

THE IMPACT OF INTRA-GROUP INTERACTION ON IDENTITY AND ACTION

Submitted by Laura Grace Elizabeth Smith to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology, October 2008.

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Laura Grace Elizabeth Smith

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ABSTRACT

The unifying theme of the chapters presented in this thesis is that intra-group interaction impacts on in-group identity content, and this content provides a foundation for social action and social behaviour. The primary goals of this thesis are first, to demonstrate that social realities can be established and transformed through interaction; and second, to investigate why the process of intra-group interaction can spark and exacerbate social conflict. In Chapter 1, I review and attempt to theoretically integrate the disparate literatures on group discussion, identity and action.

In Chapter 2, I investigate the effect of interaction on the positive-negative asymmetry effect (PNAE). In Study 2.1, participants were more likely to discriminate on rewards than fines, and find allocating rewards to be a more legitimate and pleasant act than allocating fines. Conversely, participants thought allocating fines would have a more negative effect on recipients and felt more negative about allocating fines than rewards. In Study 2.2, when in-group advancement was obstructed, no PNAE was found: obstruction was sufficient justification for out-group punishment in its own right. When in-group advancement was *not obstructed*, the PNAE reversed after group discussion, such that more hostility occurred when participants administered fines than when they awarded rewards. This reversal was mediated by processes of norm formation.

In Chapter 3, I describe three studies which show that consensual intra-group discussions about a negatively regarded out-group increased inter-group hostility. Study 3.1 compared group discussion about immigrants with individual reflection. Results showed that group discussion informed the content of stereotypes, which led to support for anti-immigrant policies. In Study 3.2, participants discussed either an irrelevant topic, the out-group stereotype, or the out-group stereotype plus what

concrete actions should be taken towards that group. Only discussion of the stereotype significantly increased hostility, suggesting that the psychological products of discussion *per se* (cohesion, identification, etc.) are not solely responsible for hostility. Rather, social validation of the stereotype explained why its discussion increased hostility. Study 3.3 replicated these results with a behavioural measure.

In Chapter 4, I present two studies which controlled for the content of interaction by showing participants short films of similar others having a group discussion. Study 4.1 investigated the paradoxical finding that when groups discuss potential courses of action against an out-group, they are less likely to act than when they discuss simply the out-group stereotype (Chapter 3). Results suggested that when group discussions imply that there is social consensus about a course of action, even the advocacy of extreme actions can increase support for (more moderate) social action. Study 4.2 manipulated whether or not the discussants consensualised on the out-group stereotype, whilst controlling for discussion content. Only when the discussion ended in consensus did participants identify with the discussants and perceive norms for social action.

In Chapter 5, I address how social identities and their associated (self-) stereotypes can disadvantage members of low status groups, but how they can also promote social change. The data demonstrates that consensualisation in small groups can transform (or reconfirm) such stereotypes, thereby eliminating (or bolstering) stereotype threat effects. In Study 5.1, female participants were asked why men are (or are not) better at maths. They generated their answers individually or through group discussion. Stereotype threat was undermined only when they collectively challenged the stereotype. Content analyses suggest that discussions redefined in-group and out-group stereotypes, providing the basis for stigma reversal or confirmation. In Study 5.2, male and female participants confirmed or challenged the stereotype in same-

gender discussion groups or no discussion, baseline conditions. After a discussion that confirmed the stereotype, women displayed signs of stereotype threat and men's performance was "lifted". When they challenged the stereotype, the difference between men and women on the maths test was eliminated.

Overall, the results reported in this thesis suggest that intra-group interaction enables group members to develop an understanding of their common ideology, which may establish the consensual basis of their identity content. If such consensualisation occurs, this provides them with a sense that their perceptions of reality are socially valid, and gives rise to (implicit or explicit) in-group norms. This provides individuals with a solid foundation upon which they may act. The implications of these conclusions are discussed in Chapter 6.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Abstract</i>	Page ii
<i>List of tables and figures</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
1 Introduction	1
Aims and objectives of this thesis.....	2
Definition of terms	4
Overview	6
Intra-group interaction.....	6
Early research using group discussion	6
<i>Group decision</i>	6
The group polarisation phenomenon	7
<i>Normative influence</i>	8
<i>Social comparison theory</i>	9
<i>Pluralistic ignorance</i>	11
<i>Informational influence</i>	12
<i>Persuasive arguments theory</i>	12
<i>Persuasion</i>	14
<i>Critique</i>	15
Identity.....	17
The social identity approach	18
<i>Social identity theory</i>	19
<i>Self-categorisation theory</i>	21
<i>SCT and social influence</i>	22
<i>The SCT account of group polarisation</i>	23
Theories of interdependence	27
The inductive model of identity formation	28
The influence of identity content on inter-group relations	32
<i>Stereotype consensus</i>	32
<i>Recent advances</i>	34
Action.....	35
Attitudes in action	35
Interaction in action	37
<i>Theories of oppression</i>	39
<i>Theories of collective action</i>	41
Summary.....	44
The current research.....	45
 2 Intra-group interaction and the development of norms which promote inter-group hostility	 48
The PNAE and its causes	49
Consensualisation and norm formation	50

<i>In-group obstruction as an aggravating condition</i>	52
Study 2.1.....	53
Method	54
<i>Dependent measures</i>	54
Results and discussion	55
Study 2.2.....	56
Method	57
<i>Participants and design</i>	57
<i>Independent variables</i>	57
<i>Dependent measures</i>	58
<i>Procedure</i>	59
<i>Pre-consensus phase</i>	60
<i>Consensus phase</i>	61
Analytic strategy	62
<i>Condition effects</i>	62
<i>Tests of specific hypotheses</i>	63
Results	64
<i>Discrimination</i>	64
<i>Condition effects</i>	64
<i>Specific hypotheses</i>	65
<i>Pre-consensus phase</i>	65
<i>Consensus phase</i>	65
<i>Hostile norm</i>	67
<i>Condition effects</i>	67
<i>Specific hypotheses</i>	68
<i>Pre-consensus phase</i>	68
<i>Consensus phase</i>	68
<i>Mediation</i>	69
<i>Social identification</i>	70
Proportion of respondents behaving fairly	71
General discussion.....	72
<i>Conclusion</i>	76
3 The power of talk: legitimising hostile social action.....	78
<i>The power of talk</i>	79
Normative and informational explanations	80
<i>Stereotype consensualisation and the normalisation of implicit ideologies</i>	82
<i>Present research overview</i>	84
Study 3.1.....	84
Method	85
<i>Participants and design</i>	85
<i>Procedure</i>	85
<i>Dependent measures</i>	86
<i>Analytic strategy</i>	87
Results	89

<i>Discussion content</i>	89
<i>HLM analyses</i>	90
<i>Mediation</i>	90
Discussion	91
Study 3.2.....	92
Method	93
<i>Participants and design</i>	93
<i>Procedure</i>	94
<i>Dependent measures</i>	94
<i>Analytic strategy</i>	96
Results	96
<i>Mediation</i>	97
Discussion	99
Study 3.3.....	100
Method	101
<i>Participants and design</i>	101
<i>Procedure</i>	101
<i>Dependent measures</i>	101
Results	102
<i>Discussion content</i>	102
<i>HLM analyses</i>	104
Discussion	107
General discussion.....	108
<i>The power of talk</i>	109
<i>Limitations and future research</i>	110
<i>Conclusion</i>	111
4 The role of in-group consensualisation in identity (in)formation.....	112
<i>The crucial role of consensus</i>	113
<i>Alternative explanations and empirical challenges</i>	115
(1) <i>The consensual discussion of actions</i>	116
(2) <i>Discussion of extreme actions</i>	116
(3) <i>The prior inter-group context</i>	117
(4) <i>The process of consensualisation</i>	118
<i>Overview</i>	118
Study 4.1.....	119
Method	119
<i>Participants and design</i>	119
<i>Stimuli and procedure</i>	119
<i>Dependent Measures</i>	120
Results	123
<i>Mediation</i>	127
Discussion	128
Study 4.2.....	130
Method	131

<i>Participants and design</i>	131
<i>Stimuli and procedure</i>	131
<i>Dependent measures</i>	132
Results and discussion	133
<i>Mediation</i>	136
General discussion.....	137
<i>Implications and future directions</i>	139
<i>Conclusion</i>	142
5 Changing social identities: social consensus as a foundation of stereotype threat.....	144
<i>The negative effects of stereotype threat</i>	144
<i>Stereotype lift</i>	145
<i>Combating stereotype threat</i>	145
<i>The power of talk: transforming social identities</i>	145
<i>The present research</i>	147
Study 5.1.....	147
<i>Hypotheses</i>	148
Method	148
<i>Participants and design</i>	148
<i>Materials and procedure</i>	148
<i>Dependent measures</i>	149
<i>Analytic strategy</i>	150
<i>Qualitative data</i>	150
<i>Measure of consensus</i>	151
Results	152
<i>Stereotype consensus</i>	152
<i>Performance effects</i>	156
<i>Maths test score</i>	157
<i>Psychological effects</i>	159
<i>Evaluation apprehension</i>	159
<i>Anger</i>	159
<i>Gender identification</i>	160
<i>Mediation</i>	160
Discussion	160
<i>Transforming social identities</i>	161
Study 5.2.....	163
Method	163
<i>Participants and design</i>	163
<i>Materials and procedure</i>	164
<i>Dependent measures</i>	164
<i>Analytic strategy</i>	166
Results	166
Performance effects	166
<i>Maths test score</i>	166

Psychological effects	169
<i>Anxiety and evaluation apprehension</i>	169
<i>Social validation</i>	170
<i>Anger</i>	170
<i>Stereotype threat</i>	170
<i>Identification</i>	170
<i>Mediation</i>	170
Discussion	171
<i>Psychological effects</i>	171
General discussion.....	173
<i>Implications and future directions</i>	175
<i>Conclusion</i>	176
6 General discussion.....	177
The purpose of this thesis	179
Brief summary of the results	179
Theoretical and practical implications	184
<i>Towards an interactive model of social action</i>	184
Considering potential alternative explanations	188
<i>“Isn’t this still just individual cognition?”</i>	188
<i>“Is interaction a necessary condition for these effects to occur?”</i>	189
<i>“Isn’t this just polarisation?”</i>	191
Concluding remarks	193
References.....	195

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1.1	The 3 stages of referent information influence	<i>Page</i> 24
Table 2.1	Coding of contrast variables for HLM, Study 2.2	64
Table 2.2	Mean scores at pre-consensus and consensus, Study 2.2	66
Figure 2.1	Mean discrimination scores, Study 2.2	67
Figure 2.2	Mean hostile norm scores, Study 2.2	69
Table 2.3	<i>N</i> Participants choosing to distribute resources equally between groups, Study 2.2	71
Table 3.1	Mean individual-level scores and scale intercorrelations, Study 3.1	88
Figure 3.1	The percentage of participants who mentioned each key code, Study 3.1	90
Figure 3.2	Gamma coefficients of the mediation model, Study 3.1	91
Table 3.2	Mean individual-level scores and scale intercorrelations, Study 3.2	98
Figure 3.3	Gamma coefficients of the mediation model, Study 3.2	99
Table 3.3	Coding of contrast variables, Study 3.3	105
Table 3.4.	Frequency of UKIP votes, mean individual-level scores and scale intercorrelations, Study 3.3	106
Figure 4.1.	Mean collective action intention scores, Study 4.1	125
Table 4.1.	Mean scores and scale intercorrelations, Study 4.1	126
Figure 4.2.	Beta coefficients of the mediation model, Study 4.1	127
Figure 4.3.	Mean collective action intention scores, Study 4.2	134
Table 4.2.	Mean scores and scale intercorrelations, Study 4.2	135
Figure 4.4.	Beta coefficients of the mediation model, Study 4.2	136
Figure 5.1	Stereotype content used to explain why men are better (A) or not better (B) than women at maths, Study 5.1	153

Table 5.1	Percentage of participants who mentioned each code in response to the question, “Why is it true that men are better than women at maths?” Study 5.1	155
Table 5.2	Percentage of participants who mentioned each code in response to the question, “Why is it not true that men are better than women at maths?” Study 5.1	156
Figure 5.2	Mean maths test scores, Study 5.1	157
Table 5.3	Means, standard deviations, scale reliabilities and intercorrelations of dependent variables, Study 5.1	158
Figure 5.3	Mean maths test scores, Study 5.2	167
Table 5.4	Means, standard deviations, scale reliabilities, and intercorrelations of dependent variables, Study 5.2	168
Figure 6.1	Models of social action: [A] Traditional model of social action, [B] Towards an interactive model of social action (IMSA)	180
Table 6.1	Summary of results	182
Appendix 3.1	Definitions of codes and example quotes, Studies 3.1 and 3.3	220
Appendix 5.1	Definitions of codes for responses to the question, “Why is it true that men are better than women at maths?” Study 5.1	223
Appendix 5.2	Definitions of codes for responses to the question, “Why is it not true that men are better than women at maths?” Study 5.1	225

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