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Association between secessionist tendencies and perceived intragroup conflict: implications of adherence to regionalist and essentialist beliefs

Claudia Estrada^{a*}, Dafne Espinoza^a, Roberto Vásquez^a and Vincent Yzerbyt^b

^a*Department of Psychology, Center for Social Psychology Studies, Magellan University, Avda. Bulnes 01855, Punta Arenas, Chile;* ^b*Psychological science research institute, Louvain University, Valonia, Belgium*

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Being part of an ingroup in order to form a new class, and perceived conflict within the original affiliation. The working hypothesis is that there is a positive correlation between these variables. Two hundred and twenty-four volunteer participants responded to five questionnaires that measured the main variables of this study and supplied feedback through other questionnaires related to social identity: regionalism (a form of ethnocentrism), group identification, and essentialism. The main results indicate that secessionism is positively associated with the perception of conflict between the ingroup and the superordinate ingroup, and that both variables in turn correlate with the other variables studied. The results are discussed in terms of the possible causal determination between the variables drawn from the aforementioned empirical evidence and the supporting theory.

Keywords: group differences; group identity; reference group; secessionism; regionalism; conflict; essentialism

1. Introduction

The focus of this study is the association between secessionist tendencies and the perception of intragroup conflict, as well as the implications for the emergence of ethnocentrism (regionalism) and essentialist beliefs among separatist subgroups. In other words, agreement with the idea that a regional group should become independent from the country to which it belongs is associated with the perception that the relationship between these two groups (faction and national ingroup) represent a conflicted affiliation. In addition, secessionist ideas also correlate with the perception that the faction has a deep common essence that defines it as such (essentialist), and an overvalued vision of the group (i.e. ethnocentrism – regionalism).

One way we can understand secession is through the actions by which a subgroup opts for a new social identity that separates it from the original ingroup and turns it into an outgroup. Secessionism has been defined in political science as a political process that involves ‘movements aimed at substantial territorial autonomy for a minority group that does not rule out independence in the future’ (Sorens 2005, 5). Secession (separatism or independence) has been a significant political phenomenon in human social history, with numerous examples, such as the separation of Venezuela and Ecuador from Gran Colombia in 1830, and Eritrea from Ethiopia in 1933. More recent

*Corresponding author. Email: claudia.estrada@umag.cl

examples are the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the explicitly secessionist tendencies in Spain, Belgium, and other countries. These processes are not harmless for those affected by them, given that acquiring a new social identity and having it recognized as such involves ingroup (and sometimes intergroup) conflict. There are numerous secessionist movements in Chile, such as that of the ‘Mapuche nation’, the ‘Easter Island people’, and ‘the Independent Republic of Magallanes’. The latter secessionist movement started in the early twentieth century. There were protests in 1910 demanding more territorial independence as a civil right. Since then, numerous protests and actions have revealed the shared desire to achieve autonomy and become what has been called the ‘Independent Republic of Magallanes’. This is currently a largely symbolic movement, activated during periods of economic or social conflict and rallying around common symbols, such as a regional flag. This movement can be viewed as a natural laboratory for studying the perception of secessionism.

Although secession has been studied extensively from a sociopolitical perspective, very little is known about the psychological processes involved in the fragmentation of social groups. Understanding this phenomenon requires an understanding of the conditions under which a group subordinate to a wider one creates its own identity as the result of a series of concurrent processes.

The sense of belonging to a social group has traditionally been known in social psychology as ‘social identity’ (Tajfel 1981). The satisfaction of an individual with respect to the groups to which they belong is fundamental in understanding why people identify with or leave certain groups (Tajfel 1984). Social identity is accompanied by emotional attachment to membership groups and the assigning of value to their belonging. A model that operationalizes this variable considers three basic elements in social identification: (1) cognitive (self-categorization), (2) evaluative (commitment to the group), and (3) emotional (group self-esteem) (Ellemers, Kortekaas, and Ouwerkerk 1999). According to Tajfel (1981), all individuals seek positive social identity and actively work towards it. When the social identity of individuals does not meet their expectations, they may try to change this situation using strategies they select according to their evaluation of the socio-structural factors proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). These factors include the stability of the current group, the permeability of intergroup barriers, and the legitimacy of the group within the social framework. The combination of these three factors leads to a series of group and individual strategies, among which are social creativity, social competition, and the redefinition of the central characteristics of the group, or inter-group comparison. Gaertner et al. (1993) proposed additional strategies, including one described as ‘subordinate recategorization’, which has some similarities to secessionism. It refers to the process by which an ingroup splits into subgroups and tries to attain a positive social identity through comparison with the lower-level subgroup. Secession can also serve as a strategy to attain a new and better social identity. Its dynamics require a negative vision of the superordinate social identity, the belief that intragroup barriers (of the different internal subgroups) are impermeable, while that of the major group is not, the perception that the status of one’s subgroup will be stable and negative, and that this condition is illegitimate. In a global sense, secessionism can be considered a strategy to mobilize groups of people. But how does this occur?

Let us suppose that a subgroup (ethnonational subgroup) perceives that the superordinate national ingroup threatens its positivity. In that case, the relationship is considered illegitimate, and the perception of intragroup conflict arises. One coping strategy is to contribute to a new identity by separating from the ingroup. The agreement with secessionism relates to the perception of an intragroup conflict that affects the faction’s values.

The belief that the objectives, values, or behaviors of the two levels of the ingroup are incompatible leads to the development of the accentuation phenomenon. The perception of similarities with the faction ingroup and the differences with this superordinate ingroup can result in polarization, which can threaten the credibility of identity and lead to intergroup anxiety (Stephan and Stephan 1985) or, in the case of secessionism, to intragroup anxiety.

It is hypothesized that the perception of identity conflict is an essential variable in explaining adherence to secessionist ideas. However, the latter is not possible without other beliefs within the group, such as essentialism and ethnocentrism.

According to Hogg (1996), groups exist in relation to other groups, that is, starting from the self-definition of what one is and what one is not. In other words, members of such affiliations develop a shared deep conviction that leads them to identify as a social entity distinct from others, and that allows some people to belong, but not others. One of these assumptions is what Medin (1989) terms essentialism in a social cognition context. Essentialism was first defined by Allport (1954) as the presumption of the existence of a common essence among the members of a group. Subsequently, Rothbart and Taylor (1992) postulated that people commonly tend to confuse natural and social categories, forgetting that the latter are human constructs that respond to certain contexts and motivations. The direct consequence of this 'error' is that social groups are considered to share genotypical elements, a 'natural essence'. Acceptance of this provides stability to the ingroup, turning it into an inalienable reality (Estrada, Oyarzún, and Yzerbyt 2007). In this sense, essentialism reifies the intergroup relationship by bestowing a concrete nature on the existence of groups.

Essentialism has been widely studied as a variable in both ingroup and intergroup contexts (Leyens et al. 2000, 2001; Vaes, Paladino, and Leyens 2002; Yzerbyt, Rocher, and Schadrón 1997). As a form of implicit theory of the origin of human grouping, it has shown to exist as a natural variable in different cultures and to be ductile with respect to manipulation. Given the above, studies in the last decade have focused on the hypothesis that essentialism has a motivational factor at its root and that it is therefore conditioned by other social variables. Numerous studies have shown that essentialism is activated or deactivated as a result of a group's beliefs, depending on their interests and the intergroup context (Hegarty 2002; Mahalingam 2003; Keller 2005; Verkuyten 2006; Morton, Hornsey, and Postmes 2009; Morton and Postmes 2009). The results of the aforementioned research concur with discussions in disciplines other than social psychology. This suggests that essentialist beliefs are characterized by their fluidity, dynamics, and political nature. Schor and Weed (1994) pointed out that essentialist beliefs are strategic, given that they provide minorities with a common ground to mobilize and bring about social change. Essentialist beliefs could then strengthen the identity of a group in a period of secession and allow for internal cohesion and the perception of profound differences within the group from which it seeks to separate. Initial studies indicate that the increase in perceived conflict or rivalry between groups is accompanied by emphasis on essentialist beliefs (Epuyao, Salinas, and Aguilar 2012). Conflict can be defined as the tension between two bodies of people, the members of which are looking for a 'better' social identity for their group. This quest involves achieving a status that cannot be shared, as social comparison entails defining the distinct position of each body. In the context of conflict, essentialism determines the membership of groups by stressing the similarities among those belonging to the same group. This phenomenon is called ingroup bias and its highest expression is ethnocentrism (William 1906; Adorno 1950). Although ethnocentrism has been related to prejudice (Van Dijk 1987;

Wetherell 1996), some positive aspects of this belief have also been identified, such as cooperation, defense, and group survival (Caruana 1996; Luque-Martínez, Ibáñez-Zapata, and Del Barrio-García 2000).

Roccatto, Re, and Sciauzero (2002) argued that the members of a body of people seek to reaffirm their nature, but that there are different visions within this same search, such as patriotism and nationalism. Studies have demonstrated that while patriotism seeks to maintain high group status, showing commitment to the ingroup and maintaining self-criticism, nationalism implies a rigid distinction between the ingroup and outgroups and idealization of the ingroup (Bar-Tal 1993, 1997; Billig 1995; Blank 1997; Blank and Schmidt 1997; Kosterman and Feshbach 1989; Lepsius 1989; Scheepers, Felling, and Peters 1992). Applying this hypothesis to regionalism implies the idealization of the group, which attempts to characterize it as superior to others while at the same time transforming it into a moral point of reference to evaluate outgroups. As a form of group adherence, this differs from group identification in that commitment to the group is radicalized in a way that does not allow for internal self-criticism. Furthermore, the process of self-categorization considers one's group to be superior from the outset. The accentuation of ethnocentric beliefs accompanies the secession process, reaffirming the faction's positivity in contrast to the superordinate group.

This study of the secessionist phenomenon considers that as an evaluative strategy to achieve a better social identity, it inevitably involves intragroup conflict. For a subgroup to deliberate on its need to split from an existing group, the former must perceive the existence of an internal conflict that compromises the attainment of the desired positive social identity. The hypothesis guiding this first study is that the secessionism process involves both perceived conflict and adherence to ideas such as essentialism and regionalism that allow for establishing a new group,

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The accidental non-probabilistic sample was composed of 224 participants, 65% female, and self-categorized as 'Magellanics' (a subgroup of Chilean residents from the southernmost or 'Magallanes' region of Patagonia), ranging in age from 18 to 74 ($M = 32$, $SD=14.2$).

2.2. Design

Non-experimental, correlational, cross-sectional.

2.3. Instruments

- **Secession scale:** This was specifically designed for this line of research. The scale is made up of seven statements that measure the level of agreement with the separation of a social group ('Magellanics') from another superordinate group to which it belongs (Chileans). The statements were answered by means of a six-point Likert scale starting from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree). The content of each statement was validated by expert judges. The psychometric properties of the scale were evaluated during the pilot and previous applications ($n = 3.115$ observations). Internal consistency for this sample was .93 (Cronbach's Alpha). Some items are:

‘I think that the desire for Magallanes to be an independent community is shared by many of us’ (Cognitive), ‘When talking about the “Independent Republic of Magallanes”, I sympathize with the idea’ (Affective), ‘I would be willing to take action to support the autonomy of Magallanes’ (Behavioral intention).

- **Conflict Perception Scale:** Created especially for this line of research, this instrument has six statements that investigate the perceived level of conflict between the Magellanic community and non-Magellanic Chileans. There is also a question about the general percentage (or proportion) of the conflict perceived between the two groups. The same scale was used as in the other instruments. The content was validated in a pilot and previous applications ($n = 650$ observations). Internal consistency for this sample was .88 (Cronbach’s Alpha). Some items are: ‘I think the relationship between non-Magellanic Chileans and Magellanic Chileans tends to be somewhat tense’ (Cognitive), ‘Although we can collaborate with each other in certain situations, in general we Magellanic Chileans distrust non-Magellanic Chileans’ (Affective), ‘In Chile, Magellanic Chileans have had numerous conflicts with non-Magellanic Chileans (e.g. the 2011 conflict over heating gas subsidies)’ (Cognitive).
- **Psychological Essentialism Scale** (Estrada 2009). This scale consists of a series of 11 statements based on the description of the essentialist syndrome made by Yzerbyt and Schadrin (1996). The same scale was used as in the instrument described above. Internal consistency for this sample was .95 (Cronbach’s Alpha). In this study, the scale version measured the faction’s ingroup essentialism beliefs (Magellanic nature). Some items are: ‘Although Magellanic have differences and similarities, deep down we share characteristics that make us similar’, ‘A Magellanic can have many different experiences, live in other cities, regions, or countries, etc., but deep down, he or she always remains Magellanic’.
- **Identification Scale:** This is a Spanish-language version of Ellemers, Kortekaas, and Ouwerkerk 1999. The scale is composed of nine of the original ten statements. Three statements measure group self-esteem, three others measure self-categorization, and the remaining three measure commitment to the group. The same scale was used as with the other instruments. Internal consistency for the total scale was .77 (Cronbach’s Alpha) for this sample. In this study, the scale version measured the faction’s ingroup identification (as ‘Magellanic’). Some items are: ‘I feel good being part of Magallanes/Chile’, ‘Being Magellanic/Chilean is an important reflection of who I am’.
- **Regionalism Scale:** Adaptation of Rocatto’s Nationalism Instrument (2002). The original six statements measuring nationalism were increased to 8 in adapting this test to measure Magellanic regionalism. The items are answered by means of a six-point Likert scale in which 1 means ‘totally disagree’ with the idea, while 6 means ‘totally agree’. Internal consistency for this sample is 0.77 (Cronbach’s Alpha). Some items are: ‘Magellanic values should be a model for other people in the country’, ‘I would be very proud if Magallanes were the “most important” region in Chile’.

2.4. Procedure

Participants voluntarily agreed to be part of the study and signed an informed consent form. All the questionnaires were completed in single individual sessions. Afterwards,

any questions the respondents had were answered. Respondents were thanked for their participation.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive analyses

The analysis that compares the observed averages with the theoretical scale midpoint ($M = 3.5$) using single-sample t tests, shows that the average secession score for the sample was high ($M = 4.4$; $SD = 1.3$, $t_{(223)} = 10.1$, $p = .0001$), as was the score for perceived conflict between the ingroup and superordinate ingroup ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 1.1$, $t_{(223)} = 13.7$, $p = .0001$), and ingroup identification ($M = 5.4$, $SD = 0.8$; $t_{(222)} = 32.9$, $p = .0001$). In the same way, regionalism ($M = 5.0$, $DT = 1.0$; $t_{(223)} = 21.9$, $p = 0.001$), and the essentialist belief about the local ingroup's origin ($M = 5.1$, $DT = 0.9$, $t_{(223)} = 25.3$, $p = .0001$) are in the agreement zone.

In other words, an average participant shows high ingroup identification, essentialist and ethnocentrism beliefs related to the local ingroup, perceives a conflict between the groups (national and regional), and supports secessionism ideas.

3.2. Correlational analyses

The correlations between *secessionism* and other variables of the study proved to be significant and positive. The regression with adherence to secessionism as a dependent variable and the perception of intragroup conflict, regionalism, essentialism, and identification as independent variables, explain 59% of the variance, $F_{(4,220)} = 77.5$, $p = .0001$. Conflict perception is the variable that best explains secessionism ($\beta = .50$, $p = .0001$, 95%IC [.38, .61]), followed by regionalism ($\beta = .29$, $p = .0001$, 95% IC [.17, .40]) and essentialism belief ($\beta = .20$, $p = .001$, 95% IC [.06, .34]). Total identification with the ingroup did not explain secessionism ($\beta = -.103$, $p = .14$, *n.s.*, 95% IC[-.24, .03]). In other words, a high level of agreement with secessionism is explained by a high perception of conflict between the internal context of the ingroups and a high level of adherence to the ethnocentric and essentialist conceptions of the regional ingroup.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The main objective of this study was to observe the relationship between secessionism and perceived conflict. The hypothesis is that a group that decides to diverge or separate from another to which it initially belonged does so because of a perceived internal tension that compromises the positivity of the ingroup (subgroup). The results support the hypothesis that there is a positive correlation between the two variables, and that an increase in perceived conflict is accompanied by greater adherence to secessionist ideas and vice versa. Drawing from Tajfel (1984), this association, which is the strongest of the studied variables, can be interpreted as a potential causal relationship that requires experimental confirmation. Tajfel pointed out that individuals belonging to a group can act individually or as a group when faced with an unsatisfactory social identity. In this sense, the assertion is based on viewing secessionism as a group strategy to improve social identity.

A subgroup that perceives that intragroup conflict is compromising its value finds itself pressured, given certain contextual and dynamic characteristics, to opt for becoming a separate group. The perception of conflict implies incompatibility in the actions and

objectives, among the members of an ingroup. A potential solution to this conflict is that the group separates into new ones in order to gain compatibility in its collective search for satisfaction, starting with equal status in intergroup relations.

This action, which is termed subordinate recategorization, facilitates attaining a positive social identity for each group emerging from an ingroup fracturing (Albert 1977). Secession, which is considered a subcategory of this strategy, differs in that this division only favors one of the subgroups created; that is, the one that decided to break away.

A limitation of the present study arising from its non-experimental nature is the impossibility of asserting the existence of a causal relationship between perceived conflict and secessionism. Secessionism may emphasize conflictive relationships among groups but it is also possible that the perception of intergroup conflict lies at the heart of secessionism. As we have noted, the theory of social identity indicates perceived conflict is a possible independent variable, but this is a matter for further studies.

Secondly, this study attempts to establish the relationship between secessionism and beliefs about the group, specifically essentialism and regionalism. We can see that both variables are positively associated with similar emphasis on adherence to secessionism. In the case of essentialism, this can be seen as increasing the differences between groups, which is compatible with the results of recent experimental studies on the same subject that suggest that perceived conflict explains the level of adherence to essentialist beliefs both in one's own group and in the outgroup in conflict (Cruz et al. 2014). In this sense, perceived conflict between one's ingroup and another group stimulates essentialist beliefs. This might be because ideas of this kind aid subjects in 'facing' conflict, given that adhering to these ideas makes categorization more stable. As a result, this reifies group coherence and makes it easier to view others as different (Hollander and Howard 2000). Similarly, the appearance of essentialist beliefs in intergroup conflict confirms the view that these beliefs play a functional role. Schor and Weed (1994) argued that essentialism can also be understood as a belief of political nature because it facilitates social mobilization and change.

The relationship between secessionism and essentialism also indicates that when one of these increases, so does the other. It is evident that the causal interpretation of this relationship needs to be studied experimentally. Essentialism facilitates group fragmentation by establishing the existence of different essences between the ingroup and the superordinate ingroup, which legitimizes the fracturing of the group. Recategorization of a group into two new groups is based on the belief that a common essence (in each group) makes new categories inevitable, because of which social identity is redefined starting from an 'us-them' attitude that did not exist before. This process bestows a provider with a fresh ontological status as a new ingroup, which make it natural to separate from what is now the other group (Rothbart and Taylor 1992). Another supporting result refers to the potential of essentialism to explain the different variables being studied. Essentialism is thus a tool that is activated or deactivated according to the identity-related needs of group members, helping them to mobilize to satisfy their demands and expectations (Schor and Weed 1994; Verkuyten 2006). Perceived conflict and secessionist tendencies are thus powerful motivating forces in the appearance of essentialism.

Something similar occurs with regionalism. The emphasis on ingroup bias, which characterizes this form of ethnocentrism, establishes inalienable adherence to the idealized ingroup, to which an ineluctable commitment is assumed based on a rigid distinction between what the group is and what it is not (Kosterman and Feshbach 1989; Scheepers, Felling, and Peters 1992). Secessionism also correlates with group identification, but with less emphasis, which raises the issue of the differences and similarities between these two

forms of group adherence, regionalism, and identification. Further research will undoubtedly have to deal with the differentiating role of secessionist processes.

Despite the modest character of the results of the first study, they support some of the affirmations that can be derived from available theory. Future experimental studies can provide empirical evidence to confirm the explanatory hypothesis of the observed results. The obvious limitation of the present study will not be overcome by then. However, the preliminary results of this line of research are promising. They point to understanding secessionism, its relationship to achieving and maintaining satisfactory social identities for groups, and its links to other beliefs and forms of group adherence, which can be considered part of group dynamics and functional to these ends.

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Notes on contributors

Claudia Estrada is a full professor of social Psychology, Universidad of Magallanes, Punta Arenas, Chile.

Dafne Espinoza is a research assistant at the Center for Studies in Social Psychology (CEPS).

Roberto Vásquez is a research assistant at the Center for Studies in Social Psychology (CEPS).

Vincent Yzerbyt is a full professor of Social Psychology, UCLouvain, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium.

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