Do ambiguous normative ingroup members increase tolerance for deviants?

Ana C. Leite[1], Isabel R. Pinto[2,3], and José M. Marques[2,3]

[1]University of Kent

[2]University of Porto

[3]Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon

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Author notes

Ana C. Leite, Centre for the Study of Group Processes, School of Psychology, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK. Isabel R. Pinto and José M. Marques, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Porto, Portugal and Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon, Portugal.

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Ana C. Leite. E-mail: A.Castro-Leite@kent.ac.uk

Abstract

Subjective group dynamics theory (Marques, Paez, & Abrams, 1998) proposes that people derogate deviant ingroup members who threaten the positive value of their social identity. In one experiment we tested the idea that derogation of ingroup deviants does not occur when the normative member is ambiguously committed to the group. Participants judged one normative and one deviant ingroup or outgroup members. According to conditions, the normative target showed either high or low commitment to the group. As predicted, the deviant and normative ingroup targets were, respectively, derogated and upgraded relative to their outgroup counterparts only when the normative member was unambiguously committed to the ingroup, whereas the ingroup deviant was less derogated when paired with an ambiguous normative member. We discuss these results in light of subjective group dynamics theory.

[130 words]

Keywords: deviance in groups, tolerance for deviance, black sheep effect, subjective group dynamics

Do ambiguous normative ingroup members increase tolerance for deviants?

Subjective group dynamics theory (SGDT; Marques, Paez, & Abrams, 1998; Pinto, Marques, Levine, & Abrams, 2010) proposes that people derogate ingroup deviants because they jeopardize the group's positive image and thus threaten individuals' social identity. According to Marques and Paez (1994), people derogate ingroup deviants in an attempt to strike a balance between their motivation to uphold a positive social identity and the fact that the deviants put such identity at stake. By the same token, they upgrade normative ingroup members because these members enhance social identity. In support of this idea, evidence on the Black Sheep Effect (e.g. Marques & Paez, 1994; Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988) shows that individuals judge desirable and undesirable ingroup members, respectively more favorably and more unfavorably than similar outgroup members, especially when their social identity is threatened or insecure (Marques, Abrams & Paez, 1998; cf. also Marques, 2004; Marques & Paez, 2008).

Research on the Black Sheep Effect has focused on the study of the conditions in which deviant ingroup members represent a relevant threat, and normative ingroup members yield relevant support, to positive social identity. These conditions typically include the activation of a prescriptive focus upon group members' behavior (Marques, Paez, & Abrams, 1998), the existence of low intragroup cohesiveness around a violated norm (Marques, Abrams & Serôdio, 2001), the lack of social validation of that norm outside the group (Marques et al., 2001), or the intragroup status of normative and deviant members (Pinto et al., 2010). In addition, the focus of such research was directed at the negative impact of deviant members on people's social identity. To our knowledge, no attention has been paid to the role of normative members in this process. The present study attempts to fill this gap. We propose that the Black Sheep Effect occurs not only because people recognize that deviant

ingroup members threaten their social identity, but also because they recognize that normative ingroup members offer strong support to the norm that justifies a reaction against the deviants.

Normative ingroup members are important, because they inform about the appropriate behavior expected from group members (Marques, Abrams, Paez & Taboada, 1998). As a result, people should be more motivated to exert normative pressure upon ingroup deviants, as opposed to avoiding these deviants, only when there is high ingroup support for that norm (cf. also Frings, Abrams, Randsley de Moura, & Marques, 2010). Indeed, the adoption of a prescriptive focus towards deviant ingroup members would depend on the norm's perceived resilience to deviant threats. Such resilience should depend both on whether salient members adopt normative conduct, but also on the perceived commitment of these members to the norm they embody.

Interestingly, as a rule, previous research has characterized normative members as people who adopt socially desirable conduct, or endorse generic prescriptive norms (Marques et al., 2001) and, simultaneously hold a positive orientation towards the group. This may have led participants to consider target members' desirable or undesirable behavior as the equivalent of members' commitment or lack of commitment, respectively, to the group. However, we can conceive of situations in which group members adopt normative behavior and, yet, are not genuinely committed to their group. Concomitantly, in other situations group members may be genuinely committed to the group, and yet adopt behavior that is deemed deviant by other group members (cf. Packer, 2008). If so, in many social situations, reaction to deviance may depend on the level of commitment that normative members exhibit. Therefore, it may be interesting to separate the normative component of the behavior from the group commitment attitude of the member that adopts such behavior. That is, to examine

how the normative member level of commitment to the group affects people's judgments of these and of deviant members, as well as their stronger or weaker adherence to the norm.

In this paper, we propose that ambiguous normative members (i.e. members who adopt the expected normative behavior whilst showing little commitment to the group) should not be perceived as a strong normative support to allow for a prescriptive focus. As a result, one should not observe a black sheep effect in such conditions. Indeed, because of their lack of commitment to the group, ambiguous normative members should be perceived as non-referential for the ingroup normative position. In this case, ingroup deviants should be perceived with relative leniency, and the normative members should not be strongly upgraded relative to situations in which normative members' behavior and commitment to the group are in line with each other.

Overview and Hypotheses

Participants were university students who believed that students from their university were involved in the evaluation of the Bologna Process. They were presented with one normative and one deviant targets who were students either from their own school (Ingroup) of from the other school (Outgroup). Depending on the experimental condition, the normative target either showed high (Unambiguous condition) or low (Ambiguous condition) commitment to their school.

In the Unambiguous condition, we expected participants to derogate the deviant ingroup target relative to the deviant outgroup target, and to upgrade the normative ingroup target relative to the normative outgroup target (Black Sheep Hypothesis). In turn, the normative and the deviant ingroup targets should be less positively and less negatively judged (respectively) in the Ambiguous condition than in the Unambiguous condition. Following the

same reasoning, participants should agree more and disagree more, respectively, with the normative and the deviant targets in the Ingroup/Unambiguous condition than in the remaining conditions (Agreement Hypothesis). Finally, as the presence of an unambiguous normative target (in the Ingroup/Unambiguous condition) increases the likelihood that the normative position can be validated, we expected differential agreement between normative and deviant position to be associated with evaluative differentiation between the normative and the deviant targets especially in the Ingroup/Unambiguous condition. Evaluations of an ambiguous normative ingroup member should be negatively influenced by these members' lack of commitment to the group, and thus, less positive than evaluations of normative ingroup members whose normative behavior emerges in parallel with a strong commitment to the group.

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 26 female and 22 male students (N = 48) who were enrolled in one of two schools at the University of Porto (Arts and Architecture). Participants were randomly assigned to conditions. The design was a 2 (Group: Ingroup *vs.* Outgroup) X 2 (Normative Target's Commitment: Unambiguous *vs.* Ambiguous) X 2 (Targets' Position: Normative *vs.* Deviant). Group and Normative Target's Commitment (Commitment) are between-participants factors, whereas Targets' Position is a within-participant factor.

Procedure

One experimenter informed participants that she was working for a department of their University whose mission was to track progress in the implementation of the Bologna Process. She proceeded to inform the participants that, as a part of this evaluation process,

students would be invited to take part in a series of forthcoming group discussions on important aspects of the Bologna Process, and that student teams were being created for that purpose. Participants, the experimenter went on, were taking part of a validation process, in which they were asked to help establishing whether the opinions previously voiced by the students who had been selected to participate in the teams were representative of the opinions of the students of their respective schools. Participants were then handed two folders, each concerning one target student (normative target and deviant target) whom, supposedly, had participated in recent discussion meeting. In each folder, participants could find information about the target's school, and target's opinion about the involvement of students in the Bologna evaluation process. In the normative target's folder participants could also read information conveying the target's position regarding the participation of ingroup students (Commitment manipulation).

Group manipulation. According to experimental conditions, both targets were presented as studying either in the same school as the participant (Ingroup condition) or in the other school (Outgroup condition).

Targets' position manipulation. The normative target endorsed a socially desirable position ("University students should be involved in the evaluation of the Bologna Process") and the deviant target endorsed a socially undesirable position ("University students are not mature enough to participate in the evaluation of the Bologna Process"). These positions were adapted from Pinto et al. (2010).

Commitment manipulation. In order to manipulate the normative target's commitment to their group, participants learned that this target either supported or opposed the involvement of own-school students in that process. In the Ambiguous condition, the normative target agreed with the normative position, but stated "the students of my faculty

should neither take part in this process, nor in the student's committee that will represent our University". In the Unambiguous condition, participants read no statement by the normative target[1].

Measures. Participants answered to three sets of questions tapping, respectively, Social Identification, Agreement with Targets' Position, and Targets' Evaluation.

Social identification. In order to control for a priori differences regarding social identification, participants answered to the following questions (*1 = not at all; 7 =*

[1] It might be argued that participants could perceive the unambiguous normative member as more normative than the ambiguous normative member. As a consequence, it would be the normative character and not the group representativeness of the normative member that would influence participants' judgments. In order to assure the meaning of Commitment manipulation, we conducted a post-experimental study on a different sample in which we manipulated Commitment of normative ingroup targets and measured perceived normativeness and ingroup representativeness of these targets. We expected both normative targets to be perceived as equally normative, and the ambiguous normative targets as less representative of the group, suggesting they are less central in the group. Results supported our expectations; for target's normativeness: ambiguous condition (M = 5.41, SD = 1.46), unambiguous condition (M = 5.69, SD = 0.90), $t(48) = 0.18$, $p = .417$, $d = 0.06$, 95% CI [-0.41, 0.97]; for target's representativeness: ambiguous condition (M = 4.24, SD = 1.45), unambiguous condition (M = 5.04, SD = 1.10), $t(48) = 2.20$, $p = .033$, $d = 0.64$, 95% CI [0.07, 1.53]. Thus, the Commitment manipulation has impact on the perception of how representative of the group this target is and not on how normative s/he is.

completely): "How competent are the other students from your Faculty?", "How similar are you to the other students from your Faculty?", "As a student, how representative of your Faculty do you consider yourself to be?", and "How much do you identify with your Faculty?". We averaged the four items to a Social Identification score (Cronbach's alpha = .70).

Agreement with targets' position. After the experimental manipulations we asked participants "How much do you agree with Student A's/ B's (normative/ deviant) position?" (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*).

Targets' evaluations. Participants evaluated the targets on five 7-point scales (1 = *bad fellow, unreasonable, selfish, boring, and disloyal;* 7 = *good fellow, reasonable, altruistic, stimulating,* and *loyal*). For each participant, we averaged each targets' evaluations on these traits to create a Normative Target (Cronbach's alpha = .88), and a Deviant Target (Cronbach's alpha = .86) scores.

Results

Social Identification

On average, participants identified with the ingroup, $M = 5.36$, $SD = 0.74$. We conducted a Group X Commitment ANOVA on the Social Identification score. This analysis yielded a significant effect of Group, $F(1,44) = 5.51$, $p = .023$, $\eta_p^2 = .111$ (remaining effects $Fs < 3.09$, $ps \geq .086$, $\eta_p^2 s \leq .066$). We, thus, controlled for potential effects of a priori differences in social identification on all our dependent measures using a regression analysis (Muller, Yzerbyt, & Judd, 2008). The regression analysis revealed no significant effects of social identification on the model terms (lowest $B = -0.43$, $SE = 0.41$, $\beta = -0.21$, $p = .303$). Social Identification did not significantly change any effects on the dependent measures.

Agreement With Targets' Position

We expected participants in the Ingroup/ Unambiguous condition to agree more and to disagree more, respectively, with the normative and with the deviant targets' position than would participants in the remaining conditions. To test this prediction, we ran a Group X Commitment X Targets' Position ANOVA on Agreement with the normative and deviant targets' position scores (see Table 1). We found a significant effect of Agreement ($F1,44 = 80.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .648$), showing that participants agreed more with the normative ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.34$) than with the deviant target ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.23$). In addition, in partial support of our prediction, the significant Commitment X Targets' Position effect ($F1,44 = 15.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .259$) shows that participants agreed less with the normative target in the Ambiguous than in the Unambiguous condition (respectively, $M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.44$, and $M = 6.13$, $SD = 0.84$), $t(46) = 3.87$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.14$, 95% CI [-2.00, -0.63]. However, contrary to what we expected, there was no difference in Agreement with the deviant target between the Ambiguous and Unambiguous conditions ($t46 = 1.50$, $p = .140$, $d = 0.44$, 95% CI [-0.18, 1.23]). The remaining effects were non-significant (F always ≤ 2.57, $ps \geq .116$, $\eta_p^2 s \leq .032$).

We did not obtain a significant full interaction. However, the mean pattern obtained across conditions is consistent with our hypothesis, especially regarding agreement with the normative target. We thus conducted independent-samples *t*-tests between conditions (all possible combinations). These tests show that participants agreed more with the normative target in the Ingroup/Unambiguous condition than in the remaining conditions ($t23 = 4.49$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.87$, 95% CI [1.05, 2.72]). Conversely, the obtained pattern of means does not support our prediction that participants would agree less with the deviant target in the

Ingroup/Unambiguous condition than in all other conditions (*t* always ≤ 1.56, $p \geq .136$, d = 0.72, 95% CI [-1.59, 0.23]).

In sum, these results provide partial support to our hypothesis. Specifically, they indicate that participants tended to agree more with the normative position when the normative target is an ingroup member and holds an unambiguous position, than with a normative ambiguous ingroup member or with any normative outgroup member.

Targets' Evaluations

We expected the black sheep effect to occur only in the Unambiguous condition. Concomitantly, we predicted that the deviant ingroup target should be less negatively evaluated, and the normative ingroup target should be less positively evaluated, in the Ambiguous than in the Unambiguous condition. To test these predictions, we conducted a Group X Commitment ANOVA on the Normative and Deviant targets' scores (see Table 2). This analysis yielded significant effects of Targets' Position ($F1,44 = 24.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .360$), Commitment X Targets' Position ($F1,44 = 10.70$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .196$), and Group X Commitment X Targets' Position ($F1,44 = 15.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .257$). Group, Commitment, Group X Targets' Position, and Group X Commitment (F always ≤ 2.36, $ps \geq .132$, η_p^2s ≤ .051) were not significant.

The Targets' Position effect shows that participants evaluated the normative target more favorably ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.09$) than the deviant target ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.00$). More interestingly, the Commitment X Targets' Position interaction shows that participants only differentiated between the evaluation of the normative ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 0.98$) and deviant ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.75$) targets in the Unambiguous condition, $t(23) = 4.94$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.23$, 95% CI [0.62, 1.51] (for the Ambiguous condition: normative target [$M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.18$]

and the deviant target [M = 4.63, SD = 1.19], t23= 1.26, p = .220, d = 0.24, 95% CI [-0.18, 0.76]).

In order to test our black sheep hypothesis, we decomposed the significant Group X Commitment X Targets' Position interaction according to the Commitment factor. As expected, Group X Targets' Position was significant within the Unambiguous condition, $F(1,45) = 11.14$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .198$, but not within the Ambiguous condition, $F(1,45) = 1.36$, $p = .249$, $\eta_p^2 = .029$. Also as predicted, in the Unambiguous condition, the ingroup normative target was more positively evaluated (M = 5.81, SD = 1.01) than the outgroup normative target (M = 4.88, SD = 0.75), $t(22) = 2.57$, p = .017, d = 1.10, 95% CI [0.18, 1.67]. The ingroup deviant target (M = 3.94, SD = 0.62) tended to be more depreciated than the outgroup deviant target (M = 4.50, SD = 0.78), $t(22) = 1.92$, p = .068, d = 0.82, 95% CI [-1.17, 0.44].

We also decomposed the interaction according to the Group factor. Commitment X Targets' Position was significant only in the Ingroup condition, $F(1,45) = 22.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .336$ (Outgroup condition: F1,45 = 0.19, $p = .667$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$). Participants evaluated the normative ingroup target positively, regardless of the targets' commitment, $t(19) = 1.47$, p = .159, d = 0.67, 95% CI [-1.92, 0.34] (Unambiguous condition, M = 5.81, SD = 1.01; Ambiguous condition, M = 5.02, SD = 1.44). More importantly, and as predicted, participants evaluated the ingroup deviant target more positively in the Ambiguous condition (M = 5.11, SD = 1.19) than in the Unambiguous condition (M = 3.94, SD = 0.62), $t(19) = 2.87$, p = .010, d =1.32, 95% CI [0.32, 2.02]. These results fully support our predictions. We found an enhancement of the normative ingroup member and a derogation of the deviant ingroup member as compared to similar outgroup members (the black sheep pattern) only when the normative member was perceived as being committed to the ingroup. Moreover, the deviant

ingroup member was derogated only when this member was accompanied with an unambiguous normative member.

Association Between Agreement With Targets' Position and Targets' Evaluations

We predicted that the association between participants' differential agreement with the normative and deviant targets and differential evaluation of these same targets would be stronger in the Ingroup/Unambiguous condition than in the other conditions. The correlations between these two scores within experimental conditions are consistent with this prediction. In the Ingroup/Unambiguous condition, the more participants disagreed with the deviant target and agreed with the normative target, the more they differentiated their evaluations of these targets, $r = .59$, $p = .055$, $N = 11$ (remaining conditions r always $<.14$, *ns*). This suggests that agreement with the normative and deviant positions are associated with targets' evaluations, especially when the normative ingroup member is perceived as committed to the group.

Discussion

Results are partially consistent with our predictions. Participants agreed more with the opinion espoused by a normative unambiguous target than by an ambiguous normative target. However, the present results do not support our prediction that participants should disagree more with the deviant position when the deviant ingroup target emerged with a normative unambiguous ingroup target. These results indicate that uncommitted normative targets are not sufficient to trigger opinion change towards the deviant opinion, but enhance the positive influential role of an unambiguous normative member to potentiate adherence to the normative position.

Regarding evaluations of the targets, results support the idea that participants are more lenient towards deviant ingroup members when these members emerge in parallel with ambiguous normative ingroup members. Indeed, we observed a black sheep effect only when there was unambiguous normative support to the ingroup. Further, the deviant ingroup target was more positively judged in the Ambiguous than in the Unambiguous condition. Finally, the positive association between evaluative differentiation and the difference in agreement with the normative and the deviant targets found in the Ingroup/Unambiguous condition suggests that it was in this condition that participants more strongly attempted to validate the normative position.

Taken together, the results offer preliminary, yet compelling, evidence in support of the idea that when they face deviant ingroup members, individuals' reaction to these members will depend on the extent to which normative ingroup members become referential for supporting the ingroup position by showing their commitment to the group. Such commitment seems to facilitate participants' tendency to address the nefarious effects of deviance, by upgrading the normative and derogating the deviant ingroup targets, and, simultaneously increasing their agreement with the normative position at stake. Conversely, people may be willing to tolerate deviant members when the group lacks the necessary normative support provided by committed members.

Previous research has found the black sheep effect to occur only in conditions in which both the normative and the deviant targets are highly representative ingroup members (Pinto et al., 2010). We believe that the present work extends Pinto and colleagues' findings by highlighting that derogation of a deviant member occurs to the extent that the normative position is supported by a committed group member. In face of an ambiguous normative member, individuals show greater leniency towards the deviant member. Thus, the attitudinal

(commitment) component is an important factor in determining whether the group has an unambiguous and sufficient normative support to highlight the prescriptive attribute of the violated norm, and thus, to react to deviance. Our results support the idea that normative members who are less committed to the group might not be enough to trigger the black sheep effect. In turn, they may lead to lenient judgments of deviant members. Although ambiguous normative members are not sufficient to trigger opinion change towards the deviant position, they determine tolerance for deviant positions.

These results may have important implications both for SGDT, which inspired the present study, and for the understanding of reaction to deviance. SGDT proposes that in the presence of ingroup deviant members, individuals try to re-establish the group's positive value by engaging in the Black Sheep Effect (Marques et al., 1988). Although recent research has focused on the conditions in which ingroup deviants are tolerated (e.g. Abrams, Randsley de Moura, & Travaglino, 2013; cf. also Abrams, Randsley de Moura, Marques, & Hutchison, 2008; Randsley de Moura & Abrams, 2013), this research did not pay attention to the impact that normative members have on deviants' evaluation. Our results suggest that individuals' recognition that normative members are committed to the ingroup is crucial for their engagement towards protecting the group against the risks of deviance, both by derogating the deviants and by increasing their adherence to the norm that the deviants are violating. Although, clearly, more conclusive research is required to elucidate this issue, we believe that the present study offers a potentially valuable extension to SGDT and to our understanding of the processes involved in the way groups react to deviance.

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Table 1

Agreement with Targets' Position as a function of Group and Commitment

		Group	
Commitment	Target	Ingroup	Outgroup
Ambiguous	Normative	4.86 (1.67)	4.79 (1.31)
	Deviant	3.63 (0.66)	3.58 (1.44)
Unambiguous	Normative	6.65 (0.45)	5.69 (0.86)
	Deviant	2.95 (1.23)	3.18 (1.34)

Table 2

Evaluation of Targets as a function of Group and Commitment

		Group	
Commitment	Target	Ingroup	Outgroup
Ambiguous	Normative	5.02 (1.44)	4.84 (1.00)
	Deviant	5.11 (1.19)	4.29 (1.10)
Unambiguous	Normative	5.81 (1.01)	4.88 (0.75)
	Deviant	3.94 (0.62)	4.50 (0.78)