

When Am I My Group? Self-Enhancement Versus Self-Justification Accounts of Perceived Prototypicality

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The tendency to view the self as a prototypic member of a group is thought to be at the foundation of many social psychological phenomena. Two opposing accounts of perceived prototypicality have been suggested in the psychological literature. The self-justification account portrays this as a defensive tendency that occurs in response to threatened group status. The self-enhancement account portrays this as a strategic tendency to associate the self with positively viewed groups. These competing views were tested using both a minimal group (Study 1) and a naturalistic group (Study 2). Both studies showed that perceived prototypicality increased with increasing group status. Moreover, the effect of status was moderated by group importance (Study 1) and behavioral choice (Study 2). Both interaction patterns supported the self-enhancement view, suggesting that people view themselves as prototypic group members when doing so will promote a positive identity. These findings contradict common statements in the social identity literature.

KEY WORDS: prototypicality; self-stereotyping; self-enhancement; self-justification; social identity; system justification.

The shift from viewing the self as a distinct individual to viewing it as a member of a group is thought to be at the foundation of many social psychological phenomena (Turner *et al.*, 1987). One way in which a group identity may reveal itself is through *perceived prototypicality*. Perceived prototypicality refers to the tendency to perceive the self as a prototypic or “typical” group member, and this concept was first introduced under the rubric of social identity theory. This theory contends that, in an intergroup context, there can be functional benefits to viewing

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one's self as a representative member of the in-group (Smith and Hamilton, 1994; Spears *et al.*, 1997; Turner *et al.*, 1987). This tendency can also have far reaching implications for social justice research. As just one example, perceiving the self as a group member may lead to more cooperative behavior among people facing a social dilemma. People in such situations must choose between acting in a manner that benefits the self or one that benefits one's group. For instance, citizens of Southwestern communities who are experiencing a drought must choose to either take a long, enjoyable shower or forgo this pleasure in order to conserve water. Social identity theory suggests that those individuals who feel they are typical community members would be more likely to engage in behaviors that benefit the group, such as resource conservation.

Although perceived prototypicality is pertinent to many group processes, it is unclear what motivation might underlie this phenomenon. Two opposing motivational accounts are suggested within the social identity literature: *self-justification* and *self-enhancement*.³ We review each and then introduce a set of studies that tests these competing accounts.

Self-Justification

The motive to justify one's actions has been studied mostly within the cognitive dissonance tradition. In the way we are using the term here, *justification* refers to the tendency to change attitudes, beliefs and feelings in a defensive manner in order to minimize psychological threats (Cooper and Fazio, 1984; Festinger, 1957). The dissonance literature has focused on self-justification tendencies following personal threats and has not given a particular focus to how people respond to threats to their collective identities, but it seems reasonable that group-based threats will evoke dissonant-like responses. Consider people who freely and knowingly choose membership in groups that later reveal themselves to be low-status. Because in-group status can influence personal status, people may feel a need to justify their membership in such groups, possibly by embracing the group identity. Evidence of a self-justification motive can be found in research showing that lowered in-group status leads to increased in-group cohesiveness (Thibaut, 1950), attraction (Turner *et al.*, 1984) and liking (Aronson and Mills, 1959).

Another way of justifying membership in devalued in-groups may be to bring the group closer to the self by defining one's self as a prototypic in-group member. A number of theories pertaining to in-group identification suggest this might occur. The strongest indications can be found in Turner's extension of social identity theory, self-categorization theory (Turner *et al.*, 1987). He used the term "depersonalization" to refer to the process whereby people perceive themselves as

³Some might argue that the distinction between self-justification and self-enhancement is untenable (e.g., Steele and Liu, 1983). However, in this case the distinction is useful because it helps discriminate between motivated reactions in response to positive versus negative group outcomes.

interchangeable exemplars of their social groups. More recently, this phenomenon has been referred to as “self-stereotyping” (e.g., Biernat *et al.*, 1996; Simon and Hamilton, 1994; Spears *et al.*, 1997).⁴ Turner noted that depersonalization is analogous to a change in self-attitudes and so it can be comparable to a dissonance-reduction process. Because dissonance occurs in response to threat, he argued, depersonalization should occur more when one belongs to a group that is relatively disadvantaged. In such cases, individuals “identify with their group to make sense of and justify public behavior as a group member which has negative outcomes” (Turner *et al.*, 1987, p. 53; and see Turner *et al.*, 1984). In support of this assertion, Turner *et al.* (1984) found that attraction to the group increased when participants were given failure as opposed to success feedback for a group performance. This was particularly true when membership in the group was freely chosen or when commitment to the group was high. Both moderators suggest that, as the threat of group failure increased, attraction to the group increased in direct proportion. Although this study did not directly test prototypicality effects, their results suggest that diminished status might evoke defensive identification with the in-group.

In sum, an early claim in self-categorization theory is that the need to justify membership in low-status groups might lead one to view one’s self as a prototypic in-group member, and empirical evidence suggests that this motive does influence related tendencies to internalize or embrace in-group identities. It is therefore reasonable to predict that people will defensively identify with low-status in-groups by viewing themselves as prototypic group members.

Self-Enhancement

The opposing view is that people will define themselves as typical group members when doing so will highlight positive in-group associations. This view of perceived prototypicality can be predicted in a straightforward manner from the vast literature on positive illusions. Research has long demonstrated that people bias their perceptions in ways that promote positive self-views. So robust are these

⁴Within the self-stereotyping literature, researchers have operationalized self-stereotyping in two manners. One is based on Turner’s original concept of depersonalization and so it maps onto our notion of perceived prototypicality. This form of self-stereotyping can be defined in general terms as an individual’s tendency to feel similar to the typical group member (e.g., Spears *et al.*, 1997; Verkuyten and Nekuee, 1999). The second definition portrays self-stereotyping as the tendency to view stereotypic in-group traits and attributes as being descriptive of the self (e.g., Biernat *et al.*, 1996; Pickett *et al.*, 2002; Simon and Hamilton, 1994). Because these two definitions have been associated with this single term, and because we are focusing on a phenomenon that makes no reference to in-group stereotypes, we have avoided using this label when discussing the tendency to represent one’s self as a typical group member. Some readers may prefer that we use the term self-stereotyping as an “umbrella term” to avoid adding unnecessary new jargon into the literature, but we would point out that parsimony of terms is only desirable in this particular instance if the two forms of self-stereotyping are influenced by the same psychological processes. Our own research, including results reported here in Study 2, suggests that this is not the case.

tendencies, in fact, that some have argued that the need for enhancement is the primary motive of the self (Sedikides, 1993; Taylor and Brown, 1988). In terms of group processes, this suggests that we are drawn to social groups with high status and that we avoid groups with low status.

There is reason to believe that this self-enhancement motive drives the tendency to view the self as a prototypic group member. This is because, just as the self-justifying view has been promoted in the groups literature, so, too, has the self-enhancing view been promoted. This latter emphasis is to be expected, given that the desire for self-esteem plays a central role in Tajfel and Turner's (1979, 1986) social identity theory. Accordingly, one reason people join groups is to satisfy their desire for a positive identity (Abrams and Hogg, 2001; Hogg and Abrams, 1988), and, once in a group, people are then motivated to act in ways that positively distinguish the in-group from out-groups (Long and Spears, 1997).

Several studies suggest that people view themselves as typical of their groups when doing so can enhance self-evaluations. For instance, Spears *et al.* (1997) showed a decreased tendency to rate the self as similar to the in-group when the group was low in status. This effect was constrained, however, such that it occurred only among people who did not identify strongly with their in-group. Similarly, Simon and Hamilton (1994) found a greater tendency to embrace the stereotypic traits of a high-status in-group, provided that the group was also a minority group. One interpretation of this result is that minority groups exert greater influence on self-evaluations and so members of these groups would be the ones most able to reap the identity benefits of being associated with a high-status group (see Blanton and Christie, 2003).

Critical Tests

The goal of the current studies was to conduct critical tests between the self-justification and self-enhancement views of perceived prototypicality. In this pursuit, we felt it was not enough simply to determine if the tendency to define the self as a group member increases in direct or inverse proportion with group status. Such tests would be open to a range of alternative theoretical accounts and would not have the precision needed to reveal specific psychological mechanisms. More informative tests consider the theoretical moderators believed to influence the tendencies to justify and to enhance. Analyses of these variables will help determine if perceived prototypicality patterns itself in ways consistent with either of these motivational systems. The current studies applied this logic by utilizing two moderators that are known to influence both justification and enhancement motives, *outcome aversiveness* and *personal choice*.

In general, the need to justify increases (1) when one's actions lead to aversive outcomes, and (2) when these actions are freely chosen (Cooper and Fazio, 1984). Consider outcome aversiveness. If people view themselves as prototypic in-group members in order to reduce the threat of lowered in-group

status, then this tendency should be greatest when diminished status is experienced as particularly aversive (Cooper and Brehm, 1971; Scher and Cooper, 1989). One variable that increases the aversiveness of lowered status is the extent to which the in-group is viewed as personally important or central to one's overall identity. It is potentially more threatening to be a member of a low-status group when this group is personally important than when it is not. We thus conducted Study 1 to test if increasing the importance of an in-group would increase an inverse relationship between status and perceived prototypicality. Now consider personal choice. If perceived prototypicality reflects a self-justification motive, people should feel more threat for being in low-status groups that were freely chosen than for being in groups that were ascribed or selected as a result of environmental constraints (Cooper, 1971; and see Barreto and Ellemers, 2002). We thus conducted Study 2 to test if increased choice in joining an in-group would increase an inverse relation between status and perceived prototypicality.

One nice feature of the two variables, in-group importance and in-group choice, is that opposing predictions can be made for both variables from a self-enhancement perspective. Whereas a self-justification account would lead one to predict greater perceived prototypicality when low-status groups are important, a self-enhancement account would lead one to predict greater perceived prototypicality when high-status groups are important. This is because global self-esteem generally is influenced more by traits or attributes that are central or important to one's self-definition than by traits that are not (Rothman and Schwarz, 1998; Sedikides and Gregg, 2003; see Pelham, 1995). We thus used the data in Study 1 to test competing predictions regarding in-group importance. The first prediction was that increased importance would increase a *direct* relationship between in-group status and perceived prototypicality, and the competing prediction was that increased importance would increase an *inverse* relationship between in-group status and perceived prototypicality.

Study 2 also tested competing predictions, this time with regards to choice to join a group. Whereas a self-justification account based on cognitive dissonance would lead one to predict greater perceived prototypicality when one freely chooses to join low-status groups, a self-enhancement view would predict greater perceived prototypicality when one freely chooses to join high-status groups. This is because positive outcomes can more easily be associated with the self when one has chosen the actions that lead to them (Tafarodi *et al.*, 2002). We thus used the data in Study 2 to test competing predictions regarding choice. The first prediction was that increased choice would increase a *direct* relationship between in-group status and perceived prototypicality, and the competing prediction was that increased choice would increase an *inverse* relationship between in-group status and perceived prototypicality.

In summary, the two moderator variables of *in-group importance* and *in-group choice* should increase the inverse relationship between status and perceived

prototypicality if the self-justification theory is correct, but they should increase the direct relationship between status and perceived prototypicality if the self-enhancement theory is correct. These competing moderator predictions were tested in Studies 1 and 2.

STUDY 1: IN-GROUP IMPORTANCE

Overview

Some groups are relatively important to one's self-definition, whereas others are not. Consider a social psychologist who views her membership in the community of social psychologists as a particularly important identity. If the status of social psychologists were challenged (say, at an economics conference), this could be threatening and arouse in her a motive to justify her group membership. In contrast, if the status of social psychologists were elevated (say, when a Social Psychologist wins the Nobel Prize for Economics), this could be uplifting and raise her feelings of self-worth. In contrast, this same woman may have little or no reaction if the status of her undergraduate alma mater went up and down as a result of the wins and losses of its football team. Whereas social psychology formed an important identity for this individual, her college affiliation did not.

Study 1 applied this logic to investigate the degree to which in-group importance moderates the influence of in-group status on perceived prototypicality. If perceived prototypicality is a self-justification process, diminished status should lead to increased prototypic perceptions the more important the group identity. If perceived prototypicality is instead a self-enhancement process, increased status should lead to increased perceived prototypicality the more important the group identity. Study 1 tested these competing predictions using a minimal group procedure.

Method

Participants and Design

Seventy-six undergraduate students participated for credit in an introductory psychology class. Their mean age was 22 years; 36 were men and 40 were women. Participants were randomly assigned to high or low status and their level of group importance was measured. The primary dependent variable was perceived prototypicality.⁵

⁵The original design also included a manipulated variable: relevance of the in-group assignment to other meaningful outcomes. The analyses showed no significant changes in the manipulation check. As such, this variable is not discussed further.

Procedure

Participants were asked to rate their liking for a set of abstract paintings on the computer. They were then told that their ratings revealed their type of “visual orientation.” All participants were told that their painting preferences indicated a strong “vertical orientation.” Participants were then presented with information regarding the status of this in-group.

Predictors

Status Manipulation. Participants were presented with information indicating that vertically oriented people constituted a high or low-status group. Participants were first told that vertical orientation is highly related to various cognitive characteristics. They then read that one such characteristic is “spatial complexity,” which was defined as “a form of intelligence that refers to one’s abstract reasoning capabilities” and described as a valuable ability in many contexts. Group status was manipulated by informing high-status participants that vertical orientation is strongly linked to high levels of spatial complexity, whereas low-status participants were told that vertical orientation is strongly linked to low levels of this trait. Thus, for high-status participants, their in-group was associated with positive qualities, whereas for low-status participants, their in-group was associated with negative qualities.

In-Group Importance. To assess individual differences in perceived importance, participants were asked to rate the importance of the basis for their group membership (To what extent is vertical orientation important to you personally?).⁶ Responses were made on an 11-point scale ranging from *not at all important* to *extremely important*.

Criteria

Status Manipulation Check. Participants were asked several questions regarding how vertically oriented people perform in terms of intelligence and other reasoning abilities. Responses were made on a 7-point bipolar scale ranging from *extremely poorly* to *extremely well*. These items were first scored so that high numbers represented higher perceived status and were then combined into a single index.

Perceived Prototypicality. To assess perceived prototypicality, we used measures identical to those used by Spears *et al.* (1997) and Verkuyten and Nekuee

⁶Differences in importance ratings across the two status conditions were tested to ensure that the manipulation did not influence the moderating variable. As expected, high and low status groups did not differ in their importance ratings, $t(74) = 1.74, p > 0.05$.

(1999). Specifically, participants were asked two questions: “How different are you from the typical vertically oriented person” and “How similar are you to the typical vertically oriented person” ($r = 0.27$, $p < 0.01$). Responses were made on an 11-point scale ranging from *not at all different/similar* to *extremely different/similar*. Responses were coded so that high scores indicated greater perceived prototypicality and were then summed to form a single index.

Results

Preliminary Statistics

Participants in the high-status condition rated their in-group as higher status ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 0.78$) than those in the low-status condition ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.78$), $F(1, 72) = 47.00$, $p < 0.01$. We view these results as confirmation that the status manipulation was effective.

Participants' ratings of importance covered the full range of the scale values (1 to 11) and the mean was $M = 3.47$, $SD = 2.59$. We view this as confirmation that participants varied in the importance placed on their minimal group assignment.

Perceived Prototypicality

The moderator analysis was conducted by utilizing interaction regression. Specifically, we regressed the perceived prototypicality scores onto the full range of importance ratings, a dummy code for status (0: low status; 1: high status), and the multiplicative cross-product of importance and status. To assess the independent main effects, importance and status were entered in the first block of a hierarchical regression equation and the cross-product was added in the second block (see Blanton and Jaccard, in press).

The results of the regression analyses are displayed in Table I. Although the first block did account for a significant proportion of variance in prototypicality, $R^2 = 0.40$, $F(2, 73) = 6.77$, $p < 0.01$, it only revealed a main effect of status, $t(73) = 2.85$, $p < 0.01$. The unstandardized regression coefficient indicated that, controlling for importance, those in the high-status condition were $B = 1.12$ units higher in perceived prototypicality than those in the low-status condition. Importantly, however, this main effect was qualified by an interaction with self-rated importance. The second block resulted in a significant increase in the proportion of variance accounted for, $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.06$, $F(3, 72) = 6.65$, $p < 0.001$, as a result of a significant interaction between status and importance, $B = 0.35$, $p < 0.05$.

To reveal the patterning of data that contributed to the interaction effect, we computed expected values at different levels of status and different levels of importance (see Aiken and West, 1991; Jaccard *et al.*, 1990). For both high and low

Table I. The Influence of Manipulated Status and Self-Rated Importance on Perceived Prototypicality

| Block | Variable | B | SE | Beta | <i>t</i> -value | <i>p</i> -value |
|-------|--------------------|-------|------|-------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Constant | 4.84 | 0.36 | | 13.44 | 0.01 |
| | Status | 1.12 | 0.39 | 0.31 | 2.85 | 0.01 |
| | Importance | 0.14 | 0.08 | 0.20 | 1.83 | 0.07 |
| 2 | Constant | 5.31 | 0.40 | | 13.18 | 0.01 |
| | Status | -0.12 | 0.65 | -0.03 | -0.19 | 0.85 |
| | Importance | -0.02 | 0.10 | -0.02 | -0.17 | 0.87 |
| | Status* importance | 0.35 | 0.15 | 0.50 | 2.36 | 0.02 |

status groups, we used the regression equation from the entire sample to estimate the perceived prototypicality scores for people at relatively low importance levels and relatively high importance levels. For these comparisons, we computed the expected values at importance levels of 1 and 6. We chose these two values because of where they fell in the entire distribution of importance scores. Twenty-nine percent of participants made an importance rating of 1, and this low score was slightly less than one standard deviation below the mean for the entire sample ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 2.59$). Nineteen percent made a rating of 6 or higher, and this high score was slightly less than one standard deviation above the mean for the entire sample.

Figure 1 shows that, at low levels of importance, there was no difference in perceived prototypicality between those in the low-status ($M = 5.30$) and high-status ($M = 5.53$) conditions, $F < 1$. In contrast, at high levels of importance, there was a significant difference in perceived prototypicality between those in the low-status ($M = 5.21$) and high-status ($M = 7.20$) conditions, $F(1, 72) = 14.09$, $p < 0.001$. This result suggests that status increased the tendency to perceive the self as a prototypic group member, but only when the importance of the group was relatively high.

Discussion

We found that increasing the status of a minimal group caused participants to define themselves as prototypic group members. Moreover, this direct effect of status increased with increasing levels of importance. This pattern is consistent with the self-enhancement view of perceived prototypicality and it runs at odds with the self-justification view.

Although this first study provided evidence for the self-enhancement perspective, there were two serious limitations that Study 2 sought to address. First, the use of a minimal group may have limited generalizability. Even though we observed the full range of values on the importance scale, it could be that the sense in which a minimal group is “important” to an individual does not map onto the

Study 1: Status X Importance

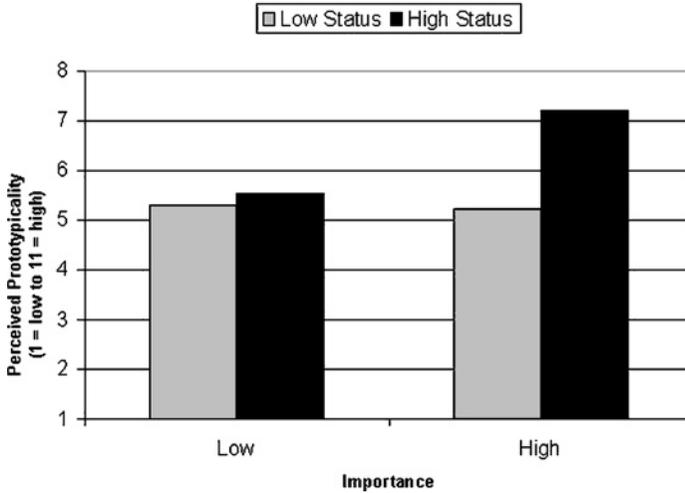


Fig. 1. Moderator analysis of the effects of status (low, high) and self-rated importance (low: 1, slightly less than 1 standard deviation below the mean; high: 6, slightly less than 1 standard deviation above the mean) on perceived prototypicality (range from 1 to 11). High scores on perceived prototypicality indicate a greater level of perceived similarity with the group.

meaning of importance for a natural group. Study 2 thus focused on the tendency of students to view themselves as prototypic members of their college. The second limitation of Study 1 was that the key moderator variable was measured rather than manipulated. Study 2 thus addressed the issue of causality by manipulating a key moderating variable: perceived in-group choice.

Replication of this sort seemed prudent for an additional reason. As noted in our review, there are bodies of research suggesting that justification motives will lead people to embrace low-status or devalued groups under some circumstances (e.g., Aronson and Mills, 1959; Jost and Banaji, 1994; Turner *et al.*, 1984). It thus seemed necessary to submit our (competing) predictions to a second test using new methods and new operationalizations.

STUDY 2: IN-GROUP CHOICE

One of the more robust findings in the cognitive dissonance literature is that the desire to self-justify increases to the extent that one freely chooses to engage in actions that lead to aversive consequences (Cooper, 1971). It follows from this that, if perceived prototypicality reflects a self-justification motive, then this perception

should increase to the greatest extent when one has freely chosen to join a group that is low in status. This prediction is consistent with statements by Turner and colleagues who argued that, “feeling responsible for group behavior with negative consequences arouses cognitive dissonance which can be reduced if one justifies the behavior by identifying more strongly with the group” (Turner *et al.*, 1984, p. 98). If perceived prototypicality instead reflects a self-enhancement motive, then a different pattern should emerge. With increased choice comes an increased ability to associate one’s actions with the self (Tafarodi *et al.*, 2002). Thus, individuals who freely choose to join high-status groups should experience a greater boost in self-esteem if they identify with this group, because membership in the group reflects positively on their character (see Barreto and Ellemers, 2002). A self-enhancement view thus predicts that choice will increase the positive relationship between group status and prototypicality. These competing predictions regarding the moderating role of in-group choice were tested in Study 2.

Method

Participants and Design

One hundred and forty introductory psychology students from the State University of New York at Albany (SUNY-Albany) participated for course credit. The sample consisted of 80 men and 60 women with a mean age of 19 years. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions based on a 2 (status: high versus low) \times 2 (choice: high versus low) factorial design, with gender treated as a blocking variable. As in Study 1, the primary dependent variable was perceived prototypicality.

Procedure

Participants were told this study was being conducted to aid in SUNY-Albany’s efforts to recruit new students. Participants were provided with several passages and told that these excerpts were from recent newspaper articles on SUNY-Albany. The first two reading passages attempted to manipulate their perceived choice in school selection and the last two passages manipulated the perceived status of SUNY-Albany students. They were then asked to provide their reactions to the information presented in the articles.

Independent Variables

Choice Manipulation. Students in the high-choice condition had their attention drawn to the many options they had in picking a college, whereas those in

the low-choice condition had their attention drawn to the few options they had in picking a college. This manipulation was carried out using two bogus newspaper articles. The first ostensibly was taken from a national report on colleges. In the high-choice condition, it emphasized the wide diversity of colleges and universities available to U.S. college students in terms of geography, finances, and admission requirements. In the low-choice condition, it instead emphasized the limitations that prevent most students from finding many schools that fit their particular constellation of geographic, financial and academic requirements. A second article reinforced these perceptions by either focusing on the many colleges in the region (high choice) or the limited number of colleges in the region that match Albany's profile (low choice).

Status Manipulation. The manipulation of status was adapted from Jost and Burgess (2000). Participants in the high-status condition read a contrived news story stating that SUNY-Albany is a nationally prestigious university, that its alumni are highly successful in the job market and that the majority of graduates are accepted into several graduate and professional programs. The article also stated that SUNY-Albany students are perceived as professional, hard-working, intelligent and highly motivated. Participants in the low-status condition read an article that led them to believe that SUNY-Albany had a failing reputation and that there were poor job opportunities for its graduates as a result. It characterized SUNY-Albany students as unprofessional, lazy, unintelligent and lacking in motivation. We felt these two views of the university would be viewed as plausible to students. Although SUNY-Albany is a relatively respected and visible university within the SUNY system, the school had recently been ranked as the "number 1 party school in the nation" by the *Princeton Review* and it traditionally has had lower admissions requirements than neighboring schools. This intuition nevertheless was tested with a manipulation check (below).

Manipulation Checks

Choice. Following the choice manipulation, participants were asked two questions regarding their own choice to attend SUNY-Albany: "I had a large number of schools to choose from," and "There are a large number of good quality schools in the area to choose from." Responses were made on an 11-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*. Scores were summed into a single index, with high scores indicating higher perceived choice.

Status. Following the status manipulation, participants were asked several questions regarding how positively/negatively SUNY-Albany students are perceived (e.g., "In terms of professionalism, how positive or negative is the stereotype of the typical graduate of SUNY-Albany"). Responses were made on an 11-point bipolar scale ranging from *extremely negative* to *extremely positive*. Scores were

summed into a single index, with high scores indicating perceptions that SUNY-Albany is high-status.

Stereotype Endorsement. In collecting status data, we also asked questions related to stereotype endorsement. This allowed a test to determine if the status manipulation led to corresponding shifts in the stereotype of SUNY-Albany students (as predicted by Jost and Burgess, 2000). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with 24 positive and negative stereotypes regarding the “typical recent graduate of SUNY-Albany.” The stereotypic words consisted of twelve negative attributes (unprofessional, antagonistic, careless, unmotivated, aggressive, self-centered, lazy, unintelligent, inconsiderate, unproductive, unpopular, dishonest) and twelve positive attributes (friendly, intelligent, well-liked, honest, professional, responsible, hard-working, successful, considerate, motivated, caring, sociable). Furthermore, half of these stereotypes were relevant to the status manipulation (e.g., successful) and half were irrelevant (e.g., sociable). Responses were made on an 11-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*. Responses were recoded so that all stereotypes were in a negative direction, with high scores indicating more negative in-group perceptions. Scores were then summed into two indices; status-relevant stereotypes and status-irrelevant stereotypes.

Dependent Measure

Perceived Prototypicality. As in Study 1, perceived prototypicality was assessed by two questions (“How different are you from the typical student who just graduated from SUNY-Albany” and “How similar are you from the typical student who just graduated from SUNY-Albany,” $r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$). Responses were made on an 11-point scale ranging from *not at all different/similar* to *extremely different/similar*. Responses were coded so that high scores indicated greater perceived prototypicality and were then summed to form a single index.

Results

Manipulation Checks

The results indicated that perceived choice was successfully manipulated. Participants in the high-choice condition perceived that they had more choice in attending SUNY-Albany ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 1.78$) than those in the low-choice condition ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 2.04$), $t(138) = 4.59$, $p < 0.01$.

The results also indicated that the status manipulation was successful. High-status participants perceived that SUNY-Albany had a more positive reputation ($M = 2.17$, $SD = 1.58$) compared to low-status participants ($M = -0.78$, $SD = 2.66$), $t(138) = -7.96$, $p < 0.01$. Moreover, the low- and high-status groups

differed in their level of endorsement of status-relevant stereotypes, with low-status participants endorsing the negative SUNY-Albany stereotypes more ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.54$) than high-status participants ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.33$), $F(1, 139) = 11.57$, $p < 0.01$. Low and high-status groups also differed in their level of endorsement of status-irrelevant stereotypes, with low-status participants endorsing the negative SUNY-Albany stereotypes more ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.37$) than high-status participants ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.10$), $F(1, 139) = 5.41$, $p < 0.05$.

There are two implications for this pattern of stereotype endorsement. First, this indicated that our status manipulation was effective and that it did influence overall impressions of SUNY-Albany students. Second, this result provided evidence that a self-justification motive was in fact operating in the study for some group perceptions. It suggests that, at some level, participants in the low-status condition recognized and reacted to the reality of their devalued identity. This finding replicates part of the pattern revealed by Jost and Burgess (2000).⁷ However, our primary question of interest was not whether self-justification motives influence perceptions in general, but whether they affected the tendency to perceive the self as prototypic of an in-group.

Perceived Prototypicality

Competing theoretical predictions were tested by conducting a 2 (status: high versus low) \times 2 (choice: high versus low) Analysis of Variance on perceived prototypicality. As in Study 1, there was a significant main effect of status on prototypicality, $F(1, 136) = 5.52$, $p < 0.05$, with high-status participants showing greater perceived prototypicality ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 2.03$) than low-status participants ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 2.05$). This main effect offered initial support for the self-enhancement view. Once again, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction, $F(1, 136) = 5.72$, $p < 0.05$. The pattern of results is shown in Fig. 2. Under the low-choice condition, there was no difference in the extent to which low-status participants displayed perceived prototypicality ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.79$) when compared to high-status participants ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 2.27$), $F(1, 136) < 1$. Under the high-choice condition, low-status participants described themselves in less prototypic terms ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 2.28$) than did high-status participants ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.55$), $F(1, 136) = 11.23$, $p < 0.001$. These results supported the self-enhancement view of perceived prototypicality and contradicted the self-justification view.

⁷We replicated Jost and Burgess' (2000) finding that low status groups are more likely to endorse status-relevant traits. However, unlike Jost and Burgess, we also found this same pattern for status-irrelevant traits. We suspect the difference in this case has to do with the breadth of our status manipulation. Although our status manipulation targeted traits related to intelligence, industriousness, and professionalism, these qualities are general in nature such that low status on these traits might lead to lowered expectations on a wide range of other status-irrelevant traits.

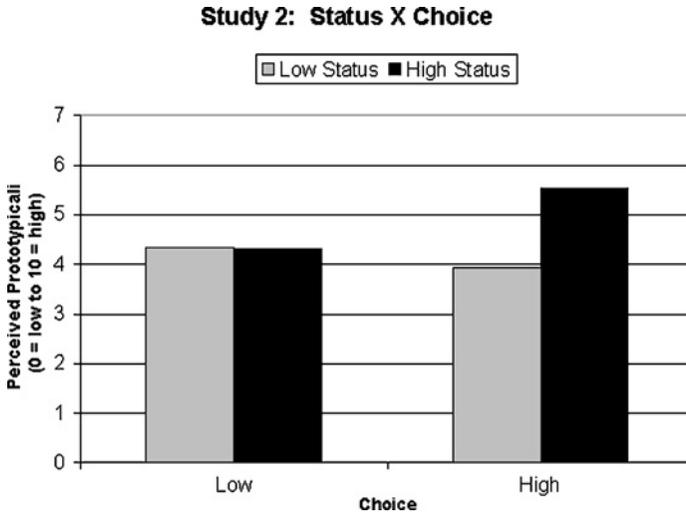


Fig. 2. The effects of status (low, high) and choice (low, high) on perceived prototypicality (range from 0 to 10). High scores on perceived prototypicality indicate a greater level of perceived similarity with the group.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Summary

If perceived prototypicality is driven by a self-justification motive, then there should be a greater tendency to view one’s self as typical of low versus high status groups. Conversely, if perceived prototypicality is driven by a self-enhancement motive, then there should be a greater tendency to view one’s self as typical of high versus low status groups. Studies 1 and 2 both provided results consistent with the self-enhancement account. Furthermore, Study 1 established that the direct effect of status increased when a minimal group was perceived as important, and Study 2 established that the direct effect of status increased when a naturalistic group was perceived as freely chosen. Combined, these studies provide strong evidence that perceived prototypicality is driven by self-enhancement concerns. This argues against a number of classic and contemporary statements portraying the tendency to view the self as representative of the group as a defensive response to diminished in-group status.

Boundary Conditions and Qualifications

Our approach to theory testing was to perform critical tests of two competing accounts of the conditions under which individuals view themselves as prototypic

group members. Although this approach typically can be more informative than a test that focuses on only one set of predictions, it is important not to infer from this or any critical test that the conclusions drawn are absolute (Lakatos, 1970). There undoubtedly are boundary conditions under which self-enhancement motives drive the tendency to see the self as a typical group member. One factor that seems to limit the tendency to strategically embrace an in-group identity is identification. Spears *et al.* (1997) demonstrated that high and low identified individuals responded differently to threats to their in-group. In their study, low identifiers who belonged to a low-status group distanced themselves from their group association. This pattern is consistent with those observed in Studies 1 and 2. Importantly, however, high identifiers in their study did not distance themselves from the in-group when status was low. This group of individuals seemed to be “trapped” by their in-group identification and so they could not disidentify with the group, simply to promote a positive view of self (for related discussions, see Blanton *et al.*, 2002; Oakes *et al.*, 1994). As this research shows, people may be strategic in their decision to define themselves as prototypical group members, but some groups are so central to a member’s self-definition that they will embrace the identity even when the group is under threat.

We also note that, although these studies suggest that perceived prototypicality is not driven by a justification motive, this does not imply that self-justification is not a powerful driving force in the psychology of the group. One theory that has provided ample support for the power of justificatory motives is system justification theory (Jost and Banaji, 1994). System justification theory asserts that people have a need to perceive the status quo as fair and legitimate and therefore they are driven to justify the existing social arrangements. Interestingly, these researchers find that those who belong to relatively disadvantaged in-groups are sometimes more likely to engage in this legitimizing behavior. For example, Jost *et al.* (2003) found evidence that individuals who were less advantaged by existing social systems (e.g., low-income individuals) were more likely to embrace system-justifying beliefs (e.g., perceiving economic inequalities to be necessary to provide incentives). Similarly, Blanton *et al.* (2001) demonstrated that the tendency for disadvantaged groups to internalize in-group norms increased the greater the investment members had in the status quo system of rewards. To wit, our results in Study 2 suggested that some self-justification concerns were operating. This study suggested that the status manipulation influenced in-group stereotype endorsements, which is consistent with the findings of Jost and Burgess (2000). In short, many aspects of group identity may pattern themselves in ways consistent with a justification motive. It just appears that the tendency to view the self as a prototypic group member is not one of them.

That said, we admit that conditions might exist that cause prototypicality perceptions to pattern themselves in a manner that is opposite of what we observed in these studies (McGuire, 2004). We find work by Crocker and Major (1989) to be

suggestive in this regard. Crocker and Major have shown that diminished group status can at times be used to discount unwanted social outcomes. It is possible that people might define themselves in terms of their group memberships for similar purposes. As examples, a college professor might view himself as a prototypic (absent-minded) professor shortly after forgetting to pick a friend up at the airport, and a college student might view herself as a prototypic (carefree) college student the morning after a night of heavy drinking. These self-protective tendencies to view one's self as typical of one's group differ from the type we studied here. Both of these examples point to momentary cognitive shifts that help actors distance themselves from undesirable actions. In such cases, these acts can either stick to one's personal identity or to one's group identity (or to both). It is possible that people typically respond in such instances by embracing the in-group and thereby projecting their unwanted qualities onto others (e.g., Mullen and Goethals, 1990). Such tendencies strike us as plausible, but future research will need to examine this issue in greater detail. At present, it appears that the tendency to view one's self as prototypic of an in-group is driven by a desire to bask in positive group associations, not to justify negative ones.

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