

Interpreting references to group membership in context: Feelings about intergroup contact depending on who says what to whom

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Abstract

Contact research often manipulates the salience of group membership, with little consideration of how such manipulations affect feelings toward intergroup contact, and how contextual features may moderate its effects. We propose that feelings toward intergroup contact may not depend solely on the degree to which group membership appears to be salient, but on how references to group membership are interpreted in the intergroup context. Two experimental studies examined how references to group membership may be interpreted differently depending on their source (ingroup or outgroup) and the recipient (minority or majority), and how these interpretations predict feelings toward cross-group interactions. In Study 1, references to group membership were interpreted more negatively from an outgroup source among majority participants, yet a reverse pattern was observed for minority participants. Similar effects were obtained in Study 2, yet participants tended to respond negatively when an outgroup member referred specifically to their group. Moreover, feelings about cross-group interactions were predicted only (Study 1) and strongly (Study 2) by the degree to which outgroup members' references were interpreted negatively, beyond what was predicted by participants' general awareness of group membership. Implications of these findings for future research on contact and salience are discussed. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

For decades, researchers have examined the means by which intergroup contact can be effective in improving relations between groups (see Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Pettigrew & Tropp, in press). Though there has been some debate regarding how best to structure contact situations to promote positive intergroup outcomes (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Miller, 2002), an extensive body of research has shown that positive, generalizable outcomes of contact can be achieved by enhancing the salience of group membership in the intergroup context (see Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Brown, Vivian, & Hewstone, 1999; Ensari & Miller, 2002; González & Brown, 2003; van Oudenhoven, Groenewoud, & Hewstone, 1996).

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Still, investigations of group membership salience and its relationships with intergroup contact have remained limited in some respects. In part, the literature has focused primarily on changes *resulting from* intergroup contact, with little attention granted to how manipulating salience can affect group members' feelings *toward* intergroup contact. Some work suggests that references to group membership can enhance feelings of threat or concern, as people anticipate being perceived on the basis of their group membership (see Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Islam & Hewstone, 1993). Thus, we must also consider how salience affects the ways in which group members approach contact situations, and how references to group membership might color their expectations for intergroup contact.

A second, broader issue concerns the ways in which group membership salience has been conceptualized and operationalized in past research. Contact research has typically examined the effects of either heightening or diminishing group membership salience (see Brown & Hewstone, 2005), while neglecting contextual features that may moderate its effects. Common methods used to manipulate group membership salience involve having an experimenter provide participants with information that is relevant to group membership (e.g., Brown et al., 1999, Study 1; Ensari & Miller, 2002, Study 2), or having an experimenter make overt references to group membership (e.g., Hornsey & Hogg, 2000a; van Oudenhoven et al., 1996). However, in more naturalistic contexts, group membership salience can shift depending on the references to group membership that emerge as members of different groups interact with each other (see Brown, Maras, Masser, Vivian, & Hewstone, 2001). More complex conceptualizations of salience are therefore needed, as group members may show different responses to contact when references to group membership come from varying sources. Indeed, our feelings toward intergroup contact may not depend solely on *whether* group membership is salient, but they may also depend on *who* makes reference to group membership, and how we interpret those references in light of our relationships with the people who make them.

SOURCES OF GROUP MEMBERSHIP SALIENCE

In particular, we wish to highlight that references to group membership will likely be received and interpreted differently depending on whether such references come from members of one's own group or the outgroup. Support for this notion comes from several branches of social psychological research. Shared group membership has been shown to enhance the effectiveness of persuasion appeals, such that people are more willing to accept comments from ingroup members than from outgroup members (Haslam, McGarty, & Turner, 1996; Mackie & Queller, 2000). Persuasion attempts from outgroup members also become less effective as the salience of group membership increases (McGarty, Haslam, Hutchinson, & Turner, 1994). Moreover, people tend to be more willing to accept criticism from ingroup sources, while they tend to be rejecting of criticism from outgroup sources (Hornsey, Oppes, & Svensson, 2002; Hornsey & Imani, 2004). These trends suggest that people should generally be less accepting of references to group membership from outgroup members, as compared to when references to group membership are made by ingroup members.

Moreover, considerable research suggests that references to group membership from an outgroup member will typically be interpreted through a negative lens. People are generally inclined to distrust outgroup members (Insko & Schopler, 1998; Worchel, 1979), and to ascribe negative intentions to them (Frey & Tropp, in press; Hornsey, Trembath, & Gunthorpe, 2004; Kramer & Messick, 1998). People also tend to expect that they will be viewed negatively by outgroup members (Krueger, 1996), as well as discriminated against by them (Vivian & Berkowitz, 1992). Thus, even under relatively neutral

circumstances, people should be inclined to assume that references to group membership from an outgroup member would be laced with negative intentions.

In turn, it seems likely that people would feel more negatively about interacting with an outgroup member who makes reference to their group membership. Generally, relations between groups are tinged with distrust (see Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002), and intergroup contexts compel people to become both more aware of group membership (Tajfel, 1978) and concerned about how they will be received by outgroup members (Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998). But people may be especially concerned about cross-group interactions when group membership is emphasized (Islam & Hewstone, 1993), as they anticipate being perceived on the basis of group membership (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that when references to group membership are made in intergroup contexts, people's feelings toward cross-group interactions may not solely depend on the degree to which they perceive group membership to be salient, but rather on how they interpret those references to group membership. In particular, we suggest that when references to group membership are made by outgroup members, people will be inclined to interpret those references negatively, and in turn, to have negative feelings about interacting with those outgroup members. Moreover, we propose that beyond the effects of salience *per se*, feelings about interacting with those outgroup members will be predicted by the degree to which people perceive those references to group membership to be imbued with negative intentions.

As such, the present research extends recent work on perceived intentions in several notable respects. Specifically, we consider how people may respond in cases where outgroup members offer relatively neutral and seemingly innocuous references to group membership. When people engage in interactions across group boundaries, they often wish to acknowledge group differences in their attempts to relate to others (see Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003), rather than to express disapproval or rejection of others (e.g., Hornsey et al., 2002; Tropp, 2003). Nonetheless, references to group membership that seem innocuous, or even well-intentioned, on the part of one group member may not be interpreted in the same manner by others within the intergroup context (see Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992 for a related argument). Given that people are generally inclined to distrust outgroup members' intentions (Insko & Schopler, 1998; Worchel, 1979), it is plausible that they would interpret even relatively neutral references to group membership in a negative fashion when offered by outgroup members.

This research also extends earlier work by considering how references to group membership might impact feelings toward interactions with outgroup members. Recent work has examined people's interpretations of and responses to outgroup members' comments (e.g., Haslam et al., 1996; Hornsey & Imani, 2004; Mackie & Queller, 2000), without the expectation that they would encounter the sources of those comments in cross-group interactions. However, in intergroup contexts, people are inclined to question whether they will be accepted by others (Devine & Vasquez, 1998), focusing on such issues as whether others can be trusted and whether they will be treated with respect (see Ensari & Miller, 2002; Smith, Tyler, Huo, Ortiz, & Lind, 1998). By establishing links between research on perceived intentions and intergroup contact, the present research examines how interpretations of outgroup members' comments might fuel expectations for cross-group interactions.

Additionally, we extend prior work by examining whether interpretations of references to group membership might vary among members of minority and majority status groups. On the one hand, legacies of prejudice and discrimination might generally lead members of minority status groups to be suspicious of outgroup members' intentions (see Cohen & Steele, 2002; Kramer & Messick, 1998). On the other hand, acknowledging group differences can often be important for members of subordinate groups, to preserve the distinctiveness of their group identity (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000b) and to affirm the value of that identity in the intergroup context (Eggins, Haslam, & Reynolds, 2002). Moreover, acknowledging one's devalued status can be an effective strategy for minority group members to reduce

intergroup tension and encourage outgroup members to develop more positive feelings about interacting with them (see Belgrave & Mills, 1981; Hastorf, Wildfogel, & Cassman, 1979; Hebl & Kleck, 2002). The present research complements this work by examining how references to group membership may be interpreted when made by outgroup members, and whether the effects of those references differ for members of minority and majority status groups.

In sum, the present research investigates how members of minority and majority status groups interpret references to group membership, and how they feel about cross-group interactions in response to those references. Following an initial pilot study, two experimental studies examined these issues with samples of ethnic minority and majority participants.

PILOT STUDY

A pilot study was first conducted to identify a comment that would serve as the basis for the experimental manipulation. A separate sample of 15 participants read the following vignette:

Imagine you are about to work on a task that requires you to come up with your own ideas about an object and then to share these ideas with other people in a group. Keeping this in mind, imagine that right before you begin working in the group, you are handed a sheet with some information about the other members of the group. Along with this information, each person has provided a brief comment about their expectations for working with the other members of the group. Examples of these comments are written below.

After reading this description, participants read nine comments and rated how positively or negatively they would feel about working with the person who made each comment. Ratings of comments were scored on 9-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (very negative) to 9 (very positive). One comment rated slightly positively (i.e., 'I wonder what kinds of ideas people will come up with,' $M = 6.53$) and one comment rated slightly negatively (i.e., 'I wonder how people will act within the group,' $M = 4.73$) were originally combined to form a neutrally worded statement for the experimental manipulation (i.e., 'I wonder what kinds of ideas people will come up with, and how they will act in the group'). However, pilot testing of the experimental procedures revealed that some participants reported suspicion due to the length of the comment; thus, the comment was shortened to include only the slightly positive comment for use in the following experimental studies (i.e., 'I wonder what kinds of ideas people will come up with').

STUDY 1

Participants and Procedure

One hundred and forty five undergraduates were recruited to participate in a study on 'brainstorming processes,' in exchange for research participation credit or a small, monetary compensation. Six participants reported suspicion, and their responses were removed prior to data analysis. Thus, the sample consisted of 139 participants (39 males and 100 females) between the ages of 17 and 22 years ($M = 19.60$ years). This sample included 64 ethnic minority participants (19 Asian American, 10 African American, 16 Latino American, and 19 mixed heritage or other) and 75 ethnic majority participants (European American).

Cover Story and Introduction to Study

For each testing session, three to four participants and one confederate participant arrived at the lab and were seated at a table. Approximately equal numbers of ethnic minority and majority participants were recruited for each testing session. Participants were informed that the study concerned brainstorming processes of individuals, dyads, and small groups, and they would be asked to complete some tasks individually, and some tasks with others in the testing session. Participants were then seated in separate areas of the laboratory where they completed an individual brainstorming task. The task required them to spend 5 minutes brainstorming novel uses for a paperclip, a procedure that has been used in prior studies of group membership salience (see Brown et al., 1999).

Before completing the individual task, participants were given a brief form in which they were asked to respond to a few demographic questions and to state any initial comments they might have about the upcoming tasks. Participants were told that the information they provided would be shared with their partner for the next task, and their partner's information would be shared with them, so that they could learn more about one another prior to the paired task.

Experimental Manipulations

Participants then received a completed form, which included a scripted comment ostensibly from their confederate partner. This form contained manipulations for both the *type* of comment and the *source* of the comment. The type of comment varied in terms of whether a reference to group membership either was or was not made. Participants in the *reference* condition received a written comment in which the confederate partner made a reference to group membership (i.e., 'I wonder what kinds of ideas people of different races will come up with'). Participants in the *no reference* condition received a written comment in which the confederate partner did not make a reference to group membership (i.e., 'I wonder what kinds of ideas people will come up with'). As determined through pilot testing, the manipulated comments were designed to be relatively neutral in content, while varying the degree to which the confederate partner was believed to be thinking about others in terms of group membership.¹

The second manipulation involved the source of the comment. For the purposes of this study, general ethnic group status (i.e., ethnic minority vs. ethnic majority) was used as the level of categorization.² Participants were led to believe that the comment they received came either from a participant of either the same ethnic status (ingroup member) or different ethnic status (outgroup member); the comment was attributed to the confederate, so that participants would know that the comment was not made by any actual participant. Using these manipulations, ethnic minority and majority participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Comment Type: Reference/No Reference) \times 2 (Comment Source: Ingroup/Outgroup) \times 2 (Participant Ethnic Status: Minority/Majority) factorial design. Following these manipulations, participants completed a brief questionnaire packet, ostensibly before proceeding to work with their partner. After completing the questionnaire packet participants were fully debriefed.

¹It should be noted that this manipulation of group membership salience creates an intergroup context by highlighting distinctions between the groups, rather than by manipulating perceived typicality of group members, as has been done in other studies (e.g., Brown et al., 1999).

²Though we recognize that various ethnic minority groups may have different relations with the ethnic majority group (see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), we believe that general ethnic status is a useful and relevant level of categorization, as members of ethnic minority groups share the common experience of having lower status relative to the ethnic majority group (see Phinney, 1996). The ethnic minority-majority distinction is also particularly relevant to the university context in which these experiments were conducted, as its members regularly make broad distinctions between students of Asian, Hispanic, African, and Native American descent and students of European descent (see Footnote 7 for an extended discussion).

Measures

Following the experimental procedures, participants completed questionnaires to assess their awareness of group membership, their perceptions of the comment made by the partner, and their anticipated feelings about interacting with their partner.

Awareness of Group Membership

To assess awareness of group membership (Brown et al., 2001), participants indicated the extent to which they themselves are aware of their ethnic group membership, and the extent to which they believed their partner would be aware of their ethnic group membership. Responses to the two items ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Since responses to these items were strongly correlated for both ethnic minority participants, $r = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$, and ethnic majority participants, $r = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$, they were averaged to create a single measure of awareness of group membership.

Perceived Negativity of Partner's Comment

Participants reported how they perceived the partner's comment, with scores ranging from 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive). Responses were reverse-scored, so that higher scores would indicate greater perceptions of negativity.

Anticipated Feelings of Acceptance with Partner

To assess anticipated feelings of acceptance, participants indicated the extent to which they expected to feel (a) respected by their partner, (b) comfortable with their partner, and (c) that they could trust their partner using scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Responses to these items were averaged to create a single indicator of acceptance for ethnic minority participants ($\alpha = 0.87$) and ethnic majority participants ($\alpha = 0.81$), with higher scores indicating greater feelings of acceptance.

Manipulation Checks

At the end of the questionnaire packet, participants also completed some checks for the experimental manipulations. A check for the comment type manipulation asked participants whether their partner offered a comment that included a reference to group membership. Four participants did not accurately report the type of comment made by their partner, and responses from these participants were omitted from subsequent analyses.³ As a check for the comment source manipulation, participants were also asked to indicate their partner's ethnic group membership. All participants provided the correct response to this question.

Results

Awareness of Group Membership

A 2 (Comment Type) \times 2 (Comment Source) \times 2 (Participant Ethnic Status) analysis of variance was conducted for awareness of group membership. The main effect of Comment Type was significant,

³In both studies, separate analyses including participants omitted from the sample show that the patterns of results are the same irrespective of whether these cases are included or excluded.

$F(1, 125) = 18.78, \eta^2 = 0.13, p < 0.001$. Participants who received a comment with a reference to group membership were generally more aware of group membership ($M = 4.87$) than those who received a comment with no reference ($M = 3.77$). The main effect of Comment Source was also significant, $F(1, 125) = 14.44, \eta^2 = 0.10, p < 0.001$, such that participants reported greater awareness of ethnic group membership when their partner was an outgroup member ($M = 4.81$) than when their partner was an ingroup member ($M = 3.82$). The main effect of Participant Ethnic Status, $F(1, 125) = 8.04, \eta^2 = 0.06, p < 0.01$, showed minority participants were generally more aware of group membership ($M = 4.68$) than ethnic majority participants ($M = 4.01$). Moreover, these effects were qualified by a significant Comment Source \times Participant Ethnic Status interaction, $F(1, 125) = 10.52, \eta^2 = 0.08, p < 0.001$. Ethnic minority participants were more aware of group membership than ethnic majority participants when anticipating interactions with an ingroup member ($M = 4.61$ and 3.07), $F(1, 64) = 17.66, p < 0.001$, yet minority and majority participants were comparably aware of group membership when anticipating interactions with an outgroup member ($M = 4.75$ and 4.87 , respectively), $F(1, 65) = 0.09, p = 0.77$.

Perceived Negativity of Partner's Comment

A 2 (Comment Type) \times 2 (Comment Source) \times 2 (Participant Ethnic Status) analysis of variance was then conducted for the perceived negativity of the partner's comment.

This analysis yielded a significant main effect of Comment Type, $F(1, 124) = 55.61, \eta^2 = 0.31, p < 0.001$, as well as a significant interaction between Comment Source and Participant Ethnic Status, $F(1, 124) = 6.64, \eta^2 = 0.05, p < 0.05$, and these effects were qualified by a significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 124) = 7.86, \eta^2 = 0.06, p < 0.01$ (see Figure 1). The two-way interaction between participant ethnic status and comment source was not significant in the no reference condition, $F(1, 61) = 0.04, \eta^2 = 0.00, p = 0.85$, while this interaction was significant in the reference condition, $F(1, 63) = 11.35, \eta^2 = 0.15, p < 0.001$. Simple effects tests showed that ethnic majority participants rated the reference more negatively when made by an outgroup member ($M = 4.42$), than an ingroup member ($M = 3.12$), $F(1, 34) = 8.05, p < 0.01$. However, ethnic minority participants tended to rate the reference less negatively when it came from an outgroup member ($M = 3.33$) than when it came from an ingroup member ($M = 4.44$), $F(1, 30) = 3.95, p = 0.056$. All other main and interaction effects were not significant. Overall, then, references to group membership were rated more negatively when made

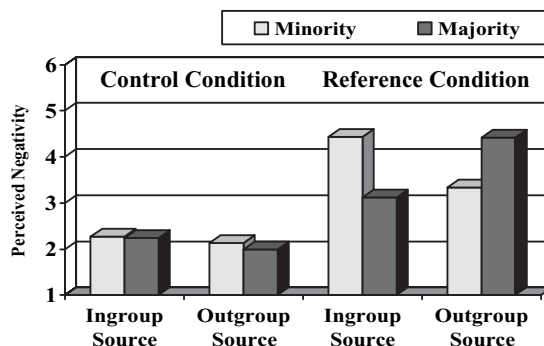


Figure 1. Three-way interaction of comment type, comment source, and participant ethnic status on perceived negativity of the partner's comment (Study 1)

by a member of the ethnic minority group, irrespective of whether that person was an ingroup member or outgroup member.

Anticipated Feelings of Acceptance in Interacting with Partner

A 2 (Comment Type) \times 2 (Comment Source) \times 2 (Participant Ethnic Status) analysis of variance for acceptance yielded a marginally significant main effect of Comment Type, $F(1, 125) = 3.20$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$, $p < 0.08$. Participants tended to have less positive feelings about interacting with a partner who made a reference to group membership ($M = 4.88$) than when no reference to group membership was made ($M = 5.26$). The analysis also yielded a marginally significant two-way interaction between Comment Source and Participant Ethnic Status, $F(1, 125) = 3.52$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$, $p = 0.06$. Ethnic minority participants did not significantly differ in their anticipated feelings of acceptance in interactions with ingroup partners and outgroup partners ($M = 4.99$ and 5.25 , respectively), $F(1, 60) = 0.65$, $p = 0.42$. However, ethnic majority participants anticipated feeling somewhat more accepted in interactions with an outgroup partner ($M = 5.28$) than in interactions with an ingroup partner ($M = 4.75$), $F(1, 69) = 3.57$, $p = 0.06$. All other main and interaction effects were not significant.

Examining the Medial Roles of Awareness and Perceived Negativity

We propose that responses to interactions with outgroup members will depend on how people interpret references to group membership, beyond the effects of recognizing that group membership is salient in the intergroup context. Thus, along with comparing effects across conditions, we have conducted additional analyses to test both awareness of group membership, and interpretations of references to group membership, as potential mediators between the manipulation of comment type and participants' anticipated feelings of acceptance. Tests of mediation have been conducted only with participants in the outgroup source condition, as the central thrust of our work concerns participants' feelings toward cross-group interactions.

Following guidelines proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), we used four regression analyses to examine whether awareness of group membership and perceived negativity of the partner's comment would mediate the effects of comment type on feelings of acceptance. Preliminary analyses show that the two mediators are only moderately correlated, $r(67) = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$; moreover, perceived negativity correlates only moderately with acceptance, $r(67) = -0.37$, $p < 0.01$, while awareness did not correlate significantly with acceptance, $r(67) = -0.05$, $p = 0.68$.

Figure 2 shows the standardized coefficients for the model predicting acceptance. This model shows that comment type has a direct effect on acceptance, such that a reference to group membership leads participants to anticipate lower feelings of acceptance with the outgroup partner. Comment type also significantly predicts both awareness of group membership, $\beta = 0.27$, $t = 2.29$, $p < 0.05$, and perceived negativity of the partner's comment, $\beta = 0.58$, $t = 5.67$, $p < 0.001$. At the same time, perceived negativity directly and significantly predicts feelings of acceptance, $\beta = -0.37$, $t = 3.17$, $p < 0.01$, while awareness does not, $\beta = -0.05$, $t = -0.42$, $p = 0.68$. Once entered into the model, the effect of perceived negativity remains significant, $\beta = -0.37$, $t = -2.49$, $p < 0.02$, while the direct effect of comment type is no longer significant, $\beta = -0.05$, $t = -0.37$, $p = 0.72$.⁴ As confirmed by a significant

⁴A reverse test examined whether acceptance might mediate the relationship between comment type and perceived comment negativity. Comment type remained a highly significant predictor of comment negativity even after acceptance was entered into the model, $\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$, and a Sobel test confirmed that acceptance did not mediate this relationship, $z = 1.53$, $p > 0.10$.

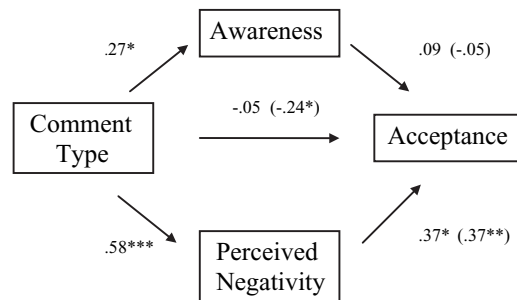


Figure 2. Testing awareness of group membership and perceived negativity of partner's comment as mediators between comment type and acceptance (Study 1).

Note. In cases where two sets of numbers are presented, numbers appearing outside of the parentheses are the standardized coefficients when comment type, awareness of group membership, and perceived comment negativity are entered simultaneously as predictors for acceptance. Numbers appearing within parentheses are the standardized coefficients representing total effects between acceptance and the predictor variable in question. * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Sobel test, $z = -2.21$, $p < 0.03$, these results indicate that the perceived negativity of the partner's comment mediates the relationship between the manipulation of comment type and participants' anticipated feelings of acceptance with their partner.⁵

Discussion

Consistent with prior research, results from Study 1 revealed that references to group membership generally make participants more aware of group membership (see Brown et al., 1999; van Oudenhoven et al., 1996) and participants are more aware of group membership when they anticipate interacting with an outgroup member than with an ingroup member (see Tajfel, 1978). Nonetheless, participants' feelings about interacting with an outgroup partner were not predicted by their awareness of group membership per se, but rather by the degree to which they interpreted the partner's comment negatively.

Moreover, we find that participants' interpretations of references to group membership qualitatively differ depending on whether they are made by ingroup members or outgroup members, and on the relative ethnic status of the participants themselves. Corresponding with our original predictions, ethnic majority participants interpreted references to group membership more negatively when they came from an outgroup member than when they came from an ingroup member. However, we observe the reverse pattern for ethnic minority participants, who were less likely to interpret the reference negatively when it came from an outgroup member.

These divergent patterns of results suggest broad differences in how members of minority and majority status groups tend to be affected by their group's status in the larger society. In particular, they point to the significance of having group membership recognized by the majority outgroup among members of minority status groups. Research has shown that acknowledgment of group membership can be important for minority group members in intergroup contexts (see Eggins et al., 2002; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000b), given that their perspectives and experiences tend to be overlooked by the individuals

⁵Although these patterns of relationships were highly similar for ethnic minority and majority participants, a supplementary, hierarchical regression analysis was conducted for acceptance, in which the three predictor variables (comment type, awareness of group membership, and perceived comment negativity) were entered at the first stage of analysis, and terms representing their interactions with participant ethnic status were entered at the second stage. Adding the interaction terms at the second stage did not contribute significantly to the amount of variance accounted for, beyond what was accounted for at the first stage of analysis.

and institutions that represent the dominant culture (see Bobo, 1999; Feagin, 2000). Thus, it is conceivable that minority group members would see the outgroup partner's reference as a positive acknowledgement of their experiences as group members, while majority group members would be inclined to interpret the outgroup partner's reference through a negative lens.

However, before accepting this explanation, we must consider whether the results we observed may be due to the nature of the comments used in our experimental manipulation of salience. In Study 1, only a general reference to group membership was made by the partner to enhance group membership salience ('I wonder what kinds of ideas people of different races will come up with'). This manipulation appears to have been successful in making participants aware of group membership, but it may not have been sufficient to lead participants to believe that their own group was the primary focus of the partner's attention. It is possible that a comment focused more precisely on the participant's own group would have led both ethnic minority and majority participants to show negative responses to the outgroup partner, as people tend to respond negatively when they believe they are being targeted by outgroup members (see Crocker, Major, & Steele et al., 1998; Pinel, 2002; Tropp, 2003). Thus, a second study was conducted using references that focus specifically on either the participant's own group or the outgroup, to test whether minority and majority participants would show similar responses to those observed in Study 1 once these procedures are used.

STUDY 2

Participants and Procedure

One hundred and sixty three undergraduates participated in this study and received either course credit or a small, monetary compensation for their participation. Nine participants were removed from the analysis due to reported suspicion. Hence, the sample consisted of 154 participants (43 males, 111 females) between the ages of 17 and 22 years ($M = 18.70$ years). This sample included 69 ethnic minority participants (24 Asian American, 15 African American, 13 Latino American, 17 mixed heritage or other) and 85 ethnic majority participants (European American).

Cover Story and Introduction to Study

The basic format and procedures used in Study 2 were very similar to those used in Study 1. However, a new focus was developed for the brainstorming task to enhance participants' interest and engagement. Specifically, participants were informed that the study concerned the ways in which students think about and discuss social issues, and that they would be brainstorming ideas individually, in pairs, and in small groups. Participants were then informed that the topic for their testing session would be 'the environment.'⁶ After opening instructions, participants were seated in separate areas of the laboratory, where they spent five minutes generating individual lists of the points they believed should be considered most strongly in U.S. government policies regarding the environment.

⁶This brainstorming task was chosen so that participants could concentrate on an engaging topic, yet one that is unrelated to the topic of race relations, since focusing on race relations could automatically bias participants' feelings about cross-group interactions (see Goff, Steele, & Davies, 2004). A separate sample of 21 undergraduates rated the importance of ten social issues (e.g., health care, race relations, environment) on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (very important), as well as rating how strongly they perceived the issue of 'race relations' to be connected to the nine other social issues with a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (strongly connected). Results showed that 'the environment' was rated as an important social issue ($M = 5.86$), yet the least closely related to the topic of 'race relations' ($M = 2.10$) relative to all of the other issues combined (M s ranging from 3.29 to 6.29, overall $M = 4.91$), $t(20) = 15.80$, $p < 0.001$.

Before developing their individual lists, participants were asked to complete a brief form, in which they responded to several demographic questions and offered any comments they might have about the upcoming discussions. Participants were informed that their responses would be shared with their partner and their partner's responses would be shared with them.

Experimental Manipulations

As in Study 1, participants then received a completed form, ostensibly from their partner, which included a scripted comment. In this study, all participants received a comment that included a reference to group membership, and the comment contained manipulations to vary both its *source* and *focus*. Once again, using ethnic status as the level of categorization, the source of the comment was varied by having the comment come from either a partner of the same ethnic status (ingroup member) or different ethnic status (outgroup member). Additionally, the focus of the comment was manipulated by having participants receive a comment that focused specifically on either people of their own ethnic status, or different ethnic status (e.g., 'I wonder what kinds of ideas White students/AHANA students will come up with').⁷ As in Study 1, the comment was intentionally attributed to a confederate, so that participants would not mistakenly attribute the comment to any actual participant.

Thus, ethnic minority and majority participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Comment Source: Ingroup/Outgroup) \times 2 (Comment Focus: Ingroup/Outgroup) \times 2 (Participant Ethnic Status: Minority/Majority) factorial design. Following these procedures, participants completed a questionnaire and were then fully debriefed.

Measures and Manipulation Checks

The questionnaires included the same measures and manipulation checks as those used in Study 1. Three participants incorrectly responded that the comment did not include a reference to group membership, and two participants did not accurately identify the group membership of their partner. Responses from these participants were omitted prior to data analysis.

Results

Awareness of Group Membership

As in Study 1, a 2 (Comment Source) \times 2 (Comment Focus) \times 2 (Participant Ethnic Status) analysis of variance was conducted for awareness of group membership. Once again, the main effect of Comment Source was significant, $F(1, 136) = 22.46$, $\eta^2 = 0.14$, $p < 0.001$, such that participants tended to report greater awareness of ethnic group membership when their partner was an outgroup member ($M = 5.58$) than when their partner was an ingroup member ($M = 4.38$). The main effect of Participant Ethnic Status was also significant, $F(1, 136) = 20.64$, $\eta^2 = 0.13$, $p < 0.01$. Ethnic minority participants were generally more aware of group membership ($M = 5.58$) than ethnic majority participants ($M = 4.53$). Moreover, these main effects were qualified by a significant Comment Source \times Participant Ethnic

⁷In 1979, the acronym AHANA was developed to refer to people of Asian, Hispanic, African, and Native American descent. This term was originally coined by students at the university where data collection took place, and ever since, this term has been used widely throughout the institution to refer to ethnic minority students.

Status interaction, $F(1, 136) = 4.33$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$, $p < 0.05$. While ethnic minority participants were substantially more aware of group membership than ethnic majority participants when anticipating interactions with an ingroup member ($M = 5.23$ and 3.66 , respectively), $F(1, 68) = 17.73$, $p < 0.001$, ethnic minority and majority participants only marginally differed in their awareness of group membership when they anticipated interactions with an outgroup partner ($M = 5.92$ and 5.32 , respectively), $F(1, 72) = 3.66$, $p = 0.06$.

Perceived Negativity of Partner's Comment

A 2 (Comment Source) \times 2 (Comment Focus) \times 2 (Participant Ethnic Status) analysis of variance was then conducted for the perceived negativity of the partner's comment. Although the Comment Source \times Participant Ethnic Status interaction was not significant as in Study 1, $F(1, 136) = 0.45$, $\eta^2 < 0.01$, $p = 0.50$, both of these variables showed significant interactions with the manipulation of Comment Focus. Specifically, the analysis yielded a significant interaction between Comment Source and Comment Focus, $F(1, 136) = 9.07$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$, $p < 0.01$. When the partner's comment focused on the outgroup, participants did not differ significantly in their perceptions of the comment depending on whether the comment was made by an ingroup partner or an outgroup partner ($M = 4.36$ and 3.82 , respectively), $F(1, 63) = 2.36$, $p = 0.13$. However, when the partner's comment focused on the ingroup, participants were significantly more likely to view the comment negatively when the comment was made by an outgroup partner ($M = 4.40$) than when the comment was made by an ingroup partner ($M = 3.59$), $F(1, 77) = 7.62$, $p < 0.01$.

The interaction between Comment Focus and Participant Ethnic Status was also significant, $F(1, 136) = 7.51$, $\eta^2 = 0.05$, $p < 0.01$. Ethnic minority and majority participants did not significantly differ in their interpretations of the comment when it focused on the outgroup ($M = 4.32$ and 3.89 , respectively), $F(1, 63) = 1.50$, $p = 0.23$. However, when the comment focused on their ingroup, ethnic minority participants perceived the comment significantly less negatively ($M = 3.56$) than did ethnic majority participants ($M = 4.37$), $F(1, 77) = 7.68$, $p < 0.01$. All other main and interaction effects were not significant.

Anticipated Feelings of Acceptance with Partner

Similar to Study 1, a 2 (Comment Source) \times 2 (Comment Focus) \times 2 (Participant Ethnic Status) analysis of variance for acceptance revealed a significant two-way interaction between Comment Source and Participant Ethnic Status, $F(1, 136) = 4.68$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$, $p < 0.05$. Ethnic minority participants did not significantly differ in their anticipated feelings of acceptance with ingroup members and outgroup members ($M = 4.89$ and 4.59 , respectively), $F(1, 62) = 1.30$, $p = 0.26$. However, ethnic majority participants anticipated somewhat greater feelings of acceptance in interactions with outgroup members ($M = 4.96$) than in interactions with ingroup members ($M = 4.47$), $F(1, 78) = 3.23$, $p = 0.07$. All other main and interaction effects were not significant.

Awareness and Negativity as Predictors for Feelings of Acceptance with Partner

Additionally, we examined the degree to which both awareness of group membership and interpretations of references to group membership predicted feelings of acceptance with the outgroup partner. Since all participants received a comment that included a reference to group membership, we

were not able to replicate the full test for mediation conducted in Study 1. Nonetheless, using regression analysis, we entered awareness of group membership and the perceived negativity of the partner's comment as predictors for feelings of acceptance.⁸ The regression model was significant, $R^2 = 0.27$, $F(2, 71) = 13.03$, $p < 0.001$, with both awareness, $\beta = -0.27$, $p < 0.05$, and perceived negativity, $\beta = -0.36$, $p < 0.001$, emerging as significant predictors for participants' anticipated feelings of acceptance in interacting with their partner.

Discussion

Complementing findings from Study 1, results from Study 2 show that references to group membership generally enhance its awareness, and that people tend to be more aware of group membership when they anticipate interactions across group boundaries (see also Brown et al., 1999; Tajfel, 1978). But beyond the effects of awareness, we observe that people's feelings about cross-group interactions are predicted strongly by how they interpret references to group membership in the intergroup context.

Moreover, Study 2 reveals that the ways in which people interpret references to group membership can vary substantially depending on the nature of those references, and on contextual features that accompany those references. Results show that participants did not significantly differ in how they interpreted references to group membership from ingroup and outgroup partners when the outgroup was the focus of the partner's comment; however, when the partner's comment was focused on their own group, participants interpreted the comment more negatively when it came from an outgroup member than when it came from an ingroup member. Thus, rather than showing similar responses to all forms of group membership salience, people may be especially likely to attend to those forms that are particularly relevant to their own experiences as group members (see Branscombe et al., 1999 and Tropp & Wright, 2001 for related arguments). These trends also suggest that people may be sensitive even to relatively neutral comments from outgroup members, such that they interpret their seemingly innocuous references to group membership in a negative manner (see Kramer & Messick, 1998).

Additionally, we observe differences between ethnic minority and majority participants in how they interpret references to their group membership. Although their responses did not generally differ in relation to the source of the comment, or in terms of how they interpreted references about the outgroup, ethnic minority and majority participants did differ in how they responded to references that targeted their own ethnic ingroup; specifically, ethnic minority participants interpreted references targeting their own group in a more positive light than did members of the ethnic majority group. Given that the dominant culture often fails to recognize the perspectives and experiences of minority status groups (see Bobo, 1999; Feagin, 2000), these results may suggest that minority group members appreciate having their group membership acknowledged in the intergroup context (see Eggins et al., 2002), whereas majority group members are instead inclined to interpret such references in a negative manner.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present research extends prior work on group membership salience by examining how contextual features may affect how references to group membership are interpreted, and in turn, how these

⁸Similar to Study 1, a supplementary regression was conducted in which awareness and perceived negativity were entered at the first stage, and their interactions with participant ethnic status were entered at the second stage. The interaction terms did not contribute significantly to the total amount of variance accounted for, beyond what was accounted for at the first stage.

interpretations may predict feelings toward intergroup contact. Consistent with earlier research, we find that the salience of group membership increases when references are made to group membership (see Brown et al., 1999; van Oudenhoven et al., 1996) and when people anticipate interacting with outgroup members (see Tajfel, 1978). However, we also observe that people's interpretations of references to group membership vary considerably depending on how and by whom those references are made. Indeed, people appear to interpret references to group membership quite differently depending on whether they come from ingroup or outgroup sources (Studies 1 and 2), and whether they do or do not focus specifically on the participant's own group (Study 2). Moreover, results from both studies showed that participants' interpretations of these references significantly predicted their anticipated feelings of acceptance with an outgroup partner, beyond what could be predicted simply by their awareness of group membership. Together, these findings suggest that more complex conceptualizations of group membership salience are needed, and that research should continue to consider the varied effects that different kinds of references to group membership might have in intergroup contexts.

In particular, future investigations could usefully extend the present research by examining how varied forms of group membership salience might impact the cross-group interactions themselves. In the present studies, we only examined how different manipulations of salience affect people's interpretations of group members' intentions, and their expectations for cross-group interactions. But just as perceived intentions and expectations are colored by the ways in which group membership is emphasized, these manipulations of group membership salience may continue to exert an influence as members of different groups interact with each other. For example, if initial references to group membership provoke beliefs in the negative intentions of outgroup members, people may be less willing to trust or engage in self-disclosure with outgroup members, which could inhibit the very kinds of activities known to promote positive outcomes from intergroup contact (see Ensari & Miller, 2002; Miller, 2002).

At the same time, it is conceivable that references to group membership from outgroup members would be interpreted differently or accepted more readily at varying points during the cross-group interaction. Recent theorizing on processes of intergroup contact suggests that members of different groups should first be given an opportunity to get to know each other on a personal level, and once a personal connection is established, the salience of group membership can then be introduced to promote more positive, generalizable intergroup outcomes (Pettigrew, 1998; see also Eller & Abrams, 2004; Miller, 2002). Correspondingly, it may be that references to group membership would be more likely to be accepted from outgroup members only after some sort of relationship or rapport has been established. Supporting this view, recent work has shown that people tend to be more accepting of criticism from outgroup members when they are given reason to believe that the criticism grows from care for their group (Hornsey et al., 2004). More research is therefore needed to examine both how differing kinds of references to group membership may affect the course of cross-group interactions, and how intergroup contact may impact the ways in which outgroup members' references to group membership are interpreted.

As we consider these possibilities, we must also acknowledge that, in the present research, members of minority and majority status groups showed different patterns of responses when references to group membership were made. Ethnic majority participants generally respond negatively when references to group membership were made by outgroup members (Study 1), and especially when the references to group membership focused specifically on their own group (Study 2). However, in both studies, there was some evidence to suggest that ethnic minority participants tended to respond favorably when outgroup members made reference to their group membership (Study 1), and even when references to group membership focused specifically on their own group (Study 2).

In part, these divergent patterns speak to the importance of examining perceptions and expectations on both sides of the intergroup relationship, rather than assuming that members of all

groups will view intergroup relations in the same way (Devine & Vasquez, 1998). Moreover, these patterns suggest that the statuses and concerns group members bring to intergroup contexts are likely to inform how they interpret references to group membership. Members of majority status groups are generally less accustomed to thinking about group membership or their group's privileged status (Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002; McGuire et al., 1978), and they are often concerned with appearing prejudiced in the presence of members of minority status groups (Devine & Vasquez, 1998). Thus, it is understandable that majority group members might find references to group membership threatening when they come from members of minority status groups, as these references could heighten a recognition of group differences in status (Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003) and spawn concerns about seeming prejudiced (Vorauer et al., 1998). By contrast, members of minority status groups may wish to have their group membership acknowledged in intergroup contexts (see Eggins et al., 2002; Hebl & Kleck, 2002), as their perspectives and experiences tend to be overlooked or discounted by the dominant culture (see Bobo, 1999; Feagin, 2000). Given this context, it may be that members of minority status groups responded positively when references to group membership were made by the majority group, because they sensed that their perspectives and experiences were being recognized rather than neglected.

While it is striking to note these different patterns of responses among members of minority and majority status groups, we must also consider whether the references used in the present research may have been particularly likely to be construed in these different ways. It is possible that other seemingly neutral references to group membership would not be interpreted in such a positive light among members of minority status groups (see also Tropp, Stout, Boatswain, Wright, & Pettigrew, in press). Indeed, other research suggests that members of minority status groups may be vigilant in responding to the majority outgroup, until they have reason to believe that outgroup members are worthy of their trust (Cohen & Steele, 2002). Additionally, it may be that group members would show different patterns of responses when references to group membership are clearly relevant to the goals of cross-group interactions, such as dialogs designed to improve intergroup relations (Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003) or potentially charged discussions of race-related policies (Goff et al., 2004). More research is therefore needed to determine how other references to group membership might seem tinged with negative intentions, depending on the conditions under which such references are made.

Nonetheless, findings from the present studies may be seen as initially encouraging, in that they demonstrate the potential for outgroup members' references to group membership to be interpreted in a positive manner. At the same time, they illustrate the difficulties that may be involved when members of different groups attempt to communicate about group differences, as they are often inclined to interpret comments about group membership in very different ways. Thus, as we consider the role that context plays in shifting how references to group membership are interpreted, we must begin to identify strategies that can encourage positive interpretations of outgroup members' intentions, to promote more positive orientations toward intergroup relations among members of both minority and majority status groups.

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