

When the Black Sheep Is Not So «Black»: Social Comparison as a Standard for Ingroup Evaluation in Classrooms*

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QUANDO LA PECORA NERA NON È COSÌ «NERA»:
IL CONFRONTO SOCIALE COME STANDARD
PER LA VALUTAZIONE DELL'INGROUP NEL CONTESTO CLASSE

ABSTRACT

Previous research (Marques & Levine, 2016) suggests that the black sheep effect refers to the tendency of people to evaluate ingroup deviants members more negatively than outgroup deviants members. School students (N = 60) evaluated negative and positive performances attributed respectively to ingroup and outgroup members (unfavorable comparison) and negative performances attributed to both ingroup and outgroup members (neutral comparison). Results show that negative performances from ingroup members are less devaluated

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in the unfavorable comparisons condition than in the neutral comparisons condition and this effect is moderated by identification with their own school. Moreover, results show that in the unfavorable comparison condition students perceived a greater threat to their social identity than in the neutral comparison condition. The implications of these results are discussed in relation to the black sheep categorization and ingroup bias in a school context.

Keywords: Black sheep effect, Ingroup bias, Multiple perspectives, Social comparison, Social identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Black Sheep Effect (BSE) is a well-known phenomenon that refers to the tendency of members of a group to judge unlikeable ingroup members more negatively compared to unlikable outgroup members (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988; Marques, Robalo, & Rocha, 1992; Marques & Paez, 1994). The first evidence of the BSE was observed by Marques *et al.* (1988, Study 1) who asked Belgians students to judge either a Belgian or a North African student using a questionnaire: when described as favorable (a qualified or likeable Belgian student), the Belgian target was rated more positively than the North African target, showing typical ingroup favoritism (e.g., Tajfel, 1970; Billig & Tajfel, 1973). However, when described as unfavorable (an unqualified or unlikeable Belgian student), a reverse pattern occurred and the Belgian target was rated more negatively than the North African target. These results contradict several findings on the polarization of favorable judgments toward ingroup and outgroup members. In fact, Linville and Jones (1980) previously showed that when a group member exhibits negative behaviors, evaluation of outgroup targets might be more extreme or harsh than ingroup targets (complexity-extreme hypothesis). In their study, the poor performance of a (white) target ingroup member was rated better than the poor performance of a (black) outgroup target: the outgroup unqualified targets were rated more negatively than ingroup unqualified targets indicating typical ingroup favoritism (Feldman, 1972; Linville & Jones, 1980). This result supports the complexity-extreme hypothesis (Linville, 1982) according to which a more complex ingroup schema would attenuate the extreme judgments about ingroup members and vice versa for the less complex schema of the outgroup.

From this early evidence, a large part of the literature on intergroup bias (for review, see Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002) has investigated those factors that predict a leniency effect toward ingroup deviant members or a

negative ingroup bias – studies that might help to account for the seemingly contradictory findings.

In the literature on BSE, derogation of unlikeable ingroup members is a cognitive-motivational strategy to distance group members who negatively contribute to social identity. For this reason it could be considered a sophisticated form of ingroup favoritism (Marques *et al.*, 1988). Since unfavorable members have a negative influence on a group's social identity, distancing him may be a way to restore the positive image of the group and also improve the self-esteem derived from group membership.

According to the *Subjective Group Dynamics* model (SGD; Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Hogg, 2001; Pinto, Marques, Levine, & Abrams, 2010), the extreme differentiation between normative ingroup members and deviant ingroup members is determined by the desire to guarantee the ingroup's positive distinctiveness. People devalue deviant ingroup members and upgrade normative members in comparison to similar outgroup members when ingroup norms or values are undermined in a social context (Marques, Abrams, & Serodio, 2001) or when an unfavorable intergroup comparison exists (Pinto, Marques, & Guilherme, 2012). In line with this view Rullo, Presaghi and Livi (2015) have reported also stronger activation (arousal) at physiological level in BSE that could reflect the struggle between the choice to react to ingroup deviancy and the choice to respect the prescriptive norm of group. Nevertheless, when the negative ingroup member is compared to a positive outgroup member (an unfavorable comparison) and the group's value is undermined, people may be motivated to reduce the negative comparison reducing the devaluation in order to restore a positive intergroup differentiation (Marques, Paez, & Abrams, 1998). In the present article, we aim to understand if the intensity of the black sheep is higher when the ingroup is compared with a negative outgroup more than when is compared with a positive outgroup. We suggest that the comparison between a negative ingroup member and a positive outgroup member represents such a strong social identity threat for ingroup members that prefer to protect, and not derogate, the negative ingroup member.

2. SOCIAL IDENTITY THREAT AND INTERGROUP COMPARISON

Social comparison between groups represents an important way to achieve a positive ingroup identity through members' tendency to differentiate between groups – a process that reflects a kind of a «social competition» (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

For example, social competition for positive identity between two groups reflects the desire of members to positively differentiate themselves from others

more than to have an overall positive value (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979). In fact, the positive or negative value of group membership is intrinsically related both to social comparison and thus also to a positive social identity. In this sense, the presence of a salient intergroup situation is a key factor for investigating particular forms of intergroup bias like the black sheep effect.

The self-esteem hypothesis for intergroup discrimination (Abrams & Hogg, 1990) suggests that a low self-esteem motivates intergroup discrimination to restore a positive self-image. The findings of the studies of self-esteem hypothesis have shown contradictory results (for a review, see Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). Some researchers have clearly shown that when group members are engaged in intergroup competition, their self-esteem is enhanced, regardless of their initial level of self-esteem (Hunter, Stringer, & Coleman, 1993; Hunter, Platow, Howard, & Stringer, 1996). Nevertheless, other studies demonstrate that when self-esteem is threatened it induces discrimination to restore a positive level of self-esteem (Ruttenberg, Zea, & Sigelman, 1996; Seta & Seta, 1996).

A recent study by Guilherme, Pinto, and Marques (2012) based on subjective group dynamics theory (see Marques, Paez, & Abrams, 1998; Marques *et al.*, 2001) shows that this phenomenon is observed when ingroup's positive distinctiveness is undermined by an unfavorable intergroup comparison. In their study, participants (students of psychology and educational science) were preliminary informed about discriminatory or democratic political opinions toward several minority groups as expressed by other students. Opinions were drawn from both students of the same course and from students of a different course. The authors manipulated two intergroup settings. In the first setting (threatening setting) participants were told that other students of the same course (ingroup) supported the discriminatory policy more strongly than students of the other course (outgroup). In the secure setting, participants were told that ingroup students supported less strongly the discriminatory policy compare to outgroup students. Afterwards, participants evaluated two students who had given opinions in support of a discriminatory (deviant) policy rather than a democratic policy (normative). Results showed that ingroup favoritism and the black sheep effect only occurs when ingroup's positive distinctiveness is threatened; when the distinctiveness was secure, the black sheep effect was replaced by a sort of outgroup derogation. The idea is that the extreme reactions towards deviant ingroup members were triggered by a violation of the ingroup's higher standards in comparison to an outgroup (Biernat & Manis, 1994; Vescio & Biernat, 1999; Eidelman & Biernat, 2003), especially when an ingroup's image is undermine (more negative) in relation to that of the outgroup (Marques *et al.*, 2001). This explanation suggests that an unfavorable group comparison is perceived as a

great threat for an ingroup's image, especially for relevant values linked to the comparative dimension of social identity.

On the other hand, some studies have shown that also taking a position of moral superiority (like having democratic values) allows members to feel proud of the positive image of their group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008). At the same time, a negative group image leads people to distance themselves from the threat triggered by a negative member (as in the BSE), or by the group (Ellemers, Spears, & Doojse, 1997; Spears, Doojse, & Ellemers, 1997). A consistent number of studies have demonstrated that members, who derive a large part of self-identity from its membership, are likely to be affected by threats to group values and consequently are more motivated to restore the image of the group using the BSE. In fact, studies of the black sheep effect carried out in the field reveals that this phenomenon is observed especially among highly identified group members (Branscombe, Wann, Noel, & Coleman, 1993; Castano, Paladino, Coull, & Yzerbyt, 2002).

Moreover, to the extent that group members perceive a threat to their group identity, they should react by intensifying their subjective sense of the «correctness» of the established ingroup worldview – i.e., the credibility of the assumptions on which the core of their social identification rests, along with the perceived «correctness» of shared ingroup opinions and points of view. This is commonly achieved by different identity management and protection strategies such as, for instance, through intensification of group members' motivational efforts that establish relatively high levels of ingroup identification (cf. Pantaleo, Miron, Ferguson, & Frankowski, 2014; see also Wright & Pantaleo, 2013). But such an identity protection function can also be achieved, perhaps more easily, by simply denying (psychologically) the multiplicity of perspectives that are usually integral to one's social surroundings, that is, by denying the correctness of other's viewpoints and perspectives. Thus, the stronger the threat, the stronger the proclivity to adopt an exclusionary attitude towards those multiple and potentially contradicting – and therefore threatening – interpretations of social reality (Pantaleo, 1997; Wicklund, 1999; Pantaleo & Wicklund, 2001; Pantaleo & Canessa, 2011). Once given the opportunity to refuse a certain pool of opinions allegedly expressed by potentially menacing others – such as, for instance, ingroup members perceived as deviants – threatened ingroup members should therefore become especially intolerant toward that multiplicity of perspectives and reject as many opinions and points of view as they can, thus reestablishing the psychological supremacy of their own (ingroup) point of view – i.e., the supremacy of their univocal social perspective.

2.1. *The present research*

In the present research, we investigated whether ingroup derogation is affected by the comparison with an outgroup. In particular, we tested the hypothesis that unfavorable comparison leads individuals to keep from derogating the negative ingroup member using a school setting. We support the idea that ingroup derogation is a strategy used by ingroup members in order to defend the overall group's image from an embarrassingly performance of an ingroup member. However when the negative performance of an ingroup member is compared with a positive performance of an outgroup member, people could prefer to reduce the ingroup derogation in order to protect a positive distinctiveness in the intergroup context. Our interest is to investigate (1) the role of an unfavourable social comparison in a real school classroom in producing a great social identity threat and (2) how group members reduce this threat protecting their negative ingroup members and restoring a positive intergroup distinctiveness. We first conducted an analysis of variance expecting stricter evaluations of ingroup performance compare to outgroup performance when both the ingroup and outgroup reported comparable poor performances (neutral comparison condition) and not when the outgroup reported more positive performance than ingroup (unfavourable comparison condition). Subsequently, we performed a regression analysis on the social comparison condition (neutral or unfavourable comparison condition) of the ingroup evaluation and tested the moderating effect of identification.

To test whether the two intergroup comparisons produce different levels of threat, we also measured the tolerance toward multiple social perspectives (Pantaleo, 1997; Wicklund, 1999; Pantaleo & Wicklund, 2001; Wicklund & Brehm, 2004; Pantaleo & Canessa, 2011), that is, the people's ability to be open to different, and even conflicting, definitions and interpretations of social reality. This measure (Pantaleo, 1997; 2002) allows us to investigate in which condition the students felt the threat was enhanced more by the incompetent ingroup member, according to their level of identification with the group. To test this hypothesis, we again used a moderated regression analysis to verify the effect of the social comparison condition of tolerance toward multiple social perspectives and the moderating role of identification.

3. PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

Sixty students in the last three years of a senior high school were recruited for this study including 25 males (41.7%) and 35 females (51.3%) (mean

age = 16.8; SD = 0.94). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two comparison conditions (27 participants in the neutral-negative condition and 33 participants in the unfavorable comparison condition) and performed the task in both target conditions (ingroup *vs.* outgroup). The order of presentation of the target conditions was counter-balanced.

The researcher explained that the study intended to investigate peer evaluations of class members who had purposed a reform in the grading system. They were also told that four anonymous students from their school had previously written three essays. The only information given about the author of the essay was the class that he belonged to, which was indicated on the first sheet to represent the target manipulation (ingroup *vs.* outgroup).

The poor quality essays and the good quality essay were randomly distributed and constituted the experimental manipulation of social comparison (neutral *vs.* unfavorable). When the essays written from ingroup and outgroup members were both of the same poor quality, the comparison condition was called, «neutral»; when the essay attributed to the ingroup member was of poor quality and the one attributed to the outgroup member was of good quality, the comparison condition was called, «unfavorable».

Two versions of poor quality essays were created and counterbalanced to recreate the different authors (from ingroup and from outgroup in the neutral condition)¹. Participants read the two manuscripts about the relationships among Italian schools, universities and employment in Italy, designed to appear as though written by a peer student because they were written in pen on sheet protocols typically used during class assignments. The poor quality versions were written with grammatical, calligraphy, and lexical errors, and the general content expressed by the manuscript was trivial («[...] I don't think is good to study literature at school, it's better to learn to use the computer [...]»). This kind of manuscript indicated a low level student while the good quality versions contained no mistakes and the ideas suggested by the student focused on the real school situation in Italy («[...] we need to have new laws that regulate the communication among schools, universities and organizations [...]»). After reading the essay, participants evaluated its quality based on different criteria such as overall quality of content, grammar and other characteristics of the essay.

To measure the intolerance among many perspectives (Pantaleo, 1997; 2002), both at the beginning and at the end of the experimental task, participants read two lists of ten opinions concerning the school organization in general and the relationship between students and teachers. Participants were told that in a previous research other students collected these opinions and were asking to delete those opinions that they perceive as «intolerable».

¹ All materials are available upon request to the corresponding author.

4. MEASURES

Essay evaluation measure. Five items were used to assess each of the two essays using a score ranging from 0 to 10. Each item asked to give a score referred to a single evaluation area: lexicon, writing, grammar, spelling and content. An example of such an item was «How would you rate the lexical in this essay?» Participants assigned a rating from 0 to 10 for each area and for each of the two essays; the average scores across all the evaluation areas was used as the dependent variable in the analyses (respectively, Cronbach $\alpha = 0.93$ and 0.94).

School identification measure. Group identification was measured using the identity scale of Mael and Ashforth (1992) to the scholar context. An example of an item was «When I talk about my school, I say 'we' rather than 'they'». Each of the six items was measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree. The overall reliability was satisfactory ($\alpha = .89$).

Multiple perspectives. «Closure to multiple perspectives» was measured via a difference score, obtained by subtracting the number of opinions participants crossed out before the task (rating the essay) from the number of opinions crossed out after the task (Pantaleo, 1997; 2002). Participants were asked to delete each opinion they considered intolerable (e.g., «Teachers are free to punish students with every means if they think is right» or «I believe that going out of school during the break, is dangerous»). Algebraic increments (or decrements) of such an index thus signaled corresponding increments (or decrements) in participants' proclivity to reject others' opinions and points of view – thus, multiple perspectives (Pantaleo, 2002). In the context of the present experiment, rejection of multiple perspectives is predicted to stem directly from unfavorable, i.e., identity-threatening, social comparisons.

5. RESULTS

5.1. *Manipulation check*

As manipulation check we perform a *t* test that showed that there no differences emerged in evaluation of the two different essays of the same poor quality ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.50$ and $M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.61$, $t(87) = .137$, $p = .89$). Another *t* test showed that the two versions were evaluated differently ($t(87) = -4.47$, $p < .001$) according to quality (good quality: $M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.17$ versus poor quality: $M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.55$).

5.2. Ingroup derogation

A correlational analysis was conducted before investigating whether identification and the manipulation of the comparison condition predicted ingroup evaluation: identification was positively and significantly associated with the ingroup member's essay evaluation ($r = 0.29, p < 0.05$), while social comparison was not significantly correlated with both ingroup evaluation and identification.

A repeated measures analysis of variance was performed in order to verify the emergence of the black sheep effect in the neutral condition using the evaluation (ingroup-outgroup) as a within-factor and the comparison condition as a between-factor. Results showed that the two way interaction was significant ($F(1.58) = 15.25, p < .001, \eta^2$ partial = 0.20). The evaluation of ingroup and outgroup essays was different according to the comparison condition; in keeping with our prediction, in the neutral comparison condition we found the classical black sheep effect. The means comparison showed that participants evaluated the negative ingroup performance significantly worse than the outgroup member performance ($M = 3.67$ for ingroup *vs.* $M = 4.67$ for outgroup). This result confirms our expected observation that the black sheep effect toward ingroup deviant members was comparable to a similar outgroup member. As already shown, in the unfavorable comparison, as expected from the manipulation, outgroup member's essays were evaluated more positively than ingroup member's essays ($M = 6.46$ for outgroup and $M = 4.23$ for ingroup).

To investigate our hypothesis that the social comparison condition predicts a more or less harsh ingroup evaluation, we compare the ingroup evaluation in the two social comparison conditions according to the degree of identification of members.

We performed a moderated regression analysis of comparison condition and identification toward ingroup evaluation using Model 1 of the process macro (Hayes, 2012). Overall the regression equation explained about 49% of the total variance ($F(1.58) = 5.90, p < 0.01$). The main effect of the identification (the moderator) on ingroup evaluation was marginally statistically significant ($b = 0.280, p < 0.08$), which was also true for the main effect of social comparison condition ($b = -0.598, p = 0.07$). More importantly, as predicted in our hypothesis, the two-way interaction effect was significant ($b = 0.911, p < 0.01$).

We investigated the interaction term with the simple slopes analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) to deconstruct and interpret the effects. The results (Figure 1) indicated that the comparison condition did not predict ingroup evaluation when identification was low ($b = 0.392, p = 0.43$), whereas when

identification was high the comparison condition significantly predicted ingroup evaluation ($b = -1.589, p < 0.05$). This confirms that in unfavorable condition (negative ingroup and positive outgroup) highly identified members give better evaluations of ingroup performance than in neutral conditions, while the social comparison did not differentiate between the ingroup evaluations among members identifying at a low level.

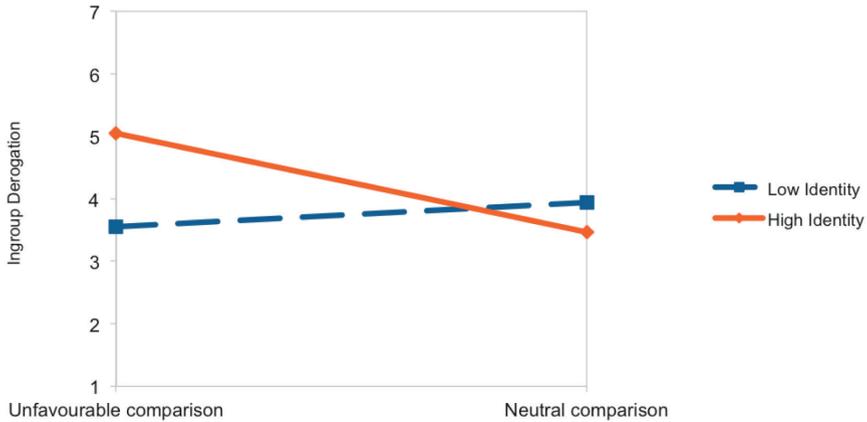


Figure 1.

The graph shows the interaction between the social comparison condition and identification in prediction of ingroup evaluation. Highly identified members tend to evaluate negative ingroup member more positive in the unfavourable condition than in neutral condition while low identified members tend to derogate negative ingroup members in both conditions.

5.3. Multiple perspectives

The second multiple regression was performed using the number of opinions deleted after the evaluation of the essay as dependent variable, that is, the operationalization of the tolerance toward multiple perspectives. The predictors were the same as introduced in the first regression, but we added the number of opinions deleted before as covariate. The main effect of identification (as moderator) was statistically significant ($b = 0.369, p < 0.05$), while the main effect of social comparison condition in this case was not significant ($b = -0.05, p = 0.88$) as was also the case for the effect of the covariate ($b = 0.932, p = 0.41$). However, the two-way interaction was barely statistically significant ($b = -0.653, p = 0.06$). In the simple slopes analysis the moderator (identification) showed a similar pattern to that observed in the previous

regression with the only exception that the simple slope effect tends to attain statistical significance only for very high or very low levels of the moderator.

More specifically, in the unfavorable comparison, we tend to observe that the number of deleted opinions is lower for members with very low levels of identification members ($b = -0.833$, $p = 0.11$), while the number of deleted opinions is higher for members with very high identification levels ($b = 1.128$, $p = 0.13$).

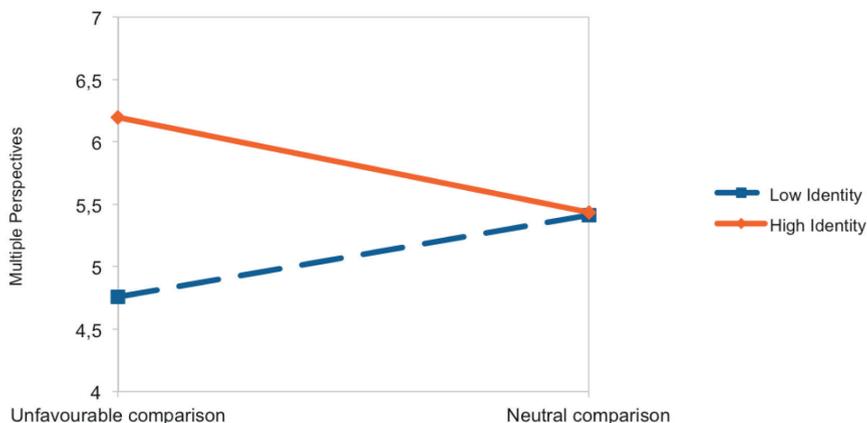


Figure 2.

The graph shows the interaction between the social comparison condition and identification in prediction of number of opinions deleted after the experimental condition. Highly identified members tend to exhibit a stronger closure to multiple perspectives compared to low identifiers in the unfavourable condition.

6. DISCUSSION

Overall, our results confirm the black sheep effect in a neutral negative comparison between ingroup and outgroup member in school context. According to Marques *et al.* (1988), the BSE could represent a strategy of group protection used by members to reduce the identity threat derived from an embarrassing performance of an ingroup member represented in our study by other classmate. Other researchers (Branscombe *et al.*, 1993; Jetten, Postmes, McAuliffe, 2002; Rullo *et al.*, 2015) suggest that highly identified members are more sensitive to the group threat because their self-esteem and self-identity is strongly related to their membership in the group.

Since intergroup positive differentiation is an important goal for members, people chose to not harshly evaluate a negative ingroup member performance as compared to a positive performance of an outgroup member. We call this condition, «unfavorable comparison», and we suggest that the desire to restore a positive image in the intergroup competition may be stronger than the desire to distance oneself from the negative ingroup member. This confirms other findings on intergroup bias (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002), especially for highly identified members. Considering one's own group superiority over others' and striving to differentiate it from a salient outgroup represents a way to increase self-confidence and derive a positive image of group membership (Brewer, 1979; Brown, 2000). Thus, when the positive intergroup differentiation is threatened, not derogating the negative ingroup member still represents an easier way to preserve the overall superiority of the ingroup compared to other groups. We argue that the derogation of a deviant member may represent a way to the «weakness» of the group, and this may be more threatening for the group's identity when an unfavorable intergroup comparison exists. Moreover, the psychological exclusion of a deviant member could lead to a reconsideration of internal dynamics among members, even though it exposes them to negative judgments of external observers who deprecate action treacherously expressed against one of its members (Van Leeuwen, Van Den Bosch, Castano, & Hopman, 2010).

Hence, these results demonstrate that the students who do not feel a high level of identification with their classroom (e.g., in an unfavorable comparison triggered by a negative performance of an ingroup member), may react by persevering in derogating other negative students of the same class in order to distance themselves from the negative assimilation with them (Biernat *et al.*, 1999). When a salient classroom identity is perceived by class members and a negative comparison with another classroom exists, group members may desire to «protect» a negative ingroup member in order to protect the overall social identity of the class.

The underlying motivation to maintain a positive ingroup identity is that people strive for a positive social identity related to self-esteem enhancement (Abrams & Hogg, 1988), and this is accomplished in those groups with positive differentiation from a relevant outgroup. As Reynolds and colleagues (2000) suggested, people show a positive ingroup bias also on negative dimensions of their group, which provide a relevant basis for self-definition in intergroup comparisons.

Nevertheless, other studies demonstrated that one of the strongest desires of people in intergroup situation is to enhance the subjective validity of the group (Frings *et al.*, 2012). In line with this finding, there are some

studies showing that deviant members who stress intergroup differences are preferred to deviant members who reduce these differences (e.g., Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Henson, 2000; Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Dougill, 2002; Hichy, Mari, & Capozza, 2008).

It is important to emphasize that optimal distinctiveness from relevant outgroups might be particularly important for low status groups compared to high status groups (Ellemers, Doosje, Van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1992). In our study, when the performance of the ingroup student was more negative than a relevant outgroup student performance, this may reflect a low status of the group.

Finally, the results about intolerance toward others viewpoints show that some circumstances are more threatening for highly identified students than for low identified students. When an embarrassing performance of an ingroup student is compared to a good performance of a salient outgroup student, this leads to the perception of an unfavorable intergroup comparison that may represent a strong social identity threat. When people are faced with a threat, they show the tendency to reject ambiguity and prefer a univocal way to read reality. One way to reduce the ambiguity and the complexity of the social environment may be to perceive that our own group is better than others' intergroup bias may therefore manifest behavior as ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination (Brewer, 1999). In this study, our aim is to confirm that the decision to favor the negative ingroup member or to derogate him or her (showing the black sheep effect) is highly related to the perception of the social identity threat posed by a negative intergroup comparison. We analyzed the tendency of students to close to multiple perspectives operationalized with different opinions expressed by other students. In the present study, students tend to tolerate or exclude the opinions collected from other students in accordance with their degree of identification with the group and to the intergroup comparison (unfavorable-neutral). They show a significant intolerance toward other's opinions when faced with a relevant identity threat and they are engaged in the group.

Hence, we aim to provide evidence that behind the preference to avoid derogation of a negative ingroup member, there could be a strong social identity threat (triggered by the unfavorable comparison) expressed by the intolerance toward the multiplicity of perspectives.

More specifically, this measure starts from the assumption that when people are confronted with insecurities, threats, and other instigators of goal-oriented thoughts and behaviors, they will also tend to show a definite preference for univocal interpretations of socially defined norms. These insecurities and threats will also affect their tolerance of the multiplicity of opinions, points of view, values, social norms, customs, and more, which are usually

embedded in other's viewpoints, or multiple social perspectives (Pantaleo, 1997; 2002; Wicklund, 1999; Pantaleo & Canessa, 2001).

Following this line of reasoning, we expected that a negative ingroup member represents a social identity threat that affects the tolerance toward ambiguity of the other group members, especially in an unfavorable comparison with an outgroup. In our opinion, this would induce group members in a psychological closure toward different opinions and points of view, which are commonly part of one's social environment, or a defensive narrowing of one's social horizons, which can be easily achieved through definite denial and firm rejection of those multiple perspectives and points of view (Pantaleo & Wicklund, 2001). We could not explicitly measure the social identity threat, but we chose to investigate this variable indirectly. Though this lack of measurement can limit the investigation of the impact that deviants members could have on group social identity, the «measurement issue» of the social identity threats is a subject already considered by other researchers who provide evidence for alternative measures such as physiological measures (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005; Scheepers, 2009; Rullo *et al.*, 2015).

As a matter of fact, the social identity threat assessment could represent a problematic topic to investigate using explicit measurements because of the assumed defensive reactions of members to indicate their state (Bettencourt, Miller, & Hume, 1999) and also because, maybe, they might not be aware of the threat that occurs (Blascovich & Mendes, 2000).

In conclusion, over limitations concerning the small simple size, our study confirm the role of a social identity threat in the manifestation of the black sheep effect or of a positive ingroup bias, confirming the motivational explanation behind these phenomenon. Moreover, this study suggest the importance to use real social categories acting in real contexts in order to test the validity of theories and experimental procedures generally used in social psychology.

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RIASSUNTO

Ricerche recenti hanno dimostrato come il «black sheep effect» sia una tendenza a giudicare più severamente un membro deviante che appartiene allo stesso gruppo di chi giudica piuttosto che un membro deviante appartenente ad un gruppo diverso. La presente ricerca

ha come obiettivo quello di analizzare il ruolo del confronto sociale e dell'identificazione sociale sulle valutazioni negative attribuite a membri dell'ingroup utilizzando come contesto di riferimento quello scolastico. Un campione di studenti di scuola superiore (N = 60) ha valutato le performances negative attribuite ai proprio compagni di classe confrontate con performances positive (confronto sociale sfavorevole) e performances negative (confronto sociale paritario) attribuite ad alunni appartenenti a classi diverse. I risultati hanno dimostrato che le performances negative attribuite ai compagni di classe dei partecipanti, venivano valutate molto peggio quando confrontate con quelle positive attribuite ad alunni di classi diverse; se invece confrontate con performances altrettanto negative attribuite ad alunni di altre classi, quelle attribuite ai propri compagni di classe erano giudicate meno negativamente. Inoltre nella condizione di confronto sociale sfavorevole, i risultati sulla tendenza dei partecipanti a sfavorire l'apertura ad una moltitudine di prospettive, hanno indicato che un confronto sfavorevole è percepito come più socialmente minaccioso di un confronto paritario. Le implicazioni di questi risultati sono state discusse in relazione alle evidenze già ampiamente discusse in letteratura sul «black sheep effect» e sulle conseguenze di bias intergruppi nei contesti scolastici.

Parole chiave: Black sheep effect, Confronto sociale, Identità sociale, In-group bias, Prospettive multiple.

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