

THREATS TO IDENTITY, SELF-ESTEEM AND INTERGROUP DISCRIMINATION

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The present study sought to test two hypotheses. The first was that intergroup discrimination leads to increased self-esteem. The second was that threatened self-esteem (i.e., operationalized here as the extent to which people believe that the ingroup is negatively evaluated by an outgroup) would lead to increased intergroup discrimination. Support was found for both hypotheses.

Keywords: intergroup, discrimination, self-esteem, identity, New Zealand.

In an attempt to explicate the role of self-esteem in intergroup discrimination Abrams and Hogg (1988) formulated the self-esteem hypothesis (SEH). The SEH is comprised of two corollaries (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). The first states that intergroup discrimination leads to increased self-esteem. The second states that low or threatened self-esteem leads to increased intergroup discrimination. Several dozen studies have assessed one or other corollaries of the hypothesis. Reviews reveal that much of the empirical evidence is inconsistent and contradictory (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). There are however, a few isolated studies that have found support for both corollaries (e.g., Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Hunter et

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al., 2005). Methodologically such studies tend to share two common features. The first relates to the use of scales designed to assess transitory changes in group-derived esteem. The second relates to the use of particular kinds of threats whereupon outgroup members are perceived to undermine the value of ingroup members. Based on this evidence, we argue that the inclusion of these two features enhances the likelihood of finding support for both corollaries of the SEH. The present study sought to investigate this notion among a sample of New Zealand university students. Two hypotheses were subsequently tested. The first stated that intergroup discrimination leads to increased self-esteem. The second stated that threatened self-esteem (i.e., operationalized here as the extent to which New Zealanders believe that the ingroup is negatively evaluated by Australians) would lead to increased intergroup discrimination.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

One hundred and twenty people took part in this study. All were students attending the University of Otago. Seventy-nine were assigned to 1 of 2 experimental conditions. Forty-one were assigned to a control condition.

DESIGN

Participants in the experimental condition were separated into high and low threat conditions on the basis of a median split. This was carried out on a measure assessing the extent to which the Australian outgroup valued the New Zealand ingroup. All were then given the opportunity to allocate points to anonymous ingroup (i.e., New Zealanders) and outgroup (i.e., Australians) members. This formed a 2 (threat level: high/low) x 2 (group membership: ingroup vs. outgroup) mixed model factorial. Control group participants were forced to allocate equal numbers of points to ingroup and outgroup targets. Prior to and following the administration of the allocation tasks all participants completed a measure of self-esteem.

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

The study was introduced as being concerned with social decisions, behavior and perception. Participants were told that during the course of the study they would complete three response booklets and then engage in a short exercise comprising New Zealanders and Australians. Australians were said to be involved in an identical experiment being carried out simultaneously in an adjacent laboratory.

Booklet one The first response booklet presented to participants contained the measure of threat and self-esteem. The threat measure was adapted from

Luhtanen and Crocker's (1992) public collective self-esteem sub-scale and assessed the extent to which ingroup members believed that they were negatively evaluated by outgroup members (e.g., 'Australians think that New Zealanders are unworthy'). Answers were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Agree Strongly*, 7 = *Disagree Strongly*). Low scores indicated high levels of threat. Heatherton and Polivy's (1991) 20-item state self-esteem scale (SSES) was also included in this response booklet. This valid and reliable scale (see Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) has been used in a number of recent studies concerned with intergroup behavior and self-esteem (e.g., Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). Following Bergami and Bagozzi, participants were directed to respond to all items (e.g., 'I feel confident about my abilities') on the basis of being New Zealanders and how they felt "right at this moment" (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*).

Booklet two The second booklet contained twelve, 13-choice, distribution matrices adapted from Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, and Flament (1971). Participants were asked to imagine that the points depicted in these matrices represented some positive resource (i.e., like money or extra exam marks). Those in the experimental condition were given the opportunity to allocate different amounts of points to ingroup (i.e., New Zealanders) and outgroup members (i.e., Australians). Those in the control condition were required to allocate equal numbers of points to ingroup and outgroup members.

Booklet three The third booklet contained the same SSES as presented in booklet 1.

RESULTS

INTERGROUP DISCRIMINATION

Participants in the experimental condition were assigned to high and low threat conditions on the basis of a median split conducted on responses to the threat measure (e.g., 'Australians think that New Zealanders are unworthy'). The median was 5. People with scores of 5 or below were assigned to the high threat group ($n = 37$). People with scores of 6 or more were assigned to the low threat group ($n = 42$). A 2 (threat level: low/high) \times 2 (group membership of target: ingroup v outgroup) mixed model ANOVA was then conducted. The second factor was within subjects. A significant main effect was found for group membership of target ($F(1, 76) = 18.89, p < .001$). More points were given to members of the ingroup than members of the outgroup ($M = 194.38, SD = 24.49$ vs. $176.79, SD = 17.04$). An interaction effect approaching conventional levels of significance was found between threat level and group membership of target ($F(1, 76) = 3.45, p < .07$). Planned comparisons revealed that participants in the low threat group showed a nonsignificant trend towards intergroup discrimination ($M = 189.65$,

$SD = 23.57$ vs. $M = 179.58$, $SD = 17.56$, $t(41) = 1.86 < .07$). Participants in the high threat group showed more pronounced levels of intergroup discrimination ($M = 199.11$ $SD = 25.33$ vs. 174.00 , $SD = 16.52$, $t(36) = 4.16$, $p < .0005$).

SELF-ESTEEM

In order to assess differences in the pre- and postdiscrimination self-esteem of those assigned to experimental and control conditions a 2 (condition: experimental vs. control) x 2 (time of esteem measurement: prediscrimination to postdiscrimination) mixed model analysis of variance was conducted. The second factor was within subjects. A main effect was found for time of CSE measurement ($F(1, 118) = 5.83$, $p < .02$). This effect was qualified by the interaction found between condition and time of CSE measurement ($F(1, 78) = 6.76$, $p < .02$). Planned comparisons conducted to assess this effect revealed that participants in the experimental condition (i.e., those who were given and took the opportunity to engage in intergroup discrimination) experienced an increase in self-esteem ($M = 74.71$, $SD = 1.67$ to $M = 76.68$, $SD = 11.68$, $t(78) = 3.91$, $p < .0005$). No effects were found for those in the control condition ($M = 75.06$, $SD = 11.43$ to 74.93 , $SD = 11.22$, $t(42) = .15$, *ns*).

This present study sought to test both corollaries of Abrams and Hogg's (1998) SEH. Two hypotheses were tested. The first stated that intergroup discrimination would lead to an increase in self-esteem. The second stated that threatened self-esteem (i.e., operationalized as the extent to which people believed that the ingroup was negatively evaluated by the outgroup) would lead to increased intergroup discrimination. Support was found for both hypotheses. Participants (i.e., New Zealanders) who showed intergroup discrimination against Australians (i.e., by allocating more rewards to anonymous ingroup members than anonymous outgroup members) experienced a sharp increase in self-esteem. Participants in the high threat group (and who thus believed that New Zealanders were negatively evaluated by Australians) showed two and a half times more differentiation than those in the low threat group. These findings are consistent with those reported by Branscombe and Wann (1994) and Hunter et al. (2005). They also highlight the utility of incorporating particular methods of threat and self-esteem when assessing the SEH.

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