

Open Borders, Restrained Change: How Group Permeability Shapes Intergroup Evaluations and Social Hierarchy

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Abstract

Building on Social Identity Theory (SIT), the dimensional compensation model (DCM) suggests that people rely on the Big Two dimensions of social evaluation to manage their group identity: members of low (high) status groups compensate their relative lower (higher) standing competence by stressing their higher (lower) level on warmth. Because SIT highlights permeability as an important structural variable that shapes people's identity management strategies, we hypothesized that stronger permeability should induce less compensation, especially on warmth. In Studies 1a, 1b, and 2 (total $N=1,694$), we measured permeability using a social ladder paradigm. In Study 3 ($N=2,263$), we manipulated permeability by relying on a fictitious company scenario. Our results confirm that judges were less inclined to compensate when permeability was high rather than low. These findings support the idea that permeability is an important structural variable that shapes the compensation effect for both high- and low-status perceivers.

Keywords: social evaluation, compensation, social identity, intergroup relations, permeability

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Introduction

In an era of globalization and growing inequality, with individuals migrating in search of better living conditions and lower-status citizens experiencing a growing difficulty in climbing the social ladder, it becomes more crucial than ever to examine how social groups come across in

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people's eyes (Yzerbyt, Koch et al., 2025). In this regard, one key aspect may well be whether group boundaries are porous or watertight. Indeed, a critical question is to understand better how group stereotypes evolve in contexts where individuals increasingly want to move from one group to another, depending on whether this is possible or not. This question directly ties into two important research traditions. The first one concerns the rich body of evidence on social evaluation (Abele et al., 2021; Yzerbyt, Koch et al., 2025). The second has to do with the abundant work on the role of social structural variables and, more specifically, intergroup permeability on group members' perceptions and behaviors (Armenta et al., 2017; Ellemers et al., 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Dimensional Compensation

As far as social evaluation is concerned, current wisdom has it that people form an impression of individuals or groups by relying on two fundamental dimensions, known as the Big Two (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Fiske et al., 2002; Yzerbyt et al., 2005). First, the so-called vertical dimension encompasses notions of competence and agency and, more broadly, refers to personality attributes that contribute to "getting ahead", i.e., progressing and climbing the social ladder. Second, the horizontal dimension pertains to warmth and communion and denotes traits that facilitate "getting along", cooperating, and securing fruitful relations with others. Research reveals that the relationship between these two dimensions largely depends on the context of evaluation. Whereas the relationship between the dimensions generally tends to be orthogonal if not positive (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, 2014, 2018; Ellemers, 2017; Ellemers & van den Bos, 2012), a negative relationship between the dimensions emerges when social perceivers are confronted with two targets, leading to a phenomenon known as compensation (Judd et al., 2005; Kervyn et al., 2010; Yzerbyt et al., 2005, 2008).

Summing up a large body of evidence, the Dimensional Compensation Model (DCM; for

reviews, see Yzerbyt, 2016, 2018) posits that, when perceivers are contemplating two social targets, they compensate a group's advantageous position on one of the two dimensions of evaluation by minimizing or even reversing the position difference on the other dimension. Yzerbyt et al. (2005) brought the phenomenon to light by showing that both Belgian and French participants rated the Belgians as less competent but warmer than the French, allowing both groups to come out positively from the comparison. Subsequent experimental evidence showed that manipulating the asymmetry on the vertical dimension leads to compensatory evaluations on the horizontal dimension, and vice versa (Cambon & Yzerbyt, 2017; Judd et al., 2005; Yzerbyt et al., 2008). Interestingly, the nature of the two dimensions would seem to be somewhat different (Yzerbyt & Cambon, 2017). Because the vertical dimension is closely tied to social structure and factors such as status, power, and resources (Carrier et al., 2014; Hornsey, 2008; Yzerbyt & Corneille, 2005), it generally comes across as more objective and, as a consequence, less negotiable than the horizontal dimension. In contrast, because the horizontal dimension reflects relational aspects between groups, it is more open to interpretation and subjective.

The available research on the DCM shows that the compensation pattern emerges both among impartial observers and group members involved in the comparison (Judd et al., 2005; Kervyn et al., 2008; Yzerbyt et al., 2005). When observers evaluate groups to which they do not belong, compensation arises from structural constraints and justice concerns, distributing benefits across dimensions. For group members, however, compensatory evaluations are assumed to be driven by the need to maintain a positive image when comparing one's group to another group (Cambon & Yzerbyt, 2018; Yzerbyt, 2018). In line with social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), compensation is thus best seen as an identity management strategy that should prove sensitive to the social structure.

Social Identity Theory

According to SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), four aspects characterize a social structure, namely the *status difference* between the groups, the *legitimacy* of the groups' relationship, the *stability* of intergroup relations, and the *permeability* of group boundaries. Each of these components shapes how groups relate to each other, influencing groups' and group members' reactions in how they manage their identity. Status differences refer to the core of social hierarchy, that is, the relative standing or prestige of one group over another. When these differences are recognized and accepted, comparisons between groups tend to contribute to harmonious intergroup relations (Cambon et al., 2015). Legitimacy and stability involve the perceived fairness and likelihood of change of the status hierarchy. That is, when a given social hierarchy is perceived as legitimate and stable, group members, both of the advantaged and of the disadvantaged group, accept the social order (Jost & Banaji, 1994), sometimes even disregarding the discrimination against disadvantaged groups (Jost & Kay, 2005; Major et al., 2002; Major & Kaiser, 2017).

The structural factor at the heart of the present effort, i.e., permeability, exerts yet another constraint on identity management strategies, particularly for low-status group members. As a rich body of SIT research reveals, a permeable social system allows for mobility between the groups and, as a result, leads low-status group members to identify less with their ingroup (Ellemers et al., 1988) and to favour an individual strategy for identity management (individual upward mobility) rather than a collective one (e.g., engaging in collective action). When confronted with an impermeable system that hinders mobility between the groups, low-status individuals are more inclined to rely on collective strategies such as social change, either actual, i.e., social conflict, or symbolic, i.e., social creativity. Specifically, the latter strategy consists of "redefining or altering the elements of the comparative situation" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 43) to achieve positive distinctiveness (Boen & Vanbeselaere, 2002; Hersby et al., 2009; Mummendey & Schreiber, 1983). In sharp contrast, permeability, that is, the

possibility to move from one group to another (Armenta et al., 2017), influences identity management strategies and affects intergroup perceptions in radically different ways. Indeed, perceiving the social hierarchy as permeable diminishes group identification (Ellemers et al., 1988) and fosters individual mobility among low-status group members (Boen & Vanbeselaere, 2002), while triggering a fear of status loss among high-status group members (Johnson, Terry, & Louis, 2005; Scheepers, 2017; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005; Scheepers et al., 2009).

Compensation and the Social Structural Aspects

According to DCM, people's propensity to produce compensatory judgments is sensitive to the structural features, i.e., status, stability, legitimacy, and permeability, that characterize the specific intergroup comparison at hand. While the status difference between the groups defines a key aspect of the social structure and the general pattern of the group evaluations, the other components are more concerned with the intergroup relations and directly shape the strategies that group members may adopt to maintain a sense of (subjective) positive distinctiveness.

Status Differences

Compensation reflects a trade-off between the vertical and the horizontal dimensions: a group perceived as more competent is viewed as less warm, and vice versa. The vertical dimension directly refers to the status differences, as it is seen as structurally grounded (see also Fiske et al., 2002; Yzerbyt & Cambon, 2017). In this context, high- and low-status groups adopt different strategies to achieve a positive social identity. Low-status groups compensate for a vertical disadvantage by favouring their ingroup on the horizontal dimension, thus engaging in social creativity (Cadinu & Cerchioni, 2001; Lemaire, 1974; Mummendey & Schreiber, 1983). High-status groups, enjoying their ingroup vertical advantage, acknowledge outgroup horizontal qualities in a gesture of "noblesse oblige" (Sachdev & Bourhis,

1985; Vanbeselaere et al., 2006), presumably to appear in a good light as well as to secure cooperation. In sum, despite the presence of distinct underlying motives, both high- and low-status groups produce a similar pattern of evaluations across dimensions (Cambon & Yzerbyt, 2018; for a review, see Yzerbyt, 2018).

Stability and Legitimacy

Beyond status difference, the stability and legitimacy of the relations between the groups also orient people's social evaluations (Bettencourt et al., 2001; Ellemers et al., 1990, 1993; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For instance, Oldmeadow and Fiske (2012) showed that, while the vertical dimension is less sensitive to the relational components of the social structure, the horizontal dimension is highly affected, especially by perceived legitimacy. Legitimacy amplifies compensation so that the more legitimate the status difference, the more both ingroup and outgroup are judged favourably, each on their relevant dimension, producing a stronger compensation pattern (Cambon & Yzerbyt, 2017; Cambon et al., 2015; Yzerbyt et al., 2005). Conversely, perceived illegitimacy fosters outright ingroup favouritism on the part of both parties (Durante et al., 2017; Ellemers et al., 1993).

Permeability

Unlike research on legitimacy and stability, research on compensation has paid little attention to the role of permeability. One notable exception is a study by Dang et al. (2017, Study 2). The authors conducted their research within the context of demographic shifts between rural and urban Chinese populations. They hypothesized that compensation would be reduced when the movement of rural citizens into urban environments was perceived as common and easy (i.e., permeable) rather than difficult (i.e., impermeable). They argued that both the low-status group (rural population) and the high-status group (urban population) should compensate less in case of permeable than impermeable boundaries because of ingroup favoritism among high-status

group members and outgroup favoritism among low-status group members.

Contrary to the authors' claim, the data revealed no reliable effect of their manipulation of permeability on compensation. Moreover, and running against their predictions, supplementary analyses showed that the compensation pattern emerged among members of both groups when group boundaries were impermeable. When boundaries were permeable, high-status group members showed less ingroup favoritism, mainly due to a smaller distinction between the two groups on the vertical dimension, but low-status group members manifested ingroup instead of the predicted outgroup favoritism. Although this single study proves promising on some levels, it falls short of materializing the authors' predictions, possibly because of a marked lack of power.

Although our theoretical rationale similarly suggests that permeability will moderate compensation for members of high- and low-status groups (Niens & Cairns, 2003), we predict somewhat different consequences as a function of the evaluation dimension. For low-status group members, low permeability should prevent individual advancement and should thus favor a collective strategy, such as social creativity. In contrast, high permeability should promote individual mobility over social creativity. As a result, low-status group members should compensate less when they face high rather than low permeability, because the possibility of upward mobility reduces their need to seek positive distinctiveness on the horizontal dimension. Turning to high-status group members, low permeability secures their hierarchical advantage, allowing them to appear magnanimous by conceding a horizontal advantage to lower-status groups. Conversely, high permeability should heighten competitive concerns, resulting in less magnanimity or "noblesse oblige" (Vanbeselaere et al., 2006). This should lead to less compensation due to a reduced willingness to concede horizontal advantages when the social hierarchy is permeable as opposed to impermeable (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005). In sum, whereas Dang et al. (2017) argued

that permeability reduces compensation through changes in global perceptions, i.e., across both vertical and horizontal dimensions, the present research proposes that permeability reduces compensation because this alters perceptions of groups mainly on the horizontal dimension.

Overview of the Studies and Hypotheses

We aimed to investigate how compensation varies among low- and high-status group members involved in an asymmetrical status comparison as a function of perceived intergroup permeability. Our main hypothesis stipulates that the compensation pattern (Target by Dimension interaction) should be larger under low than high permeability (H1). Moreover, given the more subjective nature of the horizontal dimension, we expected permeability to affect the horizontal dimension more than the vertical dimension (H2). Finally, we expected the advantage of the low-status group on the horizontal dimension to decrease as permeability increases (H3).

We tested these hypotheses in four studies. In Studies 1a, 1b, and 2, we measured participants' perception of societal permeability and their subjective position in the social hierarchy. Low-status participants (Study 1a) compared their ingroup with a higher-status outgroup, while high-status participants (Study 1b) compared with a lower-status outgroup. In Study 2, participants self-identifying as middle-status were experimentally assigned to either a low- or high-status condition by being asked to compare with higher- or lower-status groups, respectively. Study 3 extended these findings using a fully controlled design that manipulated both participants' status and intergroup permeability.

Studies 1a, 1b, and 2

Data Collection

We collected data from American participants through Prolific Academic (www.prolific.co) at a rate of £6.00/hour. We asked participants to

position themselves on a 10-rank social ladder (Goodman et al., 2001) representing their subjective social status, with rank 1 indicating the lowest status and rank 10 the highest. This measure was used to assign participants identifying as low status (rank 3 or 4) to Study 1a, participants identifying as high status (ranks 7 or 8) to Study 1b, and participants identifying as moderate status (ranks 5 or 6) to Study 2. Due to their extreme location and their small number, participants locating themselves on ranks 1, 2, 9, or 10 were excluded from the analyses.

Based on previous similar studies, we anticipated observing a three-way interaction between target group status, dimension, and permeability, with an effect size of $d=0.155$ in Study 1a. We conducted a power analysis to determine the sample size necessary to achieve 80% statistical power for detecting this effect size at $\alpha=.05$. The analysis revealed that a minimum of 544 participants would be required to meet these criteria. Based on prior studies using the same social ladder procedure (see Yzerbyt et al., 2022), we anticipated that approximately 30% of the participants would position themselves at ranks 3 and 4 of the ladder. To ensure adequate representation across all studies, we recruited a total of 1,887 participants. After excluding individuals who failed attention or manipulation checks, or whose responses lacked variance (e.g., identical ratings across entire scales), the final sample sizes for the different studies were: Study 1a, $N=542$ (47.4% women, $M_{age}=38.07$, $SD_{age}=13.64$); Study 1b, $N=446$ (46.4% women, $M_{age}=41.95$, $SD_{age}=14.93$); Study 2, $N=706$ (52.4% women, $M_{age}=40.55$, $SD_{age}=14.48$). Although the initially planned sample size was 544 participants for the three-way interaction, some studies included fewer subjects. Still, a sample of 542, 446, and 706 (split into high- and low-status participants) provides 80% power to detect an effect size of $d=0.12$ ($\eta^2_p=.003$), 0.13 ($\eta^2_p=.004$), and 0.14 ($\eta^2_p=.01$), respectively. The effect observed in this primary analysis exceeds this minimal detectable effect size, indicating that the study had sufficient power to reliably detect an effect of this magnitude. This approach ensured adequate sample sizes for

examining the targeted effects across the first three studies.

Study 1a

In Study 1a, we aimed to explore how perceived intergroup permeability moderated the compensation pattern and specifically the extent to which low-status group members judge their group higher on the horizontal dimension than a high-status target group. In other words, we hypothesized that compensation would be less marked among participants who perceive society to be more, as opposed to less, permeable. The preregistration for this study can be found here: https://osf.io/9sp26/?view_only=b9edc8b43ef244ac95f4884b950285a8.

Method

Procedure

For Study 1a, we included participants who positioned themselves at ranks 3 or 4 on the social ladder, indicative of low social status. We then asked them to convey their perceptions of societal permeability, i.e., the extent to which they believed individuals could generally move up or down the social hierarchy. Next, participants had to focus on two groups, their ingroup and one outgroup located three ranks higher than themselves (i.e., a group at ranks 6 or 7). To consolidate their impressions of both groups, they were asked to imagine and describe the typical life of people in these two groups (Judd et al., 2005). Participants then evaluated the two groups on a series of traits tapping the vertical and horizontal dimensions of social evaluation. Finally, they provided demographic information, including their age, gender, and the highest educational attainment of both parents, before being debriefed.

Measures

Social Status. We followed the Goodman et al. (2001) procedure to measure the social rank with a 10-point scale displaying a drawing ladder with ten ranks (see supplemental material).

Participants were then asked to indicate the rank that best represents where they think their group stands on the ladder (see Yzerbyt et al., 2022).

Perceived Permeability. We measured perceived permeability using the first six items of Day and Fiske (2017) and 7-point scales from 1 (*definitely disagree*) to 7 (*definitely agree*). Two example items read “It is not too difficult for people to change their position in society” and “Most people end up staying in the same social class for their entire lives” (reverse-coded).

Social Evaluation. Following Barbedor et al. (2024), we assessed participants’ ratings of the target groups on the vertical and horizontal dimensions using twenty traits presented in random order. We used ten traits to assess the vertical dimension (competent, intelligent, capable, smart, skilful, self-assured, assertive, decisive, determined, and ambitious) and ten traits to assess the horizontal dimension (cordial, sociable, warm, agreeable, friendly, honest, moral, trustworthy, sincere, and reliable) with ratings on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

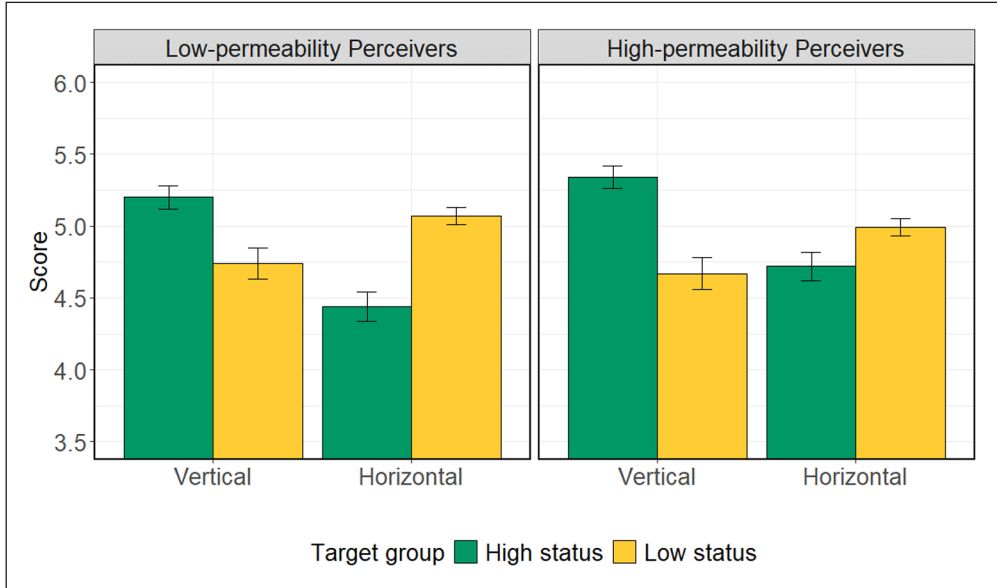
Results

Our analysis relied on a 2 (target group status: high vs. low) by 2 (dimension: vertical vs. horizontal) by permeability (continuous) mixed model, with the first two factors varying within participants. We included participants and items as random intercepts. For reasons of space limitation, we only focus here on the most relevant effects. Mean ratings can be found in the supplemental material (Table S01a). For complete results of the general model, including main effects as well as interaction effects, see Table S1.1.

In line with DCM, a significant target group by dimension confirmed the presence of a compensation pattern, $b = -1.01$, $t(21114) = -45.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. Whereas participants gave higher vertical judgments to the high-status ($M = 5.27$, $SE = 0.01$) than to the low-status target group ($M = 4.70$, $SE = 0.02$; $b = 0.57$, $t(21114) = 35.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$), the reverse pattern materialized on the horizontal dimension

Figure 1

Social Evaluation as a Function of Perceived Permeability (-1 SD/ $+1$ SD), Dimension, and Target Group in Study 1a



Note. Error bars represent standard error.

($M = 4.58$, $SE = 0.02$, and $M = 5.03$, $SE = 0.01$, for high-status and low-status, respectively, $b = -0.45$, $t(21114) = -28.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$).¹

More importantly, and in line with our first hypothesis (H1), the three-way interaction proved significant, $b = 0.06$, $t(21114) = 3.03$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 < .00$. Looking at participants located at -1 SD and $+1$ SD of the permeability measures confirmed the presence of a stronger compensation effect, i.e., a target group by dimension interaction, among the low-permeability perceivers, $b = -1.08$, $t(21114) = -34.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, than the high-permeability perceivers, $b = -0.94$, $t(21114) = -29.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$ (see Figure 1).

Also, as predicted (H2), the target group by permeability interaction was stronger on the horizontal, $b = 0.16$, $t(21114) = 11.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, than on the vertical dimension, $b = 0.10$, $t(21114) = 7.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$. Decomposing the three-way interaction for the vertical dimension first, low-permeability perceivers saw less of

a difference between the two groups, $b = 0.45$, $t(21114) = 20.26$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, than high-permeability perceivers did, $b = 0.68$, $t(21114) = 30.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Looking at the horizontal dimension, and as hypothesized (H3), low-permeability perceivers affirmed their advantage more, $b = -0.62$, $t(21114) = -27.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .035$, than high-permeability perceivers did, $b = -0.27$, $t(21114) = -11.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

Discussion

In Study 1a, we examined the relationship between perceived societal permeability and the compensation effect among judges from low-status groups. Our data confirmed the presence of compensation. That is, while low-status group members generally acknowledged the advantage of the high-status group on the vertical dimension, they asserted their advantage on the horizontal dimension, in line with the idea of social creativity

(Lemaine, 1974; Mummendey & Schreiber, 1983; Tajfel, 1981; Yzerbyt et al., 2005).

Supporting our hypotheses, perceived permeability moderated the compensation pattern (H1). Specifically, low-permeability perceivers manifested more compensation than high-permeability perceivers did, confirming the attenuating role of permeability on compensation.

Consistent with previous research highlighting the more consensual and objective nature of the vertical dimension (Yzerbyt & Cambon, 2017; Yzerbyt, Rohmer et al., 2025), judgments on this dimension were less affected by permeability than judgments on the horizontal dimension (H2). In essence, even though our findings on the vertical dimension can be seen as a manipulation check, the observed pattern also supports our conjecture that our focus should be on the horizontal dimension.

We confirmed our third hypothesis (H3) that compensation was less marked as perceived permeability increased, mainly because of participants' judgments on the horizontal dimension. In other words, the more participants perceived society to be permeable, the less they were likely to assert their advantage on the horizontal dimension, thereby showing a more modest compensation pattern.

Study 1b

Study 1b aimed to show how perceived permeability moderated the compensation pattern, but from the perspective of high-status group members. We again hypothesized that compensation would be less marked among participants who perceive society to be more, as opposed to less, permeable. The preregistration for this study can be found here: https://osf.io/udyr4/?view_only=7bfc4208a66e4a60887ce4f70089a910.

Method

Study 1b included 446 participants who positioned themselves at ranks 7 or 8 on the social ladder (Goodman et al., 2001). As in Study 1a, we asked participants for their views about societal

permeability (Day & Fiske, 2017).² Participants then evaluated their ingroup and an outgroup ranked three ranks below their ingroup in random order, assessing both vertical and horizontal dimensions. The measures were identical to those employed in Study 1a.

Results

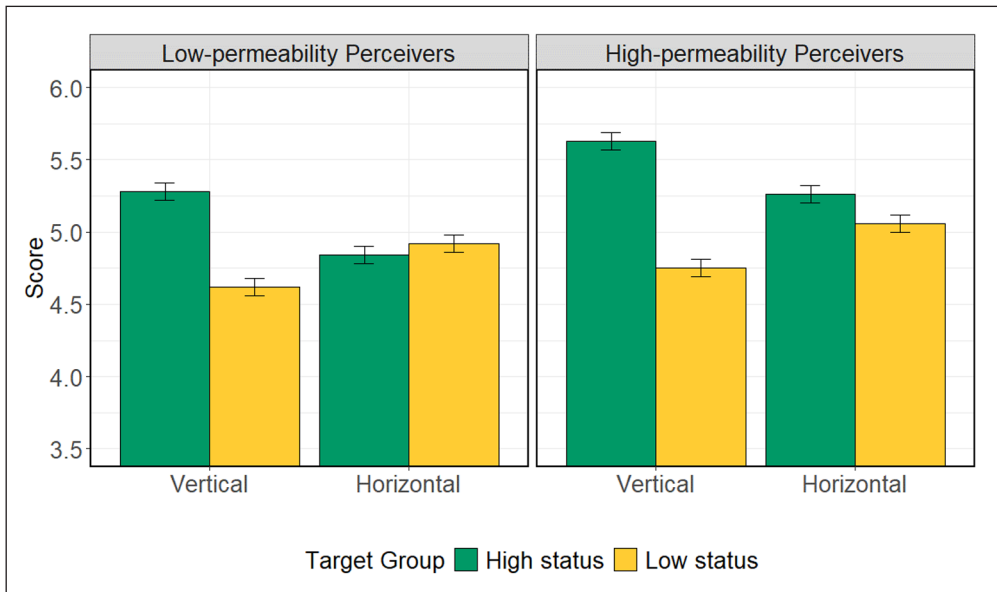
The analysis relied on a 2 (target group status: high vs. low) by 2 (dimension: vertical vs. horizontal) by permeability (continuous) mixed model, with the first two factors varying within participants. We included participants and items as random intercepts. As before, we focus here only on the most relevant effects. Mean ratings can be found in the supplemental material (Table S01b). For exhaustive results of the general model, see Table S2.1.

Supporting DCM, a target group by dimension revealed the presence of compensation, $b = -0.72$, $t(17370) = -31.67$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2_p = .06$. Whereas participants gave much higher vertical judgments to the high-status ($M = 5.46$, $SE = 0.01$) than to the low-status target group ($M = 4.68$, $SE = 0.02$; $b = 0.77$, $t(17370) = 48.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .12$), this was less the case on the horizontal dimension ($M = 5.05$, $SE = 0.02$, and $M = 4.99$, $SE = 0.02$, for high-status and low-status, respectively, $b = 0.06$, $t(17370) = 3.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p < .00$), although the pattern did not reverse.

Although the three-way interaction, $b = 0.02$, $t(17370) = 1.17$, $p = .240$, failed to reach significance (H1), the pattern of the interaction was consistent with the one obtained in Study 1a. As per H2, the target group by permeability interaction seemed more marked, albeit not significantly different, on the horizontal dimension (see Table S2.3), $b = 0.12$, $t(17370) = 8.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .00$, than on the vertical dimension (see Table S2.2), $b = 0.09$, $t(17370) = 6.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .00$ (see Figure 2). Decomposing this horizontal interaction and testing H3, the advantage of the low-status group for the low-permeability perceivers, $b = -0.08$, $t(17370) = -3.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p < .00$, reversed for the high-permeability perceivers,

Figure 2

Social Evaluation as a Function of Perceived Permeability (+1 SD/−1 SD), Dimension, and Target Group in Study 1b



Note. Error bars represent standard error.

$b = 0.20$, $t(17370) = 8.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, indicating ingroup favouritism.

Discussion

Study 1b examined the relation between perceived societal permeability and the compensation effect among high-status group members. The present data pointed to a form of compensation whereby the clear difference between the groups on the vertical dimension is less marked on the horizontal dimension. Contrary to H2, the effect of permeability was not different across the dimensions. As expected, high-status participants clearly affirmed their advantage on the vertical dimension, even more so when they perceived society as highly permeable. At the same time, the advantage of the low-status target group on the horizontal dimension was critically influenced by permeability. Indeed, whereas low-permeability perceivers conceded the horizontal advantage to the low-status group, high-permeability perceivers

did not. Instead, high-permeability perceivers showed horizontal ingroup favouritism. In other words, and in line with our rationale (H3), permeability reduced the horizontal advantage of the low-status group, so much so that high-permeability perceivers produced ingroup favouritism on both dimensions.

Although the general picture emanating from the three-way interaction replicated the one observed in Study 1a (H1), it failed to reach significance. A possible explanation for this discrepancy is that high-status participants are generally more sensitive to the norm of nondiscrimination. Research shows that alleviating concerns for this specific norm facilitates the expression of harsher judgments about members of low-status groups on the part of members of high-status groups (Cambon & Yzerbyt, 2018). Because this norm and its associated self-presentation concerns may indeed play a significant role in evaluations expressed by members of high-status groups,

this renders the derogation of low-status groups rather difficult, even when participants believe society to be highly permeable (see also Schmitz & Yzerbyt, 2022).

One issue worth noting is that participants are not fully comparable in Studies 1a and 1b. This is because participants in each of these studies located themselves at different levels on the social ladder. Clearly, a more satisfactory approach would be to rely on participants who have the same status and ask them to contemplate their own group and another group that enjoys either a higher or a lower status than the ingroup. This is what we did in Study 2.

Study 2

In Study 2, we examined the same hypotheses as in Studies 1a and 1b, but we relied on participants who positioned themselves in the middle of the social ladder, asking them to evaluate their ingroup along with a group located three ranks higher or lower than their own. We hoped to replicate the pattern observed in previous studies. Specifically, we not only expected compensation but also hoped to find stronger compensation among low-permeability than among high-permeability participants. Finally, we predicted a more pronounced target group by permeability interaction for the horizontal than for the vertical dimension. As a set, our predictions should materialize in a three-way interaction such that compensation, i.e., the target group by dimension interaction, would be moderated by the permeability for both high- and low-status participants. The preregistration for this study can be found here: https://osf.io/8h6k3/?view_only=e2e3193349e34a12bc3cc400e29152c5.

Method

In Study 2, we asked 706 participants who reported a moderate status (ranks 5 or 6) on the social ladder to judge their ingroup and an outgroup located either three ranks above or three ranks below themselves. This allowed us to have participants comparing themselves to a higher-status target group endorse the view of low-status

participants, and participants comparing themselves to a lower-status target group adopt the perspective of high-status participants. All the measures of permeability and social evaluation were the same as in Studies 1a and 1b.

Results

The analysis relied on a 2 (participant status: high vs. low) by 2 (target group status: high vs. low) by 2 (dimension: vertical vs. horizontal) by permeability (continuous) mixed model, with the first factor varying between participants and the remaining ones within them. We included participants and items as random intercepts. Mean ratings can be found in the supplemental material (Table S02). For complete results of the general model, see Table S3.1.

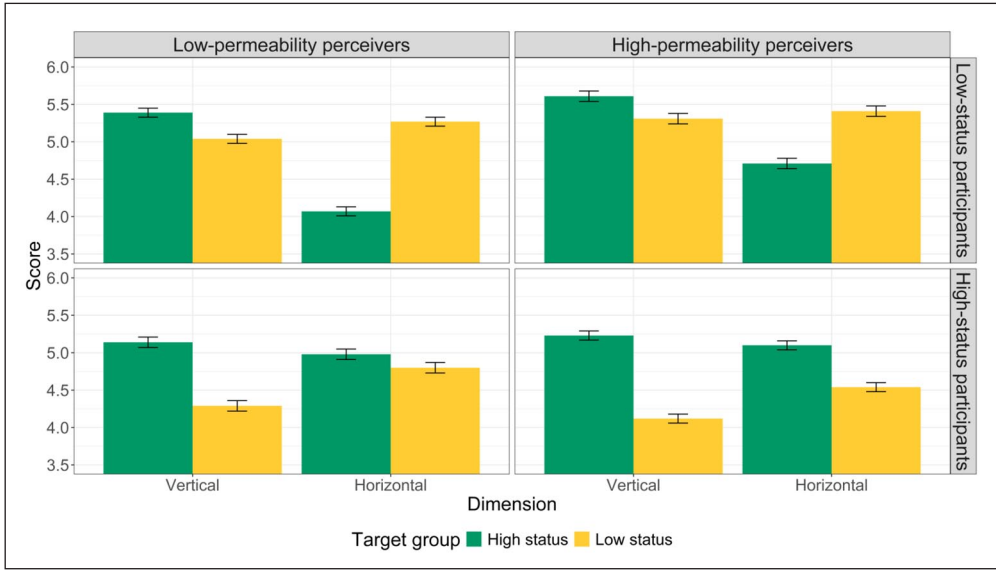
As expected, the compensation pattern proved significant, $b = -0.94$, $t(27504) = -47.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .08$. In addition to being moderated by participant status, $b = 0.67$, $t(27504) = 16.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .01$ (see below), and, in line with H1, this compensation pattern was moderated by permeability, $b = 0.15$, $t(27504) = 8.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .00$. Interestingly, the participant status by target group by dimension by permeability interaction also proved significant, $b = -0.19$, $t(27504) = -5.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .00$. Echoing the combined findings of Studies 1a and 1b, this four-way interaction signalled the presence of a more pronounced target group by dimension by permeability three-way interaction for the low-status participants, $b = 0.24$, $t(27504) = 10.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .00$, than for the high-status participants, $b = 0.05$, $t(27504) = 2.05$, $p = .041$, $\eta^2_p < .001$. To facilitate the comparison with the findings of Studies 1a and 1b, we conducted a separate analysis for each level of participant status.

Low-status Participants

Supporting DCM, a significant target group by dimension revealed the presence of compensation, $b = -1.28$, $t(27504) = -45.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .07$ (see Figure 3, top panel). All other results for low-status participants can be found

Figure 3

Social Evaluation as a Function of Perceived Permeability (+1 SD/−1 SD), Dimension, and Target Group for Low-status Participants in Study 2



Note. Top panel refers to low-status participants. Bottom panel refers to high-status participants. Error bars represent standard error.

in the supplemental material (Table S3.2). Whereas participants gave higher vertical judgments to the high-status ($M = 5.49$, $SE = 0.02$) than to the low-status target group ($M = 5.16$, $SE = 0.02$; $b = 0.33$, $t(27504) = 16.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .01$), the reverse pattern materialized on the horizontal dimension ($M = 4.36$, $SE = 0.02$, and $M = 5.33$, $SE = 0.01$, for high-status and low-status, respectively, $b = -0.95$, $t(27504) = -47.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .08$).

Replicating Study 1a (H2), the target group by dimension by permeability interaction showed a more pronounced target group by permeability interaction on the horizontal dimension, $b = 0.22$, $t(27504) = 13.27$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .01$, than on the vertical dimension where it did not reach significance, $b = -0.02$, $t(27504) = -1.15$, $p = .250$. Decomposing this three-way interaction, the results for the vertical dimension are presented in Table S3.3. On the horizontal dimension, and in accordance with H3 (Table S3.4), we confirmed that low-permeability perceivers affirmed their horizontal advantage more, $b = -1.21$, $t(27504) = -45.10$,

$p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .07$, than high-permeability perceivers did, $b = -0.70$, $t(27504) = -24.29$, $\eta^2_p = .02$.

High-status Participants

A significant target group by dimension interaction, $b = -0.61$, $t(27504) = -21.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .02$, confirmed the presence of the compensation pattern. Mirroring results of Study 1b, participants gave much higher vertical judgments to the high-status ($M = 5.19$, $SE = 0.02$) than the low-status group members ($M = 4.20$, $SE = 0.02$; $b = 0.98$, $t(27504) = 49.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .08$), while this was less the case on the horizontal dimension ($M = 5.05$, $SE = 0.02$, and $M = 4.66$, $SE = 0.01$, for high- and low-status, respectively, $b = 0.37$, $t(27504) = 18.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .01$) even though the pattern did not reverse (see Figure 3, bottom panel). All other results for high-status participants can be found in the supplemental material (Table S3.5).

In line with H2, the target group by dimension by permeability interaction revealed a stronger

target group by permeability interaction on the horizontal dimension, $b = 0.16$, $t(27504) = 9.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, than on the vertical one, $b = 0.11$, $t(27504) = 6.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$.

Decomposing this three-way interaction, the results for the vertical dimension are presented in Table S3.6. Turning to the horizontal dimension (see Table S3.7), both high- and low-permeability perceivers refused to concede the horizontal advantage to the low-status group, showing ingroup favouritism instead. However, and as predicted by H3, this pattern appeared to be stronger among the high-permeability perceivers, $b = 0.56$, $t(27504) = 20.27$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .015$, than the low-permeability perceivers, $b = 0.18$, $t(27504) = 6.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, in line with our rationale that permeability reduces compensation.

Discussion

In Study 2, we looked at the relation between perceived permeability and compensation among moderate-status target group members whom we assigned to a low- or high-status condition. This design allowed us to replicate and extend the results of Studies 1a and 1b.

Replicating the results of Study 1a, low-status participants showed compensation by acknowledging the advantage of the high-status group on the vertical dimension while asserting their advantage on the horizontal dimension. Moreover, the data confirmed our main hypothesis that social creativity was less at work as perceived permeability increased. Indeed, low-status participants expressed their horizontal advantage less when they saw society as more permeable.

Replicating Study 1b, and as predicted, high-status participants showed less “noblesse oblige” when they perceived society to be more permeable. In other words, and confirming H3, permeability strengthens the high-status participants’ ingroup favouritism on both dimensions, leading to less compensatory judgments.

Study 3

Together, the accumulated evidence points toward a reduction of the compensation effect

when intergroup permeability increases. Encouraging as this message may be, we only measured permeability, preventing us from making causal claims. To address this limitation, we designed Study 3 and relied on a fictitious context to manipulate rather than measure intergroup permeability. The preregistration for this study can be found here: https://osf.io/ndpr3/?view_only=502cbba66ed84a00896ef087881d5de5.

Method

Participants

We collected data from 2,503 American participants through Prolific Academic (www.prolific.co) at a rate of £6.00/hour. Based on Study 2, we anticipated observing a target group by permeability effect size of $d = 0.06$. A power analysis to determine the sample size necessary to achieve 80% statistical power for detecting this effect size at $\alpha = .05$ revealed that a minimum of 546 participants per condition (2,184 in total) would be required. After excluding individuals who failed attention or manipulation checks, or whose responses lacked variance (e.g., identical ratings across entire scales), the final sample size included $N = 2,263$ participants (51.0% women, $M_{age} = 38.60$, $SD_{age} = 13.06$).

Procedure

Participants learned about a company involving an eight-level hierarchy. To make it salient that the levels of the company enjoyed a different status, we specified that a higher status in the company went along with more advantages (salary, shares, health coverage, and power). To manipulate the permeability context within the company, we showed participants an internal survey allegedly completed by the employees about the company’s promotion policies. This survey comprised items from an otherwise validated permeability scale (Armenta et al., 2017). In the high (low) permeability condition, most of the employees agreed (disagreed) that low-level employees could climb the ladder and make it to the highest levels. We then asked participants to focus on two groups, one at the second level (assistants) and

the other at the sixth level of the company (directors). Participants had to imagine that they worked either as an assistant or as a director in the company and had to describe the typical life of people from those two groups to consolidate their impression of the groups (Judd et al., 2005). Next, participants provided their social evaluation of the two groups on the two dimensions with the same items as in previous studies (Barbedor et al., 2024) before completing the same permeability scale as in previous studies (Day & Fiske, 2017) and being debriefed.

Results

We first checked our permeability manipulation. As expected, participants perceived more permeability when presented with a high than with a low permeable company, $b = 1.21$, $t(2261) = 26.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .23$.

Our main analysis relied on a 2 (participant status: high vs. low) by 2 (permeability: high vs. low) by 2 (target group status: high vs. low) by 2 (dimension: vertical vs. horizontal) mixed model, with the first two factors varying between participants and the remaining ones within them. We included participants and items as random intercepts.

Mean ratings can be found in the supplemental material (Table S.01a). Again, we only focus here on the most relevant effects. For the complete results, see Table S4.1. As before, we found a significant target group by dimension, confirming the presence of compensation, $b = -1.19$, $t(88227) = -98.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$. Importantly, this compensation pattern was moderated by permeability (H1), $b = 0.17$, $t(88227) = 7.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, with a stronger target group by dimension interaction, i.e., compensation, in the low-permeability, $b = -1.27$, $t(88227) = -75.26$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, than in the high-permeability condition, $b = -1.10$, $t(88227) = -63.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$.

Importantly, the participant status by permeability by target group by dimension interaction also proved significant, $b = 0.16$, $t(88227) = 3.46$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 < .00$. As such, this four-way interaction revealed a more pronounced permeability by target group by dimension interaction for

the high-status participants, $b = 0.26$, $t(88227) = 7.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 < .00$, than for the low-status participants, $b = 0.09$, $t(88227) = 2.66$, $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 < .00$. Again, we broke down the analyses along the two levels of participant status to facilitate the comparison with previous findings.

Low-status Participants

Supporting DCM, a significant target group by dimension confirmed the presence of compensation, $b = -1.19$, $t(88227) = -70.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$ (see Figure 4, top panel). For all other results, see the supplemental material (Table S4.2). Whereas participants gave higher vertical judgments to the high-status ($M = 5.67$, $SE = 0.01$) than the low-status target group ($M = 5.21$, $SE = 0.02$; $b = 0.46$, $t(88227) = 38.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$), the reverse pattern materialized on the horizontal dimension ($M = 4.72$, $SE = 0.01$, and $M = 5.45$, $SE = 0.01$, for high-status and low-status group, respectively, $b = -0.73$, $t(88227) = -60.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$).

Consistent with previous studies (H2), the target group by dimension by permeability interaction showed a stronger target group by permeability interaction for the horizontal dimension, $b = 0.09$, $t(88227) = 3.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 < .00$, than for the vertical dimension (see Table S4.3) where it did not reach significance, $b = -0.00$, $t(88227) = -0.09$, $p = .927$.

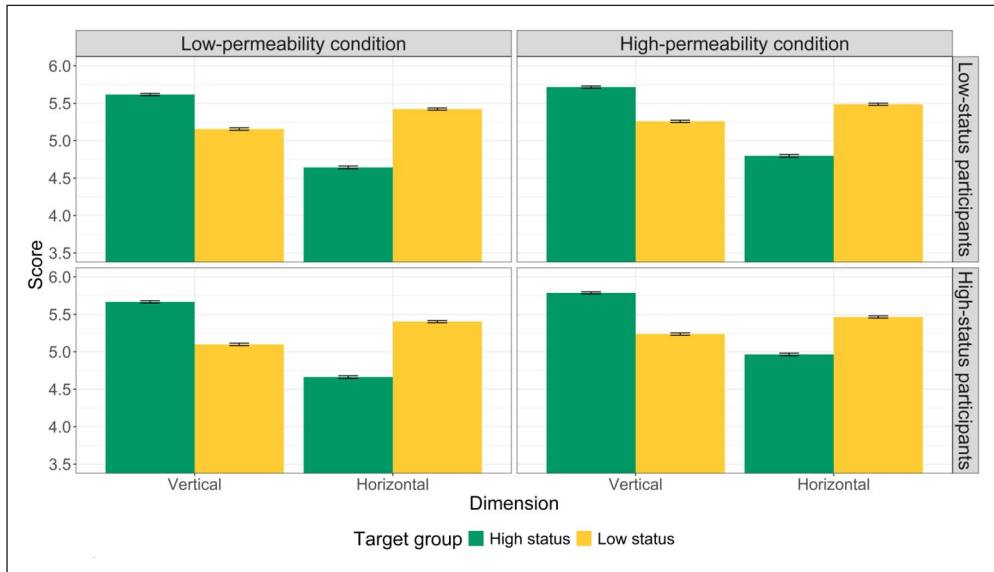
Focusing on the horizontal dimension (see Table S4.4), and as predicted by H3, we found a larger difference between the two target groups, suggesting higher horizontal advantage, in the low-permeability condition, $b = -0.78$, $t(88227) = -45.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, than in the high-permeability condition, $b = -0.69$, $t(88227) = -40.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$.

High-status Participants

In line with DCM, a significant target group by dimension interaction confirmed the presence of compensation, $b = -1.18$, $t(88227) = -69.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$ (see Figure 4, top panel). Exhaustive results of the general model, for the high-status participants, are presented in the supplemental material (Table S4.5). Whereas

Figure 4

Social Evaluation as a Function of Perceived Permeability (+1 SD/−1 SD), Dimension, and Target Group for Low-status Participants in Study 3



Note. Top panel refers to low-status participants. Bottom panel refers to high-status participants. Error bars represent standard error.

participants gave higher vertical judgments to the high-status ($M = 5.73$, $SE = 0.01$) than the low-status target group ($M = 5.17$, $SE = 0.02$; $b = 0.56$, $t(88227) = 46.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .02$), the reverse pattern materialized on the horizontal dimension ($M = 4.81$, $SE = 0.01$, and $M = 5.43$, $SE = 0.01$, for high-status and low-status, respectively, $b = -0.62$, $t(88227) = -51.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .03$).

As expected (H2), the target group by dimension by permeability interaction confirmed that the target group by permeability interaction was more marked on the horizontal dimension, $b = 0.24$, $t(88227) = 9.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .00$, than on the vertical dimension (see Table S4.6) where it did not reach significance, $b = -0.02$, $t(88227) = -0.72$, $p = .472$.

Focusing on the horizontal dimension (see Table S4.7), we found the predicted (H3) larger difference between the two target groups, suggesting higher horizontal advantage, in the low-permeability, $b = -0.74$, $t(88227) = -44.38$,

$p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .02$, than in the high-permeability condition, $b = -0.50$, $t(88227) = -28.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .01$.

Discussion

Study 3 aimed to investigate the impact of permeability on the emergence of the compensation effect by relying on an experimental manipulation rather than an individual difference measure. The results supported our hypotheses. First, regardless of the permeability condition and their status, participants acknowledged the advantage of the high-status group over the low-status group on the vertical dimension. This confirms the more objective nature of the vertical dimension as compared to the horizontal one (Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2012; Yzerbyt & Cambon, 2017). Second, and most importantly, regarding the horizontal dimension, we found a compensation effect, with low- and high-status participants

affirming or conceding, respectively, the advantage to the low-status group. Consistent with our key hypothesis (H3), there was also a reduction of this advantage on the horizontal dimension in the high-permeable compared to the low-permeable condition.

General Discussion

Across four studies, we examined how the permeability of group boundaries shaped group members' ratings of their ingroup and the outgroup on the two fundamental dimensions of social evaluation. Building on the DCM (Judd et al., 2005; Yzerbyt, 2018; Yzerbyt et al., 2005), we expected participants to translate the status position of the groups in terms of the vertical dimension and to compensate by granting the lower status group a more favourable position on the horizontal dimension. More importantly, we hypothesized that participants would compensate less under high than under low permeability, particularly on the horizontal dimension. In three studies, we measured perceived permeability by using a social ladder paradigm. In a final study, we manipulated permeability in the context of a fictitious company.

In line with the DCM literature, our data confirmed the presence of compensation in participants' judgments. Participants rated the low-status group lower than the high-status group on the vertical dimension and higher on the horizontal dimension. More importantly, the data support our hypothesis that the horizontal judgments are more influenced by participants' status and the degree of permeability than the vertical judgments. Turning more specifically to the horizontal dimension, the obtained pattern also clearly aligned with our predictions. When the permeability of the social structure was limited, low-status group members manifested more compensation and enhanced their group's positive distinctiveness via social creativity. In contrast, under high permeability, these same low-status participants did not claim the horizontal dimension so much for themselves but rather started to value the high-status

participants on this front. In other words, and in line with SIT (Ellemers et al., 1988), whereas a decidedly collective strategy, i.e., social creativity, was at work under low permeability, a more individual strategy kicked in under high permeability. As to high-status group members, they conceded a greater advantage to the low-status group on the horizontal dimension as permeability decreased, thereby manifesting the predicted pattern of "noblesse oblige". As a set, these findings provide strong evidence that the degree of permeability moderates identity management strategies and, by way of consequence, weakens the compensation effect.

Strengths

A first positive feature of the present work resides in the fact that we examined the effects of permeability on compensation from the point of view of both low- and high-status group members. We thus observed two different mechanisms that lead to compensation (i.e., social creativity and "noblesse oblige"). Our results proved consistent across studies. A second asset of our research is that we used different approaches to investigate the moderation of the compensation effect by permeability. Whereas we measured participants' perception of the general level of permeability in society in the first studies, we manipulated the permeability in Study 3 by turning to an original manipulation of permeability. Specifically, we used the items of a validated permeability scale (Armenta et al., 2017) as stimuli in a company where employees mostly agreed or disagreed with each statement. Compensation was less pronounced as permeability increased, regardless of operationalization. This level of replication suggests a robust moderation phenomenon.

Interestingly, two differences emerged in the results depending on whether we measured or manipulated permeability. In Study 3, we found (1) a canonical compensation pattern for high-status participants and (2) a stronger moderation of the compensation effect by permeability for the high- than for the low-status participants.

One possible reason may reside in the differential perception of permeability among high-status individuals when manipulating and when measuring permeability. When we measured permeability, we focused on high-status individuals who may feel relatively comfortable with the actual level of permeability. Manipulating permeability, especially in the context of an organization, may have more easily led high-status participants to feel threatened when learning that permeability was as high as the alleged survey seemed to imply. As we see it, this feature does in fact constitute an additional strength of our manipulation in Study 3.

Limitations

To be sure, our work also comes with limitations. Even though we consistently found the permeability moderation in our data, the canonical compensation pattern emerged for low-status group members but less clearly so for high-status group members, except when we manipulated the permeability. This may suggest that high-status group members are generally less inclined to concede an advantage to the out-group than low-status group members, as shown by the stronger target group by dimension interactions observed for low-status participants (Studies 1a and 2) than for high-status participants (Studies 1b and 2). This finding is entirely in line with other data showing that members of high-status groups are not always willing to give up a decent standing of their ingroup on the horizontal dimension (Yzerbyt, Rohmer et al., 2005, 2025). Interestingly, and replicating a great number of findings accumulated in experimental settings (e.g., Schmitz & Yzerbyt, 2022), this difference in the magnitude of compensation between high- and low-status group members disappeared entirely when we manipulated permeability.

Conclusion

Building on social identity theory, our work investigated how group permeability influences

the compensation effect. In four studies, we examined the impact of group permeability, i.e., the possibility for individuals to transition between groups, both using a social ladder paradigm and in a simulated organizational setting. Results indicated that the vertical dimension remained relatively stable regardless of the level of permeability. In contrast, the horizontal dimension was more sensitive to permeability. Specifically, when permeability was high, group members made less of a distinction between the groups on the horizontal dimension. In other words, they capitalized less on the horizontal dimension to compensate for the relative position of the two groups on the vertical dimension. As such, these findings underscore the importance of permeability as a structural factor that moderates and indeed attenuates the compensation effect for both high- and low-status perceivers.

Our findings have important societal implications for understanding how permeability may contribute to the maintenance of social hierarchies. Building on the theoretical insights by Tajfel and his students and the groundbreaking empirical work by Ellemers et al. (1988), social identity work has long taught us that, when group boundaries are impermeable, low-status individuals are more likely to engage in collective strategies of identity management (i.e., social creativity), which can symbolically challenge existing hierarchies. In contrast, when boundaries are permeable, low-status individuals may prioritize individual mobility over collective action. In so doing, they are, perhaps paradoxically, reducing the likelihood of structural change. The present work emphasized how compensatory judgments on the two fundamental dimensions may serve these divergent responses. Moreover, our studies also suggest that growing permeability elicits possible defensive reactions among high-status individuals. These materialize in the decrease and even reversal of the typical compensation pattern, as high-status individuals become increasingly reluctant to concede the advantage of low-status individuals on the horizontal dimension.

Together, these processes suggest that permeability functions as a mechanism that stabilizes

unequal social systems. Because the compensation effect typically occurs in contexts without intergroup conflict and is closely linked to perceptions of social justice, its attenuation by permeability not only shapes intergroup dynamics but also indirectly hinders efforts toward greater social equality.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Additional analyses examined correlations between the vertical and horizontal dimensions within each condition. These analyses did not reveal consistent negative associations between the two dimensions across studies. This pattern absence in the present data suggests that the observed effects primarily reflect intergroup-level evaluation patterns rather than systematic intra-individual trade-offs.
2. We also measured participants' zero-sum beliefs (Różycka-Tran et al., 2015) for exploratory reasons (not reported here).

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