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# Evaluating the 'Us' in the context of 'Them': Contrast effect in social comparison

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**Abstract**

*Intergroup attitudes are shared perceptions that members of one group have for members of another group. The fact that people belong to the same group or are part of a separate and distinct social group often influences perceptions of each other. The social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) asserts that social categories provide members with a social identity. It further holds that the process of social comparison in an intergroup setting often leads to intergroup differentiation. The social context in which these groups are placed often governs the nature of stereotypes. This study attempts to explore these dynamics amongst two groups with varying historical experiences. For the study, 150 respondents were taken, with 65 belonging to the Hindu community and 85 from the Muslim community. To assess the manner in which people of one group perceived themselves and members of the other group, they were asked to write five positive and five negative qualities about their group and those associated with the other group. They also rated the ingroup and outgroup on an adjective rating scale. The rating was done on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 "very little" to 5 "very much". The result shows that both Hindus and Muslims rated their groups more positively in comparison to the other groups. However, on the open-ended question, the desire for positive distinctiveness for the ingroup was not very evident.*

## Introduction

Social comparisons are fundamental psychological mechanism influencing people's judgments, experiences, and behavior. We constantly engage in social comparisons as they typically serve as strategic processes that are executed to satisfy certain motives or goals (Taylor et al., 1996). Mussweiler and Epstude (2009) have suggested that comparisons in general are so ubiquitous because they allow us to process information in a more efficient manner than the more absolute modes of information processing. Thus, social comparison may be an efficient way of self-evaluation, because the less information people have to consider, the faster they come to a conclusion, as demonstrated, for example, in research on the use of categorical thinking (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000) and heuristics (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Social cognition research has provided substantial empirical evidence that accessible constructs shape our view of others and of ourselves. In the context of intergroup relations these accessible constructs play a significant role in determining the way we look at our group and the other group. The very fact that there are multitude of groups in our society and we differentially are part of these groups it generates what the social identity theory refers to the "we" and "they" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) feeling.

Based on the perception that society is hierarchically structured into different social groups that stand in power and status relation to each other Tajfel and Turner (1979) postulated that these social categories provide the individual with a social identity. Social identity is that part of the self-concept that derives from group membership. It not only refers to the description and evaluation of who we are but prescribes appropriate behavior for the members. Social identity is quite separate from personal identity, which is that part of the self-concept that derives from the idiosyncratic personal relationships we have with other people (Turner, 1982). The social identity theory deliberately makes a clear distinction between social and personal identity so as not to explain intergroup processes in

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terms of interpersonal relations and personality attributes. The difference between personal and social identity is not a matter of the attributes which define that category but indicates how the self is actually being defined in a specific instance, the level of comparison and self-categorization that is actually taking place and the subjective sense of self that results. It appears that in-group category membership is more self-descriptive when intergroup contrasts raise the salience of those memberships (Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1991). According to the self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) when shared social identity becomes salient, individual self-perception tends to become depersonalized and it is the salient social identity that influences intergroup attitudes.

**Attitudes towards "us" and "them"**

Attitudes serve a fundamental function by subjectively organizing the environment and orienting perceivers to objects and persons in it. Pavio (1986) argues that the main function of any kind of attitude is a utilitarian one: that of object appraisal. Merely possessing an attitude is useful because it provides an orientation towards the object and influences behavior. However, people do not have to be aware of the operation of attitudes for it to be influential; attitudes can be implicit as well as explicit. Explicit attitudes are deliberate, intentional, and available to conscious awareness. They are often obtained using language to reveal an internal state. Less familiar is the notion of an implicit attitude. Implicit attitudes were defined by Greenwald Banaji (1995) as "introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) traces of past experience that mediate favorable or unfavorable feeling, thought, or action toward a social object." Explicit attitudes reflect values, beliefs, and deliberate assessments of the world while Implicit attitudes reflect positive and negative associations accumulated through experience. Explicit attitudes are exemplified by the attitudes measured by traditional self-report measures in contrast implicit attitudes are evaluations that are automatically activated by the mere presence (actual or symbolic) of the attitude object and commonly function without a person's full awareness or control (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Implicit and explicit attitudes may or may not be consistent (Blair, 2001; Dovidio, Kawakami, & Beach, 2001; Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000), and they commonly diverge for socially sensitive issues (Dovidio & Fazio, 1992). Not only can implicit and explicit attitudes be largely dissociated, they also can influence behavior in different ways (Bargh, 1999; Dovidio & Fazio, 1992; Fazio, 1990). Chen and Bargh (1997) posited that the activation of implicit evaluations and associations can influence, often without the individual's awareness or intention in systematic ways. Similarly, Fazio's (1990) motivation and opportunity as determinants of processing (MODE) model suggests that behavioral decisions may involve conscious deliberation or occur as spontaneous reactions to an attitude object or issue. When people have the opportunity (e.g., sufficient time) and motivation (e.g., concern about evaluation) to assess the consequences of various actions, explicit attitudes primarily influence responses as people reflect on the relevant attitudes. When the opportunity is not permitted (e.g., because of time pressure) or the motivation is absent (e.g., because the task is unimportant), implicit attitudes are more influential. There are a variety of circumstances that might lead these evaluations to differ. It is interesting that a single individual can hold both types of attitudes in one mind.

**Social comparison and intergroup relations**

The feeling of "Us" and "Them" presupposes that member belonging to different groups are not only attached to the group they belong but they constantly compare themselves with members of the other group. Most of the knowledge that we have about our group is based on the process of social comparison. This comparison has important psychological and social consequences (Guimond, 2006) and forms the basis of intergroup relations. The Social Identity Theory to a large extend uses this tenet of social comparison between ingroup and out group as the cornerstone of the theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The meta-contrast principle helps accentuate similarities within our group (group homogeneity) and exaggerate any differences noticed between groups (social differentiation). This according to the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) satisfies one of our basic human needs, that of self-evaluation. Research has extensively studied the affective and cognitive processes that are automatically triggered when individuals are faced with members of their own group and the other group. Spontaneous affective responses toward outgroup members tend to be more negative in comparison to ingroup members (Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995; Greenwald,

McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) and automatic stereotyping arises (Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 1997). People as cognitive misers (Taylor, 1981) have to be efficient in the use of their scarce cognitive resources, and efficiency in comparison processes may well be the reason why comparisons are so frequently engaged in the first place. Generally, researches have demonstrated that intergroup bias manifests itself as ingroup favoritism (Diehl, 1990) but Mummendey and her colleagues (Mummendey, Simon, Dietze, Grünert, Haeger, Kessler, Lettgen & Schaferhoff, 1992; Mummendey, Otten & Blanz, 1994; Mummendey, 1995; Wenzel & Mummendey, 1996) were not able to demonstrate clear ingroup favoritism on negative evaluation or only a weaker form as compared to positive evaluations.

Keeping in view these findings the present study intends to explore how in an intergroup setup people express their attitude towards themselves as well as the other group members. Further, the study intends to investigate these attitudes both at the implicit and explicit level.

## METHOD

### Sample

The sample consisted of 150 respondents, both men ($n$ = 55, 36.7%) and women ($n$ = 95, 63.3%). Of them 65 were Hindus (Men = 24, 36.9%; Women = 41, 63.1%) and 85 were Muslims (Men = 31, 36.5%; Women = 54, 63.5%). Age range of the respondents was 15 to 30 years ($M$ = 20.55, $SD$ = 2.68) with 74.7% of them falling in the range of 18 to 22 years. Around 86.7% ($n$ = 130) were graduates while 13.3% ($n$ = 20) had higher secondary education.

### Measures

**Demographic Information-** This section required the respondents to provide information about their age, gender, religion, educational qualification, and monthly income of the family.

**Open-ended Question**- Respondents were instructed to list five positive and five negative qualities of their group and that of the other group. For example, a Hindu respondent listed five positive and five negative adjectives of their group and five positive and five negative adjectives of Muslims and the same was done by Muslim respondents.

**Adjective Rating Scale-** To measure the attitudes of both Hindu and Muslim respondents towards their own group as well as the other group they rated each other on 22 adjectives (for example, responsible, trustworthy, lazy, cruel, honest, opportunist, etc.) out of which 11 adjectives were positive and 11 were negative. On each adjective, participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale (1= *very less* to 5 = *very much*) the extent to which the adjectives were applicable to people of their own religious group as well as the other religious group (e.g., for Hindus the other religious group were Muslims and vice versa). The adjectives for this scale were taken from Norm Violation Inventory developed by Ghosh et al. (1992). The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was found to be 0.75 for the present sample.

### Procedure

Respondents for this study were contacted from a university located in North India where the majority of the students were Muslims, with Hindus being in the minority. Students were personally contacted and asked to participate in the study. After eliciting their verbal consent and establishing rapport, they were briefed that the purpose of the study was to examine how people describe members of their groups and those belonging to a different group. The questionnaires were distributed after they were briefed on the study. The questionnaires were self-administered, and respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Inquiries regarding age, gender, family structure, and income were included in the demographic sheet. Afterwards, respondents were asked to write five positive and five negative adjectives about their group members and five positive and five negative adjectives about members of the other group (only two groups were taken, that is, Hindus and Muslims). At the end, respondents were requested to rate themselves and the other group on a list of adjectives (in the case of Hindus, they had to rate Muslims and Muslims had to rate Hindus).

### Results

The explicit and implicit measure of attitudes were analyzed to get an understanding of the nature of perceptions members of the two dominant group of India had for their own members and towards each other. The mean rating for both positive and adjectives were analyzed separately for Hindus and Muslims and their implicit measures on the adjectives is also presented to see whether the explicit and implicit measure of attitude for each other is the same or different.

**Table 1**
**Comparative ratings on positive and negative qualities by Hindus and Muslims**

| | +v e in group | -v e in group | t(55) | +v e out group | -v e out group | t(77) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Hindus** | 3.62 | 2.81 | 6.18*** | 3.13 | 3.27 | 1.03 |
| **Muslims** | 3.72 | 2.67 | 8.16*** | 3.19 | 3.24 | .47 |

Table 1 shows that both Hindus and Muslims had more positive perception of their ingroup in relation to negative perception, but surprisingly, when both groups were compared on positive and negative adjectives towards the outgroup, that is, Muslims towards Hindus and Hindus towards Muslims, they did not show a significant difference. The mean rating was reflected more towards the neutral side.

**Table 2**
**Showing average Ingroup favoritism scores for both Hindus and Muslims**

| | **Positive attitude** | | | **Negative attitude** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | In group | Out group | d | Out group | In group | d |
| **Hindus** | 3.62 | 3.13 | .49 | 3.27 | 2.81 | .47 |
| **Muslims** | 3.72 | 3.19 | .53 | 3.24 | 2.67 | .57 |

Ingroup favoritism scores for each of the attributes were computed. This was done by subtracting the outgroup evaluation from the ingroup evaluation for the positive attributes, whereas for negative attributes the ingroup evaluation was subtracted from the outgroup evaluation. The average for each category reflected the direction and size of favoritism. A positive score meant ingroup discrimination, and a negative score denoted outgroup discrimination between the groups. The results in Table 2 clearly indicate ingroup favoritism for both the groups.

**Table 3**
**Comparisons of groups on positive qualities (free response in order of preference)**

| **Positive attitudes for Hindus** | | **Positive attitudes for Muslims** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Hindus** | **Muslims** | **Hindus** | **Muslims** |
| Religious | Hardworking | Religious | Religious |
| Respect for other religion | Helpful | Unity | Honest |
| Helpful | Religious | One God | One God |
| Respect for elders | Friendly | Cultured | Sense of brotherhood |
| Educated | Unity | Helpful | No Caste system |

**Table 4**
**Comparisons of groups on negative qualities (free response in order of preference)**

| **Negative attitudes for Hindus** | | **Negative attitudes for Muslims** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Hindus** | **Muslims** | **Hindus** | **Muslims** |
| Caste system | Caste system | Restriction on women | Backward in ducation |
| Superstition | Superstition | Fanatics | No unity |
| Dowry system | Many God | Marriage within family | Orthodox |
| Orthodox | Selfish | Purdah system | Aggressive |
| No unity | Orthodox | Killing of animals | Superstition |

The results of tables 2 and 3 depicting the implicit measure of attitude do not clearly show the within-group bias. The positive as well as the negative adjectives used by both the communities reflect a lot of similarity. Hindus saw their ingroup as well as the outgroup as religious, and both the groups saw the other as known for their group's unity. On the negative adjectives, both Hindus and Muslims saw the caste system as negative for Hindus, but for Hindus, having no caste system was a positive for Muslims. When Muslims were seen as superstitious by Hindus, Muslims also saw Hindus as superstitious. If the dowry system was seen as a negative for ingroup by Hindus, they saw marriage within the family as a negative for Muslims. If Muslims were seen as fanatics, then their own group members were seen as orthodox. Similarly, when Muslims saw Hindus as friendly, they saw their group as having a sense of brotherhood. While Hindus saw their group as educated, Muslims saw their group as less educated. Further, when Hindus saw Muslims as cultured, they also saw their groups as respectful towards the elderly. Thus, one can see that when it comes to implicit measures, both the groups could identify the negative of their group and appreciate it as present in the other group. On negative qualities, one could see that what they considered negative for their group was also referred to as negative for the other group.

**Discussion**

Social identity—the "us" and "them"—holds relevance when groups compare themselves with each other and are in competition for resources. As we are all embedded in a world of groups, it is natural to observe the similarities and differences between them. The defining characteristics of each group become more prominent when they are juxtaposed with the other. My group's identity exists because of the presence of the "other" group. Hence, the question of interest is whether this comparison always leads to intergroup bias as predicted by the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) or is it possible that people, despite differences, can perceive each other in a more amicable manner? The focus of this research was to investigate this intergroup reality both in an implicit and explicit manner. The findings of the explicit measure clearly show ingroup favouritism as both groups evaluated their group more positively than the other group. Looking at the direction of difference between ingroup and outgroup evaluation, one can see clear ingroup favouritism for both groups. However, on the negative evaluation, the difference was not there. There is no clear ingroup favouritism when the focus is on negative evaluation (Munnendey, Simon, Dietz, Grunert, Haeger, Kessler, Lettgen & Schaferoff, 1992; Wenzel & Mummendey, 1996). Rustemli & Mertan (2005) also observed that there is an asymmetry between positive and negative domains and a norm of fairness precludes the discriminatory process when one is making a negative evaluation. Since the previous studies had adopted a minimal group perspective, this study focused on the two real groups in India, namely Hindus and Muslims. Both these groups share a history of coexistence as well as conflict. Hence, it was interesting to note that, on positive evaluation, social comparison in an intergroup context did serve the purpose of maintaining and enhancing self-esteem. In contrast, on negative evaluation, there was no bias against the other group member. It appears that the civility norm, along with the context in which the group is located, enables people to be more polite towards others.

The results of the implicit evaluation do not clearly go in the direction of the explicit evaluation. Social comparison as a fundamental psychological mechanism influences an individual's judgments, experiences, and behavior, but the nature of relations between groups plays a crucial role in intergroup relations. When members of different groups are regularly interacting with each other, their level of understanding of each other need not be limited to the religious prism. Since the study was conducted on a campus where Muslim students were in the majority but which had a considerable number of Hindu students, this might have influenced their attitude towards each other. Despite being in the minority on the campus, Hindu students, in the larger context, constituted the majority. Hence, it appears that when the majority minority dynamics are not primed, then one does not encounter intergroup bias. Status differentiation does exert an important influence in determining inter-group attitudes and relations, but as both the groups were staying at a residential university, they interacted with each other on a daily basis. So the day-to-day civility norm enables them to interact with each other in a more cordial manner. There appears to be a lot of similarity between the positive and negative adjectives that both Hindu and Muslim

students used to describe each other. This reaffirms the assertion of the contact hypotheses (Allport, 1954) that intergroup contact not only provides an opportunity to break the stereotypical ways of looking at each other, but the familiarity with each other can go a long way in reducing prejudice.

The lack of correspondence between the explicit and implicit attitudes reflects that those intergroup biases may be influenced by the associations that are automatically activated by contextual cues rather than by perceivers' implicitly held beliefs. Thus, when a deliberate choice has to be made, as in the case of explicit measures, then the processing bias is visible, but in the case of implicit measures, the bias is not very vivid as the processing of intergroup content happens spontaneously due to a lack of introspective access to memory. It appears that intergroup attitude is not only influenced by the social setting but also the cognitive processing of the available intergroup content. The implicit measure clearly establishes the fact that students were aware of each other's positive as well as negative qualities, and they also could relate them to their groups. This is clearly accounted for by the similarities in the characteristics (both positive and negative) attributed to themselves as well as the other group members. If Hindus see Muslims as orthodox and superstitious, then this response was reflected by Muslims when they identified the negative characteristics of their group. On the positive characteristics, Hindus saw Muslims as religious and having unity, and they had similar attitudes towards their own group members.

The findings of the present study clearly show that social comparison need not always be favorably biased towards one's own group. Comparisons in general are ubiquitous as they enable us to process information in a more efficient manner (Mussweiler & Epstude, 2009), but the nature of the processing will be determined by contextual factors and the type of relationship that exists between groups. One of the main motives for social comparison seems to be the need for accurate self-evaluations (Taylor, Wayment & Carrillo, 1996). As there are no objective standards against which a person can compare themselves, they rely on social comparison (Festinger, 1954). In a society characterised by diversity, the social comparison is made with a dynamic identity profile, and as a result, we see that there is a natural tendency to realign and shift our identities in accordance to the demands of the social setup. As a result, the basis of identification varied in this study as well; it was based on a student's region, religion, caste, educational stream, membership in various clubs, and language, to name a few. Diverse social networks foster multiple identities that encourage positive interdependence on non-religious grounds (Varshney, 2002). Brewer and Pierce (2005) observed that living in a diverse environment and subjected to diverse social experiences may predispose people to hold a more inclusive perception of their multiple in-groups.

In conclusion, one can, on the basis of the findings, make the assertion that the binary of "us" and "them" need not always lead to stereotypical and prejudiced ways of thinking. The larger social context and its diversity will play a major role in determining intergroup attitudes. In the Indian context, specifically in the Northern belt where the study was located, the term "hum" in the local dialect, which is an equivalent to "we," is more prevalent and governs the day-to-day interaction. It enfolds a lot of diversity and allows for norms of cordiality in social interaction between people of different groups. It would be interesting to investigate the occasions and factors that make people switch from "hum" to "them" or vice versa. This will go a long way in addressing many issues of misunderstanding and conflicts between groups.

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