

Proposal for an article for ERSP

Working title: A model of responses to group-directed criticism: Why being right is not enough to avoid defensiveness

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Overview of proposal

In this article I will review the results of an intensive program of research conducted by my colleagues and I on how people respond to legitimate group-directed criticism. This program of research has not only helped develop our theoretical understanding of how groups respond to threatening messages, but has also provided readily translatable, practical implications for improving communication within and between groups. However, I have not yet had the opportunity to integrate these insights into a single, overarching model of responses to group-directed criticism. The purpose of this article would be to formalize such a model.

Theoretical and empirical background

There are times when an individual feels compelled to stand up and articulate their group's failings and shortcomings. Rather than acting out corrupt or unfair or abusive elements of a group's culture, it is possible for members to police their group and to shape the culture in a way that better approximates the individual's world view. There are also times when criticism of a group stems from concerned *outsiders*. For example, when nations do not conform to international benchmarks of human rights, or appropriate military conduct, or environmental responsibility, criticism from the international community plays an important role in promoting positive change. Whether it stems from within or outside the group, criticism is the cornerstone of protest and political change, and it is difficult to imagine how a group can be reinvigorated, re-invented, or reformed without some process of critical self-reflection. Indeed, research shows that acts of dissent and criticism play a valuable role in terms of promoting positive change and stimulating innovation, creativity, and flexibility in decision making (Janis, 1982; Moscovici, 1976; Nemeth, 1985; Postmes, Spears, & Cihangir, 2001).

Despite this, it is clear that criticizing groups carries with it enormous social risks. Research on dissent shows that people who deviate from the "party line" face social censure (Festinger, 1950; Schachter, 1951; but see Hornsey, Jetten, McAuliffe, & Hogg, in press), and the black sheep literature shows how quick groups are to distance themselves from members who reflect poorly on the group (Marques & Paez, 1994). Furthermore, criticism of outgroups carries with it the risk of inflaming intergroup tensions and antagonizing rivals. So what choices are available to a person who does not approve of the direction a group is taking? Can individuals shape the culture of a group, and if so, who is most able to exert influence? When will legitimate criticism be accepted and when will it be rejected? These questions are important, not least of all because they comment directly on the dynamic tension that exists between individual and group will (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). Until recently, these questions have not been examined empirically, and theoretical examination of how people might respond to group-directed criticism has been virtually non-

existent. This motivated myself and my colleagues to examine how identity processes can be used to explain responses to group-directed criticism.

A robust finding in this research is that when one criticizes a group, *who you are* becomes fundamentally important in determining whether one's comments will be listened to in an open-minded or a defensive way. In short, outgroup members who criticize the group tend to be downgraded more strongly than ingroup members who criticize the group ("It's OK if *we* say it, but *you* can't"). Furthermore, criticisms articulated by outgroup members tend to arouse more negative emotion and are agreed with less than when the very same comments are made by an ingroup member, a phenomenon dubbed the intergroup sensitivity effect (Hornsey & Imani, 2004; Hornsey, Oppes, & Svensson, 2002). This defensiveness in the face of outgroup criticism remains robust even if the outgroup critic has extraordinarily high levels of direct contact and experience with the group that is being criticized (Hornsey & Imani, 2004). In other words, defensiveness in the face of criticism from outsiders does not seem to be an objective response to the qualifications of the critic, but rather a response to something deeper and more psychological.

According to my attributional model (Hornsey, Trembath, & Gunthorpe, 2004), group membership (ingroup or outgroup) acts as a powerful heuristic that tells us who can be trusted and who cannot, who is looking out for us and who is not, who cares and who does not. In the absence of any other information, people assume that ingroup members are more likely than outgroup members to be committed to the group and to have constructive motives for criticizing the group, and it is this bias in attributions that underpins the intergroup sensitivity effect. But if these assumptions are overturned, then so is the intergroup sensitivity effect. For example, if people are told that the ingroup member is not invested in the group psychologically (Hornsey et al., 2004; Expt 1), or they sense from the speaker's language that the speaker is not invested in the group (Hornsey et al., 2004; Expt 2), or if the speaker is a newcomer (Hornsey, Grice, Jetten, Paulsen, & Callan, 2005), then ingroup critics arouse as much defensiveness as outgroup critics, effects that are mediated fully by attributions of identity attachment and constructiveness of motive.

Although attributions are clearly a powerful predictor of how people respond to criticism, it does not tell the full story. More recent research suggests that responses to group-directed criticism are also affected by self-presentational and strategic considerations (see Noel, Branscombe, & Wann, 1995; Reicher & Levine, 1994; Reicher, Levine, & Gordijn, 1998, for related discussions on strategic behaviour in groups). If ingroup critics take their comments to an outgroup audience, for example, concerns about the damage this is doing to the group lead to heightened defensiveness (Hornsey, de Bruijn, Creed, Allen, Ariyanto, & Svensson, in press; see also Ariyanto, Hornsey, & Gallois, 2005). Furthermore, if criticisms are made in the context of an intense intergroup conflict, defensiveness toward the ingroup critic increases to the point that the intergroup sensitivity effect disappears (Ariyanto, 2005). The power of the outgroup over the ingroup might also be implicated: When Australians received criticism from Americans that they were not supportive enough of the war in Iraq, they rebelled attitudinally (that is, they became more anti-war). At the same time, however, they were less likely to protest against the war; in other words they conformed behaviourally to the expectations of the powerful outgroup (Brander & Hornsey, 2005). Finally, there is evidence that people's public responses to criticism are in themselves strategic communications of one's "groupy" credentials. For example, it has been shown that ingroup critics are tolerated reasonably well when responses are private, but when responses are visible to other ingroup members a less tolerant face is presented to the group (Ford, 2004). All these studies suggest a second tier of psychological considerations that need to be taken into account when modelling responses to criticism. Ingroup members are mindful of the nuances of the intergroup context and of how their response will affect their intragroup position, strategic considerations that impact on responses independently of attribution of motive.

Proposal

There are a number of reasons why a review of this research would be necessary. Although the majority of these studies have been published in leading international journals in the field, there is a pressing need for a single integration that summarizes the deeper themes that run through the

studies and elaborates on the practical implications of the data. Given the norms of writing journal papers – keep it to the point and don't stray too far from the data – researchers are increasingly reliant on journals such as *ERSP* to allow them to build the big picture. In my case, this would be the first opportunity I would have to present a single integrated model of responses to group-directed criticism, incorporating what we already know about attributional considerations with the more recent insights about strategic and self-presentational considerations. Thus, the chapter would provide a useful “one-stop shop” for my published work, an opportunity to flag current work, and for the first time an integrated model of responses to group-directed criticism. Given the fact that Europe has traditionally been a centre for research on deviance, identity, and intergroup relations, we believe that *ERSP* is a perfect outlet for this review.

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