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"They're all the Same!"...But for Several Different Reasons: A Review of the Multicausal Nature of Perceived Group Variability

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Abstract

Perceived group variability refers to the variability that people perceive among the members of a social group. Researchers in this area have tended to focus on the way in which perceivers' group affiliations lead to in-group and out-group homogeneity effects, including the other race effect. However, recent advances have highlighted the role of additional influences. In the present review, we consider the influence of (1) the perceiver's group affiliation, (2) the group's objective variability, (3) the group's social position, and (4) the group's central tendency. We focus on recent research in these areas that has highlighted the strategic, context-dependent, and symbolic nature of perceived group variability. We conclude that future research needs to adopt a multicausal approach in order to provide a more complete and comprehensive account of perceived group variability.

KEYWORDS: perceived group variability; in-group homogeneity; out-group homogeneity; stereotyping; other race effect.

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"All a girl really wants is for one guy to prove to her that they are not all the same." Marilyn Monroe

Like Marilyn Monroe, people often perceive the members of social groups, such as men, as being "all the same". In technical terms, we can say that Marilyn perceived a relatively low degree of *variability* among men or that she perceived men as being relatively *homogeneous* rather than *heterogeneous*.

Perceived group variability is important because groups that are perceived to be relatively homogeneous are often the subject of greater stereotyping, prejudice, and memory biases. Perceived group homogeneity reinforces stereotypes by leading people to generalize their stereotypical judgments from one group member to the rest of the group (e.g., Park & Hastie, 1987). So, we would expect Marilyn's negative experiences with one man to have generalized to other men that she met. Perceived group homogeneity also protects stereotypes by leading people to psychologically exclude nonstereotypical members from the group (Park & Hastie, 1987). Hence, even if Marilyn met a decent, trustworthy man, she would perceive him to be an exception to the rule, and his positive qualities would not affect her negative stereotype of men in general.

Recent research has also confirmed that perceived group homogeneity also leads to prejudice and discrimination (Brauer & Er-rafiy, 2011; Hee, Finkelman, Lopez, & Ensari, 2011; see also Roccas & Amit, 2011). People are more likely to hold the same attitude towards a group of people when they perceive them to be "all the same". This attitude can be negative, reflecting greater prejudice, although it can also be positive when multicultural ideology is salient (Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007). In addition, people are likely to react more negatively towards deviant group members who belong to homogeneous groups rather than to heterogeneous groups (Hutchison, Jetten, & Gutierrez, 2011).

Finally, perceived group homogeneity can reduce the accuracy with which people recognize the faces of members of different groups (for a review, see Hugenberg, Young, Bernstein, & Sacco, 2010). This intergroup facial recognition deficit has been implicated in wrongful convictions based on inaccurate eyewitness testimony (Hugenberg et al., 2010, p. 1168).

The Present Review

Researchers in the area of perceived group variability have tended to focus on the way in which perceivers' affiliations with groups motivate biased perceptions of group variability. However, recent advances in this area have established that perceivers' affiliations are only one of several factors that influence perceived group variability. Additional factors include the group's actual variability, the group's social position, and the group's central tendency (mean position) on specific social dimensions. In the following review, we provide a brief overview of each of these factors and outline recent advances in our understanding of how each factor operates. In particular, we focus on the strategic, context-dependent, and symbolic nature of perceived group variability.

(1) The Perceiver's Group Affiliation: *My* Group is More or Less Variable Than *Yours*

The dominant approach in the area of perceived group variability has focused on the influence of the perceiver's group affiliation. The classic finding in this area is that people tend to perceive significantly greater variability among members of groups to which they belong – *in-group* members – than among members of groups to which they do not belong – *out-group* members (for reviews, see Boldry, Gaertner, & Quinn, 2007; Mullen & Hu, 1989; Ostrom & Sedikides, 1992; Linville & Fischer, 1998). Although this *out-group homogeneity effect* is a robust and widespread phenomenon, it is by no means ubiquitous. Researchers have identified several conditions in which people show a reverse effect called an *in-group*

homogeneity effect (for reviews, see Simon, 1992; Voci, 2000). Parallel results have recently been reported in the area of intergroup facial recognition. Although people tend to be better at recognizing the faces of in-group members than out-group members (e.g., Rule, Ambady, Adams, & Macrae, 2007; Rule, Garrett, & Ambady, 2010), there are some situations in which this effect tends towards a reversal (Ackerman et al., 2006; Wilson & Hugenberg, 2010). So, it is sometimes a case of "*we* are all the same" rather than "*they* are all the same".

In-group and out-group homogeneity effects are thought to be motivated by the need to maintain a positive and distinct social identity. However, our own work in this area has highlighted the relatively strategic and instrumental manner in which people use these effects (Rubin, Hewstone, & Voci, 2001). In a series of three studies, we found that people only perceived their in-group to be relatively heterogeneous when they made their variability ratings in relation to traits that were (a) negatively stereotypical of the in-group and (b) positively stereotypical of the out-group. Both of these types of traits are threatening to in-group members because they highlight the in-group's weaknesses and the out-group's strengths respectively. By perceiving the in-group as relatively heterogeneous on these traits, people give themselves the opportunity to distance themselves from their group's negative position and get closer to the out-group's positive position. So, as in Figure 1, Marilyn Monroe might perceive women to be relatively heterogeneous on the positive male-stereotypical trait "adventurous" in order to distance herself from the stereotype that women are not very adventurous and consider herself as one of the few adventurous women. These results are important because they demonstrate that people may perceive their group to be more or less variable depending on whether they want to distance themselves from or associate themselves with the group's stereotype.

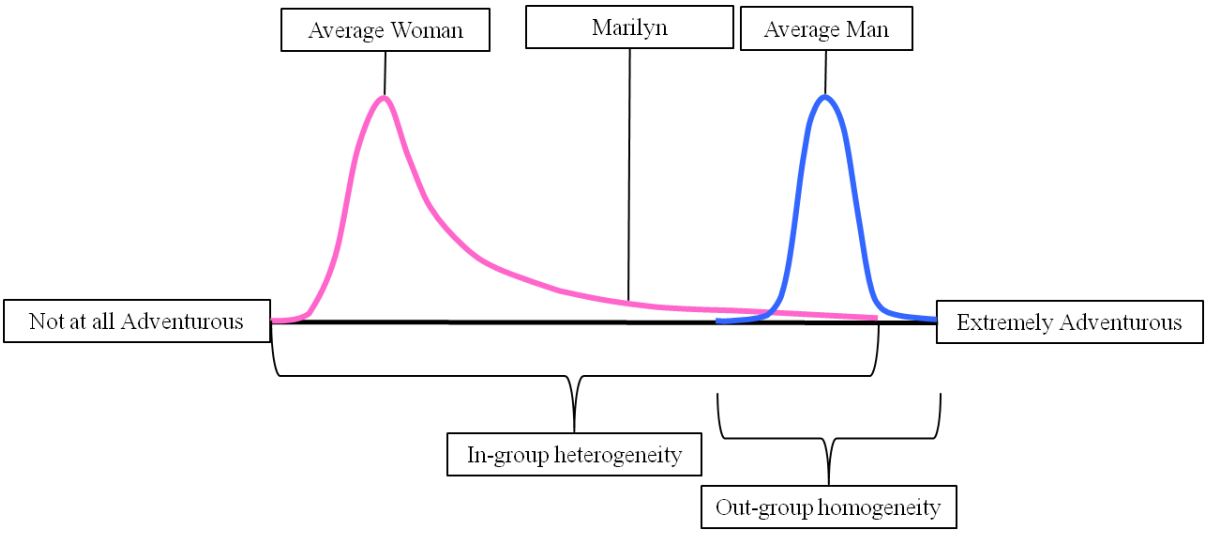

Fig. 1. Illustration of a strategic out-group homogeneity effect on a trait that is positively stereotypical of the out-group.

(2) The Group's Objective Variability: This Group is *Actually* More or Less Variable than the Other Group

Although in-group and out-group homogeneity effects are undoubtedly important, they do not tell the whole story of perceived group variability. A second, less researched but more obvious influence on perceived group variability is a group's actual, objective variability: People may perceive the members of a group to be relatively homogeneous because the members are, in reality, relatively homogenous (e.g., Park & Hastie, 1987). In other words, perceived group variability may be influenced by accurate perceptions of actual group variability.

A complication here is that people may be inaccurate in their judgments and either over- or under-estimate a group's actual variability, although underestimation is more likely on some measures of perceived variability than on others (Judd, Ryan, & Park, 1991; Ryan, 1996). When people are affiliated with the groups concerned, over- and under-estimation of actual variability can contribute to in-group and out-group homogeneity effects (Judd et al., 1991). However, recent research has shown that inaccurate perceptions do not always account for these effects. In particular, Voci, Hewstone, Crisp, and Rubin (2008) found that although male students underestimated the actual variability of men more than women, they nonetheless perceived men to be more variable than women. These results are most likely to have occurred because men are actually more variable than women on the judgment dimension and, consequently, it is possible to underestimate their actual variability without perceiving them to be less variable than women. Hence, these results highlight the importance of interpreting over- and under-estimation effects in the context of actual differences in objective group variability. So, for example, if men are actually more variable than women on some dimension, then it would be possible for Marilyn Monroe to underestimate the actual variability of men more than women whilst continuing to perceive men to be more variable than women.

(3) The Group's Social Position: Superior Groups Appear More or Less Variable than Inferior Groups

In general, groups with inferior social positions, such as small groups, low status groups, and low power groups, tend to be perceived as relatively homogeneous (Badea & Deschamps, 2009; Guinote, Judd, & Brauer, 2002; for reviews, see Mullen & Hu, 1989; Rubin, Hewstone, Crisp, Voci, & Richards, 2004). These social position effects may be due to objective differences in actual group variability (e.g., Guinote et al., 2002) as well as cognitive effects that relate to differences in the salience of groups involved (e.g., Brauer & Bourhis, 2006; Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2008) and the attention that is paid to them (Ratcliff, Hugenberg, Shriver, & Bernstein, 2011).

Our own work in this area has highlighted the context-dependent nature of social position effects by showing that inferior groups are not always perceived to be more homogeneous than superior groups (Badea, Brauer, & Rubin, 2012). We predicted that, in the context of an intergroup competition, winning groups (superior social position) should be seen as *more* homogeneous than losing groups (inferior social position) because people have an implicit understanding that uniformity, group cohesiveness, and co-ordination are necessary for successful group performance.

Consistent with this prediction, we found that people rated the members of a fashion designer group (Study 1) and an architecture group (Study 2) as being significantly more similar to one another when they were told that the group had won a competition compared to when they were told that it had lost the competition. These results suggest that the influence of a group's social position on perceived group variability depends on the social context in which it is considered.

(4) The Group's Central Tendency: Groups Are Rated Less Variable on Stereotypical Traits

A group's mean position or central tendency on a social dimension can also influence its perceived variability on that dimension. In particular, people rate groups as being more homogeneous on stereotypical dimensions (e.g., men rated on the dimension "adventurous"; for a review, see Rubin & Badea, 2007). Consistent with the dominant approach, previous researchers have tended to explain this *stereotype effect* in terms of perceivers' group affiliations: People rate in-groups as relatively homogeneous on stereotypical traits in order to protect the positive social identity that is associated with the in-group (e.g., Simon, 1992).

We have recently challenged this social identity explanation on both theoretical and empirical grounds (Rubin & Badea, 2007, 2010). Theoretically, although this explanation can account for perceived in-group homogeneity on *positive* stereotypical traits, it cannot account for the same effect on *negative* stereotypical traits. If perceiving in-group homogeneity on *positive* in-group traits helps to consolidate the group's position on those traits and *support* group members' positive social identity, then, by the same logic, perceiving in-group homogeneity on *negative* in-group traits should consolidate the group's position on those traits and *undermine* group members' positive social identity (Rubin et al., 2001).

Empirically, we have found that, contrary to the social identity explanation, people judge groups to be more homogeneous on stereotypical traits even when they are unaffiliated with those groups (Rubin & Badea, 2010). Specifically, we found that psychology students rated a group of fashion designers as being significantly more homogeneous on traits that the fashion designers possessed than on traits that they did not possess. So, the stereotype effect can occur in the absence of social identity concerns.

Given the limitations of the social identity account, we have offered an alternative explanation for the stereotype effect. We assumed that people often follow a "homogeneity equals trait possession" heuristic in which homogeneous groups are perceived to possess traits to a greater extent than heterogeneous groups. Consequently, we assumed that people rate groups as relatively homogeneous on stereotypical traits in order to indicate their perception that the groups possess those traits. So, for example, we would expect Marilyn to rate men as being particularly homogeneous on the trait "adventurous" if she believed that men possess this trait to a greater degree than women.

Our explanation assumes that people's ratings of group variability symbolize their perception of the extent to which groups possess traits. This symbolic variability explanation is distinct from the social identity explanation because it does not relate to the perceiver's group affiliation or the need for a positive social identity. Consequently, it can explain the stereotype effect regardless of (a) the affiliation of the perceiver (affiliated/unaffiliated) and (b) the valence of the traits concerned (positive or negative).

Our symbolic variability explanation assumes that people use their ratings of group variability symbolically because they do not have a more direct method of expressing the group's central tendency to the researchers. Consistent with this assumption, we found that people who indicated a group's trait possession using an explicit method no longer rated the group as relatively homogeneous on stereotypical traits (Rubin & Badea, 2007). Hence, the availability of a direct and explicit method of expressing trait possession appeared to retrench the relatively indirect, symbolic expression via variability ratings. Why waste time hinting at a group's trait possession via variability ratings after you have explicitly stated trait possession via a more direct method?

Conclusions and Future Directions

Figure 2 presents a multicausal model of perceived group variability that includes the four influences that we have discussed in this review.

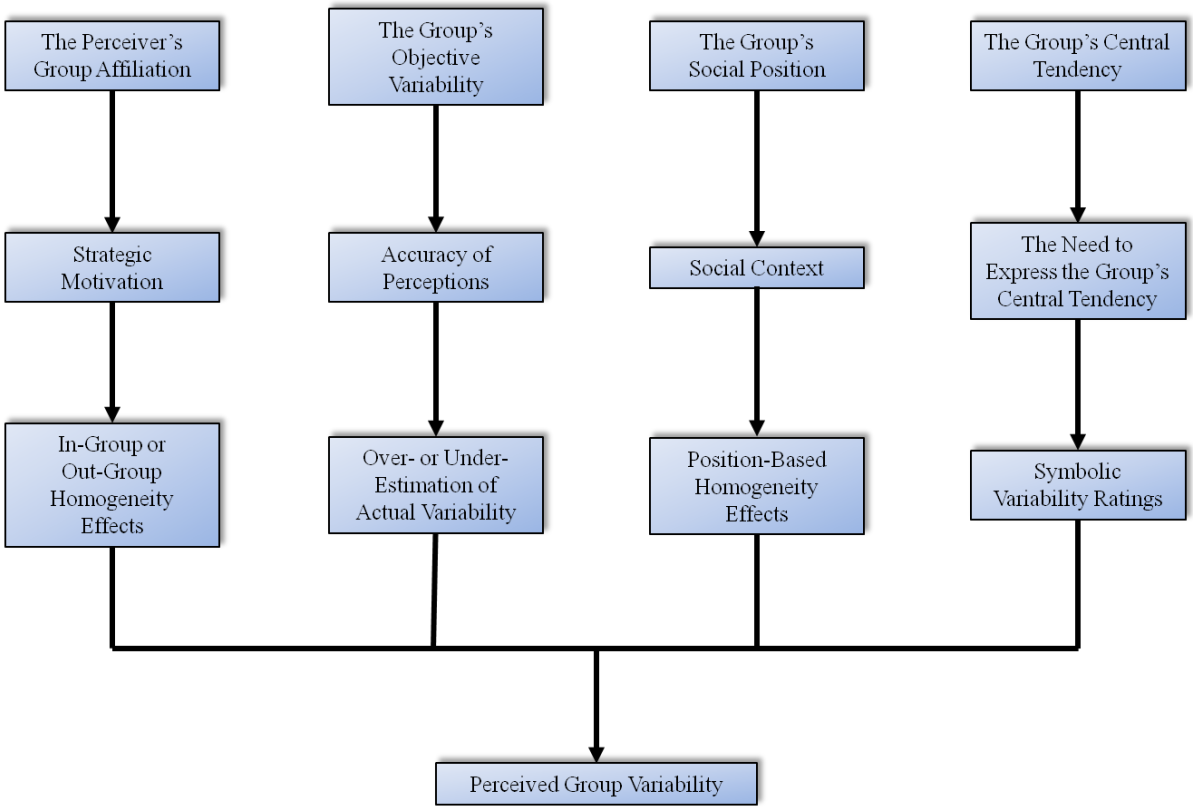

Fig. 2. A multicausal model of perceived group variability.

It is important to note that the four influences that are specified in the above model are neither omnipresent nor mutually exclusive: Some influences may operate in some situations but not in others, and some influences may co-contribute to perceived group variability. These influences may also interact with one another. So, for example, group size (social position) may interact with perceiver's affiliation (in-group/out-group) based on motivations that relate to the need for in-group distinctiveness (Brewer, 1993).

It is also important to note that the above model is incomplete. For example, perceivers' social positions may also be a key influence (e.g., Guinote et al., 2002). The main aim of our model and our review is not to provide a comprehensive account of the multiple influences on perceived group variability but rather to provide an explicit recognition that such an account is necessary. We believe that this sort of multicausal approach will lead to a more complete understanding of perceived group variability and, ultimately, stereotyping, prejudice, and intergroup memory biases.

End Note

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