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Self-activation and outgroup contrast

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Stereotype priming has been shown to influence social perceivers' subsequent automatic behavior (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). When group memberships are salient an ingroup stereotype prime (e.g., female) leads to assimilative behavior, (e.g., poor math performance) and an outgroup stereotype prime (male) leads to contrastive behavior, (e.g., excellent math performance; Gordijn & Stapel, 2006; Spears et al., 2004). The mechanism by which outgroup primes lead to contrastive responding has been the subject of some debate.

Contrastive responding to an outgroup has been shown to be associated with the activation of the ingroup (Gawronski, Bodenhausen, & Banse, 2005; Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, 2003), particularly when the intergroup context is salient to the social perceiver (Schubert & Häfner, 2003; Spears et al., 2004; Gordijn & Stapel, 2006). Hall and Crisp (2008) suggested that the intergroup context will be spontaneously salient for those perceivers who highly identify with their ingroup and so these perceivers should be more likely to differentiate (contrast) their group from an outgroup prime. This hypothesis was supported by Hall and Crisp: Following an outgroup (male) prime, higher identifying female participants contrasted from the outgroup (male) stereotype by confirming the ingroup (female) stereotype (performing poorly on a math test). The authors suggested that higher identifiers are automatically activating the ingroup and self-stereotyping when they encounter an outgroup.

The research reviewed above highlights the role of ingroup activation in predicting outgroup contrast. Other research rooted in interpersonal contexts has suggested that personal-self activation predicts differentiation and contrastive responding. For example, Stapel & Koomen (2001) demonstrated that a broad activation of the personal-self is analogous to priming a differentiation mindset and can lead to contrastive responding. Herein we attempt to reconcile these two perspectives by providing initial evidence that contrastive responding in intergroup contexts could operate by priming both the intergroup and the personal-self. We argue that outgroup contrast for

higher identifiers is caused by the co-activation of both the ingroup and the personal-self. The representation of personal-self and the ingroup (social) self are overlapping and this overlap is greater for higher identifiers (Smith & Henry, 1996). Therefore we propose that outgroup-primed higher identifiers will simultaneously and spontaneously activate both the ingroup and the personal-self (because they are overlapping) as a means of differentiating themselves from the outgroup. Given that research reviewed above has highlighted the role of ingroup activation, here we focus on investigating personal-self activation within the same paradigm as Hall and Crisp (2008).

Method

Participants and design

Thirty-six female participants (mean age 19.5 years) were randomly allocated to the ingroup (female) or outgroup (male) stereotype priming condition using a between-participants design with ingroup-identification treated as a continuous independent variable.

Procedure

Participants were told they would complete several unrelated pre-tests. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with four-items that measured identification with the group female (adapted from Branscombe, Wann, Noel, & Coleman, 1993; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much). Examples items are “I identify strongly with other females”, and “I feel a sense of solidarity with other females”. The four-item scale has been used previously (Hall & Crisp, 2008) and was reliable with Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84$. Stereotypes were then primed by asking participants to spend five minutes thinking about the typical attributes, lifestyle, and behaviors of either the ingroup (female) stereotype or the outgroup (male) stereotype (Dijksterhuis et al., 1998). On completion of the priming task participants ostensibly completed a lexical-decision task; this was the measure of personal-self activation. Drawing on the work of Dijksterhuis et al., who primed the personal-self using personal-self pronouns, we measured the activation of the personal-self

using similar personal-self descriptors. Participants completed a lexical-decision task which consisted of 20 practice trials and 60 test trials. The test trials consisted of 15 personal self words (me, my, mine, repeated five times), 15 controls words matched for length and frequency (up, an, send, repeated five times), and 30 pronounceable non-words. Following a fixation of two seconds, participants responded to whether the stimulus was a word or a non-word on the keyboard.

Results and Discussion

Each participant's mean reaction-time to personal-self words was calculated after removing all errors and outliers (mean \pm 2SD). The reaction-time data met assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity. A moderated regression analysis on self-words revealed no main effect of priming condition, $\beta = -.190$, $t = -1.38$, $p = .18$, and a significant main effect of ingroup identification, $\beta = -.677$, $t = -4.81$, $p < .01$ (higher identifiers respond more quickly to self-words). The ingroup identification effect was qualified by a significant interaction, $\beta = -.276$, $t = -2.01$, $p = .05$. Post-hoc regression analyses were computed at lower and higher identification points defined as the mean (26.7) of the continuous identification score \pm 1SD (4.41) (Aiken & West, 1991). These analyses revealed that at the lower identification point reaction-times to self-words between the ingroup and outgroup priming condition did not differ $\beta = 0.08$, $t = 0.43$, $p = .67$. At the higher identification point there was a significant difference in reaction times to self-words between the ingroup and outgroup priming condition $\beta = -0.49$, $t = -2.34$, $p = .026$, higher identifiers responded quicker to self words following an outgroup prime than following an ingroup prime suggesting that higher identifiers primed with the outgroup showed increased activation of the personal self.

The personal self was facilitated under conditions known to produce contrastive responding. Outgroup-primed higher identifiers showed greater personal-self activation suggesting that personal-self activation may contribute to their contrastive behavioral responses. This study

provides initial evidence that personal-self activation may explain contrastive responding in an intergroup context. We propose that the activation of the personal-self occurs alongside activation of the ingroup, and that it is the co-activation of these facets of the self that drive contrastive responding to outgroup stereotypes (particularly for higher identifiers). Further research should directly compare personal-self (me, my mine) and social-self (e.g., we, our, ours, Brewer & Gardner, 1996) activation following the activation of an outgroup stereotype.

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