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The impact of individualist and collectivist group norms on evaluations of dissenting group members ☆

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Abstract

Two experiments were conducted to investigate the impact of individualist and collectivist norms on evaluations of dissenting group members. In the first experiment ($N = 113$), group norms prescribing individualism or collectivism were manipulated and participants were asked to evaluate a group member who expressed an attitude dissenting from or concordant with the group. In line with predictions, group members with concordant attitudes were evaluated more positively than group members with dissenting attitudes when norms prescribed collectivism. However, for high identifiers, we found an attenuation of the preference for concordant over dissenting attitudes when norms prescribed individualism. These findings were replicated in a second experiment ($N = 87$), where dissent was operationalized in a way that did not reveal the content of the attitude. The discussion focused on the importance of individualist norms for broadening latitudes of acceptable group member behavior.

Keywords: Individualism; Collectivism; Group Norms; Dissent; Social identity; Conformity

Introduction

Social psychology has had an enduring interest in deviance (Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Henson, 2000; Cohen, 1959; Durkheim, 1893/1984; Festinger, Gerard, Hymovitch, Kelley, & Raven, 1952; Festinger & Thibaut, 1951; Levine, 1989; Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Martinez-Taboada, 1998; Moscovici, 1976; Schachter, 1951). An early definition of deviance was "behavior which violates… expectations which are shared" (Cohen, 1959, p. 462). Such a definition focuses on the social context in which deviant behavior is observed and implies that deviants are punished because their behaviors and beliefs endanger the collective values and standards of a particular group or community (Marques, Paez, & Abrams, 1998). Deviance cannot exist in isolation from the social world—it is defined by and embedded in a social context involving the shared expectations of others. This was further illustrated by Goode (2002), who argued that what is deviant "shifts around according to a society's, a group's, or a social circle's rules, norms, or standards, and how those rules, norms, or standards translate into behavior" (p. 10).

Deviance can be defined broadly as non-adherence to cultural or societal codes (e.g., drug use, criminality) or more narrowly as violations of specific group norms (see Levine, 1989). Whereas the former type of deviance is likely to cause widespread rejection, deviating from specific group norms often leads only to rejection by that group (e.g., expressing liberal attitudes in the conservative party). We focus here on the latter form of deviance and seek to investigate whether there are normative

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prescriptions within groups that affect whether or not the expression of dissent is considered deviant. We predict that dissent will be negatively evaluated in groups that hold collectivist norms, because such behavior is interpreted as a rejection of ingroup standards. In contrast, we predict that latitudes of acceptable behavior will be broader in individualist groups, because these groups encourage individual differentiation. Thus, we argue that group norms promoting individualism affect the acceptance of differences within the group and alter the meaning of deviance (e.g., Goode, 2002). Indeed, individualist behavior in groups with individualist norms may be seen as a way to produce social change, conflict resolution, innovation, and creativity (e.g., Farrell, 2001; Moscovici, 1976). Dissent can thus be viewed as acceptable behavior in such groups.

Deviance and social groups

The idea that groups pressure their members to adopt group attitudes and values has been present within social psychology since the early days of research on norm formation (Sherif, 1936) and conformity (Asch, 1956; Newcomb, 1965). This pressure was said to reflect a desire to achieve subjective validation of personal beliefs (i.e., social reality testing; Festinger, 1954), or the fear that dissent would undermine the group's ability to achieve its goals (i.e., group locomotion motive; Festinger, 1954). When this pressure fails, groups may downgrade or even exclude deviant members (e.g., Festinger et al., 1952; Festinger & Thibaut, 1951; Schachter, 1951).

The social identity perspective (Hogg, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1999; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) has provided further insight into the treatment of deviant members by groups. According to this perspective, when a person identifies with a self-inclusive group, his or her self-concept becomes enmeshed with that group. The more someone identifies with a group, the more that person's self-perception shifts from being a unique individual to being a group member whose behavior is guided by norms. When a group's members do not behave according to its norms, their behavior reflects negatively on the group and/or erodes the distinctiveness of the group (Abrams et al., 2000). As a result, distancing deviants from groups serves to maintain a positive and distinct group identity for other members (e.g., Marques et al., 1998; Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988).

Deviants are not always downgraded

Although the stigma of deviance has long been acknowledged, less consideration has been given to the conditions under which deviance might be tolerated by groups (Coser, 1962). This is surprising, because Western culture generally espouses tolerance for individual differentiation (e.g., Triandis, 1995). There is thus a mismatch between the focus of social psychological research and the values of the cultures in which most of the research on deviance has been conducted.

An exception can be found in the work of Moscovici (1976), who discussed the fact that groups can be governed by norms of originality that serve to encourage divergence and innovation. Moscovici and Lage (1978), for example, found that the more group members were primed with a norm of originality, the more they defended a deviant response in a color perception task. Other lines of research have revealed additional contexts in which sanctions against deviant behavior are waived. For example, there is research showing that leaders are often expected to deviate from traditional roles in order to adopt innovative practices and move a group in new directions (e.g., Bass, 1998; Hollander, 1958). Evaluations of deviant behavior can also be more positive if people observe tolerance toward that behavior among other group members (Dedrick, 1978) or if deviance increases the overall success of a group (Kelley & Shapiro, 1954). Finally, some group members are deviant because they over-achieve (Hogg, Fielding, & Darley, 2005; Schmitt, Silvia, & Branscombe, 2000) or endorse group norms beyond what would be considered normal (e.g., Abrams et al., 2000), yet these people are still regarded as relatively good group members. These examples point to an acceptance of deviants whose behavior does not detract from the positive identity of a group or prevent the group from reaching its goals.

Individualism, collectivism, and deviance

We are interested in another factor that might affect the acceptance of deviance in groups, namely individualism–collectivism. Although individualism and collectivism have frequently been interpreted as properties of countries, embedded within the cultural fabric of geographical areas (e.g., Hofstede, 1980), it is clear that micro-cultures of individualism and collectivism can emerge in all sorts of groups, including professions, organizations, and work groups (McAuliffe, Jetten, Hornsey, & Hogg, 2003). The dimension of individualism–collectivism refers to the prescriptions and expectations a group might have about the relationship between the individual and the collective (see reviews by Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Kim & Markus, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989, 1995; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). In collectivist groups, there is considerable emphasis on relationships, the maintenance of harmony, and "sticking with" the group, even when doing so comes at considerable personal cost. Members of collectivist groups are socialized to avoid conflict, to empathize with others, and to avoid drawing attention to themselves. In contrast, members of individualist cultures tend to define