



“I know you expect me to favor my ingroup”: Reviving Tajfel's original hypothesis on the generic norm explanation of ingroup favoritism[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The present research investigates the normative roots of ingroup favoritism, reviving Tajfel's (1970) abandoned “generic norm” hypothesis according to which (1) most ingroups are perceived to promote ingroup favoritism and (2) people infer this normative prescription in newly assigned minimal groups. Anti-discrimination norms are also prevalent, but we propose that these originally emanate from external (and often supra-ordinate) entities that act as “moral referees” of the intergroup situation (e.g., the United Nations Organization). Two experimental studies using the self-presentation paradigm (Jellison & Green, 1981) supported these hypotheses in a naturalistic intergroup context (Study 1; $N = 110$) and in a minimal group paradigm (Study 2; $N = 206$). Moreover, the relationship between these norm perceptions and participants' tendency toward ingroup favoritism was examined. Results revealed differences in the naturalistic and the minimal group contexts. In the naturalistic setting, the relationship between perceived norms and people's actual tendencies was contingent on political orientation. In the minimal group paradigm, inferences of the ingroup norm were, overall, the best predictor of ingroup favoritism. These findings are discussed in the light of current models of intergroup behavior.

“America first!” This slogan was at the heart of Donald Trump's campaign for presidency in the US. The idea is very straightforward: In the eyes of American people, their own country and citizens should be favored above all other nations and foreigners. This idea is hardly new: “charity begins at home” is a well-known saying after all. Indeed, far from being specific to the contemporary US context or even to national groups, this tendency to favor the ingroup is widespread in many intergroup contexts (see Bettencourt, Charlton, Dorr, & Hume, 2001). About half a century ago, Tajfel and his collaborators (e.g., Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971) noticed that ingroup favoritism also arises in minimal groups, in which people have no prior bonds with ingroup and outgroup members. Ingroup favoritism (or intergroup discrimination¹) thus appears as a very robust and general tendency. Understanding this phenomenon has significant societal implications. Indeed, intergroup discrimination can take the form of outgroup derogation and, in the most extreme cases, of genocide and mass murder. Research on this topic has thus been abundant, and several explanations of ingroup favoritism have been suggested. The present paper focuses on a normative perspective, reprising Tajfel's original explanation and

addressing some of the original concerns with this explanation in the process.

1. Normative perspectives: an overview of research

Many studies have focused on the moderating role of social norms on intergroup discrimination. Early evidence came from Minard's (1952) classical research on White miners' attitudes against Black miners in the Pocahontas coal field. He found that when miners were outside the mine, White miners conformed to the then general expectations by expressing prejudice against Black people. However, when working under ground, White miners were influenced by the institutional norm that promoted a sense of community solidarity, and thus treated Black miners fairly. More recent studies on prejudice have shown that levels of prejudice toward an outgroup are lower when the ingroup norm is anti-discriminatory, than when the norm is pro-discriminatory (e.g., Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002) or when no mention of the norm is made (Monteith, Deneen, & Tooman, 1996). In the same vein, research has also shown that the normative context

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¹ In this paper, we use *intergroup discrimination* as an umbrella term for ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation and thus treat both these specific forms of intergroup discrimination as interchangeable with it. Although some scholars have theorized ingroup love and outgroup hate as distinct motives for intergroup discrimination (e.g., Brewer, 1999), we here focus on the broad phenomenon consisting in treating the outgroup in a less favorable way than the ingroup.

influences people's implicit attitudes toward outgroups (Castelli & Tomelleri, 2008). Similar findings have been revealed in studies on ingroup favoritism in minimal groups (for an adult population, see Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1996; for children, see Nesdale, Maass, Durkin, & Griffiths, 2005). Finally, the prevailing normative context has been shown to bolster the emergence of populist movements (Portelinha & Elcheroth, 2016).

Previous research has thus mainly investigated how social norms moderate the level of intergroup discrimination. But, in many cases, the roots of intergroup discrimination are assumed to be more deeply anchored in human nature and cognition. As an illustration, the justification-suppression model states that: “genuine” prejudices are not directly expressed but are restrained by beliefs, values, and norms that suppress them.” (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; p. 413). However few models have considered social norms themselves as being at the heart of intergroup discrimination in this fundamental sense, as the *determining source* so to speak. Here we thus make a distinction between normative explanations that consider social norms as adding to, counteracting or overlaying a basic drive for prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Devine, 1989), and normative explanations that consider social norms as a fundamental source of discrimination (i.e., that explain its occurrence in the first place). According to this latter explanation, there is no need to refer or defer to some more basic drive or process: the basic process is itself social and normative (which is not to deny or defer further questions of why and how social norms might acquire this influence). One of the models that does take this stance is group norm theory (Sherif, 1936; Sherif & Sherif, 1953), according to which people learn to valorize intergroup discrimination throughout the socialization process with their surroundings. To quote Sherif and Sherif (1953): “Attitudes toward members of other groups are not determined so much by experiences while in contact with the groups in question as by contact with attitudes toward these groups, prevailing among the older members of the groups in which they develop” (p. 94). This perspective thus implies that intergroup discrimination is the prevalent norm in most natural groups.

So why are normative accounts of discrimination (as opposed to normative encouragements or constraints on discrimination) not more prevalent among current social psychology theories? Part of the skepticism about such a normative perspective probably stems from studies on minimal groups. Minimal groups are specifically characterized by a lack of knowledge about the intergroup context and the absence of socialization histories with the other ingroup members. Therefore, one may argue that there is little basis to the assumption that a group norm is an antecedent of intergroup discrimination. This objection was however overcome by Tajfel himself, in the early account of the minimal ingroup bias effect (see Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel et al., 1971). In line with group norm theory, Tajfel argued that (1) people have learned (through their socialization experiences) that ingroup favoritism is normatively prescribed by their ingroup(s), and that (2) this strong knowledge about group norms is then transferred into the new and uncertain intergroup situation (i.e., the minimal group paradigm). People therefore seem to make the default inference that the norm of the new ingroup promotes ingroup favoritism.

It is not completely clear why this assumption was abandoned in the later version of social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which focused on the need for positive group distinctiveness (and thus a positive social identity). One reason is potentially related to the debate about the multiplicity of norms prevailing in minimal group contexts (see Branthwaite, Doyle, & Lightbown, 1979; Turner, 1980). If the existence of a discriminatory norm is acknowledged, it is nonetheless assumed that a fairness norm is also present and influential. So, which of these norms is the most prevalent? As we will outline later in the introduction, the present paper seeks to provide answers to this issue, by showing that these two kinds of norms exist in parallel but come from *different* sources.

Another potential reason for the dismissal of the normative

perspective concerns the issue about the circularity of such hypothesis (e.g., Pettigrew, 1991), as in: “Why do we discriminate? Because it is normative. And why is it normative? Because we discriminate.” Accordingly, it would defer rather than explain the phenomenon: positing a norm for discrimination just begs the question of whether this norm actually explains rather than simply redescribes discrimination. In our opinion, the circularity issue applies to descriptive norms, but less so to injunctive norms, that invoke a clear motivational component. While descriptive norms refer to other people's discriminatory behavior (i.e., what they do), injunctive norms refer to what other people think is the right thing to do (i.e., what we are encouraged to do). Rather than stating that people discriminate because others discriminate, our rationale based on injunctive norms states that people discriminate because they believe they would be praised for it (i.e., there is an independent reason and thus a mechanism that takes us beyond re-description). When it comes to perceptions of injunctive norms, circularity is thus no more an issue. The distinction between descriptive and injunctive norms was however not taken into account at the time the normative perspective was discarded, since it appeared some 20 years later (see Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). In sum, while this concern may raise interesting questions, we argue that it does not rule out the possibility that discrimination is the result of inferred (injunctive) norms and that this possibility may have been rejected prematurely.

It must be made clear that the present research aims at reviving Tajfel's abandoned hypothesis, by setting the foundation for this normative hypothesis, and not to argue for the supremacy of this explanation. Obviously, this normative account does not dismiss other potential explanatory mechanisms, such as the social identity explanation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and reciprocity explanations (Gaertner & Insko, 2000), which we return to in the General Discussion (see also Spears & Otten, 2012, who state that the minimal group bias effect is most likely multiply determined or “overdetermined”). We simply argue that the normative hypothesis should not be dismissed simply because it was displaced by the social identity explanation (multiple explanations can co-exist and co-determine). Hereafter, we rely on research on ingroup favoritism to substantiate the assumption that intergroup discrimination is perceived to be the prevalent norm in natural groups, as well as in minimal groups.

2. Ingroup favoritism as a default ingroup norm

The hypothesis of a default ingroup norm that promotes ingroup favoritism finds support in many research areas. First, research on moral values shows that people highly valorize ingroup loyalty (i.e., being mainly driven by the ingroup's interests; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Consistent with this, DeLamater, Katz, and Kelman (1969) highlighted that showing loyalty to the national ingroup and favoring its members is a way to respond to normative expectations in order to be well-accepted in the national group. Moreover, the literature on ingroup members' evaluations has shown that members who favor the ingroup over the outgroup are judged as better group members than egalitarian members (Assilaméhou & Testé, 2013; Castelli, Tomelleri, & Zogmaister, 2008; Platow, Hoar, Reid, Harley, & Morrison, 1997; Travaglino, Abrams, Randsley de Moura, Marques, & Pinto, 2014). People justify this lower leniency toward egalitarian members by the need for group cohesion and loyalty (Rutland, Hitti, Mulvey, Abrams, & Killen, 2015).

In the light of this evidence, we could be tempted to conclude that social norms resolutely encourage discrimination. However, such a conclusion is at odds with most people's everyday experiences, and one would object that western societies are actually characterized by strong anti-discrimination norms. So, where does this egalitarian norm come from, if not from ingroups? We argue that the anti-discrimination norm, which is prevalent in western societies, originally comes from sources that are external, and often supra-ordinate to (or “above”) the (specific) intergroup situation and that act as “moral referees” of the relationship

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