



## Do I want to know? How the motivation to acquire relationship-threatening information in groups contributes to paranoid thought, suspicion behavior, and social rejection

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### ABSTRACT

We investigated the psychological and social consequences associated with individuals' motivation to search for information about whether they have been indirectly harmed by members of their group. Consistent with a motivated social cognition perspective, group members who were either chronically (Study 1a) or temporally (Study 1b) high in the motivation to acquire relationship-threatening information (MARTI) made more sinister attributions in ambiguous situations and entertained more paranoid cognitions about their coworkers. Moreover, paranoid cognitions about coworkers mediated the relationship between MARTI and suspicion behaviors toward coworkers (Study 2). Consistent with a social interactionist perspective, others chose to exclude prospective group members who were high in MARTI from joining the group and planned to reject them if they became group members (Study 3). Others' social rejection of the focal group member was predicted by their anger toward group members who were high in MARTI (Study 4).

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### Introduction

The relationships we form in groups, whether in sports teams, political committees, or organizational work units, can be a source of joy, social support, and meaning that satisfies many of our most basic needs. However, these relationships can also produce distress and psychological pain if our fellow group members do things that cause us harm. As scholars in organizational behavior (Kramer, 2002), social psychology (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), and sociology (Molm & Cook, 1995) remind us, trying to figure out whether people's intentions are potentially malevolent is a fundamental problem of social life because the risk of being harmed by others is ever-present in groups.

In this paper, we propose that group members vary in their motivation to search for diagnostic information about whether other group members seek to cause them indirect harm. Drawing from theories of motivated social cognition and symbolic interactionism, we hypothesize that this motivation is associated with paranoid thought patterns and suspicion behaviors that can anger other group members and lead them to reject those who actively search for evidence that others are secretly trying to harm them.

Although seeking information about whether other people are trying to harm them can help group members reduce uncertainty, taken to an extreme, this motivational orientation can be maladaptive and lead to the very outcomes (i.e., social rejection) the information seeker wants to avoid.

We base our arguments on the observation that group members who are directly and unambiguously harmed by others (e.g., by being cursed at, publicly berated, or physically assaulted) can infer with reasonable certainty that the harm-doer's intentions were malevolent. However, many groups and organizations have strong norms against direct aggression and extreme forms of uncivil behavior (Boye & Jones, 1997). Consequently, subtle and less conspicuous acts of harm-doing (e.g., negative gossip, back-stabbing, and efforts to undermine others' performance without it being obvious to the intended target) tend to be more prevalent (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002; Kramer, 1999).

Duplicious behaviors that are intended to cause harm to others have been referred to as *indirect victimization* (Aquino, Groer, Bradfield, & Allen, 1999) or *social undermining* (Duffy et al., 2002). Since group members are more likely to harm co-workers using these subtler forms of behavior rather than more direct forms such as physical aggression, threats, or verbal abuse (Robinson, 2008; Trevino, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006), it seems prudent for group members to actively search for diagnostic

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information about whether they have been the target of such acts (Kramer, 2002). Research on information seeking suggests that scanning the environment for evidence about others' intentions can be psychologically adaptive because it reduces uncertainty and gives people a greater sense of control and predictability over their environments (Averill, 1973; Beehr & Bhagat, 1985; Coyne & Gotlib, 1983; O'Driscoll & Beehr, 1994). At some point, though, the motivation to search for information that one is being indirectly harmed can lead to paranoid thought patterns and behaviors that are socially maladaptive. We explore this possibility in this paper.

Our predictions are derived from research on close relationships, which indicates that relationship quality can be compromised by individuals who have a chronic need to acquire information about whether their partners have harmed them behind their back (Afifi, Dillow, & Morse, 2004; Ickes, Dugosh, Simpson, & Wilson, 2003). For example, such individuals report being more dissatisfied with their partners and are more likely to end relationships compared to those who are relatively less motivated to search for information that their partners have secretly harmed them (Ickes et al., 2003). Ickes et al. (2003) referred to the chronic need to find evidence of being secretly harmed as *the motivation to acquire relationship-threatening information*. We use their terminology in this paper and expect a similar phenomenon to occur in groups because group members, like partners in a close relationship, have comparable concerns about being indirectly harmed by those with whom they routinely interact.

The theoretical contributions of our research go beyond simply demonstrating the generalizability of findings from close relationships to a different kind of social relationship because we show how “the motivation to acquire relationship-threatening information in groups,” hereafter referred to as MARTI, can be maladaptive. The reason why is that it can lead to undesirable cognitive (paranoid thought patterns), behavioral (suspicion behaviors), and social (anger and social rejection) consequences. We develop our model in two parts. First, we argue that MARTI leads information seekers to engage in specific patterns of cognition and behavior that they believe will help them reduce uncertainty in group relations. These cognitions include paranoid thought patterns like the tendency to make sinister attributions in ambiguous situations (Kramer, 1994; Study 1a) and to see the self as the target of others' malevolence (Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992; Study 1b). We suggest that these paranoid thought patterns motivate suspicion behaviors, defined as behaviors meant to monitor or test group members' intentions, such as secretly following or spying on coworkers and closely monitoring coworkers' daily behavior (Study 2).

In the second part of our model, we explain how MARTI can be socially maladaptive. We apply a *symbolic interactionist* perspective (e.g., Aquino & Thau, 2009; Felson & Steadman, 1983; Glomb, 2002) to suggest that because individuals who are high in MARTI exhibit distrust and suspicion of others (tested in the first part of our model), they decrease their chances of being accepted by group members (Studies 3 and 4). Further, we suggest that the anger provoked by high MARTI individuals partly explains the relationship between MARTI and social rejection (Study 4).

#### *The motivation to acquire relationship-threatening information and paranoid thought patterns*

People are often uncertain regarding the intentions of fellow group members because it is impossible to fully fathom others' thoughts. Everyone experiences social uncertainty at times, but according to Miller (1987), people pursue different strategies for dealing with the experience. Some people tend to act as “monitors” who seek out information; others tend to act as “blunters” who avoid gathering additional information, fearing that it might increase feelings of distress. There is some evidence that being a high

monitor heightens feelings of distress, threat, and jealousy (Ickes et al., 2003). High monitors are also more likely to experience dissatisfaction and instability in their intimate relationships than are low monitors.

We extend these findings into the group domain by suggesting that some group members are more motivated than others to seek out information about whether fellow group members have said unkind, unfair, or critical things and/or revealed intimate details about them to third parties either inside or outside the group. These third party communications can negatively affect people's well-being by damaging their reputation and compromising their ability to sustain positive relations with others (Duffy et al., 2002). We contend that a possible, and perhaps unintended, consequence of being *strongly* motivated to search for information that group members have communicated harmful things about them to others is that it increases the accessibility of harm-related cognitions in the mind of the information seeker which, in turn, leads to paranoid thought patterns. We base our prediction on theories of motivated social cognition.

#### *The motivation to acquire relationship-threatening information as motivated social cognition*

We assume that MARTI is goal-driven (i.e., I want to reduce my doubts about the intentions of others so I want to know whether they have harmed me behind my back). Like other motivational goals, MARTI can either be chronically present in people's minds or be induced by the presence of situational cues (see e.g., Elliot and Church (1997), Poortvliet, Janssen, Van Yperen, and Van de Vliert (2007), for performance motivation goals; see e.g., Burger and Cooper (1979), Whitson and Galinsky (2008), for control motivation goals). In either case, the presence of a particular motivational goal prompts people to think more systematically and intensely about the goal (De Dreu & Steinel, 2006), drives the search for information consistent with the goal (Klayman & Ha, 1987), and renders other goals relatively less salient (Fiske & Taylor, 2008). One consequence of a particular goal-related concept being more cognitively salient than others is that it can bias information processing and lead to behavior that is consistent with the goal. For example, people who adopt a prosocial value orientation (i.e., those who chronically pursue the goal of equal outcomes for oneself and others) are more likely to evaluate a negotiation opponent as being considerate of their needs than people with an individualistic or competitive goal orientation (De Dreu & Van Lange, 1995). Other studies have shown that when people are motivated to attend to harmful stimuli, they are more likely to fear that others are initiating threats against them, ascribe attributions of malevolence to others, and demonstrate rigidity of thinking about these attributions (Heilbrun, 1968; Locascio & Snyder, 1975).

Motivated cognition principles suggest that MARTI focuses attention toward seeking harm-related information. Individuals who pursue this motivational goal may adopt it because they believe that having such information will allow them to reduce social uncertainty. Understanding the motivations of others can be functional because it can protect the person from potential harm-doers. However, a strong desire to know about the harmful intentions of others can trigger frequent thoughts about harm. In other words, the concept of harm becomes more accessible in the motivated individual's mind and this increased cognitive accessibility can influence other social information processing outcomes. In Studies 1a and 1b we examine two specific information processing outcomes – the sinister attribution error (Kramer, 1994) and the self-as-target bias (Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992) – both of which can be characterized as paranoid thought patterns (Colby, 1981; Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992; Kramer, 1994).

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