Highlights

- Deviance / dissent have different meanings and consequences in intergroup contexts
- Intergroup contexts trigger reputational and definitional concerns within groups
- These concerns often cause censuring of deviance and dissent in intergroup contexts
- Despite this, deviance / dissent can help construct robust and smart group cultures
Dissent and deviance in intergroup contexts

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Abstract

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.
Dissent and deviance in intergroup contexts

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 turn 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, 17-19]. 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-blurrs” (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, Hornsey, and Gallois [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 sinister dynamic is discussed by the sociologist Coser [37] and dramatized by George Orwell’s 1984).

Interestingly, work by Packer [38,39] suggests that it is the people who care most about the group who are most likely to engage in dissent when they feel the group has strayed from its core values, particularly when broad, long-term goals of the groups are salient [40,41]. Furthermore, there is recent evidence suggesting that this process of constructive dissent may not leave the group vulnerable to attack from enemies. Across four studies, Saguy and Halperin [42] exposed Israeli Jews to examples of Palestinians criticizing their own group (i.e., engaging in ingroup dissent). Rather than emboldening the Jewish participants to exaggerate their negativity to the outgroup, the example of Palestinian heterogeneity appeared to “unfreeze” hostile intergroup perceptions, leading to increased
willingness to accept Palestinians’ perspectives on the conflict and increased hope that the intergroup conflict could be resolved.

Despite this, it seems that many people have instinctively internalized an understanding that one should not “air one’s dirty laundry”. For example, strongly identified group members (but not low identifiers) refrain from criticizing their groups when they know their comments can be witnessed by outgroup members, an effect mediated by concern over reputational damage [43]. But what happens when ingroup members ignore this rule? Typically these studies show that ingroup members who criticize their group or express a non-normative attitude are downgraded more when they take their comments to an outgroup audience than when they keep their comments “in-house” [44-46]. Criticisms made within the group are also seen to be more appropriate and less damaging than when the same comments are made to outsiders. Interestingly, though, the critic’s choice of audience has no reliable effect on how constructive the comments are perceived to be, or on participants’ willingness to agree with the substance of the comments. Indeed, there is some tentative evidence that high identifiers are particularly likely to respond positively (in terms of agreement and a perceived need for reform) when criticisms of the ingroup are made to outsiders. This reinforces a point made earlier; that intergroup contexts magnify the possibility of reputational damage. Strongly identified ingroup members can respond to this damage by engaging in denial of the message and/or demonization of the messenger. But the criticism data reflect the fact that this is a short-term strategy, and that the best way of avoiding reputational damage is to engage in genuine and enduring reform [47].

**Conclusions**

This review summarizes a range of studies demonstrating that the intragroup or intergroup nature of the context fundamentally shapes the meaning of deviance and dissent. Much of the research suggests that a salient intergroup context triggers reputational and self-
definitional concerns, which in turn makes people more negative in the face of deviance and dissent (and by extension less likely to engage in it). But this literature sits alongside a rapidly growing literature highlighting the counter-point: that under certain circumstances deviance and dissent can be constructive for the group in terms of calling attention to norms, increasing distinctiveness, triggering reform, and promoting a healthy and smart culture. Deviants and dissenters have long had reputations – even within the social psychological literature – as the disloyal ones who compromise the group’s functioning. But to the extent that deviants and dissenters catalyze self-reflection and reform, they can be seen as extremely useful. Indeed, those deviants and dissenters who risk personal censure in order to promote positive change in the collective can be seen as the very embodiment of group loyalty.
References

[1] *Jetten J, Hornsey MJ: **Deviance and dissent within groups.** Annual Review of Psychology 2014, **65**: 461–485. This review focuses on motivations that group members have to deviate and dissent, and the functional as well as dysfunctional effects of deviance and dissent. It aims for a balanced account of deviance and dissent, highlighting when such behaviors will be encouraged as well as when they will be punished.


[12] * Belmi P, Barragan RC, Neale MA, Cohen GL: Threats to social identity can trigger social deviance. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2015, 41: 467-484. Six studies demonstrate that perceiving disrespect toward the ingroup can cause increased levels of lying, cheating and stealing. Whereas most research examines deviance as a cause of social identity concerns, this paper shows how deviance can be a consequence of social identity concerns.


[17] * Chang JW, Turan N, Chow RM: A desire for deviance: The influence of leader normativeness and inter-group competition on group member support. *J Exp Soc Psychol* 2014, 56: 36-49. Most research shows that in intergroup contexts deviance is censured. In 3 studies this paper shows circumstances when the opposite is true. In a highly competitive intergroup context (an election) people prefer an “extreme” leader over a normative leader, a preference that is driven by a need for intergroup distinctiveness.


[31] Tsintsadze-Maass E, Maass RW: Groupthink and terrorist radicalization. Terrorism and Political Violence 2014, 26: 735-758. The authors examine the history of the Weather Underground – an American terrorist organization in the 1960s – to make the case that terrorism can be both rational and irrational. “Irrational” terrorism is examined
through the lens of Janis’s notion of groupthink, a major component of which is the prioritization of cohesion over dissent.


[38] * Packer DJ: On being with us and against us: a normative conflict model of dissent in social groups. Pers Soc Psychol Rev 2008, 12: 50-72. Article proposes a normative conflict model, which distinguishes between nonconformity due to dissent and nonconformity due to disengagement. The model predicts that strongly identified members challenge group norms when they experience conflict between norms and
important standards for behavior, especially when they perceive norms as being harmful to the group.


[40] * Packer DJ, Fujita K, Chasteen AL: *The motivational dynamics of dissent decisions: A goal-conflict approach*. *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 2014, 5: 27-34. The authors propose that, when deciding whether to engage in dissent, group members weigh up short-term stability goals and longer-term reform goals. Across two studies, they show that when long-term goals are highlighted, people who identify strongly with the group are more willing to engage in dissent than are low identifiers.


[42] * Saguy T, Halperin E: Exposure to outgroup members criticizing their own group facilitates intergroup openness. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2014, 40: 791-802. It is sometimes presumed that criticizing one’s group in times of war will weaken the group strategically. This paper presents a counter-point: When Israelis read about Palestinians criticizing their own group, Israelis reported increased willingness to accept Palestinians’ perspectives on the conflict, and increased hope that the intergroup conflict could be resolved.


A mechanistic view of the social identity perspective might imply that ingroup critics are doomed to face defensiveness because they are attacking a fundamental part of people’s self-concept. This chapter critically examines this notion, examining how ingroup criticism can be motivated by – and perceived as – a form of group loyalty.