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How social identity shapes the working self-concept

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We were interested in testing the principle of functional antagonism.
- When ingroups were salient, participants increased endorsement of group traits.
- This effect mainly emerged for ingroups with high psychological utility.
- The impact of personal traits, however, did not diminish during ingroup salience.
- We did not find evidence for functional antagonism, but rather for adaption.

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the process by which salient ingroups alter the working self-concept. The *antagonism account*, exemplified by self-categorization theory, contends that when ingroups are salient, the collective self defines the self-concept whereas the individual self recedes. In contrast, an *adaption account* argues that the individual self operates as a stable source of self-definition. While the working self-concept may flexibly incorporate aspects of salient ingroups, attributes that define the individual self are always actively represented. We also considered the ingroup's psychological utility as a moderator of its influence on the self-concept. To directly test these hypotheses, we manipulated the salience of an ingroup previously rated as either low or high in psychological utility and asked participants to classify traits as self-descriptive or not. When ingroups were made salient, participants increasingly endorsed ingroup traits as self-descriptive. Critically, this effect mainly emerged for groups with high psychological utility. Contrary to the antagonism account, but consistent with the adaption account, the impact of individual self-traits on the self-concept did not diminish as a result of ingroup salience.

The self-concept has been described as complex and dynamic: a "continually active, shifting array of available self-knowledge" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 957). At any particular time, only a small part of what people believe and know about themselves may be accessible (Higgins, 1996; McConnell, 2011). People can hold varied representations of themselves in the working self-concept — they can define themselves in terms of unique traits, dyadic relationships, or social group memberships. While scholars recognize that different self-representations may coexist within the same person, there is less agreement on the structural and functional relations between them (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001).

The current research focuses on the relation between the individual self and the collective self. The individual self, or personal identity, refers to aspects of the self-concept that differentiate the person from others (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). The collective self, or social identity, refers to aspects of the self-concept that are shared with ingroup members and differentiate them from relevant outgroups (Tajfel, 1982). We examine how a salient social identity may alter the working self-concept to impact the idiosyncratic traits that define a person's unique identity. Additionally, we observe how psychologically potent groups may moderate this effect (Correll & Park, 2005).

How do ingroups affect the self-concept?

Self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) argues that salient ingroups fundamentally reshape their members' sense of who they are, leading to the internalization of

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group norms and characteristics that might otherwise be viewed as inconsistent with personal identity (Hogg & Williams, 2000; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). SCT suggests that groups redefine the self-concept through *depersonalization*. When an ingroup is salient, people see themselves less as unique individuals and more as interchangeable exemplars of the social category (where *I* becomes *we*; Hogg & Turner, 1987; Turner et al., 1987).

SCT contends that there is a *functional antagonism* between the salience of personal and social identity (Turner, 1982; Turner et al., 1987, 1994). The individual self and the collective self are posited to exist at opposite ends of the same continuum, with the personal self accessible in intragroup contexts and the collective self salient in intergroup contexts. A salient ingroup is thought to shift the focus of one's self-definition away from the unique traits that differentiate the self from others and towards the characteristics shared with members of the social category (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Turner et al., 1987, 1994). According to SCT, the working self-concept is redefined such that personal identity is inhibited and traits, attitudes, and behavior assimilate to the ingroup prototype.

Support for this antagonism perspective remains largely indirect. Many studies have shown that the self can incorporate characteristics associated with salient ingroups (Carli, 1990; Hogg & Turner, 1987; Rothgerber, 1997; Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997). In one notable study, Smith and Henry (1996) asked students to describe (a) themselves, (b) an ingroup, and (c) a corresponding outgroup on 90 traits. After a delay, participants made speeded yes–no self-descriptiveness judgments of the same traits. The researchers found that response times were faster for traits shared by both the self and the ingroup and slower for unshared traits. The challenge for this work is to understand *why* participants are faster to identify traits they share with the ingroup, compared with unshared traits.

There are at least three possibilities. One possibility – consistent with SCT – is that group attributes become part of the self-concept. Smith and Henry (1996) favor this interpretation, suggesting that mental representations of the two entities become directly linked through depersonalization. A second explanation is that people selectively affiliate with groups that mirror their own attributes. This account suggests that homophily drives the similarity between individual and group: people who perceive themselves as adventurous or environmental seek groups that have those same characteristics. A third account is that individuals project their own traits onto their ingroups, viewing the group in light of the characteristics they see in themselves (Otten & Epstude, 2006). Note that the second and third accounts involve a process by which the individual self influences the (perceived) nature of the group. This is very different from the self-categorization approach, which claims that the group alters the self-concept by causing the individual self to recede. This ambiguity bedevils research in this area because all three of these processes may enhance the perceived similarity of self and group. Stated simply, the causal direction is not clear: this pattern may emerge either because the individual adopts ingroup characteristics or because she perceives the ingroup as more similar to herself.

Another, more recent attempt to assess functional antagonism between personal and social identity raises serious methodological concerns. Adapting Markus' (1977) speeded *me/not me* (MNM) rating task, Onorato and Turner (2004) sought to demonstrate that a salient social identity reshapes the self-concept by bringing it in line with prototypical ingroup characteristics. They predicted that when gender identity is activated, male and female participants would self-stereotype (i.e., endorse ingroup traits as self-descriptive). Based on SCT, men were expected to endorse more independent words such as "assertive" and women were expected to endorse more dependent words such as "conforming," regardless of their personal traits. To manipulate group salience, the researchers asked some participants to use a *collective response frame* (making us-versus-them judgments) and others to use a *personal response frame* (making me-versus-not-me judgments).

Participants in the collective-frame condition seemed to self-stereotype by endorsing gender-typical attributes even when those attributes were inconsistent with their personal self-schemata. However, this approach is problematic because the referent of the judgment task changes as a function of the response frame. In the personal frame (me/not me), responses are necessarily about the self. In the collective response frame (us/them), however, the responses may simply reflect perceptions of the groups involved. It is certainly plausible that a female participant in the collective response frame endorsed dependent words because she saw *herself* as more dependent (i.e., reflecting a shift in the working self-concept). But it is equally plausible and perhaps even probable (cf. Mitchell, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003) that any endorsement in this condition reflected an assessment of the *group* with no implications for the self-concept. A highly independent female participant might legitimately endorse a dependent trait as representative of women in general, without viewing it as *self*-relevant in the least.

Antagonism vs. adaption

Few would disagree that the self-concept is malleable and dynamic (Markus & Nurius, 1986), but do people relinquish their sense of personal identity in favor of their group identity when the latter is salient? As reviewed, previous research has yielded equivocal evidence for SCT's principle of functional antagonism. In the current study, we adopt methodological and data-analytic improvements to eliminate alternative interpretations, and directly test competing predictions regarding the influence of personal and ingroup traits on the working self-concept.

When an ingroup identity is salient, the *antagonism account* predicts that traits that typically characterize the individual will have less influence on the working self-concept (H_1) whereas traits that typically characterize the ingroup will have more influence (H_2). In contrast, other researchers have argued that the individual self operates as a stable, foundational source of self-definition (Deaux, 1993; Eidelman & Biernat, 2003; Sedikides, Gaertner, Luke, O'Mara, & Gebauer, 2013; Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009). This perspective suggests that, although the working self-concept may incorporate aspects of various social identities, attributes that define the individual self will *always* be actively represented. By this account, the personal self is not replaced by the collective self but instead adapts to include it. This *adaption account* predicts support for H_2 but not H_1: increasing the salience of an ingroup identity should lead participants to endorse more group-typical traits, but the salience of that group should not *inhibit* the personal self-concept.

We attempt to overcome the limitations of previous research and provide a strong test of the antagonism and adaption hypotheses using a stringent methodological and statistical approach. Our analysis enables us to assess the influence of each identity on the working self-concept while statistically controlling for the other. That is, we assess the effects of the individual self-ratings only after partialling out the group ratings, and we assess the effects of the group only after partialling out the individual self. Our analysis, therefore, examines only the distinct contribution of each identity — providing a clear test of both hypotheses.

The role of psychological utility

The current research further examines variation in the psychological impact of ingroups. People belong to multiple social groups; some social groups have immense personal importance (e.g., families or life-long professions) while other groups may be less potent (e.g., a certain bank's clientele). Based on an extensive review of literature concerning the relationship between self and ingroup, Correll and Park (2005) proposed that a group's potency or *psychological utility* depends on a combination of the individual's perception of the ingroup's value, the individual's identification with the ingroup, and the degree to which