Identity management strategies
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This dissertation investigates situational characteristics that may induce people to operate as individuals in a social structure, or to define themselves mainly in terms of their group membership. More specifically, an attempt is made to determine under what circumstances people who strive at a more favourable position in a status hierarchy will pursue individual strategies, or work at status improvement collectively. An important theoretical framework that addresses these issues is provided by social identity theory. According to this theory people generally strive at high status positions. Moreover, it is specified to some detail what strategies may be followed to gain higher status, and what characteristics of the status structure may induce people to strive at individual or rather collective status improvement. Close assessment of these theoretical statements, however, reveals that no clear empirical evidence is available for some of the assertions social identity theory posits. Furthermore, it seems that some of social identity theory’s hypotheses are as yet insufficiently specific.

In the introductory chapter the main theoretical issues are outlined. First, the foundations of social identity theory are presented. Furthermore, it is argued that the main principles of relative deprivation theory may lead to predictions similar to those derived from social identity theory. By examining the reasoning provided by these theoretical frameworks more closely, it is attempted to identify the main determinants of group members’ preference to work at a favourable position in the status structure individually or collectively. From this theoretical discussion, several variables emerge that appear to deserve closer investigation. To begin with, group members’ evaluation of their present situation is supposedly determined by the relative status position of their group; groups with high status are probably more desirable membership groups than groups with low status. Additionally, group members’ individual ability may be relevant, since it seems reasonable to assume that not all group members are equally dependent on their group to achieve positive identity.

Furthermore, from the discussion of different strategies that group members may pursue to achieve a more positive identity it is concluded that an important distinction can be made between the individual mobility strategy on the one hand and the group mobility (or social change) strategy on the other hand. The term individual mobility is used to denote group members’ attempts to leave their present group, and become associated with a higher status group instead. Group mobility refers to strategies that may result in a more favourable position for the ingroup as a whole. Accordingly, the extent to which the situation allows for individuals to change groups, i.e., the permeability of group boundaries determines whether individual mobility may constitute a feasible strategy. It is furthermore argued that, in the same vein, the extent to which groups may achieve a change in their relative status position, i.e., the stability of group status, indicates whether collective status improvement can be realized. Thus, the permeability of group boundaries and the stability of group status seem to constitute crucial situational characteristics that may influence people’s attempts to pursue status improvement as individuals, or as members of their social
Finally, the legitimacy of a low status position may influence group members' inclination to resign to their fate or to strive at some sort of status improvement. From social identity theory the general hypothesis may be derived that attempts at status improvement will mainly be undertaken when existing status differences are felt to be illegitimate. However, it can be argued that a distinction between the legitimacy of individual status and the legitimacy of group status may lead to more specific predictions. When a low status position results from a collective injustice, this may increase group cohesiveness. Accordingly, collective status improvement is the most appropriate remedy. A low status position resulting from an unjust personal treatment, however, is likely to elicit the desire to dissociate from others with low status. Hence, low group cohesiveness and individual mobility attempts may be expected.

The above mentioned variables, that appear to be important mediators of group members' tendency to operate in the social structure as individuals or as group members, were systematically studied in a series of experiments. In the empirical chapters, these experiments are described in detail. In Chapter two Experiment 1 and Experiment 2 are reported. Experiment 1 was conducted in order to investigate the joint effect of group status and permeability of group boundaries on group members' satisfaction and ingroup identification tendencies. As an additional independent variable, group members' individual ability was manipulated, because we suspected that ingroup identification might not be equally strong in all group members. The results of this experiment suggest that, in general, satisfaction and ingroup identification is stronger in members of high status groups than in members of groups with low status. Furthermore, permeability of group boundaries appears to render the relative favourability of the ingroup (compared to the average outgroup) more salient. When membership of another group seems a realistic prospect because group boundaries are permeable, subjects show decreased ingroup identification when their present membership group has low status (i.e., when a transition to membership of another group is likely to yield a more positive identity). Members of high status groups, conversely, appear to react to permeable group boundaries by increasing the extent to which they identify with their group. Presumably, this is the case because they are confronted with the possibility of being demoted to a group that has a lower status position than they have at present.

Experiment 2 was conducted to investigate differential effects of upward and downward mobility prospects more systematically. In this experiment, the possibility to be reassigned to a group with higher status was separated from the possibility to become member of a group with lower status. Decisions about any change of group membership would presumably be taken on the basis of subjects' individual abilities. The main result of this experiment was that subjects identified significantly less with their group when they had high individual ability and upward mobility was possible; i.e., when acquiring membership of a group with higher status seemed most likely. Contrary to what we expected, however, when confronted with the possibility of being demoted to a group with lower status subjects did not react by showing stronger ingroup identification.

Chapter three describes Experiment 3, that was carried out in order to determine under what circumstances group members will be motivated to protect their present group membership when they risk losing it. In the third experiment, an
attempt was made to render the artificial creation of groups more involving, by suggesting that group assignment was based on interpersonal similarities. Furthermore, a minority group was contrasted with a majority group, to enhance the relative attractiveness of high status and low status groups. The design of Experiment 3 comprised three independent variables: relative group status, relative group size and permeability of group boundaries. The results of this experiment point out that subjects value membership of a high status minority very highly. When permeable group boundaries confront high status minority group members with the risk of losing their favourable group membership, they seem to protect their present status position by showing increased ingroup identification. Thus, Experiment 3 offers additional support for our reasoning that permeable group boundaries have the general property of rendering the relative status position of one's group more salient. Experiments 1 and 2 demonstrate that prospective membership of a higher status group can lead to decreased ingroup identification tendencies. The results of Experiment 3 support the contention that the risk of losing membership in a distinctive high status group may enhance ingroup identification tendencies.

Experiment 4 is described in the fourth chapter. In this experiment group members' reactions to possibilities for individual mobility and group mobility as identity management strategies are investigated more closely. In this experiment, permeability of group boundaries and stability of group status were manipulated orthogonally. Other independent variables were group status and individual ability. This experiment reveals that permeability of group boundaries apparently focuses group members' attention on the possibility to attain membership of a higher status group. The (in)stability of group status, on the other hand, appears to evoke subjects' concern with upgrading the status position of their ingroup as a whole. When group boundaries are permeable, subjects report decreased satisfaction with their present group membership. Accordingly, under these circumstances ingroup identification is relatively low, and subjects seem to feel attracted to membership of a group that has higher status. At the group level, the knowledge that their group's status position is unstable, directs group members' dissatisfaction at the status position of their group. Moreover, the awareness that the position of their group might be improved, results in relatively strong ingroup identification in members of low status groups. Thus it seems that possibilities for status improvement either at the individual level (permeable group boundaries) or at the group level (unstable group status) orient group members towards their personal position in the status structure, or lead them to consider the position of their group. This general disposition of group members, furthermore, is reflected in the focus of their (dis)satisfaction feelings as well as in their ingroup identification tendencies.

In the last empirical chapter (Chapter 5), Experiments 5 and 6 are reported. In this chapter we focus on the effects of membership in low status groups only. The aim of Experiment 5 and Experiment 6 is to establish whether people react differently to a legitimate low status position than to a position they consider to be illegitimately low. In manipulating legitimacy as an independent variable, we tried to separate effects of prior expectancies from the effect of different status assignment procedures. In order to do this, three different legitimacy conditions were designed: a legitimate, an illegitimate and a justified condition.

In Experiment 5, the legitimacy manipulation pertained to the way in which the group as a whole was accorded low status. Thus, the subject's group always ended
up in the low status position. In the legitimate condition this seemed to be the logical consequence of their poor performance on a preliminary group task. In the other two legitimacy conditions, however, low status was accorded in spite of a superior group performance. When no reason for doing this was given, the status assignment would seem illegitimate. In the justified condition, however, a justification for the unexpected status assignment was provided, which was apparently accepted by other participants. In Experiment 6, the different legitimacy conditions affected the procedure that was used after a preliminary individual task to assign individual subjects to a group that held low status. In this experiment, assignment to the low status group reflected the subject's poor individual performance (legitimate condition), or took place in spite of a superior individual performance, for which a justification was not (illegitimate) or was (justified) provided. In addition to inducing these three legitimacy conditions, the stability of group status and the permeability of group boundaries were manipulated as independent variables in both experiments. Cognitive measures (consisting of evaluative and ingroup identification questions) and behavioural measures (assessing subjects' attempts at achieving individual mobility or group mobility) were identical in both experiments.

The main result of these two experiments is that subjects evaluated their low status position less negatively as it appeared to be more legitimate. It is important to note that significant differences between the illegitimate and justified conditions were consistently observed, although in both these conditions the low status position was regarded as unattractive and was lower than subjects had expected or thought they had deserved. Thus, it appears that a low status position may seem more or less acceptable depending on people's interpretation of the status assignment procedure. The provision (or omission) of a justification for an unexpected status assignment seems sufficient to evoke different normative judgements about a situation that essentially is the same. The ingroup identification measure revealed that people react differently to a collective injustice than to being illegitimately treated individually. In Experiment 5, where the group as a whole was accorded the low status position, this shared adversity strengthened group cohesion. Ingroup identification was stronger as the group's treatment seemed less legitimate. In Experiment 6, however, the procedure that resulted in a low status position affected subjects as individuals. It turned out that when low status was the result of an illegitimate individual treatment, ingroup identification tendencies decreased.

The purpose of the behavioural measures was to assess to what extent subjects competed for higher ingroup status, or intended to achieve individual locomotion to the higher status group. Various researchers claim that group mobility will only be pursued after individual ability attempts have proven unsuccessful. Our behavioural measures, however, reveal that subjects show competitive intergroup behaviour when they are primarily addressed as group members (in Experiment 5), and the group's status position is unstable. Apparently, then, under these conditions group mobility can be the most preferred identity enhancement strategy. Nevertheless, both in Experiment 5 and in Experiment 6, the knowledge that group boundaries are permeable leads group members to sacrifice their group's best interest, and try to maximize their chances at individual mobility. When impermeable group boundaries indicate that subjects' personal fates are bound to that of their group, they are more likely to pursue group goals.

In the concluding chapter (Chapter 6), the results from different experiments
are compared, and are discussed in relation to the theoretical framework that is presented in the introductory chapter. In this discussion, it is argued that some general conclusions may be drawn from the empirical work. A consistent finding is that people are more inclined to identify as group members when their group has comparatively high status than when their group's status position is relatively low. When permeable group boundaries indicate that an alternative group affiliation may be realized, this prospect seems to enhance effects of relative group status on people's willingness to identify as ingroup members. The possibility to achieve membership in a higher status group diminishes the inclination to identify as an ingroup member; the threat of losing membership of a distinctive high status group results in increased ingroup identification.

Especially in groups with low status, people appear sensitive to status improvement opportunities. A closer inspection of the results of Experiments 1, 2 and 4 reveals that those group members that have the personal characteristics that enable them to establish positive (interpersonal) distinctiveness, consistently identify least with their (low status) group. Furthermore, on the basis of Experiments 5 and 6 it is inferred that people regard a low status position more acceptable when it seems justified than when it is the result of an unjust procedure.

A more general conclusion is that when structural or normative aspects of the status structure refer to the ingroup as a social entity that might have (unstable group status) or should have (illegitimate group status) higher status, relatively strong identification with a low status ingroup is the result. When structural characteristics accentuate people's personal standing in the social system (because group boundaries are permeable or membership of a low status group seems illegitimate) identification as an ingroup member is less strong. Overall, our experimental results support the contention that group members strive at individual mobility when permeable group boundaries indicate that membership of a higher status group might be achieved. Impermeable group boundaries, conversely, increase group members' willingness to work at positive intergroup distinctiveness. At the group level, prospects for status enhancement also affect group members' reactions. When group status is unstable, this may lead group members to pursue group mobility as a primary identity enhancement strategy. When improvement of low status does not seem feasible on established dimensions of comparison, group members attempt to upgrade their social identity by introducing alternative comparative dimensions.

Finally, when we compare effects from different experiments, an intriguing pattern emerges. When people know that a higher status position might be realized, this may procure dissatisfaction with those aspects of the status quo that might change. At the same time, though, these identity enhancement prospects may reconcile group members with properties of the status structure that restrict their opportunities for status improvement in other respects.