Socio-structural intergroup characteristics and group-based emotions in three countries[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Participants from three countries (United States, India, and Bulgaria) rated the socio-structural context between their nation and China. We explored the relationship between the components of the intergroup context (permeability, stability, and legitimacy) and five group-based emotions (happiness, fear, contempt, jealousy, and disgust) across these three international relationships. Overall, the results showed that socio-structural intergroup characteristics interact to differentially influence the intensity of reported group-based emotions. The intensity and predictors of each group-based emotion were also found to differ for each country. Together, these results show that simultaneously examining different socio-structural variables yields a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the intergroup context and the emotions derived from group membership.

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1. Introduction

Psychologists have recently begun to explore the affective experience of individuals stemming from membership in a social group or category (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004; Smith, 1993; Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), self-categorization (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), as well as appraisal theories of emotion (Frijda, 1986; Roseman, 1984; Scherer, 1988) have been used as theoretical vehicles for explaining how individuals come to experience group-based emotions for events that the individual did not directly participate in (Branscombe, Doosje, & McGarty, 2002; Mackie, Smith, & Ray, 2008).

Group-based emotion researchers typically examine how a single event impacts the emotional experience of ingroup members. However, rather than an emotion being elicited by a single event, emotions can also result from a longstanding intergroup relationship (Mackie et al., 2008; Smith & Mackie, 2006). Indeed, intergroup relations can have extensive historical and broad social contexts (Tajfel, 1981; Turner, 1999) that may be overlooked when only examining single events as elicitors of group-based emotions. In Smith's (1993) classic chapter detailing the intergroup emotion theory, he proposed that in

addition to specific appraisals, intergroup contexts exist (i.e., groups differing in power and/or status) in which specific group-based emotions are likely to be observed.

2. Socio-structural characteristics

One proposition of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is that ingroup members use intergroup contextual features to direct their behavior in the search for a positive and distinctive social identity. Specifically, ingroup members make intergroup comparisons regarding the relative status of their ingroup to relevant outgroups. When groups differ in status, group members use an interaction of three socio-structural variables (stability, legitimacy, permeability) to direct either individual or group strategies to gain or maintain a positive social identity. Stability refers to perceptions of ingroup and outgroup status differences as fixed versus malleable. Tajfel and Turner (1979) describe stability in terms of the existence of cognitive alternatives – whether the existing status difference between groups may someday change (i.e., whether low status groups gain status or high status groups lose status). Legitimacy refers to perceptions of status differences as fair or legitimate. In other words, accepting the current status difference between groups as fair increases perceived legitimacy (Bettencourt, Dorr, Charlton, & Hume, 2001). Permeability refers to the perception that group members can change group memberships. Tajfel and Turner (1979) describe permeability as a belief system reflecting social mobility – society is permeable to the extent that unsatisfied group members perceive the possibility to move to another group that better suits the individual (Mummendey, Klink, Mielke, Wenzel, & Blanz, 1999).

Socio-structural variables have been used to predict collective and individual ingroup members' actions (Mummendey et al., 1999; Plante, Roberts, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2014; Wright, 1997), prejudice (Johnson, Terry, & Louis, 2005), ingroup bias (Bettencourt et al., 2001), as well as ingroup identification (Ellemers, van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1990; Verkuyten & Reijerse, 2008). For example, research tends to confirm social identity theory's original predictions regarding group members' behavior, showing permeability as a strong predictor of identity management strategy selection. If low status group members perceive the ability to move to the higher status group (i.e., high permeability) this undermines support for low status group collective action (Wright, 1997). Similarly, low status group members have been shown to hide a stigmatized identity when boundaries are permeable, even when the status difference is illegitimate and unstable (Plante et al., 2014). If low status members view the boundary as impermeable, however, and the intergroup status difference as unstable, then collective action is more likely, especially if the status difference is viewed as illegitimate (Ellemers, 1993; Mummendey et al., 1999).

Research examining bias also shows socio-structural characteristics of the intergroup context influence ingroup bias and prejudice toward outgroups. In their meta-analysis examining the influence of socio-structural variables on ingroup bias, Bettencourt et al. (2001) found that when boundaries were permeable, high status group members showed greater ingroup bias than low status group members regardless of stability and legitimacy of status difference. However, when group boundaries were impermeable and the status structure was illegitimate, both high and low status groups showed an equal level of bias. In other words, when group boundaries are permeable high status groups assert their superiority, while when the boundaries are impermeable (and status difference illegitimate) low status group members compete for ingroup positive distinctiveness. Johnson et al. (2005) examined whether socio-structural variables predict prejudice toward an outgroup. Their findings suggest that high status group members who view their status position as unstable and the boundaries permeable experience threat to the ingroup and react with prejudice.

Many theories have utilized components of the socio-structural intergroup characteristics to suggest that ingroup members' subjective perspective of the outgroup affects intergroup relations. The stereotype content model (Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999) suggests that status and competition are essential determinants of intergroup relations. Image theory (Alexander, Brewer, & Herrmann, 1999) suggests that perceived competition, power, and status affect the representations of an outgroup. Social dominance theory includes power and legitimacy as key determinants of intergroup relations (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Individual components of Tajfel and Turner's socio-structural characteristics (i.e., legitimacy) have also been found to affect group-based emotions (Harth, Kessler, & Leach, 2008; Livingstone, Spears, Manstead, & Bruder, 2009; Smith, Cronin, & Kessler, 2008). However, it is unknown to what extent these three variables interact to predict group-based emotions, if at all. In the present paper we explore the association of socio-structural characteristics with five group-based emotions (happiness, fear, contempt, jealousy, and disgust) from participants in three countries (United States, India, and Bulgaria) toward a salient outgroup (China). The three countries chosen for this study differ in status with respect to China. Of these three the U.S. has the greatest status when a comparison is made with China, followed by India and then Bulgaria in terms of economics (World Bank, 2010).

3. Intergroup context

China is currently one of the United States' top trading partners (Dumbaugh, 2006). However, there are still disputes between the U.S. and China regarding political protest, human rights (Hornick, 2010), relations with Taiwan and Tibet, intellectual property rights, currency valuation, raw materials, and national security concerns (Dumbaugh, 2006). In general, a large portion of Americans report having a negative view toward China (about 51%), which is relatively unchanged since 2009 (BBC, 2010). Half of U.S. citizens polled in 2009 view China as a threat to the U.S. (Pew, 2009), however only a minority