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Case Report

Time to go! Leaving the group in response to norm-deviations

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ABSTRACT

Group norms determine which behavior members expect from each other. When members deviate from group norms, other members often (a) respond with confrontation (e.g., deviate-directed communication or exclusion of the deviate from the group), or (b) with escape, that is, with leaving the group themselves. However, to date, it is unclear under which specific circumstances these reactions occur. Two experiments were conducted to address this question. In both studies, participants perceived norm-deviant behavior of a group member to subvert the group's identity, which in turn predicted exclusion of the deviate and leaving the group. Group leaving, however, was especially likely when the norm-deviation was perceived to change the group's norm, either due to being accepted (vs. not accepted) by others (Study 1) or due to being shown by a group leader (Study 2). Furthermore, norm-deviations by a leader resulted in a lower social identification with the group, which in turn predicted leaving. These findings suggest that group members leave their group in response to others' norm-deviations only if these deviations induce changes in the group norm and, thereby, reduce the fit between members' self-concepts and the group.

1. Introduction

Imagine that a student of a liberal university learns that another member of her school called for participation in a demonstration of a right-wing organization. Likely, she will perceive this other member's behavior as a severe deviation from the university's liberal norm. She might confront the deviate, but she might also prefer to escape the situation. What makes group members, such as this student, prefer to leave their group? We are going to argue that this decision crucially depends on whether the deviate's behavior is perceived as changing the group (norm) to an extent that it no longer fits members' self-concepts.

Research suggests that group members predominantly resort to communicating with or excluding other members when they find that others' behavior negatively deviates from group norms (e.g., Frings & Abrams, 2010; Fritzsche & Schubert, 2009). In short, they opt for *confrontation*. Research on group schisms, however, suggests that under specific circumstances, norm-deviations of some group members also elicit group leaving of other members, in short, *escape* (e.g., Sani, 2008). While confrontation has received ample attention (see social exclusion, e.g., Eidelman, Silvia, & Biernat, 2006; Hutchison, Abrams, Gutierrez, & Viki, 2008; or the Black Sheep Effect, e.g., Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988; Pinto, Marques, Levine, & Abrams, 2010), studies on the

relation between norm-deviations and escape are scarce and mostly rely on a retrospective questionnaire approach (for a summary see Sani, 2008). Hence, the specific factors motivating escape in response to norm-deviations have not been closely examined.

The current work seeks to close this gap in research on reactions to norm-deviations. We do so by investigating if group members' reactions to an in-group deviate are contingent on whether the deviation changes the group (norm) or not. With our work, we aim to contribute to understanding the preconditions of changes in group membership, which adversely affect group functioning and performance (e.g., Levine & Moreland, 1991), group interaction styles (Arrow & McGrath, 1993), and members' identification with their group (Prislin & Christensen, 2005).

1.1. Why should one react to deviations in the first place?

Group norms do not only serve as comparison standards when one evaluates the own and others' behavior (Levine & Moreland, 1994). Instead, they also represent cornerstones of group members' social identity. Only when all group members adhere to these norms, groups can maintain a positive in-group/out-group differentiation and, ultimately, a positive self-image (Christensen, Rothgerber, Wood, & Matz, 2004).

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In-group members who deviate from a group's norm are perceived as reflecting negatively on this image (Hornsey, Jetten, McAuliffe, & Hogg, 2006; Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988) and as threatening the group's integrity and cohesiveness by questioning its normative consensus (Scheepers, Branscombe, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Wellen & Neal, 2006), even if their behavior does not actually change the norm. Thus, norm-deviations ultimately question whether the group is different from and superior to other groups. Consequently, the deviant behavior puts the group's identity at stake, evoking perceptions of what Sani and Reicher (1999) call *identity subversion*. They assume that perceptions of identity subversion (i.e., perceptions of the group's identity as being at stake; cf. Sani & Reicher, 1998; Sani & Todman, 2002) arise specifically in response to norm-deviations. However, evidence for this assertion is, to date, correlational. Therefore, we sought to provide experimental evidence for the prediction that norm-deviations lead to perceived identity subversion (*Hypothesis 1*).

When perceiving identity subversion (which is aversive; e.g. Sani & Pugliese, 2008), group members frequently choose *confrontation*: deviate-directed communication or exclusion of the deviate (Frings & Abrams, 2010; Schachter, 1951; for meta-analytical support see Richard, Bond, & Stokes-Zoota, 2003). With regard to communication, Schachter (1951) has shown that group members, indeed, communicate a lot with in-group deviates. Frings and Abrams (2010) argue that communication aims at preventing the deviate (and his/her behavior) from reflecting negatively on the group. Excluding and derogating deviates (a reaction frequently documented in research on the black-sheep effect; for a summary see Pinto et al., 2010), have been argued to be motivated by a similar goal.

In sum, communication, derogation, and exclusion are ultimately motivated by the aim of preventing the deviate from reflecting negatively on the group and aim at preserving the group's positivity (Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988). Therefore, we assume that deviant (but not normative) behavior leads to confrontation, that is, to both communication and exclusion. We assume this effect to be mediated by identity subversion (*Hypothesis 2*)—because concerns about the group's positivity are conceptually closely related to perceptions of the group's identity as being at stake.

In this sense, we seek to replicate earlier findings as part of our studies. Our main focus, however, will be on extending these findings and identifying the specific preconditions for *escape* in response to group norm-deviations.

1.2. Escape in response to norm-deviations

Escape responses to observing group norm-deviations—such as leaving (intentions)—have primarily been investigated in research on group schisms (Sani, 2008). This work has studied deviant behavior shown by a leader or a group's elite (i.e., deviant behavior shown by those who have the power to change group norms), which had far-reaching consequences for the group. It demonstrated that such behavior evoked not only identity subversion, but also lowered identification with the group, together motivating group leaving (e.g., Sani & Todman, 2002). Sani and Pugliese (2008), for example, found support for this model when investigating the schism in an Italian right-wing party that had emerged after the party's leader had publicly condemned fascism.

Upon closer inspection of this and other events studied in schism research, it becomes obvious that the deviations investigated were not simply *severe* deviations from the group norms; rather, these deviations also fundamentally *changed* the norms. Unfortunately, the severity of norm-deviations and their norm-changing effects have never been empirically disentangled in schism research. This is, however, central to understanding escape responses, because norm-changing deviations do not only put the group's identity at stake (i.e., evoke identity subversion)—they actually change what the group stands for and, therefore, also reduce the extent to which group members perceive the group

to fit their self-concept. As a high fit between a person's self-concept and a certain group increases this group's attractiveness (Sassenberg, Jonas, Shah, & Brazy, 2007), norm-changing deviations likely make the group less attractive, leading members to identify less with their group. This notion is supported by schism research, showing that norm-deviations which elicited group leaving did not only evoke identity subversion, but were also associated with less identification (e.g., Sani, 2008; Sani & Pugliese, 2008).

Therefore, we assume that norm-deviations lead to escape (i.e., leaving) only when they are perceived to change (vs. not change) the group norm (*Hypothesis 3a*). This effect should be mediated by lower identification with the group and by identity subversion (*Hypothesis 3b*). We did not expect lowered identification in response to norm-deviations to play a role in predicting confrontation reactions, because we assume that confrontation serves a preventive purpose: By confronting a deviate, group members seek to prevent this person from tarnishing their group and from sustainably changing its norms. Hence, respondents will uphold their identification until they come to the conclusion that confrontation did not prevent norm-changes.

In our experiments, we consider two potential sources of norm-changes. As has been shown in schism research, norm-changes may be initiated by (deviant) leaders or group elites and their behavior (see also Hogg, van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012). Norm-changes, however, may also originate from a deviation being accepted by a significant number of regular group members, as consensual validation plays a crucial role in the development and definition of group norms (Postmes, Haslam, & Swaab, 2005). Therefore, in our studies we used norm-deviations accepted (vs. not accepted) by other members (Study 1) as well as norm-deviations by a leader (Study 2) for implementing norm-changing deviations.

In Study 1, we assessed how severe participants judged a recalled deviation to be and tested Hypotheses 1 to 3a. In Study 2, we investigated only the effect of norm-changing deviations by using a deviant leader. Going beyond Study 1, this study also investigated the mediating role of social identification for predicting leaving, thus fully testing Hypothesis 3b.

We operationalized confrontation as actual exclusion attempts (Study 1) as well as participants' intentions to communicate their disapproval to the deviate and to exclude him/her from the group (Study 2). Escape was assessed by actual decisions (Study 1) and intentions (Study 2) to leave the group in which the norm-deviation had occurred. We report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions in these studies.

2. Study 1

In this guided recall study, participants recalled a situation in which another member of their in-group had deviated from their expectations, which had either been accepted or not accepted by other group members—assuming that accepted deviations would be perceived as norm-changing. Deviation severity was rated by participants. In our instructions, we opted for not asking participants to recall strong or weak deviations to ensure that they would be able to recall the requested situation. In this study, we tested the assumption that deviations lead to identity subversion (*Hypothesis 1*) and confrontation (operationalized as participants' decision to exclude the deviate), mediated by increases in identity subversion (*Hypothesis 2*). In addition, we examined the assumption that only norm-changing deviations would lead to escape (operationalized as participants' decision to leave their group; *Hypothesis 3a*), mediated by identity subversion (first part of *Hypothesis 3b*).

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants & Design

One-hundred thirty four students were randomly allocated to the deviation-accepted or the deviation-not-accepted condition. Deviation

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