

The Relationship between Group Identity and Individual Mental Health: Regulating Variables and Mechanism

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Abstract: In recent years, the relationship between group identity and individual mental health has attracted the attention of researchers. Through combing and summarizing the relevant literature, this study found that: the number of group identity has a significant relationship with individual mental health; the relationship between group identity and individual mental health is regulated by group identity motivation and individual evaluation of the group, and depends on the mediation of self-esteem, social support, control perception, attribution style and other factors; in the future, we should use a variety of methods to continue to study the regulatory variables and mechanism of the relationship between group identity and individual mental health.

Keywords: Group identity; Mental health; Moderator; Mechanism of action

A group is a combination of people between an organization and an individual, consisting of at least two people. Group members have the feeling of “we belong to the same group”, they are psychologically interdependent and behaviorally affect each other^[1]. Group is an important factor affecting individual mental health. In previous studies, groups are generally considered as external conditions affecting individual mental health. Why groups can affect individual mental health is still an open question^[2]. Social identity theory holds that the shaping of individual psychology by groups depends on the degree of internalization of group attributes in self-system^[3,4]. Based on the social identity method, researchers found that group identity can affect the level of individual mental health^[5,6], which provides a new perspective for the study of the relationship between group and individual mental health.

Group identity means that individuals recognize their identity as members of a group, feel closely connected with the group^[7], and take the subjective norms and values of the group as an important dimension of self perception^[8]. Group identity is the premise that social connection affects individual mental health, provides individuals with psychological resources to deal with setbacks, changes and challenges, and enhances individuals' sense of trust, belonging, security and support^[9]. The internalization of group values and goals endows the meaning and purpose of individual life, provides motivation and driving force for individuals, and encourages individuals to work with other group members to achieve goals that individuals cannot achieve^[10].

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Based on the combing of relevant literature, this paper tries to clarify the relationship between group identity and individual mental health, explore the moderator variables and mechanism of the relationship between group identity and individual mental health, and suggest the future research directions.

1. The Relationship between Group Identity and Individual Mental Health

By reviewing relevant studies, we found that individual's identification with different groups and the number of group identification were significantly correlated with their mental health level^[6,11]. Moreover, this relationship widely exists in subjects of all ages, such as adolescents, youth and the elderly^[12,13].

1.1. Relationship between different types of group identity and individual mental health

Research shows that the individual's identification with different groups such as nationality, country, religion, school, family and work organization is significantly related to their mental health level^[6,11].

1.1.1. *The relationship between ethnicity, nation and religious group identity and individual mental health*

The relationship between individual identity and minority identity is one of the areas of concern. However, the results of relevant empirical studies are not uniform. Smokowski *et al.*^[11] investigated the relationship between ethnic identity and mental health of multi-ethnic subjects, including Caucasians, Indian Americans, African Americans and Latinos. The results show that ethnic identity is positively correlated with individual mental health. On the contrary, Hughes, Kiecolt, Keith and Demo^[14] found that for some African Americans, ethnic identity was negatively correlated with their mental health level. In real life, ethnic minorities usually suffer from poor conditions and low socio-economic status, and belong to discriminated and excluded groups. On the one hand, inner group identity can provide support and enhance self-esteem, which is conducive to their mental health. On the other hand, ethnic identity may also lead to the decline of individual mental health. The relationship between ethnic identity and individual mental health is affected by some factors, which is also the focus of the next part of this paper. In addition, Greenaway *et al.*^[6] explored the impact of national identity on individual mental health. The conclusion is that national identity can promote the improvement of individual mental health.

Religion plays an unparalleled role in the process of guiding values and shaping beliefs^[15]. Graham and Haidt^[16] believe that the ways that religion affects individual mental health include religious culture, religious group identity and so on: religious culture can help people better deal with negative emotions such as fear and anxiety in the short term; religious group identity strengthens believers' religious beliefs and their sense of support, and is an important source of believers' long-term happiness. Their views are also supported by empirical research. Ysseldyk, Matheson and Anisman^[17] proved through two studies that when the identity of religious groups is challenged, individuals show negative emotions and behavioral tendencies such as sadness and confrontation. Ysseldyk, Haslam and Haslam^[18] investigated the relationship between religious group identity, membership of other groups and mental and physical health by taking the elderly in Canada and the UK as subjects respectively. The results showed that the religious group identity of the elderly was negatively correlated with their depression level, while the social, physical exercise group identity was not significantly

correlated with their depression level. Atheists are a marginal group in American society. Doane and Elliott^[19] explored the relationship between atheist identity and mental health in the face of discrimination. The results show that individuals' identification with their atheist identity is positively related to their mental health level, and can offset the negative impact of discrimination on mental health. We believe that the impact of religious culture and religious group identity on individual mental health is both interrelated and independent. On the one hand, religious culture is the basis of religious groups' identity, which provides believers with the content of identity; on the other hand, to some extent, religion is a group. In order to spread religious culture, the activities of religious groups have had an independent impact on individual mental health by enhancing the identity of religious groups and providing social support.

1.1.2. Relationship between school, family, work organization identity and individual mental health

Nationality, state and religion belong to large-scale group types. On the other hand, individuals' identification with small-scale groups such as school, family and work organization also significantly related to their mental health level. Bizumic *et al.*^[12] took teachers and students from two high schools in Australia as subjects to investigate the relationship between their school identity and their mental health level. The study found that compared with the subjects with low school identity, those with high school identity had more positive emotional experience, high work involvement, low levels of depression, anxiety and other negative emotions, and less aggressive and destructive behaviors. Nakashima, Isobe and Ura^[20] found that freshmen tend to regard their major as the standard for group division. The higher their recognition of their major, the lower the degree of psychological disorder. Family identity can provide social support and motivation, and has a great impact on individual mental health^[8]. Dimitrova, Chasiotis, Bender and van de Vijfer^[21] surveyed 194 Bulgarian Gypsy teenagers and their mothers, and found that their "Bulgarian", "Gypsy" identity and happiness levels were on low; Compared with ethnic and religious group identity, family identity is more closely related to happiness.

Work is closely related to individual mental health. Researchers have found that work organizational identity can alleviate individual work stress and improve their life satisfaction^[22,23]. Haslam and van Dick^[24] believe that work organization identity can affect individuals' assessment of stressors: individuals usually evaluate stressful events based on the opinions of group members and organizational norms. On the other hand, work organization identity can also provide individuals with the social support they need to cope with stress^[24]. However, some researchers have pointed out that excessive work organization identity may lead individuals to be excessively addicted to work, thus reducing their well-being^[25]. Excessive group identity may lead to the close relationship between individual self-concept and group, which will have a negative impact on their mental health. Therefore, the relationship between group identity and individual mental health is a research topic worthy of further discussion. In addition, some researchers also discussed the effects of sports team supporters' group identity^[26,27] and psychological mutual aid group member identity^[28] on mental health, whose results showed that group identity was significantly positively correlated with individual mental health.

1.1.3. The influence of group types on the relationship between group identity and individual mental health

To some extent, group identity can be regarded as the intermediary of the group's impact on individual mental health. However, groups are diverse, and the nature, structure, function and activity mode of each group are different^[29]. Therefore, the relationship between group identity and individual mental health is likely to be

affected by group types. According to the yearning degree of group members for the group, the group can be divided into member groups and reference groups, and individuals will take the values and normative system of the latter as their personal goals and standards^[29]. The study of Ysseldyk *et al.*^[18] found that the elderly's identification with social and physical exercise groups was not significantly correlated with their mental health, while religious group identification was negatively correlated with their depression level. We believe that this may be because the elderly with religious beliefs are more willing to seek life wisdom under the guidance of religion, and their social relations are mainly carried out in religious groups. Therefore, they do not take social and physical exercise groups as their reference groups, and the relationship between the identity of these two groups and their mental health is not significant.

According to ecosystem theory, social impact can be divided into a series of systems that expand around individuals^[30]. According to ecosystem theory, family, school, religion and other groups belong to micro system, while ethnic and national groups reflect the material and cultural background of individual life, so they have the characteristics of external system and macro system. We believe that the impact of group types on the relationship between group identity and individual mental health may be due to the different positions of different groups in the ecosystem: the group in the micro system can have the most direct impact on the individual, and it is also the intermediary of the group in other systems. Therefore, the individual's identification with the group in the microsystem is more closely related to individual mental health. Dimitrova *et al.*^[21] found that family identity has a greater impact on individual well-being, which provides empirical support for our analysis. At present, there are few studies on the impact of group types on the relationship between group identity and individual mental health. Whether different types of groups can affect the relationship between group identity and individual mental health, and the possible impact mechanisms need to be further explored in future research.

1.2. Relationship between the number of group identity and individual mental health

In addition to the identification of different groups, the researchers also examined the relationship between the number of group identification and mental health. The subjects of the English Longitudinal Study of Aging (ELSA) were adults over the age of 50 living in England. The survey included data on the participants' participation in social groups and their mental health level. Using these data, Cruwys *et al.*^[13] investigated the relationship between the number of groups the individuals participating in and the level of depression. The study found that the more groups the subjects participated in, the lower the level of depression; For patients with depression, participating in various groups can promote the recovery of depression and reduce the probability of recurrence. Their research shows that group identity can not only protect normal people from depression, but also promote the rehabilitation of patients with depression and prevent the recurrence of depression. Sani, Madhok, Norbury, Dugard and Wakefield^[31] collected 1,824 subjects through a national health survey to investigate the relationship between the number of groups they identified and mental health. The results showed that most of the subjects had at least one identity group, and the more identity groups, the lower the level of depression; the depression level of the subjects with no identification group was significantly higher than that of the subjects with at least one identification group, and the depression level of the subjects with only one identification group was significantly higher than that of the subjects with more than one identification group.

2. Moderating Variables of the Relationship between Group Identity and Individual Mental Health

Although most studies have confirmed a significant positive correlation between group identity and individual mental health, some studies have reached the opposite conclusion^[14,32]. Reviewing previous studies, we found that the relationship between group identity and individual mental health is regulated by individual group identity motivation, individual evaluation of the group and other factors^[14,32].

2.1. Group identity motivation

As a psychological process, identity must be regulated by the motivation system. Ryan and Deci^[33] believe that according to the difference of identity motivation, individual identity to a group can be divided into self-determined group identity and non self-determined group identity. Self-determined group identity has a positive impact on individual psychology, while non self-determined group identity has a negative impact on individual psychology. Based on this, the researcher introduced self-determinism^[34] into the study and confirmed that identity motivation can affect the relationship between group identity and individual mental health^[32,35].

Amiot and Aubin^[32] investigated the relationship between identity motivation, group identity, individual mental health and other variables. Taking college students from Canada and Australia as subjects, they measured individual variables such as self-determination, group identity, self-esteem and positive and negative emotional experience; patriotism, racism, inner group prejudice and other interpersonal variables, and analyzed the data through multiple regression and canonical correlation analysis. The results show that self-determined group identity is positively correlated with individual collective self-esteem and positive emotional experience; non self-determined group identity is negatively correlated with individual self-esteem and positively correlated with individual intra group bias. Amiot and Sansfaçon^[35] examined the relationship between identity motivation, national identity, online community identity and personal growth orientation well-being. The results again prove that self-determined group identity can improve individual well-being, while non self-determined group identity leads to the decline of individual well-being. In the future research, we need to introduce other motivation theories to further investigate the impact of identity motivation on the relationship between group identity and individual mental health.

2.2. Group Evaluation

Generally speaking, group identity will lead to individuals' high evaluation of the internal group. However, for members of vulnerable groups, such as ethnic minorities and members of psychological assistance group, group identity does not always predict higher group evaluation^[14]. Therefore, the impact of group evaluation on the relationship between group identity and individual mental health has attracted the attention of researchers.

Kuppens, Easterbrook, Spears and Manstead^[36] found that education level is an important factor for people to define themselves; compared with the subjects who have not attended college, the individuals with bachelor's degree have higher life satisfaction and are more willing to incorporate the degree of education into their self-concept to divide the group. More importantly, there is interaction between individual education level and group identity (as shown in **Figure 1**): under the situation that people value education level, for individuals with higher education level, the identity of group with higher education level is positively correlated with their life satisfaction; on the contrary, for individuals with low education, the identity of low education groups is negatively correlated with their life satisfaction. For individuals with lower education level, dividing groups by

education level will lead to lower group evaluation, which will lead to the negative correlation between group identity and individual mental health level.

Members of ethnic minorities sometimes internalize the negative evaluation of them by the mainstream society and form negative stereotypes against their group. This phenomenon is called internalized racism^[37]. Individuals with internalized racism have a low evaluation of their group, and it is difficult to form a positive group identity^[14]. In this case, individual group identity is likely to have a negative impact on their mental health. Hughes *et al.*^[14] used the data of the national survey of American life to investigate the group identity of African Americans, the relationship between national identity and their mental health, and the interaction between internalized racism and group identity. The results show that (**Figure 2**), most African Americans have high national identity and high evaluation of this group; those subjects with high national identity and positive evaluation of this group showed high self-esteem, sense of control and low level of depression. However, the interaction between internalized racism and group identity is also significant: when the subjects' evaluation of African Americans was low, national identity was negatively correlated with their sense of control and positively correlated with the level of depression.

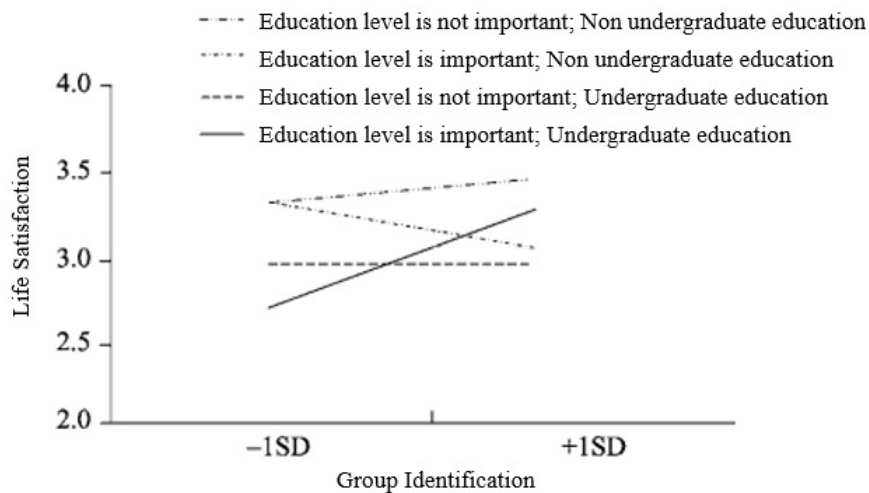


Figure1. The relationship between group identity and life satisfaction affected by education level. (source: compiled from Kuppens *et al.*^[36])

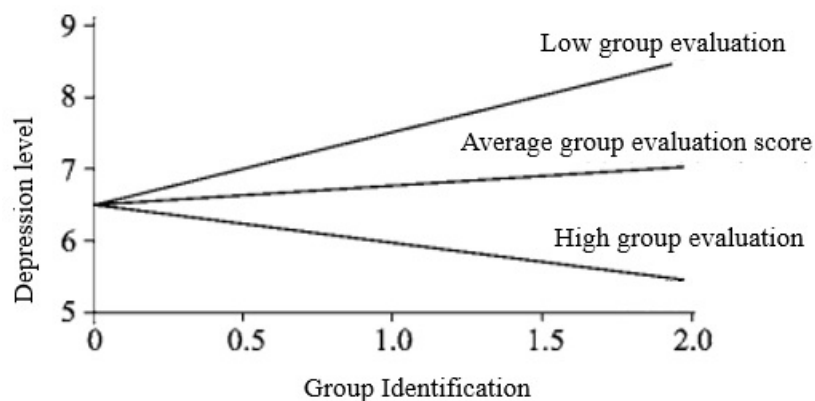


Figure2. The relationship between group identity and depression level affected by group evaluation. (source: compiled from Hughes *et al.*^[14])

The above research results show that the strategy of improving group evaluation is not always effective, and group evaluation will affect the relationship between group identity and individual mental health.

3. The Mechanism of the Relationship between Group Identity and Individual Mental Health

Group identity is closely related to individual mental health. So, how is group identity related to individual mental health? Existing research results show that self-esteem, social support, control perception and attribution style are important mediators between group identity and individual mental health^[6,27,38,39].

3.1. Self-esteem

Self-esteem is an important indicator of mental health. Jetten *et al.*^[38] found that group identity is an important source of individual self-esteem: Being a member of a group can improve the level of individual self-esteem. In their view, becoming a group member can get a sense of belonging and life meaning, which provides a basis for the improvement of collective self-esteem, and then promotes the improvement of individual self-esteem. Study conducted by Kiang and Fuligni also found that the level of self-esteem of individuals can also be improved through group identity. In order to explore why group identity can affect individual mental health, Smokewski *et al.*^[11] investigated 4,714 adolescents from five ethnic groups (Caucasians, Indian Americans, African Americans and Latinos) to explore the relationship between national identity, self-esteem and individual mental health. In the study, Smokewski and others took national identity and self-esteem as independent variables and depression, anxiety and external behavior problems as dependent variables. The results showed that national identity was positively correlated with individual self-esteem and negatively correlated with depression, anxiety and external behavior problems; self-esteem is negatively correlated with individual depression, anxiety level and external behavior problems; national identity affects individual mental health by affecting self-esteem.

3.2. Social support

Social support can promote the improvement of individual mental health in many situations^[40]. To some extent, group identity is the basis of social support: under the influence of group identity, individuals tend to provide more support for inner group members, and attribute the received help to the social support provided by inner group members^[41].

Based on the close relationship among group identity, social support and individual mental health, the researchers speculate that promoting social support may be an important way to connect group identity and individual mental health^[20,27]. Nakashima *et al.*^[20] measured 163 college students' group identity, social support expectation, depression tendency and negative life experience. The results show that (**Figure 3**), the subjects tend to regard their major as the division standard of internal and external groups; group identity and social support expectation are negatively correlated with depression tendency and negative life experience. The relationship between group identity and subjects' mental health depends on the intermediary of social support. Inoue *et al.*^[27] investigated the relationship between group identity and two different types of social support, tool and emotion, and well-being. The results showed that the subjects' recognition of their hometown team promoted emotional and social support, and then improved their sense of happiness; on the other hand, instrumental social support is positively correlated with well-being, but the correlation with group identity is not significant. These studies have proved that social support is an important way to connect group identity with individual mental health.

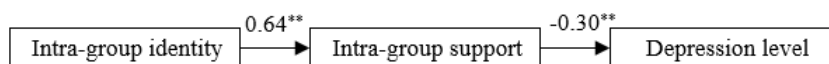


Figure 3. Group identity affects individual depression level through social support note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, the same below. (source: compiled from Nakashima *et al.*^[20])

3.3. Control perception

Individual control perception refers to an individual's subjective feeling about his ability to achieve goals^[6]. Studies have shown that individual control perception is positively correlated with mental health^[42], which is one of the pillars of life satisfaction^[43]. Group identity can provide individuals with resources to achieve goals, thus enhancing individuals' perception of control^[6]. Research shows that when control perception is threatened, individuals show stronger intra-group bias and group identity^[44].

Greenaway *et al.*^[6] proved that individual control perception plays an intermediary role in the process of group identity affecting mental health. First, they use the data of the World Values Survey to prove that there is a positive correlation between national identity, individual control perception and well-being. National identity promotes the improvement of well-being by enhancing individual control perception. Then, they measured the subjects' group identity, control perception, self-esteem, life satisfaction, depression level and academic performance after the university psychology students submitted their term papers and received their paper scores. The results showed that in the second measurement, the subjects' changes in group identity, control perception and mental health level were positively correlated. Finally, they used experimental methods to manipulate group identity and individual control perception. The results showed that the control perception and life satisfaction of high identity group were significantly higher than those of low identity group; in the context of high group identity, there was no significant difference in individual control perception between high and low control perception groups; in the context of low group identity, the individual control perception of the high control perception group was significantly higher than that of the low control perception group. This result proves once again that improving individual control perception is an effective way for group identity to affect individual mental health.

3.4. Attribution style

According to the investigation of the World Health Organization, depression is the primary cause of various health disorders^[45]. Many studies have shown that group identity can help individuals resist depression^[13,31]. Group identity provides psychological resources to help individuals fight depression. The higher the level of individual identity to a group, the more the number of groups identified, and the more obvious the decline of depression level^[10]. However, why group identity can reduce the level of individual depression is a problem worthy of in-depth exploration.

Depression attribution is one of the significant characteristics of depression^[46]. Theoretically, group identity can change individual attribution by shifting the focus of individual attention from self to group^[47]. Therefore, Cruwys *et al.*^[48] investigated the relationship among group identity, attribution style and individual depression level through two studies, trying to prove that changing attribution method is the way for group identity to reduce individual depression level. In study 1, they investigated the group identity, depression attribution style and depression level of 139 college students who were about to graduate. The reason of choosing college students who are about to graduate is that students in this period are under great pressure and have a high level of depression. The results showed that (**Figure 4**), group identity was negatively correlated with individual depression level and positively correlated with positive attribution style; the attribution style of

depression was positively correlated with the level of depression; group identity changes the attribution of depression, and then reduces the level of individual depression. In study 2, they adopted the experimental method, requiring the subjects in the experimental group to list the groups they identified after reading the articles of group identification, and arouse the subjects' depression by recalling the failed events; the subjects in the control group did not carry out any operation and directly aroused depression. The same as the conclusion of study 1 (Figure 5), the subjects in the control group had higher levels of depression and more obvious attribution of depression; therefore, the change of attribution style is an effective way for group identity to reduce the level of individual depression.

4. Summary and Future Research Prospects

As a recent research field, the relationship between individual and mental health is getting more and more attention. These studies have different emphases. The researchers studied the relationship between different types of group identity and individual mental health indicators, regulatory variables, action mechanism and so on. However, there is a lack of systematic combing, summary and generalization of the relationship between the two in the existing research, which is not conducive to the theoretical summary and future research in this field. Based on this, on the basis of systematically combing the relevant literature, this paper expounds the relationship between group identity and individual mental health, and explores the regulatory variables and mechanism of the relationship between group identity and individual mental health. Now the research conclusions and our thoughts on the future research direction are summarized as follows:

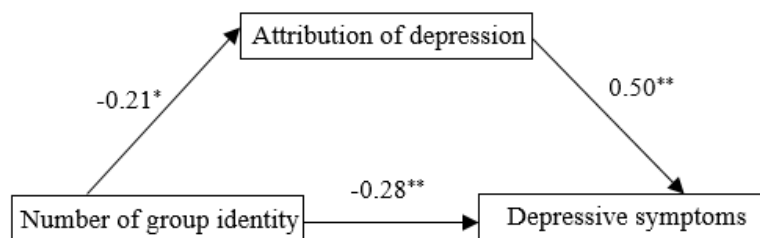


Figure 4. Intermediary model of group identity, depression attribution and depressive symptoms. (source: compiled from Cruwys *et al.*^[48])

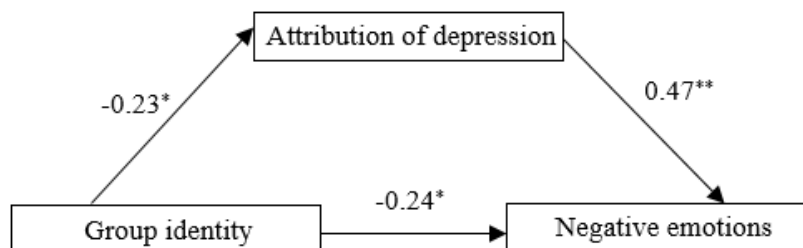


Figure 5. Mediation model of group identity, attribution style of depression and negative emotion (source: compiled from Cruwys *et al.*^[48])

First, generally speaking, group identity can promote the improvement of individual mental health. This is reflected in the higher the individual's recognition of different groups such as nationality, country, school and family, and the more the number of group recognition, the higher their mental health level. Moreover, this effect widely exists in people of different ages. However, there are many ways to divide groups. In the existing research, the way to distinguish groups mainly by scale is relatively single. On the other hand, the research results of the relationship between different types of group identity and individual mental health are contradictory. For example, Ysseldyk *et al.*^[18] found that there was no significant relationship between social

interaction, physical exercise, group identity and individual mental health; Bratt^[49] did not find the relationship between national or national identity and individual mental health. In real life, individuals usually belong to multiple groups. Each group has a different position in the individual's heart, which has a great or small impact on the individual's mental health. For example, for teenagers, peer group is of great significance. The impact of peer group identity on teenagers' mental health is a problem worthy of in-depth study. In the future research, we should start from the group attribute, systematically summarize various ways to divide different groups in theory, and verify whether the relationship between group identity and individual mental health is affected by the way of group division in empirical research.

Second, in some situations, group identity is negatively correlated with individual mental health. In the existing research, the factors affecting the relationship between group identity and individual mental health mainly include group identity motivation and individual evaluation of the group. When individuals do not recognize that they belong to a group from the heart, or the evaluation of the subordinate group is low, group identity may damage individual mental health. This shows that in the interaction with other psychological processes, the relationship between group identity and individual mental health may change qualitatively. Future research should fully consider the complexity of human psychology and deeply explore the moderating variables of the relationship between group identity and individual mental health. For example, different groups have different subjective norms, and the relationship between group identity and individual mental health is likely to be affected by group subjective norms.

Third, the relationship between group identity and individual mental health depends on the mediation of self-esteem, social support, control perception, attribution and other factors. Integrating the existing research, we found that the mechanism of the relationship between group identity and individual mental health mainly includes improving self-esteem, encouraging social support, enhancing control perception and changing attribution style. However, the results of existing studies are not consistent. Greenaway *et al.*^[6] found that the mediating effect of self-esteem and social support on the impact of group identity on mental health is not significant, which is inconsistent with the results of Smokewski *et al.*^[11] and Nakashima *et al.*^[20]. Therefore, future research needs to further verify the effectiveness of the existing mechanism. On the other hand, future research should start from the relationship between group identity and individual psychological process and individual mental health, find more intermediary variables, and clarify the impact mechanism of group identity on individual mental health.

Fourth, the existing research subjects are rich, including teenagers, college students, the elderly, soldiers, members of psychological mutual aid group and other different groups. However, in the research, the demographic characteristics of subjects are usually controlled as control variables, and the characteristics of different subjects are not taken as the focus of investigation, while individual characteristics are an important factor affecting the relationship between group identity and individual mental health. For example, Wegge *et al.*^[23] found that an individual's emotional state will affect an individual's work organization identity. Therefore, future research should highlight the characteristics of different subjects and consider the interaction between subjects' demographic characteristics and group identity. In terms of methods, most of the existing studies collect data by means of questionnaire, and use regression analysis, structural equation model and other methods to analyze the data. The conclusion is still a correlation in essence. Future research should adopt more research methods such as experimental design to explore the causal relationship between group identity and individual mental health. In addition, there are many methods to measure group identity in existing studies, which may also be one of the influencing factors of inconsistent research results. Future research can compare various measurement methods of group identity to verify their effectiveness.

Conflict of interest

The authors believe that there is no economic interest or other relationship with individuals and organizations.

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