



Report

Group status, perceptions of threat, and support for social inequality[☆]Kimberly Rios Morrison^{a,*}, Nathanael J. Fast^a, Oscar Ybarra^b^a Graduate School of Business, Stanford University, 518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305, USA^b Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, USA

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ABSTRACT

Members of high-status groups have been shown to favor social inequality, but little research has investigated the boundary conditions of this phenomenon. In the present article we suggest that perceived intergroup threat moderates the relationship between group status and support for social inequality (i.e., social dominance orientation), especially among highly identified group members. In Study 1, Democrats and Republicans rated their party's relative status and were later exposed to a leading US. Presidential candidate from the opposing party (high threat) or their own party (low threat). In Study 2, university students were made to believe that their school had high or low status and were then presented with threatening or non-threatening information about a rival institution. The results of both studies supported the prediction that status only increases preferences for group-based inequality under conditions of high threat and high ingroup identification.

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Group status, perceptions of threat, and support for social inequality

In the popular television series *The Office*, Dwight, a highly committed "Assistant Regional Manager" of a paper company, is notorious for maintaining inequality within his organization. His drastic actions include creating a health care plan that cuts nearly all employee benefits, attempting to fire his closest rival, and condescendingly referring to the company's temporary worker as "Temp." Interestingly, these anti-egalitarian aspects of Dwight's character are most pronounced when he believes his (relatively) high-status group position is threatened – for example, in the face of rumors about company downsizing. When he does not feel threatened, however, he can actually be quite open-minded and fair toward his fellow employees.

This example, though a caricature, highlights an interesting question that has yet to be answered in the scholarly literature. Do highly identified, high-status group members necessarily support social inequality, as is often assumed, or is this pattern most pronounced emerge under conditions of threat? The present paper empirically tests whether group status and threat interact to affect endorsement of inequality, as measured by social dominance orientation (SDO). It is proposed that among highly identified group members, support for inequality will increase under conditions of

high status and high threat, but not under conditions of high status and low threat.

Status, group identification, and support for social inequality

Some previous research suggests that being a member of a high-status group will engender support for social inequality. For example, high-status group members generally display greater outgroup prejudice (Sidanius, Pratto, Martin, & Stallworth, 1991) and ingroup favoritism (Guimond, Dif, & Aupy, 2002) than low-status group members, even when status is randomly assigned (Bettencourt, Dorr, Charlton, & Hume, 2001; Guimond & Dambrun, 2002; Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992). Speaking more directly to the idea that belonging to a relatively high-status group triggers greater preferences for inequality, members of groups that are perceived as high (versus low) in status tend to be higher in social dominance orientation, or SDO (Levin, 2004; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The construct of SDO originated from the notion that all modern societies are made up of group-based hierarchies, with one or more groups possessing disproportionate power and resources (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). It is thought that members of these groups are motivated to reinforce their dominant positions by adopting belief systems and ideologies, such as SDO, that promote social inequality (Sidanius, Levin, Federico, & Pratto, 2001).

The results of recent experiments suggest that high group status can actually lead to increases in SDO (Guimond, Dambrun, Michinov, & Duarte, 2003; Huang & Liu, 2005; Levin, 1996; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Kappen, 2003). In the first demonstration of this phenomenon, members of a higher-status Jewish sect in Israel

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had higher SDO scores than members of a lower-status Jewish sect, but only when the status differences between these sects were experimentally primed (Levin, 1996). The effects of status on SDO presumably occur because high SDO is compatible with the interests of those who are at the top – but not at the bottom – of the social hierarchy (Jost & Thompson, 2000; Schmitt et al., 2003). Thus, group status appears to elevate concerns for social dominance and inequality, particularly among those who perceive that their group enjoys a privileged position. Moreover, this research suggests that for high-status group members, beliefs about inequality can function as an ingroup bias and not just as a general predisposition toward social hierarchies (see Schmitt et al., 2003).

Supporting the conceptualization of SDO as an ingroup bias, the relationship between group status and support for inequality is moderated by group identification, or the importance of one's group membership to one's self-definition (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Specifically, group identification and SDO are positively correlated for high-status group members, but not for low-status group members (Levin & Sidanius, 1999; Sidanius, Pratto, & Rabinowitz, 1994). These findings have been interpreted as evidence that highly identified members of high-status groups (e.g., men) are especially motivated to accept social inequalities as a means of preserving their position. By contrast, highly identified members of low-status groups (e.g., women) may be especially motivated to repudiate social inequalities as a means of improving their position (Dambrun, Duarte, & Guimond, 2004; Wilson & Liu, 2003).

Intergroup threat and social dominance orientation

Though informative, the above research on status, group identification, and SDO does not take into account the fact that a group's relative position in society can be more or less stable. That is, status and power relations can fluctuate according to social and economic circumstances (e.g., job shortages, elections, policy changes), with certain groups feeling as though their interests are jeopardized by outgroups (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001; Stephan, Ybarra, & Morrison, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In the present paper we refer to such perceived obstacles to a group's status, power, and material resources as *intergroup threats*.

Threats to a group's position have been shown to trigger outgroup prejudice (Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999; Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Schwarzwald, & Tur-kaspa, 1998; Zarate, Garcia, Garza, & Hitlan, 2004) and endorsement of policies that favor the ingroup (Esses et al., 2001). Intergroup threats can also affect more direct expressions of support for social inequality (i.e., SDO), though perceptions of status have not yet been assessed in this context (Morrison & Ybarra, 2008). In one relevant experiment, highly identified humanities majors who were threatened by science majors exhibited higher SDO scores than did those who were not threatened (Morrison & Ybarra, 2008, Study 3). Thus, SDO appears to function as a means of protecting the ingroup's position and resources under threatening circumstances, particularly for those whose sense of self is tied to their group membership. It is unclear, however, whether threatened group members will be most motivated to protect their resources in this manner (i.e., to endorse social inequality) when they perceive their group as high versus low in status.

We suggest that for highly identified group members, perceptions of group status and intergroup threat may interact, leading to increases in SDO when both are especially high. In partial support of this idea, some studies have shown that the relationship between threat and indirect measures of support for social inequality (e.g., prejudice) is stronger for high-status groups than for low-status groups (Bettencourt et al., 2001; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006; but see Scheepers, Spears, Doosje, & Manstead, 2006). One poten-

tial reason is that high-status group members believe they have more power and resources to lose from the threat (Mullen et al., 1992). In contrast, when the ingroup is not threatened, high-status group members should not feel a need to defend their interests against outgroups by embracing social dominance beliefs.

The present research

The present studies tested whether intergroup threat would moderate the relationship between group status, group identification, and support for social inequality (i.e., SDO). To maximize the realism of our studies, we examined actual group memberships: political party affiliation (Study 1) and university affiliation (Study 2). As noted above, threat and group identification interact to increase SDO (Morrison & Ybarra, 2008), but no research has examined the role of group status in these effects. Similarly, although status and group identification interact to increase SDO (e.g., Sidanius et al., 1994), no research has examined threat as a potential moderator of this relationship. Because support for inequality is more compatible with the goals and interests of high-status groups than with those of low-status groups (Jost & Thompson, 2000; Schmitt et al., 2003), and group identification increases tendencies to protect the ingroup's position under threat (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), we predicted that highly identified members of high-status (but not low-status) groups would have higher SDO when their position was threatened than when it was not threatened.

Study 1

Study 1 took advantage of an actual political event that had received a great deal of media coverage at the time – the upcoming (2008) US Presidential election. In this study, Democratic and Republican participants were primed with the front-runner candidate from either their own political party or the opposing party. Such a manipulation was meant to elicit either low levels of threat (own party) or high levels of threat (opposing party). Participants also completed a group (party) identification measure, answered questions about their perceptions of Democrats' and Republicans' status, and completed the SDO scale. We hypothesized that threatened participants would have higher SDO to the extent that they viewed their party as high in status and identified with their party.

Method

Participants

Forty-seven participants of various professional backgrounds and from all areas of the United States (mean age = 38.0, $SD = 12.4$) were recruited through an online database maintained by Stanford University. To be eligible for the study, participants had to indicate in a pre-screening survey that they were either Democrats ($n = 18$) or Republicans ($n = 29$). Party affiliation (Democratic versus Republican) did not produce any significant main or interactive effects, and thus will not be discussed further.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: low-threat ($n = 26$) or high-threat ($n = 21$). Group status was measured and not manipulated in this experiment. Upon completion of the study, participants were entered into a drawing to win a \$25 gift certificate to a major online retailer.

Procedure and materials

All materials for this study were administered on the Internet. Prior to beginning, participants read that the purpose of the study was to pilot-test different materials (e.g., questionnaires, photo-

graphs) for use in future research. Participants first completed the group identification measure, followed by the perceived status measure, the threat manipulation, the SDO scale, and a demographics questionnaire. At the end of the experiment, participants were debriefed and thanked.

Group identification measure

The measure of group identification in this study consisted of four items, adapted from the identity subscale of [Luhtanen and Crocker's \(1992\)](#) collective self-esteem measure (e.g., "In general, my political party is an important part of my self-image"). Participants responded to these items on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), and the items were averaged to form a composite ($\alpha = .89$).

Perceived status measure

Next, participants used a seven-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*) to respond to the following two questions: (1) "In your opinion, how high in status are Democrats?" (2) "In your opinion, how high in status are Republicans?" An index of perceived status was computed by subtracting each participant's response to the question about the outgroup's status (i.e., Democrats' status for Republican participants, Republicans' status for Democratic participants) from his or her response to the question about the ingroup's status (i.e., Democrats' status for Democratic participants, Republicans' status for Republican participants). Thus, higher scores indicated higher levels of perceived ingroup (relative to outgroup) status.¹

Threat manipulation

After answering the status questions, participants completed the threat manipulation. Specifically, they viewed a full-color photograph of one of two potential Presidential candidates, described as either the Democratic front-runner (Hillary Clinton) or the Republican front-runner (John McCain). Participants were classified as being in the low-threat condition if they viewed the photograph of the ingroup candidate (i.e., Clinton for Democrats, McCain for Republicans). Conversely, they were classified as being in the high-threat condition if they viewed the photograph of the outgroup candidate (i.e., McCain for Democrats, Clinton for Republicans). Below the photograph were several filler questions allegedly designed to measure participants' reactions to the photograph (e.g., how appropriate a choice for President the depicted candidate was).

In a pretest, 28 participants from the same population (11 Democrats, 17 Republicans) viewed one of the two photographs. They then responded to three separate questions about the extent to which the depicted candidate currently posed a threat to their own party's power and resources, status, and goals (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Their responses to the three questions were averaged to form a perceived threat composite ($\alpha = .92$). Supporting our decision to manipulate threat using these photographs, participants who viewed the photograph of the outgroup candidate ($n = 12$, $M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.45$) judged the depicted candidate to be significantly more threatening than did those who viewed the photograph of the ingroup candidate ($n = 16$, $M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.27$), $t(26) = 3.23$, $p < .005$, regardless of whether participants were Democrats or Republicans.

SDO scale

Immediately following the threat manipulation, participants completed the [Pratto et al. \(1994\)](#) 16-item SDO measure, using a

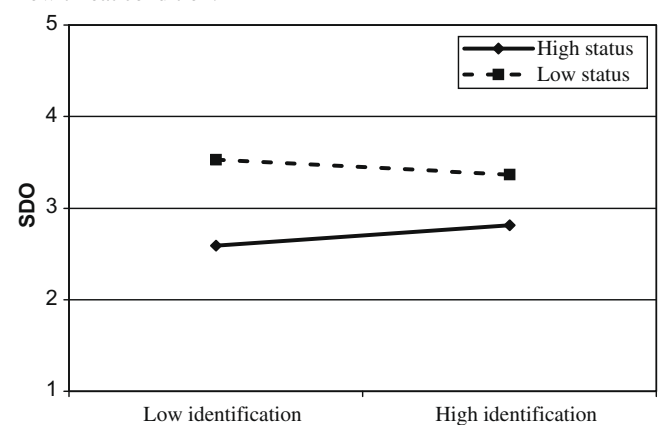
seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The scale consists of items such as, "Increased social equality would be a good thing" (reverse-scored), and "To get ahead in life, it is sometimes necessary to step on other groups" ($\alpha = .91$).

Results and discussion

We hypothesized that highly identified group members would exhibit higher SDO when they perceived their group as having high (versus low) status, but only in the high-threat condition. This hypothesis was tested using multiple regression analysis ([Aiken & West, 1991](#)). The threat condition variable was dummy-coded (0 = low-threat, 1 = high-threat). Perceived status and group identification were mean-centered and treated as continuous variables. Then participants' SDO scores were regressed onto threat condition, perceived status, group identification, all two-way interaction terms, and the three-way threat condition \times perceived status \times group identification interaction term.

The only significant result to emerge was the hypothesized interaction between threat, status, and group identification ($B = .35$), $t(39) = 2.17$, $p < .04$ (see [Fig. 1](#)). To decompose this three-way interaction, we examined the interaction between perceived status and group identification in the high-threat and low-threat conditions separately. Specifically, within each condition, we assessed whether perceived status was related to SDO at high and low levels of group identification (i.e., at one standard deviation above and below the mean). We also assessed whether group identification was related to SDO at high and low levels of perceived status.

Low threat condition:



High threat condition:

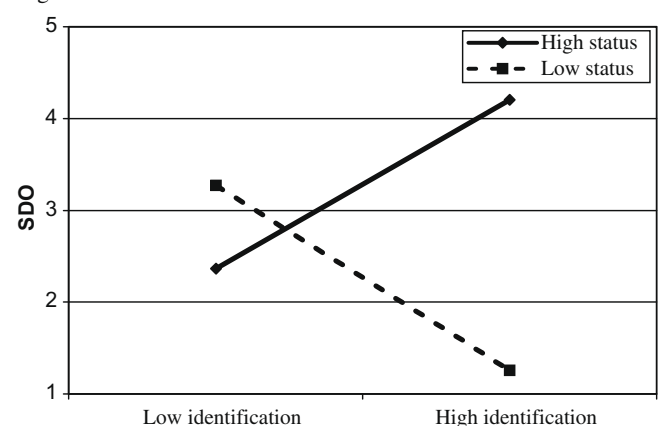


Fig. 1. SDO as a function of threat condition (high vs. low), perceived status (+/–1 SD), and group identification (+/–1 SD), Study 1.

¹ Overall, participants rated Republicans ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.17$) as significantly higher in status than Democrats ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.32$), $t(46) = 2.38$, $p = .02$, regardless of their own party affiliation. This most likely reflects the fact that Republicans were the dominant party in the United States at the time of this study (September 2006).

These analyses revealed that perceived status and group (party) identification interacted to predict SDO under conditions of high intergroup threat ($B = .40$, $t(39) = 2.66$, $p = .01$, but not under conditions of low intergroup threat ($B = .04$, $t(39) = .72$, ns). Among participants who were in the high-threat condition (i.e., viewed the photograph of opposing-party candidate) and identified strongly with their group, high perceived ingroup status was associated with high SDO ($B = .94$, $t(39) = 2.73$, $p < .01$). In addition, group identification was associated with high SDO for threatened participants who believed their group to be high in status ($B = .60$, $t(39) = 2.16$, $p < .04$, but with low SDO for threatened participants who believed their group to be low in status ($B = -.64$, $t(39) = -2.25$, $p = .03$). No other simple slopes were significant. Thus, consistent with predictions, highly identified (but not less-identified) group members who experienced intergroup threat had higher SDO when they perceived their ingroup as high in status, and lower SDO when they perceived their ingroup as low in status.

The above findings supported our hypotheses using a real-world group context (i.e., an upcoming election) and a subtle manipulation of intergroup threat (i.e., merely viewing a photograph of a candidate from a different political party). One limitation, however, is that perceived status was measured and not manipulated. Consequently, it may be that high levels of SDO led people to perceive higher levels of ingroup status, rather than the reverse. In addition, the group identification scale was administered before the threat manipulation. Thus, it is possible that the scale affected participants' responses to the threat. Study 2 was designed to address these concerns.

Study 2

Participants in this study read a passage that described a purportedly real news magazine report about their university. The passage indicated that the magazine had ranked their university either high or low among other U.S. institutions (status manipulation), and that graduates of a rival university had either worse or better job prospects than did alumni from their own university (threat manipulation). After reading the passage, participants completed the SDO scale and a measure of group (university) identification. We predicted that highly identified participants who perceived their university as high in status would demonstrate higher subsequent SDO scores, but only when they also believed that their university was threatened.

Method

Participants and design

One hundred Stanford University students participated in this study as part of an hour-long mass testing session. The study took five minutes to complete, and participants received \$20 upon completion of the entire session. Each participant was randomly assigned to either a high-status condition ($n = 51$) or a low-status condition ($n = 49$), and to either a high-threat condition ($n = 53$) or a low-threat condition ($n = 47$).

Procedure and materials

Status and threat manipulations

Participants completed a two-page survey as part of the mass testing session. On the first page, participants read a passage about an article that had allegedly been written by *The Atlantic Monthly* news magazine. The article consisted of two paragraphs, one designed to manipulate perceptions of ingroup status (i.e., university

rankings) and the other designed to manipulate perceptions of intergroup threat (i.e., prospects on the job market). Thus, status and threat were manipulated orthogonally.

Participants in all conditions read that *The Atlantic Monthly* had recently published a ranking of American universities, as well as information about the employment opportunities of alumni at the different universities. Participants in the high-status [low-status] conditions read that Stanford had been ranked #1 [#8] and Harvard #8 [#1]. Participants in the high-threat [low-threat] conditions read that Stanford alumni had worse [better] prospects on the job market and earned lower [higher] starting salaries than did Harvard alumni.

SDO scale

Next, participants completed the 16-item SDO scale ($\alpha = .89$). To disguise the purpose of the experiment, the instructions indicated that the researchers were pre-testing the items for use in a future study. In addition, the SDO instructions and items were written in a font style different from that of the experimental manipulation.

Group identification measure

At a separate point in the mass testing session, all participants completed the four-item group identification measure from Study 1, reworded to assess university identification (e.g., "In general, being a Stanford student is an important part of my self-image"). The items demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .78$).

Post-test

To ensure the effectiveness of the threat and status manipulations, we administered one of the four passages (low or high threat \times low or high status) described above to a separate sample of 59 Stanford undergraduates (randomly assigned to condition). They then responded to the following questions, all of which began with "Based on *The Atlantic Monthly* report" (1 = not at all, 7 = very much): (1) How highly ranked is Stanford? (2) How prestigious is Stanford's reputation? (3) To what extent can Harvard students be considered a threat to Stanford students' power and status? (4) To what extent can Harvard students be considered a threat to Stanford students' material resources? The first two questions (averaged to assess perceived status; $r = .82$, $p < .001$) and the last two questions (averaged to assess perceived threat; $r = .76$, $p < .001$) were presented in counterbalanced order. Finally, participants completed the group identification measure from the present study ($\alpha = .85$).

The results were submitted to a status condition (0 = low, 1 = high) \times threat condition (0 = low, 1 = high) \times group identification (centered continuous variable) regression analysis. As expected, those in the high-status conditions perceived Stanford as higher in status than did those in the low-status conditions ($B = 1.53$, $t(55) = 4.05$, $p < .001$, and those in the high-threat conditions perceived higher levels of threat from Harvard students than did those in the low-threat conditions ($B = 1.89$, $t(55) = 5.69$, $p < .001$). There were no other main effects or interactions on either dependent measure ($ps > .15$), suggesting that the status manipulation did not affect perceptions of threat and vice versa. Furthermore, perceptions of status and threat were not significantly correlated ($r = -.15$, $p = .25$).

Results and discussion

We hypothesized that highly identified participants in the threat condition would have higher SDO in the high-status condition than in the low-status condition. To test this hypothesis, we submitted participants' SDO scores to a threat condition \times status condition \times group identification regression, similar to the

post-test. Two participants with extreme scores (i.e., more than three standard deviations from the sample mean) – one on the SDO scale and one on the group identification scale – were dropped from the analyses. In addition, one participant was excluded because his/her data were poorly predicted by the regression analysis, hence qualifying him/her as a statistical outlier (studentized deleted residual = 3.41, $p < .001$; see McClelland, 2000). The remaining 97 participants were retained in the final sample.

There were no main effects of status condition, threat condition, or group identification in this study. However, there was a two-way interaction between status condition and group identification ($B = .37$, $t(96) = 2.00$, $p < .05$). Though the simple slopes did not reach significance, the pattern of the interaction suggested that high status increased the SDO scores of highly identified (but not less identified) group members.

The predicted three-way interaction between threat condition, status condition, and group identification was significant ($B = .75$, $t(89) = 2.07$, $p < .05$ (see Fig. 2). As in Study 1, status condition and group identification interacted to predict SDO among participants in the high-threat condition ($B = -.68$, $t(89) = -2.89$, $p = .005$, but not among participants in the low-threat condition ($B = .08$, $t(89) = .28$, *ns*). Specifically, those who perceived that their university was threatened and who identified strongly with their university had higher SDO scores when they were led to believe that their university was high (versus low) in status ($B = .80$, $t(89) = 2.22$, $p < .03$). In addition, group identification and SDO were positively correlated for participants who were made to feel that

their university was threatened and high in status ($B = .51$, $t(89) = 2.66$, $p < .01$). The only other significant simple slope reflected that participants who perceived their university was threatened, but who did *not* strongly identify with it, had lower SDO scores when they were led to believe that their university was high (versus low) in status ($B = -.78$, $t(89) = -2.08$, $p = .04$). This finding is consistent with research showing that less-identified members sometimes act against their group's interests (e.g., become less committed to the ingroup) during times of threat (Doosje, Spears, & Ellemers, 2002).

The above results, which conceptually replicated those of Study 1 using a different intergroup context, demonstrated that highly identified group members who perceive their ingroup as high in status exhibit increases in SDO, but only to the extent that they also perceive their ingroup's position to be threatened. In so doing, Study 2 built upon Study 1 in at least two ways. First, ingroup status was manipulated rather than measured, suggesting that status and threat indeed caused SDO scores to change. Second, although Study 1 showed that viewing a picture of an outgroup (versus ingroup) member is sufficient to elicit perceptions of intergroup threat, Study 2 increased the generalizability of the present effects by directly threatening participants with information about their ingroup's job prospects. Taken together, the results of the two studies strongly supported our hypothesis that the relationship between status, group identification, and SDO would be most pronounced under threatening circumstances.

General discussion

The present results suggest that high group status does not necessarily lead to support for social inequality (i.e., high social dominance orientation), a possibility that has not been fully tested. Whereas previous research has identified a positive causal relationship between group status and the tendency to endorse group-based hierarchies (Guimond et al., 2003; Schmitt et al., 2003), we demonstrated that attitudes toward social inequality are also responsive to the current perceived social structure. Specifically, for those who are highly identified with their group, positive attitudes toward social inequality are engendered by a combination of high group status and high intergroup threat, whereas low intergroup threat removes the need to dominate others. In addition, our findings provide further evidence that SDO can fluctuate in response to different situations (Lehmiller & Schmitt, 2006; Schmitt et al., 2003) – specifically, that group members' SDO scores can increase as a function of motives to preserve the ingroup's position (Morrison & Ybarra, 2008). Thus, by using SDO as a dependent measure, this research sheds more light on the question of how support for social inequality arises in the first place.

Importantly, our results demonstrate that perceptions of relative group status are a better predictor of anti-egalitarian responses to threat than are actual status differences (see Levin, 2004). In particular, although in Study 1 we found no effect of high-status (Republican) versus low-status (Democratic) political party membership on the observed results, there was an effect of *perceived* group status. The present research suggests that highly identified members of low-status groups can in fact exhibit lower SDO scores following a threat. However, this is especially true for those low-status group members who believe that the status differences are substantial, or whose subordinate position is made salient (see Huang & Liu, 2005; Levin, 1996).

To our knowledge, the present studies are the first to show that the previously obtained relationship between intergroup threat, group identification, and attitudes toward group-based inequality (Morrison & Ybarra, 2008) depends at least in part on group status.

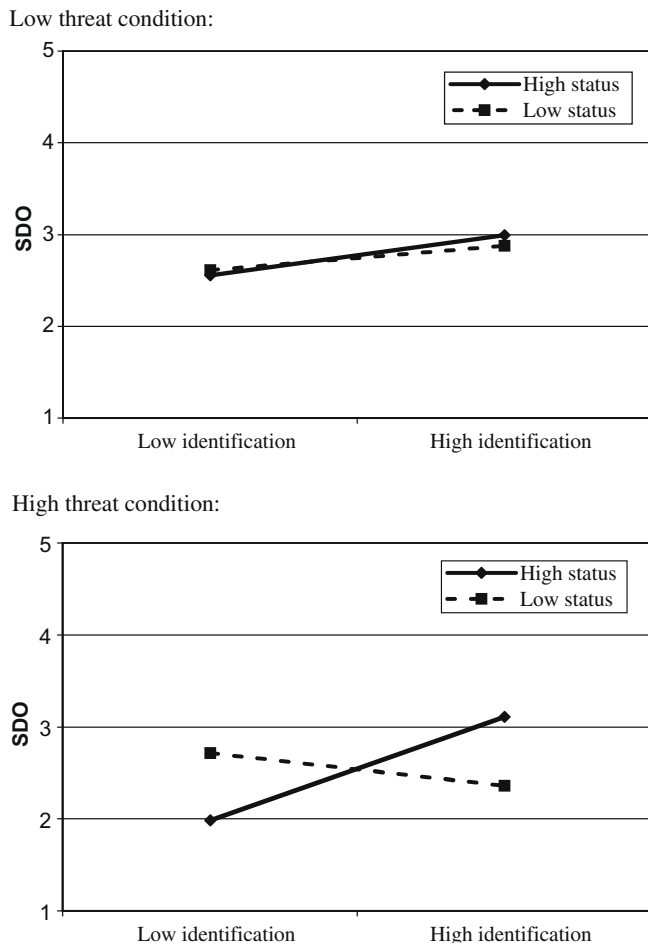


Fig. 2. SDO as a function of threat condition (high vs. low), status condition (high vs. low), and group identification (+/-1 SD), Study 2.

While our primary objective was to determine whether the status-SDO relationship among highly identified group members is most pronounced in contexts involving high or low threat, our results also suggest that threatened group members are most likely to exhibit positive attitudes toward group-based dominance when they believe their group to be high in status. Future research should attempt to identify precisely why highly identified members of high-status groups are more inclined than their lower-status counterparts to respond to threat with high SDO. For example, perhaps high-status group members feel as though they have more to lose (Mullen et al., 1992; Pratto et al., 1994) or are more confident that they can quell the source of the threat.

We do not mean to suggest, however, that low-status group members simply resign themselves to their subordinate positions (i.e., are unmotivated to change the status quo) when threatened. Rather, the fact that their tolerance for social inequality does not change, and sometimes even decreases under conditions of threat, may actually be consistent with their interests. That is, because low-status group members are not at the top of the social hierarchy, they should be less predisposed toward group-based inequality if they want to improve their position in society (Jost & Thompson, 2000; Schmitt et al., 2003), especially if they identify strongly with their group (Wilson & Liu, 2003). Thus, just as high SDO is a strategic (i.e., group-serving) response to threat for those high in status, low SDO could be a strategic response to threat for those low in status.

Finally, our studies have implications for how threat, status, and attitudes toward social inequality may operate in organizations. As hinted in the example from the introduction, one possibility is that employees who are highly ranked, but who do not have complete job security (i.e., whose status within the organization is threatened), are especially likely to enforce hierarchies in their workplace. For example, they may oppose policies such as affirmative action and paid maternity leave, which serve to attenuate existing hierarchies (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Another possibility is that high-status companies facing the possibility of a merger or acquisition become more anti-egalitarian following this potential threat (see Giessner, Viki, Otten, Terry, & Tauber, 2006). These ideas should be pursued, perhaps by looking at the effects of different types of mergers (e.g., hostile versus non-hostile), the status of the organization, and level of organizational commitment on employees' support for inequality.

Conclusion

The present studies show that support for social inequality does not always increase in response to high group status and high group identification. Rather, support for inequality also depends on levels of perceived threat. Our results suggest that simply decreasing the relative authority or resources of highly identified, high-status group members may not be the most effective strategy to restore group-based equality. In such cases, it is likely that these group members will become less, rather than more, egalitarian. In the same way, high status does not always translate into higher levels of support for dominance and inequality. When high-status group members are not threatened, they feel less motivated to actively preserve their place in the social hierarchy, even if they identify strongly with the ingroup. Thus, in addition to focusing on how to reduce status-based differences between groups, researchers may also want to identify ways of alleviating the salience and impact of potential threats.

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