Chapter 2
Towards a Clearer Understanding of Social Identity Theory's Self-Esteem Hypothesis

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Social identity theory was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1975). It provides a nonreductionist social psychological explanation of intergroup conflict. Its most fundamental assumption is that group behaviour is more than a collection of individuals behaving *en masse*. Instead, group behaviour is linked to the group's psychological representation or *social identity*. Hence, social identity theory, or SIT, focuses less on how individuals operate within social groups and more on how social groups operate within the minds of individuals.

In this chapter, we focus on a key proposition in SIT—that group members are motivated to protect and enhance the positivity of their group in order to protect and enhance their self-esteem. We begin by explaining this *self-esteem hypothesis* in detail and summarising the results of research that has tested the hypothesis. We then explain several theoretical caveats of the self-esteem hypothesis and discuss recent work that proposes a dynamic relation between collective self-esteem and group-related outcomes. Based on these caveats and new research, we present a reformulated version of the self-esteem hypothesis. We conclude by explaining how the self-esteem hypothesis can be broadened to take into account other identity management strategies and by outlining some directions for future research.

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The Self-Esteem Hypothesis

SIT is based on two of Tajfel's "great ideas" (Turner, 1996). His first great idea is that social categorisation leads to the cognitive accentuation of (a) similarities between people who belong to the same group and (b) differences between people who belong to different groups. These accentuation effects help to explain the shift from self-perception as a unique individual—or *personal identity*—to self-perception as a stereotypical in-group member who is interchangeable with other in-group members—or *social identity*.

Although Tajfel's first idea explained why people *identified* with their in-group, it did not explain why they tended to *favour* their in-group over out-groups—the so-called *in-group bias* effect (e.g. Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). This is where Tajfel's "second great idea" came into play. He assumed that people obtain information about the value of their in-group by making intergroup comparisons with salient out-groups on relevant comparison dimensions, and that these comparisons are focused on establishing a positive in-group status or *positive in-group distinctiveness*. Hence, people not only share a social identity with other in-group members, but also favour in-group members because they want to make their in-group more positive than comparable out-groups. Tajfel and Turner explained this rationale in more detail in their classic 1979 chapter. We paraphrase their explanation below:

1. People tend to have a psychological connection to the groups to which they belong; this connection is conceptualised as a social identity.
2. People also have a need for positive self-esteem, and this need motivates them to behave in ways that create, maintain, and protect the positivity of their social identity.
3. One way to increase the positivity of a social identity is to increase the social status of the in-group upon which the social identity is based.
4. Collectively favouring an in-group and derogating out-groups (i.e. in-group bias) can increase the social status of the in-group relative to the status of out-groups and, consequently, it can increase the positivity of the associated social identity.
5. People are motivated to engage in in-group bias in order to create, maintain, and/ or protect a positive social status for their in-group and, consequently, a positive social identity.

Abrams and Hogg (1988; Hogg & Abrams 1990) explained Points 4 and 5 in what has since become known as the self-esteem hypothesis. Corollary 1 of the self-esteem hypothesis predicts that successful intergroup discrimination enhances self-esteem (see Point 4), and Corollary 2 of the self-esteem hypothesis predicts that depressed or threatened self-esteem motivates discrimination (see Point 5).

Evidence for the Self-Esteem Hypothesis

Over 50 studies have tested the self-esteem hypothesis, and several reviews of the evidence have concluded that, although the majority of evidence supports Corollary 1, there is much less evidence for Corollary 2 (for reviews, see Abrams & Hogg,

1988; Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Rubin & Hewstone, 1998; for a meta-analysis, see Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000). So, although successful intergroup discrimination has been shown to improve in-group status and the positivity of in-group members' social identities and self-esteem, there is much less evidence that the need for self-esteem motivates people to engage in intergroup discrimination. Hence, we know that intergroup discrimination has a psychological effect but we are less clear about its psychological cause.

The lack of support for Corollary 2 has left an explanatory vacuum in this area that some researchers have sought to fill with other theories of intergroup discrimination (e.g. system justification theory, social dominance theory; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Sidanius, Pratto, van Laar, & Levin, 2004). However, this jump to alternative explanations may be premature. Although the lack of evidence for Corollary 2 may be because this part of self-esteem hypothesis is invalid, it may also be because this part of the hypothesis has not yet been tested correctly (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998, 2004).

One of the attractions of the self-esteem hypothesis is its simplicity. However, this simplicity belies several important theoretical caveats and qualifications that need to be taken into consideration in order to provide a valid test of the hypothesis. Below, we consider some of these caveats to clarify the conditions that must be met in order for researchers to provide valid tests of the self-esteem hypothesis. It is only after such tests have been conducted that we can be more confident about the veracity of the self-esteem hypothesis.

Caveats of the Self-Esteem Hypothesis

To begin with, the self-esteem hypothesis needs to be understood in terms of a particular type of intergroup discrimination and a particular type of self-esteem. The discrimination in question is called *social competition* (Turner, 1975), and it refers to a competition for social status and superiority in which groups strive to be *positively distinct* from one another by, for example, winning socially valued intergroup competitions. Importantly, SIT does not propose that the need for self-esteem motivates other types of discrimination. Examples of other types of discrimination include *realistic competition*, in which groups compete over material resources in order to meet specific group goals (Sherif, 1967), and *consensual discrimination*, in which groups reflect the social reality of an intergroup status hierarchy by rating low status groups more negatively than high status groups on status-relevant dimensions (Rubin & Hewstone, 2004). The distinction between these different types of discrimination is important because any given instance of real-world intergroup discrimination can involve a mixture of different forms of discrimination, and this mixture will reduce the sensitivity of tests of the self-esteem hypothesis. Valid tests of both corollaries of the self-esteem hypothesis need to unconfound these various types of discrimination and focus on the relation between self-esteem and social competition per se.

The self-esteem hypothesis also needs to be understood in terms of a particular type of self-esteem called *specific collective state* self-esteem (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Rubin & Hewstone, 1998, 2004; Turner, 1999, pp. 24-25). Specific collective state self-esteem refers to the current evaluation of a specific social identity, and it can be contrasted with *global, personal, trait* self-esteem, which refers to an overall evaluation of one's personal self across extended periods of time. Many tests of the self-esteem hypothesis have been insensitive because they have used measures of global personal trait self-esteem rather than specific collective state self-esteem (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998, 2004; Turner & Reynolds, 2001, p. 140).

There are also two individual difference variables that are likely to impact on the tendency for people to meet their need for self-esteem via intergroup discrimination. The first variable is in-group identification, which refers to the degree to which people perceive themselves to be typical group members as well as how important and emotionally significant they perceive the in-group to be to the self (e.g. Leach et al., 2008). Although in-group identification and collective self-esteem are likely to be positively related (e.g. Leach et al., 2008; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), they can also be considered to be conceptually separate from one another. Hence, one may like or dislike in-groups (collective self-esteem) that one considers to be important or unimportant to the self (in-group identification; Correll & Park, 2005; Milanov, Rubin, & Paolini, 2014). Crucially, the self-esteem hypothesis only applies to people who identify with their social groups; that is people who see themselves as group members and perceive their in-group to be an important part of their self (Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Gagnon & Bourhis, 1996; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 41). People with low or no in-group identification do not care about their in-group or the implications of its status for their self-esteem. Hence, they will be least likely to conform to the predictions of the self-esteem hypothesis.

The second individual difference variable that may moderate the tendency to meet the need for self-esteem by engaging in intergroup discrimination is global personal trait self-esteem. As Rubin and Paolini (2014) recently explained, "prejudice and discrimination represent relatively direct and blatant forms of self-enhancement, and people with low self-esteem prefer more indirect and subtle forms of self-enhancement because they lack the confidence to engage in more direct forms (Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988)" (p. 266; see also Aberson et al., 2000). Consistent with this reasoning, Long, Spears, and Manstead (1994) found an interaction between personal and collective self-esteem such that people with high personal and low collective self-esteem displayed greater discrimination than people who possessed the other three possible combinations of personal and collective self-esteem. Apparently, the combination of high personal and low collective self-esteem provides both the confidence and the motive to engage in intergroup discrimination.

Aside from individual difference variables, social norms may also impact on the relation between self-esteem and intergroup discrimination. As Rubin and Hewstone (2004) pointed out:

the societal value of intergroup behavior determines the behavior's potential for creating or protecting high ingroup status. In theory, any form of intergroup behavior can be used to create or protect ingroup status as long as group members perceive it to have a positive societal value. (p. 825)

Hence, the societal value of intergroup discrimination must be taken into account when determining the effect of this behaviour on self-esteem and the role of self-esteem in motivating such behaviour (Scheepers, Spears, Manstead, & Doosje, 2009, p. 507; Tajfel, 1979, pp. 184–185; Turner, 1999). Consistent with this interpretation, Scheepers et al. (2009) found that intergroup discrimination *reduced* rather than *increased* group members' self-esteem when fairness was a prevailing intergroup norm because discrimination contradicted prescriptions about the correct (i.e. fair) way to behave. Tajfel famously argued that research studies do not take place in a sociocultural vacuum (Tajfel, 1981), and his point is particularly relevant when testing the self-esteem hypothesis. In practice, researchers need to interpret their research findings in the context of the specific social norms that their participants use to ascribe meaning and value to groups, status systems, and intergroup behaviour.

Finally, the SIT literature focuses on creating, maintaining, and protecting a *positive* in-group status and a *positive* social identity. However, this phrasing may have biased researchers to focus on only one side of the self-esteem hypothesis. The underlying principles of SIT imply that group members should also be concerned about *avoiding negative* in-group status and a *negative* social identity. Rubin, Badea, and Jetten (2014) recently advanced this *negative identity avoidance hypothesis* in order to explain why members of low status groups use in-group favouritism to draw even in status with high status out-groups rather than to attempt to surpass them in status.

A Dynamic Model of Collective Self-Esteem

Recent evidence has highlighted a further potential caveat to the self-esteem hypothesis in the form of initial levels of collective self-esteem and identity threat. Numerous studies have demonstrated that group members who are high in (collective) self-esteem show stronger in-group bias and out-group derogation when they are placed in situations of identity threat (e.g. Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Brown et al., 1988; Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987). For example, work by Branscombe and Wann (1994) showed that group members who were highly identified with their group discriminated against an out-group significantly more in an in-group threat condition than in the no threat condition.

From our point of view, these empirical findings are important in showing that neither high collective self-esteem nor identity threat alone increases group members' motivation to react with discrimination. Instead, *threatened high collective self-esteem* appears to be the key precondition for subsequent discrimination (for

the same argument, see Martiny & Kessler, 2014; Martiny, Kessler, & Vignoles, 2012). This notion is in line with research on *threatened egotism* (e.g. Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Bushman et al., 2009; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). In this research, Baumeister et al. (1996) argued that, in contrast to the classic view which predicts a negative relation between self-esteem and violence and aggressive behaviour, the combination of high self-esteem and threat triggers defensive behaviour. People who have a strong motivation to see themselves very positively are strongly motivated to react when their favourable view of themselves is challenged. This motivation is triggered by a discrepancy between a favourable self-appraisal and a much less favourable external appraisal. One reason why people with high self-esteem react so strongly to threats against their positive self-appraisal is because they are extremely reluctant to revise their self-appraisals in a downward direction (Baumeister et al., 1996). This peculiar aversion to negative self-appraisal among people with high self-esteem is consistent with empirical evidence demonstrating that people wish to hold positive views of themselves and seek to enhance their self-appraisal whenever possible (e.g. Greenwald, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988) as well as with work demonstrating peoples' motivation to maintain consistent self-appraisals (e.g. De la Ronde & Swann, 1993; Swann, 1987).

Noting the paucity of evidence for the second corollary of the self-esteem hypothesis, we argue that a parallel process to the threatened egotism process that occurs at the personal level may also take place at the group level. More precisely, we propose that group members who have high collective self-esteem experience a large discrepancy when negative intergroup comparison outcomes are made salient and, consequently, they are especially motivated to restore their positive view of the in-group. Concomitant identity threat is also discrepant with people's motivation to maintain consistent self- and group appraisals. Thus, in line with Martiny et al. (2012), we argue that the positive evaluation of the in-group is taken as a standard in a comparison situation and that incoming negative information is compared to this standard. The larger the discrepancy between the standard and the incoming information, the stronger should be in-group members' motivation to protect their positive in-group view, and thus the stronger their motivation to cope with this identity threat by deploying identity management strategies. In support of this dynamic collective self-esteem model, Martiny et al. (2012) demonstrated across three studies that social identity threat led to the motivation to show social competition especially for group members who were high in collective self-esteem.

Research on comparison processes at the individual level (e.g. Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995) has shown that the first part of the social comparison processes is intuitive and automatic, and that this first process is followed by a second, more effortful correction process that accepts outcomes as valid if they are in line with the person's self-appraisal, and corrects or undoes information that is perceived as incorrect or unwanted. Following Martiny and Kessler (2014), we extend these findings to the group level and argue that group members initially process all incoming information automatically. However, as soon as they realise that all or part of the incoming information about the in-group is not in line with their group appraisal, they correct these outcomes in an effortful cognitive process (i.e. deploying identity

management strategies). This means that, for example, when two groups compete on an important dimension (e.g. two soccer teams play a match), all group members will automatically process the comparison outcome (i.e. which team won the match). For the losing group, and especially for those who have high levels of collective self-esteem, the negative comparison outcome (i.e. losing the match) will deviate from their positive view of the in-group (e.g. "we are a great soccer team"). For this reason, they will be especially motivated to undo this negative comparison outcome in an effortful, second process. For example, they may derogate the winning out-group on a different dimension (e.g. "maybe they play better soccer than we do, but our team is more fun"). Several empirically testable predictions can be derived from these hypotheses.

First, correction processes that take place after unfavourable group comparison outcomes need cognitive resources. Supporting this prediction, Coull, Yzerbyt, Castano, Paladino, and Leemans (2001) replicated the black sheep effect (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988) in a dual task paradigm and found that group members who strongly valued the in-group spent more cognitive resources processing information about the deviant in-group members than did group members who did not value the in-group as strongly. These results suggest that group members who are high in collective self-esteem are motivated to restore their positive group image, and that this process of restoring the group image demands cognitive resources.

Second, if restoring an unfavourable comparison outcome needs cognitive resources, then group members should not be able to achieve this outcome when they lack these resources. Hence, cognitively busy or distracted group members should not be able to restore their positive group-appraisal which in turn should lead to negative emotions (for a more detailed argument, see Martiny & Kessler, 2014). Consistent with this prediction, research shows that group members who are high in collective self-esteem respond with negative emotions when they are under cognitive load and confronted with identity threat. These high levels of negative emotions arise because the threatened group members do not have enough cognitive resources available to cope with this threat by deploying management strategies (Martiny & Kessler, 2014).

A Reformulated Self-Esteem Hypothesis

We believe that it may be helpful to reformulate the self-esteem hypothesis in order to take into account the various caveats and qualifications that we have highlighted above. Our reformulated self-esteem hypothesis is as follows:

1. The self-esteem motive: Among people who identify with their in-group and who are sufficiently confident to engage in direct group enhancement, the need for specific collective state self-esteem motivates socially competitive behaviour for in-group status. Depending on specific social norms, this behaviour may take the form of intergroup discrimination, and it is likely to be most apparent among group members who had initially high collective self-esteem and have suffered an identity threat.

2. <u>The self-esteem effect</u>: Intergroup behaviour that leads to an improvement in in-group status will elevate the specific collective state self-esteem of in-group members who identify with their group.

We concede that this reformulated hypothesis is not as simple or neat as the original version. But the social world is not neat, and we believe that our reformulated hypothesis does a better job of capturing the complexities of the underlying SIT principles and recent evidence regarding the dynamic nature of self-esteem processes.

Expanding the Self-Esteem Hypothesis to Other Identity Management Strategies

Our preceding sections discussed the various limits and qualifications of the self-esteem hypothesis. However, it is also important to acknowledge the generality of the self-esteem hypothesis and its applicability to previously unidentified areas of intergroup relations. Traditionally, tests of the self-esteem hypothesis have been limited to the relation between self-esteem and intergroup discrimination. However, intergroup discrimination (viz., *social competition*) is only one of several ways of coping with negative intergroup comparison outcomes. In Tajfel and Turner's (1979) early work, besides arguing that group members show social competition in order to improve the status of the whole group, the authors introduced two further strategies to deal with negative comparison outcomes: *individual mobility* and *social creativity*. Individual mobility comprises both literally leaving the group and joining a group that is evaluated more positively, and merely psychologically distancing oneself from the former in-group in order to increase one's individual status. Social creativity is a rather broad category because it involves all responses that "are based on primarily cognitive changes of parameters that define the intergroup comparison context which the actual status inequality between groups is derived from" (Blanz, Mummendey, Mielke, & Klink, 1998, pp. 701–702). A great deal of previous research has investigated the way in which sociostructural conditions determine which type of identity management strategy is chosen (e.g. Bettencourt, Charlton, Dorr, & Hume, 2001; Ellemers, 1993; Ellemers, Wilke, & van Knippenberg, 1993). However, much less research has investigated the relation between collective state self-esteem and these identity management strategies. The extension of the self-esteem hypothesis to identity management strategies other than social competition may help us to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the motivational processes that underlie intergroup behaviour and conflict in a broader variety of situations. In the following section, we provide a short overview of the limited amount of existing work that has investigated the relation between collective self-esteem and other identity management strategies. We then discuss how this work could be extended in future research.

Existing research has mostly investigated the relation between in-group identification and individual mobility. This work shows that when the in-group is not able to fulfil the group members' need for positive collective self-esteem, group members who do not feel a strong attachment with their group (i.e. low group identification) tend to leave the group (Bernache-Assollant, Laurin, Bouchet, Bodet, & Lacassagne, 2010; Cadinu & Cerchioni, 2001; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997; Jetten, Iyer, Tsivrikos, & Young, 2008). For example, Ellemers et al. (1997, Study 1) indicated that threatened low identifiers more strongly desired individual mobility compared to high identifiers, independent of the permeability of the group boundaries. However, in this study the authors neither manipulated identity threat nor did they specifically assess collective self-esteem which—as outlined above—is conceptually separate from general identification with the in-group. Recent empirical research, however, has manipulated social identity threat and measured collective state self-esteem in advance (Martiny et al., 2012). In contrast to the earlier work, this research demonstrated that group members with low levels of collective self-esteem showed a *reduced* motivation to leave the in-group. The authors argued that this finding is in line with earlier work in the social identity tradition because it indicates group members' motivation to increase the affiliation with the in-group when facing social identity threat (e.g. Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001). However, this work did not take into account the permeability of group boundaries. For this reason, further research should investigate the combined effects of prior levels of collective state self-esteem, social identity threat, and sociostructural conditions such as the permeability of group boundaries on in-group members' motivation to show individual mobility.

Concerning social creativity, research has shown that highly identified group members, when threatened, will use social creativity strategies such as compensating the negative feedback in an alternative domain (Cadinu & Cerchioni, 2001; Ellemers & van Rijswijk, 1997). For example, Cadinu and Cerchioni (2001) gave group members positive, negative, or no feedback and showed that high identifiers increased compensation on an alternative dimension after negative feedback but decreased after positive feedback. In contrast, low identifiers did not show this compensation bias but responded to negative feedback by distancing themselves from the in-group. Future research needs to investigate the role of specific collective state self-esteem in these processes.

In addition to these classic identity management strategies, research has also shown that the in-group overexclusion effect—peoples' tendency to misclassify ambiguous individuals as members of the out-group rather than the in-group—is driven by group members' motivation to maintain a positive view of the in-group. Rubin and Paolini (2014) demonstrated that participants misassigned significantly fewer individuals to the in-group than to the out-group when the in-group was evaluated positively and the out-group was evaluated negatively but not when these valences were reversed. Hence, consistent with the dynamic model of collective self-esteem, group members were only motivated to protect the in-group from out-group intrusions when the in-group had a positive valence and not when

it had a negative valence. Further research demonstrates that threatened group members change their perceived intragroup variability strategically in order to maintain positive self- and group perceptions (Doosje, Spears, & Koomen, 1995; Rubin, Hewstone, & Voci, 2001; for a review, see Rubin & Badea, 2012).

Summary and Directions for Future Research

In this chapter, we first presented SIT's self-esteem hypothesis and discussed its main limitations and qualifications. We then developed the self-esteem hypothesis further by presenting a dynamic model of collective self-esteem. Based on this model and the previously discussed limitations, we provided a reformulation of the self-esteem hypothesis. Finally, we extended the self-esteem hypothesis by examining the relationship between collective state self-esteem and other identity management strategies.

In the last two decades, surprisingly little research has been conducted that aimed to develop SIT's self-esteem hypothesis. This is even more surprising when considering the prominent role that SIT plays in the intergroup relations research tradition. We think that investigating the antecedences and consequences of group members' reactions to negative comparison outcomes is an important research aim, and one that will provide a better theoretical understanding of not only SIT's motivational processes but also intergroup conflicts and their potential solutions. In the modern world, where conflicts between groups seem to escalate on daily basis, it is even more important than ever to investigate and understand intergroup conflicts from a (social) psychological perspective. We will only be in a position to develop potential solutions for these conflicts and thus ensure peaceful cooperation between members of different groups if we take group members' need for a positive collective self-esteem into consideration. We need to understand why people are so reluctant to accept negative information about their in-groups and how they are likely to react to negative comparison outcomes. For this reason, we hope that the limitations of the self-esteem hypothesis that we discussed in the first part of this chapter as well as the dynamic model of collective self-esteem that we outlined in the second part of the chapter will not only inspire new research in this area but also help practitioners to understand that intergroup conflicts are not always driven by conflicts about resources but are often driven by fundamental human needs such as peoples' personal and collective self-esteem.

Several research questions derive from the outlined limitations of the self-esteem hypothesis. For example, besides social competition, do other forms of discrimination, such as realistic competition and consensual discrimination, enhance collective state self-esteem, and how do they do so (Rubin & Hewstone, 2004)? What conditions define the relations between collective and personal self-esteem (Long et al., 1994)? Are people who have low personal self-esteem especially motivated to join high status groups in order to compensate for their low levels of personal self-esteem at the collective level (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992)? Is such a compensation even possible? Does the combination of high personal and low

collective self-esteem provide the right combination of confidence and motivation to lead to intergroup discrimination (Rubin & Paolini, 2014)? Under which conditions are group members more motivated to avoid a negative social identity rather than strive for a positive social identity (Rubin et al., 2014)?

We also hope that the outlined dynamic model of collective self-esteem will stimulate further research. For example, if group members with low levels of collective self-esteem do not choose individual mobility when facing social identity threat, then what strategies do they choose and why? When do group members who do not value their group choose to leave their group and when do they decide to stand by their group in the face of social identity threat? Are there further, maybe long-term, consequences of people's inability to cope with social identity threat when they are cognitively busy or distracted? Under which conditions are group members willing to down-regulate their group appraisal after negative comparison outcomes? Can conditions be created under which other motives, such as the aim for accurate information, override the motivation to protect one's positive social identity? What further kinds of identity management strategies should be investigated in relation to collective state self-esteem?

The aim of this chapter was to move beyond the blunt question of whether self-esteem motivates intergroup discrimination. Instead, we aimed to provide a more complete picture of the various issues and nuances that need to be taken into account when considering the empirical evidence for the self-esteem hypothesis. In addition, we aimed to develop theory further by presenting a dynamic model of collective self-esteem and a reformulation of the self-esteem hypothesis. We hope that this will inspire researchers to investigate the many open questions that derive from this important theoretical development.

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