

On The Motivational Primacy of the Individual Self:

“I” is Stronger than “We”

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Abstract

The self-concept is dynamic, with momentary definition shifting from a representation of self as a unique and independent social agent to an undifferentiated and interchangeable group member. Indeed, the individual self and collective self are fundamental components of the self-concept, with each being important and meaningful to human experience. However, are those selves equally important and meaningful? We review a program of research empirically testing three competing hypotheses which suggests that the motivational core of human experience is (a) the individual self, (b) the collective self, or (c) determined by contextual factors that make a given self momentarily accessible. The research furnished unanimous and consistent evidence that the individual self is the motivationally primary form of self-definition.

The shot is up...its good! The fans are ecstatic with chants of 'We're number one!'

The elation that engulfs fans following victory as well as the dejection that follows defeat might seem bizarre or puzzling to a naïve observer. Fans are not members of the teams. They are not competitors in the game. Yet, they respond as if their psychological welfare is on the line. From a fan's perspective, however, the fan is more than a spectator **and is subjectively part of the team. More precisely, the team is a part of the fan.** Fans internalize the team into their self-concept and define themselves in terms of the team (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Dietz-Uhler & Murrell, 1999). **In other words, the team becomes a part of the fan's group-based social identity.** Indeed, chants and cheers attest to the team-based sense of self such as when fans refer to the team with the personal pronoun "we," as in "we won" or "we're number one" (Cialdini et al., 1976). **Because** the team provides a basis of self-definition, victory or loss for the team is experienced by the fan as victory or loss for the self.

As the latter example demonstrates, an internalized group identity is a powerful motivator (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). But, are all self-definitions equivalent motivators? The current article examines the relative motivational potency of two fundamental forms of self-definition: individual and collective. The individual self is a representation of self as a unique and independent social agent. It consists of traits, characteristics, experiences, interests, and goals that promote a sense of distinctiveness and individuality. The collective self is a representation of self as an undifferentiated and interchangeable group member (e.g. as when fans paint themselves in their team's colors). It consists of traits, characteristics, experiences, interests, and goals derived from shared group memberships that promote a sense of assimilation and connection. The two forms of self coexist such that persons can alternate between perceiving the self as a distinct **individual** versus an interchangeable group member (Sedikides & Brewer,

2001). Likewise, both forms of self contribute to human experience by influencing thought, feeling, and action (Hawkey, Browne, & Cacioppo, 2005; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

The psychological literature, however, is ambiguous as to whether those selves contribute equally to human experience. It is possible, for example, to delve into the literature and discover reasons to argue that the motivational core of the self-concept is (a) the individual self, (b) the collective self, or (c) a fluctuating consequence of the social context. To bring clarity to the issue, we begin the article with a brief overview of the latter three arguments or hypotheses for motivational primacy and the evidence supporting the plausibility of each. We then examine a program of research designed to test directly the hypotheses, with the goal of determining which hypothesis best accounts for motivational primacy in self-definition.

Three Hypotheses of Motivational Primacy

Individual-self primacy hypothesis

According to the individual-self primacy hypothesis, the individual self is the motivational core of human experience. Supporting this hypothesis is research that attests to the stability of the individual self (Greenwald, 1980; Pelham, 1991). The individual self consists of core attributes that are held with high certainty and regarded subjectively as important (i.e. self-schemas). Such schemas guide the processing of self-relevant information (Markus, 1977), incorporate positively affirming information (Sedikides, 1993), seek information that confirms those core attributes (Swann, 1990) and, thereby, render a stable self that is resistant to both external (Markus, 1997) and internal (Sedikides, 1995) influences. Further supporting this hypothesis is research that attests to the strong motivation to maintain and enhance a favorable self-view and protect against threats to that favorable self-view (Baumeister, 1998; Sedikides,

Gaertner, & Vevea 2005; Sedikides & Green, 2000; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Persons, for example, perceive themselves to be better than the average other (Alicke & Govorun, 2005) and seize individual credit for a group's success while denying blame for the group's failure (Mullen & Riordan, 1988; Forsyth & Schlenker, 1977). Similarly, persons protect themselves against threats to a favorable self-view with various strategies such as selectively avoiding contexts that highlight critical self-flaws in favor of contexts that highlight self-superiority (Sedikides, 1993), prospectively behaving in ways that provide alternative explanations for an impending failure (e.g., "I failed because I didn't sleep enough, otherwise I would have aced the test"; Jones & Berglas, 1978), and reinterpreting threatening information in a manner that de-emphasizes the threat (e.g., "the test is bogus and does not assess my ability"; Kunda, 1990). If threats elude the protective strategies and penetrate the self-system, further erosion of a favorable self-view is protected against by devaluing the dimension on which the self is threatened (e.g., "I don't care about math!"; Steele, 1997) or escaping self-awareness (e.g., excessive drinking, zoning out with television; Baumeister, 1991; Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). Indeed, maintaining a favorable individual self is positively associated with mental and physical health (Gaertner, Sedikides, & Chang, in press; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003a, b). Finally, support for the individual-self primacy hypothesis is provided by theories of evolution that focus on the individual as the unit of selection. Classic perspectives suggest that natural selection acts on the individuals rather than the group of a given species (Dawkins & Krebs, 1978; Wallace, 1973). Moreover, the individual-self is argued to be an adaptive human trait that provided evolving hominids with advantageous solutions to both ecological and social selection pressures (Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000, 2003; Sedikides, Skowronski, & Gaertner, 2004). In summary, the literatures on self-stability, self-enhancement/self-protection, and the

individual in evolution offer support consistent with the possibility that the motivational center of the self-concept is the individual self.

Collective-self primacy hypothesis

According to the collective-self primacy hypothesis, the collective self is the motivational core of human experience. Support for this hypothesis is provided by research that attests to the impact social groups exert on their members. Persons, for example, alter their opinions in response to their group's majority (Asch, 1951) and, at times, minority (Moscovici, 1976), polarize their beliefs in the direction of the group's tendency (Myers & Lamm, 1976; Stoner, 1968), and [naturally coordinate and distribute information with ingroup members](#) (Liang, Moreland, & Argote, 1995). [Support for this hypothesis is also provided by the motivation to protect and enhance a positive collective self-view in that persons routinely evidence favorable actions, beliefs, and attitudes toward groups in which they are members](#) (Boldry & Gaertner, 2006; Brewer 1979). Support is also provided by theories of natural selection that emphasize social groups. Theories of group-level selection, for example, suggest that natural selection, at times, operates on the group of a given species (Bulmer, 1978, Wilson & Sober, 1994). Other perspectives view the group not as a target of selection but as an environment for selection (Brewer & Caporael, 2006; Caporael, 2007; Stevens & Fiske, 1995). Such perspectives suggest that hominids who better solved the problems uniquely exerted by the dynamics of group life (e.g. problems of coordination, communication, and sharing) were more apt to survive and transmit their genes into subsequent generations; the dynamics of group life thereby shaped current human functioning. Finally, Optimal Distinctiveness theory offers conceptual support for this hypothesis with the assertion that, unlike the individual self, the collective self provides the optimal level of self-definition by simultaneously [satisfying](#) competing needs for assimilation

and differentiation via intergroup and intragroup comparisons, respectively (Brewer, 1991; Brewer & Roccas, 2001). In summary, the literatures on the impact of groups on individuals, enhancement of ingroups, groups in evolution, and Optimal Distinctiveness theory offer support consistent with the possibility that the motivational center of the self-concept is the collective self.

Contextual primacy hypothesis

According to the contextual primacy hypothesis, neither self is inherently the motivational core of the self concept, because motivational primacy varies as a function of contextual factors that affect the momentary accessibility of the selves. The self that is momentarily more accessible serves as the motivational core. This hypothesis is supported by theoretical perspectives that emphasize the context dependent nature of self-functioning. For example, the concept of the working self-concept (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987) suggests that self-functioning is influenced by the particular subset of self-aspects that are currently accessible, with accessibility being affected by both chronic activation and contextual cues. Similarly, self-categorization theory (Onorato & Turner, 2004; Turner et al., 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994) suggests that self-definition fluctuates between the individual and collective self as a function of contextual features, with the collective self becoming salient in intergroup contexts and the individual self becoming salient in intragroup contexts. In summary, the literatures on the contextual malleability of the self-concept offer support consistent with the possibility that the motivational center of the self-concept is the momentarily accessible self.

Empirically Testing the Motivational Primacy Hypotheses

Given the plausibility of all three hypotheses and the possibility of selectively referencing evidence ostensibly consistent with each hypothesis, the self literature, it seems, is at an impasse. To resolve the issue, we have been engaged in a program of research designed to compare the hypotheses and determine empirically which is most tractable. [We utilize the strong motivational tendency of protecting and enhancing a favorable sense of self as a metaphorical microscope or medium in which we empirically differentiate the motivational primacy hypotheses.](#) The research compares the relative functioning of the selves in the face of threat or enhancement with the rationale that the self that serves as the motivational core of human experience will react more strongly to events that compromise, on the one hand, and bolster, on the other hand, that self's integrity. In other words, the motivationally primary self is the self that more [strongly](#) rejects and evades threat and more strongly accepts and approaches enhancement.

Of course, with an issue as broad as that of motivational primacy, no single study can contain and control all of the methodological considerations necessary for effectively and diagnostically testing the hypotheses. Consequently, we have cast a broad net by conducting multiple studies, each with its own methodological nuances. We enacted careful control over variables that could corrupt comparative test of the hypotheses. Across the studies, for example, we enacted different procedures for controlling the accessibility of the selves, employed various forms of threat or enhancement, assessed a variety of reactions to threat and enhancement, sampled an assortment of group identities that represent the collective self, and were particularly careful to differentiate and assess the independent reaction of each self. Across those diverse procedures and controls, each study yielded consistent and unanimous support for the same hypothesis: the individual-self primacy hypothesis. [What follows are representative examples of our research program.](#)

A test with simultaneous accessibility of the selves

In an initial study (Gaertner, Sedikides, Graetz, 1999, Experiment 1), female college students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) completed a (bogus) personality test (i.e. The Berkeley Personality Inventory; BPI) under the guise that the Psychology Department was gathering data on the characteristics of female students for the (fabricated) Office of Student Affairs. We crafted the introductory materials so as to make accessible both the individual self and the collective self, which, in this instance, was based on the group “women.” Instructions, for example, cued the individual self by reminding participants that the student body “is extremely diverse; after all, each one of you is an individual with your own unique background, personality traits, skills, abilities, and hobbies.” Subsequent instructions similarly cued the collective self, “you also share membership with other students in various social groups. Previous research has indicated that one of the most important social groups to which people belong is gender. That is, you are female and you share membership in the social group UNC women.” Participants then completed the computerized BPI, which consisted of 60 items vaguely related to emotion.

The computer ostensibly scored the BPI and provided participants with either enhancing or threatening feedback about either their individual or collective self. Pilot testing ensured that the feedback referred to a positive or negative trait that was stereotypic of women. In particular, participants received either information describing what it means to be “emotionally expressive” and why it is good to be emotionally expressive or information describing what it means to be “moody” and why it is bad to be moody. Participants receiving individual-self feedback were informed, “The BPI indicates that participant #353191 is” either “very emotionally expressive” or “excessively moody.” Participants receiving collective-self feedback were informed that

feedback was not permitted to be personalized and could be provided only in aggregate form such that, “the responses of UNC-CH women tested so far (more than 1,500) have been pooled together...Please note that your score is NOT yet included in the women’s average score...The BPI indicates that UNC women are” either “very emotionally expressive” or “excessively moody.”

We subsequently assessed the extent to which participants momentarily defined themselves in regard to their individual versus collective self. We reasoned that participants could buffer themselves from the threatening feedback by strategically shifting [away \(i.e. escaping\) from the threatened self](#). Importantly, however, each of the motivational-primacy hypotheses predicted a different pattern of such strategic self-shifting. *The individual-self primacy hypothesis* predicted that negative feedback to the individual self would be more threatening than negative feedback to the collective self and, therefore, persons would be more likely to shift to the collective self to buffer a threat to the individual self than to shift to the individual self to buffer a threat to the collective self. *The collective self-primacy hypothesis*, on the other hand, predicted that negative feedback to the collective self would be more threatening than negative feedback to the individual self and, therefore persons would be more likely to shift to the individual self to buffer a threat to the collective self than to shift to the collective self to buffer a threat to the individual self. *The contextual primacy hypothesis* predicted yet a third results pattern. When both selves are made accessible, negative feedback to the individual self will be as threatening as it will be to the collective self and, therefore, persons will be equally likely to shift to the collective self when the individual self is threatened and to shift to the individual self when the collective self is threatened.

The results were consistent only with the possibility of individual-self primacy. Participants differentially self-defined in the face of positive versus negative feedback to their individual self, but not in the face of such feedback to the collective self. In particular, participants more strongly deemphasized their uniqueness and increased identification with the group women when they received negative than positive information about their individual self. However, participants did not manifest analogous changes in uniqueness and identification in response to negative versus positive feedback about their collective self. Furthermore, participants considered the negative feedback to be less favorable and the positive feedback to be more favorable, when it was directed to their individual than collective self. Such results are consistent with the idea that the motivational core of the self-concept is the individual self.

Of course studies, have their limitations and any single study cannot provide a confident basis on which to make strong conclusions. The current study, for example, has two possible limitations. First, persons vary in the extent to which they identify with a given group (e.g. “women”) and research suggests that group-level threats exert more impact on persons who strongly identify with the group (Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Doojse, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995; Spears, Doojse, & Ellemers, 1997). Indeed, level of identification is directly relevant to the collective-primacy hypothesis such that high group identifiers might evidence collective-self primacy, while low group identifiers might evidence individual-self primacy. Unfortunately, we did not assess pre-feedback levels of identification, and it is possible that the majority of participants identified only weakly with the group women. Second, we controlled the nature of the feedback by providing each self with the same information (i.e. “very emotionally expressive” or “excessively moody”). Perhaps the feedback was more important to the individual

self than the collective self and thus yielded reactions consistent with individual-self primacy. On the other hand, the feedback was pilot tested to be stereotypic of the group women.

A test with low and high group identifiers

To address the latter concerns, we conducted another study, in which we measured level of identification and the importance of the dimension of threat before supplying participants with negative feedback (Gaertner et al., 1999, Experiment 2). Male and female students at UNC-CH participated in a study ostensibly concerned with creativity. Participants first completed a measure of the extent to which they identified with UNC-CH (i.e. the group which would represent the collective self) and, depending on which self the negative feedback would be directed, rated how important creativity is to them personally (individual self) or to UNC-CH students (collective self). Participants subsequently completed a bogus, but face valid, creativity test and received feedback about their performance.

Participants who received *a threat to the individual self* were informed that they “scored at the 31st percentile. This means that your score is worse than 69% of the creativity scores in the normative reference sample.” Participants who received *a threat to the collective self* were informed that feedback could be provided only in terms of the average creativity score of UNC students to which their own score had not yet been added such that UNC “scored at the 31st percentile. This means that UNC’s score is worse than 69% of the creativity scores in the normative reference sample.” Feedback was accompanied by a histogram displaying either the participant’s personal performance or UNC’s performance within the normative sample.

Participants subsequently rated their current feelings (e.g. angry, sad) and, depending on which self the negative feedback was directed, indicated how important the outcome of the test was for them personally (individual self) or UNC-CH (collective self). We reasoned that

threatening feedback would elicit a negative mood and a potential strategy for coping with the threat would be to derogate the importance of the threat dimension (e.g. “creativity isn’t very important;” Wyer & Frey, 1983). Interestingly, the motivational primacy hypotheses offered different predictions regarding the patterns of mood and feedback derogation. The *individual-self primacy hypothesis* predicts that negative mood and feedback derogation will be stronger following threat to the individual self than threat to the collective self regardless of level of group identification. The *collective-self primacy hypothesis* predicts that negative mood and feedback derogation will be stronger following threat to the collective self than threat to the individual self regardless of level of group identification. The *contextual primacy hypothesis* predicts that patterns of mood and feedback derogation following threat will vary as a function of group identification, such that low group identifiers will show a pattern of individual-self primacy and high identifiers will show a pattern of collective-self primacy.

Because the pre-feedback importance rating indicated that creativity initially was more important to the individual than collective self, we statistically controlled the pre-feedback importance rating to prevent confounding the relative importance of the threat with the target of threat (individual vs. collective self). So, which hypothesis best accounted for the observed data? The data unanimously supported the individual-self primacy hypothesis. Regardless of level of group identification, participants experienced a more negative mood and more strongly derogated the feedback (i.e. rated creativity as being less important), when the threatening feedback was directed at their individual self. As in the previous study, threat to the individual self elicited a stronger reaction than did threat to the collective self.

A test with the idiographically “most important” group

Despite the consistent results across studies, a skeptic could argue that the obtained results are a function of methods common to the latter studies. Both studies, for example, used a nomothetic procedure of forcing participants to consider the same social group as the basis of the collective self. We did, however, vary the particular group across studies (i.e. women in Experiment 1 and UNC-CH in Experiment 2) and controlled for idiographic identification in the second study. Nonetheless, perhaps the results are somehow limited to those particular groups or the procedure of assigning a group to participants. Likewise, both studies examined reactions after the selves experienced threat. Perhaps different results would occur, if we observed the functioning of the selves before receiving a threat. To address these possibilities we conducted another study (O'Mara, Gaertner, & Wayment, 2007), in which we (a) employed an idiographic procedure that allowed participants to choose their own group (as a strong test, participants selected their most important group) and (b) examined whether the individual versus collective self differentially approaches a threat.

Male and female students at the University of Tennessee began the study writing a brief narrative about either their individual self or collective self. Instructions for the individual-self narrative asked participants to describe what makes them a unique person. Instructions for the collective-self narrative asked participants to think about the most important social group to which they belong and describe that most important group. Following the narrative, participants read a story ostensibly written by a recent college graduate who was facing difficulties finding employment and happiness (from Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002):

. . . I tried to get a job, but it's harder than I expected. I haven't been able to find a good job. I have spent a lot of time working in fast food places, and doing some pretty boring stuff. I really expected that things would get easier after I graduated,

but people are right when they say it's tough out there. Right now I'm pretty down about things. I'm not sure where I'm going to go from here – I can't afford to go back to school, but I also can't find a good job . . . this is not where I expected to be at this point in my life!

To examine whether the selves differentially approach a potential threat, we asked participants to consider the latter negative experience in terms of the self about which they previously wrote a narrative. Participants who completed the *individual-self narrative* were instructed to “describe what you think could *cause you* to have a negative experience...similar to the student you just read about.” Participants who completed the *collective-self narrative* were instructed to “describe what you think could *cause a member of your most important group (other than you)* to have a negative experience...similar to the student you just read about.” Two judges independently coded participants' written responses for whether they genuinely considered how the negative events could befall the targeted self. Inter-judge agreement was acceptable with judges agreeing on 91.5% of participants' responses for a kappa of 0.76. The judges subsequently discussed to consensus the few disagreements.

Our rationale was that the potential threat of future negative events could be avoided, in part, by ignoring the events and not adhering to the request of describing how such negativity could occur. That is, participants could evidence an unwillingness to face future threat and write a response that is off topic. Importantly, the motivational primacy hypotheses predicted different patterns of willingness to face future threat. *The individual-self primacy hypothesis* predicted that future negative events would be more threatening for the individual self than the collective self and, therefore, participants would be less willing to face future threat to the individual self. *The collective-self primacy hypothesis* predicted that future negative events would be more

threatening for the collective self than the individual self and, therefore, participants would be less willing to face future threat to the collective self. *The contextual primacy hypothesis* predicted that in this instance when participants are considering their most important social group or their individual self, negative future events will be equally threatening to both selves and, therefore, participants will be equally unwilling to face a future threat to either self.

Conceptually replicating results from our other studies, the data were consistent only with the individual-self primacy hypothesis. Where as an overwhelming number of participants (93%) were willing to write about how a future negative event could befall another member of their most important group, far fewer participants (60%) were willing to write about how the same future negative event could befall them personally. Persons are less willing to face a threat to their individual self than their collective self.

In summary, we have thus far overviewed a sample of the methodologically diverse studies in our program of research on motivational primacy. We enacted particular care to control and capture factors that could potentially yield misleading conclusions. Our research, for example, has (a) integrated various aspects of threat such as varying the nature of the threat (e.g. received vs. future), controlling the dimension of feedback, controlling the relative importance of the feedback, (b) assessed a variety of reactions such as strategic self-shifting, mood state, feedback derogation, anger (Gaertner et al., 1999, Investigation 3), (un)willingness to face a future threat, (c) explored variations in self accessibility such as simultaneously activating the selves, differentiating between high and low group identifiers, maximizing accessibility of one self while minimizing the accessibility of the other (e.g. Gaertner et al., 1999, Investigation 3), (d) employed a variety of groups to represent the collective self such as groups that are ascribed (e.g. gender), achieved (e.g. university affiliation), context dependent (e.g. Gaertner et al., 1999,

Investigation 3), and idiographically designated as most important (for similar procedures see Gaertner, Sedikides, Luke, & Iuzzini, 2008), and (e) carefully threatened the selves independently and assessed their independent responses. Most dramatic is that, across all of the studies and all of the controls, the results have consistently and unanimously demonstrated the relative motivational primacy of the individual vs. collective self. Of course, the possibility remains that such a finding is somehow limited to the particular (though diverse) procedures employed. One way to address this criticism is to continue with an endless array of studies substituting various procedures, threats, or groups. We opted instead for a more plausible (though conceptually similar) approach: a random effects meta-analysis.

A meta-analytic test

A meta-analysis aggregates results from numerous studies and enables hypothesis testing based on a large and diverse body of observed data. When coupled with a random-effects statistical model, the meta-analysis directly tests whether the results generalize beyond the observed data to a population of possible studies that differ in specific characteristics and procedures (Hedges & Vevea, 1998). In addition to extending our research by meta-analytically testing the relative reactions of the selves to threat, we also extended our research into the domain of enhancement. We searched the extant literature and located 16 studies that compared the relative reaction of the individual and collective self to threat and 21 studies that compared the relative reaction of the individual and collective self to enhancement. Those 37 studies satisfied the necessary inclusion criteria that a given study (a) separately threaten (or enhance) the selves, which enables an independent assessment of the reaction of each self, and (b) threaten (or enhance) the selves on comparable dimensions, which prevents confounding the target of threat or enhancement (individual vs. collective self) with the dimension of threat or

enhancement. The included studies varied in terms of the threat or enhancement employed, the types of reactions assessed, and the particular groups that represented the collective self.

To account for the possible context-dependent nature of motivational primacy, we coded studies in regard to two contextual variables. Studies varied in whether participants were low versus high group identifiers. A given group is a more accessible basis of the collective self for high than low identifiers (e.g. Abrams, 1994; Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Spears et al., 1997), which renders group identification relevant to the contextual primacy hypothesis. Studies also varied in whether the group on which the collective self was based was a laboratory-formed group or a pre-existing natural group. Such groups differ in several respects (e.g. member commitment and investment; Ostrom & Sedikides, 1992) that result in natural groups being a more accessible basis of collective self and therefore more relevant to the contextual primacy hypothesis.

The motivational primacy hypotheses offer different predictions for the meta-analytic patterns. *The individual-self primacy hypothesis* predicts that persons react more strongly to both threat and enhancement of the individual self than of the collective self. *The collective-self primacy hypothesis* predicts that persons react more strongly to both threat and enhancement of the collective self than of the individual self. *The contextual-primacy hypothesis* predicts that the latter patterns vary as a function group identification and type of group such that low identifiers and studies using laboratory groups will show patterns of individual-self primacy and high identifiers, whereas studies using natural groups will show patterns of collective-self primacy.

Patterns of response under conditions of threat and enhancement were consistent with only the individual-self primacy hypothesis. Participants responded approximately 0.5 standard deviations more strongly when their individual self was threatened than when their collective self

was threatened. Similarly, they responded approximately 0.4 standard deviations more strongly when their individual self was enhanced than when their collective self was enhanced. Those patterns occurred for both low and high group identifiers and for both laboratory and natural groups. Importantly, the random effects procedures enable greater confidence that the patterns are not limited to the varieties of threats, enhancements, reactions, and groups employed in the analyzed studies and generalize to a larger pool of possible threats, enhancements, reactions, and groups.

Alternative Explanations and Possible Conditions of Collective-Self Primacy

We suggest that our research program demonstrates a fundamental social-psychological phenomenon: the motivational primacy of the individual self. Of course, we neither cavalierly offer such a suggestion nor did we rush to such a conclusion. We sought alternative explanations for our findings as well as evidence in favor of the collective-self and contextual-primacy hypotheses. Yet, the consistent pattern of results across an array of diverse procedures emphasizes the possibility that the individual self is the motivational center of the self-system.

Let us briefly reconsider some of these alternatives. Perhaps the relatively stronger reaction of the individual self is a product of the particular social groups that we employed to represent the collective self. However, we found the same pattern re-occurring across a variety of groups, such as achieved groups (e.g. university affiliation; Gaertner et al, 1999, Investigation 2), ascribed groups (e.g. gender; Gaertner et al, 1999, Investigation 1), and context-dependent groups (e.g. laboratory formed groups; Gaertner et al, 1999, Investigation 3). Indeed, we obtained the same pattern with an idiographic procedure in which participants idiosyncratically represented their collective self with the ingroup that they subjectively deemed to be most important (O'Mara et al, 2007).

Perhaps our results are a non-motivational consequence of an inadvertent mismatch in the operationalized level of specificity between the individual and collective self. Klar and colleagues (Klar, 2002; Klar & Giladi, 1997; Giladi & Klar, 2002), for example, demonstrated that singular targets (e.g. any specific member of a group) are judged more extremely than generalized targets (e.g. the average representation of the group as a whole). According to such an account, the individual self was operationalized as a singular target and the collective self was operationalized with reference to a generalized target in the form of an ingroup. However, the same pattern occurs even when the collective self is operationalized as a singular target (e.g. contemplating how negative events might befall a specific member of one's most important ingroup; O'Mara et al., 2007). Furthermore, the singular versus generalized mechanism involves a comparative judgment such that the singular target is judged directly in comparison with the generalized target. The majority of our studies involved between-subject designs (i.e. participants experienced threat or enhancement of one self but not of the other self) which minimizes the likelihood that reactions of one self were formed in contemplation of and comparison with a reaction of the other self.

Perhaps the results are somehow a function of a diminished impact of threat or enhancement to the collective self, because such threats and enhancements are diffused across multiple group members (Latané, 1981). However, the same pattern is obtained across ingroups that range in size from large groups with countless members (e.g., women; Gaertner et al., 1999, Investigation 1) to small-face-to-face 3-person groups (Gaertner et al., 1999, Investigation 3). Indeed, as mentioned previously, the same effect occurs even when the collective self is represented in terms of a single ingroup member (O'Mara et al., 2007).

Finally, perhaps our findings are unique to Western cultures (e.g., US, Northern Europe), which emphasize the independence and uniqueness of persons; and possibly our findings would reverse, evidencing collective-self primacy in Eastern cultures (e.g., China, India, Japan), which emphasize the interdependence and connectedness of persons (e.g. Markus & Kitayama, 1991). However, in contrast to such a cultural-self perspective, recent research has revealed the strong presence of the individual self even in Eastern cultures (Brown, 2003; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005, 2007ab; Gaertner et al., in press; Yamaguchi et al., 2007). Indeed, direct comparisons suggest a stronger pancultural presence of the individual-self than collective-self. On self-description tasks, for example, people provide a greater preponderance of individual-self aspects than collective-self aspects. Importantly, that pattern is obtained both among persons with an independent self-construal that is characteristic of Western cultures and among persons with an interdependent self-construal that is characteristic of Eastern cultures (Gaertner et al., 1999, Investigation 4). Furthermore, that pattern replicates across comparisons of Chinese versus American students and across experimental priming of the individual versus collective self (Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991).

Conclusion

The individual and collective self are both fundamental forms of self-definition that contribute to human experience. As our research demonstrates, however, those forms of self do not contribute equally. The motivational structure of the self-concept is arrayed hierarchically and the individual self has a motivational status elevated above that of the collective self. Metaphorically speaking, screams are more anguished and smiles are more joyous in response to events that involve the individual self. Our findings have implications for theory-building. In particular, they suggest that theories on the relation between self and social perception will do

well to base their premises and hypotheses predominantly on the individual self. The individual self, it appears, sits closer to the motivational core of being human.

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