

## When “different” means “worse”: In-group prototypicality in changing intergroup contexts<sup>☆</sup>

Sven Waldzus,<sup>a,\*</sup> Amélie Mummendey,<sup>b</sup> and Michael Wenzel<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Departamento de Psicologia Social e das Organizações, ISCTE, Av. Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal*

<sup>b</sup> *Friedrich-Schiller-University, Jena, Germany*

<sup>c</sup> *Australian National University, Canberra, Australia*

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### Abstract

An experiment with 213 participants provided evidence for in-group projection—the generalization of distinctive in-group attributes to a superordinate category. The frame of reference for in-group (German) judgments was manipulated by presenting either Italians or the British as an out-group. Results showed that attributes on which Germans differed from each out-group were accentuated not only in in-group judgments but also when judging Europeans. By adapting features of the superordinate category to those of the in-group, the in-group's similarity to, and the out-group's deviation from, the prototype of the superordinate category were maintained, if not emphasized. Further, higher in-group prototypicality—compared to out-group prototypicality—for the superordinate category was related to negative out-group attitudes. In-group projection was reduced when a complex representation of the superordinate category was primed.

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Real-life examples and empirical findings show that group members often devalue and disadvantage other groups that seem different from their own. However, such social discrimination does not always occur. Our research aims to specify the conditions that produce negative attitudes and hostility towards out-groups, as well as the conditions that allow for intergroup tolerance (for a review, see Brewer & Brown, 1998).

Recently, Mummendey and Wenzel (1999) suggested an in-group projection model that attempts to explain variations in how out-groups are evaluated. Based on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Suls & Miller, 1977; Suls & Wheeler, 2000) and theories of intergroup relations (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), Mummendey and Wenzel assumed that groups are compared with

reference to dimensions provided by superordinate categories. This makes intergroup comparisons possible. For instance, Catholics and Protestants are comparable because both groups can be regarded as examples of the superordinate category of Christians. In-group projection, according to Mummendey and Wenzel, is the tendency for group members to generalize distinctive attributes of their in-group to the superordinate category. The concept of in-group projection is distinct from the more general concept of social projection (see Allport, 1924; Campbell, Miller, Lubetsky, & O'Connell, 1964; Krueger, 1998; Mullen, Dovidio, Johnson, & Copper, 1992). Social projection operates at the interpersonal level and involves generalizing personal qualities to other individuals, often in-group members. In contrast, in-group projection operates at the intergroup level and involves the relationship between self-categories at different levels of inclusiveness. In-group projection is like social projection, however, in that it involves several motivational and cognitive processes (Krueger, 2000; Marks & Miller, 1987).

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [sven.waldzus@iscte.pt](mailto:sven.waldzus@iscte.pt) (S. Waldzus).

Mummendey and Wenzel's (1999) model specifies the consequences of in-group projection for the evaluation of out-groups. In-group projection increases the perception of the prototypicality of the in-group for the superordinate category, compared to the prototypicality of the out-group. This relative prototypicality of the in-group is the basis for ethnocentrism. If the in-group is more prototypical than the out-group, then the out-group deviates from the prototype of the superordinate category. This deviation justifies negative attitudes towards the out-group. Waldzus, Mummendey, Wenzel, and Weber (2003) found, for example, that attitudes of Germans towards Poles were negatively related to the relative prototypicality for Europeans of Germans compared to Poles.

Recent research has revealed evidence of in-group projection in several intergroup contexts (Wenzel, Mummendey, Weber, & Waldzus, 2003). In these studies, researchers compared the perspectives of two groups in an intergroup context and found that members of both groups disagreed about the relative prototypicality of their groups. The members of each group perceived their group as more prototypical of the superordinate category—compared to the out-group—than their group was perceived by members of the out-group. This divergence in perspectives is consistent with the in-group projection model. However, it is confounded with group membership, and thus does not provide unequivocal evidence for the model. Differences between natural groups in ratings on the same scale can be the outcome of other variables than those mentioned in the model, such as a different understanding of the items.

Our experiment aims to show more directly that group members generalize in-group attributes onto the superordinate category (in-group projection). This will be done by demonstrating that perceptions of the superordinate category depend on (varying) representations of the in-group, thus establishing and maintaining relative in-group prototypicality. Specifically, we will show that in-group members adapt their perceptions of the superordinate category to context-specific in-group stereotypes. Our experiment goes beyond earlier research on in-group projection, which compared the perspectives of different groups, because it focuses on the perspective of just one group. Thus, our results will not be attributable to membership in different in-groups. While keeping the in-group constant, we will manipulate instead the perceived in-group stereotype. If variations in that stereotype are mirrored by variations in the attributes ascribed to the superordinate category, then generalization of in-group attributes to the superordinate category (in-group projection) will be apparent.

To manipulate in-group stereotypes while holding the in-group constant, we varied the frame of reference for intergroup comparisons (see also Diab, 1963; Haslam & Turner, 1992; Wilder & Shapiro, 1984). Comparisons

with different out-groups should make different in-group attributes seem distinctive. Specifically, we asked German participants to judge their in-group and varied their frame of reference by presenting two different out-groups, Italians and the British. All participants had to rate Germans and one of these out-groups on a list of attributes that included (a) stereotypical attributes that usually distinguish Germans from Italians rather than the British (counter-Italian attributes: correct, orderly, punctual, quiet, disciplined, and stiff) and (b) stereotypical attributes that usually distinguish Germans from the British rather than Italians (counter-British attributes: easygoing, frank, companionable, in love with life, sociable, and having tasty meals). These 12 attributes were selected based on a pilot study with 54 German psychology students who rated Germans on a list of 20 attributes in comparison with Italians ( $n = 28$ ) or the British ( $n = 26$ ). In this study, Germans were rated higher on all six counter-Italian attributes ( $ts > 3.1$  with  $df = 52$ ,  $ps < .003$ ), and lower on all six counter-British attributes ( $ts < -2.5$ ,  $df = 52$ ,  $ps < .014$ ), when they were compared with Italians than when they were compared with the British.

The same accentuation of attributes was expected to emerge in ratings of Europeans, the superordinate category, because of the generalization of in-group attributes to that category (in-group projection). Counter-Italian attributes were expected to be accentuated more strongly in judgments about Europeans when Germans compared their in-group with Italians rather than with the British. Counter-British attributes were expected to be accentuated more strongly in judgments about Europeans when Germans compared their in-group with the British rather than with Italians. Combining these opposing tendencies into one comparative hypothesis, we predicted that the accentuation of counter-British relative to counter-Italian attributes in judgments about Europeans would be stronger when Germans were compared with the British rather than with Italians (Hypothesis 1).

Wal兹us et al. (2003) found that a complex representation of the superordinate category can prevent in-group projection. In their research, Germans primed with a complex representation of Europeans perceived less relative in-group prototypicality (compared with a Polish out-group) than did Germans primed with a simple representation of Europeans. In our experiment, complexity was manipulated using the same priming procedure, so we expected that the complexity of the superordinate category would again moderate the generalization of in-group attributes to that category (Hypothesis 2). Specifically, different out-groups should affect the accentuation of specific attributes in ratings of Europeans when there is a simple representation of Europe, but not when that representation is complex (Hypothesis 2a). We also measured the relative proto-

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