Going along versus getting it right: The role of self-integrity in political conformity

Kevin R. Binning [a],[*], Cameron Brick [b], Geoffrey L. Cohen [c], David K. Sherman [b]

[a] University of Pittsburgh, USA
[b] University of California, Santa Barbara, USA
[c] Stanford University, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Participants who affirmed their self-integrity were not swayed by political norms.
- Participants who affirmed their self-integrity were swayed by evidentiary data.
- The effects persisted over time and transferred to novel political stimuli.
- The effects were moderated by participants' identification with America.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

People often conform to the opinions of ingroup members, even when available evidence suggests that the group is misinformed. Following insights from the social identity approach and self-affirmation theory, it was hypothesized that people conform to salient opinions in an effort to maintain global self-integrity. In a series of experiments examining Americans' approval of President Obama and his policies, approval was consistently swayed by normative information (national polling data) but not by evidentiary information (indicators of national economic health), except under theory-predicted conditions. When participants had satisfied their sense of self-integrity with a self-affirmation exercise (Democrats in Study 1, Republicans in Study 2), or when they had low levels of American identification and thus were less concerned with national norms (Democrats and Republicans in Study 3), they showed the opposite pattern and were swayed by evidence in spite of contradicting normative information. The extent to which people are influenced by norms versus evidence in political judgment is shaped by social identity, one aspect of self-integrity. The results highlight a social psychological means to attenuate and potentially reverse conformity in the face of contradicting evidence, a finding with both practical and theoretical implications.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

We are no longer led by men. We are led around by the polls.

[Edward Bernays (1945)]

Opinion polls reflect public opinion and, through processes of social influence, can also shape it. The observation that polls can "wag the dog" and causally affect opinion was made by Edward Bernays (1891–1995), a pioneer in the field of public relations and the science of political spin (Tye, 1998; see also Ceci & Kain, 1982; Marsh, 1985; Simon, 1954).

Social psychological research has found that descriptive norms – that is, norms that describe how typical group members think, feel, or behave (Grube, Morgan, & McGree, 1986; Terry & Hogg, 1996) – can powerfully affect individual behavior (e.g., Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007), particularly when norms are regarded as neutral and authoritative (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), as polls often are (Bernays, 1945). People's susceptibility to normative social influence has implications for democratic decision-making and speaks to long-standing concerns about psychology of conformity and independence in judgment (see Asch, 1951; Cohen, 2003; Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, & Braman, 2011; Sherif, 1936). People who make evidence-based decisions that diverge from the group can play an essential role in preventing destructive group processes such as groupthink (Janis, 1982) and can halt social inertia toward what John Adams called "the tyranny of the majority" (Adams, 1794, p. 261). This paper explores

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Pittsburgh, 3103 Sennott Square, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, USA. Fax: +1 412 624 9149.
E-mail address: kbinning@pitt.edu (K.R. Binning).

conditions that foster independence in political judgment and resistance from the sway of normative information.

We offer a self-integrity approach (Steele, 1988; see also Sherman & Cohen, 2006) to understand when people are likely to conform to salient ingroup norms (normative information, such as opinion polls about the state of the economy), and when they are likely to engage in independent judgment based on probative indicators of fact (evidentiary information, such as concrete economic indicators like unemployment or housing sales). The division between normative and evidentiary information has roots in theory suggesting that people process these two types of information in qualitatively different ways (see Deustch & Gerard, 1955), and that, depending on how people construe the psychological environment, either type of information may carry judgment (e.g., Campbell & Fairey, 1989; Chen, Shechter, & Chaiken, 1996).

We argue that normative and evidentiary information are likely to produce different effects on judgment because each type of information serves unique psychological functions (e.g., Katz, 1960; Snyder & DeBono, 1985). People may use normative information for collective-level goals (to get along, to fit in), whereas they may use evidentiary information in pursuit of individual-level goals (accuracy or neutrality in judgment). Our central thesis is that people's concerns with their self-integrity in the social context will determine the type of information that they use. Integrating insights from the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Terry & Hogg, 1996; Turner & Reynolds, 2011) and self-affirmation theory (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988), we explain when and why people are likely to follow the crowd at the expense of evidence-based decision-making. We suggest that knowledge of the role of self-integrity in information processing highlights a means to halt conformity and foster independent evaluations based on salient evidentiary data.

Normative information and collective identity

People's perceptions of descriptive group norms are powerful predictors of a range of diverse outcomes, such as exercise behavior (Terry & Hogg, 1996), environmental conservation (Schultz et al., 2007), judgments of prejudice (Binning & Sherman, 2011), and likelihood of voting (Coleman, 2007). Such conformity is pervasive, in part, because conformity can be socially and evolutionarily adaptive (Coultas, 2004). Normative information helps specify how to behave in ambiguous situations, informing people about what is seen as the right way to act for "people like us" (e.g., Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1994; Binning, 2007; Hogg & Reid, 2006). Group norms provide information about how to maintain acceptance in the group and, by extension, how to avoid becoming a "black sheep" (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988). People are especially likely to conform to groups they find attractive (Jackson & Saltzstein, 1958) and to groups that have a high level of cohesion or interdependence (Deustch & Gerard, 1955). Notably, people are generally unaware of the powerful impact of normative information on their own attitudes and behavior (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Cohen, 2003; Latanè & Darley, 1970; Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2008; Ross & Ward, 1996).

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the related self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Turner & Reynolds, 2011) help explain how group norms get their power. A core assumption of the social identity approach is that the self-concept is constructed along an individual–social continuum (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), such that people pursue individual goals and behaviors (e.g., accuracy and individual performance) when self-categorized at the individual level, but they pursue group goals and behaviors (e.g., to maintain a positive social identity) when self-categorized on the social level. Definitions of the self shift fluidly along this continuum, as people define themselves as an individual in one context and as a member of a social group in the next, depending on what aspect of identity is salient in that context (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner & Reynolds, 2011).

Another core assumption of the social identity approach is that regardless of which aspect of the self-concept is salient, people have a basic motivation to maintain a positive self-concept. When collective identity is made salient, people may be compelled to go along with group norms in order to be a good group member and maintain their positive standing. When individual identity is made salient, people may instead ignore group normative information and strive to maintain a positive individual identity. In a study on group norms for physical exercise behavior, for example, people's own exercise behavior varied in line with group norms, but only among individuals who strongly identified with the group (Terry & Hogg, 1996). People with low identification, by contrast, were not affected by group norms but rather by perceptions of behavioral control, an individual-level factor. The information people attended to was determined by the immediate relevance of each type of information to the self-concept.

When norms conflict with evidence: a self-integrity approach

In many cases, average group beliefs and norms converge with available evidentiary information (see Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Insko, Drenan, Solomon, Smith, & Wade, 1983; Surowiecki, 2004). In political contexts, when norms align with evidence, normative information simply provides a reflection or barometer of reality, which is the presumptive purpose of most opinion polling. However, a critical question for both democratic decision-making and the present research is what happens when the group ignores or disregards emerging facts and evidence (e.g., Fast, Heath, & Wu, 2009). In such cases, resistance to group norms and attention to evidence could be advantageous — at least from the standpoint of people's desire to be accurate and independent decision-makers (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989). Imagine, for example, that the public tends to believe that the economy is in decline when major indicators suggest that the economy is on the rebound. If someone is asked for their opinion about the state of the economy, they would be more accurate if they followed the economic evidence and ignored the bubble created by popular consensus. However, as scholars have noted for well over a century (Asch, 1951; Le Bon, 1897), it is often difficult to go against the group. When categorized at the collective level, going against group norms requires going against a part of one's self (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Self-affirmation theory (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988) offers a perspective to understand how people may transcend the pressure of collective identities on judgment. The theory suggests that although concerns with individual and collective identity may fluctuate from context to context, an overarching psychological goal is to maintain a global sense of self-integrity: a general feeling of being efficacious, adequate, and "good enough" (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman, 2013; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). We argue in the present research that this general goal guides what people attend to in their environment. In some situations, people are concerned more with collective goals and are therefore likely to rely on group norms in judgment. In other situations, people may feel less attached to the group norms and instead have an interest in being accurate or independent (e.g., a neutral judge or referee). However, common to both of these situations is people's concern with self-integrity. We hypothesize that regardless of whether people rely on normative or evidentiary information, they do so in an effort to maintain global self-integrity. Following this reasoning, by manipulating global self-integrity it should be possible to shift the manner in which people process information. Under certain circumstances, manipulating self-integrity should halt conformity and orient people toward independent, evidence-based decision-making.

To illustrate how global self-integrity concerns might shape conformity and independence, we use the experimental paradigm developed