Greetings,

A few months ago you participated in a study about negotiations between a student union and the university admin, and said that you would be interested in hearing about the results. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to tell you about the findings. The study was administered by Fiona Barlow under the supervision of Dr. Winnifred Louis. If you would like to ask questions, to comment on what you read, or to find out more, you can contact project staff by phoning (07) 3346 9515, by emailing w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au, or by writing to Dr. Winnifred Louis, School of Psychology, McElwain Building / University of Queensland / St. Lucia, QLD 4072. You can also read about other studies that we’ve done on opinion group norms at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: MOTIVATIONS TO COOPERATE WITH HIGH AND LOW POWER STUDENT UNIONS.

Working paper, 30/01/07. This paper has not been peer reviewed. Please do not copy or cite without author’s permission.

WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR.

The primary goal of this study was to investigate whether belonging to a high power group or a low power group influences people’s willingness to cooperate with their own group or another group in a negotiations scenario. This is a research question we’ve been studying with 2 previous experiments.

The theoretical context is a model called “referent information influence” (Terry & Hogg, 1996), which says that the norms of groups you belong to and psychologically identify with (‘ingroups’) are very important in decisions, while the norms of groups that you don’t belong to or don’t identify with (‘outgroups’) are generally unimportant. A contrasting model called “agentic normative influence” (Louis & Taylor, 2002) says that in conflict and negotiation, people do pay attention to both ingroups and outgroups.

Last year we ran one study using negotiations between a multinational corporation (high power) or a small local company (low power), and we found that people were more likely to cooperate with their own group, especially when they identified strongly with that group, and that this was because they thought cooperative behaviours would benefit the group and themselves. People were also more like to cooperate with the other group however, not only when they did not identify with their own group, but also when they thought that choice would benefit their own group and themselves. High power participants were more likely to cooperate with the other group. In a second study about negotiations in an employment context, we also found that people reported they would cooperate with both groups, and that they were motivated by perceived benefit to the group to do so. In that study though we didn’t find any effects of power.

The present study asked participants to imagine that they belonged to a student group that was lobbying the university admin about changes in lectures, tutorials, and facilities. Participants were informed that their student group was strong, with a large membership and successful negotiation history (high power), or weak with a low membership and poor history of successful negotiating (low power). Then half of the people filled in a list of positive things they would have in common with members of the student group, which was meant to increase identification with the group, while half filled in a list of positive things that made them unique as an individual. Then everyone was told that the student group supported two options (A and B), and rejected two others (C and D). They were also informed that the
university management supported two options (A and C), and rejected two others (B and D). Then everyone was measured on how they viewed the different options.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS

From August to October 2006, 234 students in first year undergraduate psychology completed the study for course credit (along with another study on rejection and race relations). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 47 (but 87% were 21 or younger). Most were women (63%), born in Australia (91%), and of White/European heritage (88%).

WHAT WE FOUND

1. IDENTIFICATION WITH A STUDENT GROUP. After being told to imagine that they were members of either a high or low power student group, and after filling in a list of things that they had in common with group members or that made them individuals, participants were asked whether, in this situation, they would identify with the group, and feel a sense of commitment and solidarity. Overall, people tended to feel a sense of association, with 64% of participants stating that they would be committed, 72% that they identified with the group, and 71% that they would feel a sense of solidarity. This ratings did not change depending on power, and (disappointingly for us) they did not change based on the list manipulation either.

2. COOPERATION PATTERNS AMONG GROUPS. We then told participants that negotiators for their student group had decided to support two of the options put forward (Options A and B) and reject the other two (C and D). They were also told that the negotiators for university management endorsed two options (A and C) and rejected two (B and D).

First we asked the participants how they thought other people would vote. As expected, people thought that student group members would support the options supported by the group, and reject the options their group rejected. Similarly, they predicted that members of the Uni admin team would vote in line with the preferences of management, selecting and rejecting the options chosen and rejected by their group. Also, most people stated that they thought that the options that their group endorsed would benefit the group and themselves, and that those endorsed by management would probably harm their group and themselves.

Then participants were asked how they would vote in this situation. Most people supported the option both the student group and uni admin supported (78%) and very few people supported the option both sides rejected (14%). Sixty-seven percent of participants stated that they would support the option supported by their group but rejected by management, and only 36% of participants supported a proposal rejected by their student group and endorsed by uni management.

3. LINKS BETWEEN GROUP IDENTIFICATION, GROUP POWER AND COOPERATION. We were interested to see whether the power of the student group in the scenario, manipulated focus on the group vs. self, and participants’ identification with their group would affect their decision to support each of the options.

We found that people’s willingness to cooperate with the negotiators from their student group was predicted by how much they identified with their group (their ingroup), and by high power. Further analyses revealed that people who identified strongly and/or were in the high power condition were more likely to think that the options their negotiators supported would benefit the group, and more likely to think that the options that benefited the group would benefit themselves. Thus overall we found that people’s willingness to vote according to the suggestions of their own student group could be predicted by (a) how much participants
identified with their group; (b) high ingroup power; (c) this identification / power position as mediated by the belief that cooperation would benefit the group; and (d) the effect of identification / high power as mediated by the belief cooperation benefits the self (through benefiting the group).

We then examined why people cooperated with the suggestions of the uni admin (the outgroup). Cooperation with the other group’s suggestions was unrelated to identification with their own group, and it was also unrelated to group power. Participants who thought cooperation with admin would benefit their own group voted with the other group, and this was mediated by the belief that benefiting the student group would benefit the self. Interestingly, those who had been led to focus on what they had in common with the group (vs. being unique) were more likely to perceive cooperation with the outgroup as beneficial.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES TO THE FIRST TWO STUDIES

Across the three studies, we found consistencies in 1) the fact that both groups’ norms impacted on decisions, supporting the agentic influence model over the referent informational influence model and 2) in the patterns of motivation for cooperation: a) people were motivated to cooperate when they thought that choice would benefit their own group and themselves; and b) conformity to the ingroup was seen as beneficial for those who identified strongly in all three studies.

We found inconsistencies in the effect of power – which did nothing in 1 study, increased cooperation with the outgroup in 1 study, and increased cooperation with the ingroup in Study 3 (this study). One problem is the manipulation of power in Studies 2 and 3 included feedback about how successful the group had been in past negotiations whereas in Study 1 it didn’t. It could be that people will cooperate more with a successful ingroup, regardless of power, and with a powerful outgroup, regardless of success! So we could run follow-up studies to tease that apart.

We also found that we still don’t have a good grip on when people will see conformity to the outgroup as beneficial. Conformity to the outgroup was seen as beneficial for those with high power in Study 1 (but not 2 or 3) and with focusing on what people had in common with the group (in Study 3 only).

There are heap of relevant variables that we know about that could be relevant, such as perceived threat from the outgroup, and it looks as though we can do some interesting follow-ups to try to clarify things in future studies.

CONCLUSION

In this study we investigated whether belonging to a high or low power student group affected how people cooperated with their own group and uni admin. These results suggested that people are more likely to cooperate with their group when they identify with that group and when the group has high power, because high identifiers / people in high power groups think this would benefit the group and themselves. People were more like to go along with the recommendations of the other group when they thought that choice would benefit their own group and themselves, and these perceptions were not systematically related to either power or identification.

THANKS AGAIN…

So that’s a description of what we found in this study. If you have any questions, or would like a copy of the longer write-up when we get that done (in several months) please get in touch. And thank you again for your participation and interest!