



The impact of ingroup favoritism on self-esteem: A normative perspective☆



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ABSTRACT

The present research examines the impact of ingroup favoritism on self-esteem. According to the self-esteem hypothesis (Abrams & Hogg, 1988), favoring the ingroup over an outgroup should lead to higher self-esteem. However, empirical tests of this hypothesis have revealed mixed results. In light of the heterogeneity of these findings, we investigate the moderating role of ingroup norms regarding intergroup discrimination. According to this normative perspective, we hypothesize that believing one has favored the ingroup increases personal self-esteem to the extent that such behavior is congruent with the ingroup norm. Three studies showed a positive impact of perceived ingroup favoritism (vs. intergroup fairness) on personal self-esteem when the ingroup norm was pro-discriminatory (Studies 1–3). However, this effect disappeared when the pro-discriminatory ingroup norm was attenuated (Study 1), and was even reversed when the ingroup norm was clearly anti-discriminatory (Studies 2–3). Further, this moderation was primarily observed when the ingroup norms were injunctive (rather than descriptive; Study 2), and among participants who highly value conformity (Study 3). These findings are discussed with regard to the classical understanding of the self-esteem hypothesis.

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The history of humanity abounds with situations in which people's interactions have been determined by the social category they belong to. Wars, holocausts, and everyday discrimination are examples depicting differential (and hostile) treatment that people inflict upon others who do not belong to the same social group. The dynamics regulating these intergroup relations are at the heart of social identity theory (SIT; *Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986*), which remains to this day a dominant approach in social psychology to explain such derogatory tendencies. According to SIT, people have a fundamental need for a positive self-esteem, which can be fulfilled through ingroup favoritism. However, mixed findings in the literature suggest that this link is not as straightforward as expected, and that further research is needed in order to fully understand the processes underlying this effect (if any). The present research investigates the moderating role of ingroup norms regarding intergroup behavior, arguing that ingroup favoritism

increases self-esteem to the extent that such behavior is congruent with one's ingroup norms.

1. Social identity theory and the self-esteem hypothesis

SIT was developed about four decades ago and continues to be one of the most influential theories in social psychology. Indeed, SIT is considered by many as the model that best predicts intergroup behaviors (e.g., *Huddy, 2004; Reicher, 2004; Rubin & Hewstone, 2004*). One of the main elements SIT focuses on is the motivational antecedents of intergroup behavior. In particular, SIT hypothesizes that ingroup favoritism is rooted in a fundamental need for a positive self-esteem; it is assumed that people have a basic motivation to enhance or maintain self-esteem, which can be satisfied by achieving or maintaining a positive social identity. Theoretically speaking, this could be obtained by creating or sustaining a favorable comparison between the ingroup and a relevant outgroup, and this would be one of the functions of ingroup favoritism. Put in other terms, ingroup favoritism would enhance people's self-esteem for they would therefore be members of a good (i.e., advantaged) group.

From this basic assumption, known as the self-esteem hypothesis (SEH), two corollaries can be derived (*Abrams & Hogg, 1988*). One corollary is that people striving for a more positive view of themselves (i.e.,

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those with low self-esteem) should display higher levels of ingroup favoritism than people with a satisfying level of self-esteem. The other corollary, which is the focus of this paper, is that when people engage in a behavior favoring the ingroup, their self-esteem should be heightened (as compared to people who do not engage in ingroup favoritism).

Since the emergence of SIT and the self-esteem hypothesis, many scholars have tried to empirically validate these two corollaries. However, as reasonable as these propositions appear, there have been contradictory findings in the literature, suggesting that the link between self-esteem and ingroup favoritism is not so clear (for a review, see Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). Indeed, some studies show that ingroup favoritism increases self-esteem (e.g., Lemyre & Smith, 1985; see also Fein & Spencer, 1997), while others show a null effect (e.g., Hunter, Stringer, & Coleman, 1993) or even that ingroup favoritism decreases self-esteem (e.g., Vickers, Abrams & Hogg, 1988, as cited in Abrams & Hogg, 1988). These inconsistent findings have contributed to the recent formulation of a complementary perspective which considers the impact of ingroup favoritism on self-esteem through a normative lens (see Martiny & Rubin, 2016).

2. Ingroup norms and ingroup favoritism

Social norms refer to a set of rules and standards indicating what type of behaviors are socially tolerable and appropriate. These norms are shared within social groups (Sherif, 1936), and based on what people actually do (descriptive norms) as well as on what is socially approved or disapproved (injunctive norms; Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). Given that people are motivated to conform to ingroup norms and to be accepted by the other members of the group (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Turner, 1991), these norms have proven to be potent determinants of attitudes and behaviors (Asch, 1956; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Hornsey, Jetten, McAuliffe, & Hogg, 2006). Accordingly, research has shown that people take ingroup norms into account when expressing discriminatory tendencies. For instance, people are more likely to show ingroup favoritism when the ingroup norm is pro-discriminatory than when the ingroup norm is anti-discriminatory (Crandall, Eshleman, O'Brien, 2002; Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1996; Nesdale, Maass, Durkin, & Griffiths, 2005). Thus, it appears that ingroup norms are strong determinants of people's intergroup attitudes and behaviors, and that people often conform to pro- or anti-discriminatory norms when expressing ingroup favoritism.

Nevertheless, the impact of norms on intergroup outcomes depends on a number of contextual and individual parameters. First, social norms seem particularly potent when they are injunctive in nature (e.g., Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Reno, Cialdini, & Kallgren, 1993; but see Manning, 2009). Indeed, research demonstrates that injunctive norms exert a unique influence on attitude and behavior, while this is not the case for descriptive norms (which work better in conjunction with injunctive norms; Smith & Louis, 2008). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that, under certain conditions, injunctive norms even override contradictory descriptive norms (Crane & Platow, 2010). Second, research has also shown that interpersonal differences exist in the extent to which conformity to social norms is likely to occur. Indeed, people who value social conformity (e.g., people with high levels of Right Wing Authoritarianism) have a greater tendency to comply with social norms prescribing intergroup attitudes (Oyamoto, Fisher, Deason, & Borgida, 2012).

3. The self-esteem hypothesis: a normative perspective

Interestingly, conformity to ingroup norms does not only have implications for intergroup behaviors. It also impacts the way people consider and feel about themselves. Indeed, conformity to ingroup norms and values increases people's sense of belongingness and commitment to the group, thereby satisfying one of their most important needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2002). According

to sociometer theory (Leary, 2005), maintaining satisfying levels of self-esteem per se is not a motivation, it is rather a marker of people's relational value and social acceptance. As a result, conformity to ingroup norms leads to higher levels of well-being (Sassenberg, Matschke, & Scholl, 2011), to more positive affect (Christensen, Rothgerber, Wood, & Matz, 2004), and to higher levels of self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

Drawing on these elements, the normative perspective postulates that the link between perceived ingroup favoritism and self-esteem might also rely on normative processes. Indeed, given that one's expression of ingroup favoritism depends on ingroup norms (e.g., Jetten et al., 1996), and that positive self-esteem is derived from the extent to which one complies with ingroup norms and other group members' expectations (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), the link between perceived ingroup favoritism and self-esteem should vary as a function of the ingroup norms dictating intergroup behavior.

This normative perspective is complementary to the rationale underlying the self-esteem hypothesis in the sense that positive self-esteem is not only considered as the by-product of the positive gap between the ingroup and a relevant outgroup (such as created by the discriminatory behavior). Positive self-esteem might additionally derive from the compliance with ingroup norms regarding intergroup discrimination. Put in other terms, while the "classic" perspective considers positive self-esteem to be the result of being a member of a good group, the normative perspective suggests that being a good group member (via behaving in favor of the ingroup) also fosters positive self-esteem.

In itself, this could help explain the inconsistent findings in the literature on the self-esteem hypothesis. Indeed, in line with the normative perspective, the positive impact of ingroup favoritism on self-esteem should be limited to contexts in which the ingroup norm is perceived as prescribing ingroup favoritism. It is therefore possible that the normative context in which past studies were conducted varied from time to time and led to null or even contradictory findings. That said, we should however point that the majority of studies on the self-esteem hypothesis have found a positive relationship between ingroup favoritism and self-esteem (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). Looking at these findings through a normative lens could suggest that some sort of "default" ingroup norm prescribing ingroup favoritism probably prevails in most intergroup contexts (see Assilaméhou & Testé, 2013; Castelli, Tomerelli, & Zogmaister, 2008; Rutland, Hitti, Mulvey, Abrams, & Killen, 2015).

4. Current state of research on the normative perspective

Despite the potentially crucial role of ingroup norms in the link between ingroup favoritism and self-esteem, very little research has directly tested the validity of this normative perspective. Partial evidence in favor of this perspective first comes from Vickers et al. (1988; as cited in Abrams & Hogg, 1988), whose research showed that people who expressed intergroup discrimination despite the local "co-operative" norm experienced lower self-esteem. Second, Hertel and Kerr (2001) showed that the relationship between ingroup favoritism and self-esteem was found after priming participants with loyalty, whereas a negative relationship was found when priming them with fairness. Finally, Scheepers, Spears, Manstead, and Doosje (2009) showed that increasing intergroup equity tendencies led to a decrease in collective self-esteem following ingroup favoritism.

Although enlightening, these findings only offer a limited account in favor of the normative perspective and suffer from several limitations. First, ingroup favoritism and self-esteem have generally been only measured, which questions the causal relationship between these two variables (Hertel & Kerr, 2001; Vickers et al., 1988; as cited in Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Indeed, given ingroup favoritism might stem from one's need to increase self-esteem (see Corollary 2 of the SEH, Abrams & Hogg, 1988), the link observed between these two variables might as

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