



In matters of opinion, what matters is the group: Minority group members' emotional reactions to messages about identity expression

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ABSTRACT

Two studies investigated the reactions of minority group members to messages about identity expression by ingroup and outgroup sources. Our main hypothesis was that compared to ingroup sources, outgroup sources arouse more anger when they argue for identity suppression. In the first study homosexuals evaluated an outgroup source arguing for identity suppression more negatively than an ingroup source, felt more threatened by this source and as a result, experienced stronger feelings of anger towards this source. The second study among members of a language-based minority replicated and extended these findings. Furthermore we showed that the anger that is experienced towards an outgroup source causes a willingness to change the opinion of this source. When ingroup or outgroup sources supported identity expression, evaluations and experience of anger did not differ in both studies. The importance of a source's group membership in reactions to opinions about one's group is discussed.

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Group memberships are an important part of everyday life. Given the omnipresence of group memberships, we are often confronted with people who have an opinion about our group. How these opinions are perceived not only depends on the qualities of the opinion itself, but largely on the group membership of the source as well. A striking example of this was when Gerrit Komrij and Gordon met on a Dutch late night show (Beerekamp, 2006). Gerrit Komrij, an elderly Dutch poet, gave his opinion about homosexuals on Dutch television. In particular, he expressed his amazement with the fact that nowadays homosexuals expressed their sexuality on television with such ease. Gordon, a popular Dutch folk singer and openly homosexual, reacted angry at his comment. The talk show host wisely interrupted the program for a commercial break. After the break, the singer and the poet had reconciled miraculously. During the interruption Gordon had been informed that Gerrit Komrij himself was homosexual which made the comment that had just seemed offensive now seem harmless.

The fact that minority members get angry at sources arguing for identity suppression is quite understandable. Throughout history there are numerous examples of (members of) majorities who tried to withhold minorities from expressing their identity, ranging from restricting the right to practice religion or using other languages than the dominant language, and even restricting the right to wear regional or national dresses. The example above also clearly shows the power of group membership in influencing the reactions to

messages about identity expression. The present research investigates how the group membership of a source and the opinion that is expressed influence the emotions members of minority groups experience. In particular we aim to show that opinions arguing for the suppression of minority identities are perceived as threatening and give rise to anger, especially if these opinions are expressed by outgroup members. This anger in turn is expected to influence the extent to which minority group members are willing to act on behalf of their group.

Minorities and identity expression

Opinions of majorities and minorities have received a great deal of attention in the study of social influence (for a review see Martin & Hewstone, 2003). This work investigates how minorities come to conform to the majority (e.g., Asch, 1951) or how active minorities can eventually influence majority members (e.g., Moscovici, 1976). In this research minorities and majorities are usually part of the same group, which may be essential for the influence they exert on each other (Crano & Alvaro, 1998). When minority or majority sources belong to different groups, influence in the form of attitude change is less likely to occur (David & Turner, 1996). Rather, in these studies group members react more defensively to opinions from outgroup sources. It thus is likely that negative emotions are easily elicited when opinions are expressed in such an intergroup context. However, how opinions about the minority group in general, and about identity expression in particular, affect the emotions of minority group members has not been addressed yet.

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Identity expression can take many different forms. According to Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004; see also Phinney, 1990) a distinction can be made between behaviors that directly indicate one's group membership and behaviors which are the outcome of one's identification with a particular group. The former constitute behaviors that automatically imply a group categorization such as wearing the shirt of a soccer club, speaking a language, or participating in cultural practices. They can also be found in more ordinary behavior, such as expressing affection to one's partner, by which people express their sexual orientation. The latter are not automatically related to identification but are linked with this concept through other psychological processes. Collective action for instance can be seen as expression of an identity but is not necessary the direct result of identification (Pennekamp, Doosje, Zebel, & Fischer, 2007). It is the first form of identity expression we are interested in this paper.

To members of the majority, identity expression is usually considered "normal". They do not have to expect negative reactions when they express their identity. To members of the minority expressing their identity is less self-evident, in particular when majority members devalue their identity. In these cases they may be faced with discrimination and negative expectations of majority members (Barreto, Ellemers, & Banal, 2006). Minorities may choose to adapt to the majority. However, research on acculturation suggests that fully assimilating to a majority can have negative consequences as well. Members of ethnic minorities usually have better mental health when they integrate their ethnic identity with the new majority identity (Berry, 1997; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). Being able to express one's identity as a minority group member thus seems to have positive consequences for one's well-being. Messages about the extent to which minorities are allowed to express their identity thus concern their well-being and are therefore likely to affect them emotionally. Before we go in to the emotional consequences of these specific messages, we first need to understand how people respond to intergroup communications.

Group membership and the inference of motives

Instead of focusing solely on the message a source communicates, people are influenced by characteristics of the source itself as well. Specifically, people actively engage in a process of making attributions about the true motives of a source (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978). An important characteristic that informs us on the motives of a source is the source's group membership. A general belief seems to exist that outgroup and ingroup members are differentially biased towards our ingroup (Judd, Park, Yzerbyt, Gordijn, & Muller, 2005). This leads people to expect and anticipate discrimination from outgroup members (Vivian & Berkowitz, 1993), but also to the expectation that ingroup members are positively biased to the ingroup (Duck & Fielding, 2003). In responding to communications about their ingroup, people will thus expect positive motives from ingroup sources, whereas they are likely to distrust outgroup members' motives.

How attributions about the true motives of a source affect the perception and evaluation of this source has received a great deal of attention in the domain of group criticism and the intergroup sensitivity effect (ISE; Elder, Sutton, & Douglas, 2005; Hornsey & Imani, 2004; Hornsey, Oppes, & Svensson, 2002; for an overview see Hornsey, 2005). In the basic paradigm used to demonstrate this effect, participants are exposed to an excerpt of an interview supposedly held with either an ingroup or outgroup member in which positive or negative comments are made about the ingroup (Hornsey et al., 2002). When this source makes positive comments, ingroup and outgroup sources are not evaluated differently. However, when the ingroup is criticized the outgroup source is re-

acted to more sensitively, is less agreed with, and is evaluated more negatively. These differences are due to the fact that ingroup members are perceived to have more constructive motives for expressing criticism than outgroup members. Furthermore, because ingroup critics are not seen as acting non-normative (Sutton, Elder, & Douglas, 2006), they are not regarded as black sheep (Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Henson, 2000).

The fact that criticism from fellow group members can be constructive is now well understood. But what happens if a negative message does not intend to inspire positive change and in fact could impair the position of the ingroup in society? Are the positive reactions to ingroup members after receiving a negative message about one's group unique to constructive group criticism, or do they represent a more general pattern in which we attribute more positive motives to ingroup members even when the message is destructive by nature? And how will these messages influence the emotions that are experienced?

The emotional consequences of messages about identity expression

An interesting question that is left unanswered by the work on the ISE, is how messages about one's ingroup affect the emotions group members experience. Whether threatening and ambiguous messages, such as group criticism, have affective consequences is hypothesized, but has rarely been empirically tested (Hornsey, 2005; however see O'Dwyer, Berkowitz, & Alfeld-Johnson, 2002). Recent theories of intergroup emotions (IET; Mackie & Smith, 2002; Smith, 1993) however, have made clear the significance of distinct emotions in intergroup relations in explaining divergent reactions to outgroups. Indeed, research has shown that when people categorize as group members, their appraisals of the social environment are group-based, for ongoing issues as well as for past events (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998; Dumont, Yzerbyt, Wigboldus, & Gordijn, 2003; Pennekamp et al., 2007; Zebel et al., 2007).

In responding to messages about one's group, the inferences that are made about the motives of a source are likely to inform the appraisals about the consequences of this message for the ingroup. Let us first consider the identity suppression message. When outgroup sources want the minority group to suppress their identity, we argue that the motives of this source for expressing this opinion will be doubted. Arguing for identity suppression by the minority in essence means that the ingroup is denied certain freedoms. These sources will be seen as unfair and as obstructing or limiting the freedom of the group, anger is likely to result from this threat (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Kuppens, Van Mechelen, Smits, & De Boeck, 2003). To date, anger is known as a response to social discrimination (e.g., McCoy & Major, 2003; Mendes, Major, McCoy, & Blascovich, 2008; Sassenberg & Hansen, 2007), but it is relatively unknown as a response to messages about identity expression.

If an ingroup source argues that minority group members should suppress their identity, this opinion might also be aversive at first glance. Arguing that the ingroup should suppress their identity is unlikely to help the group to improve their position in society. However, given the negative consequences that are attached to expressing an identity that is devalued by a majority (Barreto et al., 2006), the ingroup source may have become reluctant to express the group identity. The motives an ingroup source has for arguing against expression of the minority identity could thus be very understandable. In this case the message to suppress the identity will not be appraised as threatening to the group and will not result in the experience of anger.

When a source has a positive message and argues that the ingroup should be free to express their identity we expect little differences in the reactions to ingroup and outgroup sources.

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