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Individuation or Depersonalization: The Influence of Personal Status Position

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We propose that personal status affects the extent to which individuals have a depersonalized perception of the self, that is, perceive themselves in terms of their group membership rather than individuating characteristics. In two experiments, we tested the prediction that individuals with low personal status tend more to depersonalization than individuals with high personal status, especially when individual distinctiveness is threatened. Results were generally in line with predictions. In Experiment 1, in which relative group size was manipulated, individuals with low personal status displayed more depersonalization than individuals with high personal status, although independent of relative group size. In Experiment 2, in which group immersion was manipulated, individuals with low personal status reported more depersonalized judgments than individuals with high personal status when group immersion was high.

KEYWORDS depersonalization, individual distinctiveness, personal status, positive identity

WE ALL belong to numerous social groups, like a family, a group of friends, a sports team, and the company where we work. As such, group memberships form an integral part of our everyday life. Our awareness of these group memberships and the extent to which we tend to think of ourselves in terms of these group memberships may, however, vary from situation to situation. On some occasions, we may conceive of ourselves as unique individuals, clearly different from other people. Yet, in other situations we may be highly aware of our membership in a certain group, and focus on the things

we have in common with our fellow group members. This perception of the self in terms of social group membership is referred to as depersonalization (Brewer, 1991; Turner,

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Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Given that depersonalization implies a perception of the self and others in terms of group memberships, the extent to which an individual has a depersonalized perception of the self has important implications for the way people perceive each other and behave toward each other (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel, 1978; Turner et al., 1987). Social interaction that is grounded in depersonalized perceptions may result in prejudice, discrimination, and intergroup conflict (Brewer & Miller, 1996; Messick & Mackie, 1989; Sherif, 1966; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, insight into the determinants of depersonalization is highly relevant to our understanding of group processes and intergroup relations. Extending earlier work on the determinants of depersonalization, in the present study we argue that the extent to which individuals have a depersonalized perception of the self is affected by the extent to which their personal achievements, ability, or status reflect positively on the self.

The concept of depersonalization is central to both optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991) and self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985; Turner et al., 1987). Both theories distinguish between an individuated and a social, more depersonalized component of identity. According to these approaches, depersonalization is primarily a matter of self-categorization. The more people categorize themselves in terms of their group memberships (e.g. 'I am a psychologist'), the more they tend to perceive similarities within their group and differences between their group and other groups (Turner et al., 1987). Interpersonal differences within the group and similarities with people from other groups, on the other hand, become less salient. For example, when someone categorizes the self as a 'psychology student', the individual will mainly perceive similarities with other psychology students and differences with students from other disciplines. The individual will have less attention for interpersonal differences with psychology students or similarities with students from other disciplines. Thus, perceptions of the self are depersonalized in the sense that the individual conceives of the self as,

to a certain extent, interchangeable with other members of the ingroup. Self-categorization on an interpersonal level on the other hand engenders perceptions of the self in terms of unique, individuating characteristics. As a consequence of such individuated perceptions of the self, people accentuate interpersonal differences, especially within their own group (Brewer & Weber, 1994). Thus, whereas the depersonalized self is expressed by the relative emphasis on similarities between the self and other ingroup members, the individuated self is expressed by the relative emphasis on differences between the self and other ingroup members (Simon, Pantaleo, & Mummendey, 1995).

As depersonalization is associated with categorization at the group level, indications of the level of depersonalization may be found in judgments reflecting perceptions of within-group similarities and differences. First, depersonalization affects perceptions of group variability. When people are depersonalized, they perceive the ingroup as relatively homogeneous (Brewer, 1993). Second, because depersonalization implies categorization of the self as similar to the ingroup, depersonalization is associated with a relatively high degree of perceived similarity between the self and the ingroup (Simon et al., 1995). Finally, depersonalization is conceptually linked to social identification. Social identification has been argued to be in part cognitive, in part affective in nature (Karasawa, 1991; Tajfel, 1978). Whereas the affective component reflects the emotional involvement in the group, the cognitive component reflects the conception of the self as a group member, that is, depersonalization. Hence, depersonalized perceptions of the self should be reflected in higher levels of identification.

Mainly guided by self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985; Turner et al., 1987) and optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991, 1993), research has identified a number of factors that affect the extent to which individuals have a depersonalized conception of the self. First, a number of studies have shown that the intergroup comparative context may render group membership more or less salient, and thus per-

ceptions of the self in terms of group membership more or less likely. Haslam, Oakes, Turner, and McGarty (1995) for instance, found that the ingroup was perceived as more homogeneous when an outgroup was salient (i.e. thus rendering ingroup membership salient) than when there was no explicit comparison outgroup.

Whereas self-categorization theory emphasizes the cognitive processes underlying depersonalization (i.e. the influence of the intergroup comparative context on self-perceptions), optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991) underscores the role motivation may play in determining the extent to which individuals conceive of the self in terms of a specific group membership. Optimal distinctiveness theory proposes that individuals have the opposing needs for differentiation from others (individuation), to emphasize the uniqueness of the self, and assimilation with others (depersonalization), to assert group belongingness. The distinction between these two needs should be viewed as a continuum rather than as a simple dichotomy: in one situation people may tend more toward individuation, while in other situations people tend more toward depersonalization. The degree of depersonalization is contingent on the tension between these opposing needs. Group characteristics and context factors influence the relative strength of these needs. When individual distinctiveness is threatened, the individual will tend to emphasize the uniqueness of the self or seek a more distinctive subgroup to define the self, because too much depersonalization is uncomfortable for an individual. When, on the other hand, an individual is overly individuated, the individual will react by emphasizing similarities with others, because too much individuation is uncomfortable as well (Brewer, 1991).

Individual distinctiveness may be threatened in several ways. Membership of a relatively large group, for instance, may pose a threat to individual distinctiveness, because depersonalized perceptions of the self as a member of a relatively large group imply sameness to a large number of others. Consequently, members of relatively small groups tend more toward depersonalization than members of relatively large

groups (Brewer, Weber, & Carini, 1995, Experiment 3; Simon & Hamilton, 1994). Also, when individuals are approached on the basis of their group membership alone (i.e. when they are treated as interchangeable with other group members), this may threaten individual distinctiveness. As a result, individuals tend less toward depersonalization when they are overtly approached in terms of their similarity to other group members (Brewer, Manzi, & Shaw, 1993).

Although usually discussed in terms of identification rather than depersonalization, social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposes another important motivational determinant of depersonalization: the extent to which the group membership contributes to a positive self-image. Because through depersonalization the group's characteristics are ascribed to the self (Turner et al., 1987), the group's standing or status reflects on the self-image to the extent that one sees the self in terms of the group membership. Thus, groups with higher status may make more positive contributions to their members' self-images than groups with lower status. Given that individuals strive for a positive self-image, they are likely to strive for membership in high status groups (Tajfel, 1978) and likely to identify more (i.e. have more depersonalized perceptions of the self) with high status groups (Ellemers, van Knippenberg, de Vries, & Wilke, 1988; Ellemers, van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1990 – although this is not to say that a desire for a positive self-image is the only motivation driving group affiliation; see Hogg & Mullin, 1999). In other words, on the basis of social identity theory we propose that depersonalization may be motivated by a desire for a positive self-image.

In addition to the effects of the comparative intergroup context and group characteristics like size and status, there may also be intragroup differences in the extent to which group members perceive the self in terms of the membership in that particular group. Where depersonalization is concerned, probably the most important dimension differentiating group members is the extent to which they are prototypical of the group. Group member pro-

typicality refers to the extent to which group members' characteristics reflect what group members have in common and what differentiates the members of the group from members of other groups (Hogg, 1993; Turner et al., 1987; Van Knippenberg, 1999). Thus, group member prototypicality reflects the extent to which a group member is representative of, or similar to, the group. Because self-categorization as a member of a group is based on the perceived similarity between the self and the group, and prototypical members are more similar to the group than nonprototypical members, prototypical members are more likely to categorize the self as a member of the group and thus more likely to have a depersonalized perception of the self than nonprototypical group members. This conclusion is corroborated by a recent study by Van Harreveld, Spears, and Jetten (1997). Van Harreveld et al. manipulated group status and participants' personal status independently and found that identification was higher for high status individuals assigned to high status groups and low status individuals assigned to low status groups. Moreover, this interaction between group status and personal status was mediated by perceived prototypicality of the self. The congruency between personal and group status affected group member prototypicality and thus group member identification.

The study by Van Harreveld et al. shows that personal status may affect depersonalization because it may affect the extent to which individual group members are prototypical of their group. A study by Ellemers et al. (1988) indicates that personal status may also affect depersonalization because it may affect the likelihood that the individual will be able to join a higher status group. Ellemers et al. manipulated personal status and group status independently. Moreover, they also manipulated whether group boundaries were permeable, that is, whether it was possible for the individual group members to move to a higher (or lower) status group. Because in case of permeable group boundaries individual mobility would be based on individual merit, high status individuals would have higher chances of moving to a higher status group (and hence improving their

social identity) than low status individuals. Ellemers et al. found that when group boundaries were permeable identification was lower among high status members of low status groups, whereas these differences in identification were absent when group boundaries were impermeable. These findings suggest that personal status may also affect depersonalization to the extent that it affects the perceived likelihood that one will be able to trade membership of the group for membership in a 'better' (i.e. higher status) group.

Thus, personal status has been shown to affect depersonalization because it may affect both group member prototypicality and group members' chances of moving to a higher status group. We propose that there is yet another reason why personal status may affect depersonalization: personal status may affect the extent to which a more individuated versus a more depersonalized conception of the self serves identity needs. Social identity theory proposes that a person's identity consists of both a personal and a social component (e.g. Tajfel, 1978; see Brewer, 1991; Turner et al., 1987, for similar arguments) and has emphasized how the group's standing and achievements (i.e. the group's status) reflects on group members' self-image. Consequently, in their striving for a positive identity, individuals strive for membership in high status groups. Yet, what has been ignored in the discussion of depersonalization and group members' search for a positive identity is the possibility that for some individuals a more individuated conception of the self may serve identity needs better than a more depersonalized conception of the self. Positive identity, albeit personal rather than social identity, may also be derived from individual rather than group status. Individuals with high personal standing (e.g. high achievers like successful businesspersons, sportspersons, or academics) might more easily fulfill their need for a positive self-image on the basis of their personal status and personal achievements than on the basis of their group membership. Indeed, depersonalized perceptions of the self might even be detrimental to a positive self-image for individuals with a high personal status position, when

depersonalization would imply similarity to predominantly lower status others (i.e. fellow group members with lower personal status). This line of reasoning leads to the proposition that the extent to which depersonalized perceptions of the self as a member of a certain group contribute to a positive self-image depends not only on the group's standing, but also on the individual's personal status position. The higher one's personal status, the more likely that an individuated rather than a depersonalized perception of the self contributes more to a positive self-image (all other things being equal, of course: in everyday life, high status individuals will often be members of high status groups). Individuals with relatively low personal status, on the other hand, may have to rely primarily on group memberships for a positive self-image. In other words, we predict that group members with high personal status will tend to have less depersonalized perceptions of the self than group members with low personal status.¹

Obviously, this is not to say that low status individuals will always have a more depersonalized perception of the self. The extent to which high status and low status individuals are prototypical of the group will be a powerful moderator of low status and high status individuals' level of depersonalization (van Harreveld et al., 1997). Yet, this does not preclude the possibility that, all other things being equal, low status individuals will have a more depersonalized conception of the self than high status individuals. Although this is in fact implicit in the proposition that individuals identify more with high status than with low status groups (i.e. apparently individuation is preferable over conceiving of the self as a member of a low status group), the present study is the first to explicate this and relate this to interpersonal differences between the members of the very same group (i.e. instead of to differences between members of high status and low status groups).

Experiment 1

In the present study, we tested the hypothesis that individuals with high personal status tend

less toward depersonalization than individuals with low personal status. We reasoned that, as a result of a stronger desire for individuated self-perceptions, individuals with high personal status are more sensitive to threats to individual distinctiveness than individuals with low personal status. Therefore, we expected that individuals with high personal status tend to have less depersonalized perceptions of the self, especially when individual distinctiveness is threatened.

As noted in the introduction, because minorities are more distinctive than majorities, a depersonalized conception of the self is less threatening to individual distinctiveness for minority group members than for majority group members (Brewer, 1991). Therefore, we predicted that individuals with high personal status tend less toward depersonalization than individuals with low personal status, especially when the ingroup is the majority group within the comparative intergroup context. In addition, we expected to replicate earlier findings of overall higher levels of depersonalization among minority group as compared with majority group members (Brewer et al., 1995; Simon & Hamilton, 1994). Thus, we also predicted a main effect of relative group size.

To test these predictions, we conducted an experiment in which a threat to individual distinctiveness was induced by manipulating the relative size of the ingroup. In addition, personal status was manipulated by bogus feedback about an ability test. To assess depersonalization, we measured perceived intragroup variability, perceived similarity between the self and other group members, and identification. The first two measures were also used by Simon, Hastedt, and Aufderheide (1997). Identification was added because of the theoretical link between the concepts of depersonalization and identification (see above).

Method

Participants and design Eighty undergraduate psychology students from Leiden University (21 men, 59 women), between 18 and 29 years of age, voluntarily participated in the experiment. A short interview with all participants afterwards

revealed that four participants had serious doubts about the credibility of the experimental manipulations during the course of the experiment. These participants were deleted from further analyses. All participants received Dfl7.50 (about US\$4) for their participation and were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (Personal status) \times 2 (Relative group size) factorial design.

Procedure All participants were led individually to a computer, which was used to present the stimulus information and to measure the dependent variables. Participants were informed that two unrelated studies would take place. The first of these two studies consisted of two parts, the first of which took place before the second study and the second part after the second study. In reality, both studies were related: the manipulation of personal status was presented as a separate study to make sure that participants perceived their personal status as unrelated to their group membership. The first study was introduced as a personality study. It was suggested that two fundamental personality types can be distinguished: a type H personality and a type K personality. Participants were told that type H and type K personalities show differences on many dimensions, like pragmatism, charisma, flexibility, and extraversion. These differences were said to have a great impact on people's lives, relationships, and work attitudes. Participants were left uninformed about the exact nature of the differences between type H and type K personalities. Subsequently, participants completed a personality test, consisting of 28 questions selected from a Dutch personality test (Stichting Werkgroep Nederlandse Persoonlijkheidsvragenlijst, 1974), allegedly to determine whether they had a type H or a type K personality. After they completed the test, participants received bogus feedback about the test results: all participants were informed that they had a type H personality. To manipulate Relative group size, participants in the minority condition were led to believe that about 20 percent of humanity has a type H personality and about 80 percent a type K personality. In the majority condition, participants were led to

believe that about 80 percent of humanity has a type H personality and about 20 percent a type K personality.²

After this, the second study containing the manipulation of Personal status was introduced. The suggested aim of the second study was to investigate the (nonexistent) 'deductive-anticipating ability' among highly educated people. The Personal status manipulation was administered by bogus feedback about the performance on a test that allegedly measured the deductive-anticipating ability. Deductive-anticipating ability was described as 'the capacity of people to predict a future situation accurately and to anticipate on this future situation in as little time as possible and from as little information as possible'. It was suggested that this ability is very important for a successful career in the future.

After this, participants received the test, which was subdivided in three separate tasks, because it was suggested that deductive-anticipating ability depends on three essential skills: 'intuitive logic' (the ability to predict logical consequences from abstract information), 'estimation accuracy' (because correct assessment of a situation often requires one to make quick estimates), and 'association skill' (since people with a high deductive-anticipating ability are very good at making associations in a creative way from limited information; this enables them to get a lot of information out of only a few words). The intuitive logic task was a spatial figure task, the estimation accuracy task was an estimation task, and the association skill task was a word association task.

After the test, participants received performance feedback in the form of a test score on a scale ranging from 1 to 100 (low to high). In the low status condition, participants received a score of 14. Participants in the high status condition received a score of 86. At the end of this part of the experiment the status manipulation was checked with the question 'How would you describe your own deductive-anticipating ability?', which was answered on a 7-point scale (1 = *low*, 7 = *high*). In addition, some filler questions were asked to lend credibility to the suggestion that this was a separate experiment.

After the induction of personal status, the second part of the first study was introduced. In this final part of the study, participants answered questions aimed at assessing their perceptions of type H individuals (their alleged own personality type), administering the dependent measures. Intragroup variability was measured with the questions: 'To what extent do you consider type H individuals to be similar to each other' and 'To what extent do you consider type H individuals to be different from each other' (reverse scored) (cf. Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995; Simon et al., 1997; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; $r = .62$). Perceived similarity between the self and others was measured with two items derived from Simon et al. (1995), 'I am different from the average type H individual' (reverse scored) and 'I resemble the average type H individual', and one additional item, 'I have little in common with other type H individuals' (reverse scored) (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*, $\alpha = .77$). Identification with type H individuals was measured with four items: 'I identify with other type H individuals', 'I see myself as a type H individual', 'I am glad to be a type H individual', and 'I feel strong ties with type H individuals' (Doosje et al., 1995; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*, $\alpha = .87$). In a preliminary analysis, the items comprising the measures of intragroup variability, perceived similarity between the self and the group, and identification were all entered in a principal components analysis with oblimin rotation. Results of this analysis indicated that the intended three factors could be distinguished, with items loading on the intended factor only.

At the end of the session, all participants were fully debriefed about the purpose of the experiment and the bogus feedback, thanked, and paid for their participation.

Results

Manipulation check In the low status condition, participants rated their deductive-anticipating ability as lower ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.71$) than in the high personal status condition ($M = 5.29$, $SD = .96$; $F(1, 72) = 37.26$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .35$). The main effect of Relative group size ($F < 1$) and the interaction of Status and Relative

group size ($F(1, 72) = 1.32$, ns) were both non-significant. Thus, we may conclude that the personal status manipulation was induced successfully.

Depersonalization Analysis of variance of the intragroup variability ratings indicated that although the interaction of Status and Relative group size was nonsignificant ($F < 1$), the main effect of Status was significant ($F(1, 72) = 6.34$, $p < .02$; $\eta^2 = .08$). Participants with low personal status perceived the group as more homogeneous ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.04$) than participants with high personal status ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.22$). Thus, the prediction that group members with low personal status tend more to depersonalization was supported, although the effect was not moderated by Relative group size. As predicted, the main effect of Relative group size reached significance ($F(1, 72) = 12.84$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .15$). Participants in the minority condition perceived their group as more homogeneous ($M = 4.30$, $SD = .95$) than participants in the majority condition ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.23$).

Similar results were obtained for the perceived similarity between the self and the group. The Status by Relative group size interaction was nonsignificant ($F(1, 72) = 2.01$, $p < .17$), but the main effect of Status was ($F(1, 72) = 4.11$, $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .05$). Participants with low personal status perceived more similarity between the self and the group ($M = 4.28$, $SD = .96$) than participants with high personal status ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .96$). Again, this is in line with our hypothesis, although the fact that the Status effect was unaffected by Relative group size is not. Again, the main effect of Relative group size was also significant ($F(1, 72) = 5.81$, $p < .02$; $\eta^2 = .08$). Participants in the minority condition perceived more similarity between the self and the group ($M = 4.30$, $SD = .89$) than participants in the majority condition ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.02$), as predicted.

None of the tests reached significance for identification (Status by Relative group size: $F(1, 72) = 2.67$, $p < .11$; Status: $F < 1$; Relative group size: $F(1, 72) = 1.38$, ns).

Discussion

Results of Experiment 1 generally supported the hypotheses. Individuals with low personal status tended to display more signs of depersonalization than individuals with high personal status, although the status effect was not stronger among majority group members. In addition, participants in the minority condition rated the ingroup as being more homogeneous and perceived more similarity between the ingroup and the self than participants in the majority condition. This replicates previous findings (e.g. Brewer et al., 1995; Simon & Hamilton, 1994), and lends further support to the notion that depersonalized perceptions of the self are more likely among members of relatively small groups (cf. Brewer, 1991).

The strongest effects were found on intra-group variability, although effects were also found for perceived similarity between the self and other group members. No significant effects were found on identification. Conceptually, similarity judgments would seem to be more closely related to individual distinctiveness than identification. It is possible that, as a consequence, judgments of similarity are more sensitive to threats to individual distinctiveness.

Although the results of Experiment 1 lend support to the general prediction that low status individuals are more prone to depersonalization than high status individuals, the fact that the threat to individual distinctiveness embodied by majority group membership did not enhance the status effect is inconsistent with predictions. This apparent inconsistency might be attributable to the fact that in the majority condition depersonalization would in fact imply similarity to 80 percent of humanity. This constitutes an extremely inclusive group membership (cf. Brewer, 1991), that may have been too threatening to individual distinctiveness even for low status individuals. Thus, it is possible that the predicted difference in sensitivity to threats to individual distinctiveness will materialize for less extreme threats to individual distinctiveness than in Experiment 1. To address this possibility, we conducted a second study in which depersonalization was studied in the context of a less inclusive group membership.

Experiment 2

Although the results of the Experiment 1 support the conclusion that people with low personal status tend more to depersonalization than people with high personal status, we tested our hypothesis again in a second experiment. The second study had two main objectives.

The first objective was to test the assumption that high status individuals are more sensitive to a threat to individual distinctiveness than low status individuals if the threat is less extreme than in the first study. The second objective was to determine the robustness of our findings concerning the effects of personal status on depersonalization. To these ends, we tried to replicate the results of the first study with another operationalization of a threat to individual distinctiveness and with a natural rather than an experimentally induced group membership. A threat to individual distinctiveness was induced by a strong emphasis on group membership (cf. Brewer et al., 1993; see also Long & Manstead, 1997).

In this group immersion manipulation, participants were approached only on the basis of their group membership in the high group immersion condition, whereas they were approached as an individual in the low group immersion condition. Consequently, group membership should be more salient in the high group immersion condition. Given that we used a less inclusive group membership (students from Leiden University), we expected the threat to be less extreme than in Experiment 1. We predicted that individuals with high personal status tend less toward depersonalization than individuals with low personal status, especially when individual distinctiveness is threatened by a high level of group immersion. We also tried to replicate results from Experiment 1 with existing groups, to see whether the effects of personal status on depersonalization hold in naturally occurring groups. Replication with an existing group membership would rule out the possibility that effects are contingent on specific characteristics of experimental groups.

Method

Participants and design Eighty-six undergraduate students from Leiden University (15 men and 71 women), between 18 and 27 years of age, voluntarily participated in the experiment. A short interview with all participants afterwards revealed that five participants had serious doubts about the credibility of the experimental manipulations during the course of the experiment. These participants were deleted from further analyses. One participant was dropped from the analyses because she had previous experience with one of the subtasks used for the manipulation of Personal status. Participants received Dfl7.50 (about US\$4) for their participation. The independent variables Personal status (high or low) and Group immersion (high or low) were manipulated in a 2×2 factorial design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions.

Procedure At the beginning of each experimental session, participants were led individually to a computer, which was used to present the stimulus information and to measure the dependent variables. As in the first experiment, the personal status manipulation was presented as a separate study, to make sure participants perceived their personal status as unrelated to group membership. First, we introduced the 'first study' containing the personal status manipulation to the participants. Participants were told that this was the first of two unrelated studies. Procedures were identical to those of the 'second study' in Experiment 1. This manipulation comprised exactly the same ability test as in the first experiment. Again, participants received bogus feedback about their deductive anticipating ability, a manipulation check, and some filler questions.

The 'second study' was consecutively introduced and the Group immersion manipulation was administered to the participants. In the high group immersion condition, participants read the following instruction: 'In this study we are interested in the ideas of *students from Leiden University in general*. We are not interested in you as an individual, but in you as a student from

Leiden University. (...) In this study, you represent an example of the average student from Leiden University. This study focuses on this general category, and we are not interested in interpersonal differences'. During the rest of the experiment 'student nr. 62' remained visible on the computer screen. In the low group immersion condition, participants read the following instruction: 'In this study we are interested in the ideas of *you personally*. We are interested in you as an individual, and not in you as a student from Leiden University'. For the rest of the experiment 'participant nr. 62' remained visible on the computer screen (cf. Brewer et al., 1993).

Following the experimental manipulations, questions referring to perceptions of students from Leiden University were administered to the participants. These questions consisted of the same dependent measures as in Experiment 1 (intragroup variability, similarity between the self and the group, and identification).

Results

Manipulation check In the low personal status condition, participants described their deductive-anticipating ability as lower ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.66$) than in the high personal status condition ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.36$; $F(1,82) = 12.27$, $p < .002$; $\eta^2 = .13$). The main effect of Group immersion ($F < 1$) and the interaction of Status and Group immersion ($F < 1$) were both non-significant. Again, we may conclude that the personal status manipulation was induced successfully.

Depersonalization Analysis of variance of the intragroup variability ratings yielded a significant interaction of Status and Group immersion ($F(1, 82) = 5.23$, $p < .03$; $\eta^2 = .06$). Testing of the simple main effects of Status showed that in the low group immersion condition, participants with low personal status ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.00$) did not differ from participants with high personal status ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.03$; $F(1, 82) = 1.32$, $p < .26$), although it should be noted that these means suggest an unexpected reverse trend of the status effect. However, in the high group immersion condition, participants with

high personal status reported less depersonalized judgments ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.28$) than participants with low personal status ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.45$; $F(1, 82) = 4.72$, $p < .04$). Further, participants with low personal status were not affected by the Group immersion manipulation ($F < 1$), but participants with high personal status were ($F(1, 82) = 11.29$, $p < .002$), indicating a greater sensitivity of high status individuals to a threat to individual distinctiveness. Thus, as predicted, group perceptions of participants with low personal status were more indicative of depersonalization than those of participants with high personal status when individual distinctiveness was threatened. The main effect of Status was not significant ($F < 1$), but the main effect of Group immersion was ($F(1, 82) = 5.66$, $p < .02$; $\eta^2 = .07$). In the low group immersion condition participants reported more depersonalized judgments ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.03$) than participants in the high group immersion condition ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.40$).

The Status by Group immersion interaction for perceived similarity was nonsignificant ($F(1, 82) = 3.44$, $p < .07$). Although no strong conclusions can be drawn from a nonsignificant effect, it makes sense to compare the pattern of the interaction with the findings on intragroup variability, because the predicted interaction did approach significance on the similarity measure. High status individuals reported less depersonalized judgments in the high group immersion condition ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.19$) than low status individuals ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.32$). However, contrary to expectations but consistent with the pattern of means of intragroup variability, there seemed to be a reverse trend of the status effect in the low group immersion condition (in the low personal status condition: $M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.20$, in the high personal status condition: $M = 4.43$, $SD = .75$). This tendency for depersonalization to be stronger among high status individuals than low status individuals in the low group immersion condition might be attributable to the belief that 'students' is a high status group, as we will discuss below. As predicted, high status individuals clearly tended to be more affected by the group immersion manipulation than low status

individuals, as can be seen by the drop of means for high status individuals. As on the intragroup variability measure, the means show a clear tendency for high status individuals to be more sensitive to a threat to individual distinctiveness than low status individuals.

None of the other tests reached significance for perceived similarity between the self and the group (Status: $F(1, 82) = 1.39$, *ns*; Group immersion: $F < 1$) or identification (Status by Group immersion: $F < 1$; Status: $F(1, 82) = 3.48$, $p < .07$; Group immersion: $F < 1$).

Discussion

The results of Experiment 2 lend further support to the hypothesis that individuals with high personal status tend to have less depersonalized perceptions of the self than individuals with low personal status, because individuals with high personal status are more sensitive to threats to individual distinctiveness. Although this was only evident in perceptions of intragroup variability, this finding does show that interpersonal differences within a group affect the extent to which group members tend to depersonalization, provided that group membership is salient. Furthermore, the ingroup was seen as more homogeneous when instructions focused participants on their group membership. This finding reflects similar findings obtained by Brewer et al. (1993), who found that depersonalizing instructions similar to the ones employed in the present study attenuated ingroup favoring biases in trait ratings. Because the Brewer et al. study focused on biases in trait ratings and not on variability judgments, the salience effect observed in the present study may be viewed as evidence that the finding of the Brewer et al. study generalizes to more direct indicators of depersonalization.

Both the finding that in the high immersion condition high status individuals judged the group to be less homogeneous than low status individuals and the finding that the level of immersion affected high status individuals' but not low status individuals' variability and similarity judgments support our line of reasoning. The tendency for high status individuals to have a more depersonalized perception of the self in

the low immersion condition, however, seems to be in contradiction with this reasoning. We may explain this apparent inconsistency if we assume that high ability individuals (i.e. the high status participants in the present study) see themselves as more prototypical of the group 'students from Leiden University' than lower ability individuals (i.e. the low status participants). That is, we argued that all other things being equal, low status individuals would depersonalize more than high status individuals, but all other things may not have been equal in the context of this specific group membership. High status individuals' group prototypicality rather than their personal status *per se* may have rendered their base rate level of depersonalization in the context of this particular group membership higher than that of low status individuals (cf. Van Harreveld et al., 1997). We did not assess the variables necessary to corroborate this line of reasoning (i.e. group prototypicality and group status ratings), but this explanation is consistent with both the results of prior research and our general theoretical argument.

In both studies, the strongest effects were obtained on the variability measure. In Experiment 2, we only obtained significant results for the variability measure, and although in Experiment 1 we also obtained effects for similarity judgments, these effects were weaker than the corresponding effects for variability judgments. For identification we did not obtain effects in either experiment. We propose two explanations that may account for these differences. A first explanation may be found in the fact that perceived similarity between the self and other group members and identification were both measured with items referring directly to the self (e.g. 'I identify with students from Leiden University'). This could have had an individuating effect, thus subsiding the threat to individual distinctiveness. In other words, the intragroup variability measure, which is a very often used and widely accepted measure of depersonalization (Brewer, 1993; Doosje et al., 1995; Simon & Hamilton, 1994; Simon et al., 1995, 1997) might be a more 'unobtrusive' measure of depersonalization

because the items refer only indirectly to the self. A second explanation may be found in the fact that intragroup variability judgments were always assessed first. It is possible that once individuals have asserted their individual distinctiveness or group belongingness by expressing the belief that the group is relatively heterogeneous or homogeneous, respectively, the need for distinctiveness or inclusiveness is fulfilled. (For a similar argument concerning threats to the self, see Tesser & Cornell, 1991.) Consequently, subsequent measures will find little indication of differences in the level of depersonalization.

General discussion

Earlier studies inspired by self-categorization theory (see Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994) and optimal distinctiveness theory (see Brewer, 1991) have described how group characteristics and contextual factors affect the extent to which individuals have a depersonalized or an individuated conception of the self. The present study extends these findings by outlining how interpersonal differences between group members may also affect the equilibrium between individuation and depersonalization. Based on an integration of insights from optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991) and social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we have proposed that the extent to which one's individual status position may contribute to a positive self-image affects the relative strength of the need for exclusiveness (individuation) and inclusiveness (depersonalization). Consistent with this line of reasoning, the results of the two studies reported here support the proposition that individuals with high personal status are less likely to have depersonalized self-perceptions than individuals with low personal status.

Previous research has shown that personal status may affect depersonalization through its potential effects on group member prototypicality (Van Harreveld et al., 1997) and individual mobility opportunities (Ellemers et al., 1988). The present study extends these finding by outlining how personal status may affect

depersonalization through the desire for a positive identity. The higher depersonalization among low status as compared with high status individuals observed in the present study cannot be explained in terms of prototypicality or individual mobility. Prototypicality seems to have a reverse effect in Experiment 2 and does not seem to play a role in Experiment 1 (i.e. why would low status individuals see themselves as more prototypical of both the majority and the minority personality type?). Individual mobility opportunities were identical for low and high status individuals in both experiments. In Experiment 1, group membership (personality type) was permanent for all participants, whereas it was temporary (university students) for all participants in Experiment 2. Most importantly, however, neither an explanation in terms of prototypicality nor an explanation in terms of individual mobility opportunities can account for the finding that the status effect was moderated by a threat to individual distinctiveness. This observation is, however, perfectly in line with our theoretical position in terms of the potential contributions to a positive self-image of a more depersonalized versus a more individuated conception of the self. Thus, our findings also corroborate the more general conclusion that a desire for a positive identity may affect depersonalization. Moreover, and perhaps more important, our findings underscore that for a full understanding of depersonalization, one needs to take into account individuals' personal characteristics and personal situation as well as characteristics of the group and the intergroup context, because these personal characteristics may co-determine the extent to which identity needs are served by a more depersonalized or more individuated conception of the self.

As discussed in the introduction, depersonalization and individuation are to be seen as opposing poles on a continuum. However, less depersonalization as a member of a specific group does not necessarily imply more individuation. It might also mean depersonalization as a member of another group. In other words, although lower ratings of variability do reflect higher levels of depersonalization at the cat-

egory level, higher ratings of variability might reflect individuation as well as higher levels of subgroup identification. Our conclusions are based on the assumption that in our studies lower levels of depersonalization implied higher levels of individuation. Given that we did not directly assess individuation, but only depersonalization in terms of the group memberships that were studied, a word of caution is in order here. Future research pursuing the dynamics of depersonalization and individuation would do well to incorporate measures of individuation as well as measures of depersonalization.

An interesting implication of the present findings is that when for some reason no options to assert individual distinctiveness or group belongingness are available, this might affect low status and high status individuals' self-image differently. The self-image of low status individuals might be negatively affected when they are brought into a state of 'forced individuation' (i.e. with no means to assert group belongingness), because they rely mostly on group membership for a positive self-image. The self-image of high status individuals might be negatively affected when brought into a state of 'forced depersonalization' (i.e. with no means to assert individual distinctiveness), because they may rely primarily on their individual position for a positive self-image. Thus, low status individuals may have relatively high self-esteem when forced into a state of depersonalization, whereas the reverse might hold for high status individuals. Although the merits of this proposition cannot be evaluated on the basis of the present data (the level of depersonalization was not fixed – if fixing the level of depersonalization is at all possible – but rather the main dependent variable), future research addressing these possibilities would yield important new insights into the relationship between personal status, depersonalization, and evaluations of the self.

Another interesting avenue for future research lies in exploring the implications of group-specific individual status positions for the level of depersonalization. In the present study, personal status was operationalized in terms of

individual ability. Individual ability would seem to be a relatively 'universal' status dimension. Yet, other status dimensions may be more context-specific, and for instance rely on a specific group membership. For example, hooligans may derive status from their acts of hooliganism, but only within their own group. In such cases, the self-image can only benefit from one's personal status position in the context of the specific group membership. Thus, in such cases, the relationship between personal status position and depersonalization may be more complex, because asserting group belongingness (e.g. depersonalization) may be a prerequisite for enjoying the benefits of one's individual status position. Similar considerations might hold for specific roles within a group. For instance, a leader may derive a positive self-image from a group-specific leader role. Yet, this might present the leader with the problem of needing to simultaneously assert group belongingness and individual distinctiveness to benefit from the status associated with the group-specific individual position. Given the fundamental social psychological character of depersonalization, it would seem highly worthwhile to explore these more complex relationships in future research focusing on within-group differences in depersonalization.

Notes

1. At first glance, this proposition may resemble the second corollary of the 'Self-esteem Hypothesis' (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Hogg & Abrams, 1990). According to this corollary, low self-esteem may motivate intergroup discrimination. However, this corollary is not directly generalizable to depersonalization. Even though depersonalization may be a requirement for intergroup discrimination, a high level of depersonalization does not automatically imply a high level of intergroup discrimination (Hinkle & Brown, 1990). Depersonalization is primarily related to self-definition, whereas intergroup discrimination is primarily focused on improving social identity. Moreover, the self-esteem hypothesis refers to intergroup differentiation as a means of increasing collective self-esteem (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998), whereas our proposition concerns the balancing of personal and social identity to achieve a positive self-image.
2. Because the manipulation of relative group size was rather straightforward and we feared that a check on this manipulation (i.e. asking participants which was the more common personality type) would arouse suspicion more than anything else, we did not incorporate a check on this manipulation. Rather, we relied on the expected main effect of Relative group size as indicator of the success of this manipulation.

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