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Short Report

Avoiding Groupthink

Whereas Weakly Identified Members Remain Silent,
Strongly Identified Members Dissent About Collective
Problems

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Collective decision-making failures are often attributed to group members' unwillingness to express unpopular opinions, and incident investigations frequently name lack of dissent as a causal factor (Sunstein, 2006). The investigation following the *Columbia* space-shuttle explosion, for instance, cited a culture at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in which "it is difficult for minority and dissenting opinions to percolate up through the agency's hierarchy" (Columbia Accident Investigation Board, 2003, p. 183). Long-standing psychological explanations refer to "groupthink" (Janis, 1972) and a "spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), positing that group members are reluctant to publicly express private concerns about collective problems if they believe that other members are likely to disagree with them. Combined with social identity research that finds positive relationships between members' identification with groups and conformity to collective norms (e.g., Terry & Hogg, 1996), these accounts paint a pessimistic picture: Fearing the social costs of dissent, group members with alternative opinions are expected to remain silent, and when dissent is expressed, it is expected to come from those who care the least.

However, recent research highlights a second perspective suggesting that such pessimism may not be fully warranted. The normative conflict model (Packer, 2008) posits that strongly identified members are attentive to group-related problems, and perceptions that the status quo is harmful to the collective may trigger expression of dissenting opinions. Strongly identified members may be willing to bear social costs associated with dissent in order to improve group outcomes. Initial studies have shown that strongly identified members do challenge group norms when they are perceived as collectively harmful (Packer & Chasteen, 2008).

METHOD

The current study contrasted the normative conflict and spiral-of-silence perspectives by examining expression of opinions about potential group problems. Seventy-eight Ohio State University undergraduates completed a six-item measure of identification with their university (e.g., "I value being a student at OSU"; 1 = *not at all*, 6 = *very*; $\alpha = .83$). Participants were then asked to identify what they thought could be a problem at their university; typically identified problems included binge drinking and campus safety. Participants used 6-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 6 = *very*) to twice rate their level of concern regarding the problem: They first rated their concern privately ("how harmful do you think this problem is to the university?") and subsequently rated their concern publicly at the beginning of a discussion with three fellow students in an ostensible on-line chat room ("how concerned are you about this problem?"). Participants made their private rating before they knew they would join the chat room, and in between the private and public ratings, they indicated how harmful they thought other students perceived the problem to be ("how harmful do you believe other students think this problem is?"; 1 = *not at all*, 6 = *very*).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Employing the spiral-of-silence logic, one would expect the relationship between private and public ratings of concern to be mitigated by beliefs about other people's opinions, such that members would make private concerns public only when they expected other group members to agree. I anticipated this might be the case for weakly identified members, for whom group-related outcomes are relatively unimportant. Critically, I expected that silence would not be maintained among strongly identified members, for whom collective outcomes are important; instead, I predicted that private concerns would translate into public expressions regardless of whether strongly identified members expected other group members to agree.

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A regression predicted public ratings of concern from centered identification, private concern, and beliefs about other students' opinions. Correlations among predictors showed that private ratings of concern and beliefs about other students' levels of concern were associated ($r = .46, p_{rep} = .99$); neither private ratings of concern nor beliefs about other students' opinions were related to identification ($p_{reps} < .73$). A three-way interaction revealed that the relationship between private and public ratings of concern differed between weakly and strongly identified members as a function of their beliefs about other members' opinions ($\beta = -.20, p_{rep} = .92$; model $R^2 = .46$; see Fig. 1).

The three-way interaction was decomposed by examining patterns of results separately for weakly and strongly identified group members (i.e., at points 1 standard deviation below and above the mean, respectively). Results for weakly identified members were consistent with a spiral of silence. Weakly identified members suppressed their concerns about group problems if they expected other students to disagree with them; that is, weakly identified members who privately rated a problem as collectively harmful (1 standard deviation above the mean) publicly expressed greater concern if they thought that other students were concerned than if they thought other students were not concerned ($\beta = .37, p_{rep} = .94$). Thus, a strong relationship between private and public ratings among weakly identified members who believed that other students were concerned about a problem (1 standard deviation above the mean; $\beta = .69, p_{rep} = .97$) was attenuated among weakly identified members who believed that other students were not concerned (1 standard deviation below the mean; $\beta = .19, p_{rep} = .82$).

In contrast, strongly identified members did not suppress concerns about group problems in the face of anticipated disagreement: Strongly identified members who privately rated a problem as collectively harmful (1 standard deviation above the mean) publicly expressed equivalent levels of concern regardless of their beliefs about other students' opinions ($\beta = .06, p_{rep} = .59$). Thus, a strong association between private and public ratings was maintained among strongly identified members who believed that other students were unconcerned about a problem (1 standard deviation below the mean; $\beta = .71, p_{rep} = .99$). Interestingly, the relationship between public and private ratings was somewhat reduced among strongly identified members who believed that other students were concerned about a problem (1 standard deviation above the mean; $\beta = .41, p_{rep} = .86$). This attenuation occurred because strongly identified group members who did not personally perceive a problem as harmful (1 standard deviation below the mean) nevertheless expressed heightened concern if they believed that other students did (vs. did not) think it was harmful ($\beta = .37, p_{rep} = .90$; see Fig. 1).

Unless they were confident that their concern about a group problem would be matched by their interlocutors, weakly identified members kept their qualms to themselves. In contrast, strongly identified members were willing to express dissenting opinions about a group problem they believed was collectively harmful. Interestingly, strongly identified members' public ratings were influenced by other members' opinions if they themselves did not perceive a problem to be collectively harmful. Thus, the pattern among strongly identified members is perhaps best described as "vigilant"; if there was reason to suspect a potential problem was harmful to the group (either because they

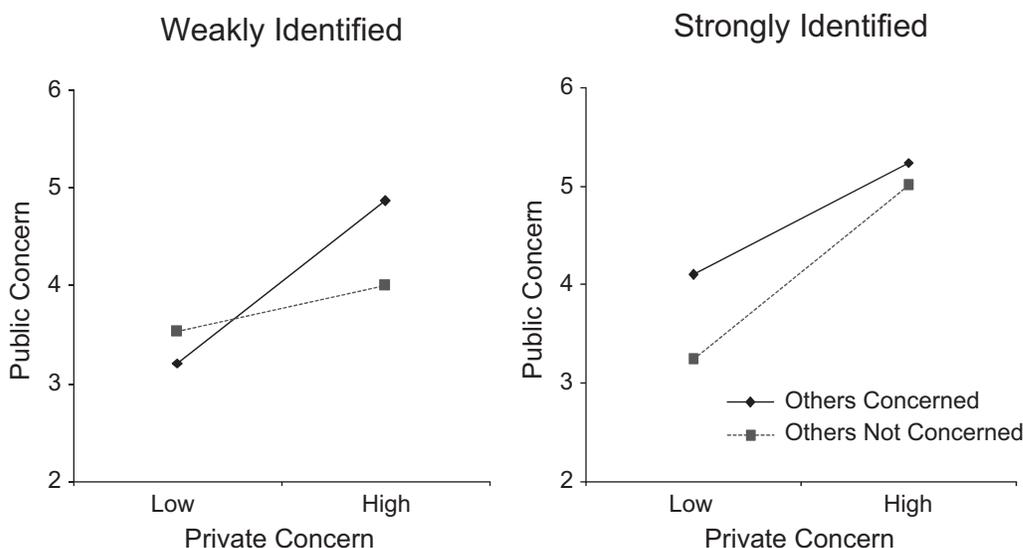


Fig. 1. Mean predicted public ratings of concern as a function of participants' collective identification (strong or weak), private concern (high or low), and beliefs about other students' opinions (others concerned or others not concerned). Variables are plotted at points 1 standard deviation below and above their respective means.

thought so or believed that other group members did), strongly identified members publicly expressed heightened concern.

Effective group decision making requires an ability to change suboptimal patterns of collective behavior by addressing group problems. This study suggests that there is reason for optimism about groups' abilities to change these patterns. This is not to deny that lack of dissent is a recurrent problem, and that it is particularly likely to be observed in poor collective decisions. Nevertheless, the requisite motivation for dissent does exist; the challenge is for groups to capitalize on this fact.

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