European Review of Social Psychology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/pers20

The Influence of Socio-structural Variables on Identity Management Strategies

Naomi Ellemers

a Free University, Amsterdam

Available online: 04 Mar 2011

To cite this article: Naomi Ellemers (1993): The Influence of Socio-structural Variables on Identity Management Strategies, European Review of Social Psychology, 4:1, 27-57

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14792779343000013

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages.
whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Chapter 2

The Influence of Socio-structural Variables on Identity Management Strategies

Naomi Ellemers
Free University, Amsterdam

ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to provide empirical support for some of the key predictions of social identity theory. This theory not only describes the psychological processes underlying the desire to establish positive social identity, it also identifies antecedent conditions to the use of different options to improve one's status position. On the basis of the theoretical statements provided by social identity theory, a research programme, designed to investigate conditions under which group members would be inclined to pursue status improvement individually or as a group, was set up. A theoretical analysis implies that status structures can be characterized with a limited number of variables and that such socio-structural variables are likely to be important determinants of people's preference to display individualist or collectivist behaviour when striving for higher status. The main variables in this respect seem to be: (1) the relative status position of one's group; (2) the permeability of group boundaries; (3) the stability of group status; and (4) the legitimacy of personal status or group status. In a series of experiments, different status structures were simulated, in order to assess the cognitive and behavioural consequences for people operating in these structures. The outcomes of these experiments and their theoretical implications are discussed.
INTRODUCTION

The general desire of people to improve their current situation (by outperforming others, gaining more material profits, more power, or more social prestige) is widely endorsed as a basic motivational principle in a variety of theoretical perspectives in social psychology (cf. Crosby, 1976; Festinger, 1954; Mulder, 1972; Tajfel, 1978). Moreover, empirical research in the domains of, for example, social comparison theory, relative deprivation theory, social identity theory, and power distance reduction theory consistently yields results that support the notion that people, in general, want to climb the social ladder. Thus it seems that people's desire for status improvement constitutes a major issue in experimental research and theoretical development in social psychology. The study of people's reactions to having a socially disadvantaged or low status position bears direct relevance to contemporary social problems. However, the question of how exactly people go about achieving this general goal of status improvement, or what makes them opt for certain strategies and not for others, has not constituted a major research focus. It is precisely this question that the present chapter sets out to address.

When we look at the options people have to remedy a socially disadvantaged or low status position, it appears that a general distinction can be made between individual strategies on the one hand, and group or collective strategies on the other. More precisely, it seems important to distinguish between individual mobility (individual group members gaining access to higher status groups), and social change or group mobility (an improvement of the relative status position of the group as a whole). Furthermore, this distinction between individual and collective strategies has significance beyond its purely theoretical or analytical value. Because these strategies require substantially different cognitive and behavioural orientations, pursuing status improvement at the individual level may hamper chances for one's group to achieve higher status, and vice versa. Therefore, it seems important to understand what motivates people to operate as individuals or as group members in the social structure.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

In a chapter published in 1979, Tajfel and Turner present "an integrative theory of intergroup conflict". This constitutes the first explicit formulation of the theoretical framework outlined in earlier publications (Tajfel, 1974, 1975, 1978a, 1978b; Turner, 1975) and is generally referred to as "the social identity theory of intergroup behaviour" (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Its original aim was to provide an alternative to the assertion that intergroup conflict is by definition characterized by some real competition for scarce resources (cf. the
Sherif summer camp studies; Sherif, 1966). The point Tajfel and Turner try to make is that positive distinctiveness of one's group vis-à-vis other groups may constitute a goal in itself. Moreover, when people identify strongly with a group, the search for positive intergroup distinction may be sufficient to induce intergroup conflict. Hence, in addition to identifying conflicting interests or superordinate goals, social identity theory proposes ingroup identification as a central explanatory concept for the occurrence of intergroup conflict.

This line of reasoning was developed in order to account for the—initially surprising—finding that awareness of some kind of distinction between different groups of people, albeit an arbitrary one, is sufficient to evoke discriminatory intergroup behaviour (cf. Tajfel, Billig, Bundy & Flament, 1971). The scope of social identity theory, however, is somewhat broader than that: its main contribution is that it defines certain characteristics of the social reality that may invoke either social behaviour with the individual as the primary social entity or behaviour of an intergroup nature.

The dynamics that social identity theory deals with were further defined more systematically by Tajfel and Turner in 1979. They distinguish three basic processes: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. Social categorization denotes people's tendency to order their social environment by forming meaningful groups or categories of individuals. As a consequence of this mere categorization, perceived differences between elements within the same category are reduced, whereas differences between categories are accentuated (as is the case with non-social stimuli; cf. Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963). Thus, social categorization serves to construe a simplified version of the social environment. As a result of this social categorization process, certain values or features that are, correctly or stereotypically, associated with a group may be ascribed to individual members of that group as well. The second fundamental process, social identification, refers to the extent to which people define themselves (and are viewed by others) as members of a certain social category. Presumably, one's place in society can be defined according to the cognitive structure social categorizations offer. As a result "social groups . . . provide their members with an identification of themselves in social terms" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40). When people identify strongly with their social group, they may feel compelled to act as group members, for example, by displaying discriminatory intergroup behaviour.

The most important aspect of the social identification process, however, is that people define themselves in terms of their group membership, "... although consensual definitions by others can become, in the long run, one of the powerful causal factors for . . . self-definition" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 41). In later theoretical elaborations, Turner (1985, 1987) accordingly argues that people's behaviour in terms of their group membership may be understood from the perspective of "self-categorization". Finally, the (relative) valence of group characteristics is determined by means of social comparison.
This use of the term social comparison extends the original definition given by Festinger, which referred to the comparison with “some other specific person” (Festinger, 1954; hypothesis 3, page 120). Social identity theory postulates that when a group compares favourably to relevant other groups, this may contribute to a positive social identity. The combined outcome of various intergroup comparisons is supposed to be reflected in the relative status position of a group. When a group may be positively distinguished from relevant other groups it has high status; low group status, presumably, is the result of predominantly negative intergroup comparisons. Thus, status may be viewed as a scarce resource, for which groups may enter into a “social competition” (cf. Turner, 1975). According to social identity theory, an intergroup conflict may ensue over social prestige just as well as it may be caused by competition for material resources.

In summation, the basic processes social identity theory describes imply that (a) people may define themselves and others as members of social groups, (b) on the basis of which certain (group) characteristics are ascribed to individual group members, and (c) these characteristics may compare positively or negatively to the characteristics of other groups.

The concept of social identity is used to refer to that part of the self-concept that is derived from the social category the person is associated with. Obviously, people can often be considered as members of different (sometimes cross-cutting) social categories at the same time (cf. Brown & Turner, 1979; Deschamps & Doise, 1978; Vanbeselaere, 1987). As a result, the concept of social identity may refer to a collection of possible self-definitions. Nevertheless, self-categorization theory, which elaborates on the cognitive processes underlying social identity (Hogg & McGarty, 1990), argues that in a given social situation there is usually one most salient categorization, that is, one categorization that has the best structural and/or normative “fit” (Oakes, 1987) to that situation. Consequently, different aspects of one’s social identity may be “switched on” in different situations (cf. Turner, 1985, 1987). Tajfel and Turner further postulate that when one’s membership group can be positively distinguished from relevant comparison groups (i.e. it has high status), this may contribute positively to one’s social identity. When one’s group has low status, this implies that it compares negatively to other groups. Consequently, membership of a low status group may yield an unsatisfactory social identity. The central assumption of social identity theory is that people strive for positive social identity. As a result they are expected to prefer the association with social groups that compare favourably to relevant other groups (i.e. with high status groups) over identification as a member of a group that has relatively low status.

For people who are members of a high status group, identification with that group—that is, defining the self as belonging to a group with high status—may be sufficient to establish positive social identity. Identification as a member of
THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIO-STRUCTURAL VARIABLES

a group with low status, conversely, yields an unsatisfactory social identity. Because of their striving for a positive identity, it is likely that members of low status groups will try to cope with their predicament by resisting identification as an ingroup member. Thus, as a theoretical construct, social identity refers to the definition of self in terms of group memberships. It entails some sort of cognitive similarity of the self to a certain social group, and may in that sense be seen as an “inevitable” process. However, when intergroup comparisons result in an unsatisfactory social identity, people might prefer not to identify with their group. Therefore, the reasoning in this chapter concerning social identity (as well as the operational measure used to establish ingroup identification) will incorporate an element of choice or preference, representing the extent to which people are motivated to identify with the group they belong to. In this sense, it may be predicted from social identity theory that people are more strongly motivated to identify as a member of their group when it has high status than when the ingroup’s status position is comparatively low. Moreover, when identification as an ingroup member does not yield a positive social identity, group members may try to evade the association with the present (low status) group and become members of a group with higher status instead. In other words, members of low status groups will presumably attempt to change their group affiliation to acquire a more positive social identity; they are likely to strive for individual mobility (cf. Tajfel & Turner, 1979; note that in his earlier publications Tajfel, 1974, 1975, refers to this as “social mobility”). Thus, when pursuing a (more) positive social identity, people may display individualistic behaviour that is intended to achieve individual locomotion to a higher status group.

Social identity theory argues that striving for a positive social identity may result in people primarily identifying either as members of their social group or in a more individualistic orientation (which may eventually lead to the association of self with a group that has higher status). The main causal factor, determining how efforts at achieving a favourable social identity take shape, presumably is the social structure (or rather, people’s belief systems regarding the properties of the social structure).

Tajfel and Turner distinguish between a social system in which individual mobility seems possible, and a system in which people do not conceive of the possibility of individual locomotion across groups. According to an “individual mobility” belief structure, higher status may be realized through individual upward mobility to another group. An example of such a social structure would be an “equal opportunities” society or meritocracy, in which each person may in principle obtain the status position he or she deserves, without being restricted by their cultural or social-economic background. Hence, such a social system is characterized by the fact that boundaries between groups with different social status can be transgressed i.e. group boundaries are permeable. In contradistinction to this, Tajfel and Turner also describe a
social structure that is rigidly stratified. Such a structure would focus people more on their identity as group members since they have no realistic alternative to their current group membership. Any attempts to realize higher status in the latter social system would involve a more fundamental social change, with group members trying to establish a higher status position for their group as a whole. Thus, in a social structure where status groups have permeable boundaries, people are expected to define themselves mainly as individuals (who may be associated with one group or another). A structure in which different status groups have impermeable boundaries does not offer the opportunity to change one's group affiliation; identification as an ingroup member may therefore seem inevitable. Under these circumstances, people are more likely to identify primarily in terms of their social group, causing the ingroup (instead of the self) to constitute the predominant social entity.

There is, nonetheless, a range of possible cognitive and behavioural responses group members may display in reaction to an unsatisfactory social identity. People may, for example, cease to make intergroup comparisons, enhance the salience of an alternative categorization, engage in fantasy comparisons, or withdraw from the situation. Some of these reactions, however, may be considered dysfunctional or even pathological (cf. van Knippenberg, 1989). Therefore, the present discussion will concentrate on the most prominent reaction patterns, namely opting for an individual solution or reacting as an ingroup member.

In sum, social identity theory defines the processes that may lead people either to display individualistic behaviour, or which result in an intergroup orientation. Because of the striving for a positive social identity, the relative status position of the ingroup is considered to be an important determinant of people’s willingness to identify as a member of their group. Presumably, the extent to which the boundaries of these status groups are permeable causes people to engage in individualistic behaviour directed at a more positive identity (individual mobility) or, conversely, implies that one’s personal fate is bound to that of one’s group. Thus, the description of social structures with permeable boundaries as opposed to impermeable status structures is an essential element of social identity theory. The impermeability of group boundaries may refer to an objective impossibility of changing group affiliations, but it may also only be experienced as such because values that are central to their self-concept prevent people from freely moving from one group to another (cf. Tajfel, 1978b). For our present purposes, however, we will only make the distinction between groups with impermeable boundaries on the one hand and groups with permeable boundaries on the other.

The extent to which people identify as members of their social group is supposed to be an important mediator of their tendency to behave as individuals or as members of that social group. So far, however, empirical research has restricted itself mainly to uncovering to what extent substantial or arbit-
rary categorizations may cause people to behave in terms of their group membership—or at least to display discriminatory behaviour towards "out-group" members (cf. Billig & Tajfel, 1973, *inter alia*; see also Brewer, 1979; Hinkle & Schopler, 1979; Messick & Mackie, 1989, for reviews). An experimental procedure has therefore been developed to enable us to investigate the effect of social structures with different properties on social identification processes. In an empirical research programme, specific elements of the social structure that may lead people to identify primarily as individuals or as group members were systematically investigated in a series of laboratory experiments. In the section that follows, the results of these studies as well as their theoretical implications will be discussed in some detail.

**PERMEABILITY OF GROUP BOUNDARIES**

To test social identity theory's predictions about the effect of group status and permeability of group boundaries on people's tendency to identify as ingroup members, Ellemers, van Knippenberg, de Vries and Wilke (1988) designed an experimental procedure in which group hierarchies were created in a laboratory setting. This procedure enabled us to manipulate specific characteristics of the intergroup situation, and investigate group members' behaviour in different social structures. This procedure was used to carry out two experiments in which effects of permeable group boundaries in high and low status groups on group members' willingness to identify with their group were investigated. In the first experiment we investigated the joint effect of group status and group boundary permeability on satisfaction and ingroup identification.

Thus, in the first experiment, we manipulated the relative status position of the subject's group (high, low) in a hierarchy of five groups, and the permeability of group boundaries (permeable, impermeable) as independent variables. Group members' individual ability relative to other members of their group (high, average or low) was manipulated as an additional independent variable. As main dependent variables, group members' satisfaction and ingroup identification were measured.

The experiment was introduced as an investigation into group problem-solving and co-operation. First there would be an individual task, after which several rounds of a group task would follow. For this purpose, five groups were formed, each consisting of three individuals. The individual task comprised a series of 10 problems that had to be solved. Group members' individual ability was manipulated by providing subjects with bogus feedback about their individual task performance, indicating either that their score was the best score in their group (high individual ability), an average score in their group (average individual ability), or the worst score in their group (low
individual ability). The group task consisted of a series of 15 problems of the same type that was used for the individual task. For the group task, subjects first indicated their initial solution. Then they received pre-programmed information about the initial solutions of their fellow group members. Subsequently, subjects chose a final solution; no information was given about the final solutions of the other group members. Subjects were told that the more group members agreed on the correct solution, the more points the group would gain. Group status was manipulated by giving bogus feedback about the group's performance on this task. Subjects were provided with a rank order of all five groups according to their performance on the group task. In the high group status condition the subject's group supposedly was the second best group; in the low group status condition the subject's group was the second worst group. Finally, permeability of group boundaries was manipulated by leading subjects in the permeable condition to believe that, after each round of the group task, some of the subjects might be transferred from one group to another. In the impermeable condition, subjects were told that the composition of the groups would not change during the experiment.

The dependent measures were framed as questions about "co-operating in a group". Subjects were asked whether they were satisfied with their group's performance and whether they were satisfied with the allocation of subjects to groups. In addition, an ingroup identification scale was developed to suit the experimental context. This measure comprised several questions and was designed to assess cognitive awareness of group membership as well as evaluative and affective components of group identity (cf. Brown et al., 1986). The results revealed that, in general, members of high status groups were more satisfied with the performance of their group than members of low status groups. Satisfaction with group membership was affected by group status as well as by permeability of group boundaries. Subjects in high status groups were always relatively satisfied with their group membership, regardless of the (im)permeability of group boundaries. In low status groups, however, group members expressed less satisfaction with their group membership when membership in another group was feasible (i.e. when group boundaries were permeable), than when they could not leave their (low status) group, because group boundaries were impermeable (Table 2.1).

For the ingroup identification scale, a principal components analysis was carried out; this confirmed that these questions do indeed measure one underlying concept (see Appendix, this chapter). Hence, factor scores were used as an index for ingroup identification. Analysis of these factor scores revealed a pattern similar to what was observed with the satisfaction measures. Overall, subjects identified more strongly with their group when it had high status than was the case in a low status group. Additionally, ingroup identification was found to be significantly lower in low status groups with permeable boundaries than in impermeable low status groups. Conversely, in high status
Table 2.1 The effect of permeability and group status on satisfaction with group membership and ingroup identification (adapted, by permission, from Ellemers, van Knippenberg, de Vries and Wilke, 1988; exp. 1)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Permeability of Group Boundaries</th>
<th>Permeable</th>
<th>Impermeable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Satisfaction with Group Membership</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>4.63\textsuperscript{a}</td>
<td>4.69\textsuperscript{a}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>3.76\textsuperscript{b}</td>
<td>4.59\textsuperscript{a}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ingroup Identification</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>0.65\textsuperscript{a}</td>
<td>0.40\textsuperscript{a}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>-0.79\textsuperscript{c}</td>
<td>-0.34\textsuperscript{b}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Only the differences between row and column means with a different superscript are significant ($p < 0.05$)

groups, permeable group boundaries appeared to induce slightly stronger ingroup identification than did impermeable group boundaries. This latter tendency, however, was not statistically significant ($p < 0.14$, two-tailed; see also Table 2.1).

The most straightforward conclusion that can be drawn from this experiment is that group members are generally more satisfied and identify more strongly with high status groups than with low status groups. This general effect, however, interacts with the (im)possibility of changing groups. For subjects in low status groups with permeable boundaries, membership of a higher status group would seem feasible (cf. relative deprivation theory; see Cook, Crosby & Hennigan, 1977). As a result, they were less satisfied about their present group membership and expressed less identification with their group than subjects in low status groups with impermeable boundaries. Nevertheless, all members of low status groups were equally dissatisfied about the relatively poor performance of their group. In high status groups, conversely, instead of evoking upward aspirations, the fact that group boundaries were permeable may have confronted subjects with the possibility that they could “slide” into a group with lower status (since three of the four other groups had lower status positions than they had). By comparison with these possible alternatives, then, their present group membership presumably seemed more favourable. Hence, members of high status groups did not become less satisfied with their group membership when there was a possibility of changing groups. Thus it appears that, as a reaction to the uncertain implications of permeable group boundaries, members of high status groups identified relatively strongly with their group. Consequently, we may presume that in groups that already have relatively high status, permeable group boundaries
may cause group members to value their present group membership even more strongly than when their membership in this high status group is secure (impermeable boundaries).

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ALTERNATIVE GROUP MEMBERSHIPS**

One concept that comes to mind when discussing the considerations group members may have had when participating in the first experiment by Ellemers et al. (1988), is the "comparison level for alternatives" which Thibaut and Kelley (1959) first introduced. They claim that people judge their satisfaction with an interpersonal relation by comparing their outcomes from this relation to a "standard" or "average" outcome. As a result, people will be dissatisfied with a relation when their outcomes are below average and are satisfied about relations with above-average outcomes. Additionally, the relation is assessed by comparing it to the comparison level for alternatives; i.e. to the outcomes expected from other relations that are available to the person. According to Thibaut and Kelley, when people's outcomes fall below the comparison level for alternatives, they will try to leave the present relation. If, however, the comparison level for alternatives is lower than their present outcomes, people will remain in the relation, even though they may be dissatisfied because their outcomes are lower than their personal standard. Perhaps this notion of comparison level of alternatives can be used to gain some additional insight into the observed effect of group status and permeability of group boundaries on group members' satisfaction and ingroup identification.

The results of the first experiment by Ellemers et al. (1988), discussed above, might be interpreted in terms of the dynamics Thibaut and Kelley (1959) propose. Subjects were probably dissatisfied with a low status position of their group because it was lower than an average status position. However, when group boundaries were impermeable, they had no alternative to identifying as a member of that group. Hence, they were relatively dissatisfied about their low status, but had no alternative that justified decreasing their identification with the ingroup. Only when there was a realistic possibility of obtaining a more favourable group membership (because group boundaries were permeable) did members of low status groups show signs of wanting to leave their group by identifying relatively weakly with their present group. In high status groups, conversely, permeable group boundaries may (also) have confronted group members with the alternative of becoming associated with a lower status group. Because this alternative was not particularly attractive, group members under these circumstances probably preferred to hold on to their present group membership.

The primary cause of group members' satisfaction and tendency to identify
with their group appears to be the relative status position of their group. As social identity theory claims, empirical findings consistently indicate that people generally are more satisfied, and are more willing to identify as a member of a high status group than a low status group (cf. Sachdev & Bourhis, 1985, 1987, 1991). This general tendency, however, appears to be influenced by the question whether group members have a realistic alternative, besides identifying as an ingroup member, to establish a positive identity. When group boundaries are permeable, this seems to rouse upward mobility aspirations in members of low status groups. In accordance with relative deprivation theory (cf. Cook, Crosby & Hennigan, 1977; Crosby, 1976; Martin, 1981), it appears that in low status groups this prospect in itself is sufficient to lower group members' satisfaction with their current group membership, and to induce a decreased level of ingroup identification. Contrary to what relative deprivation theory claims, it does seem, however, that permeability of group boundaries has a different effect for members of high status groups. Besides opening up the perspective of achieving even higher status, permeable group boundaries, for members of high status groups, may also render more salient the comparative favourability of their present group vis-à-vis groups with lower status.

To summarize the argument thus far: in order to predict how people evaluate their group membership and to what extent they tend to identify as members of their group, it seems important to consider (1) what the relative status position of their group is, (2) whether a realistic alternative to the present group membership exists, and (3) how their present group membership compares to this alternative.

**STATUS ENHANCEMENT AND STATUS PROTECTION**

When we take a closer look at social identity theory, we find that it appears to incorporate status protection motives in addition to the striving for status enhancement. Tajfel and Turner state that: "...individuals strive to achieve or maintain positive social identity" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; p. 40, my italics). Hence, although Tajfel and Turner proceed to elaborate on different possible reactions to unsatisfactory social identity, we may derive from social identity theory the assumption that group members who already have positive identity will be interested in preserving the status quo. On the basis of what Ellemers et al. (1988) found in their first experiment, it appears that permeable group boundaries have the general capacity of rendering the relative status position of one's group more salient. The resulting comparison with alternative membership groups may cause group members either to devalue their present group membership (when it is relatively unfavourable) or it may render the current situation more attractive (when alternative membership groups offer
less potential to achieve positive distinctiveness). Thus, the opportunity for individual upward mobility may lead group members to strive for identity enhancement (i.e. resisting identification as a member of their present group in the hope that a more positive identity may be realized). Analogously, the possibility that group members may be demoted to a low status group might evoke the desire to protect one’s current identity (by trying to hold on to the present group membership; cf. enhancement and protection of self-esteem, Zuckerman, 1979). In other words, the general desire, described by social identity theory, to identify with high status groups rather than low status groups, may be activated when alternative membership groups become salient. As a result, opportunities to achieve membership of a high status group can lead to decreased ingroup identification, whereas the possibility of becoming associated with a group that has lower status might evoke an increased level of ingroup identification.

Indeed, results of an experiment by Turner, Hogg, Turner and Smith (1984, exp. 2), seem to yield exactly this pattern. Subjects were members of a group that had either been successful or unsuccessful. When subjects knew reassignment to another group might follow, they reported relatively strong attraction to their group when it had been successful, whereas low attraction was observed in unsuccessful groups. A similar finding is reported in an (unpublished) paper by Ross (1977). He measured the extent to which subjects felt part of “open” or “closed” groups with different status positions. Ross found that in “closed” groups (i.e. when group membership was fixed), the group’s status did not affect the extent to which subjects felt they belonged to their group. Subjects who were confronted with a change of group membership, however, appeared to identify relatively little with their group when it had low status but showed strong group identification when their group was a high status one.

Although the distinction between status enhancement and status protection motives might account for these findings, this interpretation of research outcomes is now made post hoc. In other words, from reading the descriptions of the experiments carried out by Turner et al. (1984) and Ross (1977) we may deduce that in low status groups the possibility of changing group membership probably focused group members’ attention mainly on the possibility of attaining membership of a higher status group, whereas in high status groups the downward threat presumably was most salient. However, since these experiments were not designed to investigate differential effects of these specific identity management concerns, the present interpretation remains speculative.

In order to study status enhancement and status protection motives more closely, we carried out a second experiment (Ellemers et al., 1988, exp. 2). Here, possibilities for upward and downward individual mobility were manipulated separately, and were independent of relative group status. As in the
first experiment, a five-group status hierarchy was simulated. Individual ability (high or low) and group status (high or low) were manipulated by providing subjects with false feedback about their performance on a personal and group problem solving task respectively. Subjects were then told either that they might be reassigned to a higher status group or that reassignment to a higher status group was not possible (upward mobility possible or impossible). Similarly, it was suggested they could or could not be placed in a lower status group during the course of the experiment (downward mobility possible or impossible). Presumably, in the conditions where mobility was possible, decisions about a change of group membership would be taken on the basis of individual abilities. The main dependent variable was the ingroup identification scale, that was also used in the first experiment (see Appendix, p. 57 this chapter).

Replicating the effect of experiment 1, our overall observation was stronger ingroup identification in high status groups than in groups with low status. Furthermore, a decreased level of ingroup identification only occurred when upward mobility was possible and group members had high individual ability (Table 2.2). For the interpretation of this result, we refer to the permeability instructions that were used in this experiment, which suggested that individual abilities would be taken into consideration when deciding about possible reassignments of individuals to other groups (Ellemers et al., 1988). This may explain why the possibility of upward mobility did not affect the reactions of group members with low individual ability. Even though membership of a high status group could be achieved in principle, their low individual ability probably led them to deduce that they would not be considered for such a change of group membership. Conversely, for group members with high individual ability, the opportunity for upward mobility did constitute a realistic prospect. A measure of subjects' estimates of their personal mobility chances was consistent with this interpretation. Hence, the subjects to whom realizing membership in a high status group seemed most likely responded by showing decreased identification with their present membership group.

Table 2.2 The effect of upward mobility and individual ability on ingroup identification (adapted, by permission, from Ellemers, van Knippenberg, de Vries and Wilke, 1988: exp. 2)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Upward mobility</th>
<th>Possible</th>
<th>Impossible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual ability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>−0.33b</td>
<td>0.04a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>0.21a</td>
<td>0.08a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Only the differences between row and column means with a different superscript are significant (p < 0.05)
Experiment 2 thus offers additional support for the idea that a realistic opportunity to achieve a more favourable group membership may induce people to identify less with their current group. Contrary to what was expected, however, the converse effect, namely increased identification when downward mobility was likely, could not be established in this experiment. Hence, experimental results so far do not offer support for the status protection hypothesis. This might be attributed to people's general orientation which, as has been argued at the outset of this chapter, is likely to be predominantly directed upward. Indeed, according to the literature, "protective" downward social comparisons are only observed under more or less stressful circumstances (cf. Hakmiller, 1966; Wills, 1981). It would appear that the experimental situation we employed did not pose a threat that was perceived as serious enough to evoke a concern with status protection.

The results of the two experiments we reported (Ellemers et al. 1988) are consistent with the hypothesis that group members identify relatively little with their group when they have a realistic prospect of obtaining a more favourable group membership. In experiment 1 these are the subjects in low status groups with permeable boundaries; in experiment 2 these are the subjects with high individual ability for whom upward mobility is possible. At the same time, it appears that status protection motives are not simply elicited by the possibility that people may be reassigned to a lower status group. We therefore carried out another experiment in order to determine circumstances under which group members would be motivated to preserve their group membership (Ellemers, Doosje, van Knippenberg & Wilke, 1992). Because these laboratory experiments deal with artificially created groups, we tried to make group membership as involving as possible for the experimental subjects. Hence, instead of creating groups of subjects on a random basis, we suggested in this experiment that the group formation be based on interpersonal similarity in problem solving style. Secondly, a social structure was created in which the relative status position of the group would seem to be more consequential. This time, the status structure comprised two groups only: a high status group and a low status group. In the experimental literature, it is suggested that distinctive characteristics have more profound consequences for people's behaviour when they share these characteristics with a small group of people only (cf. Jellison & Zeisset, 1969; McGuire, McGuire, Child & Fujioka, 1978; McGuire, McGuire & Winton, 1979; McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976; Miller, Turnbull & McFarland, 1988). Therefore, we assumed that being a member of a low status group would have a greater impact on group members' social identity when only a minority of people had such low status. Similarly, the relative favourability of membership in a high status group may be enhanced by its exclusiveness (i.e. when it is a high status minority or elite group). As a
result, we expected permeable group boundaries to evoke a status enhancement tendency in low status minority groups (resulting in decreased ingroup identification), while in high status minorities permeable group boundaries could be expected to activate status protection motives (with increased ingroup identification as a consequence).

Thus, the independent variables in this experiment were: group status (high, low), relative group size (minority, majority) and permeability of group boundaries (permeable, impermeable) (Ellemers et al. 1992). Groups of subjects were formed allegedly on the basis of interpersonal similarities in problem solving style. Group size remained the same in the subject's own group. In the minority condition the other group was supposedly larger; in the majority condition it was suggested that the other group was smaller.

The evaluative measures used in this study revealed that members of high status minority groups were more proud of their group membership than subjects in any other condition. Moreover, in high status minorities subjects expressed some reluctance to expand the size of their group. The ingroup identification measure (see Appendix) replicated the results that were reported by us in 1988, namely, that overall, ingroup identification was stronger in high status than in low status groups. Close inspection of cell means and planned contrasts revealed that ingroup identification was stronger in high status minority groups with permeable boundaries than in any other cell (Table 2.3). Some additional questions, intended to assess subjects' attraction to the other group, revealed that members of high status minorities felt least attraction to membership in the other group.

Taken together, these results appear to offer support for the status protection tendency that has been described above. In high status minority groups subjects felt most proud of their group membership and indicated that they wanted to maintain its exclusiveness. Moreover, they felt less attracted to an alternative group membership than subjects in other experimental conditions. Consequently, when permeable group boundaries indicated that they might lose their positively distinct group membership, they reacted by showing strong ingroup identification.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High status</th>
<th>Low status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permeable</td>
<td>1.05(^a)</td>
<td>0.35(^b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impermeable</td>
<td>0.68(^b)</td>
<td>0.70(^b)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Only differences between row and column means with a different superscript are significant \((p < 0.05)\)
STABILITY OF GROUP STATUS

Social identity theory specifies in some detail that individual mobility is likely to be pursued when group boundaries are permeable. Only when individual mobility cannot be a viable strategy (because group boundaries are impermeable) do people presumably resort to collective strategies (cf. Tajfel, 1974; 1978a; 1978b; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A similar hypothesis is advanced by Taylor and McKirnan (1984), who explicitly suggest that there is some fixed temporal order in the use of different identity enhancement strategies. In their "five-stage model of intergroup relations", Taylor and McKirnan argue that collective action directed at status improvement may only be undertaken after attempts at individual mobility have proved to be unsuccessful. Results from experimental research indeed show that group members opt for collective action when individual mobility to a higher status group is not feasible (cf. Taylor, Moghaddam, Gamble & Zellerer, 1987; Wright, Taylor & Moghaddam, 1990).

However, in one of the first articles that addresses this issue, Tajfel (1974) also mentions what he calls "secure" and "insecure" intergroup relations. Tajfel uses the term "secure" intergroup relations to describe a situation in which another status structure than the present one is simply not conceivable. "Insecure" intergroup relations, on the other hand, imply that it is possible to imagine an alternative status order. In later publications, these terms are replaced, and stable and unstable status differences between groups are described instead (Tajfel, 1978a, 1978b). The difference between stable and unstable status structures refers to differential possibilities for status improvement at the group level, just as groups with permeable boundaries and impermeable groups offer different prospects for status improvement at the individual level. In a situation with unstable intergroup status differences, trying to achieve higher group status constitutes a feasible strategy. In a stable status structure, however, the group's status position cannot be improved.

It may be assumed that when status differences between groups are perceived as unstable, attempts will be made to change the status quo (Tajfel, 1978a). However, various theoretical statements (Tajfel, 1975, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggest that group members will always investigate their opportunities for individual mobility first. Presumably group members will only become interested in the question of whether the status position of the ingroup as a whole might be changed when the individual mobility strategy does not appear to be feasible. In other words, the extent to which individuals are bound to their group is expected to constitute the crucial factor that determines whether people display individualistic or intergroup behaviour when striving for status enhancement. In our opinion, however, it is also possible that the awareness that group status is unstable is sufficient to focus group members' attention on the possibility of achieving group mobility. The con-
cern with group goals that is then elicited is likely to result in strong identification as an ingroup member. We may predict, therefore, that, irrespective of whether group boundaries are permeable or not, group members’ awareness that their group’s status position is unstable may arouse the aspiration for collective status improvement. In this way, the instability of group status might operate to make group members consider group mobility as a viable strategy as well.

Although social identity theory remains somewhat ambiguous with respect to this issue, the above reasoning seems to justify the consideration of stability of group status as a plausible determinant of group members’ inclination to pursue group mobility and one that may function independently of the (im)possibility of changing one’s group affiliation. Empirical research, however, has so far only addressed permeability of group boundaries as a causal factor that determines whether individual mobility will be pursued (when group boundaries are permeable) or whether attempts at group mobility are undertaken (when group boundaries are impermeable; cf. Taylor et al., 1987; Wright et al., 1990). However, when investigating differential preferences of group members for individual or collective identity enhancement strategies, the stability of group status may be of as much interest as an independent variable as the permeability of group boundaries.

For this reason, Ellemers, van Knippenberg and Wilke (1990) carried out a further experiment in which the permeability of group boundaries (permeable, impermeable) and the stability of group status (stable, unstable) were varied independently. Other independent variables in this experiment were group status (high, low) and individual ability (high, low). In addition to measuring group members’ satisfaction and ingroup identification (see Appendix), we have tried to establish whether group members were oriented towards achieving individual mobility, or appeared to focus on possibilities for group mobility.

In this experiment, a five-group status hierarchy was simulated in the laboratory. Subjects were led to believe that two different skills would be measured, both of which would be related to problem solving abilities: the ability to detect structures, and the estimation of quantities. It was suggested that the ability to detect structures could be measured by means of a “structures” task; estimation of quantities could supposedly be assessed with an “estimations” task. After this explanation, all subjects first had to complete a number of test items individually; the individual test comprised “structures” items as well as “estimations” items. False feedback on subjects’ individual test performance was used to induce either high or low individual ability. Subsequently, subjects performed a group task that dealt with detection of “structures” only. Their group’s performance on this task supposedly resulted in a second place in the rank order for all five groups (high group status) or in a fourth place (low group status). The permeability manipulation consisted of instructing
group members that the composition of the groups might still change (permeable group boundaries) or that it would remain the same throughout the experiment (impermeable group boundaries). In order to manipulate stability of group status, it was further explained that a second group task would follow; this would consist exclusively of "estimations" items. In the unstable group status condition it was suggested that the status positions of the groups might still be altered as a result of the groups' performances on this second group task. In the condition where group status was stable, it supposedly was highly unlikely that the scores on the "estimations" task would affect the rank order of the groups.

As a result of these manipulations, we found overall stronger satisfaction (with group status and group membership) and ingroup identification in high status groups than in groups with low status, replicating findings of the experiments described above (Ellemers et al., 1988, 1992). Permeability of group boundaries and stability of group status also affected the dependent measures. When group boundaries were permeable, subjects expressed less satisfaction with their group membership and identified less with their group than when group boundaries were impermeable. Moreover, in response to some additional measures, members of groups with permeable boundaries reported they felt more strongly attracted to membership of a group with higher status than did members of impermeable groups. Conversely, unstable group status relative to stable group status resulted in decreased satisfaction with the status position of the ingroup, and a stronger desire to work at the improvement of the group's status position. Furthermore, although ingroup identification was equally strong in stable and unstable conditions, when group status was high, members of low status groups showed stronger ingroup identification when the position of their group was unstable than when low group status was fixed.

The consistency of the results on different measures convincingly points out that, indeed, permeable group boundaries focus group members' attention on possibilities for individual mobility to a group with higher status. Accordingly, they show decreased satisfaction with their group membership, and decreased ingroup identification; simultaneously, they express their interest in membership of a higher status group. These results, then, appear to justify elaboration of our initial conclusions regarding the effect of permeable group boundaries. Not only do permeable group boundaries appear to have the capacity to render the comparative favourability of one's membership group more salient, they also seem to elicit the desire to become associated with a group that has higher status. A more novel finding is that apparently the (in)stability of group status may affect satisfaction and ingroup identification independently of the permeability of group boundaries. Although we did not measure intergroup competitiveness in this experiment, unstable group status did result in lowered satisfaction with present group status, and evoked the aspiration to
achieve a higher position for the ingroup as a whole. Furthermore, an important observation is that when the low status position of the ingroup could still be improved, group members showed relatively strong ingroup identification, even though for the moment—because of its low status—this group could not contribute to positive distinctiveness.

The results of this experiment seem to justify the conclusion that, just as individual mobility and group mobility constitute different identity management strategies, the (im)permeability of group boundaries may be discerned from the (in)stability of group status. These situational characteristics, furthermore, appear to constitute important determinants of group members' inclination to strive at individual mobility or to aspire to group mobility. In sum, then, permeable group boundaries may elicit the desire to upgrade one's status position individually, as a result of which people resist identification with their present group. Conversely, unstable group status appears to elicit a willingness to work at status improvement collectively; consequently, identification as an ingroup member is more in order here.

THE LEGITIMACY OF LOW STATUS

An important assumption of social identity theory is that identification as a member of a high status group may be sufficient to establish positive identity. Membership in a low status group, however, does not yield positive distinctiveness. Therefore, members of low status groups may be particularly sensitive to possibilities to improve their identity. Because the aim of our research is to investigate effects of socio-structural variables that affect group members' preference for different identity enhancement strategies, we will now consider low status groups more closely.

In social identity theory, it is suggested that when there is consensus that the present status relations are fully justified, high status and low status groups will not seem comparable. The inferior group will probably refrain from attempts to establish positive distinctiveness from the dominant or high status group when status differences between groups are considered to be legitimate. If, however, intergroup status differences seem illegitimate, even a dissimilar group may become the target of intergroup comparisons (cf. Tajfel, 1975, 1978b). The shared perspective that low ingroup status is illegitimate may then constitute a basis for frustration, and incite intergroup behaviour directed at achieving positive intergroup distinctiveness. In this sense, Tajfel (1978b) argues that the perceived illegitimacy of status differences between groups is a lever for social action and social change in intergroup behaviour. Some empirical data appear to support this assertion as it seems that people tend to favour their ingroup, particularly when it has been deprived initially (Commins & Lockwood, 1979a). Moreover, strong ingroup bias is observed...
when the ingroup receives fewer points than the other group, in spite of a superior ingroup performance (Commins & Lockwood, 1979b). These experimental results seem to suggest that group members display strong ingroup favouritism in order to redress the unfair treatment of their group (cf. Cad- 

Even though Tajfel (1978a) acknowledges that group status differences may be either illegitimate but unchangeable, or legitimate and unstable, he also suggests that the legitimacy and stability of the status structure may interact. The conviction that the present status differences are illegitimate may invite attempts at changing the situation, whereas awareness that an alternative status order is possible may diminish the perceived legitimacy of the status quo. Accordingly, Tajfel and Turner (1979) regard the combination of unstable and illegitimate intergroup relations as the most powerful cause for intergroup conflict. Nevertheless, "...for all practical purposes, illegitimacy and instability can be treated as orthogonal variables" (Turner & Brown, 1978, p. 209). It seems of interest to investigate whether legitimacy and stability of intergroup status relations indeed affect group members' reactions independently. To be more specific, we may try to establish whether illegitimate status differences motivate people to look for possibilities to change the status quo, or, conversely, whether the conviction that the present structure is a legitimate one may induce people to accept an unfavourable status position.

In our discussion of theoretical statements so far we have tried to focus on variables that possibly differentiate between group members' inclination to be concerned with their personal social standing or define themselves primarily as members of their social group. The statements in social identity theory that refer to the legitimacy of status relations, however, only mention the (i)legitimacy of group status positions as a possible catalyst of attempts at collective identity enhancement. In other words, when group status is illegitimately low, people are expected to pursue improvement of group status. However, they might reconcile to a legitimately low status position. If we consider possible factors that may motivate group members to strive for individual mobility, it seems that we may also distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate social status at the individual level. When people feel their personal association with a low status social group is based on unjust grounds, they may experience their personal social standing to be illegitimately low. Considerations of this kind may lead people to contest their association with the low status group instead of evoking a concern with the group's fate. In this way, the perceived illegitimacy of the fact that one belongs to a group with low status may elicit an individualist orientation and cause people to resist ingroup identification. When the group has been accorded an illegitimately low position, on the other hand, the injustice affects the ingroup as a whole. Therefore, illegitimate group status probably does not diminish people's willingness to identify as
ingroup members; in fact, their common fate may even enhance ingroup identification tendencies.

Social identity theory asserts that illegitimate status relations induce group members to compare their status position with that of dominant status groups. Similar reasoning may fit in with relative deprivation theory, in which unfavourable outcomes of social comparisons are considered to be the motivational factor for status improvement attempts. In fact, the conviction that one is entitled to a better position is also mentioned as a cause for people to experience relative deprivation (cf. Crosby, 1976), although relative deprivation theory presumes that feelings of entitlement co-vary with the feasibility of the aspired position. Moreover, the distinction between interindividual comparisons—that possibly result in egoistic deprivation, and intergroup comparisons that may cause people to experience fraternal deprivation—might increase our understanding of the differential effects that illegitimate personal status and illegitimately low group status may have on group members' behaviour (cf. Dubé & Guimond, 1986; Walker & Mann, 1987; Walker & Pettigrew, 1972).

On the basis of social identity theory, we may argue that group members' conviction that their group's low status position is illegitimate, will result in relatively strong ingroup identification. This presumably leads group members to make comparisons at the group level, i.e. to compare their group's position with that of higher status groups. When we follow the reasoning proposed by relative deprivation theory, we might predict that fraternal deprivation emanates from this intergroup comparison. As a consequence of such an unfavourable intergroup comparison, collective action is likely to emerge. The extent to which people feel deprived individually, according to a relative deprivation perspective, might be affected by unfavourable interindividual comparisons. As has been argued above, the conviction that one is unjustly associated with a low status group might elicit such an individualist orientation in group members. Hence, when these members of a low status group compare their personal situation to that of people who belong to a group with higher status, they will experience what we might call feelings of egoistical deprivation. This predicament, in turn, may be resolved by personal status improvement through individual mobility to a higher status group. Taking these predictions together, we may then surmise that, when individuals consider their membership in a low status group to be illegitimate, they will be mostly concerned with achieving personal goals. Consequently, they may be sensitive to opportunities to improve their personal status (i.e. through individual mobility to a higher status group; cf. Taylor & McKirnan, 1984). When, however, the group's low status seems unjust, group cohesion presumably is enhanced, and group members will be motivated to undertake collective action (cf. Folger, 1987).

We made a previous distinction between permeable group boundaries
eliciting people's awareness of alternative status positions they might personally have) and unstable group status (offering prospects for status improvement as an ingroup member). In the same vein, as we argued above, it seems appropriate to differentiate between effects of illegitimate inclusion of specific individuals in a low status group (which presumably lowers ingroup identification tendencies) on the one hand, and an unjustly low status position of the ingroup in the social structure (which may result in relatively strong cohesion) on the other hand. The awareness that one's personal status is lower than seems justified (i.e. that one is associated with a low status group on unjust grounds) presumably motivates group members to seek opportunities for improvement of their personal situation. Conversely, the conviction that the ingroup has unjustly been accorded low status, is likely to cause group members to regard collective status improvement as the most appropriate strategy. In sum, not only the question of whether a low status position is legitimate or illegitimate seems relevant, but distinguishing between (il)legitimacy of a person's membership in a low status group and (il)legitimacy of the group's low status position may be crucial when we want to differentiate between individual and collective reactions to unsatisfactory social identity.

We carried out two experiments to investigate this issue (Ellemers, Wilke & van Knippenberg, 1993). In the first of these two experiments, the legitimacy of group status was manipulated; in the second experiment the legitimacy manipulation pertained to the position of individual group members in the status structure. In both experiments, all subjects were members of a low status group; the group's status position was either stable or unstable and the group boundaries were either permeable or impermeable. Regarding the manipulation of legitimacy, a methodological improvement was made relative to previous studies investigating effects of legitimate and illegitimate status assignments as follows. In the literature (cf. Caddick, 1980; Commins & Lockwood, 1979b; Turner & Brown, 1978), legitimate status differences correspond to status expectations people have on the basis of their relative competence. Status differences are considered to be illegitimate when they do not (clearly) reflect differential competence. As a result, the empirical results obtained so far cannot be unequivocally ascribed to the (il)legitimacy of the status assignment because subjects in different legitimacy conditions were not equally competent. Therefore, for our two experiments, we designed a procedure in which a differential sense of legitimacy was induced, while keeping relative competence equal (i.e. focusing on procedural aspects of legitimacy; cf. Tyler, 1989; Tyler & McGraw, 1986). More specifically, subjects were provided with false feedback on an experimental task, indicating that they were highly competent. Furthermore, they were led to expect that this superior task performance would earn them a high position in the status hierarchy. Nevertheless, all subjects were subsequently assigned a low status position. For part of the subjects, however, this status assignment procedure was later
justified" by providing an explanation for the way the positions had been assigned. Thus, although in both cases the obtained status position was unexpectedly low, and did not match subjects' superior task performance, manipulation checks confirmed that the status assignment procedure either seemed illegitimate or justified, depending on the experimental condition they were in.

This manipulation of legitimacy had an interesting effect on the evaluative questions that were posed. In each of the two experiments where the legitimacy of the status assignment was manipulated (Ellemers et al., 1993), subjects indicated that they considered their low status position more acceptable when it seemed justified than when it appeared to be illegitimately low. This finding is the more striking because in both these legitimacy conditions the low status position that was accorded (to the subject or to the subject's group) was considered to be equally unexpected and equally undeserved in view of previous task performances. Thus, we may conclude from these experiments that, indeed, the conviction that one's status position is the legitimate outcome of a just procedure may render low status more acceptable.

Although, essentially, the same legitimacy conditions were used in both experiments, these referred to the assignment of group status in experiment 1 whereas experiment 2 was concerned with the legitimacy of personal status (i.e. the assignment of an individual to a group with low status). When comparing the results of the ingroup identification measure in these two experiments, it becomes apparent that these legitimacy manipulations yield dramatically different results. In experiment 1, an illegitimate assignment of the subject's group to a low status position results in strong identification with the ingroup, especially when group status is unstable and group boundaries are impermeable (Figure 2.1). In other words, when the low status position is the result of a collective injustice, this shared misery appears to breed cohesion. The ties with one's group become even stronger when the group's status position may still be improved (unstable) but individual members cannot leave their group (impermeable boundaries). The observation that group members show relatively strong ingroup identification when the low status position of their group seems unjust is the more interesting in view of the consistent finding that people generally resist identification as a member of a low status group.

In the second experiment, the legitimacy manipulation pertained to the assignment of individual participants to a group with low status. In this experiment, an illegitimate status assignment resulted in lower ingroup identification than in the case of legitimate low status. Thus, when belonging to a group that has low status is the consequence of the way one has been treated personally, group members in the illegitimate condition contest their association with this group. Conversely, they appear to be resigned to their membership in a low status group when it seems justified.
Figure 2.1  The interaction effect of legitimacy of group status assignment, stability of group status and permeability of group boundaries on ingroup identification (adapted, by permission of the American Psychological Association, from Ellemers, Wilke & van Knippenberg, 1993, exp.1)

Consequently, as argued above, it seems that the distinction between the legitimacy of low group status and the legitimacy of low individual status is a valid one. As is the case with structural characteristics of the status order, procedural aspects of the assignment of status positions may evoke people's interest in the status position their group should have, or elicit a concern with their individual status position. The results of the two experiments reported by Ellemers et al. (1993) show that normative considerations may also focus people on their identity as ingroup members, or enhance the salience of their personal standing in the social structure.

When we take a look at the behaviour displayed by subjects in these two experiments, however, a different pattern emerges. It appears that although their evaluative judgements as well as ingroup identification patterns are influenced by legitimacy considerations, people's actual behaviour (directed at individual or group mobility) is guided by the feasibility of different identity management strategies, given the properties of the status structure. Thus, in the final instance, group members seem to pursue those status enhancement strategies that are most likely to succeed in the context of the specific situation.

In experiment 1, subjects whose group had an illegitimately low status position displayed more competitive behaviour towards the other group in the case of unstable group status than when the relative status positions of the groups were stable. In other words, the general motivation to improve the
illegitimately low status position of the ingroup only resulted in concrete action when the instability of the status structure indicated that attempts at collective status improvement might be successful. In the same vein, subjects in the second experiment (where the legitimacy of individual status assignments was manipulated) were generally more competitive vis-à-vis other ingroup members when group boundaries were permeable than when their group membership was fixed. In this case, then, subjects appeared to seize the opportunity for individual mobility when permeable group boundaries indicated that membership in a high status group was feasible, regardless of the (il)legitimacy of their assignment to membership in the low status group.

In sum, the results of these two experiments indicate that, although group members may become more aware of their group's position as a result of a collective injustice (experiment 1), whereas concern with personal social standing is raised when subjects are treated as individuals (experiment 2), people's behavioural patterns are channeled by the (im)possibilities for actual change in the social structure.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Following social identity theory, we assume that people have the general desire to establish positive social identity. This may be realized by defining the self, and by being identified by others, as a member of a group that has high social status. The empirical data described in this chapter consistently indicate that members of groups with high status are more satisfied about their group membership than members of low status groups. Moreover, ingroup identification is generally stronger in high status than in low status groups. Presumably this is the case because identification as a member of a group with high status is sufficient to derive positive social identity. Resistance to identification as a low status group member, conversely, may be the result of the fact that one cannot achieve positive distinctiveness on the basis of this group membership.

When there is a reasonable possibility that individual members may change (status) groups, this fact may operate to enhance the salience of the relative status of the ingroup. When achieving membership in a group with higher status seems a likely prospect, this alternative group membership seems to offer better opportunities to establish positive identity. People are then less motivated to identify as ingroup members. Because of the general inclination to be primarily concerned with status improvement possibilities, anticipating upward mobility is the most likely consequence when group boundaries are permeable. As a result of our experiments, we were, however, able to demonstrate that, under specific circumstances, a downward mobility threat may affect people's identification tendencies as well. When a group enables its
members to establish positive distinctiveness vis-à-vis the majority of other people in the social structure, membership in this group is considered to be highly valuable. As a result, a protective display of strong ingroup identification could be demonstrated in members of a high status minority who were confronted with the possibility that they might lose their affiliation with this group.

Because membership in a group with low status does not yield positive social identity, members of low status groups appear to be particularly sensitive to opportunities for identity enhancement. The empirical data discussed in this chapter show that in groups with high status there is consistently strong ingroup identification, and that this is hardly affected by variables that present possibilities for status improvement. In low status groups, however, the tendency to identify as an ingroup member varies with the prospects group members have of achieving higher status.

When people have low social status, this seems to be considered acceptable when it appears to be justified. But when the actual status position seems illegitimately low, people feel more negative about having that position. Thus, the extent to which having a low status position seems justified affects people's assessment of an unfavourable position in the social structure.

The characteristics of the intergroup status structure affect people's tendency to define themselves primarily as individuals (i.e. to focus on opportunities to establish a positive identity for oneself) or to conceive of their position in the social system primarily as members of their group (and thus show concern for positive ingroup identity). These characteristics may consist of the "social rules" of the status structure (i.e. the permeability of group boundaries and the stability of group status) or refer to normative judgements about the status quo (i.e. legitimacy of personal status and legitimacy of group status). From the experimental results described in this chapter we may conclude that both structural and normative aspects of the status structure have the general capacity to enhance or to reduce people's tendency to identify as ingroup members.

In spite of this general bolstering of one's self definition as an individual or as an ingroup member, people's actual identity enhancement attempts indicate that they pursue the strategy that seems most feasible. Permeable group boundaries generally elicit attempts to distinguish the self from other ingroup members. Instead of showing strong ingroup identification, members of groups with permeable boundaries express their attraction to the higher status group. Moreover, when given the opportunity, they sacrifice their group's best interests while trying to achieve membership in a group with higher status. Unstable group status, on the other hand, evokes the motivation in group members to gain positive distinctiveness for the ingroup as a whole. Consequently, ingroup identification is relatively strong, and group competition for social status prevails over the concern with personal outcomes or material ingroup gains.
In this chapter we have been able to demonstrate the validity of social identity theory's proposals about the prevalence of individual and collective identity management strategies in different social situations. Moreover, our research outcomes have enabled us to specify and elaborate existing insights with respect to enhancing and protective strategies, the stability of group status, and the distinction between legitimacy of low individual and group statuses. We have been able to draw these conclusions owing to the fact that fundamental properties of different social structures can be controlled in the experimental laboratory. At this point, however, it is important to point out that the general value of these findings may be illustrated by the fact that similar patterns have been described in field studies (cf. Dion, 1986; Dubé & Guimond, 1986; Guimond & Dubé-Simard, 1983; Tripathi & Srivastava, 1981; Vanneman & Pettigrew, 1972), although these (predominantly correlational) real-life observations do not allow us to infer causal relations. Nevertheless, the correspondence of these findings with our research outcomes strengthens our conviction that the phenomena we were able to observe in artificially created status structures are essentially the same as those taking place outside the laboratory.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This chapter is based on the doctoral thesis of the author which was supervised by Ad van Knippenberg and Henk Wilke. Some of the research was carried out in collaboration with Nanne de Vries and Bertjan Doosje.

REFERENCES


## APPENDIX

### Factor Loadings of the Ingroup Identification Questions over Six Experiments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you think the other group members performed well on the group task?</td>
<td>0.46 0.71 0.65 0.69 0.71 0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that, with regard to problem solving (decision making), you have more in common with members of this group than with members of other groups?</td>
<td>0.64 0.72 0.58 0.61 0.55 0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that, generally speaking, you have more in common with members of this group than with members of other groups?</td>
<td>0.66 0.60 0.76 0.58 0.70 0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that the members of this group are well suited to each other?</td>
<td>0.73 0.71 0.76 0.71 0.67 0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think it is right, in view of your individual performance, that you are a member of this group?</td>
<td>0.57 0.47 — 0.51 0.52 0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you enjoy doing another round of the group task with this group?</td>
<td>0.65 0.73 0.73 0.73 0.74 0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you find it pleasant to be a member of this group?</td>
<td>0.77 0.77 0.88 0.85 0.81 0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you like to continue working together with this group?</td>
<td>0.74 0.80 0.91 0.82 0.83 0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think it would be nicer in another group?</td>
<td>-0.75 -0.77 -0.70 -0.76 -0.69 -0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you glad you ended up in this group?</td>
<td>— — 0.89 0.80 0.78 0.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>