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The Group as a Resource: Reducing Biased Attributions for Group Success and Failure via Group Affirmation

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Self-affirmation theory proposes that people can respond to threats to the self by affirming alternative sources of self-integrity, resulting in greater openness to self-threatening information. The present research examines this at a group level by investigating whether a group affirmation (affirming an important group value) increases acceptance of threatening group information among sports teams and fans. In Study 1, athletes exhibited a group-serving attributional bias, which was eliminated by the group affirmation. In Study 2, the most highly identified fans exhibited the most bias in terms of their attributions, and this bias was eliminated by the group affirmation. These studies suggest that groups can serve as resources from which people can draw in response to threatening group events.

Keywords: attributional bias; fans, identification; self-affirmation; social identity

The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat occur in many instances, both for the members of a group and for people who share a social identification with that group. When the Apollo 11 crew landed on the moon in 1969, both the crew and the rest of America rejoiced, and when the space shuttle Challenger exploded in 1986, Americans mourned for the crew. When the Boston Red Sox won the World Series in 2004, fans throughout New England celebrated with them, just as they had felt the brunt of their failure in the many years when they had lost. Despite the many differences between members and supporters of a group, both share a common social identification (Hogg, 2003). When people are identified with a group, they tend to favor and defend that group, for example, allocating more resources to their groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and making attributions that reflect positively on their groups (Lau & Russell, 1980). People defend the group, in large part, because important groups are seen as part of the self (Tropp & Wright, 2001). Although being a member of a group can lead to defensiveness on behalf of that group, we argue that one's group can also serve as a psychological resource from which one can draw to confront information that is potentially threatening to the self and the group. Using self-affirmation theory as a framework (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988), we examine whether affirming values central to a group can reduce group-serving judgments analogous to the way affirming

values central to the self can reduce self-serving judgments (Sherman & Cohen, 2002).

Self-Affirmation and Defensive Biases

A great deal of research and theorizing suggest that individuals are motivated to maintain favorable self-views (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1992; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tesser, 1988). This motive and its impact on behavior become apparent when people's positive self-views are threatened. Under these circumstances, people often psychologically defend against the threat, for example, by invalidating threatening information, derogating the source of the threat, or explaining away failures. These defensive biases can be effective at protecting and maintaining a positive self-view, but they can pose costs for the individual if they lessen the probability that the person will learn from potentially important information.

Self-affirmation theory (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988) proposes an alternative way in which people can respond to threats to the self. Self-affirmation theory posits that people are motivated to maintain the perceived integrity of the self. Integrity can be defined as the sense that, on the whole, one is a good and worthy person. Standards of integrity are unique to each individual and can include, for example, the importance of being intelligent, being a good friend, having a sense of humor, and exerting control over important outcomes. According to self-affirmation theory, people can restore self-integrity in response to a threat by affirming alternative self-resources unrelated to the provoking threat. Such "self-affirmations" include reflecting on important aspects of one's self—affirmational resources—that are unrelated to the threat, or engaging in an activity that makes these important aspects salient.

Whereas defensive psychological adaptations directly address the threatening information, self-affirmation allows people to focus on domains of self-integrity unrelated to the threat. When self-affirmed in this manner, people have less need to distort or reconstrue the provoking threat and can respond to the threatening information in a more open and even-handed manner (Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Steele, 1988). Several studies demonstrate that people who have an opportunity to affirm the self are more accepting and less defensive in response to the threatening information (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000; Correll, Spencer, & Zanna, 2004; Reed & Aspinwall, 1998; Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000).

Most self-affirmations used in social psychology studies have featured affirmation of individual values, such as being religious, politically minded, or socially conscious. Self-affirmations are typically ideographic in that people first indicate their most personally important value, and then they are given the opportunity either to write an essay about it or to complete a scale or exercise that allows them to assert its importance (McQueen & Klein, 2006; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). These affirmation exercises make salient additional psychological resources on which people can draw. This conceptualization of psychological resources is consistent with the work of Hobfoll (1989) and his model of how people respond to stressful and threatening situations. He defined resources as "those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, and energies" (p. 516). The notion of *affirmational resources* was introduced by Steele, Spencer, and Lynch (1993) as a description of the assets that are situationally activated by a self-affirmation and that, in turn, enable people to confront self-threatening information nondefensively. In the current research, we extend self-affirmation theory by examining whether group affirmations, or affirmations of values important to one's group, can serve as resources upon which individuals can draw when they experience group-threatening events.

Collective Threat and Group Affirmation

Social identities, including affiliations with groups such as sports teams or other organizations and memberships in gender, ethnic, and nationality groups, are important sources of individuals' identities (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Deaux, 1996; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Research from a wide range of studies suggests that there are conceptual similarities between the collective self and the individual self (Gaertner, Sedikides, Vevea, & Iuzzini, 2002; see Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002 for a review). Studies featuring connectionist models that show a direct link between representations of the self and representations of one's group suggest that the self and important groups are overlapping cognitive constructs (Smith & Henry, 1996). People are therefore motivated to maintain the integrity not only of the individual self but also of their social identities (e.g., Harvey & Oswald, 2000). People defend against threats to their social identities even when these events do not directly implicate their personal self (e.g., even when the threat involves the behavior of another group member rather than one's own behavior; Cohen & Garcia, 2005; Norton, Monin, Cooper, & Hogg, 2003). Moreover, group-serving biases are particularly strong among individuals who are highly identified with their group (Castano, Yzerbyt, Bourguignon, & Seron, 2002).

Two recent studies with members of intramural sports teams as participants demonstrated that people who are given an opportunity to self-affirm exhibit reduced group-serving biases (Sherman & Kim, 2005). After playing

a game that their team either won or lost, participants completed a self-affirmation task in which they filled out a values scale concerning either their most important value or a relatively unimportant value. They then reported their attributions for the outcome of the game by estimating the extent to which their personal performance and their team's play and teamwork contributed to the outcome of the game. Overall, the athletes exhibited both self- and group-serving attributional biases. That is, winners thought that both their personal performance and their team's performance contributed to their team's victory to a greater extent than losers thought that their personal performance and their team's performance contributed to their team's defeat. Both self- and group-serving biases, however, were eliminated among those who completed an individual self-affirmation (Sherman & Kim, 2005). Individual self-affirmations also lead people to be less defensive in response to collective identity threats in other domains, such as threats to their patriotic beliefs (Cohen et al., in press) or information that the ingroup benefited from racism (Adams, Tormala, & O'Brien, 2006).

These studies demonstrated that when faced with social identity threat, affirmations of the individual self could reduce group-serving judgments. In the current research we examined whether affirmations of the collective self can reduce group-serving judgments. This possibility is consistent with the notion of social creativity proposed in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see Hinkle, Taylor, Fox-Cardamone, & Ely, 1998, for a review). Individuals can respond to a threatened social identity along a particular dimension by emphasizing (or in our terms, "affirming") the importance of alternative dimensions to restore the positive distinctiveness of their group. Indeed, numerous studies have demonstrated that people engage in this process. For example, when making potentially threatening intergroup comparisons, members of lower status groups tend to spontaneously emphasize the importance of traits other than those on which the higher status group is consensually superior (e.g., Lalonde, 1992; Spears & Manstead, 1989). Moreover, individuals who are outnumbered by the outgroup and emphasize the ingroup's positive dimensions are more confident and less likely to fear failure (Derks, van Laar, & Ellemers, 2006).

In the current experiments, we built on and extended prior research on social creativity in three ways. First, we experimentally provided individuals with the opportunity to affirm their group rather than rely on individual differences in participants' propensity to engage spontaneously in affirmation (cf. Spears & Manstead, 1989). Second, we compared the effects of individual and group affirmations within the same studies to facilitate interpretation of how these processes are similar and different. Third, the process of group affirmation presented here does not involve social comparison processes. Rather than observing whether a negatively distinctive group bolsters the ingroup on other dimensions (e.g., Hinkle et al., 1998; Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish, & Hodge, 1996; Lalonde, 1992) or experimentally bolstering a group's beliefs that it performs well in another domain, as has been done in recent social creativity research (e.g., Derks et al., 2006), we merely facilitated participants' affirmation of values important to them or to their group, values that do not necessarily involve social comparison with an outgroup.

We hypothesized that engaging in a group affirmation would reduce defensiveness among individuals exposed to a potential collective threat, that is, a threat to their group. To the extent both that one's group is an important part of the self and that the self and the group are highly connected constructs (Smith & Henry, 1996), people should be able to use the group as a resource to confront collective threats in analogous manner as they use the self as a resource to confront individual threats (Steele, 1988).

Whereas most studies of self-affirmation theory have focused on affirmations of individual values or personal characteristics, a recent set of studies by Hoshino-Browne et al. (2005) examined the efficacy of a more interdependent self-affirmation in which people wrote about an important family value. As predicted, the interdependent affirmation reduced dissonance-motivated rationalization when East Asian participants made a choice for a friend, whereas the independent self-affirmation did not. In addition, Hoshino-Brown et al. found that whereas the interdependent self-affirmations were effective among participants who had an interdependent self-concept (e.g., Asian Canadians), they were not effective among participants with a more independent self-concept (e.g., European Canadians). In terms of the present research, these findings suggest both that a group affirmation may be most effective at reducing group-serving biases and that a self-affirmation may be most effective at reducing self-serving biases, which we examine in Study 1. Furthermore, these findings suggest that there may be individual differences in the effectiveness of a group affirmation, an issue we examine by assessing identification with the group in Study 2.

Overview

In the present research, we examined the effectiveness of a group affirmation on self- and group-serving judgments among participants who were partially responsible for a favorable or unfavorable group outcome (Study 1) and among participants who were not directly responsible but who shared the social identity with those who were responsible for the group outcome (Study 2). We

also tested the moderating role of group identification in Study 2. We hypothesized that affirming values important to one's group could reduce group-serving judgments (Studies 1 and 2), particularly among individuals who are highly identified with the group (Study 2).

We chose to examine these processes in the domain of sports. Sports teams provide many useful features for studying group-serving judgments. First, social identification is meaningful, as individuals identified with sports teams are motivated to view them positively (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1976). Teams also experience clear outcomes of victory and defeat that can serve to threaten or bolster social identity. Moreover, previous research has established that in this context, members of teams are group serving in their attributions for the outcomes of their games, attributing victory more than defeat to internal team factors (Lau & Russell, 1980; Sherman & Kim, 2005). Thus, we conducted two field studies in the domain of sports to examine the role of group affirmations and self-affirmations in attenuating group-serving and self-serving biases.

STUDY 1

Study 1 provides an initial exploration of the potential efficacy of group affirmation in reducing group-serving attributions in the collective context of team sports competition.

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 115 European American intramural athletes (44 women, 71 men) at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB).[1] Prior to their games, the athletes agreed to participate in the study. Each participant played either a volleyball game or a basketball game and was randomly assigned to the self-affirmation condition, the group-affirmation condition, or the no-affirmation control condition before making attributions for the outcome of the game. This study was therefore a 2 (game outcome: win vs. loss) × 3 (affirmation status: self-affirmation vs. group affirmation vs. no affirmation) between-subjects factorial design.

Procedure

Experimenters approached students about to play intramural volleyball or basketball and asked if they would participate in a study immediately after their game for $5. All recruiting was done before the start of the games. This first group of experimenters watched the game, at its conclusion sought out the athletes who

had earlier agreed to participate, and escorted them to a separate part of the stadium. Then, other experimenters (who were unaware of whether each team had won or lost) administered the experimental materials.

Affirmation manipulations. The affirmation manipulations were based on those used in previous research where people either write about why a central value is important to them or why an unimportant value may be important to others (see McQueen & Klein, 2006, for a review). We modified this standard procedure to develop a group-affirmation condition that would be distinct from the self-affirmation by having individuals focus on values that are central to their groups. Participants in all conditions first ranked the importance of 10 values (e.g., sense of humor, relationships with friends, religion). Participants in the self-affirmation and no-affirmation conditions ranked the importance of the values to them personally, and participants in the group-affirmation condition ranked the importance of the values to their team. Next, participants in the group-affirmation condition wrote three reasons that their top-rated team value was important to the team and one example of something the team had done to demonstrate the importance of this value. Participants in the self-affirmation condition wrote three reasons that their top-rated personal value was important to them and one example of something they had done to demonstrate the importance of this value. In contrast, participants in the no-affirmation condition wrote three reasons that their ninth most important personal value might be important to a typical college student and something that a college student might do to demonstrate the value, a standard self-affirmation control condition (McQueen & Klein, 2006).

Dependent measures. After completing the value-writing activity, participants were given the dependent measures. First, participants were provided several potential causes for the game outcome and were asked, "How much did each of the following factors contribute to your team winning/losing?" The question was phrased so that both winners and losers could assess the degree to which each potential cause contributed to the outcome of the game. Participants rated the potential causes on a scale from 1 (*did not contribute at all*) to 8 (*contributed a great deal*). The key dependent variables focused on two potential causes of the outcome of the game: (a) the participant's personal contribution, "your personal performance," and (b) the participant's team's contribution, "your teammates' performance."[2] Finally, participants indicated whether their team won or lost their game and completed demographic information. They were then debriefed, thanked for participating, and paid.

Results

Self-Serving Attributions

We conducted a 2 (game outcome: win vs. loss) × 3 (affirmation status: self-affirmation vs. group affirmation vs. no affirmation) ANOVA to test the hypothesis that the self-affirmation and the group affirmation would attenuate the self-serving bias of attributing a win, more than a loss, to one's personal performance. There was no main effect of affirmation condition, $F(2, 109) = 2.09$, $p = .13$. There was a marginal main effect of game outcome, with winners ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 1.57$) on average attributing the outcomes of the game to a greater extent to their own performances than losers ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.37$), $F(1, 109) = 2.87$, $p = .09$. This was qualified, however, by the predicted interaction between affirmation status and game outcome, $F(2, 109) = 2.91$, $p = .059$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. As can be seen in Figure 1 (top), simple effects tests revealed that in the no-affirmation condition, winners made more attributions to their personal performance ($M = 5.86$, $SD = 1.77$) to a greater extent than did losers ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.30$), $t(34) = 2.34$, $p = .02$. This self-serving bias was eliminated by the self-affirmation, as winners ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 1.38$) and losers ($M = 6.07$, $SD = .70$) did not differ in their attributions, $t(38) = 1.01$, $p = .32$. Importantly, engaging in a group affirmation also reduced the self-serving bias, with winners ($M = 6.06$, $SD = 1.54$) and losers in this condition making similar attributions to personal performance ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.54$), $t(37) = 1.05$, $p = .30$.

Did the self-affirmation have a stronger effect than the group affirmation on increasing the attributions to the self after defeat? To examine this, we conducted a weighted contrast on losing participants, where 1 = *self-affirmation condition*, −1 = *group-affirmation condition*, and 0 = *no-affirmation condition*. Although the self-affirmation appeared more successful at reducing the self-serving bias than the group affirmation, the contrast was not significant, $t(48) = 1.26$, $p = .21$. In sum, self-affirmations and group affirmations did not differentially affect the attributions to the self for defeat.

Group-Serving Attributions

We conducted a 2 (game outcome: win vs. loss) × 3 (affirmation status: self-affirmation vs. group affirmation vs. no affirmation) ANOVA to test the hypothesis that the self-affirmation and group affirmation would attenuate the group-serving attributional bias. There was no main effect of affirmation status, $F(2, 109) = .94$, $p = .40$. There was a large main effect of game outcome, as participants overall exhibited a group-serving bias, with winners ($M = 7.31$, $SD = .87$) attributing the outcome of the game to team factors to a greater
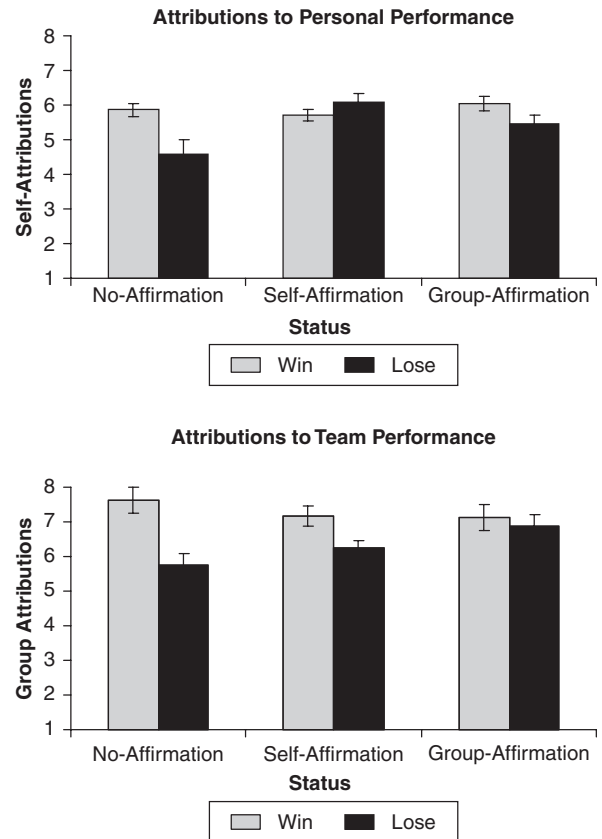

Figure 1   Effect of affirmation status and game outcome on attributions to personal performance (top) and team performance (bottom) in Study 1.

extent than losers ($M = 6.35$, $SD = 1.29$) $F(1, 109) = 27.10$, $p < .001$. This main effect was qualified by the hypothesized interaction, $F(2, 109) = 5.72$, $p = .004$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$. As can be seen in Figure 1 (bottom), in the no-affirmation condition, winners ($M = 7.62$, $SD = .81$) attributed the outcomes of the games to the team to a greater extent than did losers ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 1.49$), $t(34) = 4.91$, $p < .001$. This group-serving bias was considerably reduced, although still statistically significant, in the self-affirmation condition, as the gap between winners ($M = 7.17$, $SD = .87$) and losers ($M = 6.27$, $SD = 1.10$) was attenuated, $t(38) = 2.98$, $p = .01$.[3] Importantly, the group-serving bias was eliminated by the group affirmation, with the gap between winners ($M = 7.11$, $SD = .90$) and losers ($M = 6.86$, $SD = 1.11$) becoming nonsignificant, $t(37) = .77$, $p = .44$.

Did the group affirmation have a stronger effect than the self-affirmation on increasing the attributions to the group after defeat? To examine this, we conducted a weighted contrast on those who lost the game, where 1 = *group-affirmation condition*, -1 = *self-affirmation condition*, and 0 = no-affirmation condition. Although

the group affirmation appeared more successful than the self-affirmation at increasing attributions to the group, this contrast was not significant, $t(48) = 1.42$, $p = .16$. In sum, the self-affirmation and group affirmation did not differentially affect the attributions to the group for defeat.

Self Versus Group Values

Prior research has found that the effects of self-affirmation are not dependent on the value participants write about in their affirmation essays (Fein & Spencer, 1997). However, because the present investigation is the first study to examine a group affirmation in addition to a self-affirmation, we examined whether participants in the different conditions wrote about different values, and if so, whether this could have introduced a confound to explain the differential effects of the self-affirmation and group affirmation. To test for differences in value rankings as a function of affirmation condition, we used a Pearson chi-square to determine whether the affirmation condition predicted which value was ranked as most important. The value ranked as most important did significantly differ as a function of affirmation condition, both when comparing across the three conditions, $\chi^2(12, N = 115) = 31.36$, $p = .002$, and when comparing just the self- and group-affirmation conditions, $\chi^2(5, N = 79) = 18.00$, $p = .003$. The value rated as most important in both the self-affirmation and no-affirmation conditions was *relations with friends* and the value rated as most important in the group affirmation condition was *physical fitness/health*.

Given that the self- and group-affirmation manipulations involved writing about different values, we sought to rule out the possibility that something about writing about these particular values could explain the results. We identified one value that was rated as the most important value by many participants in all affirmation conditions (relations with friends) and reanalyzed the data only on the subset of participants who endorsed this value as most important to them or their team. Observing the same basic pattern of results would suggest that no confound was introduced by participants writing about different values in the self- and group-affirmation conditions.

Regarding self-serving attributions, we observed the predicted interaction between affirmation status and game outcome on attributions to personal performance, $F(2, 50) = 5.70$, $p = .006$, partial $\eta^2 = .19$. Simple effects tests revealed that in the no-affirmation condition, winners made attributions to their personal performance ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 1.56$) to a greater extent than did losers ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.28$), $t(18) = 2.50$, $p = .02$. The self-affirmation eliminated this self-serving bias, as winners ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 1.50$) and losers ($M = 6.22$, $SD = .67$)

did not differ in their attributions, $t(17) = .93$, $p = .37$. Engaging in a group affirmation did not reduce the self-serving bias, with winners ($M = 6.67$, $SD = 1.50$) making attributions to their personal performance to a greater extent than losers ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.08$), $t(14) = 3.36$, $p = .005$. We conducted the same weighted contrast as reported previously for those who lost the game, where $1 = group\text{-}affirmation$ *condition,* $-1 = self\text{-}affirmation$ *condition,* and $0 = no\text{-}affirmation$ *condition.* This contrast was significant, $t(24) = 3.63$, $p = .001$, indicating that the self-affirmation was more successful than the group affirmation at increasing the attributions to the self after defeat.

Regarding group-serving attributions, we observed the predicted interaction between affirmation status and game outcome on attributions to team performance, $F(2, 50) = 7.28$, $p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .23$. Simple effects tests in the no-affirmation condition revealed that winners attributed the outcome of the game to the team ($M = 7.92$, $SD = .29$) to a greater extent than did losers ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.49$), $t(18) = 6.19$, $p < .001$. The self-affirmation reduced this group-serving bias, as the gap between winners ($M = 7.36$, $SD = .81$) and losers ($M = 6.11$, $SD = 1.27$) was attenuated, $t(17) = 2.99$, $p = .01$. Importantly, the group affirmation eliminated the group-serving bias, with the gap between winners ($M = 6.67$, $SD = 1.21$) and losers ($M = 6.70$, $SD = 1.06$) becoming nonsignificant, $t(15) = .06$, $p = .96$. We conducted the same weighted contrast as reported previously on those who lost the game, where $1 = group\text{-}affirmation$ *condition,* $-1 = self\text{-}affirmation$ *condition,* and $0 = no\text{-}affirmation$ *condition.* This contrast was not significant, $t(24) = 1.01$, $p = .32$, indicating that the group affirmation did not differ from the self-affirmation at increasing attributions to the group for defeat.

In sum, even when the participants wrote about the same value, the effects of the affirmation differed as a function of whether it was written from the perspective of the self or the group. When they wrote about relations with friends from the perspective of the self, it attenuated the self- and group-serving attributional biases. When they wrote about relations with friends from the perspective of the group, it attenuated the group-serving attributional bias.

Discussion

Study 1 demonstrated that affirming the values of a group to which one belongs reduces defensive biases in response to threats to social identity. These findings support the notion that a relevant group identity can serve as an affirmational resource in response to group threat. Because the self and important groups are highly overlapping constructs (Smith, Coats, & Walling, 1999), values important to the group could serve an analogous function as values important to the self when people confront a group threat.

The effectiveness of a group affirmation, then, should depend on the level of identification with one's group, that is, the extent to which individuals see the self and the group as overlapping constructs (Tropp & Wright, 2001). Therefore, group identification may be a necessary condition for a group to serve as an affirmational resource. In Study 2, we examined this identification hypothesis directly in a sample of sports fans attending collegiate sporting events.

STUDY 2

Fans, who are not directly responsible for the outcome of a game but nevertheless share the social identity with the team, provide an opportunity to examine the role of social identification in moderating the effects on group affirmation. These social identities can have a large effect to the extent that people see the group as an important part of the self (Ellemers et al., 2002). For example, one study found that fans experienced team success as personal success; that is, after their teams won a game, fans thought they personally would have greater success at various tasks such as motor skills than after their team's loss (Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992). Fans, to the extent they identify with a team, treat winning and losing as if they were players—even showing increases in testosterone when their team wins and decreases when their team loses (Bernhardt, Dabbs, Fielden, & Lutter, 1998)—despite the only ties being their social identification with the group.

Two strategies identified in the literature for dealing with defeat of one's group are (a) to distance oneself from the group, which has been termed "CORF-ing" (cutting off reflected failure; Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986) or (b) to deny responsibility for the defeat via a biased attributional process (Lau & Russell, 1980; Sherman & Kim, 2005). Whether one CORFs or denies responsibility via attributions varies as a function of identification with the group (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). That is, CORFing in response to group failure is more common for relatively unidentified than relatively identified group members because it is less costly to distance oneself from the group when the group is less central to the self (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). However, among highly identified individuals, CORFing is less likely because the group is seen as part of the self (Tropp & Wright, 2001). Consequently, individuals who are highly identified are less likely to cut themselves off from the group following a negative group outcome. Consider again the Boston Red Sox fans who stuck with their team through the decades of failure, misery, and disappointment from 1918 until they won in 2004. Individuals who are highly identified with

their groups may even reinforce their identification with their groups following negative group outcomes (e.g., McCoy & Major, 2003). Because highly identified individuals are unable or unwilling to detach from the group to protect their self-views following negative group outcomes, they may be more likely to protect the esteem of the group via an attributional process, denying collective responsibility for failure.

Thus, we predicted that identification would moderate the extent to which people are (a) biased in favor of their group and (b) buffered by the group affirmation. We hypothesized that the highly identified group members would be more apt to defend the group in the absence of an affirmation. Yet, because the group is more central to highly identified group members, it can better serve as an affirmational resource from which they could draw when confronting the potentially threatening group information. By contrast, we hypothesized that the low-identified group members would be less biased in the absence of affirmation and less buffered by the group affirmation.

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 104 European American fans (63 women, 41 men) of the UCSB (the Gauchos) men's and women's basketball teams who were seated in the UCSB fans' section of the stadium at regular-season intercollegiate games. We measured participants' identification before their watching either a men's or women's regular-season basketball game and randomly assigned them to either a self-affirmation condition, a group-affirmation condition, or a no-affirmation control condition.[4] The study therefore featured a 2 (game outcome: winners vs. losers) × 3 (affirmation status: self-affirmation vs. group affirmation vs. no affirmation) × continuous (identification) design.

Procedure

Experimenters approached fans outside the stadium doors before the games started and asked if they would participate in a study immediately after the game for $5. Because few fans arrive at these games before they begin, it was necessary to recruit some participants after the games had begun. We elected to recruit these participants outside the stadium (the side where the UCSB fans were entering) so that they would not yet know how the team was performing, and we ceased recruiting at halftime. During recruitment, the experimenters assigned participant numbers.

During recruitment, the experimenters assessed the participants' identification with the UCSB team with a single item adapted from the Centrality subscale of Luhtanen and Crocker's (1992) Collective Self-Esteem Scale, "The UCSB

team is an important reflection of who I am." This item was measured on a 1 to 8 scale, anchored at *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*. We chose a single-item measure of identification because of the time constraints imposed by recruiting participants before the start of the game. To examine the validity of the single-item measure of identification, we ran a pilot study. We asked 122 participants from UCSB to complete a validated sports fan identification scale (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) as well as the single-item measure employed in Study 2. The two measures of identification were highly correlated, $r(122) = .58$, $p < .001$, demonstrating convergent validity of our measure.

At the conclusion of the game, experimenters sought out the fans who had agreed to participate and assembled them in groups in the stadium bleachers. Then they administered the experimental materials, which were matched to the pretest identification using participant numbers. Although experimenters were aware of the teams' win or loss, the experimental material packets were assembled so that experimenters were unaware of affirmation condition.

Affirmation manipulations. The affirmation manipulations were similar to those in Study 1, with two exceptions. First, in this study we framed the group affirmation in terms of UCSB students rather than in terms of the team. This was because the fans did not presumably know the team members' values, and we hypothesized that the group that would serve as the affirmational resource for fans would be the university rather than the team itself. Second, we modified the no-affirmation control condition. Rather than writing about an unimportant value in this study, participants in the control condition proceeded immediately to the dependent variables after reading the consent form.

Dependent measures. After completing the value-writing activity, participants were given the dependent measures. First, participants were asked to indicate what team UCSB had played, who won, and what the score was. Next, participants were provided several potential causes for the game outcome and asked, "How much did each of the following factors contribute to your team winning/losing?" as in Study 1. In this study, the key dependent variable focused on the team, "the UCSB team's performance."[5] Finally, participants completed demographic information. They were then debriefed, thanked for participating, and paid.

Results

We hypothesized that engaging in a self-affirmation or a group affirmation would attenuate group-serving attributions among fans and that this effect would be greater for strongly identified rather than weakly identified fans. To test these hypotheses we regressed the attribution to team's performance on affirmation condition (self-affirmation, group affirmation, or no affirmation), game outcome (win or loss), identification (continuous), and all possible two-way and three-way interactions in a hierarchical multiple regression analysis. To prepare the categorical independent variables for analysis in regression, we dummy coded them, with loss serving as the referent for the game outcome dummy code and no-affirmation condition serving as the referent for the self-and group-affirmation dummy codes. We also centered the measure of team identification ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.84$) in preparation for analyses.

In the first step of the analysis we regressed attributions to team performance on game outcome, identification, and the two affirmation dummy codes; this step was not significant, $R^2 = .07$, $F(4, 98) = 1.70$, $p = .16$. In the second step, we added all two-way interactions to the model; this step was also nonsignificant, $R^2\Delta = .09$, $F(5, 93) = 1.90$, $p = .10$. In the third step, we added the three-way interactions for both affirmation dummy codes to the model; this step was significant, $R^2\Delta = .18$, $F(2, 91) = 11.85$, $p < .001$. The three-way interaction of identification, game outcome, and the dummy code contrasting the self-affirmation condition with the no-affirmation control condition was nonsignificant, $\beta = .12$, $t(91) = .51$, $p = .62$. However, the three-way interaction of identification, game outcome, and the dummy code contrasting the group-affirmation condition with the no-affirmation condition was significant, $\beta = -.85$, $t(91) = -4.18$, $p < .001$.[6]

We examined the nature of the significant three-way interaction by contrasting the group-serving biases in each affirmation condition at 1 *SD* above and below the mean of identification (see Figure 2 for a graph of these predicted means). At 1 *SD* above the mean (at a high level of identification), there was the expected strong group-serving bias in the no-affirmation condition, $\beta = .69$, $t(91) = 3.24$, $p = .002$. Highly identified fans attributed wins more to their team's performance than they did losses. This bias was not reduced by the individual self-affirmation, $\beta = .94$, $t(91) = 3.63$, $p < .001$, but as predicted, it was eliminated by the group affirmation, $\beta = .04$, $t(91) = .21$, $p = .83$. At 1 *SD* below the mean (at a low level of identification), there was no evidence of a group-serving bias in the no-affirmation condition, $\beta = -.26$, $t(91) = -1.37$, $p = .17$. There was also no evidence of a group-serving bias following the self-affirmation, $\beta = -.24$, $t(91) = -.90$, $p = .37$. Unexpectedly, there was evidence of a group-serving bias in the group-affirmation condition, $\beta = .72$, $t(91) = 3.45$, $p = .001$. Engaging in a group affirmation eliminated the group-serving attributional bias observed among fans
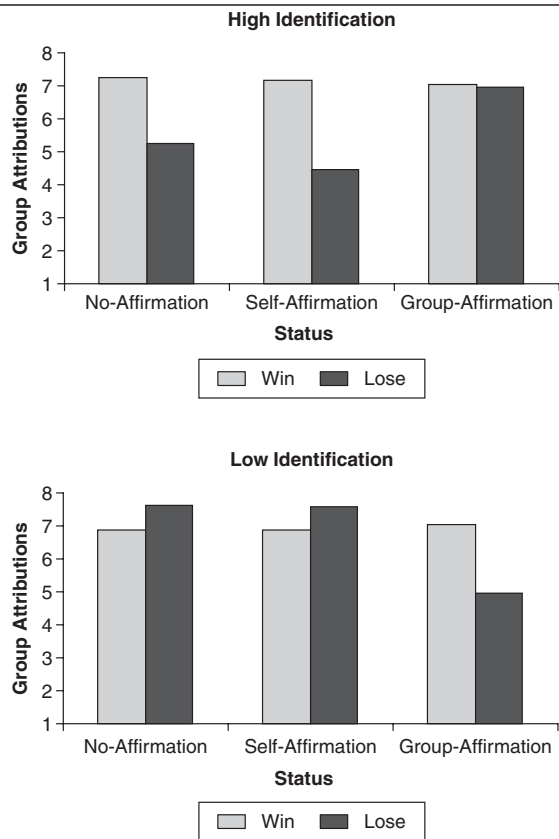
Figure 2 Effect of group identification, affirmation status, and game outcome on attributions to team factors in Study 2.
NOTE: Means are predicted at 1 *SD* above and below the mean on identification.

strongly identified with their team. By contrast, group affirmation seemed to introduce group-serving bias among fans weakly identified with their team.

Discussion

Highly identified college basketball fans were more biased in their attributions for their team's success and failure than were weakly identified college basketball fans. This pattern can be seen clearly by examining participants who received no affirmation. The strongly identified fans attributed the outcome of the game to their team's performance to a much greater extent when their team won than when their team lost. The weakly identified fans exhibited no such bias, suggesting that they CORFed (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). The group-serving bias among the highly identified group members was eliminated by the act of affirming an important alternative group value, unrelated to sports. Fans who engaged in group affirmation were as likely to attribute defeat to their team's performance as victory.

Two unpredicted aspects of the findings merit consideration. First, although we expected the group affirmation to be stronger than the self-affirmation, we did not expect that the self-affirmation would be unable to attenuate the group-serving bias among the highly identified fans. One possibility for this pattern of results is suggested by the social creativity postulate of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). That is, for highly identified group members, the self-affirmation may not be as helpful to cope with the threat posed by the group outcome because the fans were not, in actuality, responsible for the outcome of the game, and thus, perhaps, not self-threatened. The situation, then, may have prompted social identity or collective threat without activating self-threat. The group affirmation may have repaired this threat by stressing alternative dimensions of group importance, enabling them to respond to the group-threatening information less defensively (see also Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997).

The second aspect of the results that warrants discussion is the finding that fans who were weakly identified seemed to increase their group-serving judgments after the group affirmation. Indeed, the pattern of results in the low-identification group-affirmation condition is virtually identical to the high-identification no-affirmation condition. The group affirmation made the group more salient, and this had differential effects for strongly and weakly identified fans. For the strongly identified fans, this increased group salience led them to treat the group as a resource from which they could draw to accept threatening information. For the weakly identified fans, this increased group salience seemed to boost identification with the group and make the individuals more apt to defend the group. Although we do not have direct evidence to support this explanation, it is consistent with other research that has activated either an individual or a collective self-construal. In particular, Gabriel, Gardner, and Lee (1999) found that priming the individual self led East Asian participants (who are chronically interdependent) to respond more independently (like Westerners) and that priming the interdependent self led Westerners (who are chronically independent) to respond more interdependently (like East Asians). Thus, it is possible that in Study 2 the group affirmation activated a collective identity among the initially weakly identified participants.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The central question addressed by this research is whether people can cope with threats to their social identities by using their groups as affirmational resources. In two studies, with both athletic participants

in intramural competitions and fans at intercollegiate competitions, group affirmations reduced group-serving judgments. In Study 1, athletes who affirmed a team value were unbiased in their attributions for the outcome of the games in which they played, accepting as much responsibility for defeat as for victory. In Study 2, highly identified fans exhibited a similar pattern, accepting more collective responsibility for defeat when they affirmed an important group value. These results strongly suggest that the values central to a group can serve as a resource from which individuals can draw when their groups are threatened.

Persons who are most highly identified with their group are typically the most biased in their judgments of the group (e.g., Ellemers et al., 2002; Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004), a finding we observed in our research as well. Yet, the group affirmation led these highly identified group members to attribute greater responsibility for the team's losses to the team than they did in the absence of an affirmation or following an individual affirmation. The weakly identified fans, by contrast, seemed more adept at distancing themselves from the loss, or CORFing (Snyder et al., 1986; Wann & Branscombe, 1990), rather than making biased attributions for the game outcome to protect a positive self-view. Specifically, in the no-affirmation condition of Study 2, weakly identified individuals did not attribute more responsibility to the team for a win than for a loss, which suggests that they had psychologically distanced themselves from the team's outcome.

In Study 1 an interaction effect was found between affirmation status and game outcome without taking group identification into consideration, whereas in Study 2 only the three-way interaction among identification, affirmation status, and game outcome obtained significance. We believe the explanation for this difference centers on differences between the two samples in their identification with the group. In Study 1, all of the participants were actual members of the athletic teams about which they were making attributions and hence were likely to be highly identified with their teams. In contrast, fans' identification with the team was relatively weak overall in Study 2 (the mean being below the midpoint of the scale). The lack of group-serving bias among the weakly identified fans in the no-affirmation condition is consistent with this interpretation. That is, "fans" with little psychological connection to the team have no reason to employ self-protective strategies in interpreting the game outcome as they can easily CORF (Study 2), whereas actual team members are by virtue of their membership linked to the team and therefore have independent reasons to employ self-protective strategies (Study 1). Thus, Study 2 suggests that when the individual self is not directly tied to the outcome, being

identified with the team is necessary for eliciting bias and attenuating the bias through a group affirmation (see also Bernhardt et al., 1998).

Implications for Self-Affirmation Theory

A recent meta-analysis found that the most common type of self-affirmation methodology employed by researchers was the affirmation of individual values (McQueen & Klein, 2006). This methodological focus on individual values makes sense given the focus of much of the earlier self-affirmation research, which had a decidedly individual self-focus, such as cognitive dissonance (Steele & Liu, 1983), perceptions of control (Liu & Steele, 1986), and personally relevant health information (Sherman et al., 2000). However, events and information that threaten the self are often collective in nature, such as the failure of one's group (Sherman & Kim, 2005) or the notion that one's group has been a target of stereotypes (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Martens, Johns, Greenberg, & Schimel, 2006) or benefited from racism (Adams et al., 2006). Consequently, in recent years greater attention has been devoted to whether these collective threats and the defensive responses they prompt could be buffered by a self-affirmation (see Sherman & Cohen, 2006, for a review).

The present research suggests that people can respond to group-threatening events by affirming important but unrelated aspects of their groups. Just as the personal self appears to have great flexibility in how it responds to threatening events, at times drawing on alternative resources to cope with a threat, it appears that the collective self can serve as a flexible resource from which people can draw in response to collective threats. As has been proposed by social identity theory, when groups are threatened along one dimension, members can stress the importance of an alternative dimension on which one's group compares favorably (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A collection of friends who make up an intramural team is clearly focused on winning their game. Yet, they can respond to the threat of defeat by considering other aspects of the group (e.g., their shared values of religion or the importance of their friendships). The present findings build on this notion of social creativity (cf. Tajfel & Turner, 1979) by demonstrating that when members of a group accentuate alternative dimensions after group threat, they are more open to otherwise threatening information such as that their poor play led to the defeat.

But can the present findings be understood entirely in terms of social creativity? Social creativity typically involves comparing the ingroup and the outgroup on dimensions that favor the ingroup (e.g., Derks et al., 2006; Jackson et al., 1996), whereas group affirmation,

as introduced in the current article, centers on affirming aspects of group identity that are not necessarily related to the outgroup and do not necessarily involve social comparison. Moreover, although social creativity and group affirmation are both ways individuals can respond to group threats, ultimately the theoretical focus of each approach differs. People engage in social creativity—accentuating alternative positive dimensions of the group—as a response to threat with the goal of restoring positive group identity (Hinkle et al., 1998). By contrast, our focus is on how group affirmations can attenuate defensive responses to group threats.

One interesting question suggested by the present research centers on the relative efficacy of self-affirmations versus group affirmations: Might there be certain people or situations in which a group affirmation is more effective than a self-affirmation? Our findings dovetail nicely with the recent research by Hoshino-Browne et al. (2005) in suggesting that a collective affirmation is most beneficial in dealing with a collective-level threat and an individual affirmation is most beneficial in dealing with an individual-level threat. Individuals with a chronically salient collective identity, be they interdependent East Asians or highly identified group members, benefit most from an affirmation of collective values when they face a collective threat. The potential for group affirmation is especially significant in light of recent findings that self-affirmations play a protective role in stress and disease (Creswell et al., 2007; Creswell et al., 2005) and that a self-affirmation intervention improved the academic performance of African American middle school students (Cohen et al., 2006). Given the potential importance of such social psychological interventions, it seems prudent to find the affirmation that would be most effective among other minority students, including those from more collectivistic cultures that have typically not benefited from self-affirmations (e.g., Heine & Lehman, 1997b), such as Latino/Latina Americans or Asian Americans. The present findings, along with those of Hoshino-Browne et al., suggest an exciting direction for future research into the relative efficacy of different types of affirmations as a function of individual and cultural differences.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the present set of findings that should be addressed. First, participants were solely European Americans. Given the issues previously raised about the potential for group affirmations to be more effective among members from more collectivistic cultures, extending this examination to other cultures is an important area for future research. Second, participants were not randomly assigned to the win–loss condition. We chose this methodological strategy because we wanted to obtain data

from people in real groups experiencing outcomes in a naturalistic setting. Yet, it raises alternative explanations. In Study 1, it is possible that there were some preexisting differences between more and less successful teams that could have lead to differences in the likelihood of making biased attributions. However, participants were randomly assigned to the affirmation condition; therefore, it is unlikely that any preexisting differences could account for all of the present findings. Moreover, in Study 2, it is less plausible that fans differed as a function of attending a game that resulted in a victory or a defeat (indeed, they did not differ on their pretest identification as a function of game outcome). Nevertheless, future research in laboratory settings would benefit from manipulation of group outcome. Finally, both studies concerned the domain of sports. Although we investigated the effects of group affirmations only in the domain of team sports, we contend that our findings extend to other important groups. Thus, future research should examine the effect of group affirmations in other group or intergroup contexts, such as situations of collective threat where the performance of a member of an individual's group could confirm a negative stereotype (Cohen & Garcia, 2005) or instances of perceived stigmatization (Major & O'Brien, 2005).

Final Thoughts

To sum up, the present research found that group affirmations eliminate group-serving attributional biases. Affirming an important group value or characteristic enabled individuals to evaluate their own and their group's role in positive and negative group outcomes in a more even-handed fashion. Although being a member of a group often results in defensiveness on behalf of that group, the present findings suggest that groups can also serve as a resource upon which members can draw when confronting collective threats.

NOTES

1. We made an a priori decision to include only European Americans in our primary analyses in both studies, as did Sherman and Kim (2005). We excluded Asian American participants because the study centered on motivation for group-serving judgments. Previous research has shown that whereas European Americans consistently show group-serving biases, Asian Americans do not (Heine & Lehman, 1997a). Moreover, sample size did not permit us to examine culture as a factor in the study.

2. Participants also rated the extent to which luck and the referees contributed to the outcome of the game; there were no significant main effects or interactions on these factors.

3. To test for replication of Sherman and Kim (2005), we also conducted a 2 (affirmation status: self-affirmation vs. no affirmation) × 2 (game outcome: winners vs. losers) ANOVA. This analysis demonstrated that the individual affirmation did attenuate the group-serving

bias, $F(1, 71) = 3.97$, $p = .05$. Although the group-serving bias was still statistically significant following the self-affirmation, it was significantly reduced relative to the no-affirmation condition.

4. Ten additional participants were initially recruited but left before the end of the game (five from games where UCSB won, five from games where UCSB lost). To examine whether this attrition could have created different samples, we compared the identification levels in the remaining samples at the games where the team won versus lost. There was no difference in identification between the participants who watched a winning or losing game, $t(102) = .45$, $p = .65$.

5. As in Study 1, participants rated the extent to which luck and the referees contributed to the outcome of the game; there were no significant main effects or interactions on these factors.

6. We also examined whether participants in the self- and group-affirmation conditions affirmed different values in this study. They did not; $\chi^2(8, N = 66) = 9.88$, $p = .27$.

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