

14 From group-based appraisals to group-based emotions

The role of communication and social sharing

Vincent Yzerbyt
Catholic University of Louvain

Toon Kuppens
Cardiff University

Right after the infamous September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, some political leaders declared that “This enemy attacked not just our people, but all freedom-loving people everywhere in the world. . . . The freedom-loving nations of the world stand by our side” (G. Bush) or that “We are all Americans” (T. Blair). The work presented in this chapter shows that statements such as these likely (re)define the social landscape with consequences that are far from trivial. This occurs because the salience of social identity makes group members appraise the world from the perspective of the group rather than the individual, which results in emotions felt on behalf of the group instead of the person. Across four studies, we focus on these so-called group-based emotions, as well as other reactions such as group-based appraisals and group identification. Specifically, we argue that communication among ingroup members can make group identity salient, which in turn shapes group-based emotions.

In a seminal chapter, Smith (1993) combined two lines of work to account for the complexity of emotional reactions in intergroup contexts (Yzerbyt and Demoulin, 2010). His first source, appraisal theories of emotions (Scherer, Schorr, and Johnstone, 2001), suggests that the way individuals react to events is predicted by their emotional reactions, themselves resulting from a cognitive process of appraisal. Because appraisal theories of emotion deal with idiosyncratic reactions of individuals and do not apply to intergroup reactions, Smith called upon a second perspective, Self-Categorization Theory (SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell, 1987). SCT proposes that, when people find themselves in an intergroup context, they shift psychologically from an individual to a social level of identity. Combining these frameworks, intergroup emotion theory (IET; Smith, 1993) holds that, to the extent that their social identity is salient, people appraise surrounding events not so much with regard to their own personal concerns, but rather with respect to those of their group.

Our research program extends Smith's insight by putting a much stronger emphasis on the self-categorization mechanism of IET (Yzerbyt and Kuppens, 2009). Because people belong to several groups, and each of these groups can be salient at a particular moment, we focus on the specific way people categorize themselves in a group. To illustrate, one of our early experiments (Gordijn, Wigboldus and Yzerbyt, 2001) examined the emotional reactions of students from the University of Amsterdam as they learned about students from the University of Leiden suffering an unfair decision imposed by their professors. We varied participants' salient group membership so they would categorize themselves either in the same or in a different category as the victims. Specifically, we informed some participants that the study examined the reactions of students and professors, thereby stressing the joint membership of participants and victims in the student category, or focused on the reactions of students from different universities, thus stressing the different categories between participants and victims. As predicted, participants categorized in the same group as the victims reported more anger than those categorized in a different group.

Interestingly enough, studies on group-based emotions always asked participants to report their emotional reactions in isolation (Yzerbyt and Demoulin, 2010). This procedure rests on SCT's assumption that, in an intergroup comparative context, people depersonalize and function as members of a social group. Interestingly, however, the social landscape with which people are confronted often emerges as a spontaneous by-product of their interactions. Many reactions have at one point or another been communicated to and discussed with others. Indeed, about two thirds of informal conversations are about social topics (Dunbar, Marriott, and Duncan, 1997) and emotional topics in particular are subject to social sharing (Rimé, 2009). One may thus wonder whether group-based emotions could emerge from social communication, even in the absence of explicit reminders of social identity. There are several reasons to contemplate such a possibility. First, communication concerning emotionally relevant topics forges interpersonal bonds (Peters and Kashima, 2007) and increases group cohesion (Espitalier, Tcherkassof, and Delmas, 2003). Second, communicating about emotion-laden events leads to a shared perspective because of emotion contagion and social appraisals (Manstead and Fischer, 2001), and thus increases group homogeneity. It seems therefore plausible that social sharing leads to a more group-based perspective (or social identity salience). We propose that this group-based point of view manifests itself in group-based appraisals and, in turn, in group-based emotions.

Several research efforts (for a recent illustration, see L. G. E. Smith and Postmes, 2011) already investigated the effect of social interactions on group-based cognition (especially stereotypes). The evidence suggests that social communication affects the content of people's views about outgroups, although these effects are limited to interactions that occur in an intergroup context. Building upon these studies, we hypothesized that group interaction and communication should foster the emergence of group-based emotions provided the intergroup context is salient during the interaction. Moreover, we conjectured

that such group-based emotions would rest on the emergence of group-based, as opposed to individual, appraisals of the situation. In this chapter, we briefly review four studies conducted to test these ideas.

Communication and sharing breeds group-based emotions

In two experiments (Yzerbyt, Kuppens, and Mathieu, 2011), we checked whether the mere discussion between people about a group-relevant issue could trigger group-based emotions. Whenever group members join to focus on some event that is at the heart of the social definition of the setting, they likely start reacting as group members, much like when they are induced to think of themselves as group members before reporting their reactions in isolation.

In a first experiment (Yzerbyt et al., 2011, Experiment 1), senior high-school students learned that they would take part in a study about some decisions regarding students' access to universities in Belgium, and that they would discuss with another student before answering questions about this topic. Before proceeding, some participants were assigned to the *group member* condition: they read that the study was about comparing their reactions as future college students to those of politicians. Other participants were assigned to one of two *individual* conditions: they learned that the study concerned their reactions as individuals. After all participants had conveyed their experience with college administration and their personal choice of a major, they individually read a (fake) article stating that the French-speaking authorities wanted to implement a Dutch exam before acceptance to college in order to reduce the number of non-Belgian students in Belgian French-speaking universities. Student representatives were claiming the unfairness of this sudden decision because of its dramatic consequences for foreign students (i.e., few would succeed) and called for mobilization. Participants in the group member condition and half of participants in the individual condition were invited to discuss the content of the article with another student. The remaining half of the individual condition participants were asked to discuss their experience with college administration and their subject choice. Although subject choice in higher education concerns *all* students, it is not a topic that affects students *as a group*.

We expected the discussion to facilitate the emergence of group-based emotions only if it concerned the group-relevant event. That is, participants should report more anger (the emotion most relevant to our scenario) when the discussion concerned the controversial policy than when another topic was discussed. Because the discussion should make partners endorse the same group perspective about the policy, we did not expect an impact of whether participants were led to see themselves as group members or individuals before this discussion. Importantly, we also predicted a different appraisal of the (un)fairness of the policy depending on whether or not the discussion concerned the policy. As expected, participants perceived more injustice and, in turn, were angrier when they had talked about the group-relevant topic rather than the other topic. There was no effect of whether participants' group identity (as future college students) or personal identity had been made salient at the beginning of the study.

To be sure, one would expect participants categorizing themselves as group members to approach the situation in terms of their group concerns *even before* the interaction. In contrast, for participants first categorizing themselves as individuals, a social take on the event would emerge *only after* the discussion. We tested this hypothesis in a follow-up experiment (Yzerbyt et al., 2011, Experiment 2) using the same procedure albeit with one important exception: after reading the instructions and the fake article, but *before* the discussion, participants answered questions pertaining to their emotional reactions and to the emotional reactions that they attributed to the other future college students. Again, instructions asked participants to answer as future college students in the group member condition and as individuals in the individual conditions. We also checked whether we replicated the pattern of Experiment 1 by asking these questions anew after the discussion.

As predicted, even before the discussion, participants in the group member condition reported more anger for themselves and attributed more anger to other future college students than participants in the two individual conditions. This confirms that a group-based interpretation reading of the situation was already operating among these participants even without the interaction and corroborates earlier work (Yzerbyt and Kuppens, 2009). Importantly, the discussion had the same impact as in Experiment 1: only those participants discussing the actual content of the article expressed more anger and attributed more anger to other future college students. In sum, explicitly emphasizing the social identity (the group member condition before the discussion in Experiment 2) or letting people discuss a certain group-relevant issue (the individual conditions where participants discussed the relevant social event in Experiments 1 and 2) had similar consequences on group-based emotions.

Several additional findings confirm the crucial role of social identity salience in accounting for the impact of the group discussion. First, in Experiment 1, participants found the decision more unjust in the relevant than in the irrelevant discussion condition. Confirming that perceived injustice is an important appraisal for anger, the effect of the manipulation (relevant vs irrelevant discussion) on anger was mediated by the appraisal of injustice. Participants thus shared the victims cognitive perspective. Because participants were not themselves affected by the policy, we are certain that this appraisal of injustice is a group-based appraisal; that is, a consequence of viewing the world through a group lens. Secondly, in Experiment 2, we also measured participants' identification with future college students. Identification was stronger after the group-relevant than after the irrelevant discussion, showing that the group of future college students indeed became more important to our participants. Finally, participants not only reported feeling angrier after discussing the group-relevant topic than after discussing an irrelevant topic, but they also thought that other future college students would feel angrier. Together, these three pieces of evidence suggest that the impact of communicating about the relevant social event on the emergence of group-based emotions is due to participants taking a group perspective.

More evidence for group-based appraisals.

If the above efforts underscore the role of social identity salience and group-appraisals in the surfacing of group-based emotions, two additional experiments differentiate even better between individual and group-based appraisal. This time, we relied on a thought-listing procedure to measure people's evaluation of the situation because we wanted to know people's spontaneous thoughts instead of forcing responses on pre-formulated items. We used this open-ended measure both in a first experiment where we explicitly manipulated social identity, and in a second where this was done more subtly by way of a discussion on a group-relevant event. Our hypothesis was that group-based appraisals (based on the thought-listing content) would mediate the relation between social identity salience and group-based emotions.

In our third experiment (Kuppens, Yzerbyt, Dandache, Fischer, and van der Schalk, 2011, Experiment 1), we presented Belgian university students with a fake article discussing an inequitable decision of the rector of another Belgian university: English was allegedly imposed as the sole teaching language in master programs. The students of this university were described as opposing this decision and as planning to act against it. Again, the decision did in no way affect our students, but only those of that other university.

As before, we manipulated the social identity of our participants. We told participants in the "student" condition that we were interested in the opinion of students and professors, and they also completed a series of questions tapping their identification with the group of students. Participants in the "control" condition learned that we investigated their opinion as unique individuals, and they answered items measuring how they saw themselves as unique individuals. After reading the article, participants were given four minutes to list every thought that had crossed their mind while reading. All thoughts relevant to the newspaper article were coded according to whether they expressed a favorable vs. unfavorable opinion toward the rector's decision and whether they mentioned the word "student". Participants also indicated the extent to which they experienced anger, sadness, happiness, and fear in response to the article. We predicted that participants in the student identity condition would list more thoughts related to their student identity and that they would also feel emotions (primarily anger) on behalf of the other students who were the victims of the unfair decision. In fact, we expected the group-based character of the thoughts to mediate the effect of social identity salience on group-based emotions.

Consistent with previous studies, making the student identity salient generated more anger and less sadness. Because these reactions are rooted in the student social identity and differ from those of control participants, they reflect group-based emotions. Our unobtrusive measure of participants' appraisals of the event also revealed that those in the student identity condition had more thoughts that mentioned students *and* simultaneously expressed an unfavorable opinion about the rector's decision. The proportion of such thoughts was related to anger and sadness, and partially mediated the effect of social identity salience on anger and

sadness. In contrast, thoughts that were unfavorable but did *not* mention students were in no way related to anger or sadness. That is, only those unfavorable thoughts mentioning the relevant ingroup membership independently predicted anger and sadness. The unfair decision had to be seen in an intergroup context in which participants belong to the same group as the victims in order to elicit anger. This pattern provides a powerful demonstration of how group-based appraisals affect emotions.

A fourth experiment (Kuppens et al., 2011, Experiment 2) combined the thought-listing measure with the discussion paradigm used in Experiments 1 and 2. The specific goal of the experiment was to check whether the content of the group discussion would be linked to the emotions. We used a thought-listing procedure to assess each individual's account of the discussion. This time, we also measured a simple yet noteworthy behavioral signature, namely whether participants would give us their personal email address so as to be kept informed about the issue.

Our predictions were borne out. The discussion on the relevant topic led to stronger indignation and, in turn, this indignation led participants to provide their email address. Also, the proportion of thoughts that expressed an unfavorable opinion and also mentioned the relevant ingroup or outgroup was related to more intense indignation and to marginally more anger. Unfavorable thoughts that did not mention the ingroup or outgroup were not related to emotions. In other words, the negative evaluation of the issue only leads to stronger emotions if the salience of the relevant group membership makes it an issue that affects the social self of the participant. These findings provide another striking demonstration that social communication facilitates a group-based perspective, and that this engenders emotional reactions to group concerns.

Conclusions

The empirical efforts evoked in this chapter show that a discussion of a group-relevant event has very similar effects on group-based appraisals and group-based emotions as explicit manipulations of social identity salience. Importantly, the social interactions in small groups constitute a much more ecologically valid way of manipulating social identity salience. First, in real-life situations, social identity is seldom made salient in an explicit way. Second, the group discussion paradigm also provides a more ecologically valid approach to the *content* of group-based appraisals and emotions. Because emotional thoughts and experiences are very likely to be shared with close others (Rimé, 2009), the content of existing group-based appraisals and emotions has often been influenced by social communication among group members. This naturally occurring process is better approached in a dynamic situation such as a group discussion than when participants answer to a questionnaire in isolation.

Our emphasis on group-based appraisals does not mean that this is the only or even the most important process leading to group-based emotions. In fact, we have little information on the dynamic process of how group-based emotions arise

during episodes of group interactions. Emotional contagion, social appraisal, and outright persuasion within discussion groups all likely influenced participants' post-discussion emotions. Finding empirical evidence regarding these processes will thus be an important task for future research.

Over the years, our program of research has demonstrated that people's emotional reactions to surrounding events are way more malleable than they would like to admit. Depending on the way people (are led to) see themselves, the same events may be evaluated and reacted upon very differently. Striking as our introductory quotes may be, many other examples confirm that the social and political implications of our findings cannot be overestimated (Yzerbyt, 2006) but they also suggest that more work investigating the impact of social sharing and communication among group members on the emergence of group-based appraisals and emotions is needed.

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