GROUP BASED RESILIENCY: CONTRASTING THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THREAT TO THE INGROUP

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ABSTRACT

The research focused on Group Based Resiliency (GBR), the perception of ingroup's ability to positively deal with contextual threats. Based on the uncertainty reduction theory, we advanced that GBR contributes to prevent negative effects of threats to the ingroup. We successfully tested a SEM in which when the ingroup is presented as resilient a contextual threat elicits a stronger perception of ingroup entitativity, which in turn produces a stronger ingroup identification. This identification increases life-satisfaction also in terms of better perspectives for the future. When the ingroup was presented as not resilient, perceived threat did not lead to such a positive outcome. Implications for threat management are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Individuals need to belong to social groups; this satisfies numerous psychological needs. For instance, people strive to belong to social groups because these latter help them define who they are, where they belong to, and how they should behave towards ingroup and outgroup members. In the light of the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), this contributes to create and maintain a truly relevant part of individual's identity, that is, the social identity. The more people identify with the group, the more they are willing to show group-based behaviors, such as stereotyping, intergroup competition, ethnocentrism, and cohesion (e.g. Hogg, 2000).

Individuals identify with groups for many other reasons, for example for satisfying self-enhancement motivation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the need for optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991), or the need for reducing subjective uncertainty (for a review, see Hogg, 2000). The Uncertainty Reduction Theory suggests that under conditions of subjective uncertainty people are strongly motivated to reduce the subsequent uncomfortable feelings, in order to maintain a

coherent and understandable social world. One way to reduce this uncertainty, and restore a predictable social order, is to self-locate in a proper way in the intergroup comparison scenario, and make it understandable who to trust and who to avoid. So, an efficient way to restore a sense of certainty is to identify with the ingroup. Hogg and colleagues (2007) further argued that uncertainty has to do with the context in which people are operating rather than being a stable disposition. Group identification only occurs when the dimension of uncertainty is important to the people and they consider the social category to identify with as highly relevant to this dimension (Mullin & Hogg, 1998). Thus, if such an uncertainty is produced, for instance, by the presence of immigrants in the place where they live, individuals are more likely to reinforce their identification with their national group.

People prefer to identify with those groups that are more clearly defined, and that they perceived as coherent entities (Hogg et al., 2007). In other words, identification is stronger with *entitative* groups. Entitativity is meant as an internal property of a group defined by characteristics such as similarity, clear boundaries, common fate and common goals (Campbell, 1958). Previous research showed that entitativity modulates the relationship between uncertainty and identification). Hogg and colleagues (2007) interpreted such a modulation as the fact that group identification involves a self-categorization process in which the self is controlled by a simple and unambiguous prototype that prescribes cognitions, feelings, and behaviors. Sacchi, Castano, and Brauer (2009), instead, suggested that the perception of ingroup entitativity promotes the vision of the group as an entity equipped with real intents, ability to plan actions and to safeguard the security of its members, as well as with ability to protect them from external threats. Accordingly, group entitativity increases the power of ingroup identification in reducing subjective uncertainty because it satisfies the evolutionary need for protection and security. The association between identification and entitativity has been convincingly shown in the previous literature, even if the causal chain has been theorized in both directions.

We aim to advance our understanding of how social groups can react positively to situations that seriously compromise the existential need of certainty. We believe that a further factor that may potentially help individuals to reinforce the psychological link with the ingroup, and reduce feelings of uncertainty, is represented by the perception of ingroup ability to positively deal with contextual threats. We define such perception *Group-Based Resiliency* (from now on GBR). When a social group has to deal with a severe threatening situation, a general sense of uncertainty should arise. This is for instance the case of many Southern western countries (e.g., Italy) which are currently dealing with a global and severe financial crisis potentially involving the future generations. Such a crisis has been eroding the cornerstones of the individuals' fundamental needs and rights, such as the right to have a job or to create a family, and it is able to induce strong feelings of uncertainty. According to the uncertainty-reduction theory reinforcing the psychological link with the ingroup by considering it as a strong entity and by increasing the identification with the ingroup (in this case, the national ingroup) may represent a suitable strategy to face this negative contingency, with all the positive consequences associated with this identification, in terms for instance of collective self-esteem or better expectations for the future. We attempted to demonstrate that such a virtuous process can be triggered by the perception that the ingroup has the potentiality to deal with the threatening situation.

We thus advanced that GBR contributes to prevent from the negative effects of threats to the ingroup. We hypothesized that, under threatening condition, high (vs. low) GBR would enhance the perception of the ingroup as a whole entity, ingroup identification, and individuals' collective self-esteem. This in turn should produce higher levels of subjective wellbeing, even in terms of future perspective.

Pilot Study

To test for the effectiveness of our manipulation of GBR, 60 undergraduates (35 women; *mean age* 23.58, *SD* = 3.48) were asked to answer a questionnaire concerning employment in Italy. In the introduction it was stated that the Italian Government was conducting a survey to better understand the opinion of Italians regarding these issues.

Participants read that a previous survey has been conducted by the National Institute for Statistics in 2010, to describe the Italians' economic situation in 2008-2010. This research had allegedly demonstrated a dangerous situation for Italians, on account of a triple increase of unemployment and temporary work positions. This threatening economic situation was strongly related to the immigration flows. Linking the economic situation to the immigration flows allowed us to create an intergroup scenario.

GBR was manipulated by providing participants with bogus reactions of the previously interviewed Italians to the threat highlighted by the 2010 survey. In the *high* (vs. *low*) *GBR condition*, participants read that the majority of previously interviewed Italians had declared to be sure that Italians, as a national group, may certainly deal with the crisis because of their natural characteristics (*vs. may absolutely not deal with the crisis because of the lack of important characteristics*), such as for instance strong cooperative skills and cohesion. As a consequence, they had declared to be really optimistic (*vs. pessimistic*) for the future. Participants were then asked to recall the extent to which the previously interviewed Italians, on account of the characteristics they attributed to Italians in general, showed optimism for the future (from 1 = *not at all*; to 9 = *absolutely*).

Participants declared that the previously interviewed Italians showed more optimism for the future in the high (*M* = 6.20; *SD* = 2.37) than in the low GBR condition (*M* = 4.24; *SD* = 1.79), *F* (1,57) = 12.79, *p* = .001, partial eta-square = .18. Therefore, our manipulation of GBR was effective, since participants considered the ingroup as more "resilient" in the high (vs. low) GBR condition.

Main Study

One hundred and eight undergraduates (75 women; *mean age* 21.79, *SD* = 2.76) were asked to anonymously answer a questionnaire concerning employment in Italy. The cover story regarding the fictitious previous Survey conducted by the National Institute for Statistics was identical to that described above.

To assess *perceived threat*, participants indicated to what extent they considered this economic situation as threatening and worrying (from 1 = *not at all*; to 9 = *absolutely*). Then, as in the pilot study, (high vs. low) GBR was manipulated by providing participants with bogus reactions of the previously interviewed Italians to the threat highlighted by the fictitious 2010 survey.

After manipulating GBR, we assessed *ingroup identification* (4 items; e.g., "Being Italian is important to me"; alpha = .83), perception of *Group Entitativity* (10 items; e.g., "Italians share a lot of characteristics"; "There are strong links between Italians"; Castano, Yzerbyt, & Bourguignon, 2003; alpha = .69), and *private collective self esteem* (4 items; e.g., "In general, I'm happy of being Italian"; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; alpha = .82). Finally, we assessed the *subjective wellbeing* using the Temporal Satisfaction With Life Scale (TSWLS; Pavot, 1998). The 15-item scale assesses the perception of life satisfaction in three temporal dimensions, on the past (e.g., "If I had my past to live over, I would change nothing") on the present (e.g. " I would change nothing about my current life") and on the future (e.g., "There will be nothing that I will want to change about my future"). Following Pavot (1998), we combined the items into an overall wellbeing index (alpha =.92). All the scales ranged from 1 (= *totally disagree*) to 9 (= *totally agree*). After completing the questionnaire, participants were fully debriefed. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and the correlations for the main variables.

	Mean	SD	Perceived Threat	Identification	Entitativity	Private CSE	Wellbeing
Perceived Threat	6.20	2.21	1.00	-.05	.13	-.02	.22
Identification	6.34	1.96	.31*	1.00	.14	.57***	.32*
Entitativity	5.34	1.06	.46***	.57***	1.00	.27a	.39**
Private CSE	5.71	1.589	.32*	.61***	.49***	1.00	.30*
Wellbeing	5.25	1.58	.13	.16	.26*	.23b	1.00

Table 1. Correlation matrix relative to low GBR condition (above diagonal; n = 49) and high GBR condition (below diagonal; n = 58). Note: a, *p* = .06; b, *p* = .09

Results

We hypothesized a model in which we examined whether, in the presence of an external Threat, the perception that own group is able to effectively respond to this threat (high GBR) positively influences personal Wellbeing by increasing Identification with the Ingroup, Perceived Entitativity and Private Collective Self-Esteem.

To test this path of relations, a SEM with observed variable was performed. The relationships among the variables were analyzed with the EQS program (Bentler, 2004). The path model that we tested predicted that Threat positively influenced Perceived Entitativity, particularly in the High GBR condition. Perceived Entitativity would positively influence Ingroup Identification which in turn would positively influence Private Collective Self-Esteem. Furthermore, we expected that Private Collective Self-Esteem would mediate the relationship between Ingroup Identification and Wellbeing.

To test for possible moderation of GBR, we used multiple-group SEM considering GBR as grouping variable. This model estimated simultaneously the same pattern of relationships among variables in the two samples of high and low GBR.

To determine the fit of the proposed model, we report the chi-square goodness of fit test, the Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) with associated confidence intervals. A chi-square value of zero indicates optimal fit, whereas a higher chi-square indicates worse fit. More specifically, a no significant chi-square indicates that the difference between the observed and estimated variance/covariance matrices is not significantly different from zero. The NNFI and CFI give an indication of the extent to which the tested model is superior to the null model, which specifies no covariance between the measured variables. The value of these indices can vary between 0 and 1, with higher values indicating a better fit between the observed and estimated covariance matrices. The RMSEA tells us how well the model, with unknown but optimally chosen parameter estimates would fit the populations covariance matrix. We accepted NNFI and CFI values greater than .95 and RMSEA values lower than .08. In EQS the plausibility of equality constraints in multiple-group models is examined by means of the Lagrange Multiplier (LM) test. For each of the constraints specified, the LM test provides evidence on the null hypothesis that the constraint is true in the populations involved. Following Bentler (2004) we considered as untenable those constraints with an associated LM test value with probability equal or less than 0.05.

In the high GBR the hypothesized model fitted the empirical data well, chi square (5) = 5.64, *p* = .34, NNFI = . 98, *CFI* = .99, *RMSEA* = .048. Also in the low Group-Based Resiliency the model fitted the empirical data, chi square (4) = 4.33, *p* = .36, NNFI = .97, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .041.

After having established the baseline model in each group, we performed a multigroup model that simultaneously estimated the structural parameters for High and Low GBR to examine whether the parameters are partially invariant. This model fits the data extremely well, as indicated by a no significant chi square value (9, N=107) = 9.97, p = .35, high NNFI and CFI values (.98 and .99, respectively) and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of .03 (CI = .00-.11).

GBR moderates the relationship between Threat and Perceived Entitativity. In fact, in the high GBR, as predicted, we observed that the direct path from Threat to Perceived Entitativity was significant and positive (.45). The path from Perceived Entativity to Ingroup Identification was also significant and positive (.56). Participants identified more strongly with their group when the group was perceived as highly entitative: unexpectedly, this path was not significant in low GBR, maybe because the scant elicited Entitativity was not able to determine a significant link with identification. Ingroup Identification exerted a significant direct positive influence on Private Collective Self-Esteem (.65). Furthermore, Private Collective Self-Esteem exerted a significant direct positive influence on Wellbeing (.33). When we constrained the path coefficient of the relation between entitativity and identification to be equal across high and low GBR conditions, even in the latter condition this relation became significant. All hypothesized coefficients resulted statistically significant.

For low GBR, this virtuous chain that leads to Wellbeing as the final outcome is not elicited, since Threat did not predict significantly Perceived Entitativity.

Thus, perceived ability to cope with an ingroup threat (that is, GBR) is the crucial factor in the increase of Identification with the Ingroup *via* the mediation of the Perceived Entitativity. To examine group difference, we constrained path coefficients to be equal across high and low GBR conditions and examined change in model fit. Results revealed that all parameters were not significantly different across groups, with the hypothesized exception of the beta coefficient between Threat and Perceived Entitativity (p = .012).

The model accounted for 11% and 10% of the variance in Wellbeing, respectively, for high and low GBR conditions.

DISCUSSION

This research represents the first evidence that the perception of the ingroup's ability to efficiently respond to an external threat may be the trigger for a protective chain that, ultimately, leads to group members' wellbeing. When faced with a contextual threat to the ingroup, the GBR increases ingroup entitativity and identification which, in turn, promote the attainment of individual wellbeing *via* an increase in the collective self-esteem. This research contributes to the literature at least with three new and quite interesting results: first, we successfully introduced the concept of a resilience based on the ingroup, that is, the belief in the group's ability to resist and emerge unscathed from threatening situations. Such a belief is strongly related to the core constructs of the uncertainty reduction theory, that is group's entitativity and group's identification. Second, our results might represent an extension of this theory because we consider a further and distal positive outcome of the virtuous process hypothesized by the theory, that is an increased personal wellbeing of members of the threatened group. This state of wellbeing may be in turn able to positively reverberate on the perception of resilience of the group as well as on the entitativity and identification, triggering a virtuous chain. Moreover, this state of wellbeing and trust in the ingroup may further determine the adoption of behaviors aimed at collectively dealing with the perceived threat (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Nevertheless,

since in the present study we did not assess behaviors or behavioral intentions, future ad hoc studies should directly investigate this issue. Finally, the third result concerns the mediational role of the private collective self-esteem between the identification and wellbeing. Several studies have previously found a link between collective self-esteem and identification (e.g., Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), only few others have pointed out the relationship between collective self-esteem and psychological wellbeing (e.g., Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994), especially in terms of life satisfaction. Furthermore, it is particularly interesting that the measure we adopted to assess the wellbeing is grounded around the individual's confidence in the future prospects, a dimension that should be strongly involved in the probability that the individuals are willing to take effective actions to address the threat to the ingroup.

This research is in line with studies examining the functional role of ingroup entitativity. According to Crawford and Salaman (2012), for instance, our results confirm the crucial role of the ingroup entitativity in shaping how the individuals feel that their membership meets their needs, first of all the need for security and certainty.

Our results also confirm the link between group identification and group entativity, even though these are results of correlational nature: thus, establishing a causal relationship between the two constructs is only speculative, and it would be necessary to replicate the study by manipulating the perception of entitativity. Nevertheless, to manipulate the entativity of actual groups gives no guarantee of success and would therefore be appropriate to create fictitious groups. Also the fact that we measured the perceived threat to the ingroup may represent a limitation of this study to be resolved with experimental manipulations in future studies. Finally, the present study needs for replication with both larger samples and with older participants: our sample consisted in fact of very young people, but we chose such participants because they represent the future of a country.

In conclusion, our results suggest that, in conditions of uncertainty and threat, effective communication on the positive characteristics of the ingroup and on its resilient capacity can play a decisive role in fostering the loyalty of the members, and encouraging them to take decisive actions.

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