

Daily Coping with Social Identity Threat in Outgroup-Dominated Contexts:
Self-Group Distancing among Female Soldiers

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Abstract

We examine the degree to which women in a male-dominated field cope with daily experiences of social identity-threat by distancing themselves from other women. A daily experience-sampling study among female soldiers ($N = 345$ data points nested in 61 participants) showed women to self-group distance more on days in which they experienced more identity-threat. This was mediated by daily concerns about belonging but not achievement in the military, supporting the explanation that women distance from other women as a way to fit in a masculine domain. However, on a daily basis self-group distancing did not appear to protect women's outcomes as it was related to lower daily well-being and motivation. The findings indicate that targets are not passive recipients of identity-threat but active agents coping daily with the challenges they face, but that regulation strategies may also incur costs. Implications for theories on coping with stigma and costs are discussed.

Keywords: Belonging, Experience-sampling methodology, Social identity threat, Self-group distancing, Well-being

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Daily Coping with Social Identity Threat in Outgroup-Dominated Settings:

Self-Group Distancing among Female Soldiers

Social identity threat is the psychological experience of people coming to suspect that they are valued less in a context because of their social identity (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). People can experience this concern in contexts where their social group is underrepresented or negatively stereotyped, or where outgroup domains are strongly valued (Van Laar, Derks, Ellemers, & Bleeker, 2010; Van Laar, Meeussen, Veldman, Van Grootel, Sterk, & Jacobs, 2019). Considerable research has established that identity threat can negatively affect targets' well-being (Hall, Schmader, & Croft, 2015; Pascoe & Richman, 2009), motivation (Cheryan, Plaut, Davies, & Steele, 2009; Smith, Sansone, & White, 2007; Steele & Ambady, 2006), and performance (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000; Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008). Simultaneously, research increasingly shows targets not to be passive recipients of identity threat, but to also show resilience and actively cope with the challenges they face (Barreto, 2014; De Lemus, Spears, Bukowski, Moya, & Lupiáñez, 2013; Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2016; Shelton, Alegre, & Son, 2010; Van Breen, Spears, Kuppens, & De Lemus, 2018). Although now recognized in the literature, researchers are only just beginning to understand how these coping processes work.

A coping strategy that targets facing identity threat in outgroup-dominated domains use is distancing themselves from the ingroup psychologically or physically (Bergsieker, Wilmot, Cyr, & Grey, 2020; Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998; Cohen & Garcia, 2005; Derks et al., 2016; Ellemers, Van Knippenberg, De Vries, & Wilke, 1988; Shih, Young, & Bucher, 2013). Such self-group distancing can consist of emphasizing dissimilarities with ingroup members, expressing negative views of the ingroup, or trying to conceal the devalued identity (Becker & Tausch, 2014; Derks, Van Laar, Ellemers, & De Groot, 2011; Derks, Van Laar, Ellemers, & Raghoe, 2015; Ellemers & Van Laar, 2010; Pronin, Steele, & Ross, 2004). Thus,

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self-group distancing responses can take different forms, but these responses all revolve around distancing the self from a stigmatized identity at a cognitive, affective, or behavioral level. From a social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), self-group distancing is an individual mobility strategy to cope with a threatened identity. Previous work has demonstrated that minority members, such as upwardly mobile women and ethnic minorities, show self-group distancing when reporting having experienced bias in the past (e.g., Derks, Ellemers, Van Laar, & De Groot, 2011), in response to reminders of bias (e.g., Derks, Van Laar, et al., 2011; Derks et al., 2015), and in response to salient negative stereotypes and other threatening cues (e.g., Cohen & Garcia, 2005; Kaiser & Spalding, 2015; Pronin et al., 2004).

The present research aimed to gain a deeper understanding of self-group distancing as a coping strategy by examining (a) which concerns evoked by identity threat trigger self-group distancing as a regulation response, and (b) whether self-group distancing can protect individuals' outcomes. These research questions were examined in a sample of female soldiers using daily experience-sampling methodology, enabling the examination of day-to-day coping with experiences of identity threat in a naturalistic setting.

Which concerns drive self-group distancing?

Identity threat can compass two broad concerns, namely a threat to achievement and a threat to belonging in a domain (Steele et al., 2002). So, when people experience identity threat they can become concerned about whether they are competent enough in their domain and whether they fit in (Barreto, 2014; Hall et al., 2015). The present study examined the role of both achievement and belonging concerns in self-group distancing. Although research has shown self-group distancing in response to identity threat, this work has not yet provided evidence as to the underlying concerns that drive targets' self-group distancing. There has, however, been speculation about these drivers, particularly regarding women's self-group distancing (also called 'queen bee' behavior; Derks et al., 2016).

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One explanation often provided for self-group distancing among women is that it is driven by instrumental individual upward mobility concerns in the organization (see Derks et al., 2016, for a discussion). From this perspective, concerns about their competence and about being successful in their field would lead women to distance from the devalued ingroup as a way of reducing the threat and protecting their achievement potential in the outgroup-dominated domain. Whereas these achievement concerns have received more attention (see Ellemers, Rink, Derks, & Ryan, 2012, for a discussion), a recent review suggested that belonging concerns could play a role too (Derks et al., 2016). The authors suggested that women may show self-group distancing as a way of trying to fit in or assimilate into male-dominated organizations in which men are valued over women. From this perspective, women distance because they are concerned about not belonging in the outgroup-dominated domain. The present study puts this hypothesis to the test and examines both achievement and belonging concerns as potential inducers of self-group distancing after identity threat.

Can self-group distancing protect target's outcomes?

A second focus of the present research is to examine how self-group distancing in response to identity threat relates to targets' daily outcomes. From a social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), self-group distancing is an identity management strategy aimed at protecting individual-level outcomes under threat (Derks et al., 2016). To date, it remains unknown how self-group distancing affects these outcomes. Although self-group distancing may aim at protecting individual mobility and in the long run may also be helpful to this end (as for example indirectly evidenced by research showing self-group distancing among women in senior leadership positions; Derks et al., 2016), there are reasons to suspect that it may incur costs as well. First, the ingroup is an important source of support (Correll & Park, 2005; Gaines, 2001; Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, & Penna, 2005; Leach, Rodriguez, Mosquera, Vliek, & Hirt, 2010; Van Laar, Bleeker, Ellemers, & Meijer, 2014) and

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ingroup members can provide a buffer for identity threat (Levin, Van Laar, & Foote, 2006; Richman, Vandellen, & Wood, 2011; Rosenthal, Levy, London, Lobel, & Bazile, 2013). The supportive psychological effects of the ingroup are lost when one distances the self from this group (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Haslam et al., 2005; see also research on the “social cure”, Haslam, Jetten, Cruwys, Dingle, & Haslam, 2018). Additionally, related research on concealable stigmatized identities (e.g., sexual orientation, mental health issues) has shown that although people believe that others may view them more favorably when they conceal their stigmatized identity (Newheiser, & Barreto, 2014), concealment has negative individual-level consequences such as lower performance-related self-confidence (Barreto, Ellemers, & Banal, 2006), authenticity feelings, and work engagement (Newheiser, Barreto, & Tiemersma, 2017). The present research examines whether this may not only be the case for concealing a concealable stigmatized identities, but also for self-group distancing among stigmatized groups more generally. Thus, although targets may use self-group distancing as an identity management strategy to protect individual mobility, it may not necessarily be able to protect individuals’ daily outcomes. This will be examined in the present study by focusing on daily well-being and work motivation.

The present research

These research questions were examined in a sample of female soldiers. Women remain underrepresented and negatively stereotyped in the military, and masculine characteristics are strongly valued (Biernat, Crandall, Young, Kobrynowicz, & Halpin, 1998; Boldry, Wood, & Kashy, 2001). Daily experience-sampling methodology was employed in this context, enabling examination of self-group distancing on a day-to-day basis in response to identity threat. This methodology is less compromised by recall distortions than cross-sectional surveys and gives insight into social behavior embedded in its natural context (London, Rosenthal, & Gonzalez, 2011; Reis & Gable, 2000). It looks beyond people’s

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general tendencies and captures the short-term dynamics of experiences within individuals (Ohly, Sonnentag, Niessen, & Zapf, 2010). Previous experimental work has shown that certain contexts lead to more self-group distancing, for example when negative stereotypes are salient (Derks et al., 2015) or when group boundaries are perceived to be permeable (Ellemers et al., 1988). Previous cross-sectional work has shown that individual tendencies such as a low identification with the ingroup can make people more susceptible to distance from the ingroup in general, and that people can develop general self-group distancing tendencies over time because of their experiences (e.g., with bias; Derks et al., 2016).

However, we propose that this behavior may also fluctuate within individuals on a daily basis with situational experiences, and experience-sampling methodology is able to capture this.

Previous research showed that identity threat indeed fluctuates on a daily basis for women in male-dominated fields, for example in response to daily negative work interactions with male colleagues (Hall, Schmader, Aday, & Croft, 2019). Additionally, daily fluctuations of identity threat predicted women's day-level outcomes such as drop-out consideration, burn-out symptoms, and lower motivation and perceived performance in male-dominated fields (Hall et al., 2015, 2019; London, Rosenthal, Levy, & Lobel, 2011; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). However, research has not yet examined how individuals regulate threat on a daily basis by distancing themselves from the ingroup. This was the goal of the present research. We expected that daily identity threat predicts more daily self-group distancing. Additionally, we expected that this relationship is partly mediated by concerns about achievement and belonging in the military. Finally, the link between daily self-group distancing and day-level outcomes was examined.

Methods

Participants

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The sample consisted of 61 women in training at the Royal Military Academy to become officers ($M_{age} = 20.18$, $SD_{age} = 1.75$; see ‘Analytic strategy’ below for a discussion on power). Ninety-three percent indicated being Belgian; 25% (also) indicated other ethnicities, such as French, Italian, or Spanish. Only women who were at the academy on a daily basis during data collection – and hence had daily experiences in this context – were included in the sample.¹ Of the women meeting inclusion requirements, between 80% and 90% participated. Thus, the vast majority of women at the academy on a daily basis during data collection participated in this study.

Thirty-three percent of participants were in their first year at the Royal Military Academy, 25% in their second year, 30% in their third year, and 13% in their fourth year. Additionally, division of participants over the military components was as follows: 33% land component, 25% air component, 12% navy component, 3% medical component, and 28% unknown (mostly participants in their first year at the academy). The study was approved by the University’s Ethics Committee.

The military has strict selection procedures to be admitted to all their ranks, including the rank for officer. However, admission to the military does not take away achievement concerns. The students’ performance is assessed in four areas: academic (e.g., engineering), military, athletic, and personal development. There is a lot of pressure on the students to do well and they cannot continue with their education if their global performance is below a certain threshold. The statistic of close to 50% attrition (both voluntary and involuntary) during the training provides an indication of the amount of pressure that is still on students after their admission. Additionally, their global performance is used to rank order students, and all their professional choices depend on this rank order (such as their component [land, navy, air, medical], the type of unit they are placed in, and the location of their unit). Thus, in this context there is still a lot of pressure on students to perform well after their admission and

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hence there is no reason to suspect that there would be less achievement concerns in this context compared to other contexts.

Procedure

All female students at the Royal Military Academy were invited via their superiors to an information session where they received information on the study's goals and procedures. The study was introduced as examining the daily experiences of people belonging to groups that are newcomers in a particular field (first-generation students at university, men in communal fields, women in the military). Those interested in participating signed an informed consent form, after which they completed a background survey. Surveys could be completed in French (46%) or Dutch (54%; the two official languages at the academy).

For the next two weeks, participants received an invitation every other weekday (by email and text message) to complete an online survey on their experiences that day, resulting in six surveys in total (in line with recommendations to sample at least five daily surveys per person; Ohly et al., 2010). There was almost no attrition: across the six surveys, the compliance rates were between 90% and 95%. Fifty-one participants (84%) completed all six daily surveys, seven participants completed five surveys, one participant completed two surveys, and two participants completed one survey, resulting in 345 data points. After this two-week period, participants received an invitation for an end-survey (completed by 93% of participants) and debriefing. All participants were entered in a prize-draw to win one of ten coupons for an online-store.

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, items were answered on a 7-point scale from (1) *not at all* to (7) *very much*. Measures were scored such that higher scores indicated stronger scores on the concept. Below we describe the measures relevant to the present paper (see Supplementary File for a complete list of all the measures in this study).

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Identity threat. To assess daily experienced identity threat, participants were asked to what extent “did others in the military see you through the lens of stereotypes about women today?”, “did you feel uncomfortable today because you were seen as a woman in the military?”, and “did others in the military primarily judge you based on your gender today?” (α s ranged from .80 to .94 across the daily surveys). These items reflect the definition of identity threat as the subjective psychological experience of feeling valued less on the basis of a social identity. As outlined in the introduction, this concern can consist of feeling treated in a biased way, but can also arise in outgroup-dominated contexts where one feels judged on the basis of group membership or uncomfortable about being categorized as such more generally. Items were constructed based on past studies measuring identity threat (Hall et al., 2015; Shapiro & Neuberg, 2007).

Belonging concerns. Belonging concerns in the military that day was measured with three items (adjusted from the Institutional Belonging Scale; London, Rosenthal, Levy, et al., 2011; Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002), each with a different response scale. For each item, participants indicated a number between 1 (*Today I felt ... like I definitely fit in/like I belong/completely at home*) and 7 (*Today I did not feel... like I fit in at all/like I belong at all/at home at all*) that most closely represented how they felt that day (α s ranged from .90 to .94 across the daily surveys).

Achievement concerns. Similarly, a two-item scale assessed daily achievement concerns in the military (constructed from the ‘confidence in learning’ items from the Science Motivation Questionnaire; Glynn, Taasoobshirazi, & Brickman, 2009).² For both items, participants indicated a number between 1 (*Today I felt... very competent/like I could match the level of my colleagues*) and 7 (*Today I... did not feel competent at all/felt like I could not match the level of my colleagues at all*) most closely representing how they felt that day (r s

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ranged from .32 to .85 across the daily surveys, all $ps \leq .016$; for survey 2 $r = .32$, the 5 other surveys showed $rs \geq .55$). The presentation order of the concerns scales was counterbalanced.

Self-group distancing. As outlined in the introduction, self-group distancing can take different forms and take place on different levels (affective, cognitive, behavioral). What connects these responses is that they all revolve around an individual distancing from their ingroup. The present daily self-group distancing measure tapped into distancing from other women in the military (adapted from Becker & Tausch, 2014). Participants indicated on five items how they felt and behaved in the military that day. They were asked to what extent: “did you try anything to make sure that others would pay as little attention to your gender as possible?”, “did you avoid contact with other female soldiers as much as possible?”, “were you unhappy today about being a member of the group women in the military?”, “did you spend as little attention as possible to other female soldiers?”, and “did you try to show as little as possible that you are a woman?” (α s ranged from .62 to .91 across the daily surveys; survey 1 $\alpha = .62$, the 5 other surveys $\alpha \geq .84$).

Well-being. Daily well-being was assessed with 7 items adjusted from the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg & Williams, 1988), the most widely used measurement instrument in occupational health research (Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017). Participants indicated the extent to which today they felt constantly under pressure (R), were able to concentrate on things, felt able to make decisions, felt like a worthless person (R), felt that they could not control their difficulties (R), felt down (R), and had trust in themselves (α s ranged from .86 to .90 across the daily surveys).

Motivation. Two items assessed participants’ daily motivation: “How motivated did you feel for your studies today?” and “How much interest did you have in your studies today” (rs ranged from .69 to .94 across the daily surveys, all $ps < .001$). The presentation order of the well-being and motivation scales was counterbalanced.

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Control measures. Two control measures were assessed and added in secondary analyses to control for individual differences that may make participants more vulnerable to identity threat. First, secondary analyses included general *stigma consciousness* as a covariate to control for the possibility that a general tendency to be aware of gender as a source of negative evaluation could account for women's daily susceptibility to experience identity threat (as in Hall et al., 2015, 2019). Individual differences in general stigma consciousness were assessed in the end-survey using 4 items with high factor loadings from the stigma consciousness scale (Pinel, 1999). Participants indicated the degree to which they agreed with each of the following statements: "When interacting with men, I feel like they interpret all my behaviors in terms of the fact that I am a woman", "Most men do not judge women on the basis of their gender" (R), "My being female does not influence how people act with me" (R), and "Most men have a problem viewing women as equals" ($\alpha = .69$).

Second, secondary analyses controlled for individual differences in general *self-esteem* that may make participants more vulnerable for identity threat. General self-esteem was assessed in the end-survey with 4 items from the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (1979). Participants indicated the degree to which they agreed with each of the following statements: "I feel I do not have much to be proud of" (R), "I feel that I have a number of good qualities", "I wish I could have more respect for myself" (R), and "I am able to do things as well as most others" ($\alpha = .70$). Response options for both scales ranged from (1) *strongly disagree* to (7) *strongly agree*.

Finally, besides controlling for these two person-level measures to separate the day-to-day variation from general individual tendencies, additional secondary analyses were conducted including *daily general mood* as a day-level covariate to control for the possibility that daily fluctuation in general mood results in more positive or negative responding to all survey items (as in London et al., 2011). The hypothesized relationships should not be fully

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explained by such daily mood fluctuations. The following item in the daily survey assessed participants' mood: "Overall, how did you feel today?". The response scale ranged from 1 (*terrible*) to 7 (*terrific*).

Analytic strategy

The data were analyzed using two-level multilevel models with random intercepts with Maximum Likelihood estimations in Mplus 5 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998). Such models control for the nested structure of the data with repeated measures (daily variables) at Level-1 ($N = 345$ observations) nested within persons at Level-2 ($N = 61$ participants). Simulation studies have indicated that a sample greater than 50 at Level-2 in two-level models provides unbiased estimates of coefficients, variances, and standard errors (Maas & Hox, 2005). This was the case in the present study. Additionally, the Level-1 sample size is of main importance for the power in this study, as the key analyses are all examined at this level (Snijders, 2005). A post-hoc sensitivity analysis (one-tailed) conducted in G*Power 3.1.9.2 with .80 power, $\alpha = .05$, and $N = 345$ indicated that we were able to detect already small effects of Cohen's $f^2 = .02$. Person-level predictors were grand-mean centered, and day-level predictors were person-mean centered. Person-mean centering centers variables around the individual means, with the result that findings are interpreted as scores above or below an individual's average (e.g., an individual experiencing more identity threat that day than she does on average; Ohly et al., 2010).

We tested for mediation using Bolger and Laurenceau's method (2013, see p.188 for Mplus code) for within-person mediation. Within-person mediation analysis is distinct from regular mediation analyses. First, this analysis requires the inclusion of the covariance of between-person differences in the relationship between the predictor and mediator (the a-path) and between the mediator and the outcome-variable (the b-path) to reduce Type-I error (Kenny, Korchmaros, & Bolger, 2003). Second, person-mean centered predictors, mediators,

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and outcome-variables need to be used (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013). Consequently, the intercepts of the mediator and outcome-variable equations are fixed to zero. Finally, a variable ‘time’ is included in within-person mediation analysis indicating each of the daily surveys (from 0 for survey 1 to 5 for survey 6). This controls for possible linear time-trends in the mediator and outcome-variable over days (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013).

Results

Table 1 shows an overview of means, variances (at the day- and person-level), and intra-class correlations of all day-level variables. Overall, the intra-class correlations indicate relatively high levels of variance at the person-level, supporting the choice for multilevel analyses. The highest levels of variance at the person-level (around .60) are seen for identity threat, self-group distancing, and motivation; the person-level variances for the other variables are around .40 (belonging concerns, achievement concerns, well-being, and general mood). This also indicates that 40 to 60% of the variance of all variables is at the day-level, and hence that these variables fluctuate considerably within individuals on a daily basis. For example, in the case of self-group distancing this suggests that self-group distancing is not just a tendency that some women have in general (as this would mean that the variance is at the person-level), but that it fluctuates considerably on a day-to-day basis within individuals; and we hypothesize that self-group distancing fluctuates with their daily experiences of identity threat and concerns.

Does social identity threat predict self-group distancing?

The first hypothesis stated that women would distance themselves more from other women on days in which they experienced more identity threat. A multilevel analysis showed, as expected, that daily fluctuation in identity threat predicted daily fluctuation in self-group distancing, $b = .16$, 95% CI[.09; .24], S.E. = .04, $p < .001$. On days when women experienced more identity threat, they distanced themselves more from other women.³

Do belonging and achievement concerns mediate the relationship between social identity threat and self-group distancing?

Next, we examined the hypothesis that achievement and belonging concerns mediate the relationship between identity threat and self-group distancing.

As a first step, we examined the direct relationship between threat and concerns. Although daily identity threat predicted both achievement concerns ($b = .16$, 95% CI[.06; .26], S.E. = .05, $p = .002$) and belonging concerns ($b = .41$, 95% CI[.28; .55], S.E. = .07, $p < .001$), the relationship with belonging concerns was significantly stronger than the relationship with achievement concerns (Wald $Z = 14.36$, $p < .001$). Thus, on days when women experienced more identity threat, they experienced more concerns about their achievement and particularly more concerns about their belonging in the military.

Next, we tested the indirect effect of threat on distancing separately for belonging and achievement concerns.⁴ First, the analysis with belonging concerns as mediator showed a significant positive path between identity threat and belonging concerns (path a: $b = .39$, 95% CI[.22; .56], S.E. = .09, $p < .001$) and a significant positive path between belonging concerns and self-group distancing (path b: $b = .13$, 95% CI[.01; .25], S.E. = .06, $p = .030$). The indirect effect was marginally significant only (path ab: $b = .09$, 95% CI[-.003; .19], S.E. = .05, $p = .057$); belonging concerns did, however, explain 57% of the overall average relationship between identity threat and self-group distancing ($p = .027$). Additionally, after taking into account belonging concerns, identity threat was no longer a significant predictor of self-group distancing (path c': $b = .07$, 95% CI[-.03; .17], S.E. = .05, $p = .156$). Figure 1 shows a graphical representation of these findings.

The analysis with achievement concerns as a mediator showed a significant positive path between identity threat and achievement concerns (path a: $b = .18$, 95% CI[.03; .33], S.E. = .08, $p = .016$), but no significant path between achievement concerns and self-group

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distancing (path b: $b = .07$, 95% CI[-.03; .16], S.E. = .05, $p = .163$). Consequently, no indirect effect was found (path ab: $b = .01$, 95% CI[-.04; .05], S.E. = .03, $p = .855$), and achievement concerns did not explain a significant percentage (3%) of the relationship between identity threat and achievement concerns ($p = .853$). Finally, after taking into account achievement concerns, identity threat was still a significant predictor of self-group distancing (path c': $b = .16$, 95% CI[.06; .26], S.E. = .05, $p = .002$). Figure 2 shows a graphical representation of these findings.

Can self-group distancing protect individual-level outcomes?

Finally, we examined the degree to which daily self-group distancing was related to daily well-being and motivation. This link between daily self-group distancing and day-level outcomes was examined as an exploratory analysis. First, a multilevel analysis showed that daily fluctuation in self-group distancing was negatively related to daily fluctuation in well-being, $b = -.47$, 95% CI[-.63; -.31], S.E. = .08, $p < .001$. A second multilevel analysis revealed that daily fluctuation in self-group distancing was also negatively related to daily fluctuation in motivation, $b = -.43$, 95% CI[-.60; -.25], S.E. = .09, $p < .001$. On days when women distanced themselves more from other women, they experienced both lower well-being and lower motivation.

In a second set of analyses we aimed to examine whether self-group distancing is costly to people's daily well-being and motivation, over and above the costs of identity threat and belonging and achievement concerns. To this end, we tested the relationship between self-group distancing and the daily outcomes (i.e., well-being and motivation) while also controlling for daily identity threat and belonging and achievement concerns to check whether daily self-group distancing uniquely predicted variance in outcomes above and beyond experienced identity threat and concerns on that day. Two multilevel analyses (separate for well-being and motivation) were conducted in which daily identity threat, belonging concerns,

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and achievement concerns were added as predictors of well-being and motivation in addition to self-group distancing. Results of these analyses indicated that self-group distancing related to significantly lower well-being ($b = -.25$, 95% CI[-.39; -.10], S.E. = .07, $p = .001$) and motivation ($b = -.30$, 95% CI[-.47; -.14], S.E. = .09, $p < .001$) while controlling for identity threat and concerns. In these analyses, belonging concerns was related to lower well-being ($b = -.29$, 95% CI[-.38; -.21], S.E. = .04, $p < .001$) and lower motivation ($b = -.19$, 95% CI[-.48; -.13], S.E. = .05, $p < .001$); and similarly achievement concerns was related to lower well-being ($b = -.12$, 95% CI[-.21; -.04], S.E. = .04, $p = .004$) and lower motivation ($b = -.22$, 95% CI[-.31; -.12], S.E. = .05, $p < .001$). Identity threat was not a significant predictor of well-being ($b = -.08$, 95% CI[-.17; -.02], S.E. = .05, $p = .106$), and was marginally significantly related to higher motivation ($b = .11$, 95% CI[-.001; .22], S.E. = .06, $p = .051$). This suggests that daily self-group distancing uniquely predicted lower well-being and motivation, above and beyond daily threat experiences.

Secondary analyses

A final set of secondary analyses showed that results all hold with daily general mood, stigma consciousness, and self-esteem as controls (see Supplementary File). This suggests that the above daily fluctuation patterns are likely not driven by daily fluctuation in mood, nor by women who are generally more susceptible to seeing themselves as stigmatized or to experiencing low self-esteem.

Discussion

The present study is the first of its kind to show that targets cope with daily experiences of identity threat by distancing themselves from their ingroup. Going beyond general tendencies of self-group distancing shown in previous research, the current study showed that self-group distancing fluctuates within individuals on a day-to-day basis with daily experiences of identity threat and accompanying belonging concerns. Although this

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distancing may have its costs – which appeared to be the case here with links to lower well-being and motivation – the current study suggests that targets are not just passively experiencing negative consequences of identity threat on a daily basis, but employ identity management strategies to try and fit in outgroup-dominated contexts in which their ingroup is devalued.

Underlying mechanisms of self-group distancing

While identity threat was related to both belonging and achievement concerns, only belonging concerns was related to self-group distancing in the present study. Explanations of self-group distancing in the existing literature often focus on concerns about achievement as motivating women to distance themselves from other women (e.g., Derks et al., 2016; Ellemers et al., 2012). Such explanations suggest that women distance themselves to reduce the threat of not being able to be successful in the field and to protect their achievement potential in the outgroup-dominated domain. However, the present findings indicate that self-group distancing may not only be driven by such instrumental career concerns, but also (and perhaps even more so) by concerns about belonging in the domain. This highlights the potential and previously overlooked role of trying to fit in as a driver of self-group distancing. It suggests that self-group distancing is indeed very much a social identity process in which women distance themselves from their ingroup when they feel their ingroup is valued less and fits less in the organizational domain. This is consistent with arguments by Derks and colleagues (2016) that self-group distancing is a way for women to try and fit in or assimilate into male-dominated organizations in which men are valued over women. It is also in line with related work on concealable stigmatized identities showing that people with concealable stigmatized identities (e.g., sexual orientation, history of mental illness) conceal their identity to try and fit in and feel accepted (Barreto & Newheiser, 2014; Newheiser et al., 2017). The present study extends this work by suggesting that this occurs for self-group distancing more

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generally (of which identity concealment can be a part) and also for stigmatized identities that are not concealable (e.g., gender in the present study). The addition compared to this previous work also lied in the simultaneous examination of the role of belonging and achievement concerns in self-group distancing.

Future research would need to replicate the findings reported here to see whether the key role of belonging vs. achievement holds in different contexts and among different samples (e.g., ethnic minority or older employees). Our findings are in line with a recent paper among female STEM students also reporting the importance of belonging over achievement concerns for self-group distancing (Bergsieker et al., 2020). This work showed that women in male-dominated STEM majors were more likely to exclude stereotypically feminine women from their social (but not their academic) networks, especially when they had a less (vs. more) central position in university networks. They preferred to not be associated socially with stereotypic ingroup peers – possibly as a way of trying to fit in and increasing their centrality in the male-dominated STEM networks – while they were not more likely to exclude them academically (Bergsieker et al., 2020). It would also be interesting to investigate the role of time in the relative role of belonging versus achievement concerns for self-group distancing. Both the Bergsieker et al. sample and the sample in the present research were women at the start of their career in a male-dominated field. It could be that concerns about belonging are a stronger motivator of behavior at this early career stage as people adjust to a relatively new environment and try to fit in. It is possible that concerns about achievement start playing a more dominant role in self-group distancing responses among people in later career stages as they move up the organizational ladder. Perhaps such instrumental career concerns start to play a bigger role then to protect their career success and achievement potential, besides belonging motives to try and fit in or assimilate into the outgroup-dominated context. It would be interesting for future research to examine how such

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contextual and over-time factors influence the role of belonging and achievement concerns in self-group distancing responses.

The experience-sampling methodology employed in the present research provided unique insights into daily fluctuating experiences. This method enabled us to demonstrate that targets' day-to-day distancing from the ingroup was related to daily fluctuating threatening experiences, above and beyond general tendencies that some people may have. Individual tendencies such as low identification with the group might make people more susceptible to distance from the ingroup in general, and people might develop general self-group distancing tendencies over time because of experiences (e.g., with bias; Derks, Ellemers, et al., 2011). However, the present findings show that self-group distancing also fluctuates considerably on a day-to-day basis within individuals (as evidenced by more than 40% of the variance at the within-level) depending on their experiences that day. This underpins the notion that self-group distancing is a coping response that stigmatized group members in professional contexts show in everyday life and in response to daily experiences. This was also underlined by lagged analyses (reported in the Supplementary File) showing that self-group distancing was not predicted by identity threat and belonging and achievement concerns in the previous survey assessed two to four days earlier. This suggests that self-group distancing fluctuates on a day-to-day basis within people depending on the experiences they had *on that day*, and that these processes do not necessarily transfer to several days later. Experiencing more identity threat on a day than you do on average (which is how findings have to be interpreted because of person-mean centering of predictors) does not necessarily mean that you will also show more self-group distancing several days later, but it is related to more self-group distancing on the day itself. Thus, above and beyond general tendencies that some women might have, the current study evidences how self-group distancing also fluctuates on a day-to-day basis depending on the types of experiences people have on a day.

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Of course, experience-sampling remains a correlational methodology. Previous research has already shown the causal role of identity threat in creating self-group distancing (Derks, Van Laar, et al., 2011; Derks et al., 2015) and this direction also seems more likely than that self-group distancing leads to experiencing identity threat. Still, future research would need to examine the causal role of belonging and achievement concerns. The present findings also raise other interesting follow-up questions on self-group distancing, for example: Do women who distance themselves from other women in response to threatening daily experiences show compensation behaviors in other life areas outside of that organizational context (e.g., engaging in more stereotypically feminine activities)? Is experiencing ingroup support inside or outside of the organizational context helpful in supporting women's regulation of threat? And does such support reduce the need to show self-group distancing as a coping response?

Moving away from vs. moving towards the ingroup

Self-group distancing is not the only identity management strategy that targets may use. Instead of moving *away* from the devalued ingroup to cope with threat, people can also move *towards* their ingroup (Branscombe, Fernández, Gómez, & Cronin, 2011). The present study also assessed this movement towards the ingroup by measuring the extent to which women on a daily basis sought support among other female soldiers. However, this ingroup support-seeking was related neither to daily identity threat nor to belonging or achievement concerns (see Supplementary File for more details).

This may be explained by aspects of the structural environment typical of the military context that may make it less likely that people move towards their ingroup in response to identity threat (Branscombe et al., 2011; Wright & Taylor, 1998; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). In this highly male-dominated context in which domains and characteristics typically associated with men are strongly valued, women may perceive the

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underrepresentation and devaluation of women as legitimate, making it more likely that they will seek individual-level solutions such as self-group distancing to improve their social standing (Ellemers & Van Laar, 2010). Additionally, the low number of women in the military context makes it likely that oftentimes there are no other women sharing the stigma around, preventing moving towards the ingroup to be a possible or viable option to cope with devaluation (Branscombe et al., 2011). Finally, the present research focused on women at the start of their career; a point at which they may conceive their experience as a phase they have to go through and that everything will be fine if they just prove themselves. Consistent with this, research has shown that people first attempt individual mobility strategies to improve their situation before resorting to other options (Sealy, 2010; Wright et al., 1990). This could imply that the junior women in the present military context over time would start using more collective strategies and start moving more towards their ingroup to the extent that they experience that self-group distancing proves ineffective to protect their individual mobility. This may also interact with individual factors: research on the ‘Queen Bee effect’ among women in senior management positions has shown that women who have moved up the organizational ladder show more moving towards their ingroup when they identify more strongly with their gender group, while they distance themselves from their ingroup when they identify less strongly (Derks et al., 2016).

It would be interesting for future research to examine more systematically how these contextual and individual factors influence targets’ responses of moving away from vs. moving towards their ingroup over time. This would provide more insight into the development of these coping strategies as members of negatively stereotyped groups move up the organizational ladder and into the benefits and costs of self-group distancing as an individual mobility strategy.

Costs of self-group distancing

The results suggest that self-group distancing is potentially costly for daily individual-level outcomes. On a day-to-day basis more self-group distancing was related to lower well-being and lower motivation. The finding that this negative relationship remained when controlling for daily identity threat and concerns suggests that self-group distancing is a costly coping strategy independent of the negative experiences they had that day. From a social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), self-group distancing is an identity management strategy aimed at protecting individual mobility in outgroup-dominated domains in which the ingroup identity is devalued. While in the medium to long run self-group distancing may be helpful to this end, the findings of the present research are the first to show that self-group distancing may incur daily costs for the individual. This is in line with related literature showing that concealing (vs. revealing) a concealable stigmatized identity (e.g., sexual orientation, religious affiliation, physical or mental illness) has negative consequences for individuals' well-being and work-related engagement (Barreto et al., 2006; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014; Newheiser et al., 2017). The present findings indicate that this may not only be the case for concealing a concealable stigmatized identities, but also for self-group distancing among stigmatized groups more generally. Additionally, recent cross-sectional research among women in male-dominated industries showed that feeling a need to reduce femininity at work (e.g., when experiencing sexism at work) was related to lower mental health and job satisfaction (Rubin, Paolini, Subašić, & Giacomini, 2019). Future research still has to examine whether – despite these short run negative costs – distancing may in the longer run indeed enable individual mobility in the organization. Are targets who self-group distance indeed seen as fitting better in outgroup-dominated domains, and stereotyped less? And do targets who distance more have more opportunities to climb the organizational ladder? Some recent work has shown that there might indeed be a protective function to some (more indirect) self-

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group distancing strategies (Suppes, Napier, & Bettinsoli, 2020; Suppes, Napier, & van der Toorn, 2019). Members of stigmatized groups who minimize (vs. acknowledge) the extent to which their group is the target of discrimination report better well-being. This is particularly the case in countries with high levels of bias, and functions as a system justifying mechanism, which, in turn, is likely to perpetuate group inequalities (Suppes et al., 202).

If in the long run self-group distancing does help a small group of minority members to fit in and protect their individual mobility, then a negative side-effect would be that minority members in more senior positions become reluctant to help other ingroup members when they have distanced themselves from this ingroup for an extended period (Faniko, Ellemers, Derks, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2017). Research has shown that such support from ingroup members is important for protecting junior employees' outcomes and retention, particularly in contexts where they face stereotypes (Dasgupta, 2011; Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017; Sterk, Van Laar, & Meeussen, 2018, Van Laar et al., 2014). Thus, self-group distancing may be a costly strategy: in the short run it relates negatively to minority member's daily well-being and motivation, and in the long run distancing can negatively affect other ingroup members. Finally, even if it does help some individuals fit in an outgroup-dominated context, self-group distancing reduces the likelihood that a diverse workforce will introduce a diversity of perspectives (Ellemers & Rink, 2016), thus reducing the ability of the organization to capitalize on diversity benefits.

Conclusion

The present paper aimed to gain a deeper understanding of self-group distancing as a coping strategy. Results showed that women in a male-dominated field distanced themselves more from other women on days in which they experienced more identity threat and that this could partly be explained by belonging concerns. These findings suggest that targets of negative stereotypes are not passively experiencing negative consequences of identity threat,

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but they are active agents employing identity management strategies on a daily basis to try and fit in outgroup-dominated contexts. Finally, the findings provide further evidence that self-group distancing is a costly strategy: it can not only incur costs for other ingroup members and the organization, but also for minority member's own daily well-being and motivation.

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Footnotes

¹ The criterion that only women who were at the academy on a daily basis during data-collection were included in the sample excluded 31 women who were part of a special division (e.g., medicine students at a civilian university with only occasional military training) and fifth year students finishing their studies and writing their thesis (outside the academy). Additionally, one participant only completed the background survey and none of the daily surveys; and one participant completed all daily surveys at once and was excluded as her data did not represent daily experiences.

² Originally, this scale consisted of three items. However, due to a translation error to French in one of the items that was meant to assess the extent to which they were worried about their performance that day, the meaning of this item changed (from being worried to caring about one's performance). The item was excluded as it no longer measured the concept of interest (as also reflected in unreliable Cronbach's alpha when included).

³ In order to test whether this finding shows a general tendency of social withdrawal (from both men and women) rather than a self-group distancing process, the present study also assessed the extent to which women on a daily basis sought support among male soldiers. This outgroup support-seeking was not related to daily identity threat or to belonging or achievement concerns, and it was uncorrelated with self-group distancing (see Supplementary File for more details).

⁴ Results fully replicate when we control for the other concern in the mediation analyses. That is, when controlling for achievement concerns in the mediation analysis with belonging concerns, the relationship between belonging concerns and self-group distancing remains significant ($b = .13$, $SE = .06$, $p = .048$), and achievement concerns was not a significant predictor ($b = .02$, $SE = .03$, $p = .575$). Additionally, belonging concerns still explained 55% of the overall average relationship between identity threat and self-group

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distancing ($p = .033$). When controlling for belonging concerns in the mediational analysis with achievement concerns, the relationship between achievement concerns and self-group distancing remained non-significant ($b = .03$, $SE = .05$, $p = .476$), and belonging concerns was a significant predictor ($b = .06$, $SE = .03$, $p = .034$).

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Table 1. Means, variance, and intra-class correlations (ICC) of all day-level variables.

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Variance</i>	<i>Variance</i>	<i>ICC</i>
	<i>Level-2</i>	<i>Level-2</i>	<i>Level-1</i>	
Identity threat	2.44	1.27	0.85	.60
Belonging concerns	2.69	0.77	1.31	.37
Achievement concerns	3.20	0.43	0.65	.40
Self-group distancing	1.76	0.48	0.35	.58
Well-being	5.40	0.54	0.75	.42
Motivation	4.94	1.32	0.86	.61
General mood	5.02	0.67	1.16	.37

Table 2. Within- and between-person correlations of daily measures.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Identity threat	1	.33***	.18**	.26***	-.28***	-.06	-.14*
2 Belonging concerns	.61**	1	.42***	.27***	-.53***	-.37***	-.46***
3 Achievement concerns	.42*	.78***	1	.19**	-.37***	-.28***	-.30***
4 Self-group distancing	.84***	.42*	.40*	1	-.32***	-.27***	-.29***
5 Well-being	-.77***	-.84***	-.64**	-.57**	1	.44***	.61***
6 Motivation	-.38*	-.81***	-.47**	-.22	.69***	1	.62***
7 General mood	-.57**	-.80***	-.53**	-.32 [†]	.87***	.80***	1

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Note. Within-person correlations are on the right of the diagonal, between-person correlations are on the left of the diagonal.

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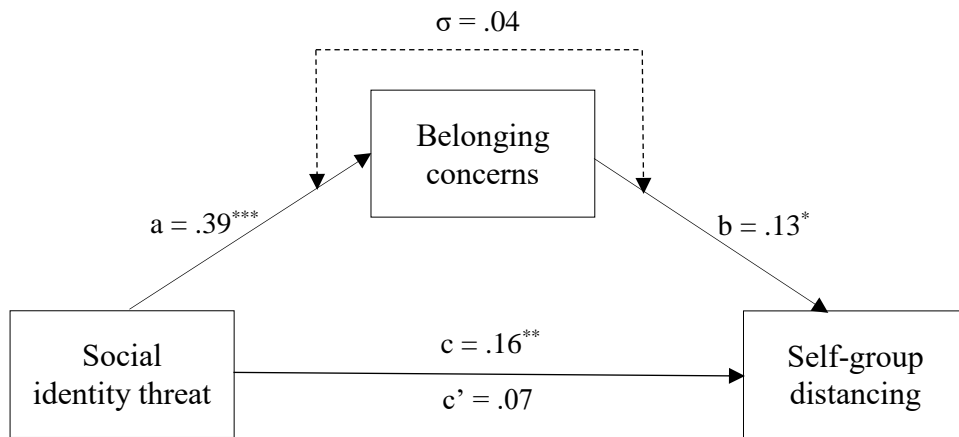


Figure 1. Graphical representation of belonging concerns mediating the relationship between identity threat and self-group distancing. Dashed lines represent non-significant paths.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

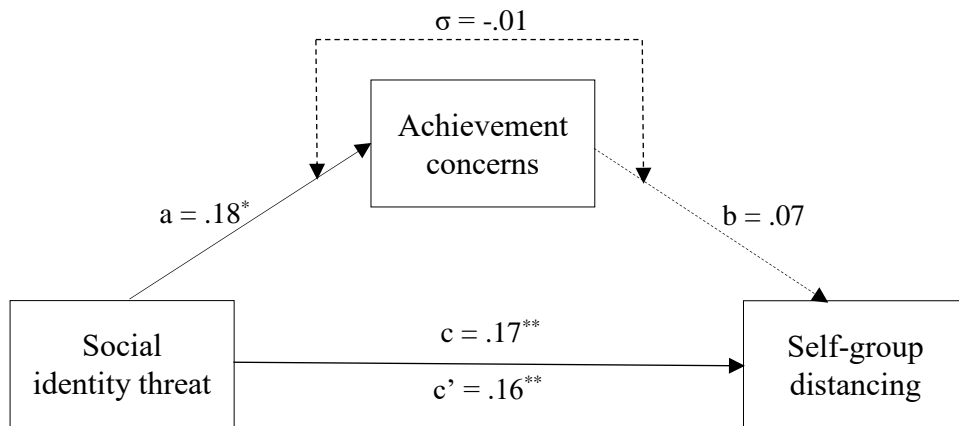


Figure 2. Graphical representation of achievement concerns mediating the relationship between identity threat and self-group distancing. Dashed lines represent non-significant paths.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.