Chapter 4  Working for the self or for the group: How personal vs. social self-affirmation promote performance motivation

Being a member of a socially devalued group, as is the case for women and ethnic minorities, can lead people to give up their investment and performance motivation in domains that are associated with high societal status (e.g., mathematics, education, leadership, see for examples Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005; Major & Schmader, 1998). Whereas most of the research on stigma and social identity has focused on stigmatized group members’ well-being and coping strategies (Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Crocker & Major, 1989; Hogg & Sunderland, 1991; Lemyre & Smith, 1985; Rubin & Hewstone, 1998), research that systematically examines how members of stigmatized groups can be motivated to perform on dimensions that could lead them to higher societal status is limited (see for examples Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2006a, in press). In this chapter, we propose that providing stigmatized group members with self-affirmation directed at improving either their personal or social identity can diminish the detrimental effects of social identity threat and improve their performance motivation in status-defining domains. Moreover, we compare personal and social self-affirmation and argue that, although both types of self-affirmation have beneficial motivational effects, they differentially affect whether individuals will work for themselves (individual mobility) or for their group (collective status improvement).

Social identity threat and motivation

For members of groups with lower societal status (women, ethnic minorities) performance settings that focus on domains in which high status groups excel (academic performance, leadership ability) pose a threat to social identity because they highlight the inferior performance of their group in these domains.
According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), some of the strategies that group members use to improve their well-being and reduce their social identity concerns can seriously harm motivation to perform well on dimensions that lead to higher societal status. For example, low status group members may cope with social identity threat by leaving situations in which their group is devalued (e.g., when ethnic minorities drop out from academic settings or when women avoid stereotypically male occupations), or by psychologically disidentifying from those dimensions on which their group is expected to show inferior performance (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Davies et al., 2005; Osborne, 1997; Schmader, Major, Eccleston, & McCoy, 2001). Importantly, domains in which low status groups are negatively stereotyped are often domains that define status in the social hierarchy. When stigmatized group members cope with their social identity concerns in ways that lower their motivation to perform on these status-defining dimensions, social devaluation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that strengthens intergroup differences in the social hierarchy (Van Laar & Sidanius, 2001).

While the detrimental effects of social identity threat on group members’ well-being and involvement in status-defining domains are well-documented (Crocker et al., 1998; Major & Schmader, 1998; Osborne, 1997; Schmader, Major, Eccleston, & McCoy, 2001), research on how stigmatized group members can overcome these negative motivational effects and remain involved in status-defining domains is scarce. In this chapter we aim to fill this gap and propose that the negative effects of social identity threatening contexts on devalued group members’ self-improvement motivation are mitigated when group members are offered ways to boost their personal or social identity.

**Self-affirmation and motivation**

Given that a threat to stigmatized group members’ social identity can lead to decreased performance motivation in status-defining domains, bolstering the self-concept by providing self-affirmation in other performance domains might lower stigmatized group members’ need to withdraw from social identity threatening performance contexts. By reducing the need to use coping strategies that harm motivation in status-defining domains, we expect self-affirmation to improve devalued group members’ motivation to strive for higher performance on these dimensions. Self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988; Steele & Liu, 1983) argues that people are motivated to sustain a positive overall self-concept. When the self-concept is under threat, for example due to negative performance feedback,
individuals are motivated to restore their self-concept. Self-regard, however, is not exclusively restored by addressing the specific threat (e.g., by reducing the psychological significance of the domain on which negative feedback was received). The self can also be affirmed by bolstering other parts of the self-concept, for example by focusing on high performance in other domains (Steele & Liu, 1983; Tesser & Cornell, 1991; Tesser, Crepaz, Beach, Cornell, & Collins, 2000). We argue that when stigmatized group members experience failure in an important status-defining domain in which their group is negatively stereotyped, experiencing self-affirmation in another unrelated domain restores their self-regard. This in turn reduces the need to address the specific threat (low performance on the status-defining dimension) by withdrawing from the performance situation or by devaluing this status-defining domain, allowing them to retain the motivation necessary to improve performance in the status-defining domain. Although most research on self-affirmation focuses on restoring well-being rather than performance motivation, some support for this argument can be found in research examining effects of personal self-affirmation in performance settings. For example, Kurman (2003) showed that among college students self-affirmation was related to increased self-criticism, which in turn was related to higher academic motivation. Similarly, self-affirmation has been shown to reduce ruminative thinking after failure (which can impede future performance motivation, Koole, Smeets, van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999), defensive reactions to negative performance or health feedback (Harris & Napper, 2005; Sherman & Cohen, 2002), and self-handicapping (Siegel, Scillitoe, & Parks Yancy, 2005). In this way, self-affirmation improves the chances that individuals behave in ways that improve their performance or health. Up till now, however, it has not been investigated whether self-affirmation also directly improves stigmatized group members’ motivation in domains in which their group is negatively stereotyped (see also Siegel et al., 2005). Testing this link is important because if self-affirmation actually helps to motivate members of stigmatized groups to perform on status-defining dimensions on which negative stereotypes predict them to fail, this could provide a powerful tool to increase the outcomes of stigmatized groups.

**Personal versus social self-affirmation**

In addition to testing the direct link between self-affirmation and performance motivation, we aim to extend self-affirmation research by distinguishing between two types of self-affirmation, namely self-affirmation that
enhances personal identity and self-affirmation that enhances social identity. In accordance with the social identity tradition (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) we view personal and social identity as two separate aspects of the overall self-concept, that both affect an individuals' motivated performance. Whereas personal identity refers to people's self-definition as unique and different from others, social identity refers to a part of the self-concept that is defined by the social categories to which one belongs. Self-affirmation research has addressed how people maintain positive self-regard, conceptualizing the self as based primarily in personal identity. However, stigmatization and group devaluation not only threaten personal identity but are even more likely to affect social identity. In parallel, self-affirmation theory and the social identity tradition have inspired research that has identified ways in which individuals affirm a threatened personal identity (Aronson, Cohen, & Nail, 1999; Spencer, Fein, & Lomore, 2001; Tesser et al., 2000) or a threatened social identity respectively (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker et al., 1998; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). For example, both theories propose that when individuals are confronted with threatening individual or collective failure feedback in one performance domain, their identity can be affirmed by focusing on high individual or collective performance in another domain. Interestingly, although the effects of personal self-affirmation on performance motivation have not been examined directly, there is some research suggesting that social self-affirmation promotes motivation in status-defining domains among members of stigmatized groups (Derks et al., 2006a, in press, see Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation). In this chapter we extend this initial work by distinguishing between personal and social forms of self-affirmation. We think this distinction is important because we argue that, although both personal and social self-affirmation can cause individual members of stigmatized groups to become motivated to perform in status-defining domains, the processes underlying the two types of self-affirmation are qualitatively different. That is, whereas social self-affirmation affects motivation through the collective self, personal self-affirmation affects motivation through the individual self. First, we predict that this qualitative difference between personal and social self-affirmation becomes apparent in the way in which low status group members strive for higher outcomes, motivating them to pursue either higher personal status (personal self-affirmation) or higher group status (social self-affirmation). In doing this, we predict that social self-affirmation differs from personal self-affirmation as it allows members of devalued groups to improve their personal performance without turning away from
their ingroup. Second, we propose that social self-affirmation is different from personal self-affirmation because, unlike personal self-affirmation, the effects of social self-affirmation depend on whether group members base their self-regard on their group membership (high group identification).

**Individual versus collective status improvement**

Although we predict that both personal and social self-affirmation should increase performance motivation among members of a devalued group, we hypothesize that whether self-affirmation focuses on the individual or collective self importantly affects the kind of behavior group members focus on to achieve better outcomes. Social identity theory proposes that members of low status groups can strive for higher outcomes either by improving their personal performance in an attempt to gain entrance into higher status groups (individual mobility, Ellemers, 2001; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997; Ellemers, Van Den Heuvel, De Gilder, Maass, & Bonvini, 2004; Ellemers & Van Laar, in press), or by improving the status position and performance of the entire group (collective mobility, Wright, 2001b). We predict that personal self-affirmation induces group members to focus on their individuality (see also Guimond, Dif, & Aupy, 2002) leading them to focus on behaviors that exclusively benefit their individual status. Social self-affirmation, on the other hand, to the extend that this helps individuals to view themselves as group members (Turner et al., 1987), should induce them to focus on behaviors that benefit the status of the entire group.

**Social self-affirmation and group identification**

Thus, we posit that social self-affirmation affects motivation through the collective self, while personal self-affirmation affects motivation through the individual self. This implies that social self-affirmation only motivates group members when their self-concept is indeed partly based on their group membership. Therefore we test whether the degree to which group members *identify* with the devalued group (i.e., the degree to which group membership is part of the self-concept) determines whether social self-affirmation positively affects performance motivation in status-defining domains. We hypothesize that, because high identifiers base their self-concept on individual *and* group characteristics, high identifiers become motivated to improve their performance on status-defining dimensions after personal as well as social self-affirmation. By contrast, low identifiers are less inclined to base their self-concept on the characteristics of the
low status group. As a result, we predict that they will only become motivated to improve their performance on status-defining dimensions when their personal self is affirmed. In fact, because low identifiers prefer not to be seen as members of the low status group, they might experience being categorized as a member of this group (social self-affirmation) as threatening to the personal self (‘categorization threat’, Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Ellemers et al., 2002). Therefore we predict that whereas social self-affirmation should lead highly identified group members to become more willing to strive for collective status improvement, social self-affirmation should lead low identifiers to emphasize their individual identity by engaging in individual mobility.

**How does self-affirmation improve motivation?**

The final goal of the current set of studies is to examine how identity affirmation leads group members to become more motivated on status-defining dimensions. We argue that self-affirmation positively affects performance motivation in status-defining domains because it transforms the threat-response that is induced by social devaluation into a challenge-response (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus and Folkman’s model of stress and coping (1984) and the biopsychosocial model of Blascovich and colleagues (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996; Tomaka, Blascovich, Kelsey, & Leitten, 1993) propose that individuals in performance situations will cognitively appraise the demands of the task and the personal resources to deal with these task demands. Individuals feel threatened when task demands exceed their perceived personal resources to cope with these demands. Challenge results when personal resources are perceived to meet or exceed task demands. We expect that motivation on a status-defining dimension is improved after self-affirmation because this increases the challenge people feel to overcome the threats that their group membership poses.

**Overview of the studies**

We performed three experiments in which we compared the effects of personal versus social self-affirmation on low status group members’ performance motivation in a status-defining domain. Identity threat was induced by explicitly having members of existing low status groups (women, Dutch students) compare themselves to members of a high status group (men, Belgian students) and inducing a performance difference between these groups on a fictitious status-defining dimension. Personal versus social self-affirmation was manipulated by providing
participants with positive personal or group performance feedback on an alternative dimension. Additionally, in all three experiments group identification was assessed to examine whether the expected positive effects of social self-affirmation depended on high ingroup identification. In Experiment 1, we studied women who were compared to men in an experimentally created job-application context. We examined how personal versus social self-affirmation and group identification affected their well-being and performance motivation on a status-defining dimension. In Experiment 2, we again examined women and tested the effects of self-affirmation type and group identification on their interest in individual and collective mobility. Finally, in Experiment 3 we extended our findings to a different intergroup context (Dutch vs. Belgian students) and examined whether self-affirmation results in increased motivation on status-defining dimensions because it induces group members to perceive the performance situation as challenging.

**Experiment 1**

In Experiment 1, we tested the effects of personal and social self-affirmation on the well-being (personal and collective self-esteem) and self-improvement behavior of low and highly identified members of a devalued group. We hypothesized that after negative performance feedback on a status-defining dimension, *personal* self-affirmation (by providing positive individual feedback on another dimension) improves devalued group members’ well-being on the level of their personal identity (personal self-esteem) and increases their performance motivation, irrespective of how identified they are with the group. However, *social* self-affirmation (by providing positive group performance feedback on another dimension) was hypothesized to benefit collective well-being (collective self-esteem) and performance motivation only for those group members for whom this social identity is important (high identifiers).

Additionally, Experiment 1 set out to check some basic principles underlying the hypothesized effects of self-affirmation type and group identification. First, through an implicit measurement of cognitive self- and group-focus designed by Dijkstra and Van Knippenberg (2000), Experiment 1 tested whether personal and social self-affirmation indeed increased participants’ focus on either their individual or collective self. Second, Experiment 1 established whether the manipulation of social self-affirmation (focusing on high ingroup performance on another dimension) leaves participants’ perception of the overall status difference between the groups unaffected, as this might provide an alternative explanation for
our results. We argue that motivation increases following social self-affirmation because self-regard is restored, rather than because social self-affirmation increases the perceived status of the low status ingroup.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 107 female Leiden University students \( M_{age} = 20 \text{ years}, \ SD = 2.62 \) who voluntarily participated in the experiment in exchange for 4.5 euros.

**Procedure**

Participants were seated in separate cubicles in which information was provided with a computer. Participants read that the study would consist of three parts. In the first part, participants were asked to complete a measure of gender identification that we were (supposedly) developing. We measured gender identification with six items (e.g., ‘Being a woman is important to me’ and ‘I feel commitment towards other women’, \( \alpha = .85 \)). In addition, we measured self-typicality (Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Kashima, Kashima, & Hardie, 2000), which is sometimes conflated with identification, but more specifically denotes the degree to which group members feel similar to other group members (3 items, e.g., ‘I have much in common with other women’ and ‘I am like other women’, \( \alpha = .89 \)). Measuring self-typicality in addition to group identification allows us to exclude the possibility that highly identified participants in the social self-affirmation condition are more affected by this information than low identifiers simply because they see the group performance feedback as more diagnostic of their personal performance on this dimension. Instead, we predict that the effect of social self-affirmation should depend on the subjective importance of the group for the self, not on perceived self-group typicality.

In the second part of the study, participants performed a bogus test measuring ‘holistic decomposition’. This was presented as the ability to understand the meaning of different components in a complex situation and to be able to rearrange these components to improve the functionality of the situation. In fact, this ability would later function as the self-affirming dimension. The task was to solve ten anagrams that were designed to increase the likelihood that participants would feel that they were good at this. Pretesting confirmed that this was the case.

Then, participants were informed about the goals of the third part of the study, namely measuring differences between men and women on a cognitive ability called ‘inferential flexibility’. Inferential flexibility was presented as the
ability to see associations between concepts that appear unrelated at first. This ability would later serve as the status-defining dimension. Participants were informed that when academically educated job candidates apply for a job they are often tested in assessment centers. Inferential flexibility was presented as one of the abilities measured to predict future job success in such assessments. The bogus inferential flexibility test that participants were asked to take consisted of ten items which were based on McFarlin and Blascovich’s Remote Associates Test (1984) in which a fourth word has to be found that is associated with three presented words (for example, ‘elephant, lapse and vivid’, the correct answer is ‘memory’). Based on pretesting we selected difficult items to assure participants would experience difficulty in this status-defining domain.

Induction of low group status on status-defining dimension: After taking the test, participants received performance feedback about their personal performance and the performance of women in general on the inferential flexibility test indicating that they personally (compared to others) and their ingroup (women compared to men) had performed below average on the inferential flexibility test. Thus, inferential flexibility was the status-defining dimension in this study. Participants were informed about their personal as well as their ingroup’s performance in order to exclude the possibility that they would protect their self-esteem from negative group feedback by estimating higher personal than group performance (Schmader, Major, Eccleston, & McCoy, 2001). To create an anticipated second achievement situation, participants were informed that the inferential flexibility test (the status-defining dimension) would be administered for a second time at the end of the study.

Self-affirmation manipulation: Unexpectedly, participants then received performance feedback on the holistic decomposition test that they had completed previously in the experimental session. In the personal self-affirmation condition, participants read that their personal performance on this other test was above average compared to other students. In the social self-affirmation condition, participants read that on this test the performance of women in general was above average and that the performance of men on this dimension was below average. This manipulation was checked by asking participants about their personal ability and the ability of women and men in general on the self-affirming dimension (i.e., ‘Within the domain of holistic decomposition I/ women/men perform 1 = very poorly–9 = very well').
Finally, in order to endorse the self-affirming dimension as a relevant performance dimension (Derks et al., 2006a), participants were told that both performance dimensions were valued highly by employers and that it was very likely that they would be tested on both dimensions in an assessment center when they applied for jobs in the future.

After measuring the dependent variables, participants were informed that there would not be a second measurement of inferential flexibility after all. Participants were debriefed, thanked and paid for their participation.

Measures

All measures were assessed on nine-point Likert-type scales. **Personal state self-esteem** was measured with six items from Rosenberg’s self-esteem scale (1965) that we adjusted to measure state self-esteem (e.g., ‘At this moment I take a positive attitude towards myself’, α = .92). **Private collective self-esteem**, which indicates group members’ personal evaluations of their group, was measured with the subscale of Luhtanen and Crocker’s collective self-esteem scale (1992), which we adjusted to measure state (instead of trait) collective self-esteem. However, since preliminary analyses revealed different results on the positive compared to the negative items, we examined the positive (r = .63, ‘At this moment I am glad to be a woman’ and ‘At this moment I feel good about being a woman’) and negative items (r = .32, i.e., ‘At this moment I feel that woman are not worthwhile’ and ‘At this moment I regret that I am a woman’) in two separate subscales. This division was supported by a principal components analysis, which revealed one component consisting of the positive items (explaining 48% of the variance) and one component consisting of the negative items (explaining 26% of the variance). We checked the overall perceived status difference between men and women on the labor market by asking participants to estimate the status of each group on the labor market on a nine-point scale on which a high score indicated high status. **Self-improvement behavior** on the status-defining dimension was measured by asking participants to indicate how much time (between 0 to 12 minutes) they wanted to spend on answering questions that would help them to improve their performance by providing insight in individual differences and gender-related factors that predicted performance.

Finally, to check in an implicit fashion whether, compared to personal self-affirmation, social self-affirmation led to more group-focus than self-focus, we administered a task designed by Dijksterhuis and Van Knippenberg (2000). Participants were given a short text written in a bogus language ('Weswe') supposedly spoken in New Guinea. In this text, 20 words were underlined and
participants were asked to guess to which Dutch personal pronouns these words would translate. We counted the number of times participants suggested self-related pronouns (I, me, mine) versus group-related pronouns (we, us, our).

Results

Overview of regression analyses

The dependent variables were analyzed with hierarchical regression analyses. The main effect of group identification was standardized and entered together with self-affirmation type (1 = personal, 2 = social) in step 1. In step 2, the interaction between gender identification and self-affirmation was entered. Interaction effects were subsequently investigated by calculating simple slopes for low (-1 SD) and high identifiers (+1 SD), or for the personal and social self-affirmation conditions (Aiken & West, 1991).

Manipulation checks

Self-affirmation type: The manipulated type of self-affirmation influenced participants' ratings of personal, ingroup and outgroup ability in the self-affirming domain as intended. Participants in the personal self-affirmation condition reported higher personal ability in the self-affirming domain ($M = 6.78, SD = 1.13$) than participants in the social self-affirmation condition ($M = 5.43, SD = 1.97; B = -1.33, SE = .31, t[104] = 18.40, p < .001$, semi-partial $r^2 = .15$). Additionally, in the social self-affirmation condition participants perceived a larger ability gap between the ingroup and the outgroup in the self-affirming domain ($M_{ingroup} = 6.79, SD = 1.32; M_{outgroup} = 3.57, SD = 1.62$), than in the personal self-affirmation condition ($M_{ingroup} = 5.83, SD = 1.38; M_{outgroup} = 5.31, SD = 1.48; B = 2.74, SE = .45, t[104] = 36.49, p < .001$, semi-partial $r^2 = .26$). There were no effects of group identification.

Overall status difference: By comparing the perceived overall status of men and women on the labor market, we checked whether personal and social self-affirmation led participants to perceive the same overall status difference between men and women in this context. If social self-affirmation reduces the perception of an overall status difference between men and women, this could mean that the effects of the social self-affirmation manipulation were not due to the restoration of self-regard, but to a lower initial threat to self-regard. However, as intended the perceived status difference between men ($M = 6.85, SD = 1.41$) and women ($M = 6.10, SD = 1.49; t[106] = 6.03, p < .001$) did not differ between conditions (all $Fs < 2.11$).
**Personal vs. social self-affirmation**

**Self- and group-focus:** We measured on an implicit level whether personal and social self-affirmation induced a cognitive focus on either the personal or social self by counting the number of self- and group-related personal pronouns participants listed in the fictitious translation exercise. Although marginally significant, as hypothesized the difference in the number of self-related and group-related pronouns was predicted by self-affirmation type only ($B = -.93, SE = .51, F[1,101] = 3.37, p = .07, \text{semi-partial } r^2 = .03$). Whereas participants in the personal self-affirmation condition reported more self- than group-related pronouns ($M_{self} = 5.33, SD = 1.73; M_{group} = 4.86, SD = 1.71$), participants in the social self-affirmation condition reported more group- than self-related pronouns ($M_{self} = 4.28, SD = 1.56; M_{group} = 4.74, SD = 1.82$). This further supports the notion that the self-affirmation manipulation focused participants’ attention on different levels of the self.

**Personal state self-esteem**

First, after having received negative feedback on the status-defining dimension, personal self-affirmation led to higher personal self-esteem than social self-affirmation ($B = -.60, SE = .26, F[1,104] = 5.46, p = .02, \text{semi-partial } r^2 = .05$). Importantly, the predicted interaction effect qualified this main effect ($B = .54, SE = .25, F[1,103] = 4.49, p = .04, \text{semi-partial } r^2 = .04$, see Figure 4.1). Simple slope analyses revealed that among less identified group members, personal self-esteem benefited more from personal self-affirmation than from social self-affirmation ($B = -1.14, t[103] = -3.18, p < .01$). Among highly identified group members personal and social self-affirmation were equally likely to lead to high personal self-esteem ($B = -.06, \text{ns}$).

**Private collective self-esteem**

The positive private collective self-esteem scale indicated the degree to which participants were happy to be female. The results showed that positive collective self-esteem was affected by group identification only, with higher positive collective self-esteem among high compared to low identified women ($B = .72, SE = .14, F[1,104] = 28.04, p < .001, \text{semi-partial } r^2 = .21$). However, on negative collective self-esteem (the degree to which participants were not pleased to be female and felt women were unworthy) a different pattern emerged. As hypothesized, the regression analysis revealed a significant interaction effect, indicating that the effect of personal versus social self-affirmation was moderated by group identification ($B = -.35, SE = .17, F[1,103] = 4.01, p = .05, \text{semi-partial } r^2 = .04$, see Figure 4.2). Whereas personal self-affirmation led to equally negative collective self-esteem among low and high identified women ($B = .04, \text{ns}$), as expected, social self-affirmation led to
lower levels of negative collective self-esteem among high identifiers than among low identifiers ($B = -.31, t[103] = 1.03, p = .02$). Additionally, whereas high identifiers tended to have less negative collective self-esteem following social self-affirmation than following personal self-affirmation ($B = -.35, t[103] = 1.42, p = .16$), low identifiers tended to have more negative collective self-esteem following social self-affirmation compared to personal self-affirmation ($B = .35, t[103] = -1.42, p = .16$). As expected then, these results show that only for high identifiers did social self-affirmation relieve negative collective self-esteem.

Figure 4.1. - Personal state self-esteem in the personal and social self-affirmation conditions for participants with low (-1 SD) and high group identification (+1 SD) in Experiment 1.

Figure 4.2. - Negative collective self-esteem in the personal and social self-affirmation conditions for participants with low (-1 SD) and high group identification (+1 SD) in Experiment 1.
Self-improvement behavior on the status-defining dimension

The time that participants were willing to invest in answering questions that would help them to improve their performance on the status-defining dimension (between 0 and 12 minutes) was explained by the predicted interaction between self-affirmation type and group identification ($B = .95$, $SE = .47$, $F[1,103] = 4.08$, $p = .05$, semi-partial $r^2 = .04$, see Figure 4.3). Among high identifiers self-improvement behavior was equally high following personal self-affirmation as following social self-affirmation ($B = .13$, $ns$). Among low identifiers, however, self-improvement on the status-defining dimension was higher following personal self-affirmation than following social self-affirmation ($B = -1.77$, $t[103] = -2.66$, $p < .01$). These results confirmed the prediction that group identification determines whether social self-affirmation results in high self-improvement behavior.

![Figure 4.3](image)

Figure 4.3. - Self-improvement behavior in the personal and social self-affirmation conditions for participants with low (-1 SD) and high group identification (+1 SD) in Experiment 1.

Does self-typicality explain the effects of group identification?

Finally, we tested whether the effects of group identification reported above could be attributed to higher levels of perceived self-typicality among highly identified group members. If high identifiers benefited more from social self-affirmation than low identifiers only because for them their group’s performance seemed a better predictor of their personal performance, social self-affirmation could simply be a form of personal self-affirmation. Group identification and self-
typicality were indeed significantly correlated \( r = .57, p < .001 \). However, additional analyses pitting group identification and self-typicality against each other in a regression analysis to see which better explained the effects reported above, revealed that neither the main effect nor interactive effect of self-typicality could account for any of the effects we found for group identification.

**Discussion**

Experiment 1 is the first to demonstrate the beneficial effects of personal versus social self-affirmation on self-improvement motivation. Whereas previous research has focused on how self-affirmation relates to well-being and forms of self-protection that potentially reduce motivation and performance (Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Siegel et al., 2005), this study showed that self-affirmation directly improves performance motivation on a dimension on which previous (group) failure potentially threatens the self-concept. Moreover, this study is the first to disentangle and compare personal and social forms of self-affirmation. As predicted, whether low status group members were affirmed on the level of personal or social identity affected whether they were cognitively focused on their individual or collective self. An implicit measure of self- versus group-focus (Dijksterhuis & Van Knippenberg, 2000) revealed that whereas personal self-affirmation increased the cognitive focus on personal identity, social self-affirmation induced a focus on social identity. As a result, although both personal and social identity affirmation enable members of a chronically devalued group (women) to focus on self-improvement in domains in which their group is negatively stereotyped, they do so in different ways. Personal self-affirmation affirms personal identity directly and results in higher well-being and self-improvement motivation among all members of the devalued group. Social self-affirmation, however, operates through social identity and therefore only results in higher personal and collective well-being and performance motivation among those group members for whom group membership is an important part of their self-concept (i.e., high identifiers).

Importantly, the results of this first experiment show that group members’ commitment and identification to their group, and not the degree to which they feel they resemble members of their group (self-typicality), moderates the effect of social self-affirmation on well-being and motivation. By controlling for self-typicality, this experiment thus refutes an important alternative explanation of our results, namely that high identifiers are more motivated by social self-affirmation than low
identifiers because for them group performance seems more indicative of their personal performance.

Experiment 1 showed that, depending on group identification, both personal and social self-affirmation induced higher self-improvement motivation, but does not reveal whether this self-improvement is directed at improving personal status or at improving collective status. Experiment 2 therefore examines in more detail whether personal self-affirmation induces self-improvement motivation that is exclusively aimed at improving personal status, and whether social self-affirmation induces group members to also work for higher status as a group.

**Experiment 2**

Experiment 2 was designed to replicate the main results obtained in Experiment 1 and to further examine whether affirming the personal versus social identity of members of a devalued group differentially affects the degree to which they are willing to perform behavior that is aimed at improving group status (vs. individual status). Examining group members' willingness to work for collective status improvement is important because in order for more large scale social change to occur it is crucial that individuals not only work to improve their own status but also work for higher status of their group. Although one could argue that the most effective way to achieve equal outcomes for different groups is for individual group members to achieve their optimal potential on status-defining dimensions, considerable research has shown the limits of individual mobility as a vehicle for collective status improvement (for a review, see Ellemers & Van Laar, in press). First of all, since entrance into higher status groups is often highly restricted (Wright, 2001a), individual mobility will be a viable strategy only for those few group members who are so talented that entrance into the higher status group cannot be denied to them. Furthermore, although group members who are successful in achieving higher personal status could use their newly acquired power to improve the status of other ingroup members, there is research to suggest that individual mobility reduces group members' concern for the welfare of their group. Individual mobility requires individuals to physically or psychologically distance themselves from their group, which can lead them to discriminate against members of their group (Ellemers, 2001; Ellemers et al., 2004) and to oppose collective action by members of their group (Wright & Taylor, 1999). Another disadvantage of exclusively promoting individual mobility is that it serves to legitimize social stratification as the small number of disadvantaged group members that successfully
achieve upward mobility simultaneously serve as ‘proof’ that all individuals have equal opportunities for status improvement, while in fact this is not the case. In conclusion, although individual mobility is an important first step towards social equality, collective behavior aimed to more generally improve outcomes for the entire group is necessary to achieve more large scale social change.

Self-categorization theory predicts that, depending on whether personal or social identity is cognitively salient, individuals will focus on their personal welfare or the welfare of their group as a whole (Turner et al., 1987). We therefore predict that social self-affirmation increases group members’ interest in behavior that not only benefits themselves, but also benefits the status of the entire group (collective mobility). Personal self-affirmation, on the other hand, is predicted to lead to decreased willingness to engage in behavior that improves collective status.

However, we expect that social self-affirmation only increases the willingness to engage in collective mobility among highly identified group members. Previous research has consistently shown that high identifiers are more likely to work for collective mobility, while low identifiers are most likely to pursue personal status improvement through individual mobility (Doosje & Ellemers, 1997; Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1999; Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1999; Wright, 2001b). For low identifiers we predict that, although social self-affirmation conveys positive information about the ingroup, it also poses a threat to their self-concept as social self-affirmation conveys that they are being seen as members of the low status group (Branscombe et al., 1999; Ellemers et al., 2002). As a result, we predict that low identified group members who are treated as group members rather than individuals because they only receive information about group performance, are even more likely to emphasize their individuality by pursuing individual mobility than they would be after personal self-affirmation.

In order to examine group members’ inclination to invest in improving the status of the entire group vs. their own status, we were specifically interested in their willingness to engage in behavior that either promotes or undermines higher status for the whole group. Therefore, in addition to measuring readiness to engage in behavior that benefits the status of the entire group, the measure we used to assess the use of individual mobility strategies was specifically designed to imply that any efforts to improve individual outcomes would simultaneously undermine the opportunities for other group members. For example, we asked participants whether they would be willing to act in a less feminine way in order to improve their
chances within an organization, a personal-level strategy that perpetuates the
general idea that job success is not compatible with being feminine.

Method
Participants
Participants were 111 female students from Leiden University ($M_{\text{age}} = 20,$
$SD = 4.15$) who voluntarily participated in the experiment in exchange of 4.5 euros.

Procedure
Apart from the dependent measures, the experimental procedure was
identical to Experiment 1. Again, we measured group identification (seven items, $\alpha =
.85$) as well as self-typicality (three items, $\alpha = .82$) and manipulated personal versus
social self-affirmation. This manipulation was again checked by asking participants
about their personal ability and the ability of women and men in general on the self-
affirming dimension.

Measures
All measures were assessed on nine-point scales. Interest in collective
mobility was measured with three items ($\alpha = .60$, ‘I think it is important that women
support each other while striving for a high position on the labor market’, ‘Women
have the highest chance of gaining equal status to men on the labor market, when
they contest these status differences together’, and ‘I am not that interested in the
position of women in general on the labor market’ [reverse coded]). Interest in
(ingroup-undermining) individual mobility was measured by assessing whether
women were willing to disidentify from their group in order to increase personal
status (two items, $r = .30$, ‘I would be willing to act in a less feminine way if that
would improve my chances within an organization’, and ‘I am willing to work in an
organization that devalues women compared to men, as long as I’m not personally
affected by it’).

Results
Manipulation checks
Again, the manipulation of self-affirmation type successfully influenced
how participants perceived their personal ability as well as the ingroup’s and
outgroup’s ability on the self-affirming dimension. Higher personal ability on the
self-affirming dimension was perceived in the personal self-affirmation condition ($M
= 6.95$, $SD = 1.19$) than in the social self-affirmation condition ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 1.41$;
$B = -1.04$, $SE = .25$, $F[1,108] = 17.22$, $p < .001$, semi-partial $r^2 = .14$). Additionally, in
the social self-affirmation condition participants perceived a larger ability gap between the ingroup and the outgroup in the self-affirming domain ($M_{ingroup} = 7.15$, $SD = 1.18$; $M_{outgroup} = 3.34$, $SD = 1.31$), than in the personal self-affirmation condition ($M_{ingroup} = 5.59$, $SD = 1.36$; $M_{outgroup} = 5.24$, $SD = 1.19$; $B = 3.44$, $SE = .42$, $F[1,108] = 68.26$, $p < .001$, semi-partial $r^2 = .38$). This main effect was qualified by an interaction with group identification ($B = 1.13$, $SE = .41$, $F[1,107] = 7.70$, $p = .007$, semi-partial $r^2 = .04$). Simple slope analyses revealed that in the social self-affirmation condition highly identified women emphasized the gender difference in ability on the self-affirming dimension even more than did less identified women ($B = .67$, $t[107] = 2.30$, $p = .02$). No such effect was found in the personal self-affirmation condition ($B = -.46$, $t[107] = -1.59$, $p = .11$).

**Willingness to engage in individual and collective mobility**

As anticipated, high identifiers were generally more willing to engage in collective mobility than were low identifiers ($B = .62$, $SE = .12$, $F[1,108] = 26.20$, $p < .001$, semi-partial $r^2 = .19$). This main effect was qualified by the predicted interaction between group identification and self-affirmation type ($B = .51$, $SE = .24$, $F[1,107] = 4.56$, $p = .04$, semi-partial $r^2 = .03$, see Figure 4.4). Whereas high identifiers were more willing to engage in collective mobility when their social self had been affirmed than when their personal self had been affirmed ($B = -.85$, $t[107] = 2.53$, $p = .02$), low identifiers were equally willing to engage in collective mobility irrespective of type of self-affirmation ($B = -.17$, $t[107] = -.50$, ns). As a result, although high identifiers were more interested in collective mobility than low identifiers, this effect was more pronounced after social self-affirmation ($B = .87$, $t[107] = 5.17$, $p < .001$) than after personal self-affirmation ($B = .37$, $t[107] = 2.19$, $p = .05$). This is in line with our prediction.

Similar effects were found for the willingness to engage in (ingroup-undermining) individual mobility strategies. As anticipated, overall, low identifiers were more willing to engage in ingroup-undermining individual mobility than were high identifiers ($B = -.31$, $SE = .15$, $F[1,108] = 3.94$, $p = .05$, semi-partial $r^2 = .04$). In addition, the predicted interaction between self-affirmation and group identification was significant ($B = -.60$, $SE = .31$, $F[1,107] = 3.89$, $p = .05$, semi-partial $r^2 = .03$, see Figure 4.5). Simple slope analyses for the personal and social self-affirmation conditions revealed that low identifiers were more inclined to pursue ingroup-undermining individual mobility strategies than were high identifiers when they
Personal vs. social self-affirmation

Figure 4.4. - Interest in collective mobility in the personal and social self-affirmation conditions for participants with low (-1 SD) and high group identification (+1 SD) in Experiment 2.

Figure 4.5. - Interest in individual mobility in the personal and social self-affirmation conditions for participants with low (-1 SD) and high group identification (+1 SD) in Experiment 2.

were categorized as group members (social self-affirmation, $B = -.61, t[107] = -2.82, p < 0.01$), but this was not the case when they were affirmed as individuals (personal self-affirmation, $B = -.01, ns$). As a result, whereas high identifiers reported a similar reluctance to engage in ingroup-undermining individual mobility irrespective of self-affirmation type ($B = -.45, t[107] = -1.05, ns$), low identifiers tended to be more willing to pursue upward mobility that potentially undermined the ingroup when
the self-affirmation manipulation addressed them as group members (social self-affirmation) rather than individuals (personal self-affirmation, $B = .75, t_{[107]} = 1.74, p = .08$).

*Does self-typicality explain the effects of group identification?*

Although self-typicality was again significantly correlated with group identification ($r = .50, p < .001$), as in Experiment 1 it did not predict any of the dependent measures, and could not account for any of the effects of group identification reported above.

**Discussion**

Experiment 1 revealed that both personal and social self-affirmation can serve to bolster devalued group members’ self-improvement motivation on status-defining dimensions. Experiment 2 extends these results in an important way: Although both personal and social self-affirmation enhance performance motivation, the way in which stigmatized group members aim to increase their outcomes is very different. The results confirm that, although overall highly identified group members are more likely than less identified group members to pursue collective mobility, affirming their personal identity instead of their social identity reduces their interest in helping the ingroup to improve its status. By contrast, social self-affirmation allows highly identified members of low status groups to pursue performance improvement on status-defining dimensions (Experiment 1) while simultaneously remaining concerned with the welfare of the group to which they belong. Conversely, among low identified group members interest in collective mobility was low to begin with and this was not affected by the type of self-affirmation received. Self-affirmation type did affect the degree to which they were interested in pursuing individual mobility that would simultaneously undermine the ingroup. That is, whereas low identifiers were already more inclined to pursue self-improvement through individual mobility than were high identifiers, imposing on them the unwanted categorization as a low status group member without offering them feedback about their personal performance (social self-affirmation) exacerbated this effect. This is consistent with the idea that group members who do not feel strongly identified with the group can perceive social self-affirmation as implying a categorization threat (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003; Branscombe et al., 1999; Ellemers et al., 2002). Because low identifiers prefer to be seen as individuals rather than being categorized as group members, they show
reactance to group-based treatment by pursuing individual mobility strategies that undermine opportunities for the ingroup to reach higher outcomes.

Experiment 1 and 2 confirmed our general hypothesis that social self-affirmation operates on a different identity level than personal self-affirmation and therefore differentially affects the willingness to engage in behavior that promotes rather than undermines collective mobility. Experiment 3 was designed to more closely examine the underlying process by which self-affirmation increases self-improvement motivation among members of a low status group. Moreover, both Experiments 1 and 2 focused on women as members of a devalued group. Experiment 3 examined whether these processes can also be observed in a different intergroup context, namely Dutch versus Belgian students and their position on the European labor market.

**Experiment 3**

In Experiment 3, we set out to identify the psychological process that explains why self-affirmation leads to higher motivation on status-defining dimensions among members of a group that is devalued. Challenge appraisals were examined as the key variable to explain why, after self-affirmation, members of devalued groups become increasingly motivated to improve performance on a dimension on which their group is negatively stereotyped (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Challenge and threat have often been conceptualized and measured as two sides of the same coin. In performance situations, people are said to estimate the ratio between situational demands and personal coping resources, with either negative threat (higher demands than resources) or positive challenge (lower demands than resources) resulting from this appraisal. We expect, however, that challenge and threat are distinct psychological constructs and that challenge is more predictive of self-improvement motivation than threat is (Kuiper, McKenzie, & Belanger, 1995). Indeed, in previous research (Derks et al., in press, Experiment 3, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation) threat reported by low status group members proved to be unrelated to the motivation they displayed on a status-defining dimension. We argue that whereas the absence of threat will not necessarily be a source of motivation to improve performance on a status-defining dimension, perceiving the performance situation as a positive challenge can set people in motion to improve performance. Accordingly, research on regulatory focus (Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997) shows that threat-related emotions, such as agitation and nervousness, are in line with a prevention goal
orientation by which people are concerned with avoiding failure and approaching non-failure. On the other hand, challenge-related emotions, such as cheerfulness and enthusiasm, denote a promotion goal orientation by which people focus on achievement and success. In Experiment 3 we therefore measure the degree to which participants feel challenged and threatened on a status-defining dimension after self-affirmation. We hypothesize that after failing on a status-defining dimension, members of devalued groups feel threatened. However, after affirming a relevant part of their identity, we predict that devalued group members come to perceive an upcoming status-defining task primarily as a challenge. Moreover, we expect that highly identified group members will feel equally challenged after both personal and social self-affirmation, but that less identified group members will feel challenged after personal self-affirmation, but less so after social self-affirmation. Finally, we examined whether challenge indeed mediates the effects of self-affirmation and group identification on devalued group members’ self-improvement motivation.

**Method**

*Participants*

Participants were 115 students from Leiden University (85 women, $M_{age} = 20$, $SD = 1.82$) who voluntarily participated in the experiment and were paid 4.5 euros.  

*Procedure*

First, participants performed the holistic decomposition test (the same as in Experiments 1 and 2) that would later serve as the self-affirming dimension. Then, participants were informed that the goal of the study was to measure differences between Dutch and Belgian students on a cognitive ability called ‘inferential flexibility’. We created an intergroup context by informing participants that we were examining whether differences in the Dutch and Belgian educational system also caused differences in cognitive skills. Participants (who all confirmed that they had been educated in the Netherlands) answered a number of detailed questions about their educational background (types of schools, etc.). Then they were asked to take the inferential flexibility test (the same as used in the two previous experiments), which served as the status-defining dimension.

*Induction of low group status:* After taking the test, participants were informed that research had shown that Dutch students have lower status on the European labor market compared to Belgian students, which was (supposedly)
caused by a lower quality school system in the Netherlands compared to Belgium. Then, participants received both personal and group feedback about performance on the inferential flexibility test indicating that they personally and Dutch students in general had performed worse than Belgian students in the domain of inferential flexibility. To create an anticipated second achievement situation, participants were informed that the inferential flexibility test (the status-defining dimension) would be administered for a second time at the end of the study.

Group identification: Group identification was measured with six items (e.g., ‘I feel strongly connected to other Dutch people’, $\alpha = .90$). Self typicality was measured with three items (e.g., ‘I resemble other Dutch people’, $\alpha = .91$).

Self-affirmation manipulation: Similar to Experiments 1 and 2, participants received information about either personal or group performance on the holistic decomposition test.

After completing the dependent variables, participants were informed that there would not be a second measurement of inferential flexibility. Participants were debriefed, thanked and paid for their participation.

Measures

All measures were assessed on nine-point scales. Threat ($\alpha = .84$) was assessed by combining the cognitive appraisal of threat (‘I appraise the second inferential flexibility test as a threat’) and emotions that indicate threat (anxious, nervous, frightful) when thinking about the upcoming test. Challenge ($\alpha = .80$) was assessed with challenge appraisal (‘I appraise the second inferential flexibility test as a positive challenge’), as well as emotions indicating challenge (enthusiastic, happy, glad). Finally, motivation on the status-defining dimension was measured with one item (i.e., ‘I plan to do my best on the inferential flexibility test’).

Results

Manipulation checks

Again, the manipulation of self-affirmation type successfully affected the perceived personal ability, as well as the ability of the ingroup and the outgroup on the self-affirming dimension. Reported personal ability on the alternative dimension was higher after personal self-affirmation ($M = 6.63, SD = .64$) than after social self-affirmation ($M = 4.48, SD = 1.69; B = -2.15, SE = .17, F[1,112] = 81.60, p < .001$, semi-partial $r^2 = .42$). Similarly, self-affirmation type affected the gap in perceived ability of each group on the self-affirming dimension ($B = 4.91, SE = .45, F[1,112] = 119.72, p < .001$, semi-partial $r^2 = .52$). In the social self-affirmation condition the ingroup
was indeed perceived as having higher ability than the outgroup \( (M_{\text{ingroup}} = 6.93, SD = 1.19; M_{\text{outgroup}} = 3.11, SD = 1.40) \). In the personal self-affirmation condition where participants had not received information about the ability of the ingroup and outgroup, the outgroup was perceived to have higher ability on the self-affirming dimension than the ingroup \( (M_{\text{ingroup}} = 4.64, SD = 1.41; M_{\text{outgroup}} = 5.73, SD = 1.19) \).

**Threat and challenge**

The degree to which participants perceived the testing situation as a threat was higher in the social self-affirmation condition than in the personal self-affirmation condition \( (B = .55, SE = .28, F[1,112] = 3.93, p = .05, \text{semi-partial } r^2 = .03) \). This main effect was qualified, however, by a significant interaction \( (B = -.72, SE = .27, F[1,111] = 6.92, p = .01, \text{semi-partial } r^2 = .06, \text{see Figure 4.6}) \). Among highly identified group members threat was similar in the personal and social self-affirmation condition \( (B = -.17, t[111] = -.44, \text{ns}) \). However, among low identified group members, threat was lower in the personal self-affirmation condition than in the social self-affirmation condition \( (B = 1.27, t[111] = 3.30, p = .01) \). Thus, in the face of having to perform on the status-defining dimension, highly identified group members felt equally threatened regardless of whether their social identity or their personal identity was affirmed. The threat experienced by low identified group members, however, was only relieved by personal self-affirmation, but not by social self-affirmation.

The degree to which participants perceived the testing situation as a challenge was explained by a significant interaction between self-affirmation and group identification only \( (B = .68, SE = .24, F[1,111] = 7.73, p = .01, \text{semi-partial } r^2 = .06, \text{see Figure 4.7}) \). As in the case of threat, highly identified group members felt equally challenged in the personal self-affirmation condition as in the social self-affirmation condition \( (B = .29, t[111] = .85, \text{ns}) \). However, low identifiers felt less challenged after social self-affirmation than after personal self-affirmation \( (B = -1.07, t[111] = -3.11, p = .01) \).

**Motivation on the status-defining dimension**

The main effects of group identification \( (B = .26, SE = .15, F[1,112] = 3.00, p = .09, \text{semi-partial } r^2 = .03) \) and self-affirmation type \( (B = -.54, SE = .30, F[1,112] = 3.35, p = .07, \text{semi-partial } r^2 = .03) \) on performance motivation approached significance. More importantly, however, the predicted interaction was statistically reliable \( (B = .81, SE = .29, F[1,111] = 7.86, p = .006, \text{semi-partial } r^2 = .06, \text{see Figure 4.8}) \). This interaction replicated the results on self-improvement motivation found in Experiment 1. Low identifiers were more motivated to do well on the status-
defining dimension in the personal self-affirmation condition than in the social self-affirmation condition (\(B = -1.35, t[111] = -3.27, p = .01\)). High identifiers, however, were equally motivated on the status-defining dimension in the social self-affirmation condition as in the personal self-affirmation condition (\(B = .27, t[111] = 65, ns\)). As a result, whereas affirming personal identity was motivating to low and high identifiers alike (\(B = -.10, t[111] = -.50, ns\)), affirming social identity was more clearly motivating for high identifiers than it was for low identifiers (\(B = .71, SE = .24, t[111] = 2.68, p < .01\)).

![Figure 4.6](image1)

**Figure 4.6.** Threat in the personal and social self-affirmation conditions for participants with low (-1 SD) and high group identification (+1 SD) in Experiment 3.

![Figure 4.7](image2)

**Figure 4.7.** Challenge in the personal and social self-affirmation conditions for participants with low (-1 SD) and high group identification (+1 SD) in Experiment 3.
We examined whether self-improvement motivation was mediated by either threat or challenge. Following the procedures recommended by Muller, Judd and Yzerbyt (2005) to test for mediated moderation, we confirmed that the moderation of the effect of self-affirmation type on motivation by group identification was mediated by challenge, not threat (see Figure 4.9). Adding the regression effect of challenge on motivation ($B = .52, SE = .10, F(1,112) = 25.99, p < .001$, semi-partial $r^2 = .17$) significantly reduced the interaction effect between self-affirmation type and identification ($B = .46, SE = .27, p = .09$, semi-partial $r^2 = .02$, Sobel test $= 2.49, p = .01$). Additionally, as was the case in previous research (Derks et al., in press, Experiment 3, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation) motivation on the status-defining dimension was not mediated by threat, as indicated by the nonsignificant regression effect of threat on motivation ($B = -.12, SE = .10, F(1,110) = 1.37, ns$). Thus, as hypothesized, high identifiers were motivated by both personal and social self-affirmation because both types of self-affirmation made them appraise the situation as a challenge. However, the reason that among low identifiers only personal self-affirmation increased self-improvement motivation was that only this individual-level feedback increased challenge appraisals whereas social self-affirmation did not.
Does self-typicality explain the effects of group identification?

Although group identification and self-typicality were again significantly correlated \((r = .69, p < .001)\), self-typicality could not account for any of the effects of group identification reported above. Regression analyses in which group identification was replaced by self-typicality revealed similar effects of self-typicality as were found for group identification on threat appraisals and challenge appraisals. However, when group identification and self-typicality were entered simultaneously, self-typicality could not account for any of the moderating effects of group identification, which remained significant even after self-typicality was entered into the regression equation.

Discussion

Experiment 3 successfully replicated the effects of personal and social self-affirmation on the self-improvement motivation of members of a devalued group found in Experiment 1. Experiment 3 additionally extended the results of Experiment 1 by replicating these findings in a different intergroup context. Whereas Experiment 1 and 2 examined a group with chronic low status, namely women for whom low gender status was salient, Experiment 3 extended these effects to a more incidentally devalued group and less chronically salient context, namely Dutch students who were accorded low status compared to Belgian students on the European labor market. Again, personal self-affirmation benefited the self-improvement motivation of low and high identifiers alike. However, as predicted,
social self-affirmation again only led to increased motivation among participants who reported to be highly identified with their group.

Most importantly, the results of Experiment 3 provide further insight into the *psychological process* that explains why self-affirmation among members of devalued groups helps to increase performance motivation on status-defining dimensions. Affirming a relevant part of the self-concept of devalued group members (that is, personal identity for low identifiers and either personal or social identity for high identifiers), leads them to perceive upcoming tasks related to the status-defining dimension as a *challenge*. It is this perception of challenge that explains the higher motivation on the status-defining dimension. Furthermore, although both perceptions of threat and challenge were significantly affected by the interaction between self-affirmation type and group identification, only challenge appraisals could account for increased motivation on the status-defining dimension. This finding confirms the notion that although perceptions of threat and challenge might appear to be two sides of the same coin, their ability to predict performance motivation is very different. Whereas threat is a negative state, relief of this state in itself does not enhance motivation. It is the perception of challenge that has the potential to motivate individuals to move towards their goals.

**General Discussion**

The three studies reported in this chapter provide consistent support for our theoretical argument that personal and social self-affirmation differentially affect the self-improvement motivation of members of a devalued group on status-relevant dimensions. First, all three experiments consistently show that social self-affirmation relies on a different level of the self, namely social identity instead of personal identity. This is evidenced by the finding that whereas personal self-affirmation increases the cognitive salience of the individual self, social self-affirmation increases the cognitive salience of the collective self. Furthermore, the positive effects of social self-affirmation on well-being and performance motivation only occur among group members who think of their group membership as relevant to their overall self-concept. Additionally, by controlling for the degree to which group members feel they personally resemble their ingroup (self-typicality) we were able to establish that this is the case because of the emotional significance of group membership, not because high identifiers see favorable group characteristics as more descriptive of the individual self. Previous work on social identification (Ellemers et al., 1999; Kashima et al., 2000) has distinguished between different components of
Personal vs. social self-affirmation

this overarching construct, namely 1) emotional attachment and commitment to the group, versus 2) the degree to which group members cognitively perceive themselves as typical of their group. These separate aspects of the relationship between the self and the group have been demonstrated to be related to different outcomes. Our results converge with these previous findings as they consistently show that it is indeed the emotional attachment to the group rather than the degree to which group members see themselves as similar to other group members, which determines whether or not social self-affirmation operates as a source of performance motivation. The distinction we made between affective identification and self-typicality thus allows us to refute an alternative explanation, namely that social self-affirmation improves performance motivation among highly identified group members merely because for them group-level feedback provides a reliable estimate of their personal performance (and therefore improves their personal identity).

Second, Experiment 2 revealed that although personal and social self-affirmation at first sight may seem equally effective in improving well-being and motivation in status-defining domains, they differentially affect how group members strive to achieve higher status (individually vs. collectively). Providing highly identified group members with an opportunity to affirm their social identity increases their motivation to improve their personal outcomes as well as their willingness to engage in behavior that improves the position of the group as a whole. By contrast, when highly identified group members receive an opportunity to affirm their personal identity, their willingness to improve their group’s status declines. This finding is important because although individual upward mobility is often seen as providing the royal road towards achieving more large scale equal opportunities and social change, there is ample reason to believe this is not the case. Often upward mobility is highly restricted by tokenism, which means that the boundaries between the groups are not entirely closed but that upward mobility is allowed to only a small minority of members of the disadvantaged group (Wright, 2001a). When only a few stigmatized group members (‘tokens’) achieve higher status, this serves to legitimize the overall status difference because the successful individuals signal that members of all groups receive equal opportunities, while in fact this is not the case as their numbers remain quite small. As a result, individuals who do not succeed in advancing in the social hierarchy are more likely to conclude that they owe their low status to themselves. Additionally, because individual mobility most likely only improves the status of highly talented members of the devalued group (Boen &
Vanbeselaere, 2001; Ellemers, Van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1990) it drains the group’s potential to strive for collective action, as collective action is often set in motion by gifted group leaders who empower and incite the group towards collective protest (Watson, Chemers, & Preiser, 2001). Moreover, when group members pursue individual mobility, this undermines the tendency of other group members to participate in collective action as they base this decision partly on whether they expect others to support and join them in doing so (Van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004). This is not to say that it is not important for individual group members to strive for high performance in status-defining domains. However, we merely want to note that when individual group members do reach positions of power, it does not necessarily follow that this will improve the position of other group members as well. To achieve more widespread social change it is crucial that individual group members explicitly work to achieve higher status for the group. When successful upwardly mobile members of stigmatized groups (ethnic minorities, women) remain concerned with the welfare of their group, they are more likely to serve as role models for other members of their group, they are less inclined to undermine collective action tendencies within their group and they will less likely be seen as the exception that proves the rule that other members of the stigmatized group are not entitled to receive better outcomes. In sum, among highly identified group members, social self-affirmation improves the chances that group members will remain concerned with their group while being individually successful.

The results presented here thus reveal the social costs of addressing the plight of social groups by focusing on the individual self (Ambady, Paik, Steele, Owen Smith, & Mitchell, 2004; Martens, Johns, Greenberg, & Schimel, 2006) or on other social identities than the one that is threatened (Gresky, Ten Eyck, Lord, & McIntyre, 2005; Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999). In order to change the current status differences between groups, it is important that low status group members remain attached to their group membership, improving the chances that they will engage in efforts to improve the outcomes for their entire group and not only for themselves.

**Social self-affirmation and categorization threat**

Although for highly identified group members social self-affirmation has advantages over personal self-affirmation, among less highly identified group members social self-affirmation actually increases behavior that potentially damages
the ingroup. Low identifiers are generally more inclined (compared to high identifiers) to endorse individual rather than collective mobility beliefs (Doosje et al., 1999; Spears et al., 1999). Additionally, the present research revealed that treating them as group members (social self-affirmation) rather than as individuals (personal self-affirmation) even increased their tendency to engage in ingroup-undermining individual mobility. This pattern suggests that for low identifiers social self-affirmation poses a categorization threat (Branscombe et al., 1999; Ellemers et al., 2002). Barreto and Ellemers (2003) distinguish between internal categorizations (how people see themselves) and external categorizations (how people are seen by others) and show that people are unwilling to work for a group in which they are categorized by others against their will. Moreover, neglecting an important part of an individual’s identity while imposing an unwanted categorization leads individuals to emphasize the neglected identity (Barreto & Ellemers, in press). Accordingly, in the case of the low identified participants in the experiments presented here, being treated as a member of a group to which they did not want to belong not only led them to feel less challenged and motivated on the status-defining dimension, it also fostered their inclination to engage in ingroup-undermining individual mobility.

The question that arises then is how beneficial social self-affirmation actually is if it sparks interest in collective mobility among some group members while simultaneously amplifying interest in ingroup-undermining upward mobility among others. We think, however, that in the real world members of devalued groups are likely to search for self-affirmation when their identity is under threat and that personal or social self-affirmation is less likely to be imposed upon them (as was the case in the experiments presented here). Real intergroup settings can offer both clues that affirm personal identity as well as clues that improve social identity, so that each group member should be able to find the type of information that best serves their own needs. Whereas low identifiers are then more likely to search for personal self-affirmation, we would expect high identifiers to search for both. The important message that this research offers is that when the goal is to improve collective mobility among highly identified members of low status groups, their search for social self-affirmation should yield possibilities to affirm their social identity so that they do not have to resort to personal self-affirmation instead. Indeed, contexts that emphasize positive characteristics of low status groups and communicate respect for these groups, allow members of low status groups to become challenged to reach their optimal potential without having to disidentify from their group. This is also important because encouraging group members to
neglect an identity that is important to them has been shown to lead to negative outcomes both for the individual (reduced health and psychological well-being, Barreto & Ellemers, in press; Berry, 1997) as well as for society (intergroup differentiation and conflict, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Validzic, 1998; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999).

**Challenge versus threat**

The third important contribution of the research reported here is that it identifies the underlying process that explains why identity affirmation enables devalued group members to increase motivation on status-defining dimensions. When members of a devalued group affirm an important identity (i.e., personal identity for low identifiers and personal or social identity for high identifiers), this helps them to perceive an upcoming performance situation in which they are to perform in a domain in which their group is negatively stereotyped, as a challenge. This challenge appraisal, in turn, motivates them to try to increase performance on a dimension on which they previously failed and on which their group is negatively stereotyped. By contrast, Experiment 3 showed that the degree to which participants reported to be threatened did not predict their motivation on the status-defining dimension. Thus although threat and challenge are often conceptualized as two extremes of the same psychological continuum (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), in this study self-report measures of the two concepts were differentially related to performance motivation.

We believe that the finding that challenge appraisals mediate the motivation of members of socially devalued groups offers a complementary route to social equality between low and high status groups in society (women and men, ethnic minorities and majorities, etc.). In essence, self-affirmation allows members of devalued groups to reappraise the obstacles that their group membership poses as challenges instead of threats, encouraging them to strive for their full potential on status-defining dimensions. This is important because it shows that, whether or not identity threat lowers motivation among devalued group members, improving perceptions of resources to cope with this threat by affirming and boosting identity allows devalued group members to experience the challenge that helps them to confront social inequality and work towards status improvement. While it has proved to be difficult to remove the chronic threats that low status groups face in society (e.g., reducing negative stereotypes and discrimination), our results emphasize the important part that devalued group members can play themselves in
the process towards social equality when they are challenged. By offering members of socially devalued groups enough opportunities to affirm the value and worth of their group membership, they can become challenged to overcome the negative stereotypes that they are confronted with, and will strive for social change.

**Conclusions**

In three experiments we showed that, among members of pre-existing devalued groups, personal and social forms of self-affirmation in an unrelated domain can improve well-being and performance motivation on dimensions that define status in a social hierarchy. Moreover, we established that among group members who feel highly identified with the devalued group, social self-affirmation improves interest in group-serving behaviors that are aimed at improving status as a group. The results highlight the important benefits of enabling highly identified members of low status groups to feel good about their group. That is, social self-affirmation not only allows members of devalued groups to personally reach optimal performance on the dimensions that define status in society, but also increases the chances that group members will collectively fight social inequality.
Footnotes

1 This chapter is based on Derks, Van Laar & Ellemers, 2006b.

2 The number of degrees of freedom in this analysis is lower, because three participants failed to complete this measure.

3 The main effect of self-affirmation approached significance ($B = -.82$, $SE = .48$, $F[1,104] = 2.95$, $p = .09$, semi-partial $r^2 = .03$), indicating a tendency for personal self-affirmation to lead to higher self-improvement behavior than social self-affirmation.

4 Originally 116 individuals participated but one was excluded from data analysis because his answers to positively and negatively framed questions revealed that he did not answer the questions seriously. Including this participant does not substantially change the results.

5 We argue this is a credible manipulation because a commonly held stereotype among Dutch students is that studying at Belgian universities is much more difficult than studying at Dutch universities is, because, compared to the Dutch university system, the Belgian university system is perceived as more strict and is more focused on specific and detailed knowledge of course materials.
Personal vs. social self-affirmation