Research article

"We have no quarrel with you": Effects of group status on characterizations of "conflict" with an outgroup

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Abstract

In three studies, we examined the effect of intergroup status on group members' tendencies to characterize the ingroup's relationship with an outgroup as conflictual following outgroup action. Findings from all three studies supported the prediction that the intergroup relationship would be characterized as less conflictual when the ingroup had relatively high rather than low status. Consistent with the hypothesis that the effect of status reflects strategic concerns, it was moderated by the perceived relevance of the outgroup's action to intergroup status relations (study 1), it was sensitive to audience (study 2), and it was partially mediated by status management concerns (study 3). The role of strategic, status-related factors in intergroup relations is discussed. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

It is easy to take intergroup conflict for granted. It features prominently in daily news media and directly affects the lives of millions of people. More prosaically, intergroup conflict is a prominent and long-standing topic in social psychology (Brown & Gaertner, 2001). Its existence is taken as a self-evident starting point for many of the most prominent social-psychological approaches to conflict management. However, the existence or scope of *particular* conflicts is not always clear-cut—at least not from the perspectives of those involved. Put another way, it is not always clear when "we" are in conflict with "them". Sometimes, others perceive conflict when we do not, or we perceive conflict but others do not. Moreover, this can have very little to do with "objective" features of the situation that might be expected to induce conflict. In short, the very existence and scope of "conflict" can be keenly contested.

A historical example that echoes current economic crises and social tensions comes from a particularly tumultuous and bloody period in industrial relations across Western countries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Yet even in this period, the existence and intensity of conflict between unions and corporations was characterized very differently by key protagonists. For his part, Henry Edwards Huntington—one of the great railway magnates of the east coast of the USA—suggested in 1903 that his organizations "have no quarrel with any unions and care little what such bodies are doing, so long as they do not interfere with our work" (quoted in Thorpe, 1994, p. 193). This essentially benign characterization of the relationship between management and unions is quite at odds with that offered by Eugene Debs, one of the key union organizers in this period. In 1902, Debs reflected on the increasing

scale, violence, and bitterness of railway industrial disputes, opining that "in the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle the class struggle was revealed" (quoted in Zinn, 2003, p. 281). For Debs, the relationship was not only sporadically violent but also perpetually and essentially conflictual.

The Role of Intergroup Status in Acknowledging Conflict

In this paper, we seek to test the proposition that there is an important strategic aspect to whether group members play up or play down the existence of conflict with another group (Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). On the one hand, the acknowledgement and recognition of conflict by the parties involved is a prerequisite for the development and implementation of conflict management strategies. This is especially true when it comes to reconciliation following protracted, violent conflicts (Nadler, 2002; Nadler & Liviatan, 2006). However, there are also potential downsides to acknowledging that the ingroup is or has been in conflict with an outgroup. For one thing, it might be seen to legitimize conflictual actions by the outgroup (Doosje & Haslam, 2005). Relatedly, acknowledging a state of conflict between the ingroup and outgroup might also serve to equalize moral responsibility and guilt for intergroup hostility.

We suggest that the status of the ingroup relative to the outgroup is one important factor that determines the way in which group members characterize conflict with an outgroup, particularly when that outgroup commits a transgression against the ingroup. The great majority of intergroup conflicts

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are characterized by status differences between the groups involved, and perceptions of these status differences are a crucial part of the dynamics of conflict (Ellemers, Doosje, Van-Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1992; Ellemers, Wilke, & Van-Knippenberg, 1993; Haunschild, Moreland, & Murrell, 1994; Scheepers, Spears, Doosje, & Manstead, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Brown, 1978).

The importance of status is emphasized by numerous approaches (e.g., relative deprivation theory: Crosby, 1976; Walker & Smith, 2002; social dominance theory: Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; social identity theory: Tajfel & Turner, 1979), but its role in the strategic acknowledgement or denial of conflict has not been directly examined in previous empirical work, at least within quantitatively oriented social psychology. Instead, the strategic, ideologically driven characterization of relations between groups has been more prominent in other disciplines such as sociology and political science, both as an object of study (e.g., Benford & Snow, 2000), and as an objective in itself (e.g., Bell, 1960; Giddens, 1994). Nevertheless, some research in social psychology (Van Knippenberg, 1978, 1984) does point to the strategic considerations that come into play when intergroup relations are characterized by status differences. This has shown that although members of groups that differ in status on an objective dimension might agree on whether their ingroup has high or low status *per se*, they can also strategically minimize or accentuate the extent and/or importance of status differences in a manner that strategically benefitted the ingroup.

These observations suggest that group members' perceptions of intergroup status relations are more than fixed reflections of social reality; rather, they communicate something about the strategic interests of the ingroup in view of its status position vis-à-vis other groups. Moreover, as Van Knippenberg (1984) argues, these strategic patterns are best understood in terms of motives to manage the ingroup's intergroup status relations. However, the strategic nature of intergroup evaluations has received surprisingly little attention (for some exceptions, see Doosje, Spears, & Koomen, 1995; Reicher & Levine, 1994a, 1994b; Spears, Lea, Corneliussen, Postmes, & ter Haar, 2002). In this paper, we seek to develop and extend this perspective to understand how intergroup conflict is characterized by group members as a function of ingroup status.

As suggested by a number of perspectives (Jost and Banaji, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Van Knippenberg, 1984; Walker & Smith, 2002), group enhancement strategies require group members to take ingroup status directly into account, because status determines whether the aim of collective enhancement strategies is to overturn an *outgroup*'s superior status (i.e., change the status quo by improving the ingroup's status) or to protect the *ingroup*'s superior status (i.e., maintain the status quo). Consequently, characterizing the ingroup's relationship with the outgroup as being more or less conflictual may have strategic value when it comes to managing status relations between the groups— and this value will depend on ingroup status. When the ingroup has relatively low status, overtly acknowledging that conflict or tension exists between the ingroup and outgroup is consistent with (and arguably a prerequisite for) a strategy of direct social competition (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In

contrast, when the ingroup has high status, its interests may best be served by strategically *downplaying* the potential for direct social competition between the ingroup and outgroup (cf. Van Knippenberg, 1984). In this case, the position of the ingroup might be better served by strategically avoiding any direct acknowledgement of intergroup tension that could give impetus to outgroup action. In other words, it may be best for high-status groups to not "rock the boat" unduly.

This does not mean that high-status group members will not react at all to action by a low-status outgroup—rather, they will simply tend to minimize the perception of social competition so that reciprocal, conflictual action by the outgroup is less likely to develop. This may be contrasted with a situation in which the ingroup has low status and the transgressing outgroup has high status. Here, the ingroup has less to lose (in status terms at least) by adopting a strategy of direct social competition (Scheepers et al., 2006) and so should be more likely to acknowledge conflict than to downplay it.

In sum, we hypothesize that when faced with a potential transgression by an outgroup, there will be an asymmetry between high-status and low-status groups in terms of the extent to which they characterize the ingroup's relationship with the outgroup as conflictual. This asymmetry arises because of the differing strategic needs associated with having high or low status. Whereas low ingroup status may be enhanced by direct group competition—and thus by acknowledging a state of conflict between the ingroup and outgroup—the strategic needs of high ingroup status dictate that the preferred reaction of ingroup members will be to instead say, "you were out of order, but we'll let it go."

Aims and Hypotheses

Our aim in the present research was to test this hypothesis, focusing on the strategic basis of the effect of status on characterizations of conflict with an outgroup. If the asymmetry between high-status and low-status groups in terms of their characterizations of conflict is driven by strategic, status-based considerations, then it is likely to emerge more strongly in some contexts than in others. In the present research, we examined two factors that—if the hypothesized effect of status is shaped by strategic concerns—should moderate this effect: (i) the perceived relevance of the outgroup's action to status relations between the groups (e.g., Mummendey & Simon, 1989); and (ii) the audience (ingroup or outgroup) to which participants' characterization of conflict with the outgroup is addressed (e.g., Klein et al., 2007). We also reasoned that if the effect of status is strategic, then its effect should be at least partially mediated by status management motives.

We tested the aforementioned hypotheses in three studies. In study 1, we examined the effect of intergroup status on group members' characterizations of conflict in response to an outgroup's potentially provocative action and examined the moderating role of the perceived *relevance* of the outgroup's action to status relations. In study 2, we further examined the strategic considerations underlying the effect of status by testing the moderating role of *audience* and distinguished the strategic effect of status from perceptions of realistic threat that have been shown to affect perceptions of

conflict (e.g., Sherif, 1966; see also Platow & Hunter, 2001, in press). In study 3, we tested our predictions in a different intergroup setting and using a different manipulation of status. We further examined the strategic considerations underlying the effect of status by testing the mediating role of the desire to improve ingroup status.

STUDY 1

Our aim in Study 1 was to test the basic prediction that there will be an asymmetry between high-status and low-status groups in terms of the extent to which they acknowledge or downplay the existence of conflict with a transgressing outgroup. Specifically, we expect that conflict will be downplayed more when the ingroup has high rather than low status relative to a transgressing outgroup. We reasoned that the utility of acknowledging or downplaying conflict as a status management strategy is most likely to emerge when an outgroup's action is perceived as being *relevant* to the status relations between the groups (see Hunter, Platow, Bell, Kypri, & Lewis, 1997; Mummendey & Simon, 1989, for similar points in relation to ingroup bias). In contrast, when the action is perceived as irrelevant to status relations, there is little need to strategically acknowledge or downplay conflict because it is unlikely to have any effect on the status quo (cf. social creativity strategies outlined by social identity theory; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For this reason, we predicted that the effects of status on characterizations of conflict would be more pronounced when an outgroup's action is seen as relevant to the status-defining dimension than when it is seen as irrelevant.

We tested these predictions in the context of academic status relations between universities. Specifically, we manipulated the status of an outgroup (higher or lower in status than the ingroup) who had reportedly rejected the ingroup university from a conference, in an apparent slight on the ingroup's academic status. We then measured the extent to which participants acknowledged or downplayed the existence of conflict between the ingroup and outgroup.

METHOD

Participants

Forty undergraduate students at a UK university participated in the study on a voluntary basis. Although gender and age information was not recorded directly, there were roughly equal numbers of men and women, and participants' ages ranged from 18–21 years.

Design

The study's main independent variable was the status of the ingroup relative to the outgroup. This had two levels: higher than or lower than the outgroup. The perceived relevance of the outgroup's action to status relations between the ingroup and outgroup was measured for use as a moderator.

Materials

Stimulus Article

The main stimulus material consisted of a mocked-up article purportedly reproduced from the ingroup university staff newsletter. The article, supposedly written by a "staff reporter," reported that the ingroup university had been rejected from an interdisciplinary conference organized by either a higher-status university or a lower-status university. A spokesperson for the outgroup university emphasized that the ingroup university had been rejected because they were not felt to be of a sufficiently high academic standard.

To manipulate relative intergroup status, the article also reported the ingroup's and outgroup's actual rankings in university league tables published by two different national newspapers. These indicated that the ingroup ranked 22nd and 28th in the two league tables, lower than the high-status outgroup (eight and seventh, respectively), and higher than the low-status outgroup (68th and 70th, respectively). Only the rankings of the ingroup and the outgroup that organized the conference were included in any given article.

Questionnaire Measures

The article was followed by a questionnaire containing all relevant measures. It began with a manipulation check of relative intergroup status. This asked whether, according to the article, the ingroup had higher, lower, or equal status compared with the outgroup and was scored from −4 (lower status than the outgroup) through 0 (equal) to 4 (higher status than the outgroup). This was followed by a measure of the perceived relevance of the outgroup's action for ingroup–outgroup status relations ("how relevant is [outgroup]'s decision to the academic status of the universities?"), scored from −4 (completely irrelevant) to 4 (completely relevant).

Conflict characterization was measured on a four-item scale ($\alpha = .90$): "There is a lot of tension/conflict/no problem at all/hostility between the ingroup and outgroup." Scores on the "no problem at all" item were reversed, and responses were recorded on a seven-point scale ranging from −3 (completely disagree) to 3 (completely agree).

Procedure

Participants were recruited on an opportunity sampling basis around the university campus. After giving their informed consent to participate, they were instructed to read the article and then complete the questionnaire immediately afterwards. Once they had performed so, participants were debriefed and thanked for their time.

RESULTS

Status Manipulation Check

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with relative status of the ingroup as the independent variable (high versus low) revealed a highly significant effect on the status manipulation

check scores, $F(1, 38) = 60.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .614$. One-sample *t*-tests confirmed that means for the high (-2.62) and low (2.53) status outgroups were significantly above, $t(20) = -6.88$, $p < .001$, and below, $t(18) = 4.57$, $p < .001$, the midpoint of 0, respectively. Thus, the manipulation of intergroup status was successful.

A similar one-way ANOVA on the perceived relevance of the transgression measure also revealed a significant effect of status, $F(1, 38) = 14.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .280$, with the transgression seen as more relevant when the ingroup had relatively low status ($M = 0.43$, $SD = 2.40$ vs. $M = -2.16$, $SD = 1.77$).

Conflict Acknowledgement

Although the preceding ANOVA did indicate overlap between status and perceived relevance, they were still sufficiently independent to conduct our main analysis relating to conflict acknowledgement, in the form of a two-way ANOVA, with relative ingroup status (high versus low) and perceived relevance of the transgression (continuous and mean centered) as independent variables.

The analysis revealed a significant main effect of perceived transgression relevance, $F(1, 36) = 8.37$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .189$, but not of ingroup status, $F(1, 36) = 1.28$, $p = .266$, $\eta_p^2 = .034$. As predicted, the interaction between relative ingroup status and perceived relevance of the transgression was significant, $F(2, 36) = 4.66$, $p = .038$ $\eta_p^2 = .118$. Simple effects analyses revealed that the effect of status was not significant when the perceived relevance of the transgression was low ($M - 1SD$), $F < 1$, but was significant when the perceived relevance was high ($M + 1SD$), $F(1, 36) = 4.14$, $p = .049$, $\eta_p^2 = .103$. This interaction is illustrated in Figure 1, which confirms that conflict acknowledgement was lower when the ingroup had high status, but only when the transgression was perceived as status relevant.

DISCUSSION

The results of Study 1 support the hypotheses that there would be an asymmetry between high-status and low-status groups in
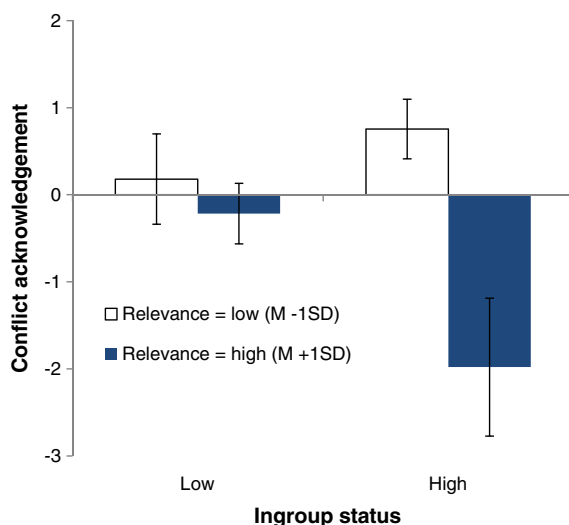

Figure 1. Interaction between ingroup status and perceived relevance on characterization of "conflict" (study 1). Error bars represent standard errors

the extent to which they characterize the intergroup relationship as conflictual and that the strength of this asymmetry would depend on the perceived relevance of an outgroup's action to status relations between the groups. High ingroup status thus led conflict to be downplayed, relative to the condition in which the ingroup had low status—but only when the action was seen as relevant to status relations. This interaction provides some support for the idea that the effects of ingroup status arise from strategic concerns, such that the motivation to maintain the ingroup's status position comes into play primarily when the action relates directly to the status dimension(s) that define the ingroup's position (Hunter et al., 1997; Mummendey & Simon, 1989). In contrast, a less status-relevant transgression has fewer implications for the ingroup's position and so does not have to be met by strategic defusion of any potential conflict. When the transgression is perceived as relevant, then the need to strategically protect the status quo means that conflict will be downplayed to a greater degree when the ingroup has high rather than low status. In contrast, an irrelevant transgression is unlikely to affect the status quo, and so the strategic characterization of conflict is not required.

STUDY 2

Although these findings are encouraging, we sought to provide a more direct test of the strategic basis of the effect of status by examining its sensitivity to audience. Research on the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE) has pointed to the ways in which the strategic considerations that play out in intergroup settings are shaped by, among other factors, the audience that participants feel they are addressing (Klein et al., 2007; Reicher et al., 1995). For example, one may express intergroup concerns differently to an outgroup audience than to an ingroup audience, particularly when intergroup relations are characterized by status and/or power differences (Reicher & Levine, 1994a, 1994b). Following this line of argument, we predicted that the asymmetry between high-status and low-status group members' characterizations of conflict will be greater when addressing an outgroup rather than an ingroup audience. For low-status group members, playing up conflict to an outgroup helps to communicate dissatisfaction about the situation; whereas for high-status group members, downplaying conflict to the outgroup represents an attempt to defuse the situation in a manner that cements the status quo (cf. Singh, Choo, & Poh, 1998). Neither of these strategic motives can be realized to the same extent when addressing an ingroup audience, and so the effect of status should be less evident. In the terms of the SIDE model, the strategic characterization of conflict can thus have a *mobilization* function (Klein et al., 2007), insofar as an outgroup audience provides an opportunity to (de)mobilize orientations toward social competition.

We also sought to show that the effect of status is independent of another important factor that influences perceptions of conflict and that may also vary as a function of status, namely, realistic threat (Platow & Hunter, 2001, in press; Sherif, 1966; W.G. Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Specifically, an alternative explanation of an effect of status on conflict acknowledgement

could be that members of low-status groups simply perceive the situation as more threatening in realistic terms than do high-status group members, because of the greater ability of high-status groups to influence low-status groups' position than vice versa. If, as we suggest, the effect of status has a strategic component over and above the influence of threat perceptions, then the effect of status on conflict acknowledgement will be evident when controlling for such perceptions.

METHOD

Participants

Eighty-five undergraduate students participated on a voluntary basis. Sex and age were not directly recorded, but the modal age was 19 years, and approximately 60% of participants were female.

Materials

Audience Manipulation

Audience was manipulated by varying the introductory text before the main stimulus article. This text stated that the aim of the questionnaire was to gather opinions within the ingroup with a view to presenting them to senior figures in the ingroup university (ingroup audience condition) or to senior figures at the outgroup university (outgroup audience condition).

Stimulus Article

The stimulus article was based on that used in study 2. The only alteration was to use the most up-do-date league table rankings. These indicated that the ingroup ranked 26th and 44th in the two league tables, lower than the high-status outgroup (sixth and fourth, respectively), and higher than the low-status outgroup (78th and 82nd, respectively).

Questionnaire measures

The article was followed by a questionnaire containing all relevant measures. It began with an audience manipulation check, on which participants had to indicate by checking a box whether the questionnaire findings would be reported to senior ingroup members or senior outgroup members. There followed a manipulation check of relative intergroup status. This asked whether, according to the article, the ingroup had higher, lower, or equal status compared with the outgroup and was scored from −4 (lower status than the outgroup) through 0 (equal) to 4 (higher status than the outgroup).

Conflict acknowledgement was measured on a four-item scale ($\alpha = .90$): There *is a lot of tension/conflict/no problem at all/hostility* between the ingroup and outgroup. Scores on the no problem at all item were reversed. Realistic threat (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) was measured on a six-item scale ($\alpha = .81$), consisting of items such as "(outgroup) has more power than it deserves in the system," "the decisions of (outgroup) affect (ingroup)," and "the successes of (outgroup)

are damaging to (ingroup)." Responses on the conflict acknowledgement and realistic threat scales were recorded on a seven-point scale ranging from −3 (completely disagree) to 3 (completely agree).

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

Relative Ingroup Status

A 2 (ingroup status: high versus low) × 2 (audience: ingroup versus outgroup) ANOVA on the status manipulation check revealed a main effect for relative ingroup status, $F(1, 81) = 83.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .508$, but not for audience, $F(1, 81) < 1$. The interaction between relative ingroup status and audience was also significant, $F(1, 81) = 9.92$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. Examination of the means indicated that the effect of ingroup status was stronger in the outgroup audience condition, *M*s and *SD*s = −3.50 and 0.78 (low ingroup status condition), 2.72 and 2.51 (high ingroup status condition), than in the ingroup audience condition, *M*s and *SD*s = −1.94 and 2.82 (low ingroup status condition), 1.10 and 2.79 (high ingroup status condition). The moderating role of audience most likely represents the operation of additional strategic considerations in the acknowledgement of an ingroup's low status (Ellemers, van Dyck, Hinkle, & Jacobs, 2000) over and above the impact of the status information *per se*. Nevertheless, the simple main effects of relative ingroup status were both highly significant in the expected direction, F's(1, 81) = 84.71, $\eta_p^2 = .511$ and 16.27, $\eta_p^2 = .167$, p's < .001, confirming the effectiveness of the status manipulation.

Audience Manipulation Check

In the low ingroup status condition, 80.95% of participants correctly identified the audience to which their responses were to be reported. In the high ingroup status condition, this percentage was 95.4. Both of these proportions were significantly greater than chance, $\chi_1^2 = 19.39$ and 35.69, p's < .001. The audience manipulation was therefore successful.

Conflict Acknowledgement and Realistic Threat

A 2 (ingroup status: high versus low) × 2 (audience: ingroup versus outgroup) ANOVA on the conflict acknowledgement scale revealed only a significant interaction between ingroup status and audience, $F(1, 81) = 6.45$, $p = .013$, $\eta_p^2 = .074$. This interaction is represented in Figure 2. Analysis of simple main effects revealed that the effect of ingroup status was only significant in the outgroup audience condition, $F(1, 81) = 6.78$, $p = .011$, $\eta_p^2 = .077$ ($F = 1.15$ in the ingroup audience condition), confirming that the relationship was characterized as more conflictual when the ingroup had low status than when it had high status. A similar ANOVA on the realistic threat scores revealed no significant effects, Fs ≤ 2.35.

An additional 2 (ingroup status: high versus low) × 2 (audience: ingroup versus outgroup) analysis of covariance
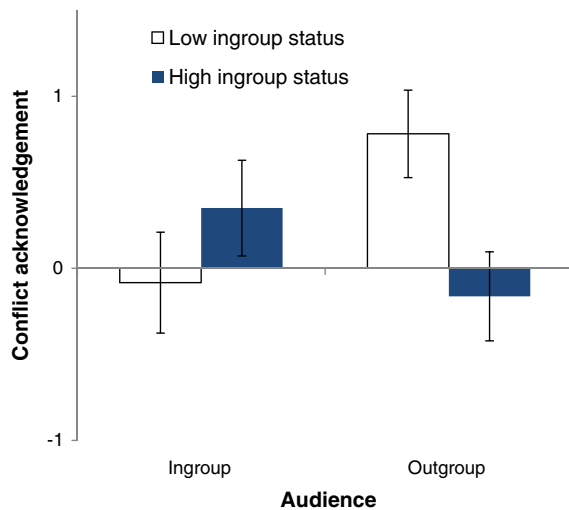
Figure 2.   Interaction between ingroup status and audience on characterization of "conflict" (study 2). Error bars represent standard errors

with realistic threat entered as a covariate revealed that, along with a main effect of threat, $F(1, 80) = 18.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .184$, the interaction between ingroup status and audience remained significant, $F(1, 80) = 5.98$, $p = .017$, $\eta_p^2 = .070$. The simple main effect of ingroup status in the outgroup audience condition also remained significant, $F(1, 80) = 4.14$, $p = .045$, $\eta_p^2 = .049$.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide support for the hypotheses that the effect of status on the characterization of conflict would be the following: (i) emerge more strongly when responses were directed to an outgroup rather than an ingroup audience; and (ii) remain significant when controlling for perceptions of realistic threat. The effect of status on conflict acknowledgement was significant but only in the outgroup audience condition. In this condition, conflict was acknowledged to a greater degree when the ingroup had relatively low status. Moreover, this effect of status remained significant when controlling for perceptions of realistic threat, which also predicted conflict acknowledgement. These findings are consistent with the contention that the strategic value of characterizing intergroup relations as more or less conflictual is heightened in an intergroup communicative setting in which low-status groups can shake up and contest the hierarchy, and high-status groups can help to defuse and demobilize such action by characterizing intergroup relations in more benign terms. Moreover, the asymmetry between high-status and low-status groups is independent of heightened perceptions of realistic threat that may accompany relatively low ingroup status and could potentially have explained any effect of status on the characterization of conflict.

This is not to say that audience effects will always take the same form as in the present findings. Like characterizations of conflict, effects of audience are themselves not fixed and are likely to be sensitive to the particular nature of the intergroup relationship in question (Klein et al., 2007). As argued in the SIDE model (Reicher et al., 1995), the specific threats posed

by and potential reaction of an outgroup—especially a more powerful one—are likely to influence in quite complex and subtle ways the enactment and communication of social identity concerns (e.g., Reicher & Levine, 1994a). For example, the nature of any threat at play in the present study is largely limited to disparagement of the ingroup's standing. In contrast, other intergroup settings are characterized by more severe threats to low-power group members or to the group as a whole. In such cases, members of a low-status group could conceivably play up conflict to a greater extent to an *ingroup* audience than to an outgroup audience, because of the potentially negative consequences of antagonizing the outgroup, and the benefits of consciousness raising within the ingroup. What we take from this finding that audience moderates the effect of status is therefore the more general point that characterizations of conflict with an outgroup are not fixed but are shaped by strategic concerns associated with the status position of the ingroup.

STUDY 3

The first aim of study 3 was to extend and refine the findings of studies 1 and 2 by examining the effect of status in a different intergroup context (international economic relations) and using a different method of manipulating status. Although clearly effective, the status manipulations in studies 1 and 2 relied on varying the comparison outgroup, which could potentially leave the status effect open to alternative explanations. We aimed in study 3 to improve upon this by manipulating status relations between an ingroup and the same comparison outgroup using different measures of performance on the same comparative dimension (economic performance).

A further aim of study 3 was to directly test our hypothesis that the effect of status arises at least in part as a result of strategic identity and status management concerns. Although studies 1 and 2 offer support for this hypothesis by demonstrating the moderating role of relevance and audience, our aim in this study was to test whether the motive to improve ingroup status plays a (partial) mediating role between ingroup status and the characterization of conflict. This motive relates to the assumed motive underlying social competition from a social identity perspective, namely, the motive to achieve positive distinctiveness (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). While in the first instance we hypothesized that this would take the form of a straightforward mediation effect, we were also conscious that the link between status, the motive to improve that status, and conflict characterization could potentially also depend on the extent to which group members hold the *goal* of maintaining the status quo in the first place, particularly in terms of the effect of status on the desire to improve ingroup status. We conceptualize the maintenance of the status quo as a goal because it refers to a specific, preferred endpoint of social behavior and one that may vary across individuals who hold different ideological standpoints, for example. For this reason, we measured both the motive to improve ingroup status, and the goal of maintaining the status quo. We elaborate on this in the succeeding texts in the context of our analyses.

METHOD

Participants and Design

Participants were 53 British undergraduate students (46 female, 5 male, and 2 unspecified) with a mean age of 19.32 years ($SD = 0.87$) at a UK university. They were recruited via the online departmental experiment management system and participated in return for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions (high ingroup status versus low ingroup status).

Materials

Participants were presented with a mock article, purportedly from the BBC news website, that reported on the decision by an outgroup (Denmark) to initiate tough trade restrictions on the ingroup (UK) because the UK was "not of a sufficiently robust economic stature." Relative ingroup status was manipulated by varying the measure used to rank nations in terms of economic performance—either gross domestic product (GDP) or GDP per capita. In both conditions, the respective measure was described as one of the most reliable and widely used measures of economic performance and strength. There followed a text and table description of the international ranking of the UK and Denmark using current real data from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In the low ingroup status condition, the measure used was GDP per capita. On this measure, the UK (21st and 23rd place according to the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, respectively) was ranked well below Denmark (fifth and sixth place). In the high ingroup status condition, the measure used was GDP. On this measure, the UK (sixth and sixth) ranked well above Denmark (32nd and 29th).

Questionnaire

The article was followed by a questionnaire containing all relevant measures. It began with a manipulation check of ingroup status. This asked whether, according to the article, the economic performance of the UK was higher than, lower than, or equal to that of Denmark and was scored from -4 (worse than Denmark) through 0 (equal) to 4 (better than Denmark). Responses on all other scales were recorded on a seven-point scale ranging from -3 (completely disagree) to 3 (completely agree).

The desire to improve ingroup status relative to the outgroup was measured using one item: "Ideally, I would like the UK's economic performance compared to Denmark to improve in the future." The motive to maintain the status difference between the ingroup and outgroup was measured using two items ($r = .29$, $p = .038$): "In the future, I would like the UK's economic performance compared to Denmark to stay the same as now," and "ideally, I would like the difference between the UK's and Denmark's economic performance to become smaller in the future" (reverse scored). A high score on this measure represents a desire to maintain status relations as they presently are, whereas a low score indicates a desire to reduce the status difference between the groups.

Conflict acknowledgement was measured on a six-item scale ($\alpha = .85$): "There is a lot of tension/conflict/no problem at all/hostility/are good relations between the UK and Denmark," and "the UK gets along with Denmark." Scores on the no problem at all and "gets along with" items were reversed.

Procedure

The questionnaire was web based. After indicating their informed consent on the study landing page, participants proceeded to the next page on which the article was presented. They were instructed to carefully read it because it was relevant to the questions that would follow. The questionnaire items were presented on the next page. Debriefing information was contained on the final page, on which participants were also thanked for their participation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Scores on all dependent measures were first analyzed using independent samples t-tests. These confirmed first that the status manipulation was successful, $t(51) = -8.68$, $p < .001$. The ingroup was seen as having higher status in the high ingroup status condition ($M = 2.44$; $SD = 1.73$) than in the low ingroup status condition ($M = -2.04$; $SD = 1.99$).

As predicted, the intergroup relationship was characterized as more conflictual ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.82$ vs. $M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.61$), and the desire to improve ingroup status was greater ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.02$ vs. $M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.05$) when the ingroup had relatively low status, $t(51) = 2.49$, $p = .016$ and $t(51) = 1.97$, $p = .054$, respectively. The goal to maintain the status quo was also stronger when the ingroup had relatively high status ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.04$ vs. $M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.06$), $t(51) = 3.09$, $p = .003$.

In order to analyze the relationships between ingroup status, conflict acknowledgement, and the motive to improve ingroup status, we conducted a regression-based mediation analysis using the procedures recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2004). We specified conflict acknowledgement as the outcome variable, ingroup status (low status = -1; high status = 1) as the predictor, and desire to improve ingroup status as the mediator. This revealed that conflict acknowledgement was significantly and negatively predicted by both the desire to improve ingroup status, $b = -0.22$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .022$, and ingroup status, $b = -0.31$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .002$. However, the bootstrapped estimates (using 5000 samples) for the indirect path from ingroup status to conflict acknowledgement indicated that this path ($b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.04$) was not significant, 95% confidence intervals (CIs) = -0.003 (lower bound) and 0.157 (upper bound). More strikingly, the negative effect of ingroup status on the desire to improve ingroup status (the mediator) meant that the indirect path was actually positive and thus opposite in sign to the direct effect of ingroup status.

We sought to explore this unexpected pattern further. We reasoned that the link between ingroup status and the desire to improve ingroup status may not be as straightforward as assumed in the aforementioned mediation analysis. Instead, the effect of ingroup status on the desire to improve ingroup

status should depend on whether group members want to *maintain* status differences or to *reduce* them, that is, whether they have the goal of maintaining the status quo. If one wants to see the status quo maintained, then one is more likely to want to improve ingroup status if the ingroup already has higher status, thereby cementing the status differential. In contrast, if one wants to see status differences reduced, then one is more likely to want to improve ingroup status if the ingroup has relatively *low* status. Put slightly differently, improving ingroup status serves to *augment* status differences when one starts from a position of relatively high ingroup status, whereas improving ingroup status serves to *reduce* status differences when one starts from a position of relatively low ingroup status. Thus, the association between the goal of maintaining the status quo and the motive to improve ingroup status depends entirely on ingroup status.

The effect of ingroup status on the desire to improve ingroup status thus needs to be understood in conjunction with the *goal* (in terms of status relations) toward which this desire is directed. Specifically, the status quo is challenged when a low-status group seeks to improve ingroup status and when a high-status group does *not* seek to improve ingroup status. When the goal of maintaining the status quo is low, then ingroup status should negatively predict the desire to improve ingroup status—a possibility that resonates with instances of solidarity-based action by members of high-status groups on behalf of low-status groups. For example, the decision by some White Americans to actively support the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s reflected their belief that status differences between Whites and Blacks should be reduced. Accordingly, they rejected the goal of maintaining White privilege and acknowledged the necessity of struggle on the part of Black Americans to achieve equal rights (Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002).

In contrast, a status quo is maintained when a high-status group pursues greater ingroup status and when a low-status group does *not* pursue greater ingroup status. When the goal of maintaining the status quo is high, then ingroup status should therefore *positively* predict the motive to increase ingroup status. Extending the aforementioned example, the decision by many other White Americans—not least of all Southern Senators—to *oppose* civil rights reflected their belief that status differences between Whites and Blacks should be maintained. Accordingly, they pursued the goal of maintaining White privilege and downplayed the need for civil rights legislation by claiming that Jim Crow laws actually facilitated racial harmony—at least until the civil rights movement became sufficiently strong to demand more overt, confrontational responses (Finlay, 2010).

To test this modified prediction, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis following the recommendations of Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007). The model followed the same basic specification as the mediation analysis described earlier. However, we also specified that the path between ingroup status and the desire to improve status relations would be moderated by the goal of maintaining the status difference between the ingroup and outgroup (mean centered). This model corresponds to model 2 as described in Preacher et al. (2007) and is summarized with results in Figure 3.
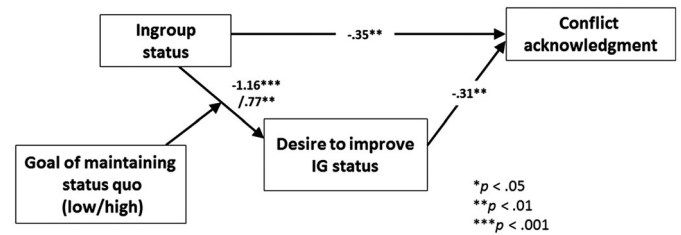

Figure 3. Moderated mediation model of the effect of ingroup status on characterizations of conflict via the desire to improve ingroup status (study 3). The path between ingroup status and desire to improve ingroup status was moderated by the goal of maintaining the status quo. The two path weights for this path are estimated at low (−2) and high (+2) levels of the moderator, respectively

Beginning with the mediator model, the main effects of ingroup status ($b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .154$) and goal of maintaining the status quo ($b = -0.23$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = .055$) were nonsignificant and marginally significant, respectively. However, their interaction term was highly significant, $b = 0.48$, $SE = 0.12$, $p < .001$. Simple slopes analysis revealed that when the goal of maintaining the status quo was low (discrete value of −2), the effect of ingroup status was negative and highly significant, $b = -1.16$, $SE = 0.27$, $p < .001$. In contrast, when the goal of maintaining the status quo was high (discrete value of 2), the effect of ingroup status was positive and highly significant, $b = 0.77$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .005$.

Turning to the dependent variable model, the effects of the desire to improve ingroup status, $b = -0.31$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = .009$, and ingroup status, $b = -0.35$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .002$, were again significant. The effect of the goal of maintaining the status quo was not significant, $b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .894$, nor was its interaction with ingroup status, $b = 0.17$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .119$. Crucially, the conditional indirect effects of ingroup status on conflict acknowledgement were significant at high (discrete value of +2) and low (discrete value of −2) levels of the goal of maintaining the status quo but in opposite directions. When the goal of maintaining the status quo was low, the indirect effect of status was positive, $b = 0.36$, $SE = 0.16$, 95% bias corrected CIs = 0.099 (lower bound) and 0.861 (upper bound), indicating that high ingroup status decreased the desire to improve ingroup status, which in turn increased conflict acknowledgement

In contrast, when the goal of maintaining the status quo was high, the indirect effect of status was negative, $b = -0.24$, $SE = 0.12$, 95% bias corrected CIs = −0.563 (lower bound) and −0.035 (upper bound), indicating that high ingroup status *increased* the desire to improve ingroup status, which in turn reduced conflict acknowledgement. In other words, when members of a high-status group are motivated to maintain the status quo, the specific desire to improve ingroup status is increased, which in turn leads conflict to be played down.

To summarize the findings of this study, they demonstrate the effect of status on characterizations of conflict with an outgroup using a different intergroup context and status manipulation to those used in studies 1 and 2. Moreover, there was evidence that the effect of status operates at least in part through the desire to improve ingroup status (cf. Van Knippenberg, 1984)—although this depends on whether group members have the goal of maintaining the status quo.

Specifically, when high-status group members have the goal of maintaining the status quo (as is predominantly the case), then the desire to improve ingroup status is increased, which in turn leads conflict to be downplayed.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present research has been guided by the observation that the existence of intergroup conflict is not a "given", particularly from the perspective of those involved. Rather, the existence of conflict is itself an important site of contestation that has a number of implications for how intergroup relations are conducted subsequently (e.g., the escalation or de-escalation of hostility) and for the possibility of managing and reducing conflict (De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000; Eggins, Haslam, & Reynolds, 2002; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Nevertheless, very little work has considered the strategic considerations that determine how intergroup conflict is characterized by group members in the first place. Our aim in the present research was to address this shortfall by examining the role of intergroup status in shaping tendencies to characterize the ingroup's relationship with an outgroup as conflictual.

Across the three studies, we found support for the prediction that intergroup status would affect the extent to which group members characterize the intergroup relationship as conflictual, such that high ingroup status would lead group members to characterize the relationship as less conflictual than when the ingroup had low status. This effect of status was sensitive to the perceived status relevance of the transgression (study 1) and to audience (study 2), providing evidence for the strategic basis of the effect. Moreover, the effect of status was independent of perceptions of realistic threat (study 2). The effect of status was also evident in different intergroup contexts and using different methods of manipulating status. Study 3 also provided evidence that the effect of status is at least partially explained by status management motives.

Together, the present findings support the idea that responses to a potential threat from an outgroup are based on a number of considerations. As past research has noted, these include appraisals of various forms of threat (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006; W. G. Stephan & Stephan, 2000), the (il)legitimacy of relations between the ingroup and outgroup (Ellemers, Van-Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1990; Reicher & Haslam, 2006; Stott, Adang, Livingstone, & Schreiber, 2007; Stott, Hutchison, & Drury, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and the structural potential for particular forms of action (e.g., in terms of perceived efficacy, Van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004; empowerment, Drury & Reicher, 1999, 2005; or stability, Ellemers et al., 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In addition to these factors, the status position of the ingroup is an important strategic consideration that shapes the way in which the relationship between ingroup and outgroup is characterized. Moreover, the present findings are consistent with the idea that, for high-status groups at least, *avoiding* rather than engaging in conflict or overt discrimination can be a statement both of strength and of a desire to maintain the status quo (Turner, 2005; cf. Scheepers et al., 2006). Here, the potential for losing ingroup status as a result of intergroup competition may be most effectively minimized by reducing the potential for competition to emerge at all.

Limitations and Future Research

We should again emphasize that we do not see the effects of status demonstrated in this research as "fixed" or universal; rather, they are likely to be highly sensitive to the specific nature of the intergroup setting. This is apparent not only from the moderation effects found in the studies reported here but also from more general observation of instances in which members or relatively high-status and/or high-power groups clearly do talk up conflict or tensions with outgroups (e.g., Reicher & Hopkins, 1996).

We suggest that this variability only serves to underline the importance of considering the strategic aspects of status effects and particularly in how the value of specific strategies (e.g., to talk up conflict or play it down) is shaped and constrained by the particularities of the ingroup's position. We have addressed only some of these particularities here (e.g., perceived relevance in study 1) and in some cases only as measured rather than manipulated moderators. Future research would do well to investigate other factors that shape the strategic aspects of status effects on the characterizations of conflict. For one thing, the ability of high-status groups to strategically downplay conflict with a transgressing outgroup should depend on how threatening or challenging the transgression (or the outgroup more generally) is seen to be. Although threat can take numerous forms (Riek et al., 2006; W. G. Stephan & Stephan, 2000), one possibility for future research would be to operationalize it in terms of the perceived stability of intergroup status relations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), focusing on expectations about the future status of the ingroup and outgroup (e.g., Doosje, Spears, & Ellemers, 2002). In addition to measuring threat or the stability of status relations as a process variable, it would also be possible to directly examine its role as a moderator of the effects of status, most likely by manipulating the expected future status relations between the groups.

Future research could also test the present hypotheses in settings in which status relations are not as clearly defined on objective criteria as they are in the contexts employed here, making status relations themselves more open to contestation. We would suggest that such circumstances are themselves likely to contribute to conflict being acknowledged by high-status groups. Specifically, ambiguity in the nature of status relations is likely to be construed as threatening by members of high-status groups, thereby reducing the extent to which conflict with lower-status outgroups can be strategically downplayed. Relatedly, the addition of a control condition in which status relations are not described at all would shed further light on whether the effect of status on the characterization of conflict is driven more by the high-status or low-status group or whether both contribute equally to the asymmetry.

There would also be value in directly examining the more covert intergroup strategies that may accompany high-status groups' tendency to overtly downplay conflict. As we argue earlier, it is unlikely that this tendency simply reflects avoidance on the basis of fear (a "flight" response; Haslam & Reicher, 2006).

It is possible, for example, that downplaying the potential for conflict provides an opportunity for the ingroup to note the impropriety and undeservedness of the outgroup—and, by seeming to take the moral high ground, the magnanimous and virtuous nature of the ingroup (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). Overt magnanimity may also be accompanied by less overtly conflictual forms of action, such as isolating and targeting "extreme" individuals ("troublemakers") in an outgroup rather than targeting an outgroup as a whole (and perhaps even enlisting the help of other outgroup members in doing so).

More broadly, the present research speaks to the possibility of looking beyond overt discrimination, bias, or oppression as the preferred or most effective strategies for maintaining high ingroup status (Reynolds, Turner, & Haslam, 2000). Instead, high status may be more effectively maintained through strategies that *reduce* the possibilities of group-level competition and conflict. Even in the present settings—which might be considered a worst-case scenario for the high-status ingroup in terms of the outgroup recognizing and directly acting against the ingroup's high status—the possibility still exists to downplay and avoid overt conflict (at least relative to when the ingroup has low status) rather than face it directly. This suggests that the protection of high status may be better served in the first instance by strategies that attempt to reduce the relevance of particular intergroup comparisons (e.g., by promoting different intergroup comparisons; cf. Leach et al., 2002) or by attempting to manage sociostructural relations between the groups so that they are seen as positive—or at least not seen as negative—by the low-status outgroup (e.g., through tokenism, Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990; paternalistic helping, Nadler & Halabi, 2006; or legitimizing ideologies, Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Together, these possibilities represent a highly important, but under-researched aspect of the relations between groups of unequal status, particularly in terms of the potential for social change.

In terms of the place of downplaying conflict within the repertoire of strategies available to groups—and high-status groups in particular—it is clearly only one of a considerable range of possibilities. Notably, the conditions under which high-status groups have been hypothesized to show the most overt, oppressive behaviors (namely, when their own status is perceived as legitimate but unstable—Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 46; see also Haslam, 2004, chapter 2) have also been found to produce relatively benevolent forms of intergroup behavior by other researchers (e.g., Scheepers et al., 2006). In terms of understanding this variability, it is important to recognize that there is a temporal dynamic to intergroup relationships (see, for example, Condor, 1996), with intergroup strategies consisting not just of "one-off" events but of behaviors that are calibrated in view of ongoing, unfolding dynamics between groups (Doosje & Haslam, 2005; Drury & Reicher, 1999, 2005). It is therefore possible that initial attempts by a high-status group to play down conflict may, if the outgroup continues to press a characterization of the relationship as conflictual, subsequently give way to overt retaliation by the high-status group. In short, there are likely to be points at which the velvet glove comes off to reveal the iron fist (Jackman, 1994). More generally, there would be much value in explicitly examining *transitions* over time from one intergroup strategy to another (Livingstone, 2014), as a function of ongoing interactions between groups.

Conclusions

The present research helps shed some light on the strategic motives that can determine whether group members are prepared to acknowledge or downplay conflict with an outgroup. In particular, the findings underline the importance of intergroup status in shaping group members' intergroup strategies and support the idea that acknowledging or downplaying conflict is an important strategic response in itself that should not be taken for granted in analyses of intergroup relations. Rather, the very existence or scope of conflict can itself be a site of contestation among protagonists. This is because, as the present research has shown, the strategic defense of high status may sometimes be best served not by openly declaring that "this is war!," but rather by suggesting use that "we have no quarrel with you."

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