

Raising the Bar: Differential Expectations for Ingroup performance

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Abstract

There is substantial evidence that individuals give preferential treatment to members of their own groups. By inflating evaluations of ingroup members, the group (and thus the self) may be viewed positively. The current paper examines whether pro-ingroup bias will extend to performance expectations. In Study 1, participants predicted ingroup and outgroup negotiation performance. Ingroup expectations were significantly and substantially inflated. In Study 2, participants set higher performance standards and indicated that an ingroup member would have to earn more points than an outgroup member in order to have performed "very well." This demonstration of inflated performance expectations and standards is discussed in terms of how these expectations may be difficult or impossible to live up to, ironically setting the stage for harsher evaluation of ingroup members if they are held to the unrealistically inflated standards.

Key Words: Expectations, Ingroup Bias, Social Identity

1. Introduction

When evaluating information in our environment, it is crucial to have a frame of reference or context. Imagine it is the end of the sales quarter and you review the performance of a subordinate. Merely having sales numbers (e.g., \$24,000) does not provide any useful information unless you have a context in which to evaluate them. Your expectations clearly need to take into account situational information (e.g., external economic conditions), and be tailored to the individual case (e.g., \$24,000 may be stellar performance for an intern or junior employee while being sadly lacking for a senior sales associate). However, what if the subordinate shares an important group membership with you? What if she attended the same small college or belongs to a similarly valued ingroup? Will your likely pro-ingroup bias (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Messick & Mackie, 1989) extend to your performance expectations for this subordinate, and if so, what implications might that have for subsequent performance evaluations? The present paper argues that ingroup favoritism may lead to inflated performance expectations that could potentially set the stage for overly harsh evaluations of ingroup members who may not meet them. Our expectations, beliefs, or schemas set the stage for us to understand the world around us (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). In fact, it has been argued that without expectations or beliefs to organize information, we would be unable to comprehend the complex information we encounter in our daily life (Sherman, Judd, & Park, 1989). Our performance and cognitive functioning suffer if we are unable to rely on these organizing beliefs (e.g., Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994). Again, imagine a manager trying to observe a subordinate's performance. Without meaningful structure to organize information, the sheer volume of information may be overwhelming. Unless that manager can determine what is pertinent and what is informational "noise," his or her observations may be scattered and of limited use. However with clear expectations of behaviors and performance levels, the manager should be able to focus his or her attention to determine whether the subordinate meets, exceeds, or falls short of these requirements.

2. Intergroup Bias

Since expectations shape how we make judgments, it is important to consider how the expectations we hold for different social groups might develop. In particular, this paper focuses on the development of standards or performance expectations for groups to which we belong versus groups to which we do not belong. The groups to which we belong can change the way we evaluate and are evaluated by others. Evidence of group-based bias in an intergroup setting has been widely studied. One common finding is that when evaluating individuals in an intergroup context, a preference for the ingroup emerges (Brewer, 1979).

Ingroup favoritism is a robust effect found in a wide range of settings and on a range of behavioral and evaluative measures (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Messick & Mackie, 1989); it has even been found in non-human primates (Mahajan et al., 2011). We tend to like members of our own groups more (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961), ascribe more positive traits to members of our groups (Brewer, 1979), and make more favorable attributions (Pettigrew, 1979) or evaluations for actions performed by our group. Ingroup favoritism often emerges when evaluating the performance of others. For instance, in Sherif and colleagues' classic Robbers Cave study, participants were shown how many objects were collected in a competitive intergroup task (1961). Although the number of objects collected by the ingroup and outgroup member was identical, participants overestimated the performance of the ingroup member.

3. Impact on Expectations

Given the wide range of settings in which the ingroup favoritism effect develops, it is plausible that pro-ingroup bias will also emerge when making predictions about upcoming performance. Teams and workgroups are widely utilized in organizations; it is important to consider whether shared categorization might lead to unrealistically high expectations and the implications such expectations would have for subsequent judgments, evaluations, and treatment of group members. In the short term, predicting better performance from ingroup members would be consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which argues that we gain part of our self-identity through our ingroups. By expecting better performance from one's group members, the group would seem more prestigious. This could be an adaptive way to maximize the perceiver's self-identity through his or her association with this group. The current studies seek to demonstrate inflated ingroup performance expectations. Such a pattern would be important because it could potentially introduce unrealistic expectations for members of our own groups and these unrealistic biases might later result in overly harsh responses to ingroup members. The studies employ a negotiation context, which makes inter-group competition salient, increasing the likelihood of demonstrating intergroup bias. Additionally, a classroom negotiation exercise provides a relatively novel and engaging activity and allows individuals to make quantitative predictions. Thus, Study 1 was developed to test the following:

Hypothesis 1. Participants should predict higher average levels of performance for the ingroup than the outgroup.

Furthermore, if individuals base their bias on a motivation to see the group in a positive light (rather than an accurate assessment of future performance), these higher levels of performance may be inflated or unrealistic. That is, it should lead to a general view that the ingroup will outperform the outgroup. This would be similar to the often found "better than average" effect in individuals (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995), and it would be logically impossible for such expectations to be accurate across the board. That is, it is neither possible for everyone to score higher than average, nor for ingroups to always score higher than outgroups (as one person's outgroup is another's ingroup). Study 1 will also test the related prediction:

Hypothesis 2. The disparity between predicted and actual performance will be greater for the ingroup than outgroup.

Additionally, the higher expectations for ingroup performance proposed in Study 1 may lead to higher standards for exemplary performance. That is, if we expect members of our group to perform at a high level, we may be constantly "raising the bar." Demonstrating this pattern is important as it may create a situation where we compare the performance of an ingroup member with our expectation for that specific group, whereas we compare the performance of an outgroup member with different (and less stringent) expectations. This might be similar to findings on how people make stereotype relevant judgments (e.g., Biernat & Manis, 1994), however this study involves randomly created groups with no prior stereotype content. If our performance expectations are higher, it follows that it should take extremely positive performance before they are violated in a favorable manner. This may prove problematic if our goal is to accurately assess individual performance. It may be easier for an outgroup member (who may be associated with more accurate or reasonable expectations) to exceed expectations than for members of an ingroup. That is, the same subjective standard, for example performing "very well," may be associated with different objective performance based on how we have categorized the target. By "raising the bar" to inflated levels, ingroup members are logically more likely to fail to meet these expectations. That is, if average ingroup performance is expected to be higher than that of the outgroup, we should expect higher thresholds for the ingroup before we are willing to say an ingroup member has performed very well. This could have numerous organizational implications.

Higher standards could make it more difficult for an individual to stand out for recognition or promotion, or could lead to group-based interpretation of the same objective performance. Thus, Study 2 was designed to test:

Hypothesis 3. Participants will require ingroup members to perform at a higher level than outgroup members before they are willing to say the individual performed very well.

Although group favoring mechanisms should lead to higher standards for excellent and average performance, they may not lead to inflated expectations or bias for poor performance. This may be due to the fact that excluding deviant members from a group's stereotype can be a protective strategy to protect the overall group image (Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988). Therefore, Study 2 will also test:

Hypothesis 4. Participants will have more similar performance standards for the ingroup and outgroup when considering poor performance.

4. Study 1

Study 1 was conducted to address hypotheses 1 and 2 by examining performance expectations for ingroup and outgroup members on an upcoming two-party negotiation exercise. The upcoming negotiation was described as a complex multi-issue exercise. Not only does the negotiation context provide an engaging intergroup task, it permits the contrast of predicted levels of behavior with actual performance on the negotiation task. In this study, membership groups consisted of semester long course groups. The data was conducted at a large state university, with a predominantly commuter student body. Given the large class size, students did not tend to already know their classmates at the start of the semester.

4.1 Participants

Seventy undergraduate business students enrolled in a required organizational behavior course participated as partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Although demographic information was not collected, this class was representative of courses at this University's business school, with an average student age of approximately 24 years, and over 60% male students.

4.2 Design

A within-subjects design was utilized, with participants predicting levels of performance for both the ingroup and the outgroup.

4.3 Procedure

Prior to the start of the semester, students were assigned to small (4-6 members) groups through the use of randomly generated numbers. These course groups worked together throughout the semester on a final group project, as well as smaller, weekly assignments. Course groups had a great deal of interaction both in and out of the classroom. Data collection took place during the 7th week of a 12-week long course. Based on the amount of interaction and common fates of these project groups, these groups constituted meaningful group memberships (Lickel, et al., 2000) for the purpose of this study.

Students were reminded that a negotiation exercise was scheduled to take place the following week. They were told that groups would be paired together, and negotiation dyads formed so that they would be negotiating with an individual from the other group. Participants were then told, "In this negotiation exercise, your goal will be to come to an agreement regarding several issues. There are different points available for different possible outcomes. In the exercise, the maximum possible points a person can earn is 11450." Participants were then asked to think about the likely performance of their own group and the other group, on average. They were asked to indicate how many points, on average, a typical member of their own group and the other group would earn. The order of group (ingroup versus outgroup) was counterbalanced across participants. After completing the predictions, students were excused. The data were then used in a later lecture to demonstrate common biases in judgment and decision-making. The following week, the class completed a two party, multi-issue negotiation exercise. This was a complex negotiation with a point scoring system. This exercise had a combination of distributive, integrative, and congruent issues.

4.4 Results

To test hypothesis 1, participants' predictions for average levels of ingroup and outgroup performance were analyzed in a repeated measures analysis of variance. Performance expectations were substantially higher for the ingroup (mean = 8134.50) than for the outgroup (mean = 6450.21). This difference was significant and in the predicted direction, $F(1, 69) = 26.734, p < .001$.

To test hypothesis 2, actual class performance when the exercise was conducted in class the following week was examined; students had a mean score of 5456.25 points. Difference scores were calculated between participants' predictions and the average class performance. These difference scores for ingroup (mean = 2678.25) and outgroup (mean = 993.96) predictions were both positive; a paired samples t-test indicated that the predictions were significantly greater for the ingroup ($t(69) = 5.17, p < .001$), as hypothesized.

Additionally, exploratory analyses were conducted to determine the relationship between expectations and participants' actual negotiation outcomes. Two measures of biased expectations were computed¹. First, an individual's prediction for his or her opponent's performance was subtracted from the prediction for the individual's own performance, resulting in a difference score where positive numbers indicated a pro-self bias. The mean difference score was 1969.9, indicating that participants predicted they would outscore their opponent ($t(69) = 5.6, p < .01$). Obviously, not everyone will be able to outscore their partners. Next, this measure of pro-self bias was correlated with actual participant performance². Expecting to outscore one's opponent was positively correlated with actual points scored ($r(59) = .329, p < .01$). Participants' pattern of bias for group predictions was likewise transformed to a difference score, with positive scores indicating a pro-ingroup bias. As discussed above, participants inflated their expectations for members of their ingroup (mean difference score = 1684.3). Group bias followed the same pattern as the individual difference bias, with individuals who expected to outperform their opponent also expecting their ingroup to outscore the outgroup ($r(68) = .545, p < .001$). Likewise, pro-ingroup bias was positively correlated to the actual points scored by participants ($r(59) = .339, p < .01$).

4.5 Discussion

Hypothesis 1 was supported, as predictions for ingroup members were higher than those for outgroup members. Furthermore, consistent with hypothesis 2, ingroup expectations were substantially higher than observed performance in the negotiation task. It is interesting that both ingroup and outgroup expectations were substantially above actual (observed) performance levels, but that might be explained by the fact that participants did not have knowledge of the payoff structure nor of the joint possible points. Not only were ingroup expectations significantly and substantially higher than those for members of the outgroup, these ingroup expectations were more poorly calibrated than outgroup predictions. The ingroup predictions were approximately 49% higher than actual performance, and outgroup predictions were only about 18% higher than actual performance. Study 1 provides compelling evidence that in a negotiation setting, predictions of ingroup performance are unrealistically biased in a positive direction.

Study 1 also demonstrated that even though predictions were inflated that there was a positive relationship between expecting the self or the ingroup to outperform an opponent and actual points earned. Although not hypothesized *a priori*, this finding complements research on the relationship between goals and performance, especially in a negotiation context (Huber & Neale, 1987; Neale & Northcraft, 1986). This pattern emerged even though participants' only knowledge of the opponent was that they were members of an equivalently sized but unspecified outgroup. In their meta-analysis, Zetik and Stuhlmacher (2002) demonstrated that more difficult (and specific) goals led to higher negotiation performance. Participants' heightened performance expectations may have functioned similarly to a challenging goal. Additionally, I argue that the parallel pattern of expectations for individual and ingroup performance is evidence that the group level bias is related to the self. One fundamental argument of social identity theory is that the group is part of the self-concept. By inflating perceptions of the ingroup, the self benefits through its association with the ingroup. As a corollary, we see our groups as good in part due to our membership in them. This demonstration of pro-ingroup favoritism is consistent with previous literature. However, by extending the effect to performance expectations, these self and group-enhancing strategies might the stage for unrealistic or unattainable standards. As discussed earlier, failing to meet these lofty expectations may lead to harsher evaluations. Therefore, Study 2 was developed to examine whether differential performance standards also emerged.

5. Study 2

Study 2 was designed to test the hypothesis that the heightened expectations demonstrated in the first study would also manifest through higher standards for performance (hypotheses 3 and 4). Since Study 1 demonstrated that "average" performance expectations were higher for the ingroup, participants should also require higher levels of quality before classifying a performance as exemplary. Again, this was examined in the context of students considering an upcoming, intergroup negotiation task.

Unlike Study 1, in Study 2 the task was described as a purely distributive task so that students could consider performance in the more intuitive context of percent of the pie claimed.

5.1 Participants

Sixty-four undergraduate business students enrolled in a required organizational behavior course participated as partial fulfillment of a course requirement. These data were collected in a different semester than Study 1.

5.2 Design

A mixed design was utilized, with participants randomly assigned materials asking for judgments about either the ingroup or the outgroup. Additionally, participants were asked to report thresholds for three levels of performance within-subjects.

5.3 Procedure

As in Study 1, students were randomly assigned to small groups at the start of the semester. Data collection took place in the 8th week of a 15-week course. Students were reminded that there was a negotiation exercise scheduled to take place the following week. They were told that groups would be paired together, and negotiation dyads formed so that they would be negotiating with an individual from the other group. Participants were then told that they would be negotiating a complex agreement with multiple issues, and that their goal would be to get the best outcome possible. They were then given the following instructions:

Take a moment and consider how the possible points will be divided between pairs. Assume there is a set amount of points to be shared between negotiators. Thus, if points are equally divided, each negotiator would earn 50% of the available points. Take a moment and think about how you expect to perform, and how your group in general should perform. After you have thought about this, please answer the following question dealing with the range of points you would expect someone to earn at high levels of quality.

Participants were then asked to report the minimum percent of available points that a typical individual from either their own group (ingroup) or from the other group (outgroup) would have to earn in order to say that person performed “very well.” Additionally, they were asked to report minimum criteria for “average” and “poor” performance. After completing the predictions, students were excused. The data were then used in a later lecture to demonstrate common biases in judgment and decision-making.

5.4 Results

The bottom cutoff for each performance range (very well, average, and poor) was computed and analyzed in a 2 (target: ingroup versus outgroup) X 3 (performance level) mixed ANOVA, with target as a between participants factor and performance level a within participants factor. Not surprisingly, there was a main effect of performance level ($F(2,124) = 384.9, p < .001$) with participants requiring more points to be earned for someone to perform “very well” (mean = 63.9) than average (mean = 42.2) or poor (mean = 11.5). There was no main effect of target group ($F(1,62) = .788, p = .378$); target group did interact with performance level ($F(2,124) = 3.915, p = .022$). This interaction is illustrated in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Consistent with hypothesis 3, participants who considered an ingroup member’s performance set a higher threshold for an individual to perform “very well” compared with participants considering an outgroup member’s performance (means of 67.16 and 60.56% for ingroup versus outgroup, respectively). At the average level of performance, this bottom cutoff was 43.66% versus 40.75% for ingroup versus outgroup, however this interaction shows that at the poor level of performance this pattern reverses, with means of 9.53% versus 13.41% for ingroup versus outgroup, as predicted by hypothesis 4.

5.5 Discussion

Hypothesis 3 was supported, in that the same subjective standard (performing “very well”) was associated with different performance requirements depending of the group membership of the target. An ingroup member would have to earn 6.6% more points before her actions would reach the standard of doing “very well.” Put another way, we can imagine a situation where an individual earns 65% of the available points in a negotiation.

Based on the results of Study 2, this might be seen as outstanding performance for an outgroup member as it exceed the minimum criterion for performing “very” well, but merely an acceptable (or expected) level for one’s own group because it falls short of the criterion for performing “very well.” Given the distributive nature of this negotiation task, it appears unlikely for real outcomes to meet these lofty standards. Additionally, the pattern of responses to the three performance standards for ingroup and outgroup members did not merely reflect a boosting of numbers for ingroup members across the board. Rather, inflated ingroup performance standards were only seen for high performance; for the lowest level of performance, the pattern reversed with ingroup standards lower than outgroup, consistent with Hypothesis 4.

6. General Discussion

The demonstration of heightened ingroup expectations and standards for these randomly created classroom groups provides compelling evidence that individuals spontaneously develop higher performance expectations for their own group. Furthermore, when considering the fact that the raised ingroup expectations persisted across the classroom groups as a whole, it is impossible to argue that these “great expectations” are accurate or veridical. The results of these two studies provide strong support that performance expectations for ingroup members are unrealistically inflated in a negotiation context. Furthermore, these inflated expectations also manifest in the criteria participants set for high levels of performance. These two findings suggest that evaluations of ingroup performance might be made using unrealistic expectations. That is, if an ingroup member performs at an objectively average level, the quality may be seen as sub-standard rather than average or acceptable in light of these inflated predictions.

Clearly whether these expectations and standards actually translate into biased evaluations or treatment is a question for future empirical consideration. If, indeed, individuals commit to these standards for ingroup members a stage might be set where the bar is raised to a level which is hard to clear. Harsh evaluations have been found when an individual violates the stereotypic expectations that are associated with his or her group (Ho, Driscoll & Loosbrock, 1998; Jackson, Sullivan, & Hodge, 1993). Future research should examine whether or not holding these inflated ingroup expectations and standards results in harsh evaluations compared to objectively similar outgroup performance. However, for performance to be harshly judged, it must first be perceived to fall short of the expectations. It is possible that the inflated expectations might lead an individual to seek out confirming evidence of the ingroup member’s excellence. Likewise, it could be that these inflated expectations, through biased perception or attribution, may allow us to rate ingroup members very highly in ambiguous situations, as we have a tendency to seek evidence to confirm hypotheses we already hold (Snyder & Swann, 1978). However, if we are faced with concrete criteria that are unambiguous, we might be forced to admit the ingroup member falls short of these expectations.

Although favoring the ingroup is argued to indirectly boost the perceiver’s self-esteem or social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), raising the bar too high may result in cases where ingroup members are derogated, ironically bringing down the group’s evaluation. This outcome would have implications both for the perceiver’s social identity and the accuracy of the evaluation. Therefore, future research will need to address evaluations of ingroup and outgroup members’ performance to determine whether the inflated expectations demonstrated in the present research lead to a harsh response to performance that falls short. Holding accurate expectations for different levels of employees (e.g., expecting a higher degree of sophistication from a senior consultant than from a newly minted MBA) is crucial for assessing progress and performance. That is, the argument is not that we should never apply stereotypic expectations, rather than we need to be concerned about systemic bias in how these expectations develop.

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Footnotes

1. It was necessary to compute a difference score for these measures because the measures of individual and group predictions were highly (and significantly) intercorrelated. Additionally, it is impossible to determine from this data if participants scored more points because they expected their group to score well or because they expected the opposing group to score poorly.
2. Because some students were present for only one of the two classes where data were collected, some students were excluded from analyses due to missing data.

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Target Group by Performance Level Interaction. Mean minimum points required for performing very well, average, or poorly for ingroup and outgroup conditions. $F(2,124) = 3.915, p = .022$

Figure: One

