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Abstract

Based on self-categorization theory, group status should be positively related to group prototypicality when the relevant superordinate category is positively valued. In this case, high status groups should be perceived to be more prototypical than low status groups even in the absence of concerns about maintaining a positive social identity. To test this hypothesis, a minimal group study was conducted in which participants ($N = 139$) *did not* belong to any of the groups involved. Consistent with predictions, participants perceived high status groups to be significantly more prototypical than low status groups. Consistent with self-categorization theory's cognitive analysis, these results demonstrate that the relation between group status and group prototypicality is a relatively basic and pervasive effect that does not depend on social identity motives.

Group Status is Related to Group Prototypicality in the Absence of Social Identity Concerns

Group prototypicality refers to the degree to which a social group is perceived to be representative of a superordinate category. So, for example, some people might perceive New Yorkers to be more prototypical than Hawaiians of the superordinate category of Americans.

According to self-categorization theory (SCT), "self and others [and in-groups and out-groups] are evaluated positively to the degree that they are perceived as prototypical (representative, exemplary, etc.) of the next more inclusive (positively valued) self-category (in terms of which they are being compared)" (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987, p. 57). Consistent with SCT, previous research has found that relative in-group prototypicality is positively related to in-group favouritism (for a review, see Wenzel, Mummendey, & Waldzus, 2007). This relation can be explained in terms of the motive to maintain a positive social identity: Perceiving one's in-group to be more prototypical than a relevant out-group is a form of in-group favouritism because it increases the association between the in-group and the positivity of the superordinate self-category.

However, the social identity motive may not be necessary in order for there to be a positive relation between group evaluation and group prototypicality. Extrapolating from SCT, I hypothesized that people perceive high status groups to be more prototypical of positively-valued superordinate categories independent of social identity concerns because high status groups are positively-valued and, consequently, more representative of positively-valued superordinate categories. This hypothesis represents the cognitive association between group status and group prototypicality independent of the motivational association between in-group favouritism and in-group prototypicality.

Method

Participants

Participants were 139 students at an Australian university who were enrolled in a second-year undergraduate psychology course. There were 30 men and 108 women (one unspecified) who had a mean age of 22.95 years ($SD = 6.94$).

Procedure

Participants took part in classroom sessions. A list of six group names was projected onto a screen at the front of the class during the sessions. The six groups were named after colours: Yellow, Blue, Red, White, Orange, and Green. In order to invest the groups with a degree of subjective importance and reality, participants were told that they would be allocated to one of the groups at a later point during the research. However, in order to eliminate social identity concerns from the research, participants remained unaffiliated with specific groups during the research.

To create a group status hierarchy, the groups were listed in a rank order, with the Yellow Group first, the Blue Group second, the Red Group third, the White Group fourth, the Orange Group fifth, and the Green Group sixth. Participants were told that this rank order was based on a random allocation of points to each group. They were told to think of the points as if they represented points in a game, where the more points a group gets, the better. Consequently, it was expected that participants would perceive the Yellow and Blue groups as having a relatively high status, the Red and White groups as having an average status, and the Orange and Green groups as having a relatively low status.

Participants' perceived group status was measured using three items: "the Yellow Group is the best group", "the Red Group and White Group are average groups", and "the Green Group is the worst group". Perceived group prototypicality was measured using four items. Two items referred to the two high status groups: "If I had to choose the two most

representative groups, I would choose the Blue Group and Yellow Group", and "the Blue Group and Yellow Group seem like good examples of the six groups". The other two items were similar except that they referred to the two low status groups (i.e., the Orange and Green groups). All items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Results and Discussion

The three perceived group status items combined to form a reliable index ($\alpha = .79$). The mean score on this index was 4.45 ($SD = 1.50$). A one sample t test showed that this value was significantly different from the scale's neutral midpoint of 4.00, $t(138) = 3.55$, $p < .001$. Hence, participants tended to agree that the Yellow group was the best, the Red and White groups were average, and the Green group was the worst. In other words, participants tended to accept the group status hierarchy based on the points allocations.

The perceived group prototypicality items combined to form reliable indices for both the high and low status groups ($\alpha s = .60$ & .70). I performed a paired sample t test on these indices. Consistent with predictions, people perceived the two high status groups to be significantly more prototypical ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.40$) than the two low status groups ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.03$), $t(138) = 7.20$, $p < .001$, $d = .76$.

I created an index of perceived differential group prototypicality by subtracting participants' prototypicality ratings for the low status group from their prototypicality ratings for the high status group. There was a significant positive correlation between perceived group status and perceived differential group prototypicality, $r(139) = .43$, $p < .001$. In other words, the more participants endorsed the intergroup status hierarchy, the more they perceived the high status groups to be more prototypical than the low status groups.

In summary, consistent with SCT's cognitive analysis, the present research demonstrates a positive relation between group status and group prototypicality in the absence of social identity concerns. Participants perceived high status groups to be more prototypical than low status groups even when they did not belong to any of these groups. This relation is likely to have occurred in the present research because participants placed a positive value on the superordinate category of "research study groups", making higher status groups appear more prototypical. Future research should investigate the possibility of a negative relation between group status and group prototypicality when the superordinate category is negatively-valued.

References

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