior vs. the same vs. a superior) condition than others should donate for this cause?") versus from the other-perspective ("How much money do you think others in (an inferior vs. the same vs. a superior) condition than you should donate for this cause?"), using a slider scale ranging from \$0 to \$100.

4.1.4 | Measured variables

Besides the spare money measure used in Study 1, we also included a measure adapted from Berman et al. (2020) of how much spare money they (vs. others) have in a 7-point scale (1 = very little spare money; 7 = a lot of spare money). The impact of perceived social responsibility was measured from self and other perspectives by using three items (e.g., "(I vs. others) in (an inferior vs. the same vs. a superior) position than (others vs. you) should do something to compensate for social disparity"; $\alpha = .827$) in a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Participants were asked 10 items about their meritocratic beliefs (Day & Fiske, 2017) in a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; e.g., "Anyone who is willing and able to work hard has a good chance of succeeding"; "A person can take almost all responsibility for their standing in society"; "In our society, a person is deserving of almost every success"; $\alpha = .93$). Finally, the participants answered the social comparison manipulation check from Locke (2005) and demographics.

4.2 | Results

4.2.1 | Manipulation check

We conducted an ANOVA with the social comparison and evaluative perspective as the two between-subjects factors and the social position as the dependent variable. As expected, there was only a main effect of social comparison ($F [2, 370] = 63.640$; $p < .001$;

$\eta_p^2 = .256$). The participants prompted to make an upward social comparison perceived others in a higher social position ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.47$) compared to those under both downward social comparison ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.77$) and control condition ($M = 4.52$, $SD = .946$). Specifically, there was a difference between upward comparison and control condition ($F [1, 251] = 31.300$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .111$; $d = .72$), between downward comparison and control condition ($F [1, 236] = 38.898$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .141$; $d = .81$), and between upward and downward social comparisons ($F [1, 253] = 100.624$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .285$; $d = 1.25$).

4.2.2 | Moderation analysis

To test [H5a](#) and [H5b](#), we used the PROCESS macro (model 3; 5000 samples; Hayes, 2018). We tested the impact of social comparison (upward vs. control vs. downward) and evaluative perspective (self vs. other) as between-subjects factors and a meritocracy belief as a continuous predictor of monetary donation prescription. Social comparison was coded as $-1 =$ downward, $0 =$ control, and $1 =$ upward. For evaluative perspective, the codes were $0 =$ other and $1 =$ self. Results showed a significant three-way interaction ($\beta = 8.9112$, $CI = 2.6467$ to 15.1756).

We distilled this three-way interaction into two 2-way interactions between social comparison and evaluative perspective at 1 SD below and 1 SD above the mean of meritocracy beliefs. As predicted, the results of the two-way ANOVAs showed a significant interaction

between social comparison and evaluative perspective among individuals who score lower than 1 SD in meritocracy beliefs ($F [2, 364] = 26.619$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .128$), but among individuals who score higher than 1 SD in meritocracy beliefs the interaction was not significant ($F [2, 364] = 1.519$; $p = .220$). Figure 3 shows the interaction between social comparison and evaluative perspective at lower (Panel A) and higher (Panel B) meritocratic beliefs on monetary donation prescriptions.

Among low meritocratic beliefs (-1 SD), individuals who make upward comparisons prescribe higher monetary donations when they are asked how much others should donate compared to when they are asked how much they themselves should donate ($\beta = 35.572$, $t = 4.814$, $CI = 21.0118$ to 50.127), whereas individuals who make downward comparisons prescribe higher monetary donations to they themselves than to others ($\beta = -39.831$, $t = -5.075$, $CI = -55.266$ to -24.396). Within control condition, we found no differences on monetary donations prescriptions between self and other evaluative perspectives ($\beta = -4.581$, $t = -.521$, $CI = -21.868$ to 12.705). Among high meritocratic beliefs ($+1$ SD), there were no self and other differences on monetary donations prescriptions within upward social comparison ($\beta = 8.932$, $t = 1.183$, $CI = -5.938$ to 23.802), downward social comparison ($\beta = -8.218$, $t = -1.000$, $CI = -24.382$ to 7.945), or control condition ($\beta = 7.997$, $t = .949$, $CI = -8.582$ to 24.577).

Floodlight analysis showed that among individuals who scored 4.81 or higher on meritocratic beliefs, the interaction between social comparison and evaluative perspective was not significant. We also

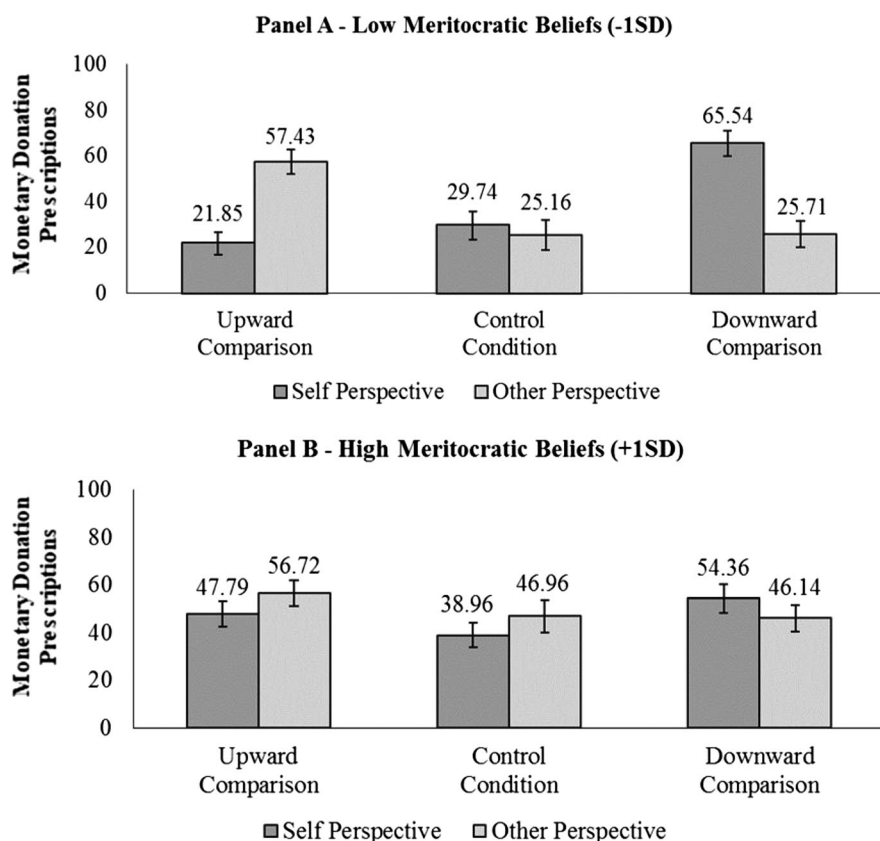


FIGURE 3 Monetary donation prescriptions as a function of social comparison (upward vs. control vs. downward), evaluative perspective (self vs. other), and meritocratic beliefs (Study 2). Means and standard errors were obtained from the regression estimates.

ran the analysis including income and age as covariates and gender as a predictor, but neither significant effects nor changes were observed in the pattern of results.

These findings provide support to [H5a](#) and [H5b](#). Under low meritocratic beliefs, those prompted to make a downward (vs. an upward) social comparison prescribe that they themselves should donate more (vs. less) money compared to when they are prompted to prescribe how much others should donate ([H5a](#)). Under high meritocratic beliefs, individuals assign no self-other differences in donation prescriptions when making social comparisons ([H5b](#)). We conducted supporting information Study 2 using participants' household income to allocate them to the social comparison conditions. The results are consistent and replicate the predictions for [H5a](#) and [H5b](#).

4.2.3 | The mediating influence of spare money

To investigate the mediating impact of spare money on the interaction between social comparison and evaluative perspective and on monetary donation prescriptions ([H3a](#) and [H3b](#)), we used the PROCESS macro (model 8; 10,000 samples; Hayes, 2018). Social comparison was coded as 0 = downward and 1 = upward. For evaluative perspective, the codes were 0 = other and 1 = self. The results show a significant interaction of social comparison and evaluative perspective on spare money ($\beta = -5.3000$, $CI = -6.1092$ to -4.4908), and that spare money was significantly associated with a monetary donation prescription ($\beta = 10.0798$, $CI = 7.9653$ to 12.1943). The expected indirect effect of spare money was negative ($\beta = -53.4227$, $CI = -66.8557$ to -40.7754). Conditional indirect effects show a negative indirect effect of spare money on monetary donation prescription for the upward social comparison conditions ($\beta = -28.0663$, $CI = -36.2073$ to -20.6242) and also a positive indirect effect of spare money on monetary donation prescription for the downward social comparison conditions ($\beta = 25.3564$, $CI = 18.2172$ to 32.8783).

Participants who make upward socioeconomic comparisons perceive that others in a wealthier situation have a higher amount of spare money seeing themselves as more financially constrained, thus confirming hypothesis [H3a](#). Participants who make downward socioeconomic comparisons think that they have more spare money than those in an inferior position when they were reminded of their relative socioeconomic position at the time of judgment, rejecting [H3b](#).

We also ran the same analysis with spare money measured by using a slider scale as Study 1 and the expected moderated mediation is also significant ($\beta = -24.7623$, $CI = -35.1689$ to -15.6489). Together, these results provide support for the role of spare money in explaining monetary donation prescriptions. Finally, we analyzed the mediating impact of perceived social responsibility on the interaction between social comparison and evaluative perspective on monetary donation prescriptions. There was no interaction between social comparison and evaluative perspective on perceived social responsibility ($\beta = .0447$, $CI = -.2922$ to $.3815$) neither an indirect effect ($\beta = .4546$, $CI = -2.8476$ to 3.6341).

4.3 | Discussion

Study 2 demonstrates that meritocratic beliefs attenuate the effect of the relationship between social comparison and self-other perspectives on monetary donation prescriptions ([H5a](#) and [H5b](#)). Relevant to this study, people who made downward social comparison were as likely to believe in meritocracy as those who made upward social comparison ($F [2,373] = .450$; $p = .638$).

Most importantly, our results show that low meritocratic beliefs increase the effect of social comparisons on the difference in donation prescriptions for oneself and others. When people have low beliefs in meritocracy, they prescribe to they themselves higher monetary donations following a downward social comparison and prescribe that wealthier others should donate more following an upward social comparison. These results suggest that people use charity donations for redistributive motives. The perceived fairness of income distribution drives donation prescriptions based on social comparisons.

5 | STUDY 3: SOCIAL COMPARISON, TIME DONATION PRESCRIPTION, AND PERCEIVED SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Study 3 tested the prediction that following an upward (vs. a downward) social comparison, people believe that others (vs. they themselves) should donate more time to charity ([H1b](#) and [H2b](#)). We also investigate whether consumers' feelings about social responsibility shape the influence of social comparison on judgments about time donation prescriptions for oneself and others ([H4](#)).

5.1 | Method

5.1.1 | Participants and design

This study employed a 3 (social comparison: upward vs. control vs. downward) by 2 (evaluative perspective: self vs. other) between-subjects experimental design. Fifty-eight respondents reprobated on attention check and were removed from our data. Similar results and the same conclusions were obtained including these cases. The final sample was composed by 346 respondents from MTurk ($M_{age} = 43.88$, $SD = 13.15$; 52.6% female).

5.1.2 | Social comparison manipulation

Social comparison manipulation followed the same procedure of Study 2. Next, the participants were randomly designated to one of the two evaluative perspective conditions of time donation prescriptions.

5.1.3 | Time donation prescription

As an unrelated study, the participants were exposed to an appeal from UNICEF, a philanthropic charity advertisement requesting donations for humanitarian causes (adapted from Kristofferson et al., 2014; see Appendix C). Based on the evaluative perspective conditions, the participants were randomly asked about their time to volunteer from the self-perspective (“How much time do you think you in (an inferior vs. the same vs. a superior) condition than others should weekly donate for this cause?”) versus from the other-perspective (“How much time do you think others in (an inferior vs. the same vs. a superior) condition than you should weekly donate for this cause?”), using a slider scale ranging from 0 to 150 min per week.

5.1.4 | Measured variables

The impact of perceived social responsibility was the same as used in Study 2 measured by three items ($\alpha = .907$). We also measured the impact of spare time by asking the participants how much spare time they (vs. others) in an inferior (vs. the same vs. a superior position) have by using a 7-point scale (1 = very little spare time; 7 = a lot of spare time). The manipulation check for social comparison was the same of Studies 1 and 2. Finally, demographic data were collected.

5.2 | Results

5.2.1 | Manipulation check

To check for the impact of social comparison manipulation, we conducted an ANOVA with social comparison and evaluative perspective as the two factors and social position as the dependent variable. As expected, there was only a main effect of social comparison ($F [2, 340] = 92.810$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .353$). Participants prompted to make an upward social comparison perceived that others were in a

better-off social position ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 1.47$) compared to those in both downward social comparison ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.63$) and control condition ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.1$). Specifically, there was a difference between upward comparison and control condition ($F [1, 229] = 65.103$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .221$; $d = 1.06$), between downward comparison and control condition ($F [1, 230] = 41.766$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .154$; $d = .84$), and between upward and downward social comparisons ($F [1, 227] = 155.014$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .406$; $d = 1.64$).

5.2.2 | Time donation prescription

We conducted a two-way ANOVA to assess the impact of social comparison and evaluative perspective on time donation prescriptions. The results showed a non-significant effect of social comparison ($F [2, 340] = 2.522$; $p = .082$) neither for evaluative perspective condition ($F [1, 340] = .010$; $p = .921$). The expected interaction was significant ($F [2, 340] = 4.468$; $p = .012$; $\eta_p^2 = .026$; see Figure 4).

Participants prompted to make an upward social comparison, when asked to prescribe what others should do, believe that others in wealthier position should donate more time for charity ($M_{\text{self}} = 35.53$, $SD = 31.25$; $M_{\text{other}} = 50.69$, $SD = 38.44$; $F [1, 340] = 4.839$; $p = .029$; $\eta_p^2 = .014$; $d = .44$). However, within a downward social comparison, time donation prescription was higher to oneself ($M = 53.18$, $SD = 38.64$) than to others ($M = 39.33$, $SD = 35.38$; $F [1, 340] = 4.104$; $p = .044$; $\eta_p^2 = .012$; $d = .38$). Within control condition, we found no differences on time donation prescriptions between self ($M = 53.72$, $SD = 37.63$) and other-evaluative perspectives ($M = 53.59$, $SD = 38.53$; $F [1, 340] = .0004$; $p = .985$).

We found an effect of social comparison within the self-evaluative perspective ($F [2, 340] = 4.818$; $p = .009$; $\eta_p^2 = .028$), but no effect of social comparison within the other-evaluative perspective ($F [2, 340] = 2.449$; $p = .088$). We also ran the analysis including income and age as covariates and gender as predictor, but neither significant effects nor changes were observed in the pattern of results.

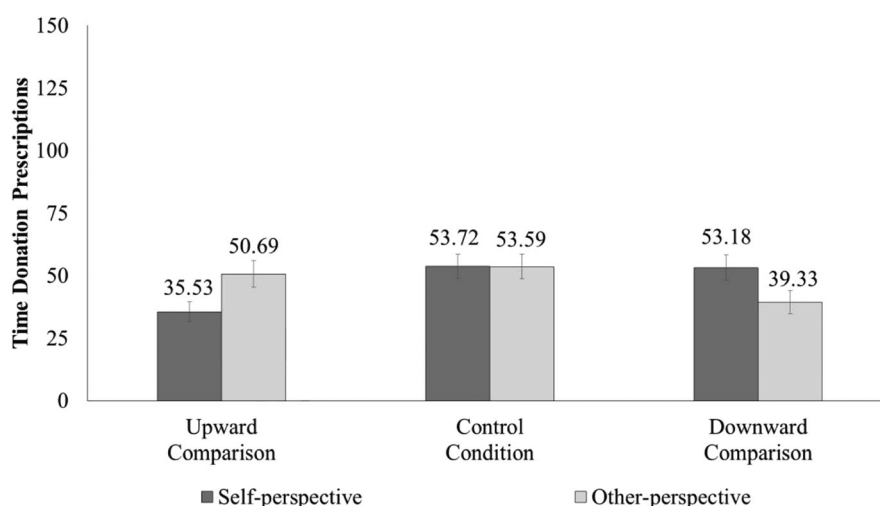


FIGURE 4 Time donation prescriptions as a function of social comparison (upward vs. control vs. downward) and evaluative perspective (self vs. other) (Study 3)

Together, these results support hypotheses **H1b** and **H2b**. Those prompted to make an upward social comparison prescribed that others in a superior socioeconomic condition should donate more time to charity compared to how much they themselves should donate (**H1b**). However, the opposite pattern is observed among those prompted to make a downward social comparison (**H2b**).

5.2.3 | Perceived social responsibility

We conducted similar analysis to test the impact of social comparison and evaluative perspective on perceived social responsibility. The results showed no main effect of social comparison ($F [2, 340] = 1.606$; $p = .202$) neither for evaluative perspective ($F [1, 340] = 3.603$; $p = .059$). The expected interaction was significant ($F [2, 340] = 21.041$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .110$). Those who make upward social comparison perceived that others should have higher social responsibility when compared to themselves ($M_{\text{others}} = 5.13$, $SD = 1.39$; $M_{\text{self}} = 4.05$, $SD = 1.74$; $F [1, 340] = 14.343$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .040$; $d = .68$). However, those under downward social comparison perceived they have higher social responsibility when compared to others ($M_{\text{self}} = 5.34$, $SD = 1.55$; $M_{\text{other}} = 3.84$, $SD = 1.64$; $F [1, 340] = 28.304$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .077$; $d = .95$). Within control condition, there were no differences between self-other evaluative perspective conditions ($M_{\text{self}} = 5.16$, $SD = 1.36$; $M_{\text{other}} = 4.65$, $SD = 1.36$; $F [1, 340] = 3.244$; $p = .073$).

Social comparisons influenced perceived social responsibility within the self-evaluative perspective ($F [2, 398] = 12.038$; $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .057$), as well as within the other-evaluative perspective ($F [2, 398] = 9.484$; $p < .001$; $\eta_p^2 = .045$; $d = .70$).

5.2.4 | The mediating influence of perceived social responsibility

To further investigate the mediating impact of perceived social responsibility on the interaction between social comparison and evaluative perspective on time donation prescriptions (**H4**), we used the PROCESS macro (model 8; 10,000 samples; Hayes, 2018). Social comparison was coded as 0 = downward and 1 = upward. For evaluative perspective, the codes were 0 = other and 1 = self. The results show a significant interaction of social comparison and evaluative perspective on perceived social responsibility ($\beta = -2.5868$, $CI = -3.4171$ to -1.7558), and that perceived social responsibility was significantly associated with time donation prescription ($\beta = 6.0843$, $CI = 3.2260$ to 8.9426). The expected indirect effect of perceived social responsibility was negative ($\beta = -15.7390$, $CI = -25.3375$ to -7.2324).

The conditional indirect effect shows a negative indirect effect of evaluative perspective on time donation prescription through perceived social responsibility for upward comparison conditions ($\beta = -6.5763$, $CI = -12.0495$ to -2.2744) and a positive indirect effect for downward comparison conditions ($\beta = 9.1627$, $CI = 4.0217$ to 15.2072). Together, these results provide support to **H4**.

Individuals prompted to make an upward (vs. a downward) social comparison believe that others (vs. they themselves) should donate more time to charity because they believe that others (vs. they themselves) have higher responsibility to do more to compensate for social disparity.

We also tested an alternative possibility that spare time would mediate the impact on time donation prescriptions. The results show an indirect effect of spare time perception ($\beta = -18.6878$, $CI = -29.2766$ to -9.5668). Conditional indirect effects show a negative indirect effect of spare time on time donation prescriptions for the upward social comparison ($\beta = -9.7387$, $CI = -17.1245$ to -3.9784) and a positive conditional indirect effect of spare time on time donations prescriptions for the downward social comparison ($\beta = 8.9491$, $CI = 4.2273$ to 14.5167).

We conducted supporting information Study 3. The results replicate **H1b** and **H2b**. However, we find that the indirect effect of spare time was not significant ($\beta = 3.0228$, $CI = -6.1833$ to 12.7956). While spare money perception consistently drives judgments about self-other monetary donation prescriptions in Studies 1 and 2, we did not find a consistent effect in Study 3 and supporting information Study 3 that self-other judgments about time donation prescriptions are related to the amount of spare time that individuals perceive that others and they themselves have.

5.3 | Discussion

Study 3 provides evidence for the hypotheses about time donation prescriptions (**H1b** and **H2b**). Individuals following a downward social comparison prescribe to themselves a higher responsibility to donate more time to charity, while those making an upward social comparison believe that others in a superior socioeconomic condition should donate more time. This study also supports the prediction that following a downward social comparison, individuals are willing to donate more time because their position triggers the feeling that they are responsible for doing more for others.

6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research examines prescriptions of how much oneself and others should give to charity after social comparisons. Given that within country inequality has increased to remarkable levels in recent years (Chancel & Piketty, 2021; Lakner & Milanovic, 2013; Piketty et al., 2018), consumers make socioeconomic comparisons more often (Cheung & Lucas, 2016; Payne et al., 2017). Our findings show that socioeconomic comparisons shape prescriptions of time and monetary donations to charity.

Study 1 shows that individuals who make upward social comparisons prescribe higher monetary donation to others in a wealthier position (**H1a**), while those who make downward social comparisons prescribe no differences in monetary donation between themselves and others in a poorer position (**H2a**). Study 1 also shows that

perceptions about spare money explain why people prompted to make upward social comparisons assign monetary donation prescriptions for others while those prompted to make downward social comparisons do not assign higher monetary donation prescriptions for the self (H3). Even though participants who make downward social comparisons feel richer, they do not perceive having more financial slack, which is crucial for charity decisions about monetary donations. Supporting information Studies 1A and 1B replicate the interaction between social comparison and evaluative perspective on prescriptions of charitable giving.

It is important to note that one inconsistency across these studies is that, in Study 1, we find an effect of social comparison in both the self and the other perspective conditions, whereas in Studies 1A and 1B this effect is only observed in the other perspective condition. Participants who make upward social comparisons believe that others should donate more money (Study 1 and supporting information studies 1A and 1B) but may eventually also believe that they themselves should donate less money to charity (Study 1).

Overall, these findings show that perceived unfairness of income distribution drives beliefs about the use of charity donations for redistributive motives. Income inequality is more salient when individuals make an upward social comparison (Rucker et al., 2018), which increases their expectation that higher earners demonstrate more virtuous actions (Belmi & Laurin, 2016; Kraus et al., 2009). As a result, upward social comparison seems to affect the judgments of others more than judgments about the self.

Study 2 tests the role of meritocracy beliefs on the effect of social comparisons on how much oneself and others should donate to charity. The participants with low meritocracy beliefs prescribe higher donations to wealthier others when making upward social comparisons and to themselves when making downward social comparisons (H5a), but participants with high meritocracy beliefs prescribe no differences in how much they themselves and others should donate (H5b). Supporting information Study 2 largely replicates these results. Different from Study 1, in Study 2 participants were reminded about their relative position when prescribing donations to themselves. The results show that those making downward social comparison perceived that they had more spare money, and that they should donate more. This shows that it is indeed effective for driving higher donations among those in a superior socioeconomic position to remind them about their relative advantaged situation.

Study 3 found support for the prediction that those who make upward social comparisons believe that others in a superior position should donate more time (H1b), while those in the downward social comparison position prescribe to they themselves more time donation (H2b). Study 3 also finds that perceived social responsibility mediates the interaction of social comparisons on how much time oneself and others should donate. Participants who make upward social comparisons believe that wealthier others are more responsible for donations, whereas those who make downward social comparisons believe that they themselves are more responsible for donations. These judgments of donation responsibility help explain the interaction between social comparisons and self-other perspectives on time donation

prescriptions. Judgments of spare time also help explain this interaction. Supporting information Study 3 replicated the interaction of social comparisons on how much time oneself and others should donate.

It is important to note that perceived social responsibility for donations did not help explain the interaction of social comparisons on how much money oneself and others should donate in Study 2. While the interaction of social comparisons on time donation prescriptions for oneself and others is explained in part by moral considerations of how much oneself and others should donate given their socioeconomic position, the interaction of social comparisons on money donation prescriptions for oneself and others is more strongly explained by perceptions of financial slack related to how much spare money one has available to donate.

6.1 | Theoretical and practical implications

By investigating how people form their judgments regarding the appropriate level of monetary and time donations under socioeconomic comparisons, we contribute to several streams of literature. First, previous research shows a mixed effect of social class on altruism. While some studies demonstrate that low-income individuals are more generous, trustful of others, and willing to give more support both to charity and to third-party strangers (Gong & Sanfey, 2017; Piff et al., 2010; Van Doesum et al., 2017), others show some circumstances where high-income individuals are more prosocial (Korndörfer et al., 2015; Whillans et al., 2017). We examine individuals' judgments of donation prescriptions for themselves and others given their socioeconomic position, and find that while those in an inferior socioeconomic position believe that wealthier others should donate more money and time to charity, those in a superior socioeconomic position do not consistently prescribe that they themselves should donate more money than poorer others. We, therefore, moved beyond the question of who behaves more prosocially and examined how socioeconomic comparison shapes prescriptions about how much money and time oneself and others should give to charity. In doing so, we contribute to understanding when and why income inequality shapes charitable giving among those with the greatest capacity to give. While there is not much difference between how much money people think that they themselves should donate, those in an inferior socioeconomic position think that wealthier others should donate more for charity.

Second, we contribute to the literature investigating the differences between time and money donation prescriptions across the socioeconomic spectrum. Past research shows that giving time is psychologically more demanding than giving money (Reed et al., 2016), but also more rewarding. For instance, volunteering is more associated with warm glow feelings than monetary donations (Brown et al., 2018), and asking for time (vs. monetary) donations lead to higher levels of charity contributions (Costello & Malkoc, 2022; Liu & Aaker, 2008). However, there was no consistent evidence that social classes would be differently impacted by time versus monetary

donation requests. Our findings show that individuals' differential beliefs about how much oneself and others should give to charity given their socioeconomic position go beyond monetary donations and embrace time donations. Those in an inferior socioeconomic position think that wealthier others should donate more money and time to charity. Those in a superior socioeconomic position think they should donate more time, but not necessarily more money, than others in an inferior socioeconomic position.

Finally, this research extends previous findings about the influence of meritocratic beliefs on preferences for redistribution (Côté et al., 2015; Davidai, 2018; McCoy & Major, 2007; Mijs et al., 2022; Son Hing et al., 2011). High meritocracy beliefs reduce self-other differences about monetary donations for charity. When people believe in meritocracy, those in a superior socioeconomic position do not think that they should donate more than the poor, and those in an inferior socioeconomic position also do not think that they should donate less than the wealthy.

This research also presents implications and knowledge to charitable and non-profit organizations. In a highly unequal socioeconomic environment, where social disparities are more evident, prosocial actions performed by the wealthy are particularly important. However, individuals in a downward position do not prescribe much higher monetary donations to themselves than to others in an inferior socioeconomic position. In addition, individuals in an inferior socioeconomic position delegate the responsibility of monetary donations to wealthier others.

These findings have practical implications. For instance, charities are struggling for funds more than ever with the coronavirus pandemic (e.g., Evans & Weller, 2022). In developing countries, where higher inequality rates are observed, lower earners may feel relatively incapable of making an impact and delegate to wealthier others the responsibility to support social causes related to this pandemic. Charities could promote campaigns focusing on societal needs of minimizing inequality. Also, the lack of meritocracy could be highlighted to increase empathy for those in need. By highlighting the misfortune and difficult situation of those in need, wealthier individuals may realize they should do more to help.

6.2 | Limitations and future research

This research measured prosocial behavior with time and monetary donation requests. However, prosocial activities include a variety of behaviors, such as pro-environmental actions (recycling or choosing green products); helping a stranger; and donating food, clothing, or other material resources. Future studies could include other donation requests to test the consistency of our findings. Also, given the differences in how those feeling richer spend their time versus their money, it would be interesting to further investigate the time-money asymmetry in the downward condition and compare these two prosocial activities in a single study.

Consumers need to decide not only how much money to donate but also to which cause they wish to contribute (Small &

Simonsohn, 2008; Vieites et al., 2022). Social comparisons may impact judgments about contributions to specific social causes. As people making upward comparisons believe they have less spare money than others, they may assign different priorities for donations. For instance, following upward comparisons, people may expect those in a superior socioeconomic condition to donate more for causes directly associated with the lack of resources (food and shelter or helping children living in poverty areas), whereas following downward comparisons individuals may be more willing to donate for causes associated with discretionary and ideological preferences (cultural and art activities or pro-environmental protection).

Perceived social inequality triggered by socioeconomic comparisons might also influence perceptions about self-interest and altruism. When people believe that others are motivated by self-interest, they come to see self-interest as the norm, and thus become less altruistic themselves (Miller, 1999). Similarly, the belief that others are responsible for charitable giving may inhibit donations by driving people to pass on to others the obligation to donate. In addition, if people become aware or think that others are donating less than they were supposed or able to, they might donate less as well. Future research should further examine this dynamic process.

6.3 | Conclusion

The current research shows that socioeconomic comparisons shape prescriptions of how much money and time oneself and others should give to charity. Following social comparisons to wealthier others, individuals believe that those wealthier others should donate more time and money to charity than themselves. But following social comparisons to poorer others, individuals prescribe that they themselves should donate more time, but not necessarily more money, to charity than those poorer others. This is because while those in a lower socioeconomic position perceive they have less financial slack than wealthier people, those in a higher socioeconomic position may not see themselves as having more financial slack than poorer people. This can propagate inequality as poorer people may delegate the responsibility of donations to wealthier others, who in turn may not see themselves as more responsible for monetary donations.

CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

This research contributes to previous studies investigating the impact of social class on prosocial behavior by demonstrating that socioeconomic comparisons shape individuals' beliefs about how much money and time oneself and others should give to charity. People who make an upward social comparison expect wealthier others to donate more to charity. However, those making a downward social comparison only think they have more spare money, and should donate more, when reminded of their hierarchical position at the time of judgment. In addition, while prescriptions of time donations are driven by moral considerations of how much oneself and others should donate given their socioeconomic position, prescriptions of monetary donations are more influenced by

perceptions of financial slack related to how much spare money one has available to donate. Low meritocracy beliefs exacerbate the difference between the beliefs of how much oneself and others should donate given their socioeconomic position. More generally, this research suggests that people may use charitable giving for resource redistribution purposes, especially when they have low meritocratic beliefs, by prescribing to the wealthier a higher responsibility to donate. Therefore, this research provides a unique theoretical contribution to how socioeconomic comparisons shape beliefs and prescriptions about monetary and time donations.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All the data, codes, and materials both from the manuscript and supplementary studies are available at <https://osf.io/9fb3j>.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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APPENDIX A: Social cause advertisement (adapted from Duclos & Barasch, 2014; Study 1)



UNICEF has helped millions of children that are under humanitarian crisis such as conflict situations, natural disaster, and other emergencies, in the last year. Please help UNICEF to provide much-needed food, supplies, and medicine for these individuals and families. Donations can be made at www.UNICEF.org.

APPENDIX B: Social cause advertisement (adapted from Han et al., 2017; Study 2)

We build strength, stability, and self reliance through shelter.

Habitat for Humanity is a true world leader in addressing the issues of poor people housing condition. Through donors, we build and rehabilitates simple, decent houses alongside homeowner families. Help us with so-needed donors at www.HABITAT.org.



APPENDIX C: Social cause advertisement (adapted from Kristofferson et al., 2014; Study 3)

**GUARANTEE CHILDHOOD AND
ADOLESCENCE DEPENDS ON YOU**

Did you know you can help us without spending or leaving home?

This semester we are launching online volunteering, a way to help us accomplish tasks from your home, in your time! There are support vacancies in marketing, logistics, accounting, economics, human resources, planning, and digital media areas. Help us to continue assist millions of children in humanitarian crisis situations such as conflicts, natural disasters, and other emergencies!

