



# Forming impressions of in-group and out-group members under self-esteem threat: The moderating role of the need for cognitive closure and prejudice



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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate whether and how participants' need for cognitive closure (NCC) and their level of the prejudice moderate the self-esteem threats' influence on their perception of in-group and out-group members. There is still an open debate concerning the relationship between in-group favoritism and out-group negativity, as well as concerning factors that may increase these two phenomena and their reciprocity. Participants (78 students) completed a questionnaire containing the scales of prejudice and NCC. Subsequently, after they watched a short movie clip showing an interaction between an in-group member behaving negatively and an out-group member behaving positively, participants were exposed to a self-esteem threat (vs. self-enhancement), and, finally, they were requested to evaluate these in-group and out-group members. Results, as hypothesized, show that self-esteem threats increase negative evaluations of the out-group members and decrease negative evaluations of the in-group members only among participants with a high need for closure and a high level of prejudice.

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## 1. Introduction

In everyday life, we frequently observe other people's interactions and spontaneously form impressions and make inferences as to their traits and goals (Uleman, Saribay, & Gonzalez, 2007). In our multicultural societies, we quite often observe interactions between people belonging to our own ethnic group and to other ethnic groups, such as immigrants, for example. What factors influence the impressions we form of in-group and out-group members in these interactions? To what extent are these impressions and inferences affected by the specific information derived from the observed interaction or by our potential stereotypes (lay theories), capacities, and motivations? Several research traditions within social psychology have addressed these questions (for a recent review, see Macrae & Quadflieg, 2010). Classical studies on attribution bias (Hamilton, 1979; Taylor & Jaggi, 1974) showed that positive behaviors of in-group members are usually ascribed to the actor's internal and stable features, while the same type of behaviors of out-group members are explained in terms of situational features. The opposite attributions are provided for negative behaviors. In this way people can defend their own stereotypes' stability as well as their social identity. Researchers have reached the same goal by using different words (more or less abstract) to describe the same behavior performed by an in-group or an out-group member, as research in linguistic inter-group bias has consistently shown (e.g., Fiedler, Bluemke, Friese, & Hofmann, 2003; Maass & Arcuri, 1996; Maass,

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Milesi, Zabbini, & Stahlberg, 1995; Wigboldus, Spears, & Semin, 2005). Contemporary social psychology researchers have a general awareness that people can make inferences about others based on all sorts of information, that they can make these inferences pre-consciously, and that the perceiver's salient motivations strongly affect the inferences (Dijksterhuis, 2010). One of these powerful motivations is to maintain a positive self-image when one's self-esteem is under threat. Human self-esteem can be easily threatened by events that have negative implications for it, such as negative experiences and failures (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). Self-esteem threats, unfortunately, have negative consequences not only at the level of the threatened person's affective experience, but also at the level of her or his cognitive processes and social behaviors (Bodenhausen, Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Moreno, 2001; Fiske, 1998). Among such consequences, as several studies have documented, is increased in-group bias. When people experience a drop in self-esteem, they become more likely to evaluate their in-group more positively (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Bodenhausen, 1990; DeSteno, Dasgupta, Bartlett, & Cajdric, 2004; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Some authors have explained this effect in terms of people's need to protect their own in-group (positive identity, integrity) and their own self-esteem (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Sinclair & Kunda, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Very often, but not always (Allport, 1954), in-group bias is associated with out-group derogation, prejudiced attitudes, negative evaluations, and a higher accessibility of negative stereotypes (e.g., Bodenhausen, 1990, 1993; DeSteno et al., 2004; Esses & Zanna, 1995; Fein & Spencer, 1997; Forgas & Fiedler, 1996; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social psychologists have long made the distinction between in-group favoritism and out-group negativity or prejudice and discrimination (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Indeed, a significant body of research exists that attempts to identify the relationship between in-group favoritism and out-group negativity, as well as to identify conditions that will lead to out-group negativity (Bourhis & Gagnon, 2001; Mummendey & Otten, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Reynolds, 2001), but the research has not always produced congruent results. In a review of the literature on the relationship between out-group derogation and in-group favoritism, Brewer (1999) argues that in-group love and out-group hate are separable phenomena and that only in some conditions are they reciprocally related (Hinkle & Brown, 1990; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). Brewer and Weber (1994) delineated self-esteem threats as one of those special conditions in which in-group love is related to out-group hate, but few studies have provided empirical evidence to validate this point since most research examining the threat-prejudice relationship has focused on out-group members' perception and/or evaluation, neglecting in-group members' evaluations.

Modern social psychology researchers still have an open debate concerning the underlying mechanism that mediates the relationship between self-esteem threats and in-group bias vs. out-group derogation. One side, according to the cognitive perspective, claims that a self-esteem threat increases the accessibility of negative information about out-group members to be used as a tool to restore self-esteem (Allen & Sherman, 2011; Esses & Zanna, 1995; Fein & Spencer, 1997; Forgas & Fiedler, 1996; Sinclair & Kunda, 1999). They suggest that when individuals are under a self-esteem threat, negative stereotypes of certain groups may more likely come to mind, and the threatened person interprets the other's behavior in a negative light (Esses & Zanna, 1995). By activating negative stereotypes about out-group members, ego-threatened individuals are apparently able to engage in downward social comparison and thereby feel better about themselves (Gilbert & Hixon, 1991). On the other hand, some authors suggest that a self-esteem threat induces a need to recover self-esteem, which, in turn, reduces motivation to inhibit negative attitudes and behaviors toward out-group members (Sinclair & Kunda, 1999). Finally, self-esteem threats might induce a kind of ego-depletion (Baumeister, 1998; Baumeister et al., 1996), so that threatened people do not have the cognitive energy needed to inhibit stereotype expressions. However, results are not always consistent. Other researchers have found that individuals with low self-esteem have a higher prejudice to both in-group and out-group members (Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987) (for a review, see van Dellen, Campbell, Hoyle, & Bradfield, 2011). Some studies have even shown that high self-esteem groups have greater prejudice than low self-esteem groups (Sachdev & Bourhis, 1987). This research may suggest that an alternative explanation exists, along with additional reasoning about the relationship between self-esteem and in-group favoritism/out-group derogation.

Our study aims to further investigate the impact of self-esteem threats on in-group favoritism/out-group derogation, focusing on two aspects thus far under-investigated. First, while most studies examining the threat-prejudice relationship have focused on out-group members only, this study gives attention to both out-group and in-group members in a condition of social interaction between them. Therefore, we can assess whether a self-esteem threat increases negative evaluations of out-group members, while also increasing positive evaluations of in-group members. Second, this study explores if individuals' needs for cognitive closure and their prejudice level moderate this impact. In fact, in most research on intergroup biases, a target's membership is manipulated, but the participants' own expectancies and attitudes are often left unmeasured. Several authors (e.g., Allen, Sherman, Conrey, & Stroessner, 2009; Lepore & Brown, 1997; Moreno & Bodenhausen, 1999) have questioned the use of mere group membership manipulations, advocating the inclusion of individual differences and claiming that category does not automatically activate the stereotype for all people and that high and low-prejudiced people activate divergent automatic stereotypes (e.g., Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995; Lepore & Brown, 1997; Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 1997). Because of these factors, in the present study we incorporated prejudice as an individual difference variable.

This study explores the impressions and evaluations of an observed in-group member (a White male) who misbehaved toward a beggar as well as in the interaction with an out-group member (a Black immigrant) who acted positively in the same situation. A self-esteem threat is assumed to activate the motivation to defend or enhance self-esteem and, consequently as described above, people evaluate their in-group members more positively and out-group members more negatively. But

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