Sociopsychological profiles of students that leave the ingroup or engage in social competition

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We present a study of the sociopsychological profiles of students who are disposed to engage in social competition on behalf of ingroup interests. Five predictors were selected: the advantageous or unfavourable context for ingroup interests, group identification, meritocracy, just-world beliefs, and social dominance orientation. It was found that those students who were prepared to invest personal resources on behalf of ingroup interests were characterized by a strong group identification and middle or low scores in the meritocracy and social dominance orientation. In contrast, students with the lowest disposition to social competition were defined by their low identification and/or middle-high scores in the meritocracy and social dominance orientation. Against our expectation, the manipulation of the favourable versus unfavourable situation of the ingroup did not have a significant influence. In order of their importance, the variables that showed stronger effects were group identification, followed by meritocracy, social dominance orientation, and world-just beliefs.

Key words: group identification, intergroup relation, social competition.

Introduction

We present a descriptive study of the social-psychological profiles of university students who respond with different coping strategies (leave the ingroup versus engage in social competition) to threats to their ingroup. The social-psychological variables considered here are strength of ingroup identification, adherence to meritocracy and just-world beliefs and the social dominance orientation. The reasons for choosing these variables are that, as we will see later, they are linked to social mobilization (collective attempts to defend or improve the group's interests).

Moderators of intergroup relations

We define moderators as those variables that induce differences in the way people face intergroup dynamics. There are many moderators. Some are contextual (presence or absence of threats to the group's interests), others psychological (e.g. personal self-esteem, authoritarianism, etc.) and others are sociopsychological (beliefs, ideologies etc.). A review of all these moderators is beyond the scope of the present study. For a recent review readers can consult Hewstone, Rubin and Willis's (2002) contribution to the *Annual Review of Psychology*. We will consider only four of these sociopsychological moderators, namely the strength of group identification, adherence to meritocracy and just-

world beliefs, and social dominance orientation. Moreover, a contextual factor will be included: Perception of threats against ingroup interests. The relation between these sociopsychological and contextual factors and the way people cope with threats will be reviewed below.

Threats

There are many meanings of the 'threat' concept. In the Realistic Conflict Theory (Campbell, 1958; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961; Sherif, 1966; Esses, Haddock, & Zanna, 1993), threats derive from the perception of intergroup competition for scarce resources such as employment, wealth, health resources, housing etc. But they also include symbolic threats such as the loss of cultural identity, low intergroup differentiation (the perceived similarity with relevant outgroups may engender feelings of threat), questioning religious beliefs, customs, world views etc. (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1996, 1998; Brewer, 2001; Hewstone *et al.*, 2002). Independently of how the concept of threat is defined, the implementation of coping strategies is associated with the perception of some current or future threat. In the present study, this variable will be experimentally manipulated.

Strength of ingroup identification

Tajfel (1981) states that ingroup identification determines how people cope with threats against ingroup interests. Low identifiers use individual strategies to cope with ingroup threats, such as establishing psychological distance from the group (and eventually leaving the group),

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downward comparison, social creativity, or individual mobility. In contrast, high identifiers are more inclined to engage in collective attempts to defend ingroup interest (social competition). While it is true that the relationships between ingroup identification and commitment to collective actions are mediated by additional factors (e.g. permeability of intergroup boundaries, stability and legitimacy of intergroup differentials etc.) (Ellemers, Doosje, van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1992; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997; Mummenday, Klink, Mielke, Wenzel, & Blank, 1999), ingroup identification remains one of the most important determinants in the choice of coping strategies (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hinkle & Brown, 1990; Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Turner & Reynolds, 2001). For instance, Doosje, Spears, and Ellemers (2002) found that whereas low identifiers only express solidarity with their group to the extent that the status of the group is favourable to their interests, high identifiers maintain commitment to their group even when the group is faced with a bleak and uncertain future. To summarise, whereas high identifiers should always be ready to engage in action on behalf of the collective interests of the ingroup, low identifiers should be prepared to leave the ingroup and join more prestigious outgroups in negative conditions.

Just-world beliefs

This concept was developed by Weber (1973, 1980) and Lerner (1980, 2000) in their explanation of the ideological-religious origins of capitalism. Over time, religious legitimation evolved into a more secular version, known as the Protestant Work Ethic. This ideology makes the individual responsible for his or her situation in the world. The world is viewed as a just and fair place where everyone receives what they deserve. Bad things only happen to bad people. Everybody is responsible for what happens in his or her life (Mirels & Garret, 1971; Weber, 1973; Rosaldo, 1984; Schweder & Bourne, 1984; Schweder & Miller, 1985; Andersen, 1987; Farr, 1987; Logan, 1987; Pepitone & Triandis, 1987; Lipkus & Siegler, 1992; Hafter & Olson, 1993). This ideology plays a central role in the Western justification of the social status quo (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Jost, Pelham, Sheldom, & Sullivan, 2003). Just-world beliefs play a demobilizing role (inhibition of any attempt to change intergroup status quo). People who adhere to these beliefs are expected to accept group differences, even those that prejudice ingroup interests, because the existing differences are judged to be justified and legitimate. Although the demobilizing influence of these beliefs is clear, their effect on the individual strategy of leaving the group are less clear and certain. Adherence to just-world beliefs can provoke a sentiment of fatalism and helplessness in the face of negative outcomes (Chuen & Knowk, 1996). We would expect that people who adhere to just-world beliefs would accept situations that are negative to ingroup interests without engaging in any individual or collective coping strategy.

Meritocracy

Tajfel (1981) states that dominant or ruling elites try to maintain social inequalities that are favourable to their interests by creating and spreading ideologies that depict these differences as natural, justified and legitimate. The role of ideologies in intergroup relations is explicitly developed in Taylor and McKirnan's five steps model (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1987; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). This model stresses the role of ideologies in the creation of illusions of legitimacy, discouraging social competition. In the Western tradition, meritocracy is the best-known ideology that has fulfilled this function (Weber, 1973). Meritocracy is the belief in personal and individual agency. Social success depends on individual factors such as intelligence, ambition, hard work, capacity and so on. This belief serves to divert attention from the material and structural roots of inequality and sanctions a psychological view of class distinctions (Gillies, 2005). Its origins can be traced to the protestant reform and are expressed in the Protestant Work Ethic. Success and failure reflect personal strength or weakness. This ideology conceals the relevance of social and structural factors in the distribution of wealth, power, influence etc. The myth of classlessness is not brought into question (Bullock, 1995). Belief in meritocracy has an important effect on how people face threats to their ingroup interests (Foster & Tsarfati, 2005; Foster, Sloto, & Ruby, 2006). Meritocracy is also frequently used as an argument to oppose affirmative action policies (Son, Leanne, Bobocel, & Zanna, 2002; Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Every, 2005).

In contrast to just-world beliefs, the adherence to beliefs in meritocracy encourages individual coping strategies. Faced with situations where group membership contributes negatively to individual interests, subjects with strong beliefs in meritocracy are expected to be inclined to leave the group and join other groups that better serve their interests.

Social dominance orientation

The last social-psychological variable that will be considered here is social dominance (SD) orientation. SD theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) proposes that society contains ideologies that either promote or attenuate group-based hierarchies. SD orientation is defined as 'the orientation expressing one's general support of group-based systems of social stratification' (Sidanius, Levin, & Pratto, 1998, p. 138). There are individual differences in the extent to which people adhere to this orientation. The social dominance

orientation is more frequently present among high status group members. This variable has a relevant influence on intergroup biases. These latter are expected to be stronger in subjects with a high SD orientation (Gaertner & Insko, 2000; Sidanius, Levin, Liu, & Pratto, 2000). Although the literature about the relation between SD orientation and intergroup biases is extensive (Federico, 1998; Pratto, 1999; Jost & Thompson, 2000; Pratto & Shih, 2000; Hewstone *et al.*, 2002), studies analyzing the relation between SD orientation and specific coping strategies with which people face groups are relatively scarce. How do high SD-oriented subjects respond to threats against ingroup interests? Although the rationale of SD orientation definition should lead us to expect a strong reaction on their part, it is difficult to predict the direction of their responses: engagement in intergroup struggle and social competition or abandonment of the threatened ingroup?

A study was designed to depict the social-psychological profiles of university students who engage in social competition on behalf of ingroup interests versus those who take the decision to leave the ingroup to search for another more satisfactory option. Our chief objective was to analyze the extent to which these alternatives were associated with differences in the strength of identification with the ingroup, adherence to just-world and meritocracy beliefs, and the social dominance orientation.

Study

Sample and procedure

One hundred and twenty-six undergraduate psychology students participated in the study. Some explanations were necessary to justify the meaningfulness of identification with psychology for the participants. The study was carried out in March, 7 months after the beginning of the academic year and the participants had just passed their first five exams in February. Conditions guaranteeing rapid development of group identification were settled previously. The students were studying a degree that they had chosen as their first preference.

The study was carried out in two phases.

The first phase was presented as designed to validate a number of scales translated from English into Spanish. Subjects filled the social dominance orientation (SDO) scale (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), Rubin and Peplau's (1973) just-world scale and Davey, Bobocel, Son Hing, and Zannas' (1999) merit principle scale (meritocracy scale). The α reliability coefficients of the three scales were high (SDO = 0.82, just-world = 0.77, meritocracy = 0.81). In addition to these scales, participants were asked to respond to several questions formulated to measure the strength of their identification with the ingroup

(psychology). They were asked to express the extent to which they: (i) identified with; (ii) were similar to other psychology students; and (iii) the personal importance they attached to this identity (1 = very low and 6 = very high). Moreover, they were asked to state to what extent their being psychology students raised feelings of pride, shame, happiness or sadness (format: 1 = not at all and 6 = a lot). All the identification items were grouped into a single factor (explained variance = 44.75%), with sadness and shame with negative factor loads. Thus, an identification index was created after reversing the scores of shame and sadness ($\alpha = 0.74$).

Participants received a second questionnaire immediately after filling in the first one. The threat against the group's interests (privileged versus prejudiced) was manipulated in this second part. This part was presented as 'a survey of the Department of Social Psychology of the Basque Country University aimed at ascertaining the opinions of university students on a number of topics related to university life. The questionnaire is anonymous.'

As the participants were students of introductory courses (meaning that they were in their first year and had little knowledge of the university's structure), they received a short explanation about the university's governing structures. This served to introduce our manipulation.

'The university is governed by two main institutions: The rector with a team of vice-rectors responsible for different areas (such as students, postgraduate courses, administration, budget, research etc.) and the Claustro (the university parliament). The Claustro is made up of 300 members elected by the three university sectors: students, teachers and the administrative staff. Each sector has its quota. Moreover, each centre (faculty) also has its quota. This quota depends on the relative weight of each faculty relative to the whole university. The objective weight of the psychology faculty in relation to the overall university is 6%. However, the actual representation of psychology in the Claustro is 12% (Privileged condition)'. In the unfavourable condition, participants were informed that the objective weight of the psychology faculty was 10% but its actual representation is 5%. The paragraph continued as follows: 'This over-representation (under-representation) has positive (negative) consequences in terms of the numbers of grants assigned to psychology, the annual budget invested, the provision of technical and teaching equipment and, in general, the resources assigned to the faculty'.

After reading this paragraph, participants were asked to say to what extent they were prepared to: (i) take part in mobilizations in defence of the interests of the psychology faculty; (ii) take part in elections to the Claustro as a representative of psychology faculty; (iii) argue with those who attack the prestige and interests of psychology faculty; (iv) invest personal time and effort in activities on behalf of the interests of psychology faculty; and (v) if possible,

leave psychology to join another more prestigious faculty (format 1 = not at all and 5 = a lot). All items were grouped into a single factor (variance = 45.34%), with leaving the ingroup with a negative load. Thus, a single scale was created (after reversing the scores in the exit item) ($\alpha = 0.71$) with high scores indicating a disposition to get involved in collective activities on behalf of the psychology faculty (social competition) and low scores reflecting a disposition to leave the psychology faculty and join a more prestigious course of study. This was a weighted index that resulted by assigning a weight of 0.25 to each of the four engagement items and a weight of 1.0 to the abandoning item. The reason for this procedure was to give equal weight to the abandoning and the engagement items.
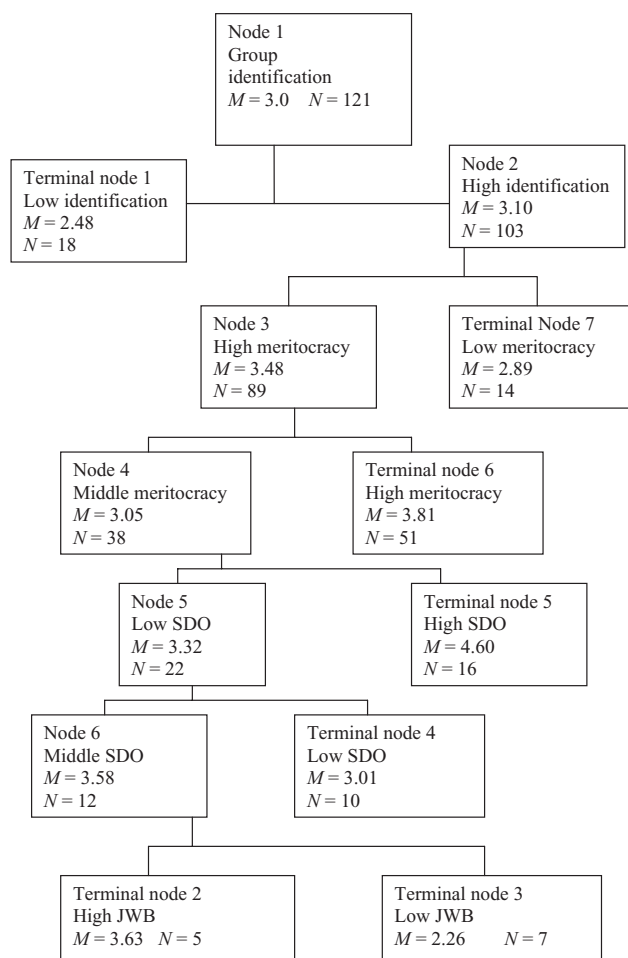
Results

A classification and regression tree analysis was carried out with the social competition scale as the target or dependent variable and the manipulation, the just-world belief (JWB), meritocracy, group identification, and social dominance orientation (SDO) scales as predictors. The results are shown in Table 1.

The classification and regression three (CRT) analysis yielded seven homogeneous groups (terminal nodes) combining the predictors. The goodness-of-fit indices were quite satisfactory. It must be remembered that the relative cost varies between 0 and 1, the latter representing he performance of random guessing. With regard to the ROC, it ranges between 0 and 1 with higher values indicating better performance. ROCs higher than 0.70 are considered respectable. Moreover, CRT projects the terminal nodes upon the target or dependent variable. Looking simultaneously to the tree and to the means of the seven terminal nodes in the social competition scale, the following conclusions might be drawn. The lowest disposition to fight on behalf on the group was clearly related to the low group-identification group (terminal node 1). The second group (terminal node 2) with lowest scores on the social competition scale was characterized by high group identification but also by middle scores in meritocracy and SDO, and high scores on the JWB. The third group (terminal node 6) was defined by high group identification and meritocracy. In the middle was placed the group (terminal node 5) with high group-identification but middle meritocracy and high SDO. The following group (terminal node 3) was characterized by high group-identification, middle scores in meritocracy and SDO, and low scores on the JWB. Terminal node 7 manifested a strong disposition to engage in a fight on behalf of the group, being defined by high group identification and low meritocracy. The group (terminal node 4) that showed a strong disposition to engage in social competition was defined by high group identification, middle

scores in meritocracy, and low SDO. Summarizing these results, we find that strong group identification is a sine qua non to engage in social competition. This is corroborated by the fact that this is the most important variable (Table 1). However, at least in the present study, it alone is not sufficient to dispose subjects to invest personal effort on behalf of the ingroup. The subjects that showed the strongest disposition to act on behalf on their group were those who combined high group identification with middle–low scores in meritocracy and SDO.

Discussion

We were interested in the study of the sociopsychological profiles of groups of university students that differ in their strategies to cope with threats against the ingroup's interests. Four sociopsychological factors were selected to build up these profiles: strength of identification with the group (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Tajfel, 1981; Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Doosje *et al.*, 2002), beliefs in the just and fair nature of the world (Weber, 1973, 1980; Lerner, 1980) and in meritocracy (Son *et al.*, 2002; Augoustinos *et al.*, 2005; Foster *et al.*, 2006), and the social dominance orientation (Federico, 1998; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Pratto & Shih, 2000; Sidanius *et al.*, 2000). Although these are variables traditionally studied in the domain of intergroup dynamics, usually they have been individually approached. However, as has been clearly established by the system-justification model (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Jost *et al.*, 2003), different social and ideological beliefs intertwine to form unified belief systems. Here we were interested in the particular and combining contribution of the four sociopsychological variables. We found some interesting results. The first, unexpected, result was the lack of influence of the 'threat' experimental manipulation. The influence of the four sociopsychological variables on the disposition to engage in social competition was beyond the situational manipulation of the favourable versus unfavourable situation of the ingroup. A tentative explanation can be advanced. The participants were students of introductory courses of psychology. They freely joined these studies and considered psychology as their most attractive alternative. In fact, the average mean of group identification was high. With regard to the sociopsychological variables, we have found that their combination depict a variety of groups that differ in their disposition to invest personal effort on behalf of the ingroup. In line with previous findings, we have found that group identification is the most importance factor that stimulates this disposition. However, it was the combination of high group identification and low meritocracy and social dominance orientation that appeared more strongly associated with this disposition to social competition.

Table 1 Classification and regression tree. Sociopsychological profiles of individuals that engage in social competition or exit the group

Node 1
Group identification
$M = 3.0$ $N = 121$

Terminal node 1
Low identification
$M = 2.48$
$N = 18$

Node 2
High identification
$M = 3.10$
$N = 103$

Node 3
High meritocracy
$M = 3.48$
$N = 89$

Terminal Node 7
Low meritocracy
$M = 2.89$
$N = 14$

Node 4
Middle meritocracy
$M = 3.05$
$N = 38$

Terminal node 6
High meritocracy
$M = 3.81$
$N = 51$

Node 5
Low SDO
$M = 3.32$
$N = 22$

Terminal node 5
High SDO
$M = 4.60$
$N = 16$

Node 6
Middle SDO
$M = 3.58$
$N = 12$

Terminal node 4
Low SDO
$M = 3.01$
$N = 10$

Terminal node 2
High JWB
$M = 3.63$ $N = 5$

Terminal node 3
Low JWB
$M = 2.26$ $N = 7$

Goodness of fit indices
ROC test = 73.08
Relative cost = 45.62

Terminal nodes sorted by target variable (social competition) prediction

	Social competition scale		
Nodes	M	Max.	Min.
1	2.60	2.60	1.60
2	2.60	3.40	1.60
6	2.80	3.80	1.40
5	3.00	4.00	2.20
3	3.60	5.00	2.60
7	4.10	4.20	4.00
4	4.60	5.60	3.60

Variable importance

Variable	Score
Group identification	100.00
Meritocracy	85.32
Social dominance	77.19
Just-world belief	4.54

JWB, Just-world belief; SDO, social dominance orientation.

Although we think that these results shed some light onto the complex domain of the sociopsychological factors that work around intergroup dynamics, certain shortcomings and further developments must be acknowledged. The first shortcoming is the correlational and static nature of our study. As in all studies of this type, it is not possible to draw causal affirmations, and the control of external variables is difficult. A second shortcoming is the demographic characteristic of the sample: university students. This represents a problem in terms of generalization of results to the larger population. Amir and Sharon (1987) demonstrated that the dynamics that took place between samples of different cultures, and within the same culture between demographically different subsamples, are different. This means that the generalization of these sociopsychological profiles to other groups such as people who unconditionally support a political party in a general election versus those who are prepared to change their political loyalties, or people inclined to support their trade union's consigns and interests versus the 'free-riders' etc. must be proven by the recruitment of a variety of samples.

While acknowledging these shortcomings, we believe that this illustrative study offers pointers to researchers interested in a sociopsychological approach to intergroup relationships.

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