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OnlineFirst Version of Record - Aug 1, 2011

What is This?

When Common Identities Reduce Between-Group Helping

Esther van Leeuwen[1] and Ali Mashuri[1]

Abstract

Emphasizing a common group identity is often suggested as a way to promote between-group helping. But recently, researchers have identified a set of strategic motives for helping other groups, including the desire to present the own group as warm and generous. When the motive for helping is strategic, a salient common identity should reduce the willingness to help another group, because the help no longer communicates a quality of the ingroup (only of the common group). The authors tested this hypothesis in two experiments, in which they assessed beliefs about helping (Study 1) and actual helping through behavioral observation (Study 2). The results fully supported the predictions, demonstrating that a common identity is not a universal tool for the promotion of prosocial behavior. The studies also illustrate the strategic nature of between-group helping, in which acts that appear prosocial on the surface are in fact intended to enhance the ingroup's image.

Natural disasters such as the December 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia illustrate the need for human cooperation that transcends national or ethnic group boundaries (van Leeuwen, 2007). Yet research has shown that prosocial acts between members of different groups are unlikely in the absence of a common bond (e.g., Dovidio et al., 1997; Dovidio, Gaertner, Shnabel, Saguy, & Johnson, 2010; Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005). The general message in more than 20 years of research is therefore that stressing a shared group membership or common identity is a key factor in promoting prosocial behavior and helping between groups (e.g., Dovidio et al., 1997; Gaertner, Mann, Murell, & Dovidio, 1989; Rosenberg & Treviño, 2003; Wit & Kerr, 2002). This message is also the central pillar of the Common In-group Identity Model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). In the present research, however, we challenge the universal effectiveness of a common identity by examining the hypothesis that a common identity will make between-group helping less likely when the motive for helping is a strategic one.

People systematically respond less favorably to others whom they perceive to belong to different groups than to their own group (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These biases can also extend to the domain of prosocial behavior and helping (Dovidio et al., 1997; Gaertner, Dovidio, & Johnson, 1982; Levine et al., 2005). Various researchers have therefore argued that inducing a perception of the target of help as a member of one's own group, rather than as belonging to a different group, could increase the willingness to help this person (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio,

2000; Rosenberg & Treviño, 2003). Empirical evidence seems to support this notion (Dovidio et al., 1997; Levine et al., 2005). For example, Levine and colleagues (2005) showed that Manchester United supporters who were induced to think of themselves in terms of a higher order inclusive category (football fans) were equally likely to offer help to Liverpool fans as to Manchester United fans in an emergency, but when their perceptual focus was on their membership as Manchester United fans, they were less inclined to help Liverpool fans.

The proposed effectiveness of a common identity lies in the fact that the helpee is no longer viewed as belonging to a different group than the helper's—as a result of which, the general tendency to favor one's own group and discriminate against other groups that seems inherent in intergroup interactions disappears (Gaertner et al., 1989). But the Common In-Group Identity Model has also received some criticism. For example, researchers have shown that the induction of a common identity can increase intergroup hostility because the shared superordinate identity itself can turn into a battleground on which groups strive to assert their dominance (van

[1] Department of Social and Organisational Psychology, VU University Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Corresponding Author:
Esther van Leeuwen, Department of Social and Organisational Psychology, VU University Amsterdam, van der Boechorststraat 1, 1081 BT, Netherlands
Email: EAC.van.Leeuwen@vu.nl

Leeuwen, van Knippenberg, & Ellemers, 2003; Wenzel, Mummendey, & Waldzus, 2007). A common identity can also threaten valued subgroup identities, causing resistance and attempts to restore group distinctiveness (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004). A common identity is thus no panacea, and it is important to take into account specific contextual factors when the goal is to promote prosocial behavior between groups.

We propose that a common identity can impede between-group helping when the motive for helping is a strategic one. Recently, researchers have recognized a set of strategic, ingroup-serving motives that increase the willingness to help other groups in a salient between-group setting (Hopkins et al., 2007; Nadler, Harpaz-Gorodeisky, & Ben-David, 2009; van Leeuwen & Täuber, 2010). These strategic motives include the desire to present the own group as warm or as competent to other groups (Hopkins et al., 2007; van Leeuwen & Täuber, 2011a). Since helping is generally perceived as an act of kindness, but can also portray important qualities such as knowledge or skills, it can be an effective impression management tool. When activated, strategic motives can help overcome the aforementioned bias in helping, even to the point where other groups are favored over the own group (Hopkins et al., 2007; van Leeuwen & Täuber, 2010).

By helping members of another group, people may attempt to alter the way they believe they are perceived by this group—the meta-stereotype (Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998; Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009). Research by Hopkins and colleagues (2007), for example, showed that Scottish participants who believed that the English viewed them as mean and stingy (a negative meta-stereotype that can be refuted through acts of generosity) were more willing to help the Welsh than participants who believed they were perceived as naïve (a negative meta-stereotype irrelevant to helping).

Van Leeuwen and Täuber (2010) argued that helping for strategic reasons is an act of communication, in which group members deliberately try to portray their own group as warm, competent, or powerful. What seems crucial to this act of communication is the fact that the recipient of help can recognize the helping behavior as originating from the helper's group, since only then can it communicate a specific quality of that group. In other words, the exchange should occur in a salient between-group setting. A salient between-group setting also focuses group members' attention on their group's needs, including the wish to present their group in a favorable light. When a common identity is salient, help can no longer communicate a quality of the helper's group, and attention is diverted away from these ingroup serving motives. As a result, emphasizing a common identity should decrease helping in response to a negative meta-stereotype that describes the own group as uncooperative and mean.

We tested this notion in two experiments, using Indonesian (Study 1) and Dutch (Study 2) participants. In both studies, we presented participants with another nation's view of their own country's population as either uncooperative (relevant meta-stereotype) or unattractive (irrelevant meta-stereotype). We assessed participants' willingness to help another nation when either their own national identity was salient (two groups) or when a shared identity was salient (common identity). We expected that participants confronted with a relevant meta-stereotype would be more willing to help in the two groups condition compared to the common identity condition (Hypothesis 1a). For participants confronted with an irrelevant meta-stereotype, we predicted a reversed pattern, reflecting earlier research (e.g., Dovidio et al., 1997; Levine et al., 2005) demonstrating that, in the absence of strategic motives, a salient common identity results in more prosocial behavior than a salient subgroup identity (Hypothesis 1b).

Study 1

In Study 1, Indonesian participants were confronted with the Chinese' view of themselves as either uncooperative or unattractive. In a second, ostensibly unrelated study, we informed participants of an educational crisis in neighboring country Laos and asked them to what extent they supported plans from their Indonesian government (two groups condition) or from the more inclusive ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations; common identity condition) to help Laos with this crisis. ASEAN constitutes a common category in which both Laos and Indonesia, but not China, are included.

Method

A total of 262 students from the Public Islamic University, Indonesia ($M_{age} = 20.70$, $SD = 1.74$; 86 men, 168 women, 8 gender unknown) filled out a paper questionnaire in exchange for course credit. Participants first read a newspaper article describing Chinese students' view of Indonesian students, in which the latter were described as either tight-fisted and uncooperative (relevant meta-stereotype), or pug-nosed and short-bodied (irrelevant meta-stereotype). Presented as a second, unrelated study, participants then read a text about a crisis in neighboring country Laos, whose poor financial circumstances made it impossible to provide even the most basic facilities for education, including housing and schoolbooks. In 7 items, participants could indicate to what extent they thought that the Indonesian government (two groups) or the more encompassing ASEAN (common identity) should help Laos with its educational crisis (e.g., "I support the plan of the Indonesian government/ASEAN to provide financial support for the purchase of new school books for primary and secondary schools in Laos," "I support the plan of the Indonesian government/ASEAN to provide financial support for building additional primary and secondary schools in the countryside," 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*; α = .90). To check the effectiveness of the meta-stereotype manipulation, we asked participants to rate the extent to which they thought Indonesians were viewed by others as mean, tight-fisted, and uncooperative (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*; α = .81). When finished, participants were thanked and debriefed.
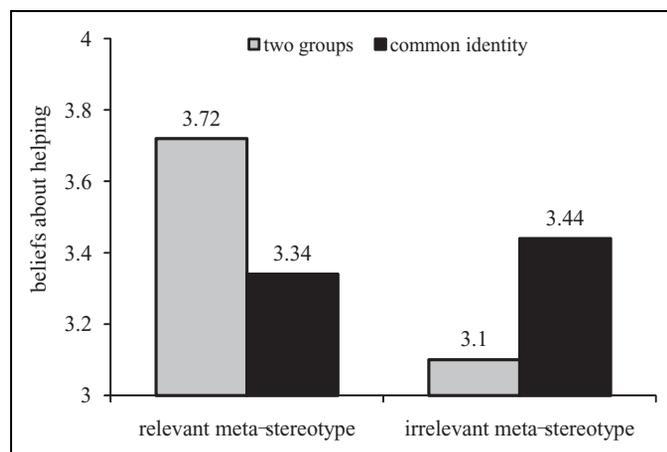
Figure 1. Beliefs about helping Laos, Study 1.

Results

Analysis of variance of the helping scale revealed a main effect of Meta-stereotype, $F(1, 258) = 5.00$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, which was qualified by the predicted interaction, $F(1, 258) = 9.20$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. The relevant means are presented in Figure 1. Overall, participants in the relevant meta-stereotype condition were more in support of helping Laos ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.91$) than participants in the irrelevant meta-stereotype condition ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.98$). However, within the relevant meta-stereotype condition, participants were more in support of helping Laos when the help could be identified as Indonesian compared to ASEAN, $F(1, 258) = 4.93$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, supporting Hypothesis 1a. Within the irrelevant meta-stereotype condition, participants were less in support of helping Laos when the help could be identified as Indonesian compared to ASEAN, $F(1, 258) = 4.28$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, supporting Hypothesis 1b. Tested differently, when help could be identified as originating from Indonesia, participants in the relevant meta-stereotype condition were more in support of helping Laos than participants in the irrelevant meta-stereotype condition, $F(1, 258) = 14.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. When help was said to originate from ASEAN, the difference between the relevant and the irrelevant meta-stereotype conditions was not significant, $F < 1$, ns.

The meta-stereotype manipulation was successful. Analysis of variance revealed that participants in the relevant meta-stereotype condition indicated that they were viewed more strongly in terms of that uncooperative stereotype ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.03$) than participants in the irrelevant meta-stereotype condition ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 0.83$), $F(1, 258) = 8.80$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$.

Conclusion

Only the stereotype of Indonesians as uncooperative and tight-fisted can be refuted through acts of generosity—helping does little to change the stereotype of Indonesians as physically unattractive. We reasoned that, in order to refute the uncooperative stereotype, helping must be identified as an act of Indonesia, thus reflecting generosity as an Indonesian quality. In support of this reasoning, emphasizing a common identity, although effective in promoting helping in the irrelevant meta-stereotype condition, decreased helping among participants confronted with the relevant stereotype.

There are a few limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. First, our helping measure was a measure of beliefs about what the (subordinate or common) group should do to help Laos. On one hand, this measure clearly reflects group-based helping (cf. van Leeuwen, 2007), as opposed to helping from one individual to another. On the other hand, the fact that behavioral intentions do not always automatically translate into actual behavior make it important to replicate our findings using a behavioral measure of helping. Second, categorization was manipulated by asking participants to what extent Indonesia, or ASEAN, should help Laos. Such an explicit manipulation may unintentionally trigger other considerations that could affect beliefs about helping another country in need. For example, participants could think it is the task of ASEAN, more so than Indonesia's task, to help Laos, or that ASEAN has more financial resources to assist Laos than Indonesia does. We addressed this problem in the second study.

Study 2

The aim of the second study was twofold. First, in response to the issues raised in the previous paragraph, we manipulated categorization by means of a less conspicuous accessibility prime. We also directly observed participants' willingness to help a member of the target group, using a helping task that is less susceptible to the ability to help, or to beliefs about who should, or should not help. Second, we set out to test our hypotheses with a target of help who was a member of the group believed to hold the negative stereotype, as opposed to a third party. Although helping a third party could communicate warmth to others, it would arguably be more effective if people could demonstrate their cooperative qualities directly to the source of threat (i.e., the group believed to hold the negative stereotype), in order to directly contribute to stereotype change.

In this study, Dutch participants were confronted with the Italians' view of the Dutch as either uncooperative or unattractive. In a subsequent, ostensibly unrelated task, we either primed a more inclusive European identity, or the noninclusive Dutch identity. When participants reported to the Italian test leader at the end of the study, the test leader knocked over a box of pens, unobtrusively noting whether participants volunteered to pick these up. This constitutes our dependent variable. We also included measures of perceived valence and impact of the meta-stereotype to ensure that the relevant and irrelevant meta-stereotypes did not differ in valence or impact.

Method

Seventy-three Dutch students ($M_{age} = 20.32$, $SD = 2.58$; 28 men, 45 women) were received by an Italian female test leader
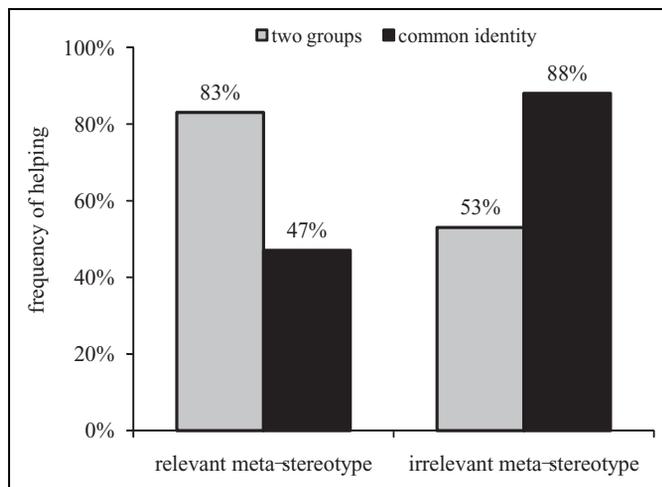
Figure 2. Frequency of helping the Italian test leader, Study 2.

in the laboratory, one by one. She introduced herself as an Italian exchange student, and seated them in separate cubicles in front of a computer that provided further instructions and questionnaires. Introduced as a study on text comprehension, participants were then asked to read three separate newspaper articles and answer a set of questions about each. Two of these were neutral texts, the third contained a text describing how Italians view the Dutch as either unhelpful and uncooperative (in the relevant meta-stereotype condition) or unattractive and poorly dressed (irrelevant meta-stereotype). Embedded in a following set of questions related to text comprehension were a measure of perceived valence ("I think the message of the article is rather negative," $1 = not at all$, $7 = very much$) and a measure of perceived impact ("I was touched by the article," $1 = not at all$, $7 = very much$). Next, participants were asked to write a short essay on the computer about what being Dutch (two groups condition) or being European (common identity condition) meant to them.[1]

When finished, participants were informed the study was over and asked to report to the test leader to receive their monetary compensation. While ostensibly searching for the appropriate list to sign the participant off, the test leader knocked over a box of pens, dropping them on the floor. She continued her search for the list with her back to the participant for 1 min, while unobtrusively noting whether the participant volunteered to pick up the pens (no, yes), which is our measure of helping. Participants were then paid, thanked, and debriefed.

Results

We performed a binary logistic regression analysis with helping as the dependent variable, and Meta-stereotype, Categorization (both dummy-coded), and their interaction term as predictors.[2] Only the interaction term was significant, $B = 3.62$, Wald $\chi^2 = 9.46$, $p < .01$, $\phi = .36$, see Figure 2. As expected, in the relevant meta-stereotype condition, participants with a salient Dutch identity were more willing to help the Italian test leader than participants with a salient shared

European identity, $B = -1.72$, Wald $\chi^2 = 4.81$, $\phi = .26$, $p < .05$. In the irrelevant stereotype condition, participants with a salient Dutch identity were less willing to help the Italian test leader than participants with a salient European identity, $B = 1.91$, Wald $\chi^2 = 4.69$, $\phi = .25$, $p < .05$. These results support Hypotheses 1a and b. Tested differently, when a Dutch identity was salient, participants in the relevant meta-stereotype condition were more willing to help the Italian test leader than participants in the irrelevant meta-stereotype condition, $B = -1.50$, Wald $\chi^2 = 3.70$, $\phi = .23$, $p = .05$. However, contrary to the results from Study 1, when the common European identity was salient, participants in the relevant meta-stereotype condition were less willing to help the Italian test leader than participants in the irrelevant meta-stereotype condition, $B = 2.12$, Wald $\chi^2 = 5.78$, $\phi = .28$, $p < .05$. We will elaborate on this unexpected finding in the discussion.

A full factorial analysis of variance on perceived valence revealed no significant main or interaction effects of our manipulations. Overall, both stereotypes were viewed as rather negative (overall $M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.49$). In a similar vein, no differences were found for perceived impact of the article (overall $M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.63$).

Conclusion

Using behavioral observation and a categorization prime, the second study replicates the results from the first study in demonstrating that a salient common identity increased helping upon activation of the relevant meta-stereotype, but decreased helping upon activation of the irrelevant meta-stereotype. No difference was found between the relevant and the irrelevant meta-stereotype in perceived valence or impact of the manipulation, which means that the observed effect of our manipulations on helping cannot be attributed to differences in perceived valence or impact of the meta-stereotype manipulation.

Unexpectedly, participants in the common identity condition were less willing to help the test leader when confronted with the relevant meta-stereotype than when confronted with the irrelevant meta-stereotype. As a result, we did not observe a main effect of the meta-stereotype manipulation, as we did in the first study. This finding may be attributed to the fact that participants in this study, in contrast to Study 1, were helping a member of the threatening outgroup. When the target of help is a member of the group believed to hold the negative stereotype, a salient common identity essentially incorporates this (threatening) outgroup into the shared identity. Previous research has shown that common identities can sometimes worsen intergroup relations because the common identity becomes a battleground on which groups strive to assert their dominance and reestablish their distinctiveness (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Wenzel et al., 2007). Being categorized with an aversive outgroup constitutes a form of identity threat, which triggers a response to create more distance between the ingroup and the threatening outgroup (Jetten et al., 2004). Ironically, this can result in assimilation to the meta-stereotype. Kamans, Gordijn,

Oldenhuis, and Otten (2009) reasoned that meta-stereotypes not only give information about how an outgroup views the ingroup but also about how that outgroup views itself on that dimension. Thus, when Italians describe the Dutch as uncooperative, the implicit message is also that they view themselves as more cooperative. Differentiation in that case involves moving away from the outgroup stereotype in the direction of the meta-stereotype (Kamans et al., 2009). Distance between Italians and Dutch in our study could then best be achieved by behaving in line with the meta-stereotype, and act uncooperatively accordingly.[3]

General Discussion

The general view in psychology seems to be that a lack of shared group membership makes helping unlikely. The current research highlights at least one exception to this rule: When the reason for helping another group is strategic, aimed at presenting the own group in a more favorable light, a lack of shared group membership makes helping more likely than a salient common identity. This finding is significant for both theoretical and practical reasons.

At a theoretical level, the current finding qualifies existing theory and research that suggests that the introduction of or emphasis on a shared superordinate category will ameliorate intergroup relations (e.g., Dovidio et al., 1997; Gaertner et al., 1989; Rosenberg & Treviño, 2003; Wit & Kerr, 2002). To the extent that negative attitudes and behaviors stem from a salient between-group categorization, diverting attention away from an "us" versus "them" mentality to a more inclusive "we" mentality has been shown to reduce intergroup bias (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996). It is important, however, to recognize that not all forms of helping stem from a more inclusive "we" mentality. We argued in the introduction of this article that helping can be an act of communication. Groups may be motivated to help other groups in order to present their group in a favorable light. To this end, it is important that people think and act in terms of that particular group membership and that their behavior can be recognized as originating from that group. Emphasizing a common identity will reduce the likelihood that the act will be viewed as descriptive of the helper's group. Moreover, a common identity could divert attention away from the motivation to help. This latter point is nicely illustrated by recent work by Morton and Postmes (2011), who demonstrated that notions of shared humanity can protect people from feelings of guilt over harm their group had inflicted upon another group by obscuring the ingroup's role in that event. Since feelings of guilt can lead to attempts at restoration, this would imply that encouraging groups to focus on their shared humanity could hinder reconciliation.

At a practical level, when the goal is to promote between-group helping, it is important to recognize the circumstances under which groups can be motivated to help other groups, instead of automatically assuming that people are always less motivated to help other groups. In fact, empirical evidence in support of such a bias in helping is mixed (Saucier, Miller, & Doucet, 2005; Stürmer & Snyder, 2010), which suggests that there are more nuances to between-group helping than currently recognized. The fact that helping can sometimes be facilitated by a salient between-group setting, instead of a salient common identity, is particularly promising in light of the fact that the recipient's need for help is also most apparent in an intergroup setting. In a salient between-group setting, intergroup inequalities such as differences in expertise or access to valued resources are visible, and it is exactly these inequalities that highlight the need for help. There seems great promise for tactics that make use of the between-group distinction in motivating outgroup helping—as compared to tactics in which intergroup differences are ignored by diverting attention away to a more inclusive level of categorization.

Despite a number of methodological differences, the two studies presented here yielded comparable findings. The predicted interaction effect was obtained among Indonesian as well as Dutch participants, and with respect to beliefs about helping as well as on an unobtrusive observation of actual helping. Moreover, support for our hypotheses was found when the target of help was a second outgroup (Study 1) but also when the target was a member of the group believed to hold the negative stereotype (Study 2). Previous research has shown that the desire to refute negative meta-stereotypes can promote helping of a second outgroup (Hopkins et al., 2007), but, the current study is the first to demonstrate that this type of strategic helping also extends to the source of threat (but see van Leeuwen & Täuber, 2011b). This finding is important, because helping (a member of) the source of threat is arguably a more effective way of refuting a negative stereotype. It is also important because Vorauer and colleagues (1998) reasoned that feeling stereotyped could evoke hostile reactions and avoidance of contact with outgroup members, which suggests that negative meta-stereotypes would impair helping. Future research might examine under what conditions antisocial meta-stereotypes cause outgroup avoidance or refutation through enhanced helping.

Strategic motives imply that helping another group is beneficial to the own group. The extent to which this "ingroup benefit" is accompanied by "outgroup harm" differs across specific motives (see van Leeuwen & Täuber, 2010), which is of direct consequence to the desirability of promoting such behavior. Some motives are harmful because they imply the intention to make the target appear dependent (Nadler et al., 2009) or incompetent (Gilbert & Silvera, 1996). On the other hand, presenting the own group as warm and generous, as in the current research, is arguably more benevolent in nature. Although an appeal to (benevolent) strategic motives seems promising in promoting between-group helping, particularly when emphasizing a common identity is difficult or undesirable, more research is needed into the psychological consequences, both intended and unintended, of receiving this form of help.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. All participants properly understood these instructions and wrote essays about being Dutch or European, respectively.
2. Preliminary analyses showed no main or interaction effects related to participants' gender, so gender was not included in the analyses.
3. In a similar way, participants in the irrelevant meta-stereotype condition may have attempted to create more distance by portraying themselves as unattractive, but the study did not include any measures to test this notion.

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Bios

Esther van Leeuwen, PhD, works at the department of Social and Organisational Psychology of the VU University Amsterdam. Her research interests include between-group helping and group deviance.

Ali Mashuri is a master's student at the VU University Amsterdam. His research interests are in intergroup relations and outgroup helping.