
The Dynamics of Group Differentiation in the Face of Defeat

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This study examined the process of between-group differentiation in a disadvantaged group to see how its members achieved some form of positive in-group distinctiveness. The players on the last-place ice hockey team in a competitive league were tested at eight games. Before and after each game, they were asked to rate how they perceived their team, the opposing team, and themselves. One hypothesis was that players could not ignore their past and present performance and would rate their opponents as superior on attributes that were critical for success. A second hypothesis was that players would achieve a measure of positive distinctiveness by seeing their opponents as more "dirty" in their play. Results, which supported these hypotheses, are discussed within the context of Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory.

One of the most comprehensive theories of intergroup relations is Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory. This theory builds on some relatively basic assumptions. It states that individuals strive to achieve positive self-esteem, that an important part of an individual's sense of self comes from memberships in social groups (i.e., social identity), that these groups may be positively or negatively valued, and that value connotations associated with groups are the result of social comparisons between one's in-group and a relevant out-group. A positive social identity is achieved if one's group is seen as being different from a relevant out-group in a favorable way. But what happens to the members of a group who are clearly in a disadvantaged position relative to members of a salient out-group? An interesting aspect of social identity theory is its predictions regarding the behavior of such individuals. The purpose of the present study was to test certain aspects of this theory by focusing on the process of social category differentiation in a group of disadvantaged individuals in an intergroup setting. These individuals were members of a competitive ice hockey team that was in last place in its league.

The groundwork for social identity theory was laid by Tajfel's (1959) early work on categorization, which indicated that the tendency for a perceiver to accentuate differences between stimuli from different categories could be generalized from the perceptual to the social domain. As applied to intergroup relations, this central cognitive process is called *between-group differentiation* (Tajfel, 1978). In social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), this process is used to explain the clear distinctions that are often made between in-groups and out-groups (see Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

Between-group differentiation has received considerable empirical attention. Much of the evidence for its existence has been demonstrated in studies using the *minimal group paradigm* (e.g., Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). In the first part of these studies, participants are randomly assigned to a group on the pretense of a trivial criterion (e.g., dot overestimators vs. dot underestimators). The second part of the study usually involves a reward allocation task. The reliable finding is that the in-group is favored at the expense of the out-group in reward allocations. The conclusion to be drawn is that even group membership based on trivial categories will lead to a differentiation between in-group and out-group. Evidence for an in-group favoritism effect

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extends beyond the allocation of rewards to other areas, such as the attribution of evaluative traits (see Brewer, 1979).

A shortcoming of these studies is that group members often interact (if at all) in a historical vacuum that is void of any sense of past, present, or future accomplishments. Real intergroup situations, which involve an element of conflict or competition, are usually embedded in a historical context where certain groups are clearly at a disadvantage. How can a positive identity be sustained when social comparisons are made with a clearly superior out-group? No empirical work on the long-term effects of losing on group differentiation has been framed within social identity theory. The theory does, however, describe the strategies that an individual may use to deal with a threatened or negative social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

One strategy, called *individual mobility*, involves an attempt to dissociate from the in-group and possibly to move into a higher-status group. Individual mobility is predicated on the subjective belief that social mobility is possible and that group boundaries are permeable. Two other strategies, referred to as social change strategies, are predicated on the belief that group boundaries are rigid and fixed. *Social creativity* involves cognitive behaviors such as comparing the in-group with the out-group on a new dimension of social comparison, changing the value assigned to traditional dimensions of social comparison, or changing the out-group of social comparison. *Social competition* is more collective in nature and involves engaging in conflict with the advantaged out-group in order to reverse the positions of in-group and out-group. It is the social creativity strategy that will be examined in this study, along with some of the basic assumptions underlying social identity theory.

The group under investigation in this study was a collegiate ice hockey team. Because the team was the poorest in performance in its league, it was possible to study how its members dealt with the negative social identity that might result from identifying with the team. Furthermore, the context of competitive team sports has a number of interesting characteristics that permit a close examination of some of the assumptions that are central in social identity theory. First, the dimensions that are used for social comparison are tied to performance (e.g., skilled, motivated). As a result, the process of between-group differentiation can be tied to objective measures (i.e., points) that reflect success or failure. Second, in organized sports, groups have a history, which is revealed by their standing within a competitive hierarchy, and findings can be interpreted within the historical context provided by a team's record. Finally, the mem-

bers of groups in competitive sports are limited in the strategies that they can use to rectify their negative social identity. Among the strategies suggested by Tajfel and Turner (1979), individual mobility and social competition are not viable options. Individual mobility would require players to quit their team, and social competition is not applicable as an option, since players are already involved in competition. The only remaining option, therefore, is social creativity.

The use of social creativity in social differentiation has been described in detail by Lemaine (1974). One of his examples is his summer camp study, where groups of children were asked to build huts. A disadvantaged group, which did not receive some important material for building the hut, chose to focus on an alternative dimension of social comparison to differentiate themselves from the other groups—namely, the garden they had made around their hut. A more recent study by Lalonde, Moghaddam, and Taylor (1987) provides some insight into the process of between-group differentiation in a competitive sports setting. This study examined spectators' perceptions at ice hockey games. Fans were asked to rate their home team (in-group) and the opposing team (out-group) on a number of dimensions at four points in time (i.e., pregame and after each of the three periods). One finding of note was that the home team was always rated as being less arrogant and dirty than their opponent, regardless of their performance. Spectators, it seemed, could always maintain the superiority of their team on dimensions that were not closely tied to performance. This finding suggests that when their team is losing, fans can focus on an attribute that is less relevant to performance; this process can be seen as an example of a change in the focus of intergroup social comparison, one of the social creativity strategies suggested by Tajfel and Turner (1979).

Although the Lalonde et al. (1987) study is of interest, it does have its shortcomings. A first limitation was that it focused on spectator perceptions. Fans (observers) are not engaged in interaction, but are merely supporters of groups. Players (participants) are in the heat of the action and have a qualitatively different emotional investment in their games. Social identity theory does not make a participant-observer distinction in describing intergroup processes, and it is of interest to see whether the same processes are operating at these two levels of group membership. A second shortcoming of the Lalonde et al. study was that the home team finished by winning all the games. In order to get a good understanding of social identity and intergroup behavior, it would be beneficial to look at a group that is clearly doing poorly and whose members are clearly identifiable. Focusing on the

members of a group having a history of failure made it possible in the present study to test more fully some of the ideas that follow from social identity theory.

An underlying assumption of the theory is that members of a disadvantaged group in a social hierarchy cannot ignore their situation when they engage in social comparison processes. In other words, the process of denial is not offered as a strategy for rectifying a negative social identity. As a result, it was hypothesized that members of a losing group could not ignore performance indicators and positive in-group distinctiveness could not be achieved on dimensions of social comparison that related to successful performance (i.e., skilled, motivated, aggressive). In other words, it was expected that the losing team would see their winning opponent as being superior on these dimensions. Still, members of a disadvantaged group must try to maintain positive in-group distinctiveness if they are to have some form of positive social identity for the maintenance of their self-esteem. The results of the Lalonde et al. (1987) spectator study suggested that this could be achieved by maintaining superiority on an attribute that is unrelated to performance, such as "dirty." A team may play a dirty game or a clean game and come out victorious in either case. The second hypothesis was that the losing in-group would achieve positive distinctiveness by viewing their team as less "dirty" than their opponents. This hypothesis follows from the social creativity strategy suggested by Tajfel and Turner (1979).

In addition to testing these hypotheses, it was of interest to examine how individuals perceived themselves in relation to their failing in-group. Two possible processes could be operating. Players may want to dissociate themselves from their teammates by making distinctions between themselves and their team on hockey-related characteristics (e.g., "My team may not be motivated, but I am"). This self/in-group differentiation would be partially indicative of Tajfel and Turner's social mobility strategy for preserving self-esteem. Alternatively, individual players may not see themselves as being any different from their team; such a finding would be indicative of a desire to maintain in-group cohesiveness. A previous study by Taylor, Doria, and Tyler (1983) suggested that the latter process would be operating. They observed a losing ice hockey team and found that players managed to maintain team spirit and cohesiveness over an extended period of poor performance.

METHOD

Subjects

The participants in this study were male ice hockey players in their late teens who belonged to the last-place team in a nine-team regional college league in the provin-

ce of Quebec. The team was in last place when the study began (1 win, 21 losses) and ended (2 wins, 28 losses). They had previously played against all the other teams in the league, and as a result, they were familiar with the opponents in all games observed in this study. Data were collected from players during eight games in a 1-month period in the second half of the season. Five of the games were at home and three were away. Seven of the games ended in severe defeats, with a median score differential of 7 goals. The fifth game was a victory against the second-weakest team in the league. The number of players who provided complete information varied from game to game and ranged from 11 to 15.

Procedure

A brief questionnaire was given to players by one of two male experimenters before and after each game. Both experimenters had attended a number of games and practices before the study began in order to gain the confidence and respect of the players. The players were informed about the study at a team meeting, where a sample questionnaire was distributed and questions concerning its use were answered. Participation was voluntary, and players were informed that their responses were confidential and would not be shown to the coaching staff.

The central question asked of players was "How do you see yourself and the teams on the following characteristics?" Players rated themselves, their team, and the opposing team on four key attributes: *aggressive*, *dirty*, *skilled*, and *motivated*. These four characteristics were judged to be relevant dimensions of social comparison by a group of hockey coaches consulted in a prior study. Ratings on a fifth attribute, *lucky*, were also taken to determine whether players were using an external attribution for their failures. Each player, therefore, provided a total of 15 ratings before each game, as well as at the end of each game. A 9-point scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *extremely* (9) was used to make each rating.

RESULTS

Analyses were conducted to assess the different hypotheses separately. Because the team members providing data differed somewhat for the eight games, it was not possible to treat games as a factor, and analyses were conducted separately for each game. Because the same analyses were conducted for all games, it was possible to look for a reliable pattern in the results (i.e., the most consistent effects).

Intergroup Comparisons on Trait Ratings

Intergroup ratings for the traits skilled, motivated, aggressive, and dirty were analyzed for each game in a

TABLE 1: MANOVA and Univariate Results of In-group Versus Out-group Ratings

Game Score	N	Multivariate F	Univariate F			
			Skilled	Aggressive	Motivated	Dirty
1 4-12	14	4.43**	5.67**	0.48	5.10**	18.28**
2 2-14	12	8.21***	6.51**	15.75**	5.53**	38.02**
3 2-9	12	3.50*	1.67	2.20	1.61	4.82**
4 4-8	15	12.91***	5.83**	1.13	0.67	31.37**
5 5-4	11	4.47**	2.40	6.47**	10.54**	9.23**
6 5-13	13	2.58				
7 7-12	11	3.84*	0.14	0.67	0.06	15.70**
8 2-12	13	4.26**	7.55**	4.69**	5.72**	15.71**

* $p < .07$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2: Mean In-group and Out-group Ratings

Game	Group	Skilled	Aggressive	Motivated	Dirty
1	In-group	5.64	5.86	5.39	5.25
	Out-group	6.36	6.11	6.25	6.32
2	In-group	4.92	5.13	5.00	5.29
	Out-group	6.75	6.96	6.37	7.13
3	In-group	5.33	5.62	5.71	4.67
	Out-group	5.88	6.12	6.08	5.33
4	In-group	5.53	6.07	5.83	5.10
	Out-group	6.03	6.27	6.13	6.20
5	In-group	6.59	7.59	7.73	5.32
	Out-group	5.64	6.59	6.14	6.50
6	In-group	5.27	5.58	5.50	5.15
	Out-group	6.92	6.12	5.96	6.27
7	In-group	5.27	5.73	5.95	4.91
	Out-group	5.14	6.14	6.05	6.05
8	In-group	5.23	5.31	5.23	5.00
	Out-group	6.46	6.27	6.46	6.15

NOTE: Ratings could range from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely).

Group (in-group vs. out-group) \times Time (pregame vs. postgame) repeated-measures design using a MANOVA procedure. Given the limited power associated with the small samples, a somewhat liberal level of significance was adopted for multivariate effects ($p < .07$). Univariate effects associated with the different attributes were examined only if their associated multivariate effect was significant (Hummel & Sligo, 1971). The most reliable finding for intergroup ratings was the multivariate main effect for group, which was found for seven of the eight games. A summary of these effects is provided in Table 1, and the means associated with the effects are presented in Table 2.

Two hypotheses were made with regard to intergroup ratings: that the opponent would always be seen as dirtier than the losing in-group and that the out-group would be rated superior to the in-group on dimensions related to performance (skilled, motivated, aggressive) when

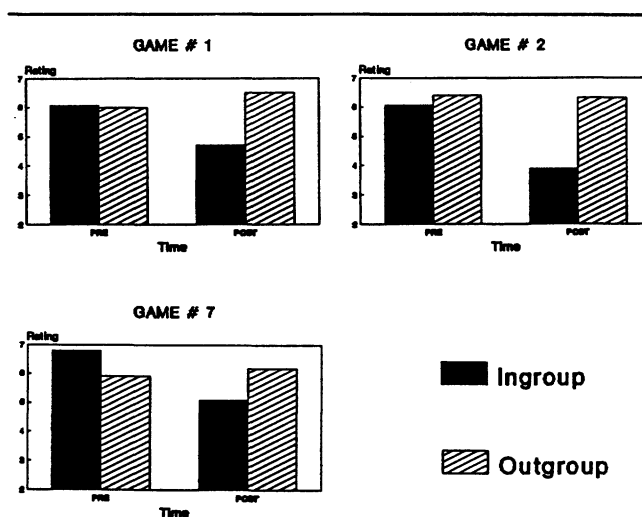


Figure 1 Group by time interaction effects for ratings of motivation.

the out-group was victorious. The univariate test for the characteristic "dirty" always yielded significance (see Table 1). Examination of the means (Table 2) revealed that the opponent was always seen as dirtier than the in-group, regardless of the outcome of the game. For the significant univariate effects involving the other attributes, the opponent was seen as more skilled and motivated than the in-group for four of the seven losses and more aggressive for three of the losses. In the case of the sole victory, the in-group was seen as more aggressive and motivated than the opponent.

Significant multivariate Group \times Time interaction effects were also found for three of the eight games. These interaction effects were found in Game 1, $F(4, 10) = 11.27$, $p < .01$; Game 2, $F(4, 8) = 3.67$, $p < .06$; and Game 7, $F(4, 7) = 6.00$, $p < .02$. Significant univariate effects for the attribute "motivated" were associated with each of the interaction effects ($p < .05$) and are represented in Figure 1. Whereas the group effects indicated that the opponent was often seen as more motivated than the

in-group, these interactions indicate that the difference was most notable in the postgame ratings and was largely due to a decrease in the rating of in-group motivation.

Significant multivariate time effects were found for three of the eight games, but they were not relevant to the hypotheses under investigation and are not presented.

Self/In-group Comparisons on Trait Ratings

Self versus in-group ratings for the traits skilled, motivated, aggressive, and dirty were analyzed separately by game in a Target (self vs. in-group) × Time (pregame vs. postgame) repeated-measures design using a MANOVA procedure ($p < .07$). These analyses were conducted to determine whether players were dissociating themselves from their team. Results indicated only one significant effect for target (Game 6) and one significant Target × Time interaction (Game 3) in the eight sets of analyses. These results suggest that virtually no dissociation was taking place between team members and their in-group.

Significant multivariate main effects for time (pre-post) were found for six of the eight games, but these did not play a role in the hypotheses that were tested.

Intergroup Comparisons on Ratings of "Lucky"

Ratings of luck were analyzed separately by game in a Group (in-group vs. out-group) × Time (pregame vs. postgame) repeated-measures design using an ANOVA procedure. The purpose of these analyses was to see whether players were using an external attribution to explain their losses following defeats. Significant main effects were found for time for all seven losses and for group for six of the seven losses. Most of these effects were subsumed under significant Time × Group interactions, which were found for six of the eight games (all losses). These interactions, represented in Figure 2, all show the same pattern in responding. The differences between group ratings all occurred before the game, when the out-group was seen as luckier than the in-group ($M_s = 6.20$ vs. 4.13 averaged over the six games in Figure 2). No differences between the out-group and the in-group were evidenced at the end of the game ($M_s = 3.35$ vs. 3.26). The relatively low ratings for luck at the ends of games (compared with ratings on all other dimensions) suggest that, at the conclusion of a game, players are forced to focus on the performance of their team and that luck is not seen as relevant to the outcome of the game.

DISCUSSION

Two hypotheses were put forward regarding the process of between-group differentiation. The first was that the losing team would maintain positive distinctiveness

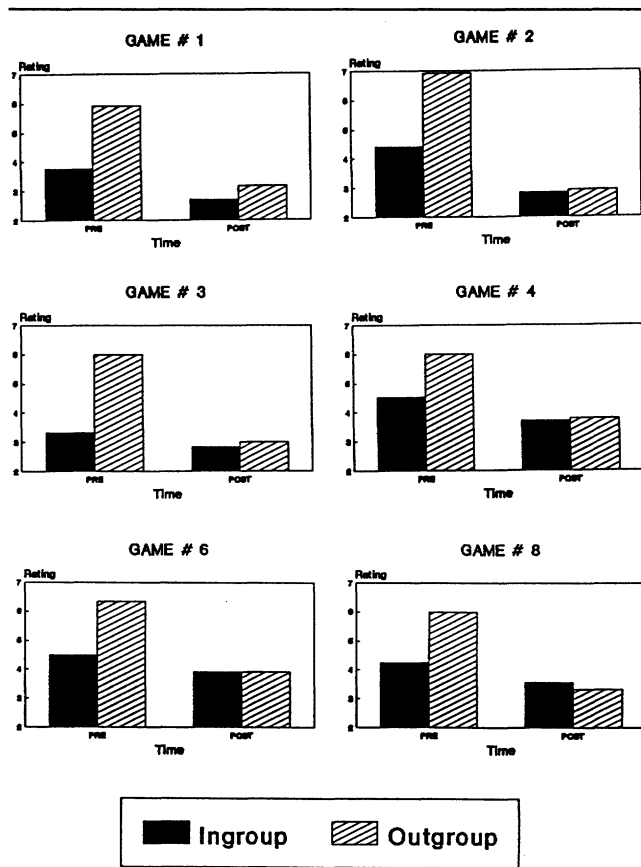


Figure 2 Group by time interaction effects for ratings of luck.

by viewing their opponents as more dirty than themselves. The rationale for this hypothesis was that the attribute of dirtiness represents a characteristic that is not directly related to performance, and losing-group members can focus their attention on this dimension in order to achieve a measure of positive distinctiveness. This hypothesis received strong support.

The prediction was based on Tajfel and Turner's (1979) proposal that one way of attaining positive distinctiveness, when social comparisons based on traditional dimensions cannot provide such distinctiveness, is to be socially creative by focusing on less traditional dimensions of social comparison. In competitive sports the more traditional dimensions of social comparison are those related to winning, and other temperamental dimensions such as being dirty, arrogant, or flamboyant are secondary in importance. Although this effect was predicted and may seem intuitive from the perspective of the fans, the result was somewhat surprising in the case of the present team. By many accounts (personal observations and coaching staff analysis), this team was one of the "dirtiest" teams in the league. In fact, this particular

hockey league had a "good behavior" scoring procedure that was based on the number of penalties assessed against a team, and at the time this study was completed, the team had the second-lowest total score in the nine-team league. This evidence indicates that players were willing to ignore certain types of information about their team in order to maintain a form of positive distinctiveness. It should be noted that this type of information (e.g., penalties) can easily be associated with individual team members and not the team.

The second hypothesis was that members of a losing group could not positively differentiate themselves from their opponents on social comparison dimensions that are directly related to successful performance. The rationale for this prediction was based on the assumption that players involved in structured competitive sports cannot ignore their game performance and the history of their past performance (an assumption that is implicit in social identity theory). This hypothesis also received support. The in-group were never seen as more skilled, motivated, or aggressive than their opponent in any of the games where they suffered a loss. In fact, it was found that for many of these games, the opponent was seen as significantly more skilled than the in-group.

It is of considerable interest that the observed "out-group superiority effect" did not interact with the time of the rating (pre vs. post), indicating that players did not have to know the outcome of the game to recognize the superiority of their opponent. This suggests that players knew at the outset that they were at a disadvantage and recognized the history of their performance. Further evidence for this interpretation comes from the results obtained for the only victory. In this game the in-group were rated as more aggressive and more motivated than their opponent, and these effects did not interact with the time of the rating and thus depend on the outcome of the game. The opponent for this game was the only team in the league that they had defeated in the past. Aware of their own history, players may have recognized their potential for superiority before the game began.

A second set of analyses that were presented in this study examined the differentiation that took place between self- and in-group ratings on performance-related attributes. No systematic evidence for a differentiation between self- and team ratings was found. Although this result should be interpreted with caution, since it is based on the null hypothesis, it does lend support to some prior studies on group cohesiveness. The absence of a self/in-group distinction is in line with empirical work demonstrating that group cohesiveness can be increased under certain conditions of failure and defeat (e.g., Turner, Hogg, Turner, & Smith, 1984). Turner and

his colleagues have noted that whereas such results run counter to predictions made by interpersonal attraction theory, they are expected from the perspective of social identity theory. They have argued that competitive intergroup situations inevitably engender a self-categorization of members into their groups and that "self-categorization leads to a stereotypical self-perception and depersonalization, and adherence to and expression of ingroup normative behavior" (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987, p. 102). The process of within-group similarity, therefore, can be seen as the cognitive expression of an in-group normative behavior. It should be added that the absence of differentiation between self and group can also serve a functional purpose. Team members realize that they must continue to work as a group in upcoming games, and by seeing themselves as no different from their teammates, they can maintain their group allegiance and cohesion for the future. This latter interpretation is consistent with Carron's (1982) conceptual model for understanding cohesiveness in sport teams.

Many of the results in this study can be interpreted in attributional terms. In a recent discussion of intergroup attributions, Hewstone (1989) uses as a starting point an intergroup perspective put forward by Tajfel (1978) and discusses the results of attribution studies from the perspective of social identity theory. A number of studies have demonstrated an intergroup bias when causal attributions are made about the behaviors of in-group and out-group members (e.g., Taylor & Jaggi, 1974). Mullen and Riordan (1988) predicted that if an attributional bias is operating in a sports setting, winners will be more likely to use internal attributions and less likely to use external attributions than losers. Although the present study was not designed to test attributional predictions, it is possible to discuss some of the results from this perspective.

For example, the results pertaining to ratings of motivation are particularly interesting from an attributional viewpoint. It can be argued that if players are using any type of defensive attribution with regard to motivation, their in-group ratings should remain stable over time (from pregame to postgame) and the out-group ratings should rise from pregame to postgame ("The other team won because it was more motivated"). The opposite pattern of results was found, however. Out-group ratings of motivation remained stable, whereas in-group ratings went down following a loss. These findings suggest that players were accepting some responsibility for their loss and not using responses that would be indicative of a defensive attribution. The results pertaining to ratings of luck shed further light on this interpretation. No differences were found between in-group and opponent rat-

ings on the luck dimension at the conclusion of a game. The fact that players do not perceive luck as determining the success of their opponents suggests that it was not possible for them to ignore their past and present performance and provides more evidence for the absence of defensive attributions. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating that losers in sports do not see luck as a critical factor in the outcome of a game (Bukowski & Moore, 1980; Scanlan & Passer, 1980). It was somewhat surprising to find that when differences on ratings of luck occurred, they were before the games began! Prior to game time, the out-group was often seen as luckier than the in-group. Different interpretations can be offered for this finding. One explanation is that players were expecting to lose and they simply saw the other team as luckier because it would probably win. It is also possible that the repeated experience of failure had induced a state of learned helplessness in which even the hope of luck was removed. Both interpretations stress the importance of history in its impact on the process of intergroup perception.

The results of the present study have implications for the study of processes in intergroup relations. It was demonstrated that it is possible to study groups which have a history and which are involved in dynamic interactions. By doing so, we can test assumptions that are made by theories, such as social identity theory, without altering natural intergroup interactions. In this study it was demonstrated that members of a losing group take into account their history and their performance but still manage to maintain a form of positive in-group distinctiveness.

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