„NOT SO GREAT?!?" INTERGROUP COMPARISONS, SOCIAL IDENTITY THREAT AND ASCRIPTION OF COMPETENCE AND COMMUNION TRAITS TO INGROUP AND OUTGROUP MEMBERS

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THEORY

We explored psychological mechanisms of response to threatening intergroup comparisons in the context of Polish-German relations. Comparison of ingroup with a highly competent outgroup gives rise to feelings of ingroup' inferiority threatening its positive image. In our studies we asked what kind of coping strategy is then applied. Social Identity Theory (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that, in response to a comparison threat, a **generalized group-defensive process** should emerge (more positive evaluation of own group on all evaluative dimensions at hand). Recently proposed theory of the relationship between judgments of competence and warmth (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005) points to **compensatory strategies** as useful means of restoring group value (when made aware of deficient group competence, people might therefore stress group positivity on what they consider to be its strong side, e.g., interpersonal warmth). Another possibility, suggested by the research on stereotype threat (e.g., von Hippel et al., 2005) is that threat to ingroup competence should instigate very simple group defensive strategy: **denial of ingroup inferiority** on competence dimension.

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

Our studies were conducted on-line on a sample of 1763 young Poles of both sexes (mean age = 22.78). This large sample was randomly split into two sub-samples of comparable size. In Each sub-sample a group comparison threat was introduced by inducing participants to compare Poles with Germans (in the experimental group) or with Czechs (in the control group) on group competence traits such as *work organization skills, level of technology, attention to cleanliness and order*. Then, participants evaluated either Poles or Germans using personality traits related to competence, morality, and warmth.

METHOD

The participants started from filling in the Roccas's National Identity Scale (16 items, e.g. *"I feel strong affiliated with Poles", "Other nations can learn a lot from Poles"*).

Then, they were asked to compare Poles with another nation (Czechs or Germans) on 6 dimensions related to group competence, displayed in random order. For each dimension, participants had to answer whether Poles, are worse, much the same, or better in comparison to the other nation.

Immediately after the treatment, participants were shown a list of 24 traits (12 positive and 12 negative), 8 of them refering to competence (e.g. *effective, weak*), 8 to morality (e.g. *righteous, envious*), and 8 to warmth domain (e.g. *friendly, cold*), and were asked to assess their presence among Poles (in one group) or Germans (in another). The traits were displayed in random sequence, one per page. A 5-point rating scale was used ranging from 1 ("I'm sure they haven't this trait") to 5 ("I'm sure the have this trait").

RESULTS

A comparison threat was effectively induced: participants assessed group competence of Poles as much lower in experimental (with Polish-German comparisons) than in control group (with Polish-Czech comparisons): for the first sample, $t(823) = 27.317$, $p < .001$, d = 1.90 ; for the second sample, $t(867) = 31.983$, $p < .001$, d = 2.16 .

Preliminary analysis for control conditions in both samples (see Figures 1 and 2) have revealed that Polish participants evaluated Poles as significantly less competent and less moral but more warm than Germans.

A series of ANOVAs in 2 (Comparison Threat: present vs. absent) x 2 (Target of Evaluation: Poles vs. Germans) on three evaluative dimensions (competence, morality, and warmth) have revealed that comparison threat:

- Reduced perceived difference between Poles and Germans on competence (significantly less ascribed to Germans; see Figures 3 and 4) and morality (significantly more ascribed to Poles; see Figures 5 and 6);

- Did not significantly alter evaluation of Poles or Germans on warmth dimension (see Figures 7 and 8).

FIG. 1 (sample 1): Ascription of comptence, morality and warmth to Poles and Germans

FIG. 2 (sample 2): Ascription of comptence, morality and warmth to Poles and Germans

FIG. 3 (sample 1): Identity threat and ascription of competence traits to Poles and Germans – F(1,821) = 7.578, p < .01

FIG. 5 (sample 1): Identity threat and ascription of morality traits to Poles and Germans – F(1,821) = 4.209, p < .05

FIG. 7 (sample 1): Identity threat and ascription of warmth traits to Poles and Germans – F(1,821) = 1.381, p = .24, ns.

FIG. 4 (sample 2): Identity threat and ascription of competence traits to Poles and Germans – F(1,865) = 2.869, p = .09

FIG. 6 (sample 2): Identity threat and ascription of morality traits to Poles and Germans – F(1,865) = 7.853, p < .01

FIG. 8 (sample 2): Identity threat and ascription of warmth traits to Poles and Germans – F(1,865) = .312, p = .58, ns.

DISCUSSION

The research showed that participants evaluated **Poles to be less competent and less moral than Germans but showing instead more interpersonal warmth.** In addition to its descriptive value, this finding suggests that traits representing morality and warmth – considered to be psychologically very close to each other as belonging to communion traits (e.g., Wojciszke, 2010) – may nevertheless be used differently in self-stereotyping. At least in comparisons with higher status outgroup – it is warmth, not morality, that seems helpful in the maintenance of a positive ingroup image.

The present studies also clarify how do people respond to social comparison threat. When induced to compare Poles with Germans on group competence traits, Polish participants engaged themselves in the group-defensive process. Our findings do not support the hypothesis of compensation (no signs of enhanced superiority of Poles over Germans on warmth dimension after threat); also, they do not support the hypothesis of an overall group-defensive response. However, we found some evidence supporting the hypothesis of a group-defensive denial: in both sub-samples, exposure to a comparison threat made participants to deny one's own group inferiority on competence and morality dimensions. Thus, the coping strategy applied by our participants might best be described as a **generalized denial of own group' inferiority** (it is generalized, because perception of outgroup as much higher on group competence traits made participants not only to deny ingroup inferiority on competence but also on morality dimension).

Why the last strategy appeared to be preferred by our participants? Perhaps, comparing an ingroup with a high-status outgroup on one dimension (e.g., competence) spontaneously activates other aspects of ingroup' inferiority (e.g., low power, low morality), therefore motivating to cope with feelings of inferiority on whatever dimension salient. Further research seems necessary to elucidate the pattern of coping strategies used in the context of threatening intergroup comparisons.
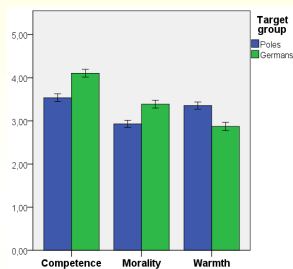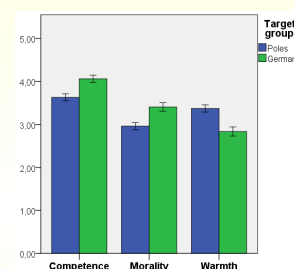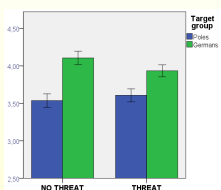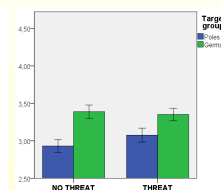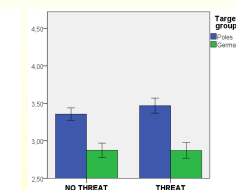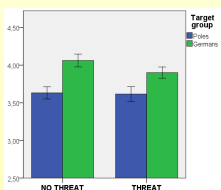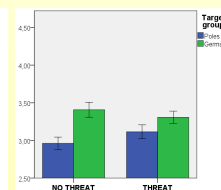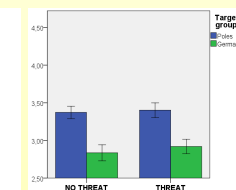
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