Self-Focus and Stereotyping of the Self

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Abstract:

A study tested the effects of mirror-induced self-focus on participants' tendency to self-stereotype. Americans high and low in identification with their nationality rated themselves and the group "Americans" on traits that varied in stereotypicality and valence. Participants made these ratings under one of three conditions: (1) while facing a mirror, (2) while facing a mirror with an American flag visible, and (3) while not facing a mirror. High identifiers were more likely to endorse stereotypic traits and to rate themselves as similar to their national group when self-focused. In contrast, low identifiers were less likely to endorse stereotypic traits and to rate themselves as similar to their national group when self-focused. These patterns were limited to traits negative in valence. Correlational analyses indicated that self/group ratings were most similar when high identifiers were self-focused. Implications for the distinction between personal and social identity are discussed.

Keywords: Self-Stereotyping | Self-Focus | Self-Awareness | Social Identity | Personal Identity

Article:

The distinction between self-definitions that are personal and individuating and those that are shared and collective is popular among psychologists (Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Triandis, 1989; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Self-definition that differentiates the self from other individuals is thought to reflect personal identity, whereas self-definition that is shared with others and derived from group memberships is typically considered to reflect social identity. Many who endorse this distinction assume or assert that these constructs are largely distinct and independent (e.g., Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; cf. Deaux, 1992). Self-categorization theorists have been most explicit in making this point, and argue that these two levels of self-definition oppose one another and as such are functionally antagonistic (Turner et al., 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994).

Recent empirical evidence supports this contention. Mullen, Migdal, and Rozell (2003) measured the ethnic social identity of participants under different experimental conditions. Some participants completed dependent measures while self-focused (while sitting in front of a mirror); others completed dependent measures under normal conditions (i.e., not in front of a mirror). Research indicates that self-focus – and mirrors in particular – increase individuation and the salience of personal identity (e.g., Davis & Brock, 1975; Ickes, Layden, & Barnes, 1978). In the research of Mullen and colleagues, the presence of a mirror significantly increased participants' personal self-focus but simultaneously decreased the salience and importance of ethnic social identity compared to those who were not in the presence of a mirror. These researchers concluded that increased personal identity salience (via mirror-induced self-focus) precluded the salience of participants' ethnic identity (see also Abrams, 1994).

One problem with the antagonism perspective concerns those who identify with and care about their social identifications. Those for whom group membership is central and self-defining are likely to have accepted and internalized the characteristics of the social group. Indeed, internalization of a social identification is thought to be necessary in order for group behavior to occur (Ellemers, Spears, & Doojse, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Rather than oppose personal identity, those highly identified with their social groups may have social identities that compliment, extend, and are built on top of the personal self (see Simon & Kampmeier, 2001, for a related argument). It is noteworthy that the most common ethnic identity of participants in Mullen et al.'s study was Caucasian/White, an ethnicity unlikely to have much importance attached to it (Nario-Redmund, Biernat, Eidelman, & Palenske, 2004). Because low identifiers are unlikely to internalize group characteristics as their own, and because self-focus has been found to offset the effects of incongruent self-aspects (e.g., Gibbons, Carver, Scheier, Hormuth, 1979), it is reasonable to expect self-focus to keep low identifiers from defining themselves in group-consistent ways. Had participants in Mullen et al.'s study considered their ethnicity to be an important aspect of who they were, we might expect increased ethnic identification among those who were self-focused.

We suggest that there is substantial overlap between personal and social identity for those who attach importance to their ingroups, and that factors increasing the salience of one are likely to simultaneously increase the salience of the other. To test this contention, we manipulated the self-focus of Americans who were high and low in identification with their nationality and then provided an opportunity for them to self-stereotype, an indicator of social identity salience. According to self-categorization theory, when group membership becomes salient, a perceptual shift in identity occurs whereby individuals take on group attributes as their own; i.e., they self-stereotype (Turner et al., 1987; see also Brown and Turner, 1981). Self-perception is thought to become depersonalized as individuals perceive themselves as sharing characteristics believed to be typical of the group and its members. Many experimental manipulations of group salience have been shown to increase self-stereotyping, including the demands of an experimenter (Hogg & Turner, 1987), minority status (Simon & Hamilton, 1994), and distinctiveness within the group (Biernat, Crandall, Young, Kobrynowicz, & Halpin, 1998). In our study, we assumed the self-regulatory aspects of self-focus would motivate those highly identified with their nationality to self-stereotype as a means of moving the self closer to this salient standard. At the same time,

we expected self-focus to motivate those low in identification to move the self away from this standard that, though salient, was not self-consistent.

Self-stereotyping has been operationalized in many ways, including endorsement of traits stereotypic of the ingroup (e.g., Biernat, Vescio, & Green, 1996; Pickett, Bonner, & Coleman, 2002; Simon & Hamilton, 1994) and similarity to the ingroup and its members (e.g., Simon & Hamilton, 1994; Spears, Doojse, & Ellemers, 1997). In our research, we measured self-stereotyping both ways. We also looked at the relationship between participants' self ratings and ratings of their national group as a gauge of how closely participants' sense of self was tied to this identity (Biernat et al., 1996).

We exposed participants to a large American flag before they were seated in front of a large mirror that either had the reflective side facing participants or the wall. Participants were pre-selected to be high or low in their identification as an American, and we assumed that the sight of a national symbol would increase awareness of this social identity for both groups. We also expected participants who faced the mirror to become self-focused, a manipulation known to increase personal identity salience (Ickes et al., 1978; Mullen et al., 2003). Because some argue that mirrors might be particularly adept at undermining the salience of social identity (Abrams, 1994), we added a third condition as a safeguard in our study. In this condition, we hoped to simultaneously heighten participants' personal and social identity by having them sit in front of a mirror with a large American flag behind them so that their reflection was imposed over the flag. All participants were then given the opportunity to self-stereotype by endorsing traits pre-selected to be stereotypic of the group Americans and by matching their trait ratings to those of the group Americans.

Because those high in national identity are likely to have internalized group characteristics as their own, we expected significant overlap between this social identity and personal identity when self-focus was high. This is because self-focus motivates the self to regulate by reducing inconsistency between self and salient standards (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Gibbons, 1978; Silvia & Duval, 2001; Wicklund, 1975). With their national identity made salient, we predicted that self-focus would lead to *greater* self-stereotyping for high identifiers compared to when not self-focused, and regardless of whether an identity cue (an American flag) remained visible. Because low identifiers are unlikely to have internalized group characteristics as their own, the salience of national identity should be incongruent with how they typically see themselves. And because self-focus is known to offset the effects of incongruent self aspects (Gibbons et al., 1979), we predicted less self-stereotyping for low identifiers in the presence of a mirror (i.e., when self-focused) than when not. In terms of trait endorsement, changes in self-definition should be limited to endorsement of stereotypic traits; we expected our experimental and quasi-experimental variables to only affect traits associated with the group Americans. When self-stereotyping was operationalized as similarity to the group, we did not expect the stereotypicality of traits to matter (participants should see themselves as closer to the group regardless of the relationship of the trait to the group stereotype). Because previous research has sometimes found (e.g., Biernat et al., 1996) and other times not found (e.g., Pickett et al., 2002; Simon & Hamilton, 1994) endorsement of negative self-stereotypes, we also investigated trait valence as a potential moderating variable. As a final operationalization of self-stereotyping, we

also considered the covariation between endorsement of personal and group traits. We expected this relationship to be strongest when high identifiers were self-focused.

Method

Participants and Design

Eighty-five University of Kansas undergraduates (41% female) were recruited based on a measure administered during a prescreening session held early in the semester. In this session, participants indicated their nationality and then indicated the extent to which they identified with this group using a single item with response options that varied from 1 (*not at all important to who I am*) to 7 (*very important to who I am*) scale. Only Americans who indicated being highly identified (those who reported values greater than 5, $n = 50$) or not highly identified (those who reported values less than 3, $n = 35$) were recruited. These two groups of participants were randomly assigned to one of three self-focus conditions, described below.

Procedure

Participants meeting the above criteria were contacted by phone and scheduled for individual sessions. When they arrived, participants were shown to a small room with a chair and desk, upon which sat some boxes and a large (76×122 cm) mirror. In addition, a large American flag (approximately 91×152 cm) hung length-wise from the wall opposite the furniture and mirror. Taped signs indicated that the items were part of another experiment and admonished participants to not disturb them. The experimenter acted annoyed and apologized for the mess. She went on to explain that the room was usually used by another researcher and invited the participant to sit at the desk. Depending on experimental condition, the reflective side of the mirror either faced toward or away from the participant. Because the flag was clearly visible when participants entered the room, we expected this social identity to become salient in all conditions.[1]

After giving informed consent, participants were told that the study was about how people think of themselves and various groups. The experimenter then left the participant alone to work on a questionnaire packet containing the study's dependent measures (described below). Before leaving the room, the experimenter again apologized for the mess and offered to get some things out of the participant's way. Specifically, the experimenter took some boxes from the table and – in one of three conditions – took down and removed the American flag. In all conditions, the mirror – turned toward or away from participants – was left behind. Removal of the flag and placement of the mirror combined to form three experimental conditions of self-focus. In the *no mirror* condition, the reflective side of the mirror was turned away from participants. Though the flag remained on the wall, participants could not see it or themselves while they worked on their packets. In the *mirror* condition, the reflective side of the mirror faced participants, but because the experimenter removed the flag from the wall before leaving the room, participants only saw themselves while working on their packet. The reflective side of the mirror also faced participants in the *mirror/flag* condition but because the flag remained on the wall, participants could see themselves imposed over the flag (which took up most of the reflection in the mirror) while completing their packet. We considered self-focus to be absent in

the first (no mirror) condition and present in the second (mirror) and third (mirror/flag) condition.

Dependent Measures. Participants were instructed to rate themselves along 20 traits carefully selected based on extensive pre-testing. Two of these traits, *industrious* and *pleasure-loving*, were rated by an independent sample of 18 University of Kansas students as typical of Americans (above 7 on a 9-point scale) and positive in valence (above 6 on a 9-point scale). Another two traits, *aggressive* and *materialistic*, were also rated as stereotypic of Americans but negative in valence (below 4 on a 9-point scale). Two positively-valenced control traits, *adaptable* and *neat*, differed from the positive stereotypic words in the extent to which they characterized Americans ($p < .05$) but did not differ from these same traits in valence. Similarly, two negatively-valenced control words, *callous* and *gullible*, differed from the negative stereotypic traits in the extent to which they were thought to characterize Americans ($p < .05$) but not in valence. Responses to positive and negative stereotypic and control traits were averaged to form a positive stereotype index, a negative stereotype index, a positive control index, and a negative control index, depending on the pair of traits in question. Comparison of these indexes allowed us to operationalize self-stereotyping as the differential personal endorsement of positive and negative traits stereotypic of the group Americans and to compare these ratings with traits unrelated to the group stereotype (e.g., Biernat et al., 1996; Pickett et al., 2002; Simon & Hamilton, 1994). Twelve additional traits, eight positive (*compassionate*, *conscientious*, *ethical*, *reliable*, *sympathetic*, *tactful, truthful,* and *warm*) and four negative (*forceful*, *jealous*, *moody*, and *secretive*) were also rated (these traits were not selected based on the extent to which they were rated as typical of Americans). Traits were listed alphabetically, and participants rated themselves using a 1 (*never or almost never true of me*) to 7 (*always or almost always true of me*) scale.

Participants then rated all 20 traits again. This time, participants were asked to rate the extent to which each trait characterized the group Americans along a 7-point rating scale (1 = *never or almost never true of Americans;* 7 = *always or almost always true of Americans*). To determine the degree of similarity between participants' self ratings and ratings of the group Americans, we subtracted the former from the latter. Computed in this way, values closer to zero indicated more similarity to the group Americans and positive values indicated that the trait was more characteristic of Americans than the self. We then combined these values for the positive and negative traits separately to form a positive similarity index ($\alpha = .72$) and a negative similarity index ($\alpha = .61$). These indexes allowed us to operationalize self-stereotyping a second way, as the degree of similarity between participants' self ratings and their ratings of the group Americans across positive and negative traits (e.g., Hardie & McMurray, 1992; Simon & Hamilton, 1994; Spears et al., 1997). We also compared the relationship between self and group ratings for low and high identifiers who were self-focused and not self-focused as a third way of operationalizing self-stereotyping (see Biernat et al., 1996, and Gibbons, 1978, for conceptual and methodological precedents, respectively).

After answering some demographic items and exploratory measures, participants were thanked, debriefed, and dismissed.

Results

Data Analysis Strategy

To test whether self-focus and identification level affected participants' propensity to self-stereotype, we first used multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) procedures to compare responses across measures. We followed these procedures with univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) and planned contrasts. We also computed correlations between the sum of self and group trait ratings within each level of identification and self-focus.

Trait Endorsement

To test the hypothesis that high identifiers would endorse stereotypic traits more and low identifiers would endorse stereotypic traits less when self-focused, a 3 (self-focus: mirror, mirror/flag, or no mirror) × 2 (identification level: high or low) MANOVA was computed across the four measures of trait endorsement (i.e., the positive stereotype index, negative stereotype index, positive control index, and the negative control index). This analysis produced no main effects but did indicate a marginal multivariate interaction, Wilks's $\lambda = .83$, $F(8, 152) = 1.78$, $p < .09$. Consistent with predictions, univariate analyses indicated a significant Self-Focus × Identification Level interaction on the negative stereotype index, $F(2, 79) = 5.07$, $p < .009$, $\eta^2 = .11$ (see Figure 1). High identifiers endorsed negative stereotypic traits as more self descriptive in the mirror ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.05$) and mirror/flag ($M = 3.77$, $SD = .75$) conditions than the no mirror condition ($M = 3.25$, $SD = .91$), contrast $p < .04$. In contrast, low identifiers reported less stereotypic traits in the mirror ($M = 3.26$, $SD = .92$) and mirror/flag ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.02$) conditions compared to the no mirror condition ($M = 4.10$, $SD = .65$), contrast $p < .03$.
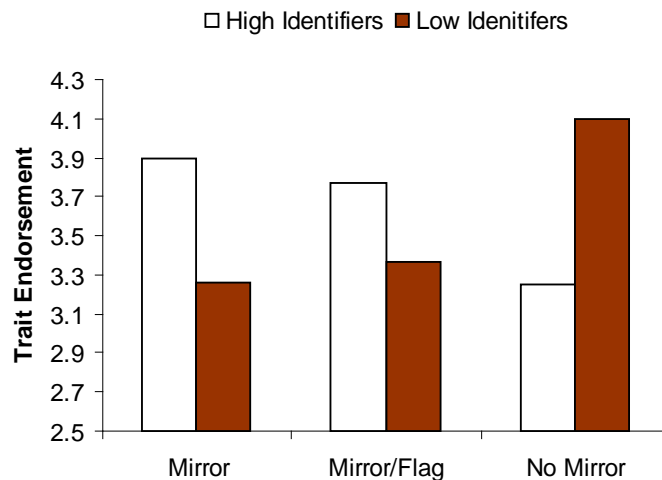

Figure 1. Endorsement of negative stereotypic traits as a function of self-focus and identification level.

No significant effects emerged on the positive stereotype index or negative control index (all Fs < 1). Only a main effect for identification level emerged on the positive control index, $F(1,79) = 4.00$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$, indicating that high identifiers ($M = 5.28$, $SD = .97$) endorsed

positive traits not typical of the ingroup more than low identifiers ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.21$). No other effects on the positive control index were significant.

Similarity to the Group

To test the hypothesis that self-focus would cause high identifiers to rate themselves as more similar to Americans and low identifiers to rate themselves as less similar to Americans, a 3 (self-focus: mirror, mirror/flag, or no mirror) $\times$ 2 (identification level: high or low) MANOVA was computed across the two measures of similarity (the positive similarity index and the negative similarity index). This analysis produced no main effects but did indicate a significant multivariate interaction, Wilks's $\lambda = .88$, $F(4, 156) = 2.47$, $p < .05$. Univariate tests indicated a significant Self-Focus $\times$ Identification Level interaction on the negative similarity index, $F(2,79) = 4.08$, $p < .03$, $\eta^2 = .09$ (see Figure 2). Highly identified Americans self-stereotyped by indicating that they were more similar to Americans on negative traits characteristic of this group in the mirror ($M = 1.30$, $SD = .62$) and mirror/flag ($M = 1.37$, $SD = .78$) conditions compared to the no mirror condition ($M = 1.79$, $SD = .96$), contrast $p < .09$. Low-identifying Americans, in contrast, indicated that they were more similar to Americans on the same negative traits in the no mirror condition ($M = 1.01$, $SD = .87$) compared to the mirror ($M = 1.76$, $SD = .90$) and mirror/flag ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 1.13$) conditions, contrast $p < .03$.
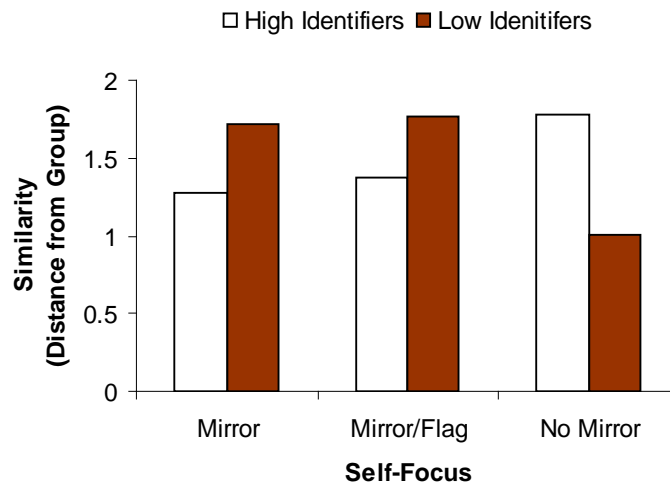

Figure 2. Similarity between self and group on negative traits as a function of self-focus and identification level.
Note: Lower numbers = more self-group similarity.

Neither the main effects nor the interaction between self-focus and identification level was significant on the positive similarity index, all Fs < 1.

Correlations

To determine whether the relationship between self and group ratings was affected by our independent and quasi-independent variables, we averaged participants' self and group ratings for all traits and then computed correlations between these values within self-focus

(mirror and mirror/flag) and no self-focus (no mirror) conditions separately for low and high identifiers (see Table 1). Consistent with predictions, this (positive) relationship was only significant for high identifiers who were self-focused ($p < .03$; all other ps $> .63$). Moreover, the strength of this relationship tended to be greater for high identifiers who were self-focused than high identifiers who were not self-focused and low identifiers who were self-focused, both zs $>$ 1.11, ps $= .13$.

Table 1. *Correlations between averaged self and group ratings by self-focus and identification level*

	Condition	
	Self-Focused	Not Self-Focused
High Identifiers	.38*	.04
Low Identifiers	.09	.07

Notes: Mirror and mirror/flag conditions were collapsed into the self-focused condition.
* $p < .05$.

Discussion

Though some argue that personal and social identity might oppose one another (Mullen et al., 2003; Turner et al., 1987), our data suggest otherwise for those highly identified with their nationality. When self-focused, highly identified Americans were more likely to endorse negative stereotypic traits as self-defining, and to rate themselves as more similar to other Americans, compared to highly identified Americans who were not self-focused. Because mirror-induced self-focus is particularly individuating (Davis & Brock, 1975; Ickes et al., 1978; Mullen et al., 2003) and self-stereotyping is an indicator of social identity salience (Turner et al., 1987), it seems that personal identity salience and social identity salience were co-present for the self-focused, highly identified Americans in our sample. This is not surprising if we assume that those who place a premium on their group identity are likely to have internalized this self-definition. That the opposite pattern occurred for low identifying Americans – self-focus decreased self-stereotyping – also supports our thinking about the relationship between personal and social identity. Because these individuals are unlikely to have accepted group characteristics as their own, self-focus (and the individuation it leads to) should override any superficial assimilation to the group that its initial salience would be likely to have evoked (e.g., Gibbons et al., 1979).

These patterns were limited to traits negative in valence; positive stereotypic traits were not endorsed more due to self-focus or participants' level of identification with their nationality, nor did participants tend to match their self-ratings on positive traits with those of the ingroup (although correlational data indicated that, irrespective of trait valence, self/group ratings were more closely related when high indentifiers were self focused). Others have also found that trait valence moderated self-stereotyping, but in this case self-stereotyping only occurred for positive traits (Biernat at al., 1996). Though we have no ready explanation for this inconsistency, we speculate that self-enhancement motives are relevant. Both low and high identifiers may have been eager to accept positive traits as self-defining, even those stereotypic of the ingroup. Similarly, it is likely that neither high nor low identifiers wished to endorse negative traits, and in particular, negative stereotypic traits made relevant by the presence of an American flag. Indeed,

inspection of cell means indicates that when not self-focused, highly identified Americans tended to distance themselves from the group stereotype more than did those low in identification. Because self-focus motivates comparison between salient standards and behavior (Duval & Silvia, 2001; Duval & Wicklund, 1972), only high identifiers would have experienced conflict between self-enhancement and endorsement of traits relevant to the ingroup (e.g., Swann, 1987). Because high and low identifiers differ in the importance placed on their nationality, comparison with this salient standard invoked by self-focus led to different self-definitional responses. Those low in identification were able to distance themselves from this unimportant reference group (cf. Carver & Humphries, 1981), whereas high identifiers accepted the unfavorable aspects of being American. We also note that although self-focus did not increase self-stereotyping on positive traits for high identifiers, neither did it decrease it (as would be predicted by other perspectives; cf. Mullen et al., 2003; Turner et al., 1987; Turner et al., 1994).

Self-Focus and Self-Regulation

Self-focus leads people to compare self with salient standards, and behavior is then adjusted to more closely conform to this standard. Heightened self-focus, in other words, promotes self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1998). Many studies demonstrate the power of self-focus to regulate behavior in this way (e.g., Beaman, Klentz, Diener, & Svanum, 1979; Carver, 1975; Gibbons, 1978). Macrae, Bodenhausen, and Milne (1998) recently showed the applicability of such a process to category-based judgment of others; self-focus led to less social stereotyping among those who thought it was unacceptable to stereotype others, but *more* social stereotyping among those who thought it was acceptable. Our own data show a similar process for stereotyping of the self; self-focus led to more self-stereotyping among those high in identification with their group but less self-stereotyping among those low in identification. Should a group seek to instigate self-regulation among its members, obstacles must be overcome (Wicklund, 1982). Self regulation is at base a matter of changing the self, but how the self changes will depend on who the self is and the nature of the standard in question.

Content and Process in Personal and Social Identifications

We are not the first to suggest overlap between personal and social identifications. Others have argued that the same characteristic (e.g., being a vegetarian or wearing glasses) may differentiate the self from other individuals (personal identity) or be shared socially (social identity) depending on context (Simon, 1997; Turner et al., 1994). Recently this point was demonstrated by Pickett and her colleagues (Pickett et al., 2002), who found that heightened needs for assimilation *and* differentiation increased self-stereotyping among members of relatively distinct groups (e.g., honors students, sorority members). Presumably, the distinctiveness of these groups allowed participants to be the same (similar to other group members) and different (distinct from those in other groups) at the same time (Brewer, 1991). Also related, Simon and colleagues (1997; Simon & Kampmeier, 2001) have suggested that whether personal or social identity becomes operative is often the function of focus of attention. In particular, social identity results from a narrow focus on one dimension of self that is shared with others. In contrast, personal identity results from the unique configuration of several, non-redundant self-dimensions (e.g., a gay vegetarian who identifies with the Republican Party and loves salsa dancing). Of importance, any one of these dimensions of self could reflect personal or

social identity, depending on focus of attention (itself determined by various personal and contextual factors; see Simon, 1999).

This last point is important, as it moves the discussion of the relationship between personal and social identity from content to process (see Deaux, 1996). As noted, some (Turner et al., 1987; Mullen et al., 2003) maintain that the *process* determining personal and social identity salience oppose one another, such that focus on self at one level precludes focus on the other. In addition to the work of Mullen and colleagues, recent research by Simon, Aufderheide, and Hastedt (2000) supports this contention. These researchers found that members of an experimentally created minority group were more likely to engage in group-level information processing (presumably an indicator of social identity salience) than were their majority-group counterparts, and an experimental manipulation of personal identity salience reduced this discrepancy. However, the same personal identity salience manipulation *increased* group-level processing on the part of majority group members, suggesting that personal and social identity were simultaneously salient. Like our own findings of increased self-stereotyping for high identifiers who were self-focused, this moderating effect of group size challenges the assertion that social and personal identity salience are necessarily antagonistic. We did not measure personal identity salience directly in our own study, and a proxy for personal identity salience used in the research of Simon et al. (2000) (uniqueness as an individual) failed to covary with changes in group-level information processing. Clearly, further researcher is needed.

Interpersonal and Intergroup Behavior

Understanding the relationship between personal and social identity is important in its own right, but also because self-definition at these two levels is theorized to correspond to interpersonal and intergroup behavior, respectively (e.g., Ellemers et al., 1999; Turner et al., 1987, Turner et al., 1994). Social identity and self-categorization theorists maintain that social identity salience is the causal mechanism underlying a host of group processes. At the same time, theorists from these traditions point out that contextual factors thought to increase the salience of social identities are limited to those who have some degree of subjective identification with the ingroup; people must accept and internalize a contextually relevant social identity in order for intergoup behavior to occur. If true, our findings, which indicate overlap between personal and social identity for high identifiers, carry an important implication for what is often assumed to be intergroup behavior. In particular, the theoretical distinction between these self-definitions and the disconnection thought to underlie interpersonal and intergroup behavior becomes more difficult to maintain. Our findings, along with those of others (Deschamps, 1998; Simon et al., 2000), suggest that such sharp distinctions may be uncalled for (Simon, 1997). Determining when and to what extent these two self-definitions and their behavioral correlates overlap, and if these different levels are truly disconnected (Harrington & Miller, 1990), will be an important goal for future research.

Notes

1. In making national identity salient in all conditions, we hoped to focus participants on this and not other, potentially competing identifications. Mullen et al. (2003) followed a similar approach by asking all of their participants to indicate their ethnic group in a small box at the top of their

questionnaire. One consequence, of course, is that differences between conditions may be harder to demonstrate.

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