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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

Abstract *Page* ii
List of tables and figures x
Acknowledgements 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
Group decision 6
The group polarisation phenomenon 7
Normative influence 8
Social comparison theory 9
Pluralistic ignorance 11
Informational influence 12
Persuasive arguments theory 12
Persuasion 14
Critique 15
Identity 17
The social identity approach 18
Social identity theory 19
Self-categorisation theory 21
SCT and social influence 22
The SCT account of group polarisation 23
Theories of interdependence 27
The inductive model of identity formation 28
The influence of identity content on inter-group relations 32
Stereotype consensus 32
Recent advances 34
Action 35
Attitudes in action 35
Interaction in action 37
Theories of oppression 39
Theories of collective action 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

In-group obstruction as an aggravating condition 52
Study 2.1 53
Method 54
Dependent measures 54
Results and discussion 55
Study 2.2 56
Method 57
Participants and design 57
Independent variables 57
Dependent measures 58
Procedure 59
Pre-consensus phase 60
Consensus phase 61
Analytic strategy 62
Condition effects 62
Tests of specific hypotheses 63
Results 64
Discrimination 64
Condition effects 64
Specific hypotheses 65
Pre-consensus phase 65
Consensus phase 65
Hostile norm 67
Condition effects 67
Specific hypotheses 68
Pre-consensus phase 68
Consensus phase 68
Mediation 69
Social identification 70
Proportion of respondents behaving fairly 71
General discussion 72
Conclusion 76

3 The power of talk: legitimising hostile social action 78
The power of talk 79
Normative and informational explanations 80
Stereotype consensualisation and the normalisation of implicit ideologies 82
Present research overview 84
Study 3.1 84
Method 85
Participants and design 85
Procedure 85
Dependent measures 86
Analytic strategy 87
Results 89

Discussion content 89
HLM analyses 90
Mediation 90
Discussion 91
Study 3.2 92
Method 93
Participants and design 93
Procedure 94
Dependent measures 94
Analytic strategy 96
Results 96
Mediation 97
Discussion 99
Study 3.3 100
Method 101
Participants and design 101
Procedure 101
Dependent measures 101
Results 102
Discussion content 102
HLM analyses 104
Discussion 107
General discussion 108
The power of talk 109
Limitations and future research 110
Conclusion 111

4 The role of in-group consensualisation in identity (in)formation 112
The crucial role of consensus 113
Alternative explanations and empirical challenges 115
(1) The consensual discussion of actions 116
(2) Discussion of extreme actions 116
(3) The prior inter-group context 117
(4) *The process of consensualisation* 118
Overview 118
Study 4.1 119
Method 119
Participants and design 119
Stimuli and procedure 119
Dependent Measures 120
Results 123
Mediation 127
Discussion 128
Study 4.2 130
Method 131

Participants and design 131
Stimuli and procedure 131
Dependent measures 132
Results and discussion 133
Mediation 136
General discussion 137
Implications and future directions 139
Conclusion 142

5 Changing social identities: social consensus as a foundation of stereotype threat 144
The negative effects of stereotype threat 144
Stereotype lift 145
Combating stereotype threat 145
The power of talk: transforming social identities 145
The present research 147
Study 5.1 147
Hypotheses 148
Method 148
Participants and design 148
Materials and procedure 148
Dependent measures 149
Analytic strategy 150
Qualitative data 150
Measure of consensus 151
Results 152
Stereotype consensus 152
Performance effects 156
Maths test score 157
Psychological effects 159
Evaluation apprehension 159
Anger 159
Gender identification 160
Mediation 160
Discussion 160
Transforming social identities 161
Study 5.2 163
Method 163
Participants and design 163
Materials and procedure 164
Dependent measures 164
Analytic strategy 166
Results 166
Performance effects 166
Maths test score 166

Psychological effects 169
Anxiety and evaluation apprehension 169
Social validation 170
Anger 170
Stereotype threat 170
Identification 170
Mediation 170
Discussion 171
Psychological effects 171
General discussion 173
Implications and future directions 175
Conclusion 176

6 General discussion 177
The purpose of this thesis 179
Brief summary of the results 179
Theoretical and practical implications 184
Towards an interactive model of social action 184
Considering potential alternative explanations 188
"Isn't this still just individual cognition?" 188
"Is interaction a necessary condition for these effects to occur?" 189
"Isn't this just polarisation?" 191
Concluding remarks 193

References 195

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1.1	The 3 stages of referent information influence	*Page* 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	*N* 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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