“How many bad apples does it take to spoil the whole barrel?”: Social exclusion and toleration for bad apples

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In social dilemmas, where personal welfare is in conflict with collective welfare, there are inherent incentives to act non-cooperatively. Moreover, there is evidence that the example of a few uncooperative group members (“bad apples”) is more influential than the example of comparable numbers of cooperative members (a bad apple effect). Two studies are reported that examine the functional relationship between the number of likely bad apples and individual cooperation, and whether and when the threat of social exclusion for uncooperative behavior may effectively counter the temptation to follow the example of such “bad apples”. It is shown that (a) the threat of exclusion is sufficient to counter the temptation to follow a few bad apples’ example, (b) such threats cannot, however, overcome the cooperation-degrading effects of large numbers (e.g., a majority) of bad apples, and (c) the effectiveness of such threats may be greater in relatively smaller groups.

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Our current focus is on identifying moderating factors or boundary conditions for this relationship. One obvious moderation question is whether uncooperative group members have greater impact on our behavior than equally-extreme cooperative ones. Following Colman (1982) and Ouwerkerk, Kerr, Gallucci, and Van Lange (2005), we will refer to this as the bad apple effect. A number of scholars (Colman, 1982, 1995; Marwell & Schmitt, 1972; Sugden, 1984) have proposed such an effect and there is some indirect but supportive empirical evidence. For example, it has been widely observed (e.g., Andreoni, 1995; Ledyard, 1995; Pruitt & Kimmel, 1977) that with repeated play in a social dilemma, the mean rate of cooperation tends to decline. The notion that the relatively less cooperative members of the group have more impact on the group’s behavioral norm than the relatively more cooperative members is quite consistent with a bad apple effect. Also, it has been reported (Messick et al., 1983; Rutte & Wilke, 1984) that providing a relatively wide distribution of false harvesting feedback in a resource-conservation dilemma leads to faster depletion of the shared resource than feedback with a narrow distribution and the same mean, just as one would expect if the extremely low cooperators had greater relative impact on others’ behavior. Finally, a recent, unpublished set of studies by (Ouwerkerk, Van Lange, Gallucci, & Van Vugt, in preparation; also see Ouwerkerk et al., 2005) reports that participants were more inclined to follow the bad example of a single, relatively non-cooperative person (a bad apple) in a social dilemma than the good example of a single relatively cooperative person.

The proverb with which we began this paper, “one bad apple spoils the barrel”, makes an even stronger claim. Not only may – as Baumeister et al. (2001) suggest – bad be stronger than good (a bad apple effect), but even a single bad model may also be sufficient to make the rest of the group act badly (a one-bad-apple effect). This possibility is supported by Kurzban, McCabe, Smith, & Wilson’s (2001) findings. Using a real-time five-person game, in which participants received continuous and veridical feedback on others’ current contribution decisions, they found evidence that group members strived to contribute at or slightly above the level of the person making the lowest contribution in the group (a minimal reciprocity rule; cf. Sugden, 1984). More direct evidence comes from a study summarized in a chapter by Rutte and Wilke (1992). They asked members of five-person groups to play a dichotomous choice NPD game, and to begin by stating a non-binding intention. After receiving this feedback, all participants make their final decision on whether to punish one another (e.g., choices were anonymous and/or group members were led to believe that they could not interact with one another following the study).

Social psychological interest in the general effects of social exclusion (and its many variations—ostracism, rejection, bullying) has grown dramatically in the last few years (see Abrams, Hogg, & Marques, 2005; Williams, 2007; Williams, Fargas, & von Hippel, 2005, for excellent overviews). Much of this work demonstrates that social exclusion or rejection is highly aversive (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Williams, 2001), or conversely, that there is a strong
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