

## LOW SELF-ESTEEM AND INGROUP BIAS

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This study examines the effect of collective self-esteem on ingroup bias exhibited through traditional measures (attributions) and alternative strategies (basking in reflected glory). Seventy-seven U.S. college students were divided into minimally defined groups, worked together on a series of tasks, received performance feedback, completed the Collective Self-esteem scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) and then rated similarity to both groups and attributed performances to a variety of causes. It was predicted and found that low self-esteem individuals utilized basking in reflected glory more than individuals with higher self-esteem. Additionally, high self-esteem individuals exhibited greater bias through use of attributional ratings. Results are interpreted as evidence for the mediating role of self-consistency needs on ingroup bias strategies (e.g. Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988).

Social Identity Theory supports two corollaries regarding the relationship between self-esteem and ingroup bias (Hogg & Abrams, 1990). The first corollary states that successful intergroup discrimination enhances self-esteem. The second corollary argues that depressed or threatened self-esteem promotes ingroup bias. As such, it is apparent that Social Identity Theory supports both the idea that low self-esteem individuals (LSEs) show greater ingroup bias (i.e., those with depressed self-esteem) and the contrasting claim that high self-esteem individuals (HSEs) exhibit greater ingroup bias (i.e., those whose self-esteem has been enhanced).

### HIGH SELF-ESTEEM INDIVIDUALS EXHIBIT MORE BIAS

Several empirical studies provide support for the proposition that high self-esteem individuals exhibit greater ingroup bias. This perspective argues that ingroup

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bias is a means by which high-self-esteem individuals maintain positive social identities. Individuals who have poor self-concepts do not exhibit bias, if they did exhibit bias, then they would not have poor self-concepts (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1991).

A pair of studies asked participants to take a social perception test, gave participants feedback as to performance on the test, and then had participants rate ingroups, outgroups, and themselves on a series of traits. When rating minimally defined groups (all other individuals who had either succeeded or failed on the task), high self-esteem participants showed a pattern of individual or ingroup-enhancing social comparisons whereas low self-esteem participants did not enhance themselves or their ingroups. Individual enhancement was predicted by personal self-esteem whereas ingroup enhancement was predicted by collective self-esteem (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987).

Whereas the above studies provide evidence for the argument that HSEs exhibit greater bias, it may be the case that research has ignored other competing motivations (Hogg & Abrams, 1990). For example, Brown (1993) argues that all individuals, including LSEs, experience a motivation to self-enhance; however, there also exists a need for self-consistency. The strategies used by low and high self-esteem individuals must reflect both needs. For instance, a high self-esteem individual may enhance him/herself through proclamation of group or individual superiority. However, those individuals with low self-esteem may not feel that they are useful contributors to the group or may not feel like valuable group members. Thus, exhibiting bias through indicating superiority may be inconsistent with the self-concepts of low self-esteem individuals. Strategies meeting self-consistency needs allow low self-esteem individuals to exhibit bias and thus, enhance self-esteem, whereas measures incompatible with these requirements will not.

The above studies utilized adjective ratings. Ingroup bias is exhibited through rating the ingroup superior on positive adjectives. It may be the case that individuals with low self-esteem may not exhibit bias through adjective ratings of ingroups and outgroups but rather will use other strategies. Several studies support this proposition.

#### **PARTICIPANTS VS. OBSERVERS**

A set of studies investigated self-esteem and consistency through examination of ratings of individuals directly involved with the ingroup (participants) and those who were assigned to the ingroup but not involved with the group (observers). Those directly involved in the group worked with the ingroup on a brainstorming task. Indirectly involved participants were assigned to groups but did not participate in the brainstorming task. After participating or observing, participants rated the products of a group-brainstorming task. Those individuals with high self-esteem exhibited greater bias when they participated in the ingroup (direct bias),

whereas low self-esteem individuals showed greater bias when not involved in the group task (indirect bias) (Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988).

Another study examined the role of success versus failure feedback regarding ingroup and outgroup performance in addition to self-esteem and involvement (C. E. Seta & Seta, 1992). Consistent with patterns of ingroup bias, high self-esteem participants exhibited greater bias toward the ingroup when the ingroup was successful and the outgroup failed. When the ingroup failed, differences between the groups were minimized. Low self-esteem participants did not discriminate between groups. However, low self-esteem observers exhibited a pattern of ingroup bias consistent with the high self-esteem participants. High self-esteem observers did not discriminate in this manner. Another study (Long, Spears, & Manstead, 1994) allowed for study participants to act as both participants and observers in the group task. Again, a pattern wherein high self-esteem individuals exhibited greater bias when participants but not as observers and low self-esteem individuals exhibited bias as observers but not participants received support.

The participant/observer studies found that low self-esteem individuals do not exhibit ingroup bias when they are contributors to the group but will show bias when they are nominal, non-contributing members. Interpreting this effect in terms of consistency needs, it may be the case that low self-esteem individuals do not rate products they have contributed to as superior as they question the positive impact of their contributions. When products excluded their contributions, then ingroup bias does occur. Another study pinpoints the mechanism that allows moderates ingroup bias effects for low self-esteem individuals.

J.J. Seta & Seta (1996) tested the hypothesis that individuals low in personal self-esteem may feel that they are at the bottom of the group's social hierarchy. That is, they may feel they are not useful contributors to the group. The researchers investigated reactions of high and low self-esteem individuals who were, similarly to the above studies, either participants or observers in a group task. Those who felt they did not make a valuable contribution fail to enhance the ingroup (i.e., participants with low self-esteem). Additionally, participants were either given feedback as to how the group performed (similar to the above studies) or they were told how the group performed *and* how they personally performed. Group feedback only results were consistent with previous findings; LSEs exhibited bias only when serving as observers. However, when acting as participants in conditions in which ingroups were successful, low self-esteem individuals did exhibit ingroup bias only when told that they personally had performed well. This supports the proposition that individuals low in self-esteem do not perceive themselves to make useful contributions to the group.

These results can be taken to indicate that LSEs do exhibit ingroup bias given certain conditions. When an individual with low self-esteem is directly involved

in the group, he/she does not exhibit ingroup bias. However, when he/she is a group member but not a contributor to the group product, ingroup bias does occur. Further, when low self-esteem individuals are given feedback that reduces inconsistency, such as feedback as to the positive contribution of the individual to the group product, ingroup bias is exhibited. Low self-esteem individuals will favor the ingroup only under certain conditions.

#### **WHICH SELF-ESTEEM?**

Interpreting results from the above studies is complicated due to the use of a variety of self-esteem measures. Despite the fact that several different self-esteem measures were employed in the participant/observer studies (Texas Behavior Social Inventory, Collective Self-Esteem Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale), results are consistent. However, collective self-esteem may be the most appropriate measure of self-esteem for all group level phenomena. Collective self-esteem is a measure of the impact of group membership on the individual. Luhtanen and Crocker (1992) argue that the self-esteem referred to by Social Identity Theory reflects esteem gained from social group memberships. As such, measures of personal esteem, such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and measures of social competence, such as the Texas Behavior Social Inventory, may not be predictive of collective enhancement, as these measures have no relation to social group membership. As a predictor of collective enhancement strategies such as ingroup bias, the Collective Self-Esteem Scale is likely the most appropriate measure.

#### **STUDIES OF STATUS EFFECTS**

Similar to the high self-esteem individuals in the participant/observer studies, members of high status groups exhibit ingroup bias effects in a more consistent manner than do members of low status groups (Mullen, Brown, Smith, 1992). Blanz, Mummendy, and Otten (1995a; 1995b) argued that members of low status groups might utilize dimensions of ingroup bias not typically measured in ingroup bias studies. Ingroup bias studies tend to focus on distribution of positive stimuli such as positive attributes and benefits to the ingroup and outgroup. This ignores the distribution of negative stimuli such as negative attributes and punishments. Blanz, et al. (1995a; 1995b) found that members of low status groups favor the use of negative evaluations whereas members of high status groups favor use of positive evaluations. An implication of these findings is that the bulk of studies examining the relationship between status and ingroup bias focus on dimensions favored by high status groups. Thus, findings indicating that high status groups exhibit greater ingroup bias result from the type of ingroup bias strategy measured.

### DIFFERENT INGROUP BIAS STRATEGIES

Just as members of high and low status groups utilize different ingroup bias strategies, it may be the case that high and low self-esteem individuals utilize different ingroup bias strategies. Further, it is possible that previous research has focused on dimensions favored by high self-esteem individuals. In prior studies, low self-esteem individuals show bias through traditional measures only under certain conditions. One point in need of clarification is whether this is the only way that low self-esteem individuals exhibit bias. That is, what other strategies are used by persons with low self-esteem?

One such strategy may be basking in reflected glory of a group through enhancement of ratings of association and similarity to the ingroup when it is successful and minimizing association when the ingroup fails (e.g., Cialdini & DeNicholas, 1989; Lee, 1985). Through a strategy such as basking in reflected glory, low self-esteem individuals attain positive distinctiveness through enhancing their similarity to successful ingroups. This may serve a similar function as traditional ingroup bias measures such as point allocation or adjective ratings, gaining esteem through membership in a positively valued group.

### HYPOTHESES

It is hypothesized that low self-esteem individuals will bask in reflected glory to a greater extent than high self-esteem individuals. Specifically, it is predicted that low self-esteem individuals will exhibit more ingroup bias than high-self-esteem individuals on measures of similarity between themselves and members of the ingroup and outgroup. When the ingroup is successful, but not when the ingroup fails, low self-esteem individuals will rate themselves as more similar to ingroup members and less similar to outgroup members. Additionally, attributional measures represent a more traditional measure of ingroup bias. High self-esteem individuals are predicted to exhibit more bias than low self-esteem individuals using attributional ratings.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

A diverse population of seventy-seven undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology courses at a large U.S. university served as participants. The sample consisted of 29 males and 48 females with a median age of 20 years. Twenty-eight participants classified themselves as Caucasian/white (36%), 6 were African-American (8%), 22 were Asian-American/Pacific Islander (29%), 17 identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino/Chicano/ (22%), 4 participants classified themselves as a member of some other category (5%).

### MATERIALS/MEASURES

Participants first completed the NASA task (Hall & Watson, 1970). The NASA task asks participants to work in groups to rank, in priority order, a list of 15 items necessary for survival on the moon. The task is used to strengthen group identity by placing group members in a situation wherein they must cooperatively interact with one another.

Each group completed a series of twelve verbal anagrams. For half the groups, anagram sets were composed of simple five letter anagrams, for the other half, sets consisted of more difficult seven letter anagrams. As a manipulation check, subjects were asked to recall the performances (success or failure) of each group on the anagram task.

Self-Esteem was measured using the Collective Self-Esteem Scale. The reliability of this scale is reported as .85 (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). The Collective Self-Esteem scale consists of four subscales, private collective self-esteem, public collective self-esteem, membership collective self-esteem, and importance of identity. Analyses used the membership subscale. The membership subscale measures the participant's feelings of contribution to the group. The Membership Collective Self-Esteem subscale is reported to have a reliability of .63 (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992).

Basking in reflected glory was measured by two 7-point items asking the individual to rate how similar he/she found him/herself to the ingroup and outgroup. Similarity to the outgroup was subtracted from similarity to the ingroup to create an index ranging from -6 to +6.

Attributional question items measured the degree to which the subject attributes the ingroup and outgroup performances to ability, luck, effort, and task difficulty. Participants indicated on a series of 7-point scales to what extent each group's performance on the anagram task was due to their personal ability, luck, the effort they put into it, and how hard the task was to successfully perform. An evaluation index for each group was constructed. The scale took reverse coded negative attributions (internal attributions for failure, external attributions for success) and subtracted them from positive attributions (i.e. internal attributions such as ability or effort as explanation for success, external attributions such as luck and task difficulty for failure) for evaluations of each group. The scale ranges from scores of -24 to +24, higher scores representing more ingroup favoritism.

### PROCEDURE

Groups of 8 to 13 participants were randomly divided into sub-groups of roughly equal size and segregated (by placing each group at a separate table in the same room) for the duration of the study. Participants were assigned to either the "blue" or "green" group based on a random lottery procedure.

After categorization, participants worked within their groups to complete the NASA task. Groups were instructed that the task was a "group decision making exercise" and that they would have five minutes to come to agreement on a mutually acceptable solution. The task was not scored, rather it served only to make group membership salient through interaction and contact. Group affiliation was further reinforced by the color of the cover sheet of the questionnaire, which was either blue or green, corresponding with group membership.

Groups were then given the anagram task. The experimenter informed the participants that 7 out of 12 correct answers, more than half correct, was considered a success, less than 7 correct answers constituted a failure. All members of the group worked together on the same task. Groups then were given five minutes to complete a set of twelve verbal anagrams. Each group received a set of either difficult/unsolvable anagrams or simple anagram. The anagram tasks were designed so that groups given difficult anagrams failed (most items unsolvable), and groups given simple tasks succeeded (all items solvable and simple).

Participants received verbal feedback concerning the performance of both groups. Participants were told only if each group succeeded or failed at the task. Information regarding the number of correct responses was not given, nor was information on individual performance. After feedback, participants filled out the Collective Self-Esteem scale, attribution items, and similarity measures.

## RESULTS

Manipulations checks indicated that all individuals correctly recalled group membership and whether each group was successful or failed. The average score for membership collective self-esteem was 22.6. A two-way ANOVA tested for differences in collective self-esteem scores between different experimental conditions. No differences were found between successful ingroups ( $M = 22.5$ ,  $SD = 3.8$ ) and failing ingroups ( $M = 22.9$ ,  $SD = 4.4$ ),  $F(1, 73) < 1$ , successful ( $M = 22.4$ ,  $SD = 4.2$ ) and failing outgroups ( $M = 22.7$ ,  $SD = 3.9$ ),  $F(1, 73) < 1$ . Additionally, no interaction was present,  $F(1, 73) = 1.4$ , *ns*. Thus, collective self-esteem was not affected by feedback.

To preserve integrity of the self-esteem data, hierarchical regression analysis was used to analyze the results. Regression allows for a more accurate test of hypotheses, as it does not require artificial dichotomization of continuously scaled self-esteem scores into low and high self-esteem groups. All regression analyses enter group performance (either ingroup and outgroup or both plus interactions, depending on analysis) in the first step of the analysis and self-esteem in the second step, this allows for a test of the effect of self-esteem over and above the effects of group performances. Interaction terms were created by multiplying ingroup performance and outgroup performance variables together (Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

TABLE 1  
SIMILARITY AS A FUNCTION OF COLLECTIVE SELF-ESTEEM AND PERFORMANCE

Condition	Predictor	R <sup>2</sup> Change	$\beta$	pr <sup>2</sup>
Ingroup Success	Outgroup Performance	.00	.10	.00
	Self-Esteem	.25	-.51**	.25
	Model <sup>a</sup>	.25		
Ingroup Failure	Outgroup Performance	.11	.335	.09
	Self-Esteem	.00	-.03	.00
	Model <sup>a</sup>	.11		

NOTE: Interactions between self-esteem and outgroup performance all ns, omitted from analysis. \* $df = 2, 40$ , <sup>a</sup> $df = 2, 31$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

The first hypothesis (when ingroup is successful, low self-esteem individuals bask in reflected glory more than individuals with high self-esteem) was supported. Data were analyzed via regression analysis entering outgroup performance and then collective self-esteem (membership). As shown in Table 1, when the ingroup is successful, self-esteem proves to be a significant predictor of basking in reflected glory. Low self-esteem individuals bask in reflected glory more than individuals with higher self-esteem ( $= -.51$ ). When the ingroup fails, self-esteem is not a significant predictor of similarity ratings. Performance of the outgroup relative to the ingroup was not a significant predictor in either analysis.

TABLE 2  
ATTRIBUTIONS AS A FUNCTION OF COLLECTIVE SELF-ESTEEM AND PERFORMANCE

Target	Model/Predictor(s)	R <sup>2</sup> Change	$b$	pr <sup>2</sup>
Ingroup	Social Comparison Dimension	.51		
	Ingroup performance		-.68**	.09
	Outgroup performance		-.05	.00
	Interaction		-.08	.00
	Self-esteem	.04	.21*	.09
	Model	.55		
Outgroup	Social Comparison Dimension	.40		
	Ingroup performance		-.99**	.15
	Outgroup performance		-1.39***	.25
	Interaction		1.01**	.11
	Self-esteem	.02	.12	.02
	Model	.42		

NOTE: Interactions between self-esteem and ingroup/outgroup performance all ns, omitted from analysis. Both models,  $df = 4, 72$ . \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Hypotheses two (high self-esteem individuals exhibit greater ingroup bias using attributional measures) also received support. As shown in Table 2, ratings of the ingroup but, not the outgroup were significantly predicted by self-esteem. Ingroup performance was the strongest predictor of ratings of the ingroup with collective self-esteem making a significant contribution to prediction. Higher self-esteem individuals showed greater bias ( $= .21$ ). Self-esteem had no effect on

ratings of the outgroup. Rating of the outgroup is predicted well by ingroup performance, outgroup performance, and the interaction between performance conditions. Thus, hypothesis two received some support; high self-esteem individuals do show greater bias on attributional measures. The self-esteem effect ( $R^2$  change = .04), however, is comparatively small in relation to the effect of ingroup and outgroup performance ( $R^2$  change = .51).

## DISCUSSION

Consistent with predictions, results indicate that individuals low in collective self-esteem show a greater tendency to bask in reflected glory of successful ingroups. Low self-esteem individuals exhibit ingroup bias by indicating greater association with the ingroup relative to the outgroup through ratings of similarity when the ingroup is successful. High self-esteem individuals exhibited greater ingroup bias than low self-esteem individuals through traditional measures of ingroup bias (i.e., attributional ratings).

These findings parallel research in several fields. Personality studies indicate low self-esteem individuals to favor self-protective strategies such as reducing expectations of success to guard against failure. On the other hand, high self-esteem individuals favor self-enhancing strategies such as boldly predicting success (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Tice, 1991). Relationship research indicates low self-esteem individuals to enhance themselves through elevating ratings of their romantic partners and thus, bask in reflected glory through association with the partner. When rating the self and the partner, high self-esteem individuals bolster ratings of themselves over their partners (Schütz & Tice, 1997). Additionally, social comparison research (e.g., Gibbons & McCoy, 1991; Wood, Giordano-Beech, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994) indicates low self-esteem individuals to be more likely to self-enhance through comparisons with worse-off others whereas individuals high in self-esteem prefer to seek out other, possibly more challenging comparisons.

Results have several implications for the study of ingroup bias. First, ingroup bias may be exhibited in a variety of ways. Previous research has operationally defined ingroup bias in terms of point allocations, adjective ratings, and attributions. This study has exhibited one manner in which low self-esteem individuals may show ingroup bias.

Previous research examining ingroup bias and self-esteem using measures of bias, such as adjective ratings have found that high self-esteem individuals show greater ingroup bias (e.g., Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990). The results of this study may qualify that argument. When given the opportunity to use strategies that do not force the individuals to claim superiority, low self-esteem individuals tend to exhibit greater bias. It may be the case that high self-esteem individuals favor

more direct strategies whereas low self-esteem individuals prefer a circuitous strategy (e.g., basking in reflected glory). Research indicating high self-esteem individuals to show greater ingroup bias may tap only dimensions meeting self-consistency needs for those with high self-esteem. It may be the case that neither group exhibits greater bias but, rather, an issue of how each group shows bias. Instead of examining whether low or high self-esteem individuals are more biased, future research should focus on the different strategies used by both groups.

### LIMITATIONS

A critique of the current research may be the timing of the collective self-esteem measure. As the measure followed the performance feedback, the use of the measure as a predictor may be questioned. Ideally, the measure would have preceded the performance manipulation. However, manipulation checks indicate no differences in collective self-esteem based on ingroup and outgroup performances. Further, previous research supports the idea that the measure would not show appreciable changes whether measured prior to or after the manipulation. It is important to differentiate between measures of global (stable) and transient or domain specific self-esteem. A transient measure of self-esteem will change whereas a global measure will remain steady over time (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). Collective self-esteem is a global measure, thus it can be assumed that the timing of the measure had no effect on scores. Further, the subscale utilized, membership collective self-esteem, assesses the individuals' perceptions of their contribution to the group product. As no feedback is given as to how individuals performed, there would likely be no elevation of this aspect of self-esteem.

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