

Devaluing Domains in Response to Threatening Intergroup Comparisons: Perceived Legitimacy and the Status Value Asymmetry

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Group status and status legitimacy were tested as moderators of devaluing in response to threatening intergroup comparisons. In 3 experiments, participants received feedback comparing their in-group (based on school or gender) to a higher or lower status out-group. When the legitimacy of group status differences was assumed (Studies 1 and 2) or manipulated (Study 3), participants devalued the domain when their in-group compared unfavorably with a lower status out-group but did not devalue the domain when their in-group compared unfavorably with a higher status out-group. In Study 3, this *status value asymmetry* was eliminated when status differences were delegitimized. Mediation analyses suggested that the status value asymmetry was explained by the perceived utility of the domain for gaining status-relevant rewards.

So our self-feeling in this world depends entirely on what we *back* ourselves to be and do. It is determined by the ratio of our actualities to our supposed potentialities; a fraction of which our pretensions are the denominator and the numerator our success. . . . To give up pretensions is as blessed a relief as to get them gratified; and where disappointment is incessant and the struggle unending, this is what men will always do. (William James, 1890/1950, p. 187)

In this statement, James (1890/1950) implied that the experience or expectation of failure in a domain leads individuals to devalue (or give up pretensions of success in) that domain. Indeed, a substantial amount of research indicates that when individuals fare poorly in a domain relative to others, they often follow James's advice (e.g., Rosenberg, 1979; Tesser & Campbell, 1980; Tesser & Paulhus, 1983). James's argument becomes more provocative, however, when one considers its implications for members of groups that have lower social status and, hence, more limited opportunities for success. A Jamesian perspective implies that in an effort to protect self-esteem, members of lower status groups who encounter obstacles to success might devalue those domains

in which their group fares poorly relative to other, more advantaged groups (cf. Crocker & Major, 1989).

Although this prediction can be derived from most theories of self-protection, we believe that it ignores the impact of a group's social status and the perceived legitimacy of that status on self-protective processes. Specifically, we hypothesize that group members do not devalue domains in which higher status groups outperform their in-group unless they have reason to believe that status differences between the groups are illegitimate. Without such delegitimizing information, we argue, the default tendency is represented by a *status value asymmetry*, whereby group members devalue domains in which their in-group fails relative to equal or lower status groups but do not devalue domains in which their in-group fails relative to higher status groups. The goals of the present research are to show that group status constrains devaluing in response to threatening intergroup comparisons, to test the prediction that perceived status legitimacy moderates this status value asymmetry, and to examine appraisals that mediate this phenomenon.

Devaluing in Response to Threat: An Ego-Defense Perspective

Devaluing can be defined as a process of reducing the perceived importance of a domain in an effort to protect oneself against negative outcomes received in that domain. Derived originally from James (1890/1950), this view of devaluing as an ego-defense strategy has received considerable support (e.g., Harter, 1986; Jussim, Coleman, & Nassau, 1989; Robinson, Tayler, & Piolat, 1990; Rosenberg, 1979; Tesser & Campbell, 1980; Tesser & Paulhus, 1983). For example, Tesser and Paulhus (1983) demonstrated that individuals who scored lower than another individual on a fictitious personality trait described that trait as less personally relevant to their self-concepts, compared with individuals who scored higher than another on the trait. According to Tesser's (1988) self-evaluation maintenance model, the upward social com-

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