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Who do we think we are? The effects of social context and social identification on in-group stereotyping

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In this study, in-group stereotyping was examined as a function of variations in social context and perceiver factors. The social context consisted of different comparison groups and different domains of comparison. Comparison group and comparative domain were expected to interact in determining the content of the in-group stereotype. This prediction was confirmed with in-group stereotyping being strongest in conditions where the combination of comparison group and comparative domain made the in-group seem most similar to an out-group. The perceiver's level of in-group identification was also positively related to the level of in-group stereotyping. Moreover, the level of identification was shown to be dependent on the immediate social context and mediated the relationship between social context and in-group stereotyping. This pattern is explained in terms of a search for in-group distinctiveness.

What are social psychologists like? What are social psychologists like compared with cognitive psychologists or social gerontologists? What are social psychologists like when seen through the eyes of a social psychologist? In all likelihood, responses to each of these three questions differ. Our perception of a group is probably influenced by the context in which this group is perceived and whether we ourselves are (committed) members of this group.

Research on stereotypes has predominantly focused on groups that are defined on one category dimension only (e.g. women vs. men). However, many (if not all) groups can be categorized on multiple category dimensions (young women, old men; see Crisp & Hewstone, 1999; Fazio, 1998). Therefore, it is important to know which of these multiple possible categorizations become relevant in different social contexts. We propose that stereotypical images of groups generally depend on the relative salience of social categorizations in any given social context.

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When judging members of social groups, several factors can determine the salience of multiple possible social categories (Ellemers & van Knippenberg, 1997; Oakes, 1987). One important determinant of category salience is the specific social context (e.g. comparison groups and the comparative domain of judgment; Turner, 1985). An additional factor that influences category salience is the group membership of the perceiver, or more specifically the perceiver's level of social identification with the group in question (indicating the importance of the group for the self). Moreover, we suggest that identification is context-dependent and therefore can be examined as a mediator of the relationship between social context and stereotyping. Our stereotypical perception of a group should therefore vary with changes in category relevance and our reactions to members of this group will vary accordingly.

The current study examines the impact of both comparison groups and comparative domain on an in-group stereotype by investigating the combined impact of these contextual variables on identification with that in-group and assessing the resulting stereotype content.

Social context: Comparison groups and comparative domain

According to self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), all social judgments are context-dependent as they depend on the frame of reference in which they are made. Social context has been shown to alter the form and content of social categorizations, mainly in research which manipulates the array of comparison groups. Here, changes in category relevance result in changes in the salient content of target group stereotypes (e.g. Doosje, Haslam, Spears, & Koomen, 1998; Haslam & Turner, 1992; Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty, & Hayes, 1992; Hopkins, Regan, & Abell, 1997). Extending this line of research, van Rijswijk and Ellemers (2002) conducted a study examining the stereotyping of a target group defined on two category dimensions. Here it was found that the perceived applicability of stereotype content varied as a function of comparative context. Different stereotypic attributes were applied to a student in-group depending on which of two categorizations (university affiliation or discipline) was rendered more salient by the specific comparison group.

However, the categorization process is not only structured by the groups that are salient in a given context but is also shaped by the domain relevant to the categorization. In the same way that comparison groups can render certain categories and aspects of stereotypes salient, salience can be shifted when a certain domain or dimension of comparison becomes relevant. In any given context, particular category comparisons may appear more informative than others depending on the dimension that the groups are compared on. Along these lines, it has been shown that stereotypic judgments occur on dimensions relevant to the groups in question, but not on other dimensions. Subsequently, stereotype content changes when judgments are made on different comparison dimensions (Doosje *et al.*, 1998; Hopkins *et al.*, 1997).

The evidence summarized above suggests that, in principle, both aspects of the social context (comparison groups and comparative domain) can influence categorization and the associated stereotype, because both may determine which differences between groups seem important and which categorization prevails. As a result, groups that are categorized as different in one context can be seen as similar in another (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994).

While changes in either comparison group or comparative domain may be sufficient to enhance the salience of a particular categorization, an interesting question is what happens when comparison groups and comparative domain vary *simultaneously*. It is possible that, when both comparison groups and comparative domain have compatible impact, they will enhance each other's effects. Conversely, when multiple possible categorizations are available, these effects may counteract each other when the comparison group renders one categorization salient while the domain renders another categorization salient. For instance, the comparative domain might diminish the heightened category salience resulting from the comparison group when it emphasizes another possible categorization. Thus, the perceived similarities and differences between the groups will depend on the interplay between the specific comparative domain and the relevant comparison group. However, the exact manner in which these two factors interact with each other remains to be investigated.

Processes

According to the principle of meta-contrast specified in SCT (Oakes *et al.*, 1994; Turner, 1985), social categories will become salient as intergroup differences increase. Category salience in turn will lead to stronger stereotyping. Hence, most in-group stereotyping should occur in those situations in which the in-group is most salient; that is, when the in-group is most clearly differentiated from the out-group. Therefore, highest in-group stereotyping is expected in situations where the interaction of the comparison group and the comparative domain draws attention to the *differences* between in-group and out-group.

However, perceivers should not only attend to the comparative relations between categories, but also to the *social meaning* of differences between people as well as the relative accessibility of particular categorizations (Oakes, 1987; Oakes, Turner, & Haslam, 1991). This means that motivational processes other than meta-contrast may determine category use and group perception, especially when the in-group's relation to other groups is highlighted.

Indeed, the role of motivational processes of this form is directly predicted by social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). From SIT, we would expect that, in comparison with predictions based on categorization processes alone (cf. SCT), the in-group category should become particularly important when it is *similar* to the comparison group. We do not intend to contrast SCT and SIT here, but rather to argue that diverging predictions regarding group distinctiveness can be made to the extent that the cognitive and motivational processes differentially emphasized within these theories of intergroup relations become important in different contexts (see Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004 for a similar argument). When perceivers are rating groups that they do not identify particularly strongly with, more cognitive processes might prevail in category judgments. On the other hand, when perceivers' identity is invested in a group (e.g. when group membership is self-selected rather than experimentally assigned) motivational considerations are likely to dominate.

According to SIT, the similarity of an out-group can serve as a possible threat to the distinctiveness of the in-group (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Brewer, 1993; Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1998; Jetten *et al.*, 2004). Because group distinctiveness is important for a group, the less clearly the in-group is defined in the current social context, the more its members will be motivated to distinguish the in-group from other groups in order to restore group distinctiveness. One way to achieve this is to emphasize the unique attributes (i.e. distinctive stereotypic features) of

their own group, and differentiate the in-group from the out-group on those stereotypic attributes. Thus, according to this line of reasoning, one would expect strongest in-group stereotyping, not in situations where the in-group is clearly differentiated from the out-group, but precisely when the distinction between the groups is not sufficiently clear (i.e. when the comparison group is seen as most similar to the in-group).

Perceiver factors

People might only be motivated to perceive their in-group in a positively distinct way to the extent that they identify as members of that group in that particular context. However, few studies have directly examined the relationship between (in)group identification and categorization and stereotypic judgments. Nevertheless, the role of in-group identification as an explanatory variable in intergroup contexts is well demonstrated by research investigating issues of in-group favouritism (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992), cross-categorization (Crisp & Hewstone, 1999; Migdal, Hewstone, & Mullen, 1998), and in-group homogeneity (Simon, 1992). Studies have shown that people who report a relatively high level of identification with their in-group (i.e. high identifiers) react differently to matters concerning their group than low identifiers (e.g. Ellemers & van Rijswijk, 1997; Wann & Branscombe, 1995). High identifiers, for example, are generally more likely to favour their in-group over an out-group (Ellemers & van Rijswijk, 1997) and a recent meta-analysis showed that in-group identification moderates the relation between intergroup distinctiveness and differentiation (Jetten *et al.*, 2004). In previous studies demonstrating differences between high and low identifiers, reactions are most often directed at an out-group. However, studying in-group stereotyping provides the opportunity to examine the role of the level of in-group identification more closely.

In intergroup situations, in comparison with interpersonal situations, the shared social identity (the in-group category) will become more important (Turner, 1982). When their social identity is salient, group members will describe themselves more in terms of their social group (self-stereotyping). Studies investigating self-stereotyping (Simon & Hamilton, 1994; Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997; Verkuyten & Nekuee, 1999) find that there is generally more self-stereotyping among high identifiers (those who identify strongly with their group) than among low identifiers. Similarly, as heightened salience leads to a more stereotypical self-description, it is expected that enhanced in-group salience will lead perceivers to describe the group as a whole in more in-group stereotypic terms. Thus, the overall level of in-group stereotyping will be higher as the importance of this group membership for its member's increases.

Interplay of contextual and perceiver factors

While there is evidence for the separate effects of both social context and perceiver factors in determining group judgments, their combined effects have yet to be studied. Not only are stereotypic judgments expected to be influenced by social context, but so too the level of identification with the group itself is context-dependent. Whereas identification is usually operationalized as an *a priori* distinction between people who display relatively high or low identification with a group, this does not mean that identification is by definition a chronically salient or stable concept (Ellemers *et al.*, 1999), with the same group members always displaying the same level of group identification. The level of identification can be dependent on particular features of the group (Ellemers, 1993). Indeed, in the context of another debate, it has been argued that perceptions of the self are generally influenced by the social situation (Abrams, 1999;

Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Furthermore, according to SCT, the categorization of the self is dependent on the immediate social context. Hence, identification should not be conceptualized as something that is expressed independently of the social meaning of the situation (Turner, 1985, 1999). Instead, the level of in-group identification can be seen as the perceived importance of a particular categorization for a person in a specific context. Importantly, different identities may become salient in different situations and hence the level of salience of any particular identity may vary with changes in social context (McGarty & Grace, 1999; Rutland & Cinnirella, 2000). Self-reports of identification are thus a variable outcome of self-categorization and social identity processes in the specific setting (Haslam, 2001; Onorato & Turner, 2004; Turner & Onorato, 1999).

The above reasoning leads to the prediction that degree of identification will also be influenced by comparison group and the comparative domain. Again, the impact of social categorization processes should lead the in-group identity to become most salient when the in-group is clearly differentiated from an out-group (due to cognitive distinctiveness), whereas an identity explanation would predict higher levels of in-group identification when the groups are perceived as similar (as a result of a motivational process). Moreover, rather than considering identification as a *moderator* of intergroup behaviour (i.e. distinguishing between high and low identifiers), level of identification should lead to higher levels of in-group stereotyping (Doosje, Spears, & Ellemers, 2002), and hence may function as a *mediator* of the effects of social context. Specifically, it is predicted that in-group members will perceive their in-group more stereotypically in social contexts that enhance their identification with it.

The current study

In sum, this study will investigate the combined effects of comparison group and comparative domain on the stereotyping of an in-group. In addition to the direct effects of these contextual factors, the mediating effect of the level of in-group identification (resulting from the manipulation of social context) on in-group stereotyping will be examined.

To be able to show that the comparison group and the comparative domain interact to determine category salience, the target in-group was defined on two independent cross-cutting category dimensions (university affiliation and discipline). This provides the opportunity to make a particular category salient by varying both the comparison group and the comparative domain and hence to examine judgments of groups that can be viewed as similar or different according to one or both of the categorizations (see Table 1). Contextual comparisons were made with a group that had the same university affiliation but came from a different discipline, or with a group that had a different university affiliation but came from the same discipline. By focusing the

Table 1. Perceived similarity or difference depending on comparison group and comparative domain

	Comparison group	
Domain	ACU psychology	ANU physics
Universities	Different	Similar
Disciplines	Similar	Different

comparison on either the university or discipline domain, the relative salience of the in-group categories in the specific comparative context was shifted. Thus, perceived similarity or difference is dependent on the social context, such that the two groups will be perceived as similar in those instances where the comparative domain enhances the salience of the category which both groups have in common, but will be perceived as different when the comparative domain emphasizes the category which the groups do not have in common.

Taken together, we predict that in-group stereotyping is dependent on the extent to which similarities and differences between the in-group and the comparison group appear relevant. If only categorization processes are involved, more in-group stereotyping is expected as differences between the groups are more salient. However, when motivational processes driven by group identification play a role, more in-group stereotyping is expected in those conditions in which the similarities between the groups are most apparent. Furthermore, those group members who identify relatively strongly with their in-group are expected to display a higher level of in-group stereotyping in general. Regarding the interplay between the perceiver's level of in-group identification and social contextual factors, it is expected that the manipulation of context factors will influence the level of identification with the in-group which in turn will determine the level of in-group stereotyping.

The social categories used in the current study are pre-existing and self-chosen group memberships and therefore ones that are likely to be important to their members (cf. Hornsey & Hogg, 2002; see also Jetten *et al.*, 2004). Because important in-group categories are used and judgments are made on in-group-defining characteristics, we expect that a motivational account would be most predictive of the results. Most stereotyping is therefore expected in conditions which emphasize in-group–out-group similarity because this entails a threat to in-group identity.

Method

Participants and design

A total of 159 psychology students from the Australian National University (ANU) participated in this study as part of a course requirement. Data from eight participants were not included in the analyses because they were taking courses in physics ($N = 7$) or because they failed to complete the questionnaire ($N = 1$). Of the remaining 151 participants, 103 were females, 38 were males, and 10 did not state their gender.

The study had a 2 (comparison group: ACU psychology, ANU physics) × 2 (comparative domain: universities, disciplines) between-subjects design.

Procedure

The study was conducted in a first-year psychology class. Participants were told that the study was concerned with the evaluation of promotional material. They were told that the researchers were interested in comparing material produced either by different universities (university domain condition) or by different disciplines (discipline domain condition).

It was explained that two sample promotional videos would be shown and that participants had to evaluate these. One video was always the in-group video about 'ANU psychology'. The other video provided the comparison group manipulation. This video ostensibly was produced by either the Australian Catholic University (ACU) Psychology department or the ANU Physics department. To render the comparative

context more salient, the two videos (ANU psychology and the video from the relevant out-group) were passed around and participants had to indicate whether they had seen either of the videos previously.

After reading the instructions, the in-group video (ANU psychology) was shown. Participants then rated the video on features, such as level of interest, information, length, and so on. After this, participants were told that there was no time left to show the second video and that they would therefore continue with the questionnaire. Participants were told that, because their judgments of the video might have been influenced by their pre-existing ideas about the subject of the video (namely ANU psychology), the researchers wanted to investigate their ideas about this group. Participants rated how well certain characteristics applied to the target in-group: ANU psychology. The trait open-minded and the behaviour related to it, 'listening to another person's views', were the focus of our analyses, because open-mindedness was considered to be more stereotypic of the in-group than either the out-group university or the out-group discipline (Oakes, Haslam, & Reynolds, 1998) and effects of social context were only expected on in-group defining characteristics. However, to conceal the main interest variable and to provide some credence for our cover story, ratings were also made on five non-stereotypic positive traits and related behaviours (well-mannered, responsible, serious, intelligent, and scientific; see Doosje *et al.*, 1998).

Participants completed four questions concerning their identification with psychology students (e.g. I have a lot in common with other psychology students), and the same four questions for their identification with ANU students (e.g. I feel strong ties with other ANU students). They also indicated how similar they perceived ANU psychology students to be to each other (homogeneity).[1] All questions were answered on 7-point rating scales with the end points labelled *not at all* (1) and *completely* (7).

Results

ANOVA

Unless otherwise stated, the following analyses all result from a 2 (comparison group: ACU psychology, ANU physics) × 2 (comparative domain: universities, disciplines) ANOVA.

In-group stereotype

The in-group stereotype measure consisted of the unweighted mean of the ratings of the in-group stereotypic trait and the in-group stereotypic behaviour ($r = .49$, $p < .001$). A factor analysis with a three-factor solution clearly revealed the in-group stereotype (open-minded) as a separate factor (total explained variance = 70.24%). ANOVA on this in-group stereotype measure revealed no main effects of group, $F(1, 146) < 1, p = ns.$, or domain, $F(1, 146) < 1, p = ns$. The predicted interaction between-group and domain was significant, $F(1, 146) = 12.95, p < .001$. As can be seen in Table 2, in the context of

[1] *Perceived group homogeneity of the target group was also measured as an indicator of in-group stereotyping. ANOVA on this measure yielded a marginally significant interaction of comparison group and comparative domain, $F(1, 146) = 2.73$, $p = .10$. The pattern of the means of perceived homogeneity parallels that of the in-group stereotype. Mediation analysis on homogeneity with identification as a mediator also showed the similar pattern as the in-group stereotyping. In-group identification was strongly related to the level of perceived in-group homogeneity (discipline identification $r = .48$, $p < .01$; university identification, $r = .32$, $p < .01$).*

Table 2. Applicability of in-group stereotype and non-stereotypic characteristics as a function of comparison group and comparative domain

	Comparison group	
Domain	ACU psychology	ANU physics
	In-group stereotype	
Universities	5.06	5.47
Disciplines	5.49	5.06
	Non-stereotypic characteristics	
Universities	4.42	4.38
Disciplines	4.57	4.35

ACU psychology stronger stereotyping was found in the discipline domain ($M = 5.49$) than in the university domain ($M = 5.06$), $t(71) = 2.78$, $p < .01$. In the context of ANU physics there were higher stereotypic ratings in the university domain ($M = 5.47$) than in the discipline domain ($M = 5.06$), $t(75) = 2.36$, $p < .05$. Furthermore, in the university domain stereotypic ratings were higher in the context of ANU physics ($M = 5.47$) than in the context of ACU psychology ($M = 5.06$), $t(71) = 2.58$, $p < .05$. The reverse was found for the discipline domain. Here stereotypic ratings were higher in the context of ACU psychology ($M = 5.49$) than in the context of ANU physics ($M = 5.06$), $t(75) = 2.52$, $p < .05$. In accordance with the hypothesis derived from social identity principles, in-group stereotypic ratings were thus highest in those conditions that combined to render the perceived similarity between the in-group and the given comparison group most salient (cf. Table 1).

Non-stereotypic characteristics

As expected, social context manipulations did not affect ratings of characteristics not stereotypic of the in-group. The interaction of group and domain was not significant, $F(1, 146) = 1.58$, $p = ns$. This indicates that the observed effect was confined to the in-group stereotype and could thus not be interpreted as a more general positive in-group bias. Furthermore, the applicability of stereotypic in-group characteristics was generally greater ($M = 5.26$) than the applicability of non-stereotypic characteristics ($M = 4.43$), $t(149) = 13.98$, $p < .001$, which were rated close to the scale mid-point.

Identification

Identification concerning the in-group discipline category and university category were measured separately (Cronbach's α discipline $= .89$; university $= .91$). As predicted, context affected the level of in-group identification. For discipline identification, the only significant effect to emerge from ANOVA on this measure was the predicted interaction between-group and domain, $F(1, 147) = 5.01$, $p < .05$. Similarly, for university identification the expected interaction was also significant, $F(1, 147) = 10.19$, $p < .01$. As can be seen from Table 3, both discipline and university identification were highest in the conditions in which the comparison group was most similar to the judged in-group. These were the conditions where ACU psychology context was combined with the discipline domain and the ANU physics context with the university domain. Both measures of identification were highly correlated, $r = .65$, $p < .001$.

Table 3. Level of in-group identification as a function of comparison group and comparative domain

	Comparison group	
Domain	ACU psychology	ANU physics
	Discipline identification	
Universities	4.05	4.41
Disciplines	4.39	4.01
	University identification	
Universities	4.19	4.61
Disciplines	4.50	3.86

Mediation analyses

The predicted mediating role of in-group identification was investigated by conducting regression analyses in which the dependent measure (in-group stereotype) was regressed on the interaction of comparison group and domain (social context) and the level of identification was entered as a mediator (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Discipline identification

First, the direct effect of the social context, (i.e. the interaction of group and domain) on the in-group stereotype proved to be significant, $\beta = -0.29$, $t(148) = -3.62$, $p < .001$. Second, the effect of social context predicted the level of identification, $\beta = -0.18$, $t(149) = -2.26$, $p < .05$. Furthermore, identification was a significant predictor of in-group stereotyping, $\beta = 0.35$, $t(148) = 4.56$, $p < .001$. When both the social context and the level of identification were entered into the equation, the effect of the interaction remained, $\beta = -0.23$, $t(147) = -3.05$, $p < .01$, but was reduced significantly, Sobel $t(148) = 2.01$, $p < .05$.

University identification

The direct effect of the social context, (i.e. the interaction of group and domain) on the in-group stereotype was significant, $\beta = -0.29$, $t(148) = -3.62$, $p < .001$. The effect of social context predicted the level of identification, $\beta = -0.26$, $t(149) = -3.24$, $p < .01$. In addition, identification was a significant predictor of in-group stereotyping, $\beta = 0.34$, $t(148) = 4.41$, $p < .001$. Moreover, when both the social context and the level of identification were entered into the equation, the effect of the interaction remained, $\beta = -0.21$, $t(147) = -2.73$, $p < .01$, but was reduced significantly, Sobel $t(148) = 2.43$, $p < .05$.

These analyses showed that, as hypothesized, level of identification was a significant mediator of the effect of the comparison group and domain on in-group stereotypic ratings. The context effect remained a significant direct predictor of in-group stereotyping.

Discussion

This study shows that comparison group and comparative domain interactively affect in-group identification and in-group stereotyping. Furthermore, the effect of these contextual factors on stereotype content was partly mediated by the level of identification with the in-group. The pattern of results showed that identification

and in-group stereotyping were highest in conditions where different aspects of social context combined to make salient the similarity of the in-group and the comparison group, as opposed to conditions where context emphasized differences between the groups (see Table 1). Moreover, the interaction between comparison group and comparative dimension was obtained on ratings of the in-group stereotype but not for non-stereotypic but positive traits, indicating that the effect observed on the stereotypic attributes was not due simply to a positivity bias.

The observed relationship between context and identification on the one hand, and identification and in-group stereotyping on the other, supports a more motivational explanation for the findings. Evidently, when the in-group's distinctiveness is threatened, motivational processes have a stronger effect than categorization effects alone (Oakes *et al.*, 1991). It may well be that for other groups (e.g. minimal laboratory groups that are less self-relevant to their members), cognitive processes dominate (cf. Jetten *et al.*, 2004). Hence the findings here relate to important group membership and are not necessarily generalizable to all intergroup judgments.

Whereas previous research has shown that comparison group (Haslam *et al.*, 1992) and comparative domain (Doosje *et al.*, 1998) can independently influence in-group stereotyping, study provides evidence of the *interactive* contribution of comparison group and comparative domain to the context-dependency of stereotype content. Thus, while both comparison groups and comparative domain can have independent effects on categorization and stereotyping, in combination their effects may either enhance or counteract each other. When studying stereotyping of social categories, it is thus important not to look at the comparison groups or the domain of comparison in isolation, but to consider these features in relation to each other.

Whereas we aimed to study the comparison of the same group (ANU psychology) to other groups, one could argue that, by varying social context, *different* groups were made salient, (i.e. either psychology or ANU), and therefore perceived similarities and differences were dependent on the salience of the separate categories rather than the superordinate 'crossed' category. Since it is difficult to disentangle category activation and category use (see Wegener & Klauer, 2004), this issue warrants further investigation. Ultimately, we are not in a position to ascertain whether people judged the same group. Nevertheless, the important point remains true: that people form different impressions of an in-group on the basis of the information provided depending on interacting facets of the context that this information is viewed in.

Besides the sensitivity of stereotypic in-group ratings to social context, the perceiver's identification with that group also played a role in these judgments. Importantly, in this study it was shown that group identification can be influenced by features of the social structure (Ellemers, 1993). Although the level of identification is sometimes assumed to be a relatively stable ongoing state, it was shown here that the level of identification was also affected by factors in the immediate social context. These findings accord with the notion that identification is a product of self-categorization in context (Turner, 1985, 1999; see also Onorato & Turner, 2004). Higher levels of in-group identification were particularly pronounced in those contexts in which the similarity between the in-group and the comparison group was emphasized. Identification was measured for the discipline and university categorization separately to allow for the possibility that they would be differentially affected by the context manipulations. However, results on both identification measures were virtually identical. It seems most likely that, since context threatened the distinctiveness of the crossed in-group, both identifications increased in reaction to this threat.

Consistent with previous investigations (e.g. Ellemers *et al.*, 1999), it was found that the level of identification with the group predicted the level of in-group stereotyping. Consistent with evidence from the self-stereotyping literature (Spears *et al.*, 1997), the more people identified with the in-group, the more they judged the stereotype to be applicable to the in-group. Therefore, members who identify strongly with their group in a particular context are more likely to stereotype this in-group.

Regarding the interplay of contextual and perceiver factors, we found that the effect of context on stereotyping was (at least partly) explained by the level of in-group identification. In certain contexts the degree of in-group identification was enhanced and higher identification led to an increase in in-group stereotyping. This indicates that context, in addition to a direct influence, has an indirect effect on stereotyping via the degree of in-group identification. This suggests that the level of in-group identification, in contrast to the usual conceptualization of identification as a moderating variable, can be treated as a mediator variable (Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001, see also Jetten *et al.*, 1998 and Jetten & Spears, 2004). This finding constitutes an important contribution to existing knowledge since previous research (Ellemers *et al.*, 1999) has considered identification largely as a predictor variable in the sense that differential reactions are expected for individuals defined *a priori* as high and low identifiers.

An explanation of the finding that in-group stereotyping is increased when similarities between the in-group and a comparison group become salient, can be offered by the more motivational approach to stereotyping put forward by social identity theory. Social identity processes are particularly likely to come into play when the group identity is important and relevant intergroup comparisons are made, and when the identity is threatened. In this study the in-group identity was an important one concerning a real group membership and comparisons were made in relation to relevant comparison groups. When the comparison group seems too similar to the in-group, and hence the group's distinctiveness is threatened, those members whose group membership is important will react to this distinctiveness threat (Jetten *et al.*, 2004). High identifiers thus become motivated to regain this group distinctiveness in order to maintain a positive social identity (Jetten *et al.*, 1998). In the present study, this was achieved by emphasizing the in-group stereotype.

Tentative further evidence for this notion was obtained by showing that relatively high degrees of in-group identification led to higher perceived homogeneity (cf. Simon & Pettigrew, 1990). Highest in-group homogeneity ratings were obtained for those conditions in which the in-group identity was most threatened; that is, in the contexts where the out-group could be perceived as most similar to the in-group (Doosje & Ellemers, 1997). By perceiving their in-group as homogeneous, relatively strong identifiers stress the fact not only that the in-group entails certain stereotypic traits and behaviours, but also that these are likely to be applicable to all group members (see Castano & Yzerbyt, 1998). Consequently members draw together, and at the same time enhance the distinctiveness of their own group from other groups by avoiding overlap (Pickett & Brewer, 2001).

Whereas some evidence was found for the relation between group identification and social context this could be further investigated in future work. Furthermore, it is not clear whether identification is determined by contextual salience alone or more specifically by identity threat. Perhaps in those contexts where the in-group identity is threatened, people will heighten their identification as a way of dealing with this distinctiveness threat (cf. Branscombe *et al.*, 1999).

In conclusion, this study contributes to knowledge of the stereotyping process by simultaneously examining multiple aspects of context as well as group identification. Context is known to have an impact on stereotypic ratings but here we have shown that different aspects of context (comparison groups and comparative domain) interact to structure the stereotyping process, and thus a more fine-grained examination of the process was possible. More interestingly, the effect of context is mediated by the perceiver's level social identification with the in-group. This indicates that when we study the effects of identification on intergroup processes we need to realize that identification itself is a product of the immediate social situation in which these intergroup processes occur.

In other words, who we think we are is affected not only by the situation we find our group in, but this fundamental relationship is also partly determined by the extent to which that situation makes us aware of the group's self-relevance. Context helps define who we are, partly because it has the capacity to make this question important.

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