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Intuitive theories of group types and relational principles

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Abstract

Three studies investigated perceivers' beliefs about the principles by which different kinds of social groups govern interactions among group members. In Study 1, participants rated a sample of 20 groups on a set of group properties, including measures of relational principles used within groups. Results showed that people believe that interactions in different types of groups are governed by different blends of relational principles unique for each type of group. Study 2 experimentally demonstrated that perceivers could use minimal group property characteristics of different types of groups (i.e., extent of group member interaction, group size, duration, and permeability) to make inferences about the relational principles used in different types of groups. Study 3 demonstrated that relational style information influences people's judgments of a group's entitativity and collective responsibility.
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Introduction

Theories, which delineate how elements of a system function in relation to one another, are crucial tools in the scientific effort to understand human society and psychology. The complex social world that scientists attempt to understand also confronts non-scientists in everyday life. For lay people, however, the tremendous complexity of social life is not merely of academic interest but is instead of vital daily importance. Given the importance of groups in their lives, lay people may also have well-developed intuitive theories of how group life is organized and functions. Such theories would be useful for anticipating the behavior of group members and for guiding one's own behavior. In the present research, we sought to understand the extent to which people believe that different kinds of social groups (Lickel et al., 2000)

rely upon different relational principles to regulate interactions among group members (Fiske, 1991). Furthermore, we investigated the extent to which perceivers use relational style information to judge a group's entitativity and to make judgments of collective responsibility.

Intuitive theories of groups

Intuitive theories consist of people's beliefs about the entities that define a given domain and how those entities operate and relate to one another. These beliefs form an interconnected system of knowledge that can be used to make inferences about phenomena within the domain in which a particular intuitive theory can be applied (Gopnik & Wellman, 1994; Morris, Ames, & Knowles, 2001; Murphy & Medin, 1985). The idea that social perceivers possess and use intuitive theories in their comprehension of the social world is not new. Past research has studied people's theories about personality (Schneider, 1973) and the extent to which personal attributes can change (Dweck, 1995), as well as people's theories about

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others' mental states and their responsibility for their actions (Heider, 1958; Wellman, 1990). Recently, researchers have recognized the importance of people's intuitive theories of social groups (Hong, Levy, & Chiu, 2001; Lickel, Hamilton, & Sherman, 2001). For example, people appear to have an intuitive theory of some groups possessing an inherent, biologically based nature or essence, a belief that can influence people's perceptions of groups and their members (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Hirschfeld, 1995; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992; Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001). Other work argues that people treat some groups as discrete causal agents (e.g., Morris, Menon, & Ames, 2001).

An intuitive taxonomy of social groups

Our work has focused on perceivers' intuitive taxonomy of different types of groups. Based on their participants' judgments, Lickel et al. (2000) empirically identified four basic clusters of groups: *intimacy groups* (e.g., families, friends, and romantic partners), *task groups* (e.g., committees and juries), *social categories* (e.g., Blacks, Jews, and women), and *loose associations* (e.g., people who live in the same neighborhood, people who like classical music). These group types differ along a number of dimensions in a fairly complex manner. That is, no single feature or property defined the distinctions among the types of groups—each group type was defined by a complex pattern of group properties. Thus, intimacy groups are believed to be small, long lasting, highly interactive, and difficult to enter or exit. Task groups are small and interactive groups, but are generally not as long lasting or as impermeable as intimacy groups. Social categories are large groups with long histories and impermeable boundaries, but only modest amounts of interaction among members. Loose associations are groups that involve low levels of interaction (and are often of short duration), and that can be easily joined or left. Moreover, the group types differed significantly in the extent to which they were perceived as meaningful, coherent entities. Across several studies, intimacy groups were rated highest in entitativity, followed by task groups, social categories, and loose associations.

Furthermore, the distinctions perceivers make among the different group types are implicitly employed when perceivers encode information about groups. Using an implicit categorization task, Sherman, Castelli, and Hamilton (2002) showed that the group types were spontaneously used as participants encoded information they were acquiring about group members. Thus, this folk typology (though by no means rigid or totally uniform across all individuals) is more than just a convenient way of consciously sorting groups into categories. Instead, it reflects perceivers' cognitive structures that are spontaneously used in processing and storing information about group members. As with other cognitive structures, we expect that perceivers would have additional knowledge and beliefs about the different group types. For example, we know already that people associate different patterns of group properties or features with each type of group and that the group types vary in their perceived entitativity (Lickel et al., 2000).

The present research was designed to extend our understanding of this intuitive taxonomy of groups. Specifically, we investigated perceivers' beliefs about the ways in which different types of groups function, and in particular, their beliefs about the norms or rules by which interactions among group members are governed. We hypothesized that lay people believe that different types of groups structure interactions among group members according to distinct sets of relational principles.

Relational principles regulating social interactions

Investigation of the relational principles used to regulate social interactions and relationships has a long history in psychology, sociology, and anthropology (e.g., Clark & Mills, 1979; Deutsch, 1975). This work has been synthesized by Fiske (1991), who has argued (from both ethnographic and experimental research) that there are four basic relational principles that humans use to regulate social interactions[1]: *Market pricing* is guided by a calculation of the utility of interaction; efficiency and maximization are the key motivations. In *equality matching*, the goal is to maintain balance among interactants, though this balance may occur over multiple interactions in the form of turn taking. Decision-making is guided by equality—one person equals one vote. *Communal sharing* is marked by a fusion of the self to the group, generosity is the key motive in exchange, and decisions are ideally made unanimously. *Authority ranking* is guided by status differences between people. Decisions are made as a decree from a leader, and orders follow a chain of command. High status persons may appropriate the belongings of lower status persons but are also expected to care for and protect underlings.

Work by Fiske (e.g., Fiske, Haslam, & Fiske, 1991) documents people's use of these relational styles, and Haslam (1994) has developed a questionnaire to assess people's perceptions of the degree of each relational style used within a particular social relationship. In the present research, we used this framework to assess beliefs about how social interactions are governed in different types of groups.

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[1] We will use the terms relational principle and relational style interchangeably. Both are also intended to be synonymous with the term "relational model" (Fiske, 1991).