Dissent and deviance in intergroup contexts

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Deviance and dissent have different meanings and consequences depending on whether they occur in an intragroup or an intergroup context. This paper reviews literature showing how the intergroup context triggers reputational and self-definitional concerns, and how these concerns influence evaluations of, and willingness to engage in, deviance and dissent. Much of the literature highlights the tendency for people to inhibit deviance and dissent when it is visible to outsiders, or when it takes place in the context of an intergroup competition for status. However, under certain circumstances, deviance and dissent can be constructive in terms of calling attention to group norms, increasing distinctiveness, triggering reform, and promoting a healthy and smart group culture.

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Introduction

This paper deals with deviance and dissent in groups, and how people's responses to it are shaped by the intergroup context. *Deviance* is defined here as the violation of a group norm [1•], which means that no behavior is inherently deviant: killing is non-normative in most contexts, but less so for a soldier in battle. *Dissent* is defined as the expression of disagreement with group norms, group action, or a group decision [1•]. Deviance and dissent are often referred to in the same breath, but whether dissent is an example of deviance depends on context: to dispute a leader's decision might be non-normative for a soldier in war, but it is normative for an academic.

Highlighting the relative nature of deviance and dissent reminds us that context shapes what is seen to be moral, 'normal' and right. One contextual factor that is particularly important is whether the behavior occurs in an enclosed intragroup context or whether it occurs in an intergroup context. In this paper I examine recent research exploring how intergroup dynamics change the meaning of — and people's responses to — deviance and dissent. Specifically, I review literature showing how the intergroup context triggers reputational and self-definitional concerns, and how these concerns influence evaluations of, and willingness to engage in, deviance and dissent.

Deviance

Social psychological theorizing about deviance is heavily influenced by social identity theory [2]. A basic principle of the social identity approach is that people's self-concept comprises both their personal identity (the idiosyncratic memories, attitudes and behaviors that define us relative to other individuals) and their social identities, which are derived from the groups to which they belong. Furthermore, social identity theorists argue that people are drawn to groups and identities that have two features: (1) they possess positive qualities (e.g., of competence, warmth, and/or morality), and (2) they have clear and distinct group norms. In concert, these two goals help furnish people with a positive collective self-concept; one that is clear, distinct, and worthy of pride.

Deviance by ingroup members can threaten both of these motives. Where the deviance involves ostensibly negative behavior — if people within the group are incompetent, disloyal or obnoxious, for example — this represents a direct threat to the reputation of the group. Keen to maintain a positive (collective) self-image, people may feel a desire to derogate, exclude or distance themselves from the deviant group member. This tendency has been documented many times: group members are harsher in their judgments of negative behavior when it comes from an ingroup member than when the same behavior is displayed by an outgroup member (the so-called 'black sheep effect' [3–8]). On face value this seems like an inversion of the standard ingroup favoritism effect, but in fact it is driven by the same underlying motive: ingroup enhancement and protection of one's (collective) reputation.

Of course the reputational element of the 'black sheep' effect should be most pronounced when the negative behavior is witnessed by outsiders, or where it takes place in the context of an intergroup competition for status. To examine this, Chekroun and Nugier [9] had French participants read a scenario in which a French person lit up a cigarette in an ashtray-free, non-smoking room. When the deviance occurred entirely in the company of other French people, participants expressed less shame and less of a desire to intervene than when Belgian and

Swiss people were in the room. Similarly, when environmental deviance is noticed and commented on by outgroup members, ingroup members are more likely to express a willingness to follow environmental norms than when the deviance goes unnoticed or is ignored by outsiders [10,11].

This research suggests that deviance can lead to reputational damage. But recent research makes the case that the causal relationship between deviance and reputational damage can go the other way as well. The more people feel as though their social identity is being threatened, the more they endorse or engage in deviant actions like stealing, cheating and lying [12•]. The argument is that social identity threats are seen as symbolic of continued disrespect in society, which in turns makes people less motivated to internalize societal norms of 'good' conduct.

Sometimes it is not the reputation of the group that people are responding to, but rather the need to maintain tight, clear boundaries that define the group against relevant outgroups. This principle is captured by the model of subjective group dynamics [13–16] which argues that interactions with deviants are shaped by the desire to enhance or maintain the subjective validity of group norms. Importantly, then, deviance is not evaluated in isolation, but rather in the context of a salient intergroup comparison. When group members deviate from group norms, but in a way that exaggerates the difference between the ingroup and relevant outgroups, they are judged more favorably than an equally deviant target who dilutes intergroup boundaries [13,17•,18,19]. Concerns about intergroup distinctiveness might also help explain why defectors (people who leave the group to join a rival group) are judged more harshly than deserters (people who simply leave the group [5]). But it should be noted that there are occasions in which people might be motivated to *blur* intergroup boundaries; for example when ethnic minorities are focused on inclusion in the ethnic mainstream. There is some evidence that Asian Australians, for example, show a strategic preference for befriending 'boundary-blurrers' (i.e., targets who defy ethnic normative expectations) whereas White Australians do not [20].

The theorizing reviewed above points to situations in which deviants might be tolerated: when deviants help one achieve social mobility; when they help reinforce the integrity of group boundaries, and when they help the group triumph over rivals. Sometimes the latter two goals — of self-definition and status — lie in awkward competition. For example, political leaders who stray from the 'party line' may be grudgingly tolerated if their policies maximize their chances of electoral success [21,22]. Another example is the fate of positive deviants; people who are exceptionally gifted or successful within the group. Sometimes these 'tall poppies' face subtle

censure within the group, a backlash that is partly fueled by anxiety that the successful group member will leave the group and join a higher status outgroup [23]. But in the context of an intergroup competition, the positive deviant is an asset: someone who helps leverage status with respect to outgroups [24]. In sum, concerns about the integrity of group values and norms are real, but at times they may be trumped by more pragmatic concerns associated with the success of the group in intergroup competition.

Dissent
In the above section I discuss how people's construal of deviance is heavily influenced by the intergroup context. In this section I make a similar point with respect to dissent. This point has a long legacy: in his classic work on 'groupthink', Janis [25] argued that the pressure to conform is particularly pronounced when the group faces pressure from the outside; for example armed conflict. It is often assumed that dissent communicates the impression of division, an impression which emboldens the enemy. This dynamic is so frequently invoked that it has assumed in some quarters the gravity of a collective wisdom or rule: do not criticize your country in times of war (or 'support the troops'). Furthermore, it is a dynamic that can be observed in the lab: Ariyanto *et al.* [26] exposed Indonesian Muslims to criticisms that Muslims were fanatical. In a neutral context, participants were more negative toward the critic when s/he was a Christian than when s/he was a Muslim (the 'intergroup sensitivity effect' [27,28]). But after being primed with an article about inter-religious conflict, the trend reversed: the ingroup critic was rated more negatively than the outgroup critic. Similarly, minimal group experiments have found that, under certain conditions, experimentally induced intergroup conflict increases enforcement of ingroup norms [29].

The 'united we stand' mantra — so ubiquitous in the aftermath of the two wars in Iraq [30] — makes pragmatic sense. On some levels, a divided group *is* more vulnerable to outgroup attack. But as Janis and others have pointed out, unanimity brings a different set of problems [25,31]. Under some circumstances the harmony can become dysfunctional, leading groups to enter into risky and calamitous military situations. This has been reinforced by a wealth of social psychological research: groups without dissent might be harmonious, but they are not as smart or creative as groups that allow for dissent [32–34]. Furthermore, the pressure to be 'supportive' can lead to self-censorship, and the resulting repression of information can allow conflict-maintaining narratives to be left unchallenged, contributing to intractable conflicts [35,36•]. At an extreme level, the 'united we stand' philosophy can be exploited by Machiavellian governments who see intergroup conflict as a means to maintain obedience and loyalty among their citizens (this more