

Perceiving Status (In)stability in a Low-Status Group

The Effects of Identification on Explicit and Implicit Intergroup Attitudes

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Abstract. We examined whether perceptions of status (in)stability moderate the effects of ingroup identification on explicit and implicit intergroup attitudes. We expected that identification with Italians (low-status group) would enhance ingroup bias toward (US) Americans (high-status group) more when status was unstable rather than stable. We also predicted that the effects of identification on bias would be driven by ingroup enhancement for explicit attitudes and by both ingroup enhancement and outgroup derogation for implicit attitudes. The results revealed that identification increased explicit ingroup evaluation and ingroup bias independently from status (in)stability. However, identification increased implicit outgroup derogation only with unstable status. The results are discussed with reference to social identity theory and to the importance of considering both explicit and implicit attitudes.

Keywords: ingroup identification, implicit attitudes, Go/No-go Association Task (GNAT), social identity theory (SIT), status instability

According to social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1981), the nature and content of intergroup relations are a function of the interplay between psychological variables, such as group identification, and sociostructural factors, such as status stability. Most research to date has focused on experimental designs with laboratory groups (see Ellemers, 1993) or correlational studies in natural contexts (e.g., Mummendey, Klink, Mielke, Wenzel, & Blanz, 1999; Verkuyten & Reijerse, 2008). This study is an experimental attempt to examine the unstable nature of intergroup relations using real groups. In particular, we aimed to test whether perceptions of status (in)stability moderate the effects of identification with the low-status group of Italians on attitudes toward the high-status group of Americans¹ at both an explicit and an implicit level. Examining the moderator role of status (in)stability on intergroup attitudes using national groups appears to be particularly interesting in this current historical period, in which the international economic and political situation is rapidly changing.

In the present study, we focused on the low-status group because its members should be more prone than high-status group members to enhance their group position, thus making

responses by low-status groups especially interesting (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Identification was tested as a predictor, since a certain degree of commitment to one's group is a necessary condition for displaying ingroup bias (Leonardelli & Brewer, 2001; Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 2009) and identification has been shown to be an important antecedent of intergroup attitudes when national groups are considered (Mummendey, Klink, & Brown, 2001; Nigbur & Cinnirella, 2007). Furthermore, although many studies conducted from the social identity approach have considered only explicit attitudes, we included a measure of implicit attitudes. To the extent that explicit attitudes might be biased by self-presentation strategies, implicit attitudes, which are unintentional and beyond awareness, can, in principle, tap prejudice independently from people's attempts to manage their own responses (Devine, Plant, & Blair, 2001; Nosek, 2005, 2007). Validating and extending results obtained with classical measures (i.e., self-reports) by considering implicit attitudes is an important step in providing a more realistic and valid test of SIT predictions (Tajfel, 1981). This examination is most relevant in nonconflictual intergroup contexts, such as that between Italians and Americans, where people might be espe-

¹ In this paper, by Americans we refer to people living in the United States.

cially reluctant to express negative intergroup attitudes (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995).

Group Identification and Status Stability

SIT (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) states that individuals derive part of their self-image, or social identity, from the groups to which they belong. Since people strive to achieve or maintain a positive social identity to enhance their self-esteem, in the case of unsatisfactory group membership (i.e., low-status), they may be motivated to leave the ingroup or, if this is not possible, to positively differentiate their group from relevant outgroups. Hence, members of low-status groups should be especially concerned with the improvement of their status position to obtain a more satisfactory social identity. In particular, according to Tajfel and Turner (1979), “negative social identity promotes subordinate-group competitiveness toward the dominant group to the degree that: (a) subjective identification with the subordinate group is maintained; and (b) the dominant group continues or begins to be perceived as a relevant comparison group” (p. 45). Thus, ingroup bias should be more evident in those members who are highly committed to their group when intergroup comparisons are salient.

With respect to membership salience, an important moderator is the stability of status differences, defined as the extent to which the status hierarchy is likely to change in the near future. Status instability, in particular, increases the relevance of intergroup comparisons and consequently competitive attitudes (Ellemers, Wilke, & Van Knippenberg, 1993; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Turner & Brown, 1978), especially among low-status groups (Tajfel, 1978).

Concerning the relationship between identification and ingroup bias, the empirical evidence is mixed. In fact, while some studies have supported the idea that identification increases ingroup favoritism (e.g., Falvo, Capozza, Dovidio, & Vezzali, 2006; Perreault & Bourhis, 1998, 1999), other studies have obtained weaker results (see Brown, 2000; Brown & Capozza, 2006; Hinkle & Brown, 1990). As noted by Turner (1999), SIT has never hypothesized a direct link between identification and ingroup bias, which is just one of several identity management strategies. Instead, this relationship can be expected only in the presence of some conditions, such as when there are factors (e.g., status instability) that stress the importance of intergroup comparisons (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002).

There is some support for the idea that status stability moderates the relationship between identification and intergroup attitudes. For instance, Doosje, Spears, and Ellemers (2002), employing quasiminimal groups, found that low-status group members who were more identified, compared to those who were less identified, perceived both the ingroup and the outgroup as more homogeneous (and, thus, acted more at a col-

lective than at an individual level) only if there was high potential for social change. Thus, it is possible to predict that identification with a low-status group will be associated with increased ingroup bias more when status is unstable rather than stable, since status instability should foster intergroup competition (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, since in a nonconflictual intergroup relation (such as the one examined in the present study) social norms toward equality may be especially salient and people might be unwilling or unable to report prejudiced attitudes, we expect that the hypothesized effect of identification will take the form of ingroup enhancement rather than outgroup derogation (Brewer, 1999; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995).

Surprisingly, little research has examined the link between identification and implicit ingroup bias. The results obtained by Ashburn-Nardo, Knowles, and Monteith (2003) revealed that the implicit preference for a low-status ingroup (Black Americans vs. White Americans) was positively correlated with some aspects of ethnic racial identity, such as private regard for one’s race and the centrality of race for participants’ self-concept. Similarly, Sassenberg and Wieber (2005), in two studies with German university students, found that identification with the group of young people, either measured or manipulated, was a significant predictor of implicit prejudice toward the elderly. Other studies, however, found no relationship between identification and implicit ingroup bias (e.g., Otten & Wentura, 1999).

There is also evidence showing that sociostructural factors can influence the link between identification and ingroup bias measured at an implicit level. Crisp, Stone, and Hall (2006) found that, when group distinctiveness as English was threatened (by creating a recategorization condition as Europeans), highly identified English females expressed more implicit bias toward the French than those less identified and than participants in a control condition. However, no study, to our knowledge, has examined status (in)stability as a moderator of the relationship between identification and implicit ingroup favoritism. On the basis of the available literature, we can predict that, similar to explicit attitudes, the relation between identification and increased implicit ingroup bias will be stronger when status is unstable rather than stable. In addition, it is reasonable to expect that, since people can hardly control their implicit attitudes (Devine et al., 2001), high-identifiers will express more intergroup competition, with unstable status, by increasing both the implicit evaluation of the ingroup and the implicit derogation of the outgroup.

The Present Research

The goal of the current study was to examine the effects of identification on explicit and implicit intergroup attitudes by varying the perceived stability of the status relationship between Italians and Americans. We decided to focus on the economic domain to vary status stability, since the economic situation of a nation is an important determinant of

its position in the international ranking and of its relationships with other countries (Alexander, Brewer, & Livingston, 2005). In general, Italians have a consensual lower economic status compared to Americans (Capozza, Trifiletti, Vezzali, & Andrighetto, 2009). After completing a measure of national identification, Italian students were randomly allocated to one of two experimental conditions. In the first (status instability condition), participants were led to believe that the Italian and American economic situation was unstable; the second was a control condition. Participants then completed the manipulation checks, a Go/No-go Association Task (GNAT; Nosek & Banaji, 2001), and measures of explicit ingroup and outgroup evaluation. The use of the GNAT, which is an advancement of the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), allowed us to detect implicit attitudes separately for each of the two target-groups considered (i.e., Italians and Americans), thus permitting a direct comparison with the explicit evaluation of ingroup and outgroup. We tested Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) as a further predictor of intergroup attitudes. The construct of SDO refers to the general orientation displayed by individuals toward the support for unequal relationships among salient social groups. Since extensive literature has shown consistent effects of SDO on prejudice (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006) and has demonstrated that this variable is deeply involved in shaping intergroup relations, we considered SDO as an additional predictor with exploratory purposes. Finally, we included a measure of social desirability as a control variable.

To recap, hypotheses were the following:

Hypothesis 1: Concerning explicit attitudes, identification should be associated with increased ingroup bias. We also expected an interaction between commitment to one's group and experimental condition: The relationship between identification and ingroup bias should be stronger in the status instability than in the control condition. Importantly, the effects of identification on ingroup bias should be driven by increased ingroup evaluation rather than by decreased outgroup evaluation.

Hypothesis 2: With respect to implicit attitudes, the relationship between identification and enhanced ingroup bias should be stronger in the status instability than in the control condition and depend on shifts in both ingroup and outgroup evaluations.

Method

Participants

Eighty-six students enrolled in psychology courses at the University of Padova (27 males, 58 females; one missing data) were randomly allocated to one of the two experimen-

tal conditions (status instability vs. control). Mean age was 23 years ($SD = 3.20$).

Procedure

Participants were examined individually in a laboratory. The experiment was introduced as a study on attitudes related to media communication. After completing measures of national identification and SDO, participants were given an article to read, ostensibly taken from the online version of the most popular Italian newspaper (*Corriere della Sera*), which, in turn, had adapted it from an editorial of *The New York Times*. In the status instability condition, the article emphasized the recent decline of the US in the economic domain; at the same time, it highlighted the rise of different nations, and especially Italy, in the same domain². In the control condition, the article provided information irrelevant to the relationship between Italians and Americans, dealing with the benefits of daily physical activity for health. Afterwards, participants completed the manipulation checks, the GNAT (Nosek & Banaji, 2001), and the questionnaire (measures of ingroup and outgroup evaluation, social desirability). Finally, they were thanked and debriefed.

Measures

Explicit Attitudes

Manipulation Checks

To test the efficacy of the manipulation, participants answered four items concerning the instability of the status relationship between Italians and Americans. Two items ($r = .81, p < .001$) asked if, in the actual international situation, the Italian economy was declining (1), stable (5), or improving (9); two identical items concerned the American economy ($r = .74, p < .001$). The four items were combined to form reliable indices of Italian and American perceived economic stability, respectively.

Furthermore, participants indicated the status of both Italians and Americans, considering the international situation, on an 11-step scale, where 0 represented *extremely low* and 10 *extremely high* status.

Participants also indicated on a 7-step scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *extremely*) the literary quality of the journal article in the two conditions, so as to rule out alternative explanations due to the text read.

Ingroup Identification

We used the 20-item scale by Capozza, Brown, Aharpour, and Falvo (2006). Examples of items are: "I feel similar to

² Data were collected from February to April 2008.

the other Italians”; “I feel attached to the other Italians.” On the 7-step scale (1 = *I strongly disagree*; 7 = *I strongly agree*), higher scores reflect greater identification with the Italian group. The 20 items were combined in a single index of ingroup identification (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$).

SDO

SDO was measured with the Italian adaptation of the SDO₆ scale (Aiello, Chirumbolo, Leone, & Pratto, 2005; see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), consisting of 16 items presented on a 7-step scale, ranging from 1 (*I strongly disagree*) to 7 (*I strongly agree*). The 16 items were averaged in a reliable index ($\alpha = .78$): The higher the score, the stronger the support for social inequality.

Ingroup and Outgroup Evaluation

The Italian ingroup and the American outgroup were rated on five semantic differential scales, representing the evaluation factor (e.g., undesirable/desirable). A 7-step scale was used: 1 was given to the negative pole, while 7 indicated the positive pole (4 = *neither/nor*). Ratings were aggregated for ingroup ($\alpha = .84$) and outgroup ($\alpha = .75$).

Social Desirability

We used the 12-item social desirability scale by Crowne and Marlowe (1960), adapted to the Italian context by Manganello Rattazzi, Canova, and Marcorin (2000). Participants responded on a 7-step scale ranging from 1 (*totally false*) to 7 (*totally true*). The 12 items were combined in a single index ($\alpha = .72$): Higher scores reflect stronger social desirability.

Implicit Attitudes

The GNAT (Nosek & Banaji, 2001) was run using the Inquisit software package (Version 2.0, 2006). Four categories of stimuli were used: Ingroup and outgroup were exemplified by 10 Italian (e.g., Marco, Anna) and 10 American (e.g., Kevin, Abbey) typical names; for the attribute dimension, the stimuli were 10 positive (e.g., peace, enjoyment) and 10 negative (e.g., cancer, prison) words. The Italian and American names were matched for typicality and word length, the positive and negative words for familiarity and word length.

The GNAT consisted of four critical blocks, presented in a randomized order. In each block, two target-labels were shown in the upper-left and upper-right of the screen as reminders. The targets in the four experimental blocks were: Italian names + positive words; Italian names + negative words; American names + positive words; American names + negative words. Stimuli randomly appeared in the center of the screen. Participants were asked to press the space bar (Go) as quickly as possible for items belonging to the target-categories (signal) and to do nothing (No-go)

for the distracter items (noise) belonging to the contrasting categories. The response deadline was 800 ms (interstimulus interval = 400 ms).

Results

Manipulation Checks

As intended, participants in the status instability condition perceived that the American economy was declining ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.22$) and that the Italian economy was improving ($M = 7.43$, $SD = 1.12$) more than those in the control condition (M s = 3.96 and 3.10, SD s = 1.77 and 1.31, respectively), $t(84) > 4.10$, p s < .001.

Italians were perceived to have a lower status ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 1.61$) than Americans ($M = 6.99$, $SD = 1.67$), $t(85) = 5.62$, $p < .001$; status perceptions did not differ between experimental and control conditions, $t(84) < .59$, ns . This is in line with expectations, since the manipulation aimed to increase the potential for social change but not the relative actual positions of the groups in the status hierarchy.

The quality of the journal article was not different in the status instability ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.31$) vs. the control condition ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.23$), $t(84) = 1.69$, ns .

Preliminary Analyses

Explicit Attitudes

Identification ($M = 4.12$, $SD = .85$) and social desirability ($M = 3.98$, $SD = .80$) were moderate; SDO was low ($M = 2.65$, $SD = .67$). The scores of the three variables did not differ across conditions, $t(84) < 1.73$, ns .

Overall, participants displayed significant ingroup bias: Although the evaluations of both the Italian ($M = 5.02$, $SD = .94$) and the American ($M = 4.37$, $SD = .80$) groups were higher than the neutral point of the scale, $t_{Italians}(85) = 10.05$, $p < .001$; $t_{Americans}(85) = 4.26$, $p < .001$, the ingroup was evaluated more favorably than the outgroup, $t(85) = 5.86$, $p < .001$. An index of explicit ingroup bias was computed by subtracting the explicit evaluation of the outgroup from that of the ingroup; higher scores indicate stronger ingroup bias.

Implicit Attitudes

Following Nosek and Banaji’s indications (2001), for each block of trials, a sensitivity index (d') based on signal detection theory (Green & Swets, 1966) was calculated; higher scores indicate a stronger association between a target-concept (e.g., Italians) and an attribute dimension (e.g., positive words).

Sensitivity scores were submitted to a 2 (Target-concept: Italian vs. American) \times 2 (Attribute: positive vs. negative)

repeated measures ANOVA. The only significant effect was the interaction Target-concept \times Attribute, $F(1, 85) = 241.25, p < .001, \eta^2 = .74$. Predictably, simple effects analyses revealed significant implicit ingroup bias: Participants associated Italians more with positive ($M = 3.19, SD = .66$) than negative words ($M = 2.12, SD = .81$), $F(1, 85) = 138.24, p < .001, \eta^2 = .62$, whereas they associated Americans more with negative ($M = 3.10, SD = .77$) than positive words ($M = 2.01, SD = .83$), $F(1, 85) = 131.09, p < .001, \eta^2 = .61$.

Three indices were calculated: ingroup evaluation (difference between the d 's of the two blocks where the Italian category served as signal), outgroup evaluation (difference between the d 's of the two blocks where the American category represented the signal), and ingroup bias (difference between the two previous indices). Higher scores indicate, respectively, more positive implicit ingroup and outgroup evaluation, greater implicit ingroup bias.

Main Analyses

To test the hypotheses, hierarchical regression was applied. Dummy-coded experimental condition (1 = status instability; 0 = control) was entered together with centered identification and SDO in the first step. In the second step, we added the two-way interactions. In the third step we examined, with exploratory purposes, the effects of the three-way interaction. Social desirability was entered as a covariate. The dependent variables were: explicit and implicit in-

group and outgroup evaluation, explicit and implicit ingroup bias.

Concerning explicit attitudes, consistent with Hypothesis 1, the results revealed the expected main effect of identification for both ingroup evaluation, $F(4, 81) = 12.73, p < .001, \beta = .52, p < .001$, and ingroup bias, $F(4, 81) = 2.90, p < .05, \beta = .31, p < .01$: Stronger identification was associated with a more favorable evaluation of the ingroup and with increased ingroup bias. However, no other significant effects concerning predictors and/or experimental condition emerged.

With respect to implicit attitudes, we found a significant interaction, Identification \times Experimental condition, concerning the measure of implicit outgroup evaluation, $F(7, 78) = 2.30, p < .05, \beta = -.43, p < .01, Fchange(3, 78) = 3.69, p < .05$. Simple slope analyses revealed that, consistent with Hypothesis 2, identification reduced the implicit evaluation of the outgroup in the status instability condition, $b = -.48, SE = .16, t = 2.94, p < .01$; the effect of identification on outgroup evaluation was nonreliable in the control condition, $b = .15, SE = .15, t = .99, ns$ (see Figure 1). No other significant effects emerged.

Discussion

The present research examined perceptions of status (in)stability as a moderator of the effects of identification on explicit and implicit intergroup attitudes, by considering a low-status group. In particular, we investigated the relationship between Italians and Americans from the point of view of Italians. We reasoned that nowadays economic and political changes in the international situation, and consequently perceptions that the international status hierarchy might change, are likely to deeply affect people's attitudes toward other countries.

Our first hypothesis, concerning the effects of identification on explicit intergroup attitudes, received partial support. In particular, identification increased ingroup bias, and this effect was driven by ingroup enhancement. However, these effects were not moderated by perceived status stability. In contrast, when considering implicit attitudes, the expected interaction between identification and experimental condition emerged with regard to the index of outgroup evaluation. Supportive of Hypothesis 2, identification increased implicit outgroup derogation only when the status was unstable.

With respect to the absence of effects of SDO, it should be observed that our findings do not necessarily contradict social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999): Stronger associations between SDO and intergroup attitudes might be expected for high- rather than for low-status group members at both high and low levels of status stability (Federico, 1998; Pratto et al., 2006).

The results obtained for both explicit and implicit attitudes are in line with SIT (Tajfel, 1981). With respect to

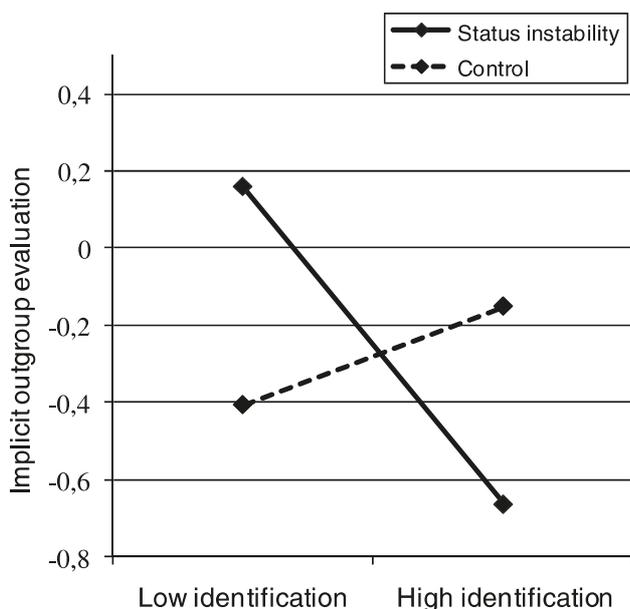


Figure 1. Interaction Identification \times Experimental condition. Dependent variable: implicit outgroup evaluation. High and low scores of identification are intended at a standard deviation above and a standard deviation below the mean.

explicit attitudes, unsatisfactory group membership (i.e., low-status) probably was sufficient, for those highly identified, to elicit ingroup bias, even when the status relationship was stable (control condition). The fact that the effects of identification on explicit ingroup bias were driven by ingroup enhancement is consistent with research showing that favoring one's group does not automatically imply hostility toward the outgroup (see Brewer, 1999).

Strong support for SIT (Tajfel, 1981) comes from the findings obtained on implicit attitudes, which are consistent with the assumption that intergroup competition from the low-status group is more likely when the status is unstable and illegitimate (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), especially for those who are highly identified (Doosje et al., 2002). Indeed, to the extent that instability and illegitimacy are often correlated (Bettencourt, Dorr, Charlton, & Hume, 2001), the context in the status instability condition was ideal for displaying the greatest amount of intergroup competition, expressed by derogating the outgroup.

The difference between the results obtained for explicit and implicit attitudes is especially intriguing. It is possible that high-identified participants were not any more willing than those less identified to explicitly show hostility toward the outgroup, even when the situation was likely to increase competitiveness (i.e., in the status instability condition). In contrast, implicit attitudes were unaffected by self-presentation strategies, such that high-identifiers were "free" to reveal a stronger outgroup derogation, compared to low-identifiers, with unstable status. In line with the reasoning that impression management may have influenced the results for explicit attitudes, it should be noted that, whereas participants explicitly evaluated both the ingroup and the outgroup positively, they revealed a strong implicit bias, driven by both ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation, irrespective of experimental condition. The fact that the context considered was nonconflictual may have strengthened the dissociation between explicit and implicit attitudes. It is possible that, in more conflictual situations, less characterized by social norms toward equality, the results for explicit and implicit attitudes would not differ.

We are not aware of other studies testing the moderator role of sociostructural factors in the relation between group identification and both explicit and implicit intergroup attitudes. To the extent that self-presentation strategies and impression management may clearly bias explicit evaluations and, thus, lead to misleading conclusions with respect to the factors affecting intergroup relations, our findings point to the importance of examining social identity processes by also considering implicit attitudes.

Our results underscore the need to consider ingroup and outgroup evaluations separately, both explicitly and implicitly, as we did in this study; otherwise, important effects might be obscured. For instance, in the present research, status instability moderated the effects of identification on implicit outgroup but not ingroup evaluation.

The present research has some limitations. First, we did not consider the high-status group. Second, we examined

the moderator role of status (in)stability, whereas perceived permeability of group boundaries and legitimacy of the status relationship may also be important. A further limitation is that, to vary status stability, we focused exclusively on the economic domain. It is possible that perceived (in)stability on alternative dimensions would produce different results. Finally, it is worth mentioning that our manipulation considered at the same time the increasing status of the ingroup and the decreasing status of the outgroup. Possibly, the decrease of US status may have generated a more negative implicit evaluation of this group, suggesting that its members are less worthy of esteem. Future research should manipulate ingroup enhancement and outgroup decrease separately and examine their effects on the implicit derogation of the outgroup.

Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that identification is an important predictor of intergroup attitudes in real groups, and that examining the potential for social change of the intergroup context is not pointless. The present study also suggests that considering both explicit and implicit attitudes is crucial for a better understanding of the complex dynamics characterizing intergroup relations and for a more adequate test of SIT (Tajfel, 1981).

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