
Chapter 4

Extending the self in space and time: Social identification and existential concerns

*Emanuele Castano, Vincent Yzerbyt, Maria-Paola Paladino,
and Andrea Carnaghi*

The concept of social identity is most influential in modern social psychological theory. A distinctive outcome of the European tradition, it has helped the discipline in one of its most important challenges, namely in modeling the relationship between the individual and the social group.

The concept originated in Tajfel's (1981) early research on intergroup relations and it thus comes as no surprise that empirical work stemming from social identity theory has focused on the consequences of social identification and self-categorization (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), especially in terms of intergroup behavior. Interestingly, however, we know comparatively little when it comes to understanding the determinants of social identification (see Brewer & Harasty, 1996; Stevens & Fiske, 1995). It is on this issue that we focus in the present chapter. Specifically, we propose a perspective on the motives for social identification and argue that social identities may serve, among other needs, the fundamental need of human beings to transcend their mortal fate.

Personal and social identity

Lay people and social psychologists alike would hardly question the assumption that "in the beginning there was the individual". With a standard configuration comprising two legs, two arms, a connecting part in the middle, and a protuberance that we call the head on top, we humans are very easy to identify. Walk down the street and you can count many of us, potentially talk to each of us, and identify idiosyncrasies and similarities between us. And if this was not enough, there is the fact that we do seem to act as single entities most of the time. We are individual units and we are aware of this (this self-awareness turns out to have important consequences on our behavior, as we discuss below).

Yet, if we ponder our emotional and cognitive reactions to a host of small and large events that happen in our daily lives, the idea that we are individual, separate entities begins to crumble. We surely feel joy or anger when we are praised or insulted, but we do so as well when it is our beloved

partner who is honored or criticized, or when our national soccer team scores a goal or suffers a humiliating defeat (Mackie & Smith, 2002; E. R. Smith, 1993; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Gordijn, & Wigboldus, 2002).

These findings are of course consistent with social psychological theory which suggests that our sense of identity extends well beyond our own individuality. The very concept of *social identity* refers precisely to the fact that individuals can see themselves as group members and that the shift from personal to social identity leads to a radical change in the perception of the social world and in the norms that guide behavior (Reicher, 1987; Turner et al., 1987). Furthermore, empirical evidence indicates that individuals include important others (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) as well as their own ingroup in the cognitive representation of their self (Coats, Smith, Claypool, & Banner, 2000). In other words, individuals show a remarkable ability and readiness to extend their sense of self to incorporate others and to see themselves as members of social groups. But why do people identify with social groups?

Brewer's (1991; Brewer & Caporael, Chapter 7, this volume) optimal distinctiveness theory and Hogg and Abrams' (1993; Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Hogg, Chapter 2, this volume) uncertainty reduction model provide two interesting and complementary perspectives on the motives for social identification. In our work, however, we propose that identification with social groups may satisfy yet another need of human beings, arguably a more fundamental one. We propose that social identities provide individuals with a sense of transcendence that is necessary for their psychological equanimity, which is continuously threatened by the awareness of the inevitability of their own death.

Surviving (the awareness of) death

Among the many scholars who addressed the issue of death and examined how human beings cope with the awareness of its inevitability, cultural anthropologist Ernst Becker (1971, 1973) is recognized as one of the most influential. The basic tenet of his general theory of human social behavior revolves around the fact that, with the development of a sophisticated intellect, humans developed self-awareness and with it the awareness of the inevitability of death. This awareness clearly does not come without its costs. In fact, it has the potential to create a paralyzing terror. Fortunately, thanks to their sophisticated intellectual abilities, humans developed cultural conceptions of reality. These conceptions are thought to buffer the anxiety derived from the awareness of the inevitability of death. In other words, the "problem" and the "solution" evolved concurrently.

Intriguing as they are, Becker's (1971, 1973) ideas would probably not have made it into modern social psychological theory, were it not for the work of social psychologists Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon

Solomon. These scholars took on the challenge of testing Becker's intriguing propositions empirically. They also developed them further, into what is now known as terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). According to this theory, the "faith in a culturally derived worldview that imbues reality with order, stability, meaning, and permanence", coupled with the "belief that one is a significant contributor to this meaningful reality" are the two psychological mechanisms that allow humans to maintain psychological equanimity in the face of death (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003, pp. 16–17).

According to the terror management theory, seeing oneself as a "meaningful contributor" corresponds to having positive self-esteem. Support for the theory comes from research demonstrating the existence of a negative correlation between self-esteem and anxiety (for a review, see Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) as well as from work showing that people whose self-esteem has been raised respond to threats with lower levels of anxiety (Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Rosenblatt, 1992, Study 2) and also engage in less vulnerability denial (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Pinel, 1993).

The greatest impact of the terror management theory comes from the research it triggered regarding the link between cultural worldviews and the salience of death thoughts. Terror management theorists reasoned that "if a psychological structure provides protection against the potential terror engendered by knowledge of mortality, then, reminders of mortality should increase the need to maintain that structure" (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997, p. 78). This postulate has been empirically tested in a series of *mortality salience* experiments, in which participants are randomly assigned to an experimental condition in which the idea of death is made salient – for instance by asking them to write a paragraph about their own death – or to a control condition – in which they are asked, say, to write a paragraph about watching television. In endless studies, compared to participants in the control condition, mortality salience participants have been found to value behaviors consistent with their cultural worldview more and to more strongly denigrate individuals who behave contrary to such views (for reviews, see Greenberg et al., 1997; Solomon et al., 1991).

Because people's cultural worldviews are elaborated and maintained within a social group, one can conjecture that the well-documented tendency to enhance the image of the ingroup would be more pronounced when death is salient. Consistent with this hypothesis, Greenberg et al. (1990, Experiment 1) found that, when mortality was made salient, Christian participants viewed Christian targets more positively and Jewish targets more negatively. They also rated Christian targets more positively on a series of traits. In an even more stringent test of this idea, Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, and Simon (1996) found that when personal death was made salient, participants in a minimal group paradigm

displayed greater levels of ingroup bias compared to participants whose death had not been made salient.

The transcendental value of social identity

As is apparent from the above section, the hypothesis that social identity can serve an existential function is indebted to terror management theory. Our perspective differs, however, on one important count. Terror management theory argues that social identity serves an anxiety-buffer role because of its possible relations with self-esteem and because it is the repository of cultural worldviews (see Greenberg et al., 1990). In contrast, we propose that social identity can serve as a buffer for the anxiety because it allows for an extension of the self in space and time. Thanks to this possibility, individuals manage to escape the limitation *par excellence* of their humanity, namely being mortal.

To better appreciate the difference between the terror management theory conception and our own perspective on this issue, it helps to focus on the characteristics of social identity and more precisely on the difference between *social* and *personal* identity. Personal identity is that portion of identity that directly concerns the individual self. Clearly, personal identity is related to our body, which is finite. Our body not only limits us spatially, but it is the ultimate reminder of our limited time (see Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000). With good exercise, a high-quality diet, and a generous dose of luck, an individual can hope to stick around for some 80 years. Due to these limitations, the various experiences that we see associated with our selves are bound to disappear. In other words, our individuality, with its host of private experiences and unique features, will unmistakably come to an end.

The groups with which we may identify do not face the same constraints. Their fate is not linked to a particular human body, and therefore not subject to the decay to which all humans, individually, are. Groups extend spatially well beyond the limits of the individual members and tend to outlive them; members can very often come and go without necessarily threatening the existence of the group. Also, the group is a much more abstract entity than the individuals, and as such is likely to survive for much longer, or at least to be perceived as doing so. This is especially the case for large social entities like ethnic groups, nations, or even ideological categories, which seem to have been constructed with the precise intent to appear immortal (e.g., Anderson, 1991; A. D. Smith, 1995).

If, as we argue, social identity provides a buffer against anxiety, the more chronically it is activated – that is to say, the more central it is to one's sense of self – the less one should be concerned with the idea of one's own demise. We found support for this conjecture in a historical analysis of the consequences of the conquest of Alexander the Great – around 330 BC.

In what is referred to as the pre-Hellenistic era, entities like the tribe or the polis, i.e., the city, were central to a person's understanding of his or her own identity. Such centrality should not be understood simply as an attachment of the individual to his or her group. Rather, it should be thought of as a deeper communion of the self and the community, so much so that the former could be understood only within the latter. Such a primacy of collective identities meant, according to Ulansey, that the problem of individual death was not at the forefront of individuals' psyche: "the fact that the collective would continue after one's personal death was experienced unconsciously as reducing the stress that the knowledge of human mortality might otherwise produce" (Ulansey, 2000, p. 216).

Things changed, however, as a result of Alexander's conquests. The collective identities were lost when the small communities in which they were grounded lost their autonomy in the new Hellenistic imperial order, and as a consequence of an enhancement in communication and transportation that accompanied it. These societal changes are thought to have been so important in modifying individuals' self-perception that they can be summarized by the sentence that "With Alexander begins *man as an individual*" (Tarn, 1968, p. 79). And with the individual as such, the problem of individual death becomes more salient. To say it with terror management theory, the "new individual" had lost what perhaps constituted his foremost anxiety-buffer mechanism.

What we learn from the analyses of this case study in the history of human civilization is that the extent to which different cultural systems and societal arrangements have stressed individual autonomy *versus* connection seems to be related to the way death was, and needed to be, understood. Specifically, death seems to be a great problem when one's identity is highly individualized, and less so when it is highly collective. This conclusion is consistent with our perspective on the role of social identity in dealing with existential concerns.

The loss of corporate identity brings individual mortality to the foreground. Is the reverse true? Does making mortality salient increase the importance of social identity? We believe that this is indeed the case. If social identity is a vehicle for transcendence, then it is reasonable to expect that when people are reminded of their mortality they will attach greater importance to membership in social groups. This can take the form of stronger identification and stronger defenses of the symbolic existence of the ingroup and of its integrity. It is also reasonable to expect that ingroups will be reified to a greater extent, since this process leads to the perception of the group as an entity having real existence, or, as put by Campbell (1958), as high in entitativity. These straightforward hypotheses were tested across a series of experiments in which individuals were asked to think of their own death or were subliminally primed with death-related words. We assessed the effects of these manipulations on the variables outlined above.

It is to the presentation of the results emerging from this research program that we now turn.

Testing the existential value of social identification

A preliminary test of our hypothesis was carried out in a study conducted in Italy and Belgium. The very simple design consisted of priming half of the participants with death, by asking them to write a short paragraph describing the emotions that the thought of their death aroused in them (cf. Greenberg et al., 1990). The other half were asked to engage in a parallel writing task – they were asked to write a short paragraph describing the emotions that arise in them when reading a book. Subsequently, all participants were asked to complete the who-am-I? task, and we counted the social identities that were listed (male/female; Belgian/Italian; student; etc.). Consistent with expectations, participants in the mortality-salient condition listed a greater number of social identities than those in the control condition (Castano & Sacchi, 1999).

A second study allowed for a more elaborate test of our hypothesis (Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, & Sacchi, 2002b). Participants were either asked to write about their death (mortality-salient condition) or to write about reading a book (control condition). After a brief delay, in what was presented to them as the second, unrelated, part of the study, participants in both conditions filled out another questionnaire which included measures of ingroup entitativity (e.g., “Italians have many characteristics in common”, “Italians have a sense of common fate”, “Italy has real existence as a group”; Castano, Yzerbyt, & Bourguignon, 1999), ingroup identification (e.g., “I identify with Italians”, “Being Italian has nothing to do with my identity”), and ingroup bias. The latter consisted of ratings of Italians and Germans (the outgroup) on 10 traits (e.g., gourmet, warm, hard-working).

The pattern of results was highly consistent with our hypothesis. Compared to the control participants, the mortality participants, all Italian students, identified more strongly with Italy, perceived Italy as more entitative, and judged Italians, but not Germans, more positively. Further analyses yielded evidence for the mediating role of entitativity and identification on the impact of the manipulation on ingroup bias, a result that nicely complements previous findings on the impact of mortality salience on ingroup bias (Harmon-Jones et al., 1996) and of entitativity on ingroup bias (Gaertner & Schopler, 1998).

Shifting from common-identity to common-bond groups (Prentice, Miller, & Lightdale, 1994), a third experiment was conducted, on a sample of Belgian undergraduates at the Catholic University of Louvain at Louvain-la-Neuve (Yzerbyt, Castano, & Vermeulen, 1999). After a manipulation of mortality salience of the kind described above, participants were presented with a series of circles that represented the participant himself/

herself and his/her friends. Six different diagrams were proposed, in which the circles could vary in the extent to which they overlapped with each other, going from no overlap at all to an important overlap (cf. Aron et al., 1992). The higher the overlap, the higher the perceived entitativity of the group (see Gaertner & Schopler, 1998). In line with expectations, we observed a higher perception of entitativity of the group of friends in the mortality-salient condition, suggesting that the effect of mortality salience on the tendency of individuals to cling to the ingroup applies to common-bond groups as well.

The findings reviewed above illustrate the fact that when individuals contemplate their own demise, they cling to the ingroup more strongly than when they have not been thinking of their death. However, the origins of the precise psychological mechanism through which such an effect is produced need further consideration.

Research stemming from terror management theory has shown that when mortality is salient, individuals engage in two kinds of behaviors (see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). They utilize *proximal* strategies that supposedly would delay death, like adopting a good diet or engaging in physical exercise. They also engage in the cultural worldview defenses we described above, which because of their bearing no rational relation with death are called *distal*. After all, one is unlikely to prolong one's life by fining prostitutes more harshly (cf. Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). We therefore asked ourselves, what is the precise nature of the mechanisms that we observed in our studies on social identification? Specifically, are mortality-salient participants thinking that they are better off identifying with their countries or another entity because they realize that as single individuals their existence is threatened, or are they largely unaware of the processes that occur when death thoughts are salient? To answer this question, we conducted two studies, in which the death manipulation was subliminal (Castano, 2004) and indirect measures of the extent to which individuals cling to their ingroup were used (Castano, 2004; Yzerbyt, Carnaghi, & Castano, 2003).

A first study relied on a categorization paradigm, in which participants are asked to classify individual targets as members of the ingroup or the outgroup. Research using this paradigm has shown that group members are reluctant to include ambiguous targets in the ranks of the ingroup, and that this tendency results in what has been referred to as the "ingroup overexclusion effect" (Leyens & Yzerbyt, 1992; Yzerbyt, Leyens, & Bellour, 1995). This effect has been interpreted as stemming from the motivational concerns of individuals to protect the ingroup from the erroneous inclusion of outgroup members. This interpretation is supported by evidence that the level of ingroup identification moderates the magnitude of overexclusion. Castano, Yzerbyt, Bourguignon, and Seron (2002a) asked Northern Italian participants to classify pictures as Northern Italians or Southern Italians

and found that highly identified Northern Italians classified a greater number of pictures in the Southern Italian category. In contrast, Northern Italians who did not identify strongly with their ingroup did not show any tendency to overexclude from the ingroup. The degree of ingroup overexclusion can thus be considered a good measure of the importance attached to the ingroup by the participants. Moreover, it has the distinct advantage of being fairly indirect. It was thus used in one experiment in which we attempted to provide further evidence that mortality salience would increase the importance attached to the ingroup.

A series of pictures of male students were first pre-tested among Scottish students at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, so as to be able to classify them into various levels of “Scottishness” or “ingroupness”. Pictures at level 1 tended to be classified as English, pictures at level 5 tended to be classified as Scottish, and the remaining levels consisted of intermediate pictures. This material was then used in an experiment in which half of a sample of Scottish students was primed subliminally with the word “death”, while the other half was primed subliminally with the word “field”. Subsequently, they completed an ingroup–outgroup categorization task in which required classifying the pre-tested pictures as either Scottish (the ingroup) or English (the outgroup).

The subliminal priming paradigm is not only a well-known technique within social cognition in general (Bargh & Pietromonaco, 1982) and stereotyping research in particular (Devine, 1989; Lepore & Brown, 1997), it has been successfully used by Arndt and colleagues (Arndt, Allen, & Greenberg, 2001; Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997) to replicate the classic terror management theory findings. In line with other studies showing that aversive events do not produce effects parallel to mortality salience, subliminally priming the word “death” but not other negative words such as “pain” has been found to produce typical mortality-salience effect. Indeed, only those participants who had been confronted with subliminal presentations of the word “death” were later found to be more positively disposed toward people or ideas that support their worldview and self-esteem, and more negatively toward people or ideas that threaten these two psychological entities (Arndt et al., 1997, Study 2). This pattern strongly suggests that it is not just the negativity of the primes that is at stake but indeed the fact that people are automatically activating the notion of their own death.

Building on previous overexclusion findings, we anticipated that participants in the death-prime condition would show a stronger degree of ingroup overexclusion, particularly at lower levels of ingroupness; that is, for target pictures that the pretest indicated were likely to be categorized as English (i.e., outgroup members). The reverse pattern was expected to emerge for targets that very much looked like ingroup members. This was precisely the pattern that was observed. While at lower levels of

ingroupness, death-prime participants classified more pictures than control participants as outgroup members, the opposite trend was observed at higher levels of ingroupness (Castano, 2004).

In addition to the categorization decisions, the latency for categorization was also recorded. The findings on this additional variable showed that while the control condition revealed no relationship between the type of target to be classified and the categorization latency, most interesting linear and quadratic trends emerged in the mortality-salient condition. Closer inspection of the data suggests that mortality-salient participants took longer to classify pictures when these looked like ingroup members. Moreover, they took longer to classify more ambiguous pictures. This result is entirely consistent with the hypothesis that ingroup–outgroup categorization indeed becomes a more important task under mortality-salient conditions.

The relevance of the results from a study using the ingroup overexclusion paradigm is twofold. First, since subliminal primes were used, the observed difference clearly stems from the operation of some unconscious processes rather than from the deliberate thinking of individuals engaged in resolving the problem of their own demise. Second, the fact that the pattern emerged on indirect measures of “ingroup clinging”, also suggests that participants may not be as much aware that they are boosting their representation of the ingroup as they are when explicit ingroup evaluation measures are used.

Support for the hypothesis that clinging to the ingroup is a spontaneous reaction to the confrontation with death-related stimuli is not restricted to this study, in which we relied on the ingroup overexclusion paradigm. Another study conducted among psychology students at the Catholic University of Louvain at Louvain-la-Neuve yielded highly convergent results (Yzerbyt et al., 2003).

In this study, we hypothesized that individuals perceive a greater overlap between themselves and the ingroup when they find themselves confronted with the idea of their finitude. Concretely, participants first rated the extent to which a series of traits were characteristic of themselves and then, depending on the experimental condition, were instructed to write a paragraph about their own death (mortality-salient condition) or about their leaving their parental home in order to start living on their own (control condition). Subsequently, participants were asked to rate the ingroup (the group of psychologists) on the same traits that they had used to rate the self. Both lists of traits comprised a series of filler traits along with six traits that pretest work had revealed were stereotypical of psychologists. There were three positive traits (empathic, understanding, sensitive) and three negative traits (disorganized, messy, disordered). In order to make participants’ task somewhat less obvious, the order of the presentation of the traits differed between the self and group.¹

The critical dependent variable was the degree of overlap between the self and the ingroup ratings, which was measured by means of a d-square score.

This score provides a measure of the similarity between two profiles (in the present context, the self and the ingroup) while taking into account the distance between the ratings given to the traits. We computed one d-score for the positive traits and one for the negative traits to obtain two indices of self–group similarity. Analyses on these scores revealed that the self–ingroup overlap was much higher in the mortality-salience condition than in the control condition. However, this was the case only for the negative traits. The absence of effects of the manipulation on the positive traits was most likely due to a ceiling effect. Indeed, the self–ingroup overlap on positive traits was very high in both conditions.

These data yield further evidence for the claim that stronger attachment to the ingroup in a mortality-salience, compared to a control condition can be observed on indicators that are not easily controllable by participants. Moreover, because the enhanced self–ingroup overlap occurred on negative traits, the present findings suggest that this phenomenon is not driven by self-serving considerations.

Conclusion

In this chapter we proposed that social identification with entities that are broader and longer lasting than the individual self has a unique value for humans: it allows escape from the *unbearable finitude of being*. By shifting from a personal, finite identity to a social, abstract, and more encompassing identity, human beings may experience a different level of existence which is not threatened by the biological fate that they know, as individuals, they cannot escape.

If our conjecture holds some value, then the loss of social identity may entail an enhanced anxiety about individual death. Conversely, making the idea of death more salient should increase the importance of social membership and the associated identification. In support of the former corollary, we have noted scholars' observations on how the loss of corporate identity following the conquest of Alexander the Great brought to the foreground the issue of individual death and transcendence, in a way that was unknown to the pre-Hellenistic societies (Ulansey, 2000).

The results of a series of experimental studies yield evidence for the second corollary. After being reminded of their mortality or being subliminally primed with death, individuals listed a greater number social identities in the who-am-I task and perceived their group of friends as more bounded. We also found that Italian participants perceived themselves as more Italian and saw Italy as more of a real entity. Finally, we observed that Scottish participants displayed a greater concern for Scotland and even that psychology students perceived a greater overlap between their individual features and those characterizing the members of their ingroup.

These findings are consistent with our conjecture, as well as with terror management theory, which played a fundamental role in shaping our thinking about this issue. Indeed, terror management theory suggests that “symbolic immortality is provided through identification with entities larger and longer-lasting than the self” (Greenberg et al., 1997, p. 65). Social identification, however, is conceptualized in terror management theory as a means toward an end, which remains one’s consensual validation (Greenberg et al., 1990). Consistent with this view, research stemming from terror management theory has examined whether the possibility of deriving positive self-esteem from social groups affects social (de)identification processes under mortality-salience conditions, and found support for this rationale (Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002; Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt, & Schimel, 2000; Dechesne, Janssen, & van Knippenberg, 2000).

As pointed out above, we adopted a somewhat different perspective with respect to the role of social identification in the management of existential concerns. Indeed, we argued that social identification could be an end in itself: it is through the very fact of extending the self in space and time, and thus through their provision of a different level of existence, that groups become a vehicle for transcendence (Castano et al., 2002b). By arguing this position we are by no means suggesting that social identification does not provide self-esteem and/or that it cannot boost one’s cultural worldview. Social identity may serve as an anxiety-buffer mechanism in several different ways, and we see our own proposition as complementary to, rather than as in contrast to, the two mechanisms proposed by terror management theory. (The interested reader will find elsewhere an elaboration of the relationship between our perspective and the self-esteem interpretation of the role of social identification; see Castano, Yzerbyt, & Paladino, 2004)

Are all social identities born equal?

In our empirical work, we have used a variety of social groups as repositories of social identities: from national and professional groups to small, relational groups like a group of friends. Are the social identities derived from these groups equivalent? Common sense and research findings alike tell us that this is unlikely to be the case. For one thing, the former type of groups (e.g., national, professional) are large social categories where contact among all or even most group members, as members, is rare and certainly not a defining feature. The latter kind of groups, like a group of friends or family, are relational, common-bond groups. These groups clearly provide different kinds of “WEs” (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Social identities derived from these different kinds of groups can thus vary in the ways in which they alleviate existential concerns. Small, interacting groups may alleviate them because they provide individuals with a sense of

intimacy and this may be a powerful buffer for the anxiety deriving from contemplating one's demise (cf. Wisman & Koole, 2003; this is perhaps a proximal rather than distal defense). Other mechanisms, like cultural worldview defense and the attachment to more abstract social identities based on membership in large social categories, may be more *distal*, activated automatically and without individuals' awareness. Given the wealth of research on this theme, we are optimistic that these questions will soon be answered.

In the beginning there was the individual. Or was there?

Similar to other contributions to this volume (e.g., Brewer & Caporael, Chapter 7; Hogg, Chapter 2), the perspective presented here focuses on a fundamental need of the human being as an *individual*. Given the physical properties of human beings, it may seem artificial to see individuals as anything other than single individual entities. As elegantly put by Geertz (1979), "The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe . . . , however incorrigible it may seem to us, [is] a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures" (p. 229; quoted in Semin & Rubini, 1990, p. 465). In fact, other, non-Western cultures seem to have a conception of the person which varies greatly from ours. Most notably, so-called interdependent cultures have been shown to see human beings as much more interconnected with their environment and other human beings (e.g., Menon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999; Miller, 1984).

The issue, of course, is not who is getting it right. Reality is defined by the cultural experience and it therefore becomes an issue of beliefs rather than one of truth. However, a careful examination of these cultural differences, especially with respect to the conception of human identity, is of interest. It reminds us that other conceptualizations are possible, and indeed, as we described in the introduction to this chapter, have existed. Acknowledgement of these different "worlds" allows consideration that perhaps, in the beginning, there was not the individual, or at least not the individual as we know it. Such a point can be more clearly understood in light of the model of human evolution proposed by Caporael (1997). According to Caporael, sociality is a constitutive part rather than a consequence of individually evolved beings. It would thus be misleading to consider human cognitive functioning as well as human needs (and perhaps even human drives) as stemming exclusively from the individual, at least the individual seen as a biological, separate entity. Human needs most likely emerged thanks to, or have been shaped by, the evolutionary history of humanity. And this is far more *groupal* than it is individual (see Brewer & Caporael, Chapter 7, this volume).

From this perspective, social identification processes may not be considered exclusively as a strategy available to individuals to, say, boost their self-esteem but rather as a constituent part of their being. Similarly, social identification with groups may not have been “invented” by full-fledged human beings when they were first confronted with the annoying realization of the inevitability of their death. Rather, the cognitive complexity that allows for self-awareness and for the awareness of the inevitability of one’s demise may have emerged together, in synergy, with the capacity for collective self-definitions which extend each human being’s physical and psychological boundaries. Life in groups and the social identification processes that are constituents of such a strategy may have played a critical role in the emergence of human cognitive complexity, as much as it serves the management of one of its most inconvenient consequences.

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Note

¹ As can be seen, this paradigm builds on earlier work on social projection (Krueger & Clement, 1994) with the important exception that ratings made about the ingroup now replace ratings made about people in general (see also Arndt et al., 2002; Simon, Greenberg, Arndt, Pyszczynski, Clement, & Solomon, 1997). Note also that we are confronted here with the way people relate to a real group. Because there is no way to prevent people from spontaneously self-projecting to the ingroup if they were to fill in the ratings for the ingroup first and only then indicate the extent to which the various traits were self-descriptive, we needed to restrict ourselves to the opposite order in the measures. Moreover, our goal was not to disentangle people’s tendency to project the self to the group *versus* to introject the group into the self, but rather to have a valid index of self–group overlap.

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