

The renegotiation of social identities in response to a threat to self-evaluation maintenance

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Abstract

Two experiments examine the strategic re-negotiation of social identities as a method of alleviating threats to self-evaluation. Participants were given a partner who shared one, and had one non-shared identity. After completing a self-relevant or non-self-relevant task, participants received either no feedback or learned that they had performed poorly compared to the partner. Participants showed identity distancing in response to being outperformed on a self-relevant task, but affiliation in response to being outperformed on a non-self-relevant task. This effect was reversed when participants were given the opportunity to self-affirm after the feedback. Overall, the results provide evidence that individuals are quite adept at altering their self-categorizations and that self-evaluation serves an important role in identity selection. Results are discussed in relation to the substitutability of self-esteem maintenance mechanisms and self-definition.

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Introduction

Contemporary social psychological theory recognizes the importance of viewing the self in terms of multiple selves rather than the self as a single construct. Because of these multiple selves, one can identify with any number of social groups or categories depending on either the needs of the individual or the structure of the environment. Understanding the motivations underlying social identification and change (either temporary or more permanent) in self-categorization is crucial to understanding perceptions of the self in relation to others. The current research postulates that the selection of an identity can be driven by self-evaluation maintenance (Tesser, 1988) concerns. Specifically, when threatened by the comparatively better performance of an in-group member, individuals will strategically alter their self-categorization to alleviate the threat from

that identity by increasing the dissimilarity between the self and that identity.

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explicitly incorporates the relation of the personal identity to the inclusion of the self within a larger, meaningful social context with the underlying belief that category membership carries with it either a positive or a negative connotation and that, more importantly, individuals are motivated to obtain a positive self-concept. Thus, social identity theory might predict the opposite pattern of results. That is, if an in-group member performs exceptionally well on some task, the evaluative connotation of the group as a whole is made more positive, thus making identification as a member of that group more likely. However, this may not be the case as threats to personal self-evaluation may override self-esteem benefits that identification may bring. Consequently, when the self-categorization as a member of a specific group threatens positive self-evaluation, individuals will re-negotiate their identities in an attempt to distance themselves from that threatening social identity.

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Self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) distinguishes itself from social identity theory by focusing less on the motivation to enhance positive social identity and more on the cognitive antecedents and consequences of how self-categorization occurs. Self-categorization theory suggests that individuals first categorize themselves as members of social categories, and then use this categorization to define (i.e., self-stereotype), describe, and evaluate themselves. One of the essential points of the self-categorization approach is that the appropriate level of categorization depends on the context. It is this context-dependent evaluation of the self in terms of the category that drives the current theorizing. It is proposed that strategic self-categorizations (selectively focusing on one or another potential social category) can result from threats to self-evaluation. Specifically, it is proposed that the processes laid out by Tesser's (1988) self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) model provide an additional variable that affects the likelihood of choosing to self-categorize by a given social identity option.

Much like social identity theory, Tesser's (1988) self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) model assumes that individuals behave in a manner to either maintain or, if possible, increase positive self-evaluation. Most importantly, SEM holds that one's relationships with others have a marked impact on this self-evaluation. Tesser (1988) proposed two processes by which positive self-evaluation can be maintained: *reflection* and *comparison*, as well as two relationship variables: the closeness of the other and the personal relevance of the dimension of comparison. To the extent that a close other performs very well on an activity that is not self-defining, it is possible to focus on the close relationship with the other, thus increasing self-evaluation (i.e., reflection). In contrast, being outperformed by a close other on a personally important task is likely to evoke the comparison process, resulting in a threat to self-evaluation. This threat may be ameliorated, and homeostasis reinstated, by distancing the self from the other (Pleban & Tesser, 1981), downplaying the relevance of the task, or the adequacy of measurement (Tesser & Campbell, 1980, 1982; Tesser & Paulhus, 1983), or by undermining the performance of the other (Tesser & Smith, 1980).

The SEM Model has more recently been revised and extended to incorporate long-term romantic relationships (Beach et al., 1996, 1998; O'Mahen, Beach, & Tesser, 2000), but the extension to group membership is novel. The basic premise is that being outperformed by an in-group member should make self-evaluation maintenance needs salient. That is, a high-performing in-group member, although reflecting positively on the group as a whole, may provide a greater individual self-evaluative threat (i.e., ego threat). Work by Gaertner, Sedikides, and colleagues (Gaertner, Sedikides, & Graetz, 1999; Gaertner, Sedikides, Vevea, & Iuzzini, 2002) has shown that threats to the individual self are seen as much more threatening than are threats to the collective self. However, the multifaceted nature of social identity provides several ways in which an individual may

deal with this potentially ego-threatening situation. The fact that individuals belong to a vast number of different groups provides an effective strategy for viewing comparison others as less similar to the self by focusing on non-shared identities. For example, focusing on the fact that an attractive model is a model (i.e., a non-shared identity) rather than on the fact that the model is of the same gender or age as the individual decreases the relevance of the model for comparison purposes (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992).

Mussweiler, Gabriel, and Bodenhausen (2000) examined the tendency to focus on non-shared social categories as a reaction to a threatened identity as a self-protective strategy. These authors 'accidentally' presented White females with information regarding the performance of another student, an Asian female, on a 'person perception' task that was described as an important social skill, before receiving their own scores on the task. Half the participants received scores that were comparatively lower and half received scores comparatively higher than the score received by the Asian female. Thus, the Asian female comparison other shared one identity (i.e., gender) and contained one non-shared identity (i.e., ethnicity). The findings indicated that, when outperformed by the comparison other, high self-esteem participants were more likely to focus on the non-shared identity than a relevant baseline condition.

However, depending on the importance of the task to the individual, one will attempt to either associate with or distance themselves from the shared social identity in question. If the ability is considered self-relevant, the comparison process will result in lowered self-evaluation and an attempt to distance oneself from the threatening identity. This pattern of results is similar to that shown by Mussweiler et al. (2000). In that work, the authors stressed the importance of the impression formation task, thus likely making it more personally relevant for the participants. On the other hand, if the ability is not important to the individual, the reflection process should be engaged, thus maintaining or increasing self-evaluation (by association) and cause accessibility or closeness of this aspect of identity. This is one aspect that the current research attempts to address: the idea that the relevance of the task to the individual greatly affects the re-negotiation of identities. When self-relevant, it is expected that participants will attempt to distance from that threatened identity. However, when not self-relevant, participants are expected to affiliate with the shared identity. That is, both reflection and comparison processes as proposed by Tesser (1988) affect the strategic re-negotiation of selected identities.

Predictions

Self-relevant task

When outperformed by the comparison other on a self-relevant task, participants will attempt to alleviate the potentially negative self-evaluation implications of that upward comparison by distancing the self from the

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