When the World Understands Me… And My Alignment with the Group. From Self-verification to Verification of One's Group Identity

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ABSTRACT

How do we see ourselves? How do we think other people see us? And how would we like others to see us? The answers that humans have considered for these questions separately and the relation among them, have been the focus of attention of an important set of studies in social psychology since several decades. However, although this question has been studied deeply at the individual level by self-verification theory, the collective and the group levels need to be explored. Verification is an additional proof that something that was believed is correct. The main aim of the present paper is to argue that verification phenomena stem from a motive that manifests itself not only at the individual and the collective level but at the group level as well. We propose that feeling that one is understood when aligned with a group represents a fundamental line of research for intergroup relations and needs to be explored. In addition, we will try to establish a bridge between two important lines of research in social psychology: the self and social identity theory.
Key words: Self-Verification, Collective Self-verification, Group Identity, Social Identity.

RESUMEN

¿Cómo nos vemos a nosotros mismos? ¿Cómo creemos que nos ven los demás? Y, ¿cómo nos gustaría que nos viesen? Las respuestas de los seres humanos a estas preguntas por separado, y a las relaciones entre ellas, han sido el foco de atención de un conjunto importante de estudios dentro de la Psicología Social desde hace décadas. Sin embargo, aunque esta cuestión se ha estudiado en profundidad en el plano individual por parte de la teoría de la auto-verificación, es necesario explorar su plano grupal y su plano colectivo. El principal objetivo de este artículo es defender que los fenómenos de verificación surgen de un motivo que se manifiesta no sólo en el plano individual y en el colectivo, sino también en el plano grupal. Proponemos que el sentimiento que tiene una persona de que se la comprende cuando se alinea con un grupo, representa una línea de investigación de las relaciones entre grupos que debe ser explorada. Además, intentamos tender un puente entre dos líneas importantes de investigación en Psicología Social: el yo y la teoría de la identidad social.
Palabras clave: autoverificación, autoverificación colectiva, identidad grupal, identidad social.

The main goal of the present research is to establish a link among self-verification, collective self-verification and verification of one's group identity. Verification is an additional proof that something that was believed is correct. Self-verification is the desire for others to verify our self-view. Self-verification theory stipulates that people prefer others to see them in the same way they see themselves regardless of the valence of such self-views (Swann, 1983). Collective self views are also *personal* self-views but associated with group membership. According to collective self-verification, people seek feedback that confirms their particular conception of the self as a group member (Chen, Chen, & Shaw, 2004). Finally, *verification of one's group identity* is the process through which people strive to confirm and validate their group memberships as well as the convictions about the groups with which they are aligned (Gómez, Seyle, Morales, Huici, Gaviria, & Swann, 2006; Lemay & Ashmore, 2004), which corresponds to the content of social identity as distinguished by Ellemers, Spears, & Doojse (2002) from the strength of the ties with a particular group, what they call group commitment.

Being conscious of our own and others' personal identities makes our existence in the real world easier. But also realizing the meaning and the importance that groups we belong to (or not) have for us, facilitates our interpersonal and intergroup relations (Gómez, 2006). Indications that other people understand how I am make me feel that I present myself to others coherently. The implications of this coherence motive have been illustrated by self-verification theory for more than twenty years (for a review see Swann, Chang-Schneider, & Angulo, in press; Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2002). Moreover, in the last few years, studies about collective self-verification have demonstrated that people also prefer evaluations that confirm qualities of themselves that they associate with group membership (Chen *et al.*, 2004; Chen, Shaw & Yeung, 2006; Lemay & Ashmore, 2004). However, the purpose of the present paper is to further argue that this motive is not restricted to the individual and the collective levels. Verification strivings might also be applied to the group level, and in this respect, focusing on the group as a whole, we will speak of verification of one's group identity.

In order to present verification of one's group identity as a line of research that needs to be explored, we will start by referring to several antecedents showing why it is important for humans to know ourselves. After analyzing those contexts where verification strivings have been studied in depth at the individual (self-verification) and the collective (collective self-verification) levels, verification at the group level will be presented as verification of one's group identity. To that end, it will be necessary to consider the role of social identity theory for an extension of verification strivings to the group level. Finally, we will present evidence showing that the rationale to verification of one's group identity may be supported by several theoretical perspectives with an important tradition in social psychology.

ANTECEDENTS

The self has been the focus of interest for several disciplines such as Psychology and Sociology since the seventies[1]. However, concern for the self can be traced back

to Buda (563-483 B.C.), Plato (428-374 B.C.), and to some writings found in China (200 B.C.) and India (100 B.C.). Before that, during the Enlightenment period, some well-known philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, Hume, Leibnitz, Berkeley and Kant, showed interest in studying the self. But probably the first evidence that psychology was interested in the self was the chapter by James (1890) about "understanding the self". Later, the importance of self-knowledge to achieve a human understanding was emphasized, among others, by Cooley (1902), Mead (1934), and Goffman (1959). One of the main aspects that these authors have in common is the relevance they confer on "others" (individuals and/or groups) in the definition of the self.

Firstly, Cooley referred to the concept of "*looking-glass self*" as a basic sociopsychological phenomenon consisting in seeing ourselves through the eyes of others, and even more, in incorporating the image we think others have of us into our self-concept. Some recent findings show that it is the way someone sees him/herself that influences how he/she thinks others see him/her (Ichiyama, 1993), this being the cause of changes in the self-concept, and not how others see oneself really (e.g. Murray, Holmes & Griffin, 1996). As an example, the "Michelangelo Phenomenon" shows that when an individual perceives that his/her couple recognizes him/her in the ideal way he/she would like to be seen, he/she behaves as their ideal self would do, being consistent with the image that his/her partner has of him/her, and thus with his or her own ideal (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999). Secondly, Mead considered that individuals are the product of the relation between self and society. He argues that when we take into account the role of others toward ourselves, we become, at least for a while, an object to ourselves. The reason is that in order to be conscious of ourselves, we need to be previously conscious of others. According to Mead, people develop the self interacting with others and, furthermore, what others say about us help us to build our self-concept. And thirdly, Goffman stated that the self-concept is parallel to the multiple roles that people play in society. The role that people perform includes not only the individual, but also other individuals that play the same role. When different individuals share the same attributes to define themselves, the individual self becomes the collective self.

Although the self was not a core topic of the mainstream social psychology in the 1930-60 period, it has attracted increased attention ever since. So, in the seventies, and within the context of a recovered interest in the study of cognitive processes, several important studies were conducted (for example, about peoples' strivings to achieve a positive self-esteem), and a series of related measures were developed (eg., the self-awareness scale from Feningstein, Scheier, & Buss 1975). In the eighties and nineties, the self became one of the most important areas of research in social psychology. The present paper focuses on one of the motives that have generated a great deal of research in psychology: the self-verification motive.

Self-verification motive is based on the conception that people strive to maintain their self-views, and finds its support in the contention made by several self-consistency theories that people are motivated to maintain consistent beliefs about themselves (Swann, 1987). Typical examples are provided by dissonance theory (Aronson, 1968; Festinger, 1957), attribution theory (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelly, 1967), or Counter-Attitudinal

Advocacy (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). However, to date, self-verification motive has been mainly focused on the personal self-views, and only recently has it been extended to the collective level. Indeed, collective self-verification is also referred to "personal" self-views, although associated with group membership. We are interested in the perception of the group as a whole. The role that verification processes might play for group processes and intergroup relations is still an uninhabited island that should be explored. The present paper tries to argue that the rationale of self-verification motive may also be extended to the group level as verification of one's group identity, showing that different levels of verification are possible. In this way, collective self-verification might be considered as a bridge between self-verification and verification of one's group identity.

Empirical evidence that the verification motive is operating at the individual, collective and group levels will be presented in the next section. Each level involves, however, new and different processes that need to be analyzed. In fact, our interest in arguing for the existence of verification processes at the group level is our conviction that it will open new and promising lines of research not explored so far.

THE "INDIVIDUAL" CONTEXT: SELF-VERIFICATION THEORY

Self-verification theory is based on the traditional conception that people work to maintain their self-view because they seek order and symmetry in their perceptions of themselves and social reality (Lecky, 1945). Self-verification processes allow people to stabilize their self-view (Lecky, 1945; Secord & Backman, 1965; Swann, 1983, 1990, 1999). Stable self-views provide people with a sense of coherence and confidence, and also with a sense of being understood by others that facilitates social interactions. This is a key point, since self-verification assumes that people want to verify their self-view because this is the way to perceive that the world is predictable and controllable, and not because of verification by itself.

Assuming that people like others to see them in the same way they see themselves, the purpose of self-verification theory is to demonstrate that people strive to ensure the stability of their self-conceptions (Swann, 1983). This theory stands on the hypothesis that people form their self-view by observing how others treat them and inferring that they merit the treatment they receive. Evidence that people perceive as supporting their self-views increases their certainty of such self-views. This phenomenon helps people to make predictions for their future, guides their behaviour and produces a sense of coherence and continuity. So important is this function for humans that people prefer those evaluations that confirm their self-views and strive to search these verifying evaluations. As a consequence, self-verification allows people to know that their beliefs about themselves are *coherent*, and that their social interactions will be free of misunderstandings because there is a coincidence between what others think of them and their self-view.

There are three different aspects that have been extremely important in self-verification literature. The first one is *coherence strivings*. People strive for coherence

between what others think of them and their self-view, and this gives rise to self-verification processes. The second one is an empirical finding that supports self-verification theory: this search for coherence is *independent of the valence* of the self-view. And the third one is a moderator of self-verification strivings: people are especially motivated to seek feedback about those self-views that they consider being *certain*. Although there is not a single category that could include the three of them, we consider that analysing these three points will make the understanding of self-verification theory more comprehensible. In addition, although self-verification theory was created and developed mainly at the individual level, these three different but major points should be "universal" for any kind of verification. In other words, they should also be applied to collective self-verification, and to verification of one's group identity.

Firstly, as for strivings to search for *psychological coherence*, self-verification theory assumes that people want to validate their self-views not as an end in itself, but as a means of supporting their perception that the world is predictable and controllable (Swann, 1990; Swann *et al.*, 2002). People feel better when the world seems coherent to them. Perceive coherence in oneself is related with psychological and physical health. This psychological coherence has important consequences for the individual but also for the source of coherence.

Secondly, this search for coherence *does not depend on the favourability of the appraisal*. Taking advantage of findings of dissonance studies, Aronson and Carlsmith (1962; see also Aronson, 1968) already suggested that people with negative self-views would prefer a consistent-negative world to an inconsistent-positive one (see Swann, 1990). Swann, Pelham and Krull (1989), showed that although people prefer feedback about their positive attributes, when they seek feedback regarding their negative self-views, they seek unfavourable feedback -as would be expected from self-verification theor- instead of favourable feedback. In fact, individuals prefer to interact with people who confirm their favourable and/or unfavourable self-views because the weight is placed in the confirmation and not in the valence of the self-view (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). Summarising, self-verification overrides the valence of the self-view. That is, negative self-views are sought as much as positive ones (McNulty & Swann, 1994; Swann *et al.*, 1989). That means that self-verification strivings are a powerful motivator regardless of whether self-views are favourable or unfavourable. In fact, one of the most intriguing findings of self-verification, that support its relevance, has been that people who hold negative self-views, or when a part of their self-view is negative, seek self-verification just as do people with positive self-views, or when a part of their self-views is positive[2].

And thirdly, *certainty* is the other key point in self-verification theory. In fact, self-view certainty has been considered as one of the main moderators of self-verification (Swann & Schroeder, 1995), although some authors have found little support for this moderator role (Anseel & Lievens, in press). People are more motivated to seek feedback about those self-views they consider as certain (Chen *et al.*, 2004; Pelham & Swann, 1994; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann & Pelham, 2002: Swann, Pelham & Chidester, 1988). For example, Swann and Pelham (2002) showed in a field study that only participants who were certain of their self-view -or perceived it as important- preferred

roommates who confirmed it. Also, supporting that verification strivings are independent of the appraisal's favourability, participants highly invested in negative self-views present a higher preference for congruent roommates than those who had positive self-views. However, certainty has also been crucial in other related areas of research in social psychology. As literature has previously shown, an attitude that a person holds with certainty is more stable over time, more resistant to change, influences the future judgments, and is a good predictor of behaviour and personality (for a detailed revision of these points, see DeMarree *et al.*, 2007).

Once these three points have been analysed, three points have been the major focus of attention in self-verification research: *the nature of verifying information, the situations where self-verification is especially desirable*, and the effect that self-verification may produce on the relationship with *the source of the verifying or not verifying information*.

The relevant literature has shown that self-confirmatory information in and by itself presents a series of characteristics that sets it apart from disconfirmatory information. First, since people are especially motivated to obtain self-confirmatory feedback, this kind of information is more attended than disconfirmatory information (Swann & Read, 1981). Second, it is *selectively encoded* and *better remembered* (Swann & Read, 1981). People are more likely to seek feedback that confirms their self-view as compared with disconfirmatory feedback and recall better this kind of information. More intriguingly, people who hold negative self-views seek and receive self-verification information just as do people with positive self-view (e.g. McNulty & Swann, 1994; Swann *et al.*, 1989). And third, self-confirmatory information is considered as *more legitimate*, *valid*, and *credible* (Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987).

But, when is self-confirmatory information considered as more attractive? Self-verification information is especially desirable when it is referred to important aspects of the self-view, be those central or extreme (Chen *et al.*, 2004; Giesler, Josephs, & Swann, 1996; Pelham & Swann, 1994; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann *et al.*, 1988). It is also particularly preferred when people think that others see them in a non-verifying manner (Swann & Read, 1981). Furthermore, self-confirmatory information is chosen when people have a high commitment with the source of the feedback. For example, self-verification is more searched in marital partners than in dating partners (Swann, De La Ronde & Hixon, 1994).

The third point discussed here is extremely important for the relevance that verification phenomenon has for group processes, as we will analyze later in more detail. Information that confirms or disconfirms the self-view might affect the source of such information. In general, participants are most intimate and committed with those partners who self-verify to them (Swann *et al.*, 1994). Pinel and Swann (2000) showed that self-verification could be a motive for people to join groups of members who shared a similar self-view. As a consequence, a selective interaction is produced due to the tendency of people to prefer self-verifying information and/or partners. Also, people look for opportunities (and for groups providing them) to verify their identities and avoid situations (and groups) where self-verification is problematic (Cast & Burke, 2002). For example, Swann (2005) showed how targets make a real effort to bring

perceivers to verify their self-view and how, when people have to choose a partner, they show higher preference for a self-verifying one (De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Katz, Beach, & Anderson, 1996; Ritts & Stein, 1995).

Other findings support the relevance of self-verification theory for social psychology. To date, and almost without exceptions, literature has shown neither gender differences on self-verification strivings nor differences between self-views about specific qualities (e.g., intelligence) or about global self-image (e.g., self-esteem). For example, Swann, Bosson and Pelham (2002) demonstrated that people preferred self-verification in several dimensions of the self, while they preferred self-enhancement in some others. However, supporting a great deal of research indicating that the self is multifaceted (i.e. Higgins, 1987; Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984; Markus & Nurius, 1986), Chen, English and Peng (2006) recently demonstrated that self-verification strivings are also applied to contextualized self-views "-views of the self in particular situations and relationships" (Chen *et al.*, 2006, p. 930). The authors support their research in literature showing that, depending on the situation, people describe themselves using different attributes, and manipulating the situation may also produce malleability in the self. This suggests that, although global self-conceptions exist, there are also contextualized self-views. Whereas Swann *et al.* (2002) focused on a specific relationship (dating relationship), Chen *et al* (2006) examined different types of relationships and situations. Additionally, the authors demonstrated individual differences in self-verification strivings, insofar as people for whom contextualized self-views are an important part of the self have a higher desire to verify their self-views. Moreover, taking into account the existing differences between men and women in relationship-specific self-views (Gabriel & Gardner, 1999), Chen *et al* (2006) also illustrated that women reacted more positively than men to feedback that verify their relationship-specific self-views. The authors note that their research is the first in providing evidence of the existence of individual differences in this particular area of research.

Chen et al's (2006) study is only a first step showing that, although self-verification research has a long tradition, it is alive and well, and ready to explore new avenues of research[3]. In view of the empirical support of self-verification theory and of the many areas of research that it has given rise to over more than twenty years, we think that the time has come to launch more ambitious endeavours. We refer to the fact that self-verification phenomena have been successfully tested in many contexts. Extending it to cover new, and yet unexplored, areas of psychosocial relevance seems to be the next step, and among the potential areas of study from the self-verification perspective group processes and intergroup relations emerge as the most promising candidates.

Self-verification theory may increase its explanatory power by incorporating group processes to its theoretical body. As has been shown already, the theory has focused so far exclusively on the effects of personal self-views. However, since we are not alone in the world, the self has to be relational by nature (see Markus & Cross, 1990, and Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006, for an extended review of the relational self). For that reason, when people's personal self-views take place within the context of their group membership, new characteristics and phenomena are likely to emerge. Insofar as they concern verification of one's group identity, they will be different from

the ones studied by traditional self-verification research. The analysis of collective self-verification studies may help to understand the thrust of our argument.

THE "COLLECTIVE" CONTEXT: COLLECTIVE SELF-VERIFICATION

A second step on the extension of self-verification processes beyond the individual level is collective self-verification. This extension draws on social identity (SIT) and self categorization theory (SCT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1987) for the definition of collective self as equivalent to social identity, as those aspects of self derived from membership in a social group. As SCT states, someone's self-definition as a member of a social category involves a transformation of the self in line with the defining characteristics of the group. According to Chen *et al* (2006), collective self-verification occurs "when others confirm a person`s particular conception of the self as group member". Research in this domain has been conducted by Chen and her co-workers, and in a different line of work by Lemay and Ashmore (2004) who, in turn, define collective self-verification as the "seeking of feedback that confirms self-categorization in groups" (p. 175). Although these two approaches differ in the specificity or generality of what is being verified in the collective self view – specific attributes or self categories- they share a common focus of verification: the individual as member of a group or social category.

Chen *et al* (2004), in a series of studies, found effects of collective self-verification which parallel those obtained at the individual level. In one of the studies, participants selected partners for interaction who verified a negative collective self-view, when they were certain of this view and when the partner was from the ingroup versus not from the ingroup. In additional studies they showed the importance of priming the collective self versus the individual self for the process of collective self-verification. They also found that the centrality of attributes for the group definition and the degree of identification with the group moderated the verification process. The findings of these studies are limited by the fact that they referred either to hypothetical collective self-views or to a hypothetical source of collective self-verification.

Chen *et al* (2006) extended the work by focusing on collective self-verification by members of a real group, a campus religious group, and using as measure of verification the correspondence between self description as member of the group and a partner rating. They also considered how centrality of the attributes for the definition of the group and the degree of identification with the group influenced the verification process. Finally, long-term effects of self-verification, such as perceiving oneself as prototypical of the group and dedication to the group, were taken into account. They found greater collective self-verification, as reflected in correspondence between self and partner ratings, for attributes that were considered central for the group definition in the case of highly identified members. They also found long-term effects related to collective self-verification, such as perceiving the self as a prototypical member and showing greater dedication to the group.

Lemay & Ashmore (2004), using the above mentioned definition of collective

self-verification in terms of getting confirmation of self-ascribed social categorizations, examined longitudinal reactions to subjective perceptions of being categorized by others. They focused on changes in self categorizations overtime by university students during the period of college transition, the first semester of their first year in the university. They compared their own self-categorizations in different social categories with their perception of the proportion of others who categorize them as members of these groups. Participants' self-categorizations predicted their perceptions of being categorized by others into the categories that they had chosen themselves, and these effects were stronger in the case of important categories. They also found that participants were less willing to verify a negative than a positive self category.

As we have seen, collective self-verification involves the extension of the self-verification motive to several contexts that had not been explored to date. Also the different nature of collective self-views involves the study of new phenomena that were not the focus of attention of self-verification theory.

However we argue that the next step should be to consider the qualities people associate with the groups as a whole of which they are members, what we refer to as group identity, or the content of that group identity. In accordance with self-verification and collective verification findings, people should prefer and seek evaluations that confirm their group identities (Gómez *et al.*, Reference Note 1). In order to justify why this prediction should be correct, once we have described the main arguments and findings of self and collective self-verification, we are going to analyze in more detail the case where the group as a whole is the object of verification, that is, verification of one's group identity.

THE "GROUP" CONTEXT: VERIFICATION OF ONE'S GROUP IDENTITY

People define themselves in terms not only of their personal self-views, but also of their relation with other people and groups. For this reason, people's self-descriptions include attributes related with the groups they belong to (family, work, country, gender, age, etc.). However, in our opinion, the concept of collective self-verification does not capture the real nature of the extension of self-verification to the group processes studied in the literature. Both personal and collective self-views are self-definitions *referred only to the individual*.

Very limited research about verification has taken as the focus of analysis the image of the group as a whole and how the group is represented by others (Lemay & Ashmore, 2004; see Brewer, 2001)[4]. Among more than a hundred studies on self-verification that have been conducted up to now some of them focused on collective self-verification, none has dealt with verification of one's group identity[5], that is, people's conception of their group as a whole.

As previously described, Lemay and Ashmore (2004) investigated group identities in the light of verification research. Group identities are convictions about the groups with which people are aligned (Gómez *et al.*, Reference Note 1). The authors interpreted their results as supporting collective self-verification. However, they really focused on

the impact of self-perceived group memberships instead of the personal self-views associated with group membership (that was defined as collective self-verification). As a consequence, what Lemay and Ashmore really showed was evidence for strivings to verify group identity, since they focused on the characteristics that people link with the groups (as a whole) to whom they belong.

In order to consider any social phenomenon at the group level, we cannot avoid a reference to the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). According to the main principle of SIT, people strive to achieve and maintain a positive social identity and, as a consequence, there should be a strong tendency for ingroup bias. That is, people who belong to a group and are identified with it should tend to favour it. For example, in the context of stereotyping, a way to achieve positive group distinctiveness is to ascribe positive characteristics to the ingroup. According to this assumption, it is easily credible that striving for verification of one's group identity would be produced when positive attributes of the ingroup are concerned. However, in those studies that have investigated the correlation between identification and bias, this correlation is positive but not very strong (Hinkle & Brown, 1990). There is evidence that groups not always try to differentiate themselves positively from outgroups (e.g., Mummendey & Schreiber, 1983). In fact, ingroup bias is one of the possible strategies for identity maintenance, but not the only one (eg., see Brown, 2000).

Nevertheless, studies focused on this early version of SIT cannot explain why, for example, there are some members who identify themselves with negative identities (i.e. people who belong to low status groups, stigmatized groups, etc.). Following this argument, probably the most intriguing question when verification is applied to group processes is what happens with those ingroup attributes that are negative, or even when a negative social identity, or certain negative aspects of it, are shared by ingroup members. Fortunately, recent research shows the open-minded attitude of defenders of SIT and SCT regarding this point. The research conducted by Reynolds, Turner, and Haslam (2000) showed that ingroup favouritism is selective and depends on the typicality of traits involved in the intergroup comparison. That is, it was found only regarding positive traits typical of the ingroup ("we are better than they are") and in negative traits typical of the outgroup ("they are worse than we are"). However, what is more important for the verification process is that they also found outgroup favouritism in positive traits typical of the outgroup ("they are better than we are") and in negative traits typical of the ingroup ("we are worse than we are"). This amounts to accepting certain negative aspects in the content of their social identity. There is also a recent tendency to view the role of social identity as a way to achieve a sense of the world (e.g., Turner, 1999; Turner & Reynolds, 2001). In relation to it, the importance of agreement between groups about the nature of social reality has been emphasized (Ellemers & Van Knippenberg, 1997, Turner & Reynolds, 2001). This involves obtaining positive distinctiveness within the constraints and limitations imposed by a particular social system. In the case of comparison between groups of different status, this consensus about social reality means recognising mutual inferiorities and superiorities, thus one may expect both ingroup favouritism and outgroup favouritism in the dimensions

consensually considered characteristic of each group.

From SIT perspective, different strategies have been proposed to face a negative social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see also Blanz; Mummendey, Mielke, & Klink, 1998): Escaping from the source of the negative identity –the group- (*individual mobility*), exceeding the outgroup in a dimension where this outgroup is better (*social competition*), and, probably the most sophisticated one, re-defining the situation in different ways (*social creativity*; e.g., see Jetten, Schmitt, Branscombe, & McKimmie, 2005). However, recent revisions of SIT point out the need to explore how members of low-status groups react to their negative identities (Brown, 2000).In the last few years, researchers have shown that people who identify themselves as having low status hold these negative identities (e.g., Spears, Jetten, & Scheepers, 2002). People sometimes adopt negative traits as a way to achieve differentiation (Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001)[6]. For example, Mlicki and Ellemers (1996) showed that for Polish students it was important that others include negative traits in their definition of the ingroup as typical of Poles (e.g. quarrelsome, vulgar and disorderly). A considerable group of studies have even shown that ingroup members can react to the devaluation of their group increasing group identification and cohesion (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Jetten *et al.*, 2001; Simon *et al.*, 1998; Turner, Hogg, Turner, & Smith, 1984).

Therefore, as research in this new age for SIT shows, sometimes ingroup members accept or even adopt a negative identity as something distinctive and important for their group. In this way, it would be reasonable that members of these groups would prefer and seek those situations that provide a verifying feedback for their negative identity. As already mentioned self-verification theory assumes that people want to verify their self-view in order to perceive the world as predictable and controllable, and not because of verification itself or for the favourability or unfavourability of the appraisal. In the same line as findings at the individual and the collective level, people who belong to a group should prefer information about their group as a whole that matches their own view of the ingroup, be that positive or negative.

As we described before, there are three points in the self-verification literature that should be analyzed also at the group level: the coherence strivings that give rise to self-verification theory; one of the major empirical finding that supports self-verification theory: the *independence of the valence*; and a moderator of self-verification strivings: *certainty*. Now it is time to deal with these points at the group level.

Coherence would help people to confirm that they are in the "right" group and that other people or groups agree with the image they have of their own group[7]. Validating the view that they have of the group they belong to would also help people to have a perception of predictability and control about what might happen to their group. As for the *valence of the appraisals*, verification of one's group identity would imply the confirmation not only of the attributes that describe the ingroup, but also of the valence that each attribute has for the ingroup, and the perceived agreement of the outgroup regarding this valence. It might happen that ingroup members accept the negative traits assigned by one outgroup as typical for the ingroup, but that they consider such traits as not so negative. In this case, it would be a hidden self-enhancement. The third point

previously pointed out as crucial for verification processes is *certainty*. Just as people are motivated to seek feedback about those attributes of themselves that they consider as certain, the same is true for beliefs people hold about the groups they belong to (Chen *et al.*, 2006). The effect should be the same in group processes, although moderated by ingroup identification as in the case of collective self-verification (see Chen *et al.*, 2004).

Two of the aspects previously pointed out as the main focus of attention for self-verification research -our analysis about the nature of verification information, and the description of those situations where self-verification would be especially desirable- could be easily extended to the group level. However, the one referred to the source of the verifying or non verifying information should be analyzed in more depth. Self-verification research shows that providing information that confirms the self-view has positive consequences for the relationships between the target and the source of such verification. Regarding the verification of one's group identity, the target of verification would be the group as a whole. Especially interesting are the effects that could be produced when the source of a feedback providing verification is an outgroup member or an outgroup as a whole. Previous findings at other levels (personal and collective) suggest that verification of one's group identity should produce a positive effect on attitudes toward the source of such verification. For example, ingroup members should show a higher preference for those outgroups that verify the ingroup's self-view. In particular, ingroup members should prefer and seek those outgroups that verify their ingroup self-view, and should avoid the non-verifying outgroups. In the same line, being conscious that outgroup members see my group just as my group is conceived by ingroup members should produce an improvement of outgroup evaluation.

The other way round, some recent research has shown that, in fact, those strategies used to improve intergroup relations also produce an increase in the perception that ingroup image is verified by outgroup members. Self-verification implies a comparison between how people see themselves (personal self-views) and how they think other people see them (meta-perception). When this comparison is moved to the group level, it should be considered how ingroup members see their group (ingroup self-perception or, specifically, ingroup stereotype), and how people think others see their group (meta-stereotype), (see Gómez, 2002). The greater the overlap between ingroup stereotype and meta-stereotype, the higher the verification of one´s group identity.

The extension of verification phenomena to the group level opens a new line of research that could answer a number of questions such as, for example: would people who belong to a group like members of other groups to see the ingroup as a whole in the same way as ingroup members see it? Would this happen in the negative as well as in the positive domain? Do these processes of verification of one´s group identity happen for all group members? Do these strivings affect the relationship with the source of such verification? Does group self-verification strivings depend on previous outgroup evaluations? Etc. Some of these questions have already been answered.

Probably one of the most successful strategies to improve intergroup relations has been intergroup contact (e.g., see Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003; Shelton & Richeson, 2005; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000, in press). When a situation

of intergroup contact brings about an improvement of outgroup evaluation and reduces intergroup anxiety (two of the most common dependent variables in this literature), it should also increase the perception of predictability and control in an intergroup relation setting. Gómez and Huici (Reference Note 2) manipulated a positive vicarious intergroup contact in order to increase verification of one's group identity. A perceived group identity verification index (that could also be considered as an outgroup bias score) was computed by subtracting meta-stereotype perceptions from ingroup perceptions. A positive vicarious intergroup contact increased the perceived verification of one's group identity as compared with a no-contact condition. More importantly, this study showed that the improvement in the evaluation of the outgroup was partially mediated by participants' perception about how outgroup members saw them.

In the same line, Gomez *et al* (2004) conducted a research looking for strategies to improve intergroup relations, providing participants either with a feedback about how outgroup members saw the ingroup, or with information on intergroup value similarity. Both strategies improved participants' image of the outgroup and, what is more important, they increased verification of one´s group identity, that is, they yielded a higher coincidence between how ingroup members thought that outgroup members viewed the ingroup (meta-stereotype), and how ingroup members viewed their own group (ingroup self-stereotype). This study also showed that verification of one´s group identity was related to liking (see also Heine & Renshaw, 2002).

Gómez and Eller (Reference Note 3) found, in two different cultures (Spain and United Kingdom), and two groups of a different nature (immigrants and asylum seekers), that quantity and quality of contact were both related with verification of one´s group identity. The authors measured the degree of verification of group identity as the difference between how ingroup members view their group as a whole (group self-view of Spaniards and British respectively), and how they think outgroup members see the ingroup (meta-stereotype according to immigrants and asylum seekers). They showed that an increase in verification of one´s group identity was related to a reduction of intergroup anxiety, to an increase of liking for the outgroup, and to more positive behavioural intentions toward the outgroup.

Finally, Gómez *et al.* (Reference Note 1) predicted and found that people strive to verify their group identities. Participants sought verification for an ascribed group identity as Spanish citizen (studies 1 and 2) but also for chosen identities (studies 3 and 4, fans of Spain's national soccer team or people prejudiced against Gypsies). Consistent with self-verification theory but contrary to self-enhancement theory and ingroup-bias research, participants sought verification for negative group identities, even when it meant choosing dislikeable or low-status interaction partners. These results indicate that self-verification strivings appear also when self-related beliefs refer to group identities and even when these group identities are negative. Consistent with previous findings on collective self-verification (Chen *et al.*, 2004), efforts to verify group identities were most apparent when group identification was high.

Although self-enhancement strivings could also be a motivation in some specific cases (as happens at the individual level)[8], it seems that verification of one's group identity could have great importance in many social situations, especially in those

concerning relations with other groups, as when they face an intergroup encounter. Knowing whether the outgroup is aware of our relative strengths and weaknesses should be positive if ingroup members are motivated by verification strivings. However, in the case of highly competitive relations, or in a situation of open conflict, this knowledge would appear as threatening.

In case someone still wonders why verification of one's group identity should be studied, we will present some other important theoretical perspectives that support the relevance of this research area.

VERIFICATION OF ONE'S GROUP IDENTITY FROM DIFFERENT THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Some lines of research with strong tradition in social psychology may help us to support an extension of self-verification and collective verification processes to one's group identity. Although our arguments could probably be supported by other perspectives, we will focus on three of them. We specifically refer to information processing, entitativity, and uncertainty reduction processes. Finally, we will also provide an evolutionary explanation of the importance of verification at the group level.

Research on information processing differences when the focus of attention is an individual versus a group has shown that in the case of individuals a greater coherence and consistency across time and situations is expected in comparison to groups (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). That is, large differences in the impression formation of the social targets will be produced starting from identical information depending on whether such target is an individual or a group. Also, impressions about individuals are expected to be more organized than those about groups. We may argue that information verifying group identity should have a greater impact as long as a coherent view of the ingroup by a source is less expected than in the case of individual self-verification. Also, from impression formation literature, the same processes that lead to judgments of liking for persons lead to liking groups. Clement and Krueger (1998) showed that people based their liking of a group on the degree of similarity between the group and themselves. This assumption suggests that information verifying ingroup identity may increase the perception of intergroup similarity between the ingroup and outgroups providing information about the ingroup and the ingroup itself. Targets might also think this as a proof that the outgroup knows and understands the ingroup, which might lead ingroup members to believe that ingroup and outgroup members share a common superordinate category.

Secondly, the work on group *entitativity* offers another argument in favour of the importance of feedback verifying group identity. Entitativity, as proposed by Campbell (1958), refers to the quality of a group to be perceived by others as a real entity, which stands independent and with clear limits from other entities. The perception of entitativity implies seeing social targets as possessing unity and coherence. Drawing on Gestalt psychology principles, he proposed that the most important conditions for the perception of an entity are proximity, similarity and common fate. More recent work on group entitativity has shown that the more a group is perceived as an entity, the more likely

that information processing about the group will be similar to the processing of information about individuals (Hamilton, Sherman, & Lickel, 2001), the higher ingroup identification (Castano, Yzerbyt, & Bourguignon, 2003), and the more likely the perception of psychological "groupness" (Dasgupta, Banaji, & Abelson, 1999). We contend that a possible source of entitativity is the verification of the ingroup defining characteristics. This verification process would amount to a form of recognition of its existence. This would be more important in the case of loose categories which are considered less entitative groups. Entitative groups are characterized by high interaction, common goals and results, and similarity among members (Lickel, Hamilton, & Sherman, 2001). The increase of entitativity, in turn, produces an increase in ingroup identification (Castano *et al.* 2003), and transfers the stereotype of the group to all group members (Crawford, Sherman, & Hamilton, 2002). Being perceived as an entity should include both the positive and the negative traits of the group.

Thirdly, another area of interest refers to the motivation for group formation based on *uncertainty reduction* for individuals (Hogg, 2000; Hogg & Abrams, 1993; Reid & Hogg, 2005). Uncertainty reduction is an epistemic motive that reflects a need for knowledge on understanding the self and the social world. Uncertainty is negative and people strive to reduce it. Reid and Hogg (2005) argue that any situation that affects self-evaluation should also affect uncertainty. According to this perspective individuals form groups in order to reduce subjective uncertainty about the social world and their position in it. Uncertainty can be high in intergroup relations, because people really do not know the image that members of other groups have of their own group. In these situations clarity of self-definition is especially important to reduce uncertainty. Group consensus helps to reduce subjective uncertainty. This uncertainty reduction by the ingroup will produce a positive evaluation of it, and this evaluation would be the basis for ingroup favouritism. We may extend this explanation to the intergroup context. One new source of uncertainty refers to how the ingroup is viewed in the larger social context. To the extent that ingroup self-definition is confirmed, the source of this confirmation (-outgroup-) will receive a positive evaluation.

And finally, verification of group identity may have also an *evolutionary explanation*. It is widely accepted today that our species evolved in a social context of small hunter-gatherer groups. Actually, 90 per cent of our evolutionary history has been spent in such interactive groups. Belonging to a group may have been crucial for human survival, and group living was surely both safe and demanding for individuals. In that environment, affective-cognitive mechanisms necessary for adaptation to group living were selected, such as identification with the group, group loyalty, norm adherence, a tendency for cooperation, fear of social exclusion, and so on (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Brewer & Caporael, 1990; Caporael, Dawes, Orbell, & Van de Kragt, 1989). Verification of group identity may be related to the ancestral importance of belonging to a group, identifying oneself with that group, and being loyal to it -"however imperfect my group may be, it is a group and I belong to it".

Now, why should we value more positively someone who says my group is not perfect than someone who flatters it? It is probably a matter of reliability, and this should apply to self-verification as well as to verification of one´s group identity. In our

ancestors' time trust must have been of paramount importance in order for a cooperative system to develop. But trust could not have evolved if it were indiscriminate. You had better distrust someone who praises you in an unjustified way. According to the "social intelligence hypothesis" (Humphrey, 1976), our intellectual capacities have evolved due to the need for solving social situations, and manipulation of conspecifics is a clear consequence of such evolution (Byrne & Whiten, 1988). Thus, we have learned to cheat others (e.g., flattering), but we have also become more and more suspicious against cheating and more skilful in detecting it. Furthermore, natural selection is not expressed only at the cognitive level but at the interpersonal level too. One of the mechanisms to prevent deceiving tendencies from spreading among individuals in a group is to punish them in some way (in order to render such tendencies unprofitable), as well as reinforcing truthfulness (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). We probably value more positively those who judge our group in the same way we do, even in its negative aspects (or particularly in those aspects) because we infer they are truthful and reliable people. And these features were surely of great importance in a hard environment such as that in which our ancestors lived.

Another evolutionary explanation of self-verification (also applicable to verification of one´s group identity) is that based on Leary's "sociometer theory" (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). According to this theory, self-esteem acts as a "sociometer", that is, a mechanism to detect any problem with social relationships that was designed by natural selection for its survival value. Thus, when something is wrong about our interpersonal (or group) relationships, for example, when some danger of social exclusion exists, the sociometer sounds the alarm (self-esteem falls), and we are motivated to look for strategies to solve the problem. In such situations, positive bias strategies, such as self-enhancement, and fooling oneself with others' flattering would not be adaptive. It is this need for accuracy in reappraising one's (group) situation that accounts for the preference for self-verifying rather than self-enhancing feedback from others (Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2004).

<div align="center">CONCLUSIONS</div>

The main goal of this paper has been to present verification as a motivation that is found at the individual, collective, and group levels. With this aim, we analyzed in detail self-verification theory and recent findings of research on collective self-verification. However, these starters were only a presentation of our main dish: verification of one's group identity.

Probably the main distinction between verification of one's group identity and verification at the other two levels is placed in the object (target) of verification. While self-verification and collective self-verification are focused on the individual, research on verification of group identity considers the whole group as an object of analysis. For that reason, verification of group identity does not necessarily imply a confirmation of qualities that link individuals with their group, nor does verification of personal self-view. The possibility of confirming or disconfirming different levels of verification at the same time is something that should be explored (as Swann *et al.*, 2004, suggested

in their analysis of verification of social self-views).

Our conception of verification of one's group identity could be especially intriguing when a negative group identity is considered, and also when it is referred to some attribute of the group definition that is negative. In the same way as a long debate has arisen at the individual level between self-verification and self-enhancement, those defenders of social identity theory might argue that striving for verification of one's "negative" group identity contradicts the quite accepted ingroup bias and positive distinctiveness principles. However, fortunately social identity researchers themselves are recognising in the last few years that negative identities may also help groups to make sense of the world and that they could adopt their negative identity as something distinctive. Receiving information about the ingroup that is negative but matches one's group identity should increase the perception of predictability and control, as stated by self-verification theory, but this time, as referred to the group level, this perception will affect intergroup relations.

Consequently, groups should strive to live in a world that is predictable for them. This extension of self-verification and collective self-verification opens the door to a promising line of research showing that people like living in a world that understands them whether the context be individual, relational or group but always "social".

Notes

1. For a definition of self, see De Marree, Petty and Briñol (2007).
2. The debate between self-verification and self-enhancement has existed since both theories appeared. There has been always a controversy about which motivation is more important. However, this question will not be pursued here, because our focus is on the verification motive and its operation at the group level (for a more detailed revision see, Swann, 1990; Swann *et al.*, 1989, 2002; see also, Dauenheimer, Stahlberg, Spreeman, & Sedikides, 2002; Katz & Beach, 2000; Sedikides, 1993).
3. Another aspect to be explored in the future concerns the application of verification strivings in different cultures. To date, studies about self-verification and collective self-verification have been conducted mainly with North American, Asian American or European American participants. Research conducted on collective self-verification shows that collectivistic cultures as Asian American (Chen *et al.*, 2004; in press), and European American samples (Lemay & Ashmore, 2004), follow the assumption of self-verification. There are some reasons that support a good adjustment of verification strivings to different cultures. Studies conducted by Gómez in Spain (e.g., Gómez, Huici, & Morales, 2004; Gómez *et al*, Reference Note 1) suggest that verification strivings may be extended to other cultures. Several studies (for example, Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, and Gelfand, 1995) locate Spain as a somewhat collectivistic culture, and others (see, Fernández, Carrera, Sánchez & Páez, 1997; Hofstede, 1984) at the mid point of the individualism-collectivism continuum. However, Heine and Renshaw (2002) studied cultural differences on self-enhancing tendencies between North Americans and Japanese. The authors found that North American participants liked those people who shared their own views of themselves. However, for Japanese participants, liking was unrelated with self-verification. This finding suggests the existence of cultural differences in liking and in their relation with self-verification and, therefore, the need to explore self-verification processes in different cultures.
4. Research about social justice reflects something similar to our conception of verification of one´s group identity. From studies about justice, three levels are distinguished: *individual-level*, *group-level* and *inclusive-level* (Wenzel, 2004). These levels refer to the evaluation of the target as a defining criterion. From this perspective, the inclusive-level refers to evaluation and consensus about the ingroup, that is, the group is perceived as a unit in itself. At this level, it is possible to compare my group as a whole with other groups, and it includes those people with whom I share a common group membership.
5. To describe the process through which people strive to confirm and validate their group memberships as well as the convictions about the groups with which they are aligned we have opted for the term *verification of one´s group identity* instead of group self-verification or group self-views (that would be the logical following step of collective self-views) because, according to Gómez & Heller (Reference Note 3), it is referred to the group as a whole and includes the process of identification, that is a key variable, as literature on collective self-verification already showed (Chen *et al.*, 2004).

6. In verification literature (eg., see Pinel & Swann, 2000; Swann, Polzer, Seyle & Ko, 2004), it has been also discussed that members who belong to low status groups are sometimes reluctant to reject their identities, even when doing so would be very advantageous for group members.
7. If people do not perceive coherence, ingroup members may abandon the group, or, else, they may face the source of incoherence. The consequences for intergroup relations would be extremely important.
8. E.g., in case of war, or when two groups of violent youths are confronted, or in a group-sport scenario, it would probably be more advantageous or even adaptive to look stronger or better to the outgroup because it would be more threatening.

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