



## Sympathy for the devil? The physiological and psychological effects of being an agent (and target) of dissent during intragroup conflict



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined intragroup conflict at the individual level
- We tested cardiovascular effects of being an agent and target of dissent
- Targets exhibited avoidance responses; Agents exhibited approach responses
- Targets experienced threats to all fundamental psychological needs
- Agents experienced threats to belonging and self-esteem but not control needs

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### ABSTRACT

Research has accumulated on the impact of intragroup conflict on group outcomes, but little is known about the effects of dissent on the individuals who provide it. Here, we examined how being the agent *and* target of dissent impacted physiological responses and psychological needs. Groups of three (a participant and two confederates) completed a marketing task. Participants were assigned to an agent of dissent, target of dissent, or inclusion control role. Agents of dissent exhibited an approach-motivated cardiovascular profile: low vascular resistance and rapid sympathetic recovery. Conversely, targets displayed avoidance responses: vasoconstriction. Role assignment also impacted basic psychological needs. Targets experienced threats to all fundamental needs, but agents only exhibited threats to belonging and self-esteem (not control or meaningful existence) needs. Taken together, agents and targets of dissent responded vastly differently in this group performance context. Implications for health and performance are discussed.

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### Introduction

Organizational decisions are rarely unilateral. Important decisions are typically made in groups. During the decision process, groups strive to reach strategic consensus – agreement on strategy-relevant content (see Kellermanns, Walter, Floyd, Lechner & Shaw, 2011, for a review) – which improves coordination after decisions, assists in the implementation of agreed strategies, and attenuates self-interest (Guth & MacMillan, 1986; Kellermanns & Floyd, 2005). Strategic consensus has an overall positive effect on organizational performance, but is not necessarily beneficial for decision outcomes, particularly objective outcomes (Kellermanns et al., 2011). In cohesive social groups, members can be motivated to maintain cohesion. If motivation to conform limits critical scrutiny of options, classic research indicates that

the resulting *groupthink* can impair decision making (Janis, 1972, 1982). Thus, under some circumstances intragroup conflict can benefit group performance. However, little is known about the psychological profiles, and nothing is known about the physiological profiles, of the individuals who are tasked with engaging in dissenting behavior. This is especially important given that basic psychological needs of belonging can be threatened by dissenting from a consensus. For instance, individuals providing rejecting feedback to others may damage relationships. Towards this end, we integrate social stress models with research on psychological factors to establish profiles of dissenters (and targets of dissent).

#### *Intragroup conflict and “Devil’s advocates”*

Intragroup conflict is perceived incompatibility or difference among group members (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008). A large corpus of research has accumulated in the past half-century (plus) on intragroup conflict and its effect on conformity and performance (Asch, 1955; see De Dreu

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& Weingart, 2003, and De Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012; Schwenk, 1990 for meta-analytic reviews). These efforts identified three subtypes of intragroup conflict (relationship, process, and task conflicts), which moderate associations with outcomes. Each subtype involves disagreement among group members but differ in the focus of the disagreement. *Relationship conflict* entails disagreement regarding personal issues (personality clashes or differential values). *Process conflict* is disagreement about logistics (how the group makes decisions). Finally, *task conflict* involves disagreement about decision content/outcomes (what the group ultimately decides) (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Whereas relationship and process conflicts predict less cohesion and positive affect, task conflict exhibits no such negative associations (De Wit et al., 2012). More importantly, task conflict positively predicts decision quality and performance compared to other types of intragroup conflict as it helps overcome confirmatory biases (Schulz-Hardt, Brodbeck, Mojzisch, Kerschreiter, & Frey, 2006; Schweiger, Sandberg, & Rechner, 1989; Schwenk, 1990) and enhances innovation (e.g., De Dreu, 2006; De Dreu & West, 2001).

Business and government leaders, conscious of the benefits of task conflict, have developed methods to foster beneficial conflict. The most widely used approach is assigning a member (or members) of the group to act as a “Devil’s advocate” (DA) by dissenting to others’ ideas/suggestions regardless of whether they agree or not. The central aim of the DA is to dissent without necessarily offering a counterplan. Meta-analytic data suggests that the DA type of intragroup task conflict improves decision outcomes relative to strategies involving no conflict (Schwenk, 1990).

Although the extant literature suggests that intragroup task conflict can facilitate group outcomes, no research to date has examined the effects of task conflict on the individuals who are assigned to provide it. Given the important effects that social-situational factors have on emotions, decisions, and health (Barrett, 2006; Lieberman, 2007; Slovic, Peters, Finucane, & MacGregor, 2005; Stroebe, 2011), it is integral to understand how dissent impacts individuals in group performance contexts. To illustrate, current models of emotion indicate that emotional experiences are constructed from situational factors, bodily responses, cognitive appraisals, and language (e.g., Barrett, 2006). Although task conflict (and rejection more broadly) is an oft studied situation, the bodily responses and appraisal processes of agents who provide rejecting feedback remain unclear. Along these lines, the research presented here examined the physiological and psychological effects of providing and receiving dissenting feedback.

#### *Task conflict as stress*

Group decision tasks are acutely stressful goal-directed, motivated performance situations. There exist situational demands (making a choice or completing an assignment) that the group must meet. DAs are agents of dissent in this context. Here, we conceptualize dissent as any response aimed as dissenting to, rejecting, or disagreeing with the input of another, the *target* of dissent. Thus, task conflict involves an agent and target(s). Although the organizational literature routinely discusses stress in intragroup conflict settings, to our knowledge no research to date has actually measured individuals’ stress responses during group performance. Towards this end, this research is the first to examine how being the agent and target of dissent affects cardiovascular responses with an eye towards understanding motivational orientation. To do so, we relied on the theoretical framework provided by the biopsychosocial (BPS) model of challenge and threat (see Blascovich & Mendes, 2010, for a review).

Broadly, BPS models explain how acute stress responses unfold in active, goal-directed situations. More specifically, the BPS model of challenge and threat provides a theory of how appraisals of situational demands interact with appraisals of coping resources to determine responses in motivated situations. Challenge and threat states are both accompanied by sympathetic nervous system (SNS) activation, but differ in antecedent processes and downstream responses. Individuals

experience challenge when sufficient coping resources exist to meet demands. This elicits approach motivation and resultant physiological changes including dilation of the peripheral vasculature so as to increase the delivery of oxygenated blood to the brain. Alternatively, threat manifests when demands exceed resources, producing avoidance motivation. The body, in turn, decreases cardiac efficiency and constricts the vasculature in anticipation of harm.

Targets of negative social feedback typically experience threat (Blascovich, Mendes, Tomaka, Salomon, & Seery, 2003). In fact, negative social evaluative feedback is one of the most effective and reliable means to activate the hypothalamus–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis – a primary stress system that responds to threat – in the laboratory (see Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004, for a review). The pattern of reactivity for agents of dissent is less clear. On one hand, dissenting is an approach-motivated act. DAs must actively act against others. Dissonance theory suggests that engaging in such approach-motivated behaviors should elicit responses consistent with that motivational orientation. If so, this would produce approach-oriented physiological reactions (cf., Jamieson et al., 2013a, 2013b). Alternatively, providing dissenting feedback can potentially damage relationships, which could bring about threat responses if dissent diminishes social coping resources.

Delineating physiological responses of agents and targets of dissent has direct implications for understanding downstream responses. For instance, threat predicts impaired decision making in the short-term (Kassam, Koslov, & Mendes, 2009) and is associated with more rapid cognitive decline with age over the long haul (Jefferson et al., 2010). On the other hand, approach-motivated responses have been linked to improved cognitive performance (Dienstbier, 1989; Jamieson et al., 2010b), but can also promote risky decision making (Jamieson et al., 2013a). Because no studies to date have examined how agents of dissent respond physiologically during group performance, research has likely missed information pertinent for understanding health and decision outcomes in group performance contexts. The research presented here fills this gap in the literature.

#### *Fundamental psychological needs*

The stressful nature of task conflict stems from the rejecting feedback provided by the agent to the target(s). Not only does providing and receiving negative feedback affect physiological responses as specified above, but it also has important consequences for psychological processes. The temporal-need threat (TNT) model provides a theoretical framework to understand the psychological impact of dissent during group performance.

The TNT model posits that social exclusionary/rejecting acts reflexively threaten four fundamental psychological needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence (see Williams, 2009, for a review).<sup>1</sup> Belonging and self-esteem needs are associated with maintaining and developing social connections with others. Control and meaningful existence needs are independent of social-relational factors, and are determined by the individual’s ability to autonomously make decisions and enact behaviors (Williams & Nida, 2011). Empirical research demonstrates that being the target of negative social feedback threatens all four of these basic psychological needs (Williams, 2009). Need-threat then predicts negative mental health outcomes (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Smith et al., 1999), and even activates

<sup>1</sup> This research focused on social rejection in group contexts. Thus, we relied on the organizing theoretical framework provided by the TNT model. However, the basic psychological needs argued for by TNT correspond to those featured in other prominent models, such as self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2010). For instance, TNT and SDT include a social connection factor (belonging in TNT, relatedness in SDT), a self-guided behavior factor (control in TNT, autonomy in SDT), and a positive self-regard factor (self-esteem in TNT, competence in SDT). The meaningful existence factor from TNT is associated specifically with the experience of rejection/exclusion.

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