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AMBIVALENCE TOWARD THE INGROUP UNDERLIES INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

The present research deals with low status group members reacting to a social identity threat. According to previous insights, we proposed and found that expressing an ambivalent evaluation toward the ingroup – an evaluation which contains both positive and negative aspects – may represent a way to manage such a threatening situation, particularly when individuals scantily identify with the ingroup. We found evidence that ambivalence toward the ingroup underpins the willingness to invest in individual identity management strategies. Results confirmed our interpretation of ambivalence as a form of psychological disengagement as well as how this disengagement further determines an individual course of action.

INTRODUCTION

An important claim of the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is that people strive for achieve or maintain a positive social identity, meant as that part of the self-concept that derives from belonging to groups. While belonging to dominant (high status) groups is rewarding in terms of a positive social identity, membership in devalued groups produces instead a wide range of negative consequences, for instance in terms of affective costs. In the past decades, researchers have deeply investigated how low status group members react to their *threatened*

social identity engaging in the so-called *identity management strategies* (van Knippenberg, 1989). Social identity theorists describe different strategies available to low-status group members who aim to improve their social standing. Starting from Hirschman's (1970) distinction between Exit and Voice strategies, Tajfel and Turner (1979) distinguished between two main clusters of strategies, aiming at individual vs. collective status improvement, respectively. With the former, we refer to group members' attempt to change their individual position, while leaving the ingroup's relative position unchanged. This strategy has been classically referred to as *individual mobility*. By contrast, collective strategies refer to individuals' effort to improve their social standing by changing the relative position of the ingroup as a whole. These strategies have been referred to as *social change*. Several factors influence the choice for an individual versus a collective strategy, such as socio-structural factors (Ellemers, 1993), the level of ingroup identification (e.g., Ellemers, 1993), and group norms (e.g., Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008; Pagliaro, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2011).

Beyond behavioural attempts to better their social standing, people may even merely cope with an identity threat by cognitively re-defining the disadvantaged situation they are facing with. This can occur for instance when they perceive the group boundaries as impermeable or the status relations as unchangeable (Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish, & Hodge, 1996). In such cases, they may adopt *social creativity strategies*, that is, a series of (primarily) cognitive attempts to re-define the intergroup comparison scenario, which could reflect either group-based or individualistic goals (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998).

A social creativity strategy can be also represented by a strategic use of people's judgments about their ingroup. For instance, when investigating the issue of group variability (for a review, see Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1988), researchers had ascertained that low status group members who scantily identify with the ingroup tend to exaggerate the intragroup variability to manage the potential identity threat arising from a negative intergroup comparison (the *We are bad, but varied* device, Doosje Spears, & Koomen, 1995, p. 653).

Recently it has been advanced and found that a further consequence of a negative social identity may invest the evaluation of the ingroup as a whole, after involving its internal variability (Pagliaro, Alparone, Pacilli, & Mucchi-Faina, 2012). More specifically, the perception of intragroup variability has been found to determine a subsequent ambivalent evaluation of the ingroup, namely an attitude that contains both positive and negative elements, which has been interpreted as a social creativity strategy, as detailed below. In the present paper, we set out to investigate whether expressing an ambivalent evaluation toward the ingroup, further constitutes the psychological basis for a subsequent behavioural disengagement from the ingroup, namely, the willingness to invest in an individual strategy to manage a negative social standing.

ATTITUDINAL AMBIVALENCE TOWARD THE INGROUP AS PSYCHOLOGICAL DISENGAGEMENT

There is wide evidence that people generally tend to evaluate the ingroup more favorably than the outgroup (i.e., intergroup bias; for a review, Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). Social identity theorists interpreted this asymmetry in terms of identity concerns and need for distinctiveness, and showed that low status group members generally manifest less intergroup

bias than high status group members (e.g., Bettencourt, Dorr, Charlton, & Hume, 2001). Nevertheless, despite a number of other factors moderate the expression of intergroup bias, such as for instance the (positive or negative) nature of resources that people have to allocate to ingroup and outgroup (e.g., Otten, Mummendey, & Blanz, 1996); the perception of an identity threat (e.g., Otten et al., 1996); the content of group norm (e.g., Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1997), people are generally inclined to favor their ingroup (but for possible exceptions, see Jost & Banaji, 1994), and this effect occurs regardless of the relative status of the ingroup when they strongly identify with it (Perreault & Bouhris, 1999).

Despite this general tendency to favor the ingroup, several authors have suggested that, according to specific contextual conditions, people may hold ambivalent attitudes toward the ingroup (Mucchi-Faina, Costarelli, & Romoli, 2002; Mucchi-Faina, Pacilli, Pagliaro, & Alparone, 2009; Jost & Burgess, 2000). According to Mucchi-Faina and colleagues (2002; 2009), for instance, expressing ambivalence toward the ingroup is a way to satisfy two competing motivations at work in intergroup contexts, namely, establishment of positive distinctiveness for the ingroup and conformity to the fairness norm (Branthwaite, Doyle, & Lightbown, 1977), which prescribes impartiality and equity.

Jost and Burgess (2000) relied instead on System Justification Theory to explain that, among low status group members, ambivalence toward the ingroup arises as a result of the conflict between group justification tendencies – which lead to ingroup favoritism – and system justification tendencies – which elicit outgroup favoritism – because low status group members tend to favor the superior outgroup to justify the status asymmetry.

In a recent paper, Pagliaro and colleagues (2012) reasoned that ambivalence is somewhat related to an “adjustment” of the ingroup favoritism, and that even identity management needs call into question a similar adjustment. In particular, we advanced that, when the inferiority of the ingroup one belongs to is made salient, expressing ambivalence toward the ingroup may be interpreted a form of psychological disengagement. Experimental evidence sustained this idea. In particular, when asked to evaluate their own group in a high (vs. low) threat condition, low status members weakly identified with the ingroup firstly stressed the heterogeneity of the group, and then produced a more negative judgment of the group as a whole, as a form of further identity management. This negative evaluation, conflicting with the general tendency to favor the ingroup, produced an ambivalent evaluation of the ingroup, which has been interpreted as a social creativity strategy. Nevertheless, this previous evidence has not ascertained whether such a psychological disengagement, in the form of an ambivalent evaluation toward the ingroup, actually relates to the subsequent behavioral disengagement, for instance in terms of individual (vs. collective) behavioral identity management strategies. Namely, it is worth studying whether the ambivalent evaluation toward the ingroup represents the psychological basis to invest in individual attempts to improve one’s negative social standing. In the present paper we aimed to shed light on this issue.

Based on the above reasoning, we expected that low identifiers (vs. high identifiers) would express higher ambivalence toward the ingroup (Hp 1a), and express in turn higher intentions to invest in individual strategies to better their social standing (Hp 1b), particularly when an identity threat is made salient. Finally, we expected that the effect of identification and identity

threat on the willingness to invest in individual strategies would be mediated by ambivalence toward the ingroup (Hp 2).

Method

One-hundred and eighty-eight participants (115 women; *mean age* = 29.64; *SD* = 9.31) were recruited in the Campus of a medium-size Italian University and were asked to anonymously answer a questionnaire concerning their opinion about some questions related to the employment in Italy.

Following Pagliaro et al.'s (2012) procedure, after assessing socio-demographic information Ingroup identification was measured with three items (e.g., Being Italian is important to me; Ellemers et al., 2008; from 1 = *totally disagree*; to 9 = *totally agree*; $\alpha = .84$). Then, identity threat was manipulated between participants. In previous studies (Mucchi-Faina et al., 2009) it has been ascertained that Italians considered themselves as higher or lower in status compared to Senegalese and British, respectively. We manipulated identity threat by presenting participants with fictitious comparative data relative to the economic situation of Italians. In the high identity threat condition, participants were told that Italians were dramatically disadvantaged compared to British, in terms of average salaries/unemployment. In the low identity threat condition, the opposite scenario was presented, with Italians' economic conditions emerging as better than Senegalese's ones. This manipulation was subsequently checked by asking participants to indicate "what are the actual economic and occupational conditions of Italians compared to British/Senegalese" (1 = *absolutely worse*; 9 = *absolutely better*).

Dependent Variables

Ambivalence toward the ingroup was assessed by asking participants to indicate their opinion toward Italians along 12 randomized unipolar items (from 1 = *not at all*, to 6 = *extremely*): six positive (e.g., attraction; Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$) and six negative (e.g., disapproval; Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$). The items were then combined through a formula for close-ended measures to calculate the ambivalence score: $(P+N)/2 - |P-N|$, where P = positive attitude score and N = negative attitude score. A constant of 1.5 was added in order to avoid negative results (possible range = 0 to 7.5; see Mucchi-Faina et al., 2002; 2009).

Willingness to invest in individual (status improvement) strategies was assessed by asking participants to indicate to what extent they would engage in each of four specific strategies for individual status improvement (e.g. Move to the North-Europe; Get a higher level of education) on a scale ranging from 1 (= *Absolutely not*) to 9 (= *Absolutely*). Their responses were averaged to construct a single measure indicating participants' willingness to invest in individual status improvement (Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$; see Pagliaro et al., 2011).

Results

Manipulation Check

A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed that participants in high threat condition reported that the economic and occupational situation of Italians (vs. the outgroup) were worse ($M = 3.16$; $SD = 1.63$) than in the low threat condition ($M = 7.34$; $SD = 1.78$), $F(1,186) = 282.08$, $p < .001$, partial eta-squared = .60. Thus, our manipulation of identity threat was successful.

Preliminary Analyses

All participants declared to be Italian and thus were all included in the subsequent analyses. Since preliminary analyses did not show any significant effect of gender, data were collapsed across this variable. Table 1 shows the correlations between identification, ambivalence, and willingness to invest in individual strategies in the high and low identity threat conditions.

Table 1. Correlation matrix relative to high identity threat condition (above diagonal; $n = 94$) and low identity threat condition (below diagonal; $n = 94$).

	Ingroup Identification	Ambivalence toward the ingroup	Willingness to invest in individual strategies
Ingroup Identification	1.00	-.60***	-.52***
Ambivalence toward the ingroup	-.36***	1.00	.45***
Willingness to invest in individual strategies	-.29**	-.03	1.00

Data Analysis

To test for the effects of identity threat and identification on ambivalence toward the ingroup and willingness to invest in individual strategies, we performed two moderated multiple regression (Aiken & West, 1991). Identity Threat was modelled as effect coding (-1 = Low Identity Threat from now on, *LIT*; $+1$ = High Identity Threat, from now on, *HIT*), and Ingroup Identification was modelled as (centered) predictor. We entered predictors at the step 1, and the two-way interaction at the step 2. Then, to depict the significant two-way interactions, we analyzed the two simple slopes, at each level of Identity Threat.

Ambivalence toward the Ingroup

As Table 2 shows, in the first step Ingroup Identification predicted significantly ambivalence toward the ingroup. More importantly, adding the Ingroup Identification by Identity Threat interaction provided a significant increase of the R-square, with the interaction being a significant predictor of ambivalence toward the ingroup.

Table 2. Moderated multiple regression on ambivalence toward the ingroup.

	<i>Step 1</i>	<i>Step 2</i>

	<i>Standardized Beta</i>	<i>Standardized Beta</i>
Identification	-.49***	-.50***
Identity Threat	.002	.60***
Identification * Identity Threat	-	-.63***
$\Delta R\text{-square}$	0.24	0.06
ΔF	28.89***	7.45**

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; *Adj* R-square for the full model is .30

In line with predictions, the simple slopes analysis showed that the effect of identification on ambivalence toward the ingroup was stronger in the high threat condition (simple slope = $-.45$, $p < .001$) than in the low threat condition (simple slope = $-.22$, $p < .001$; slope difference test: $t(187) = -2.73$, $p = .007$; Dawson & Richter, 2006). Therefore, low identifiers showed higher ambivalence toward the ingroup than high identifiers, particularly when a situational threat was salient.

Willingness to Invest in Individual Strategies

Table 3 shows the results for the willingness to invest in individual strategies. In the first step, Ingroup Identification was a significant predictor. Adding the Ingroup Identification by Identity Threat interaction provided a significant increase of the R-square, with the interaction being a significant predictor of the perception of the willingness to invest in individual strategies.

Table 3. Moderated multiple regression on the willingness to invest in individual strategies.

	<i>Step 1</i>	<i>Step 2</i>
	<i>Standardized Beta</i>	<i>Standardized Beta</i>
Identification	-.40***	-.41***
Identity Threat	-.14*	.36
Identification * Identity Threat	-	-.53**
$\Delta R\text{-square}$	0.17	0.03
ΔF	19.22***	4.77*

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; *Adj* R-square for the full model is .20

The simple slopes analysis showed that, in support of predictions, the effect of identification on the willingness to invest in individual strategies was stronger in the high threat condition (simple slope = $-.58$, $p < .001$) than in the low threat condition (simple slope = $-.27$, $p < .001$; slope difference test: $t(187) = -2.19$, $p = .02$). That is, low identifiers showed a higher tendency to individual status improvement, particularly when a situational threat has made salient.

Mediaton Analysis

Given the primary experimental effect on ingroup identification by identity threat interaction, we tested for mediated moderation. The interaction effect on ambivalence ($\beta = -.63, p < .001$) and willingness to invest in individual strategies ($\beta = -.53, p = .03$) was significant. Moreover, ambivalence predicted the willingness to invest in individual strategies ($\beta = .23, p = .01$). When interaction and ambivalence were entered simultaneously as predictors, the effect of ambivalence remained significant ($\beta = .23, p < .01$), while the effect of the interaction was no longer reliable, ($\beta = -.13$, n.s.; Sobel test: $z = -2.08, p = .03$). We also tested the inverted model, that is whether the willingness to invest in individual strategies mediated the effect of interaction on ambivalence toward the ingroup. This inverted model was not significant.

CONCLUSION

People strive for a positive social identity, thus when they are faced with a negative group-based comparison they have to manage a negative social standing. Abandoning the group is not always a suitable and pursuable strategy, for instance when the group boundaries are perceived as impermeable. In such cases, group identification often represents the key for the choice of the strategy to pursue. Previous research showed that strongly identified members try to better the position of the ingroup as a whole, thus adopting a collective strategy. But what about low identified people? An important amount of research demonstrated that – in order to deal with the identity-threatening situation – they are likely to disengage from the devalued ingroup, at least cognitively, by means of social creativity strategies. Among the possible strategies, it has been recently advanced that expressing an ambivalent evaluation toward the ingroup may represent a form of psychological disengagement in front of an identity threat (Pagliaro et al., 2012). The present research confirms this idea, and extends previous literature in an important way by providing evidence that an ambivalent evaluation of the ingroup further underlies the willingness to behaviorally disengage from the ingroup, by trying to improve one's own personal social standing. Our findings confirmed that is the salience of an identity threat and not low identification per se that produces the psychological disengagement. That is, whereas it is expectable that low identifiers generally express more ambivalence and willingness to pursue individual strategies than high identifiers, such an individual course of action was strongly strengthened by the threat induced through a negative group-based comparison.

A number of intriguing questions arise from the present research that may be pursued in ad hoc future research. For instance, even though previous research has ascertained that behavioral intentions represent the most proximal determinants of actual behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), adopting an actual behavioral measure could further complement the present findings.

A further issue that is worth investigating is related to whether or not people strategically express ambivalence toward the ingroup to manage a negative social identity. That is, are they aware that such an evaluation represents a distancing from the ingroup? And above all, does the expression of ambivalence toward the ingroup provide positive outcomes for low-status group members, for instance in terms of well-being or a reduction in the stress associated with the threatening situation? Ad hoc research is needed to ascertain these questions. But, the present research further confirms the role that ambivalence may play in the identity management field, an until now relatively unexplored association.

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