

## Research Article

## SUPERORDINATE IDENTIFICATION, SUBGROUP IDENTIFICATION, AND JUSTICE CONCERNS: Is Separatism the Problem; Is Assimilation the Answer?

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**Abstract**—*The diversity of American society raises concerns about whether authorities can maintain social cohesion amid competing interests and values. The group-value model of justice suggests that authorities function more effectively when they are perceived as fair (e.g., benevolent, neutral, and respectful). However, such relational evaluations may be effective only if authorities represent a group with which people identify. In a diverse society, subgroup memberships may assume special importance. People who identify predominantly with a subgroup may focus on instrumental issues when evaluating a superordinate-group authority, and conflicts with that authority may escalate if those people do not receive favorable outcomes. Results indicate that subgroup identification creates problems for authorities only when people have strong subgroup identification and weak superordinate-group identification. As long as people identify strongly with the superordinate group, even if they also identify strongly with their subgroup, relational issues will dominate reactions to authorities.*

The United States is fast on its way to becoming a truly multicultural society. If the trend continues, what was once the melting-pot society will be better described as a cultural mosaic in which each ethnic group will be motivated to retain aspects of its culture rather than fully assimilating into "mainstream" society (Rose, 1993; Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). Diversity can be beneficial in utilizing the unique contributions of people from different backgrounds, but it may also create new forms of conflicts caused by differences in interests and values. Consequently, some people may be hesitant about relinquishing the melting-pot ideal, fearing that loyalty to ethnic groups prevents loyalty to the larger society.

This article deals with the problem of whether authorities can maintain cohesion within an ethnically diverse group. We describe two psychological mechanisms, relational evaluations of authority (Tyler, 1994a) and social identification, that can help authorities to function more effectively by facilitating their efforts to bridge across competing interests and values. Furthermore, we show that these two mechanisms can bridge across group differences without requiring that those differences be suppressed.

### RELATIONAL EVALUATIONS

Justice research demonstrates that perceptions of justice can enhance acceptance of decisions made by authorities, obedience to legal rules, and evaluations of legitimacy (e.g., Lind,

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Kanfer, & Earley, 1990; Lind, Kulik, Ambrose, & de Vera Park, 1993; Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Lind, 1992; Tyler & Mitchell, 1994). Justice theories based on the social-exchange framework argue that justice takes on special importance because it helps people obtain valued resources (e.g., Leventhal, 1976; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). From this perspective, authorities are most effective when they are able to provide group members with the kind of outcomes they seek. However, recent research based on the group-value model of justice shows that in addition to their concerns about outcomes, people are concerned about issues related to the quality of their relationship with authorities and other group members (Tyler, 1994b; Tyler & Lind, 1992). This line of research suggests that acceptance of an authority's decisions is enhanced when people feel that they are being treated fairly, independent of the nature of the outcome (Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Lind, 1992).<sup>1</sup> When making relational justice judgments, people consider three issues: feelings that authorities' motives or intentions can be trusted (benevolence), beliefs that authorities' actions are based on a nonbiased consideration of facts (neutrality), and feelings that authorities treat them with the dignity and respect appropriate for full group members (status recognition).<sup>2</sup>

The group-value model suggests why people care more about relational issues than instrumental issues when evaluating authorities (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1989; Tyler & Lind, 1992). The underlying assumption of the group-value model is that people derive a sense of self-worth from group membership. Individuals assess their status within groups by evaluating the extent to which important group representatives, such as authorities, treat them fairly. When people feel that they are treated with benevolence, a lack of bias, and respect, their sense of self-worth is bolstered and their attachment to the group is reaffirmed.

The instrumental view of justice suggests that a focus on outcomes will pose a serious problem for the maintenance of cohesion in a multicultural setting because it would be difficult to reconcile competing interests. The relational view offers a more optimistic outlook by suggesting that authorities may be

1. Consistent with the social-exchange model of justice, the group-value model suggests that people care about the quality of their outcomes over time. However, the two models differ substantially in their predictions of the criteria people use to make justice judgments in any particular interaction. The key distinction lies in the focus of the group-value model on treatment rather than on outcome as the main determinant of justice evaluations in important social interactions. For a discussion of these issues, see Tyler and Smith (in press).

2. In previous publications (e.g., Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992), benevolence was referred to as trustworthiness and status recognition as standing.

able to bridge differences in goals, values, and beliefs by invoking issues related to fair treatment. In other words, in the relational view, neutral, benevolent, and respectful treatment by authorities can help resolve conflicts successfully and maintain group cohesion even if the resolution does not include personal or group gains.

### SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION

The group-value model proposes that the importance of relational issues to acceptance of authority is linked to identification with the group that empowers the authority (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1989; Tyler & Lind, 1992). According to the theory, when one identifies with the group represented by the authority, the authority's actions carry information about one's value to and position within the group, and this information is more important than the outcome attached to the authority's decision. However, if the authority figure is perceived to represent a group with which the individual feels little or no attachment, then relational issues may become less relevant (Tyler & Lind, 1990).

Identification with the group represented by a particular authority is just one of many possible self-categorizations (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). People are potentially members of many different groups, and some of these groups may be a more important source of identity than others (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987). For example, when a person identifies with a subgroup included within a larger category, the extent to which the person identifies with the superordinate group versus the subgroup within it should determine when relational concerns predominate over instrumental concerns. When the authority is empowered by a superordinate group, perceptions of fairness and acceptance of decisions should turn on relational considerations to the extent that the person in question identifies more with the superordinate group and less with the subgroup. As identification with the subgroup becomes the primary self-categorization, disputes among superordinate-group members who belong to different subgroups take on the qualities of intergroup conflict (Azzi, in press; Brewer & Kramer, 1986; Kramer, 1991), and instrumental concerns should dominate.

There is some support for these predictions. We (Smith & Tyler, in press) found that relational evaluations strongly influenced the political attitudes of white Americans and African Americans who identified more with Americans in general (a superordinate group) than with their ethnic group (a subgroup). Moreover, we found that instrumental evaluations strongly influenced the political attitudes of white Americans and African Americans who identified more strongly with their ethnic group than with Americans in general.

Consideration of multiple levels of self-categorizations offers a potentially useful framework for examining the effects of diversity. This approach allows one to evaluate the potential influence of social identification on justice concerns in a society in which people may experience tension between their loyalty to the larger society and to their subgroup. Because identifications with particular groups can be treated as independent constructs (Azzi, in press; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton,

1993; Phinney, 1990), it is possible to consider people's feelings about both the superordinate group and their subgroup when examining the effects of social identification on relational and instrumental concerns.

This line of analysis suggests that the melting-pot and the cultural mosaic metaphors describe quite different situations with respect to the influence of relational and instrumental concerns in reactions to authorities. If, as we argue, strong subgroup identification in conjunction with weak superordinate-group identification leads to a focus on instrumental concerns when evaluating the actions of authorities who are perceived to represent a different subgroup than one's own, then social conditions such as competition for resources and differences in values and beliefs will result in conflicts that would be difficult to resolve. In contrast, strong identification with the superordinate group and weaker identification with the subgroup will result in more concern with relationships among members of different subgroups and less concern with instrumental issues and the conflicts they bring (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). We tested these ideas by examining the antecedents of justice judgments and acceptance of authority among assimilators (i.e., people who identify weakly with their subgroup and strongly with the superordinate group) and separatists (i.e., those who identify strongly with their subgroup and weakly with the superordinate group).

One limitation of considering only the assimilation and separatist approaches is their implication that the only way to maintain societal cohesion is to insist that everyone assimilate to mainstream society. In his framework of cultural relations, Berry (1984, 1991) proposed that assimilation and separatism are only two of four ways of relating in an ethnically diverse society. The two other options are integration or biculturalism (i.e., strong identification with both the subgroup and the superordinate group) and marginalization (i.e., weak identification with both the subgroup and the superordinate group). The concept of biculturalism leads us to pose the question of whether it is possible to reap the benefits of a relational focus if people identify both with the superordinate group and with their own subgroup. If biculturalists emphasize relational concerns when evaluating how authorities handle conflicts that occur across subgroups, there may be hope that superordinate-group cohesion can be maintained without requiring that people give up their identifications with their subgroups.

In summary, the primary goal of this study was to examine whether identification with the superordinate group promotes an emphasis on relational issues over instrumental issues in conflicts among members of different subgroups. Furthermore, we considered the question of whether the promotion of relational interests requires people to forsake their attachment to the subgroup. This latter question is important because it carries implications for whether societal cohesion comes at the cost of individuals' denying their ethnic identity.

### OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

In an effort to recruit respondents from diverse backgrounds, we mailed surveys to members of four ethnically based work unions at a public-sector organization. We received 305 completed surveys from respondents who described con-

## Social Identification and Justice Concerns

licts they had with their work supervisors. The sample consisted of 117 Asian Americans, 58 Chicanos or Latino Americans, 56 European Americans, 45 African Americans, 25 respondents who indicated their ethnicity as "other,"<sup>3</sup> and 4 who did not indicate their ethnicity. Respondents were asked to evaluate their experience in dealing with their supervisors.

Although the response rate of 29% for this survey is reasonable for a mailed questionnaire, it is low in absolute terms. Nevertheless, we believe the analysis of these data provides a conservative test of our hypotheses for two reasons. First, it is likely that individuals who identify strongly with their ethnicity are also the most willing to join an ethnically based work union voluntarily. It follows that we are submitting our hypotheses to a relatively difficult test by examining whether identification with the superordinate group influences the importance of relational evaluations for respondents who already have a strong subgroup identification. On average, respondents indicated that they identified more with their ethnic group than with the work organization as a whole,  $t(212) = 4.03, p < .01$ . Second, it is likely that this study overrepresents the views of people who have had negative experiences with supervisors, because these people are more motivated to recall a conflict and hence to respond to questions about that conflict. Indeed, a large proportion of the respondents indicated that the conflict experience had left them frustrated (54%), irritated (45%), and angry (40%). If relational evaluations and superordinate identification are influential even when respondents have had relatively negative experiences with their supervisors, we can be more confident that both mechanisms can be effective in resolving conflicts successfully in all situations.

The diversity of the sample provided us with the opportunity to study the special situation in which an employee is engaged in conflict with a supervisor from a different ethnic background than his or her own. In such a situation, if the two parties perceive themselves as representatives of different ethnic groups, their interaction could be construed as an intergroup conflict. Alternatively, if they perceive themselves as both belonging to the superordinate group, then they can be considered to be engaging in an intragroup conflict. Conflicts between an employee and a supervisor from the same ethnic background were not included in the analyses. Same-ethnicity conflicts pose a potential problem for the interpretation of the results. For example, if in such a situation the employee relied on relational concerns in evaluating the conflict, would it be because she and her supervisor shared the same ethnic category or because they are both perceived to be members of the same work organization? To avoid this problem, we limited our analyses to the 221 respondents who described conflicts with supervisors from different ethnic backgrounds than their own.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Dependent Measures

The analyses in this study involved three dependent variables: decision acceptance (e.g., "How willing were you to

3. Of those respondents who indicated their ethnicity as "other," some identified themselves as Native Americans, and others indicated identification with more than one ethnicity.

voluntarily accept the decision(s) your supervisor made?"), procedural justice (e.g., "Overall, how fairly were you treated by your supervisor?"), and distributive justice (e.g., "How fair was the outcome you received?").<sup>4</sup> Each of these three variables was intended to measure an aspect of the respondent's reactions to the authority with whom the respondent reported a conflict. Principal components analysis confirmed that the three variables loaded onto one factor that explained 84% of the total variance. The factor loadings of decision acceptance, procedural justice, and distributive justice were .87, .94, and .93, respectively.

### Predictor Variables

The main predictor variables in this study were respondents' evaluations of the instrumental and the relational aspects of the conflict and their identification with the superordinate group and with a subgroup. *Relational evaluations* were defined in terms of three issues: neutrality (e.g., "How honest was your supervisor in what he or she said to you?"), benevolence (e.g., "How hard did your supervisor try to do the right thing by you?"), and status recognition ("How politely were you treated by your supervisor?"). *Instrumental evaluations* assessed what the respondent gained or lost in the conflict (e.g., "How favorable was the outcome to you?"). Respondents were also asked to provide information about their *identification with the superordinate group* (e.g., "I am proud to think of myself as a member of the organization I work for") and their *identification with a subgroup* (e.g., "I am proud to think of myself as a member of my ethnic group").

### Superordinate identification

In assessing the potential influence of group identification on relational and instrumental evaluations, we addressed two issues. The first was whether identification with the superordinate group increases interest in relational issues while reducing interest in instrumental issues. The second was whether using superordinate identification to facilitate an interest in relational issues requires individuals to relinquish their attachment to their subgroup.

We began the analysis by testing whether superordinate identification, in and of itself, influences the relative importance of relational and instrumental evaluations in forming reactions toward the authority. Two interaction terms were created. The first term tested whether superordinate identification moderated the importance of relational evaluations. The second term tested whether superordinate identification moderated the importance of instrumental evaluations.<sup>5</sup> The two interaction terms along with instrumental evaluations, relational evaluations, and identification with the superordinate group were en-

4. For the sake of brevity, we present only samples of items in discussions of the variables measured in this study. The complete text of the questions used and scale reliabilities are available upon request. The scale reliabilities of the composite variables are all within acceptable levels (i.e., alphas ranging from .95 to .55).

5. In creating the two interaction terms, we standardized the scaled scores of instrumental as well as relational evaluations. Furthermore, identification with the organization was a dichotomous variable created by using a median split of the scaled scores.

**Table 1.** Effects of relational evaluations, instrumental evaluations, and superordinate-group identification on overall reactions toward authority

Predictor	Overall reactions toward authority	
	Beta	F
Relational evaluations ( <i>R</i> )	.96	56.25**
Instrumental evaluations ( <i>I</i> )	.07	0.42
Superordinate identification ( <i>S</i> )	-.05	1.46
<i>R</i> × <i>S</i>	-.54	11.09**
<i>I</i> × <i>S</i>	.53	14.14**

\*\**p* < .01.

tered simultaneously into a regression equation to predict overall reactions to the authority. This dependent variable was created by combining the three aspects of reactions to authority—decision acceptance, procedural justice, and distributive justice, weighted by their factor-loading scores.

As shown in Table 1, relational evaluations significantly predicted reactions toward authority. Furthermore, the two interaction terms were significant, suggesting that identification with the superordinate category does moderate the relative contribution of instrumental evaluations and relational evaluations in predicting reactions toward the authority. The main effects for instrumental evaluations and identification with the superordinate group were not significant. The predictor variables together accounted for a significant amount of variance in reactions toward authority (adjusted  $R^2 = 86\%$ ,  $F[5, 184] = 228.99$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Similar regressions were run separately for each of the three dependent variables. We conducted these additional analyses because decision acceptance, procedural justice, and distributive justice are each the focus of an important research literature. Hence, it is of value to examine whether results similar to those for the overall index are found when the dependent variables are analyzed separately.

A pattern of findings similar to the overall regression was found for all three dependent variables. Relational evaluations significantly predicted decision acceptance ( $F[5, 182] = 9.55$ ,  $p < .01$ ), procedural justice ( $F[5, 184] = 85.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and distributive justice ( $F[5, 178] = 20.80$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Similarly, the interaction between superordinate identification and instrumental evaluations significantly predicted decision acceptance ( $F[5, 182] = 4.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ), procedural justice ( $F[5, 184] = 13.18$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and distributive justice ( $F[5, 178] = 6.76$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The interaction between superordinate identification and relational evaluations significantly predicted procedural justice ( $F[5, 184] = 12.04$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and distributive justice ( $F[5, 178] = 6.97$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but did not predict decision acceptance ( $F[5, 182] = 1.66$ , *n.s.*). There were no main effects for instrumental evaluations and superordinate identification.

The interactions between superordinate identification and instrumental evaluations as well as the interactions between

**Table 2.** Importance of relational and instrumental evaluations in predicting decision acceptance, procedural justice, and distributive justice, by superordinate identification

Predictor	Superordinate identification	
	High	Low
Decision acceptance		
Relational evaluations	.54**	.32**
Instrumental evaluations	.26**	.42**
Procedural justice		
Relational evaluations	.81**	.59**
Instrumental evaluations	.17**	.40**
Distributive justice		
Relational evaluations	.48**	.20*
Instrumental evaluations	.46**	.70**

Note. Entries are standardized regression coefficients.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

superordinate identification and relational evaluations suggest that people who identify highly with the superordinate group react to authorities differently than people who do not identify as highly. To better evaluate the meaning of the significant interactions, we used a median split of the distribution to classify respondents as identifying more or less with the superordinate group. Regression analyses were conducted separately for each dependent measure within each category (i.e., low vs. high identifiers). Relational evaluations and instrumental evaluations were entered into the regression as predictors. As Table 2 illustrates, identification with the superordinate group facilitates the use of relational information and decreases the use of instrumental information. Relational evaluations were always more important for high identifiers than for low identifiers. Instrumental evaluations, in contrast, were always more important for low identifiers than for high identifiers.

### Subgroup identification

Although the preceding analysis shows that superordinate identification facilitates the use of relational evaluations, it does not answer the question of whether that process requires people to identify less with their subgroup. To address this question, we needed to take into consideration not only people's identification with the superordinate group, but also their subgroup identification. Respondents were classified into three groups. The first group included respondents who reported high superordinate identification and low subgroup identification (*assimilators*;  $n = 35$ ). The second group included respondents who reported high identification with both the superordinate group and the subgroup (*biculturalists*;  $n = 73$ ). The third group in-

**Table 3.** Importance of relational and instrumental evaluations in predicting decision acceptance, procedural justice, and distributive justice, by social identification

Predictor	Assimilators	Biculturalists	Separatists
Decision acceptance			
Relational evaluations	.50**	.55**	.11
Instrumental evaluations	.24	.27**	.71**
Procedural justice			
Relational evaluations	.76**	.82**	.39**
Instrumental evaluations	.17	.18**	.59**
Distributive justice			
Relational evaluations	.58**	.44**	.04
Instrumental evaluations	.35**	.51**	.90**

Note. Entries are standardized regression coefficients.  
\*\* $p < .01$ .

cluded respondents who reported low superordinate identification and high subgroup identification (*separatists*;  $n = 62$ ).<sup>6</sup>

The hypotheses suggest that instrumental issues should be most important to the separatists, whereas relational issues should be most important to the assimilators. The question of whether biculturalists focused more on instrumental or relational evaluations or on both equally was examined. To test the predictions, we conducted separate regressions for each of the three groups identified, assimilators, biculturalists, and separatists; relational and instrumental evaluations were entered into the equations as predictors. The results are shown in Table 3. As hypothesized, in evaluating their conflicts, assimilators focused on relational concerns and separatists focused on instrumental concerns. Interestingly, the pattern of results for biculturalists was strikingly similar to the pattern found for assimilators.

The results shown in Table 3 suggest that assimilators and biculturalists will be satisfied if authorities treat them in a benevolent, neutral, and respectful fashion even when, in the short run, they do not get what they want. In contrast, separatists may pose a problem for social cohesion because their reactions to conflicts rely heavily on receiving favorable outcomes. In a more direct test of these ideas, we created two interaction terms to see whether separatists do care less about relational issues and more about instrumental issues compared with both biculturalists and assimilators. The two interaction terms along with the main effects for relational evaluations, instrumental evaluations, and identification were entered into the equation to predict decision acceptance. Both interaction terms were significant (identification  $\times$  instrumental evaluations:  $\beta = -.63$ ,  $p < .05$ ; identification  $\times$  relational evaluations:  $\beta = .45$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Similar results were found for

procedural justice and distributive justice. These findings confirm that separatists were more concerned with instrumental issues and less with relational issues than were biculturalists and assimilators.<sup>7</sup>

We also created two interaction terms to test whether assimilators and biculturalists are indeed similar in that they place more emphasis on relational evaluations than on instrumental evaluations. The two interactions (identification  $\times$  instrumental evaluations, identification  $\times$  relational evaluations) were entered into a regression equation to predict decision acceptance. Neither of the interactions was significant. Similar results were found for procedural justice and distributive justice. This set of results suggests that there is no difference in the relative importance assigned to relational and instrumental evaluations between assimilators and biculturalists. Both put more weight on relational evaluations than on instrumental evaluations.

## IMPLICATIONS

The results from this study offer optimistic evidence for the successful resolution of conflicts among members of an ethnically and culturally diverse society. If people are genuinely instrumental in their dealings with authorities, then competition for scarce resources and differences in goals, values, and beliefs would stand in the way of harmonious intergroup relations. In our study, however, we have shown how identification with the superordinate group can redirect people's focus away from outcomes to interpersonal, relational concerns. This shift allows authorities to worry less about providing desired outcomes to group members and to concentrate more on achieving the

6. Median splits of the scaled scores of both superordinate and subgroup identification were used to create the three groups. Respondents who identified weakly with both groups (i.e., the marginalized) were dropped from the analyses because they did not express a strong desire to affiliate with either of the two groups we asked about. The group-value model assumes that people are motivated to belong to groups and does not provide theoretical predictions for individuals who attach little value to group memberships.

7. There is a possibility that the observed difference in the importance attached to relational and instrumental evaluations is tied to differences in scale reliability across the three groups of respondents. Our analyses show that this possibility can be ruled out. Scale reliabilities calculated for each of the three groups were comparable. The alpha coefficient for relational evaluations was .85 for assimilators, .90 for biculturalists, and .88 for separatists. The alpha coefficient for instrumental evaluations was .79 for assimilators, .82 for biculturalists, and .85 for separatists.

greater good and maintaining social stability. If people are treated fairly—if they are accorded dignity, respect, and consideration by honest, unbiased authorities—they can overlook minor inconveniences and remain committed to the superordinate group.

The results also indicate that increasing interest in relational issues and decreasing interest in instrumental issues do not require people to devalue their subgroup memberships. Respondents who identified strongly with the superordinate group were especially sensitive to relational issues regardless of the strength of their subgroup identification. Using relational evaluations of authority and superordinate identity as mechanisms for maintaining social cohesion does not have to come at the cost of suppressing loyalties to subgroups, which may be important to people's sense of self (Berry, 1991; Moghaddam & Solliday, 1991). Work on acculturation suggests that having attachments to both the superordinate group and a subgroup is healthy and adaptive for the individual (LaFromboise et al., 1993). Our results show that biculturalism (i.e., having dual identities) is adaptive not only for the individual but also for the larger society.

These findings allow us to address some concerns that are often raised about the future of a multicultural society. The good news is that the promise of superordinate identification as a mechanism for cohesion does not hinge on people feeling less loyal to subgroups. The bad news is that people who do not have a strong attachment to the superordinate group will pose a threat to the functioning of authorities if they are not satisfied with their outcomes. For social cohesion to be maintained and for authorities to function effectively, people do not have to relinquish their ties to the subgroup, but they do have to care about their ties to the superordinate group.

Before we conclude, we should recognize the limitations of the correlational nature of our study. Although we have established an interesting relationship between levels of social identification and justice concerns in authority-subordinate relations, we cannot draw conclusions about the causal order of the relationship. It is possible, and certainly not inconsistent with the predictions of the group-value model, that fair treatment at the hands of important group authorities can translate into feelings of enfranchisement and thus increase identification with the group and reliance on relational issues. These more intricate relationships are interesting in their own right, and we hope that this study will stimulate future research exploring these ideas and discussions of their implications for public policy.

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