



Intergroup dissimilarity predicts physiological synchrony and affiliation in intergroup interaction[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal similarity attracts. In intergroup contexts, however, similarity between groups potentiates bias. The current study examined whether intergroup similarity versus dissimilarity engenders cross-group friendship formation. We used an essay-writing paradigm to manipulate perceived intergroup similarity or dissimilarity between the ethnic groups of participants prior to a dyadic interaction that involved a competitive party game. During the interaction, we continuously recorded physiological and behavioral responses from both participants. We used the physiological responses to derive a measure of physiological synchrony: the mutual activation of partners' sympathetic nervous systems. People primed with dissimilarity, not similarity, experienced physiological synchrony with their partner. Moreover, the partners of people primed with dissimilarity acted more affiliative than the partners of people primed with similarity, which in turn predicted friendship initiation by participants. We discuss the seemingly counter-intuitive value of emphasizing differences between groups to foster positive intergroup relations.

1. Introduction

Social identity theory posits that similarity between social groups can trigger animosity and intergroup conflict (Brewer, 1991; Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010; Tajfel, 1978). The basis of such animosity is a motivation to restore or amplify the distinctiveness of the social groups to which a person belongs (“ingroups”) relative to the social groups to which a person does not belong (“outgroups”). Having a sense of positive distinctiveness relative to a comparison outgroup enables people to gain positive self-esteem from their social identities. Hence, when similarity between groups undermines distinctiveness, the drive to feel good about oneself can give rise to behaviors and judgements that create social distance between groups and may sour intergroup relationships.

Despite decades of research examining how intergroup similarity elicits these differentiating behaviors and judgements, the ramifications of perceived intergroup similarity for social interactions are relatively under-studied. Using a dyadic, multi-method approach, the current study examines the impact of intergroup similarity versus dissimilarity

on physiology and behavior during interethnic interactions. Of key interest was a measure of *physiological synchrony* between partners, specifically covariation of the activity of their sympathetic nervous systems during the interaction. We also measured the impact of intergroup similarity on participant and partner affiliative behaviors during the interaction as well as participant and partner friendship initiation.

2. Similarity in social versus personal identities

Social identity is the part of a person's self-concept derived from group membership, together with the value and emotional significance attached to the group (Tajfel, 1978). People are motivated to achieve positive, meaningful social identities and people do so by emphasizing how their social groups differ from outgroups in positive ways. Belonging to groups that are distinct from other groups in positive ways can boost a person's self-esteem and solidify group bonds.

Social identity differs from personal identity, which is determined by the characteristics and drives of the individual person (Haslam, 2004; Tajfel, 1978). When individuals define themselves in terms of

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their personal identities, perceived similarity can draw individuals together (Berscheid, 1985; Festinger, 1954; Selfhout, Denissen, Branje, & Meeus, 2009), even in intergroup contexts (Diehl, 1988, Study 1; Mallett, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008; Pintel & Long, 2012; West, Magee, Gordon, & Gullett, 2014). When social identity is salient, however, and relevant outgroups are too similar to the ingroup, then intergroup distinctiveness is undermined. In such situations, intergroup similarity makes it difficult to draw comparisons that favor the ingroup. Thus, social identity is threatened, and the need to differentiate intensifies (Brown, 1984; Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004; Tajfel, 1978) encouraging ingroup favoritism (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1996, Study 2; Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1997, Study 2; Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 2001; Mummendey & Schrieber, 1984; Roccas & Schwartz, 1993), outgroup discrimination (Diehl, 1988, Study 2; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000), and violence against the outgroup (Genthner, Shuntick, & Bunting, 1975; Struch & Schwartz, 1989).

Often, the most functional social identity is one in which people identify with both a subgroup, such as ethnicity, and a superordinate identity, such as nationality. Holding to dual identities preserves a sense of distinctiveness for members of all groups within the superordinate group while encouraging affiliation with outgroup members who ascribe to that broader social identity (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009). Even majority group members, who have the most to gain in maintaining a single national identity, benefit from ascribing to a dual identity during interactions with minority group members (Scheepers, Saguy, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2014). Although the current work does not attempt to manipulate a dual identity, it is presumed that by encouraging a sense of intergroup distinctiveness, a respect for mutual differences will pave the path toward interpersonal cohesion.

On the flip side, perceptions of intergroup dissimilarity can make people have anxiety about intergroup interactions and avoid them (Mallett et al., 2008). Intergroup differences fuel fears of rejection and embarrassment related to social and cultural misunderstandings (Stephan & Stephan, 1985), and also encourage symbolic threat, the tendency to view an outgroup's cultural differences as threatening to the worldview of the ingroup (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Even holding to a dual identity can be disadvantageous for intergroup interactions, if subgroups within the superordinate group perceive themselves as more prototypical than other subgroups (Dovidio et al., 2009). Such perceptions encourage demonization of the other subgroups as inferior and deviant and promote bias and hostility against the outgroup.

So, it seems that both similarity or dissimilarity have the potential to negatively impact the quality of intergroup interactions. This past research might lead to the conclusion that social identities should be downplayed during intergroup interactions and personal identities should be emphasized. However, a large body of research shows that social identities must be salient during intergroup interactions in order for positive intergroup interactions to have an impact on intergroup attitudes (see Brown & Hewstone, 2005, for a review). So, how do we best amplify the salience of social identities during intergroup interactions, by emphasizing similarity or dissimilarity between the social groups of interaction partners?

Based on the evidence reviewed, we anticipate that emphasizing social group distinctiveness, not similarity, during benign intergroup interactions would encourage a more positive interpersonal experience. While dissimilarity can give rise to anxiety during intergroup interactions, the anxiety-producing aspects of dissimilarity are less relevant in diverse contexts where intergroup contact is both frequent and benign. Indeed, after people experience a certain number of benign intergroup interactions they may cross a “contact threshold” wherein subsequent intergroup interactions reduce prejudice rather than increase anxiety (MacInnis & Page-Gould, 2015). Thus, in keeping with the predictions of social identity theory, we anticipate that emphasizing intergroup dissimilarity will enhance intergroup interactions and we test this assumption in the context of an ethnically diverse university campus: The University of Toronto, Scarborough.

3. Physiological synchrony

The current research tests how distinctiveness, or lack thereof, influences the interpersonal tenor of interethnic interactions at the physiological, behavioral, and subjective levels. In social interactions, the physiological activity of interaction partners can synchronize (e.g., Kaplan & Bloom, 1960; Kraus & Mendes, 2014; Levenson & Gottman, 1983), a phenomenon called physiological synchrony. Physiological synchrony is striking because physiological states are relatively uncontrollable and are difficult for an interaction partner to perceive. Nonetheless, physiological synchrony has been observed within a variety of social relationships, including between strangers (Henning, Boucsein, & Gil, 2001; Henning & Korbela, 2005; Kaplan, Burch, Bloom, & Edelberg, 1963), mothers and infants (Feldman, Magori-Cohen, Galili, Singer, & Louzoun, 2011; Ham & Tronick, 2009), romantic partners (Levenson & Gottman, 1983; Reed, Randall, Post, & Butler, 2013), and friends (Chanel, Kivikangas, & Ravaja, 2012). Physiological synchrony also occurs during different forms of social contact, including cooperation (Strang, Funke, Russell, Dukes, & Middendorf, 2014) and conflict (Levenson & Gottman, 1983).

A naïve assumption to make about physiological synchrony is that it reflects a positive social experience. This assumption appears to only sometimes be true. Physiological synchrony is associated with both beneficial relational outcomes such as empathy (Marci & Orr, 2006), enhanced group performance (Elkins et al., 2009), and increased social presence (Chanel et al., 2012), but also detrimental relational outcomes such as marital dissatisfaction (Levenson & Gottman, 1983) and mutual dislike (Kaplan, Burch, & Bloom, 1964). In order to disentangle the meaning of physiological synchrony, self-report and behavioral measures are critical to triangulating the interpersonal meaning of this internally shared state (Palumbo et al., 2016). In the current study, we used behavioral and self-report measures of participant and partner affiliation and friendship initiation to complement our measure of physiological synchrony.

3.1. Physiological synchrony in the sympathetic nervous system

The sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system (SNS) enables a range of physiological responses for coping with environmental demands. When the SNS is activated, the heart contracts with greater speed, facilitating a greater exchange of oxygen and nutrients throughout the body (Berntson, Quigley, & Lozano, 2007). The SNS is one of the two major stress axes in the body (the second being the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis; Blascovich & Mendes, 2010). The SNS is typically associated with engagement in a task or situation (Blascovich, Mendes, Tomaka, Salomon, & Seery, 2003; Seery, 2011). Covariation of the sympathetic nervous system was one of the first forms of physiological synchrony observed in the lab (Kaplan & Bloom, 1960), and it has been widely studied in the physiological synchrony literature (Levenson & Gottman, 1983; Marci & Orr, 2006). Especially because SNS activation reflects engagement in a situation, sympathetic covariation during social interactions is thought to reflect a shared internal state (Levenson & Gottman, 1983).

4. Study overview

The main goal of this research was to examine how intergroup similarity influences interethnic interactions. Despite ample research showing the impact of intergroup distinctiveness on intergroup behavior and judgements (Jetten et al., 2004), this study is the first to examine the impact of intergroup distinctiveness on social interactions. We used an essay writing paradigm to manipulate perceived intergroup similarity and dissimilarity between East and South Asians before a social interaction that occurred in our laboratory at the University of Toronto, Scarborough. Thus, the social groups were salient in all interactions, but either the perceived similarities or dissimilarities

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