Self-enhancement through Group and Individual Social Judgments

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ABSTRACT

Substantial amounts of research demonstrate people engage in a variety of mechanisms to enhance their self-image, whether it is by forgetting their shortcomings or by stressing their accomplishments. The present study investigated another method by which individuals can self-enhance, that is by making positive or negative social judgments concerning their ingroup and a fellow ingroup member. Using a minimal group paradigm, we found that when participants were given negative group information, they tended to distance themselves from both the ingroup and fellow ingroup member by judging themselves more positively. When given positive group information, participant's self-ratings did not differ from their social judgments, both at the group and individual level.

Given the inquisitive nature of human beings, it is difficult to imagine people going about their daily lives without making social judgments. That is, judgments concerning the individuals who make up their social worlds. Is the person I am dating a smart, kind individual? Is the politician I voted for last November a trustworthy human being? Is the driver who just sped by me on the highway careless and aggressive? These are just a sample of the types of social judgments a social perceiver could make about others. These examples also demonstrate the utility of social judgments, showing that social judgments assist people in being cautious about those around them. After all, one typically does not want to be involved with an obtuse, malevolent person, endorse a crooked, disingenuous political candidate, or be on the road with a fellow motorist who is callous and irresponsible.

In making their social judgments, people attempt to place themselves in the most favorable light. Indeed, people tend to tailor their judgments of others in order to maintain or bolster positive self-images. Individuals regularly evaluate others' performances in ways that place themselves

in favorable lights (Dunning and Cohen 1992; Beauregard and Dunning 1998; Dunning et. al. 2003). For example, Beauregard and Dunning (1998) found that low-performing participants tended to rate high-, medium-, and low-performing targets fairly positively, thereby giving them leeway to judge themselves positively. High-performing individuals, in contrast, differentiated among high- medium-, and low-performing targets, judging the target individuals they outperformed fairly negatively. Consequently, high-performing participants were able to heighten the distinctiveness of their achievements.

The act of judging others is a well-documented action within the social psychology canon (Andersen and Ross 1984; Johnson and Boyd 1995; Monin and Norton 2003; Pronin et al. 2001). One literature in which social judgments are most pronounced is within the ingroup/outgroup paradigm. Research has typically shown people tend to favor ingroup members over outgroup members (Brewer 1979; Mullen, Brown and Smith 1992). For instance, participants allocate more money to ingroup members compared to outgroup members and evaluate members of their ingroup more favorably than outgroup members (Messick and Mackie 1989). However, recent studies demonstrate that under certain conditions, people judge ingroup members less favorably than outgroup members (Eidelman and Biernat 2003; Marques, Abrams, Paez, and Hogg 2001). One theory that intricately details the mechanisms of judging ingroups and outgroups, along with discussing the downstream effects of categorizing individuals in ingroups and outgroups is social identity theory (SIT).

Social identity theory focuses on discussing the nature and extent of the cognitive processes that occur during judgments of the ingroup/outgroup. These social arrangements are represented by belief structures individuals possess about the nature of inter-group relations and the best ways to achieve or maintain positive distinctiveness (i.e., that our group is better than their group). These structures have a number of different elements such as beliefs about the social status of one's group, beliefs about the stability of this status, its legitimacy, and the permeability of group boundaries (Hogg 2006). It is theorized that these belief structures are arranged in order to generate positive distinctiveness between groups. This arrangement has the result of the in-group being evaluated positively, and by virtue of being a group member the individual, resulting in increases in the integrity of the person's self-image and a boost to their self-esteem.

The presence of this boost to self-esteem created by achieving positive distinctiveness has been found to be limited by a variety of socio-structural, individual and interpersonal factors (Abrams and Hogg 1988). Of specific interest for this study are the socio-structural effects. Abrams and Hogg suggest that in contrast to the multiplicity of motives for intergroup discrimination seen in real social groups, minimal groups used in the majority of research on social identity theory processes can only supply an increase in self-esteem to the participant. These minimal groups generated through arbitrary sorting on the part of the researcher have no preexisting stable structural relationships to one another. Subsequently, the argument could be made that in these cases the participants would exhibit low group identification, and would possibly pursue strategies other than those theorized by social identity theory when it more greatly benefits their self-esteem. McGarty (2001) in the past has been very direct in his assertion that the link between in-group bias and group membership is a function of identification and not a main effect as is suggested in some interpretations of social identity theory (Mummendey, Klink, and Brown 2001).

Group identification can be understood as the degree to which the in-group is included in the self (Troop and Wright 2001). Minimal groups present situations that bring little of the participant's social world with them. Subsequently, participants would have little reason to include them in their conception of self. In situations where these groups have positive connotations there is little cost to accepting the boosts to self-esteem that they bring. In contrast, in situations where these groups are construed as negative the participant has been shown to seek group mobility and distance themselves from them (Cadinu and Cerchioni 2001; Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje 1997). This suggests that individuals are motivated to embrace low identification groups only when it is beneficial to their self-esteem.

The present study seeks to explore this hypothesis. We examine whether peoples' judgments will vary depending upon whether negative and positive traits are associated with the group as a whole or a fictional past group member. This leads us to a series of hypotheses. First, we hypothesize that in situations in which participants are presented negative group information they will attempt to dissociate themselves from the group. In this first scenario the positive distinctiveness provided by the group does not outweigh the negative stigma it represents and presents them with little benefit to self esteem, and we propose they will seek to engage in disidentification from the group. Next, we expect that when presented with negative individual information, participants will identify with the group and exclude the individual by giving the individual lower ratings. Here it is still possible by excluding the black sheep to retain some of the benefit of positive distinctiveness that group membership offers. Finally, in the positive conditions, we hypothesize that little difference will exist between the ratings of the group, the past participant, and self, and no exclusion or disidentification judgments are expected.

METHODS

Participants were drawn from the student pool at a large Mid Western University. Eighty undergraduate students completed the experiment in return for partial course credit. The study used a ten point scale to record participant ratings of self, group, and a past participant on select personality traits. A short lead in was presented which gave fictional information about the performance of either the group as a whole or a fictional past participant on measures of creativity, messiness, impulsivity, narrow-mindedness, likeability, and competence. Participants were also asked to judge how similar to themselves they saw both the group and the past participants. Participants either received information that scores were high on the positive traits and low on the negative traits or the reverse. Overall, this created four conditions where the participant was judging either a positive or a negative in-group and in-group member after having received information about the group as a whole or a fictional past participant.

Procedure

Utilizing a Klee and Kandinsky minimal group paradigm, participants were asked to indicate their preference between two paintings over the course of thirteen trials. Once completed responses were collected and taken out of the room to be "scored". All participants were then privately informed that they expressed a preference for Klee and were subsequently given either positive or negative information about Klee lovers as a group or a fictional past participant who

also expressed a preference for Klee artwork. A brief introductory paragraph informed the student that either a single student or group of students had completed the same picture task in a similar study the previous quarter, and had given consent for their results to be shared. Next, they were informed that the previous experiment had also included measures of personality, and a summary of the results were presented below. Participants were then asked to make judgments about Klee lovers as a whole, a fictional past participant possessing a gender neutral name, and themselves.

RESULTS

Difference scores were constructed from the raw data to indicate the relative similarity between ratings of group versus self and group versus past participant. The data were then structured by the format of presentation, either group or past participant, and the valence of the information. This allows us to test the participants' unique responses in each of the test conditions. This is necessary since significant main effects for the two dependent variables are not clear enough to test our hypotheses. As an example the means and standard deviations of the trait creativity are presented in Table 1. Significant results are identified by an asterisk.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of trait Creativity

	Group	Past Participant	Self	Difference Score GP	Difference Score GS
Group -	3.80	4.28	6.95	-0.56	-3.15*
	(2.33)	(2.52)	(1.57)	(1.50)	(2.64)
Past Participant -	6.47	4.39	6.95	2.06*	-0.47
	(1.71)	(2.28)	(1.72)	(2.69)	(1.47)
Group +	8.25	7.58	7.70	0.63	0.55
	(1.29)	(1.64)	(1.66)	(1.50)	(1.39)
Past Participant +	8.57	8.11	7.48	0.37	1.10*
	(.93)	(1.05)	(1.66)	(1.12)	(1.64)

Next, one-sample T-Tests were conducted comparing the difference scores to a test value of zero. The goal being to determine in what situations the ratings between group and self or past participant were functionally equivalent to one another. Once again we propose that when presented with a negative group the participant will seek to engage in group mobility through disidentification, while when presented with a negative past participant they will employ target derogation. Results support the specified hypothesis for three of the six traits (creativity, narrow-mindedness, and competence with impulsivity being marginal). For the remaining traits, messiness and likeability, participants failed to display the predicted pattern. For messiness they distanced themselves from the group in the group conditions, but failed to identify in the past participant condition. Conversely, for likeability they distanced themselves but not the past participant in the group conditions, but distanced both themselves and the past participant in the past participant condition. Further examination of mean values in this case indicated that participants were rating themselves as significantly more likeable than the group, and rating the group as significantly more likeable than the past participant. This trend might suggest that in certain cases individuals both derogate an outlier and enhance themselves in relation to the group.

Results in the positive information conditions mostly supported our hypothesis. For three of the traits messiness, narrow-mindedness, and competence there were no significant differences between the group and either the self or past participant in either the group or past participant conditions. Interestingly, for two of the traits creativity and impulsivity participants judged themselves in a less positive way versus the group when presented with a positive past participant. In other words they judged themselves as being less creative and more impulsive. Finally, when rating likeability they indicated no significant difference between self and the group in the group conditions, but rated the past participant as significantly less likable.

Overall, there is moderate evidence to support both of our hypotheses. In all of these cases mean differences ranged from one to as much as four points suggesting that these differences are not just statistically significant but also of practical significance.

DISCUSSION

Social identity theory asserts that individuals are motivated to maintain positive distinctiveness between the groups that they belong to and others, and that accomplishing this leads to a boost to positive self perceptions. This study has sought to continue to explore this complex process. First, rather than use a single indicator of group judgments we have sought to include a variety of both positive and negative traits to determine unique effects. Further research is necessary, but some evidence does exist to indicate that individuals might display the effects theorized in social identity theory differently depending on what specific factor they are asked to judge. Regardless, the primary point of the current study has been to expand on the idea that certain behavior like those found in studies of black sheep effects are geared toward individual enhancement rather than group protection.

Overall, results suggest that when participants are given negative group information they attempt to distance themselves from both the group and the past participant by judging themselves more positively. Conversely, when given negative individual information, participants attempt to exclude the past participant from the group by judging themselves and the group more positively than the fictitious group member. Consistent with Eidelman and Biernat (2003) we do not propose that we are unique in proposing that individuals may distance themselves from negative group memberships. This conclusion was clearly presented in work by Tajfel (1978). Instead, we seek to expand on the conclusion drawn by Eidelman and Biernat (2003) that in the same way that an individual will engage in target derogation to maintain positive self perceptions from group membership they will when this isn't possible attempt to engage in group mobility to maintain a positive self-image. We propose that both target derogation and group mobility are strategies designed to maximize positive self perceptions. When groups are positive little work on the part of the individual is necessary to enjoy the boost to self esteem that positive distinctiveness brings. Similarly, when a single group member is performing poorly target derogation serves to distance that member from both the self and group allowing the individual to enjoy the benefits of membership relatively unimpeded. In contrast, when the group itself is tainted little personal benefit can be obtained by identifying with it, and the individual then engages in group mobility to maintain a positive self-image. People engage in both self-enhancement and self-protection in order to feel good about themselves. However, there are

distinctions between the two mechanisms. Self-enhancement is routinely utilized to regulate the positivity of one's self-concept, maximizing self-views. However, self-protection strategies, including group mobility, are employed to respond to threats to one's self-concept (Hepper, Gramzow, and Sedikides 2010)

Abrams and Hogg (1988) proposed some time ago that groups that individuals poorly identify with are useful only as long as they bolster self esteem. Regardless, numerous studies still make use of this type of design. The results of the current study lend more support to Abrams and Hogg's assertion, while again demonstrating the significant lengths that individuals will go to before seeking to abandon even these groups. Future research is necessary to expand on these ideas by exploring the relationship between group identification and the self enhancement motive. It is reasonable to theorize that real social groups that engender high identification from their members would result in individuals displaying much different results on tests of social identity processes than those found in research based on minimal group designs. For example, in situations where group mobility isn't available target derogation might be more extreme due to it being the only option to maintain positive self perceptions. While accessibility is important in research design, answers to these types of questions can only be found with a more textured conception of the group based in real world distinctions.

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