

The Meaning of Dysfunctional Group Norms and its Impact on Conformity and Social Identification

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Groups strive towards positive and distinct identities, yet many groups endorse dysfunctional group norms. Once these norms are integrated into the group identity, members are motivated to conform to them. Impression management research demonstrates that positive attributions for any given behaviour can pressure individuals to engage in that behaviour. The current study investigates the impact of neutral, positive or negative attributions for a dysfunctional group norm in a group-identity salient context on the motivations of individuals to engage in this dysfunctional norm and the impact of these attributions on levels of group identification. Our results indicate that participants in the positive attribution condition were more motivated to engage in a dysfunctional group norm than those in the negative attribution condition, but contrary to our hypothesis, identified less with their group after the experiment than those in other conditions.

Keywords: identity, dysfunctional group norms, norms attribution, identification, conformity

Les groupes aspirent à des identités positives et distinctes, pourtant, beaucoup adoptent des normes de groupes dysfonctionnelles. Une fois ces normes intégrées à l'identité du groupe, les membres sont motivés à s'y conformer. Les recherches en gestion de l'impression démontrent que des attitudes positives pour un comportement donné peuvent pousser les individus à adopter ce comportement. Dans un contexte où l'identité de groupe est explicite, notre étude analyse l'impact des attitudes neutres, positives ou négatives pour une norme de groupe dysfonctionnelle sur les motivations des individus à endosser cette norme et les conséquences de ces attributions sur les niveaux d'identification au groupe. Nos résultats indiquent que les participants dans la condition attitudes positives étaient plus motivés à endosser une norme de groupe dysfonctionnelle que ceux dans la condition attitudes négatives, mais contrairement à nos hypothèses, s'identifiaient moins avec leur groupe, après l'expérience, que ceux des autres conditions.

Mots-clés : identité, normes de groupe dysfonctionnelles, attribution de normes, identification, conformisme

Sometimes, the groups to which we belong engage in unhealthy, risky or dangerous behaviours. These behaviours are often referred to as dysfunctional behaviours. When enacted by a large proportion of group members, dysfunctional behaviours may even become normative. There are many examples of unhealthy group normative behaviours: smoking among young adolescent groups (Kobus, 2003), racing among young drivers (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1995), and binge drinking among first year university students (Johnston & White, 2003).

One group that has received a good deal of attention is first year university students who engage in binge drinking. Clearly, binge drinking can have negative consequences on many areas of their lives. It interferes with their studies, which subsequently puts them at risk of not achieving their academic goals. Binge drinking also leads to health problems such as liver damage, alcohol poisoning, and to social problems such as getting involved in fights or having car accidents (Room, Babor, & Rehm, 2005). Despite its negative consequences, it is surprising that binge drinking remains a powerful norm among first year university students. Why is it that behaviours that are clearly detrimental to one's health and well-being become endorsed by so many individuals? This is the central question that guides the current research.

This work was part of a research project completed by the first author under the supervision of Megan Cooper and Donald M. Taylor. A special thanks is extended to them and to the JIRIRI team for their guidance and encouragement throughout all the steps that made this publication possible. Please address correspondence to Nada Kadhim (email: nada.kadhim@mail.mcgill.ca).

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Belonging to groups that perpetuate negative norms and following these norms goes against the literature in social psychology, which states that individuals are usually motivated to belong to groups that have positive social characteristics. In other words, individuals tend to identify with groups that have positive social characteristics because, by being part of a positively perceived group, they see themselves more positively (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and consequently have higher levels of well-being (McCullough, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000). What often defines the social characteristics of the group is its social norms. "Social norms are rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that guide and/or constrain social behavior without the force of laws" (Cialdini & Trost, 1998, p. 152). In other words, these rules and standards determine the group's identity by representing the behaviour of the majority of group members.

Even though it is expected that individuals would act according to the positive norms of their groups, in some situations, group members follow its negative norms. Indeed, the negative nature of a group norm doesn't necessarily restrain the group members from following it, but can sometimes make them endorse these norms. Therefore, it is important to study the role that the subjective factors, such as the given valence to social norms, have on the individuals.

We propose that although some group norms are objectively negative, group members might still perceive them positively. This subjective perception of dysfunctional norms, which we call norm attribution, may influence conformity to group norms and identification with the group, which are core elements of group membership.

In order to be able to encourage groups to endorse healthy behaviours and prevent them from adopting unhealthy ones, it is important to first identify which factors influence adherence to dysfunctional group norms. Also, investigating the influence of norm attributions on group members' levels of identification is essential, since it can be a useful tool to encourage people to belong to groups that endorse norms that have positive attributions as opposed to negative ones and contribute to their well-being.

The purpose of the present study is to find out how the valence of norm attributions increases or decreases the likelihood of conforming to a dysfunctional group norm that is part of a group's identity, and also to determine how it influences group members' levels of identification to the group.

Attributions

First and foremost, humans are social beings who depend on each other throughout their lives. In other words, they have a "need to belong". The need to belong is a fundamental, universal and powerful human need that motivates people to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

According to social identity theory, individuals aspire to belong to groups that are distinct and positively evaluated in society and that will have a positive reflection on their self-concept and identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Put differently, they desire a positive and distinct social identity. Based on this desire, group members tend to adopt group norms that contribute positively to their social identity.

Since we are motivated to belong to groups that are positively evaluated, we care about the impressions we make on others and we make efforts to appear in socially admirable ways. Impression management research has demonstrated that the desire to make positive impressions on others often motivates people to take part in risky behaviours that can lead to health-related problems and even death in some cases. For example, adolescents are motivated to drink alcohol and use drugs to appear cool or sociable (Martin & Leary, 1999). In fact, social acceptance and approval among peers is one of the most important motivators for drinking alcohol (Farber, Khavari, & Douglas, as cited in Martin & Leary, 1999). People who drive at high speeds and end up in fatal accidents are also often motivated by the desire to appear as risk takers (Hingson & Howland, as cited in Martin & Leary, 1999). These examples demonstrate that even though some group normative behaviours are objectively negative, group members still conform to them. This conformity could be due to the fact that sometimes, group members give a positive attribution to negative and harmful social behaviours and this further motivates individuals to engage in unhealthy behaviours. In reality, the existing literature has neglected the fact that dysfunctional group norms can be promoted in a positive way by changing the subjective perception of group members about these norms.

Different cultures and groups value diverse social images. As we have noted, many dysfunctional behaviours are motivated by the desire to appear in socially gratifying ways. For example, people who are highly concerned about appearing physically attractive are more likely to engage in behaviours such as tanning and/or not using sunscreen that put them at risk for skin cancer (Leary & Jones, as cited in Ginis & Leary, 2004). Moreover, when individuals possess a

positive and valued social image, they strive to protect and maintain that image. Put differently, the subjective meaning associated with behaviours and social images greatly impacts individuals' motivation to engage in that behaviour.

The subjective meaning individuals assign to their behaviour is called attribution. An attribution can be (a) neutral, (b) positive or (c) negative. A positive attribution promotes a valued social image, a negative attribution promotes an undesired social image, and a neutral attribution promotes a social image that is neither valued nor undesired.

In fact, the more positive the attribution for a behaviour is, the more pressure individuals will feel to conform to the behaviour, even when it is dysfunctional (Ginis & Leary, 2004). Equally, if the attribution of a behaviour is negative, individuals are more likely to avoid it. Although the influence of attributions has been shown to influence individuals' behaviour in a social context, the literature has not addressed how the subjective evaluation of a group norm can influence group members' perception of that norm and consequently, their conformity to it. Given the importance of the construals we assign to social behaviour, it is essential to determine whether the valence of the attribution given to a dysfunctional group norm has an influence on group members' motivation to engage in that norm.

Social Identification

In her model of identity-based motivation, Oyserman (2007) offers alternative ways in which our health behaviours are influenced by the social world. According to Oyserman's model, our motivation for engaging in certain behaviours or disengaging from them is impacted by our group identity. The content of our group identities influences the cognitions we hold and these cognitions affect our decision-making processes for engaging in different behaviours. Thus, when a behaviour is incorporated into a social identity and shared among group members, engaging in that behaviour becomes a normative part of being a group member and "carries a positive tone of inclusion in the in-group" (Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder, 2007). Identity-infused behaviours can lead to positive or negative consequences on group members' health. Based on this model, individuals' decision making about these health-related behaviours is determined more by the identity and social consequences than by the actual health consequences (Oyserman et al., 2007).

Discovering the influence of different social identities on any individual is complicated by the fact

that individuals place a different amount of importance on their membership to the different groups that form their self-concept (Tajfel, 1978). In social psychology, this is referred to as the level of identification an individual feels in relation to a particular social group. Moreover, the level of identification is an indication of how much group members perceive themselves as being part of the group and how much this membership is important to them.

The degree to which individuals identify with their groups is important because, if group members perceive their social identity to be inadequate or negative, they might dis-identify with the group or leave it (Tajfel, 1978). Therefore, if a group adopts dysfunctional norms that contribute negatively to group members' social identity, the importance individuals place on their membership to that group might diminish. Thus, it is important to find out what happens to levels of identification of group members if their group norms, and as a consequence their group's social identity, is perceived to be undesirable.

Present Research

The current study has two general goals. First, we want to examine the impact of positive and negative attributions for a dysfunctional group norm on the degree of conformity of group members to this norm. Second, we aim to explore how positive and negative attributions for dysfunctional group norms affect identification levels of group members.

Asking people about dysfunctional behaviours is often complicated by the desire to appear in socially desirable ways. Also, group members aren't necessarily aware of the specific mechanisms that lead them to internalize these behaviours. In order to correct for these biases, we decided to examine dysfunctional group norms by using an experimental paradigm. Since most real-life risky behaviours (e.g., binge drinking) different groups engage in are impossible to study in a research laboratory, we had to find a behaviour that is less risky and that is ethical and safe to examine.

We chose to use a "cold pressor" paradigm. The cold pressor test is a classic measure of pain tolerance, as it asks people to leave their hands in extremely cold water for as long as they can, and this experience is painful. In the present research, we aim to determine the conditions necessary to increase the amount of time people are willing to keep their hands in the cold water. In short, the cold pressor paradigm is used to measure the amount of pain participants are willing to take over their natural pain tolerance level.

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By choosing a behaviour that was painful and by informing participants that going through unnecessary pain was not beneficial for health, we made it clear that this willingness to keep one's hand in the cold water despite knowing its detrimental effect on health is in fact a dysfunctional behaviour. We extended the dysfunctional behaviour to the group level by introducing it as a group norm and by linking it to a shared identity among participants. To be more specific, the dysfunctional norm was to be able to keep one's hand in the cold water for at least 10 seconds longer than an individual's baseline. Furthermore, in order to be able to activate an already existing group identity, we recruited participants who share a common social identity as second language students at McGill University.

We theorize that the valence attributed to the dysfunctional norm will influence people's willingness to endorse the norm. Therefore, in this study, we introduce a) a positive attribution condition, b) a negative attribution condition and c) a neutral attribution condition, to be able to examine the impacts of these different attributions types on group members' conformity and degree of identification.

The primary hypothesis is that the valence of the attribution attached to a potentially dysfunctional norm will impact the degree of conformity to the norm. To be more specific, participants in the positive attribution condition will leave their hands in the cold water longer than those in the neutral and negative attribution conditions, and participants in the negative attribution condition will remove their hands from the water sooner than those in the neutral attribution condition.

It is also predicted that activating participants' identities, linking the norm attribution to this identity and having the opportunity to engage in the group norm will make participants reflect upon their degree of identification with their group. Therefore, the second hypothesis is that individuals who are presented with a positive attribution for a dysfunctional group norm will identify more with their group after the experiment, because individuals are motivated to identify with groups who have positive and distinct characteristics. In particular, participants

in the positive attribution condition will be more identified than those in the neutral and negative attribution condition and participants in the negative attribution condition will be less identified than those in the neutral attribution condition.

Method

Participants

We recruited 126 McGill undergraduate students for whom English is not their first language. They were recruited through a social psychology participant pool and through undergraduate classes at McGill University. The participants from the social psychology research pool received 10 CAD per hour for their time and those recruited from undergraduate courses received class credit in exchange for their participation.

We removed 21 of the 126 participants from our final analysis: 10 were removed because they reached the safety limit on their baseline trial and so could not be asked to conform to the group norm (see the procedure section for details) and 11 were removed because although they were recruited as second language students, the pre-experimental questionnaire revealed that their first language was in fact English. Therefore, our final data set consisted of 105 participants: 91 females, 13 males and 1 unknown. Their age ranged from 18-33 ($M = 20.80$, $SD = 2.15$). The majority of the sample identified as Asian or Pacific Islander (57%), 28% of them as Caucasian, 1% as multiracial and 11% did not specify their ethnicity. Table 1 shows the distribution of their first languages.

Apparatus

Our cold pressor apparatus consisted of: a 49 litre drink cooler with the top removed to hold the water, a Dixell (EK45 model) water chiller which was set to chill the water at 5 degrees Celsius. Two water pumps, made for a turtle habitat and strong enough to circulate the water around the cooler, were placed on either side of the cooler and next to the chiller apparatus to prevent ice blocks from forming on the chilling coil and maintain a steady temperature throughout the

Table 1

Distribution of mother tongue among participants

First language	Frequency
1. Chinese (Mandarin & Cantonese)	32
2. French	21
3. Korean	17
4. Other	35

tank. Circulation was also important to ensure that warm water bubbles did not form around the hands of the participants. A clock timer was started when participants put their hands in the water and counted their time and it was set at eye level directly in front of where the participants would stand.

Materials

Participants were asked to fill out a pre-experimental questionnaire at least a day before they came into the laboratory. This questionnaire asked them to report basic demographic information, in addition to the following measures:

Self-control. Self-control (e.g., I am good at resisting temptation) was assessed using 10 items from the *Self-Control Scale* (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). The Cronbach’s alpha of this scale was found to be .76.

Need to belong. Need to belong (e.g., I try hard not to do things that will make other people avoid or reject me) was assessed with the 10-item *Need to Belong Scale* (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2008). The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .80.

All items from these scales were rated on a 7-point Likert scale where 1 represents “strongly disagree” and 7 represents “strongly agree.”

Participants also completed a post-experimental questionnaire after the laboratory portion of the study. This questionnaire asked them about their experience taking part of the experiment and specifically asked them to report:

Identification with experimental group. Identification (e.g., I feel connected to other members of my experimental group) scores were computed from the responses to 3 items from the adapted form of *Cameron’s Identification Scale* (2004). The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .74. All items from this scales were rated on a 7-point Likert scale where

1 represents “strongly disagree” and 7 represents “strongly agree.”

Conformity. Conformity was assessed using the following item: “Pressure from other members of your group”. This item was taken from the conformity subscale of the *Four-Factor Model of Drinking Motives* (adapted from Cooper, 1994) and was rated on a 7-point Likert scale where 1 represents “not at all” and 7 represents “very much”.

Procedure

Participants were recruited online and over email. Once participants signed up, a link to the pre-experimental questionnaire was sent to them and they were asked to complete it. After completion of the questionnaire, participants came to the laboratory in groups of three to seven to complete the laboratory portion of the experiment.

Once participants arrived in the waiting room, they signed a consent form. Then, they received general instructions about the study. They were told that the study is designed to validate the cold pressor test as a measure of pain tolerance. They were also told that there is a great amount of variability between people on ratings of pain tolerance and that pain tolerance can predict other life outcomes, but that having higher pain tolerance is not necessarily a good thing.

Then, they were taken to another room to perform the cold pressor test individually. Participants were told to immerse their hands in the cold water (5°C) and keep them in there as long as they are able to do so. However, there was a safety limit of three minutes beyond which participants were not allowed to persist at the task. This was the first cold pressor test and it was designed to assess the baseline measure of their pain tolerance. After, participants went back to the waiting room and read an information sheet about the second cold pressor test, which was the dysfunctional behaviour.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics for all measures across conditions

Variables	Neutral attribution condition (n = 35)	Negative attribution condition (n = 33)	Positive attribution condition (n = 37)
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
1. Need to belong	4.21 (0.96)	4.60 (1.05)	4.40 (0.94)
2. Self-control	4.21 (0.92)	4.26 (1.03)	4.28 (0.89)

Note. N = 105.

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At this point, each group of participants was randomly assigned to one of three conditions. The information sheet contained information about the participants' group and was different in the three different conditions. All conditions had the same dysfunctional norm, which was to leave their hands in the water at least 10 seconds longer than their baseline in the second cold pressor test. However, the norm attribution (i.e., the meaning associated with the norm) was different in each condition.

The main independent variable is the norm attribution type (i.e., whether it is neutral, negative or positive). The neutral norm attribution was the presence of a practice effect. When the norm attribution was negative, participants were told that they experience greater stress, and when it was positive, they were told that they have higher self-control. Our main dependant variable was norm conformity which was measured in terms of the number of seconds that each participant left their hands in the water over their baseline measure (i.e., the difference in time from the experimental trial and the baseline trial on the cold pressor test).

Plus, it was necessary to make sure that participants understood the fact that keeping their hands in the cold water beyond their limits and to the point where their hands hurt, is a dysfunctional behaviour. Therefore, they were told that having a high pain tolerance does not necessarily benefit us and that previous research has demonstrated that having higher self-protective instincts is more functional in everyday life.

In the neutral attribution condition, participants were told that they should be able to keep their hands in the water 10 seconds longer on their second time than on their first time due to a practice effect with the cold pressor test.

In the negative attribution condition, participants were told that they were recruited because English is not their first language, and also because previous studies have found that bilingual or multilingual people typically experience greater stress as a result of constantly switching from one language to another. In this case, they should be able to leave their hands in the water 10 seconds longer on their second trial because this type of experience has a dulling effect on the pain response to repeated pain exposure.

In the positive attribution condition, the same identity (i.e., being a second language student at McGill) was activated, except that in this condition, they were told that bilingual or multilingual people have greater self-control since they are required to constantly switch from one language to another and that this self-control would allow them to leave their hands in the water for 10 seconds longer.

After reading the information sheet, participants performed the second cold pressor test. Then, they were taken to a second room to complete the post-experimental questionnaire on a computer. After completing the questionnaire, they were asked to sit at a large table and enjoy a snack together.

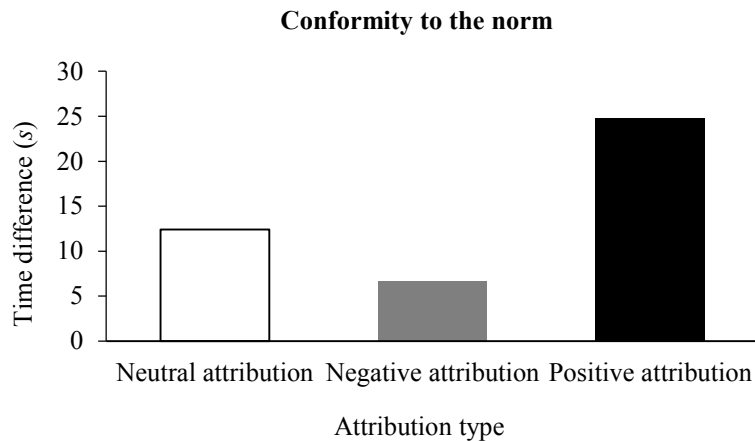


Figure 1. Conformity to group norm measured in terms of mean time differences from baseline.

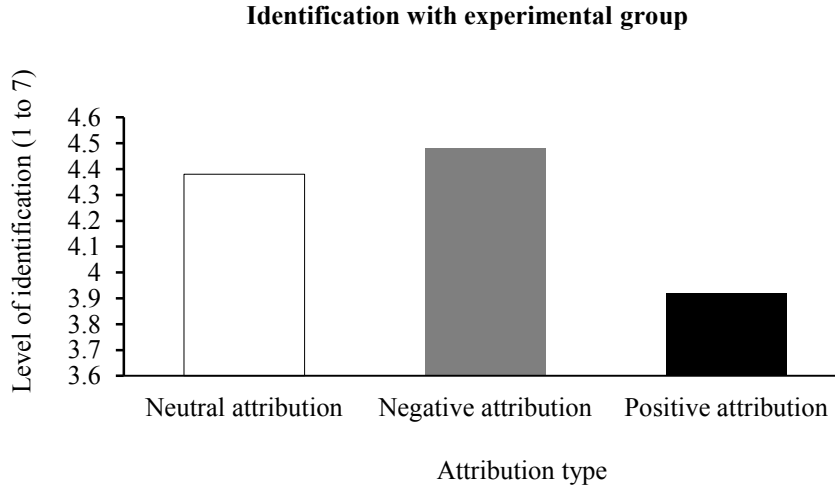


Figure 2. Mean levels of identification with the experimental group.

Results

Explicit measures of self-control and the need to belong have previously been found to affect performance on the cold pressor test (DeWall, Baumeister, & Vohs, 2008; Muraven & Slessareva, 2003). To ensure there are no significant differences between our experimental groups, we first computed mean scores on these measures using the pre-experimental questionnaire data. The means of these scores were compared across groups and are presented in Table 2. Analysis of variance revealed no significant differences between our three groups ($p > .05$).

Norm Conformity

In the control condition with a neutral attribution, the mean time difference between the experimental trial and the baseline trial was 12.4 seconds ($SD = 24.7$, $n = 35$). In the negative attribution condition, the mean time difference between the experimental trial and the baseline trial was 6.65 seconds ($SD = 26.1$, $n = 33$). Finally, in the positive attribution condition, the mean time difference between the experimental trial and the baseline trial was 24.8 seconds ($SD = 33.4$, $n = 37$). A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of attribution effect on norm conformity between our experimental conditions, $F(2, 102) = 3.77$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Levene's test indicated equal variance between the three conditions $F(2, 102) = 2.82$, $p = .065$, indicating that our assumption of homogeneity of variance was not violated in our sample. Using Tukey's HSD test, a post-hoc analysis revealed that participants in the positive attribution condition left their hands in the water for a

significantly longer amount of time (as measured in seconds) over their baseline on their second trial than those in the negative attribution condition ($p = .024$). Participants in the positive attribution condition also kept their hands in the water for a longer amount of time than those in the neutral attribution condition; however, this difference was not significant ($p = .159$). Finally, participants in the negative attribution condition removed their hands sooner than those in the control condition, yet, this difference was also not significant ($p = .683$; see Figure 1).

Level of Identification

Means of the three items adapted from *Cameron's Identification Scale* (2004) were computed and the differences compared across experimental groups. The mean level of identification was 4.38 ($SD = 1.09$) in the neutral attribution condition, 4.48 ($SD = 0.96$) in the negative attribution condition and 3.92 ($SD = 0.82$) in the positive attribution condition. A one way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of attribution type on level of identification with the experimental group, $F(2, 102) = 3.49$, $p = .034$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Levene's test indicated equal variance between the three conditions $F(2, 102) = 1.24$, $p = .292$, indicating that our assumption of homogeneity of variance was not violated in our sample. Post-hoc analyses using the Tukey's HSD test indicated that level of identification was significantly lower in the positive attribution condition compared to the negative attribution condition ($p = .041$). Level of identification was also lower in the positive attribution condition compared to the neutral attribution condition,

and this difference was marginally significant ($p = .109$). Finally, level of identification was lower in the negative attribution condition compared to the neutral attribution condition; however, this difference was not significant ($p = .897$; see Figure 2).

Discussion

Norm Attributions and Conformity

The primary aim of the current study was to test whether the meaning attributed to a dysfunctional group norm, which was to keep one's hand in the cold water for at least 10 seconds longer than the baseline test, will influence people's conformity to that norm. The obtained results confirmed the hypothesis that participants in the positive attribution condition conformed more to the dysfunctional norm by leaving their hands in the water longer than those in the negative attribution condition. In other words, when participants were told that they should be able to conform to the norm because of their higher self-control as a result of constantly switching between languages, they endorsed the dysfunctional norm and complied with it. Conversely, when they were told that they had the capacity to conform to the norm since they had a lower sensitivity to pain as a result of exposure to stress while switching between languages, they dissented from the dysfunctional norm.

These findings have many implications. First, they confirm the presence of an identity-based motivation model. Indeed, when a health-damaging norm is tied to a salient social identity, group members endorse the norm and comply with it. In other words, if a harmful norm is internalized by group members as being part of their group identity, they will downplay its negative impacts on their health (Oyserman, 2007). In fact, when participants thought that leaving their hands in the water was part of bilingual and multilingual people's identity, they pushed themselves beyond their limits and left their hands in the water longer than their baseline, even though they were told that putting oneself through unnecessary pain could have detrimental effects on one's health.

Our results are also consistent with impression management research. Participants in the positive attribution condition, who were told that norm conformity meant that they had higher self-control, acted according to the norm and those in the negative attribution condition, who were told that they were more stressed, did not conform to the norm. Since self-control is associated with a positive social image, especially in an academic environment, people made

substantial efforts and endured cold water to maintain the proscribed positive image. Interestingly, since being stressed is viewed as a negative characteristic and is associated with negative consequences on one's health and life, people may have been motivated to change this negative social image by not adopting the norm, even if it was tied to their identity. Of course, these behaviours were motivated by the desire to make good impressions on others (Ginis & Leary, 2004).

It is interesting to infer that as outsiders and out-group members, we might separate norms from attributions and meanings. However, from an insider and group member's point of view, the attribution is often embedded within the norm or is sometimes more important and salient than the norm. In fact, the attribution represents the norm and sometimes, it is possible for the norm to get lost in the midst of these attributions. As a result, group members might engage in the norm automatically, but it is the attribution that is constantly present that motivates people to engage in the norm and that is provided as a rationale to outsiders who ask about the reason behind a behaviour. This is especially important when it comes to behaviours that society or the majority of people consider dysfunctional or strange. When group members are questioned about why they engage in that behaviour, they might start thinking about the meaning behind their behaviour. If people have a convincing rationale for themselves or find a positive meaning for it, this can increase the importance of the behaviour and make individuals endorse the norm even more. However, if people are questioned about a harmful or odd norm and they cannot seem to find a good and positive reason for engaging in it, they might stop engaging in that behaviour gradually. Hence, the meaning attributed to a behaviour or group norm is essential for its continuation or discontinuation.

Norm Attributions and Identification

The second goal of this study was to examine whether attributing negative versus positive meanings to the dysfunctional group norm of keeping one's hand in the water longer would influence people's level of identification with their group. The results that we obtained are contrary to our hypothesis and expectations. Participants in the positive attribution condition identified less with their group after the experiment than those in other conditions. Despite greater conformity to the group norm, those in the positive attribution condition actually reported lower levels of post-experimental identification. Also, although levels of identification of participants in the negative attribution condition were not different from those in the neutral attribution condition, participants in the negative attribution condition identified more

with their group than those in the positive attribution condition. Put differently, when participants were told that they had higher self-control, they identified less with their group, and when they were told that they experienced higher stress, they identified more with their group.

A possible explanation for the fact that many individuals in the negative attribution condition dissented from the norm can be found in the norm dissent theory (Packer, 2008). Based on this theory, highly identified individuals will dissent from a norm if they feel that the norm is harmful to the group. This non-conformist reaction is motivated by a desire for the improvement of group norms. In fact, these individuals dissent from the norm to redefine it and help the group and their welfare. Another possibility is that dissenting from harmful norms may cause individuals to feel more identified. Actually, the average time difference from baseline to second trial in the negative attribution condition was lower than the threshold of what could be considered norm conformity, which is an increase of at least 10 seconds. Indeed, these people dissented from the norm and identified more with the group after doing so. After dissenting from the norm, they might have felt like they engaged in a collective movement and an act to make their group and its image better. This might have made them feel more identified. For example, this is often what happens during social action protests. When people are protesting for a cause, they feel more like a group and more connected to each other. Another possible explanation for this counter-intuitive finding is that individuals felt greater group pressure when they were less internally motivated to conform to the norm, and this group pressure, made the group aspect of the experiment more salient. Support for this proposition comes from an item on our post-experimental questionnaire, which asked participants to report to what degree pressure from other group members impacted the amount of time they left their hands in the water after they felt pain. Participants in the negative attribution condition ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.41$) perceived more pressure to conform to the group norm than those in the neutral ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .70$) or positive attribution ($M = 1.51$, $SD = 1.10$) conditions, and this difference was significant ($p = .006$). Put differently, participants in the negative attribution condition who did not conform to the norm stated that they perceived more pressure from the group to conform to the group normative behaviour, and this same group reported feeling more identified with the group. Therefore, it is possible that participants in the negative attribution condition experienced a more salient group identity as a result of the pressure they perceived from the group.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The current investigation has many important implications. At the theoretical level, it highlights the importance of the meanings attributed to group norms. In fact, this study demonstrates that once a dysfunctional behaviour is considered to be a group norm and is tied to a group's identity, the meanings group members associate with it has the power of determining whether group members adhere to that norm. When the attribution given to a dysfunctional behaviour is positive and is associated with a desired social image, group members are more likely to internalize it. In contrast, when the harmful behaviour has a negative meaning and represents an unwanted social image, group members are less likely to internalize it.

This finding also has a significant implication at the practical level. For example, it is useful for interventions aimed at modifying dysfunctional group norms. If group members conform more to a harmful norm that is construed positively, then altering the attribution of that dysfunctional norm so that it is interpreted negatively could result in the reduction of conformity to that norm.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of the current investigation is that our sample is not representative of the general population. Our participants were bilingual and multilingual undergraduate students from McGill. Therefore, our findings are limited to this group. It is possible that characteristics specific to this group contributed to the obtained results. Future studies should try the same paradigm with people from different populations and with different identities. Also, it would be interesting to try to create an in-laboratory identity, where participants interact with each other and form an identity before doing the cold pressor test. These studies could give further insight on whether the identity activated before the introduction of the group norm and the norm attribution have a differential impact on people's willingness to engage in a dysfunctional behaviour.

Another limitation of this study is that there was no condition in which we had a norm but not an attribution. Having such a condition would further clarify and disentangle the effects of group normative behaviour and meaning attributed to the group norms. However, it should be noted that this was the first study in a series of studies and we felt that the current conditions were the most important ones. Future studies plan on adding a condition that has a norm without an attribution.

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Finally, it is possible that the results we obtained are limited to the attributions associated with the norms. If participants in the positive attribution condition believed that they have higher self-control, this might have led them to perform better on the cold pressor test the second time, since they had to exert self-control and push themselves beyond their limits. Also, if participants in the negative attribution condition internalized the fact that they experience greater stress, this might have contributed to their underperformance on the second cold pressor test, since experiencing stress can be reasonably understood to undermine performance on tasks, especially if they require self-regulation. Future studies should vary the attributions to ensure that it is the valence of attributions (positive vs. negative) that caused us to obtain our results, and not other characteristics of the attributions employed in the current study that caused the observed effects.

Conclusion

This study found that meanings attributed to group norms in an identity-salient situation impact whether group members conform to the norm or not. When the meaning tied to a group norm was positive, group members were more likely to comply with it, but if it was negative, they were more likely to dissent from it. Also, the attribution type impacts the level of identification of group members. Surprisingly, in our study, those who conformed to the norms identified less with the group and those who dissented from the norm identified more with the group. Since this was an unexpected result, future studies should disentangle this relation between degree of conformity to dysfunctional group norms and levels of identification with the group. Future studies should also try to construct interventions for modifying dysfunctional norms such as binge drinking among first year university students, by giving this dysfunctional norm a negative attribution to discourage students from engaging in it.

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Received May 22, 2014

Revision received December 1, 2014

Accepted December 21, 2014 ■