



*Regulating Deviance with Emotions. Emotional Expressions as Signals of Acceptance and Rejection*

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## REGULATING DEVIANCE WITH EMOTIONS

### Emotional Expressions as Signals of Acceptance and Rejection

The behavior of an individual group member can provoke strong emotional reactions from other group members. This is especially true if the behavior constitutes an act of deviance, which is behavior that is intentionally or not intentionally different from a prevalent group norm. The social psychological literature documents several examples of these reactions to deviance, and characterizes them as extremely angry, hostile, and aggressive. But despite a long standing interest in how groups respond to and regulate the behavior of individual group member between the extremes of deviance and conformity (e.g., Asch, 1956; Bond, 2005; Festinger, 1950; Hornsey & Jetten, 2014), there is little understanding of the role that these emotional reactions may play in the regulation of deviance, or of emotional influence processes in groups more generally. My dissertation answers the question of whether the deviant is affected by these emotional reactions, and, if so, in what way.

My answer to this question starts with the idea that different emotional expressions signal different degrees of acceptance. Specifically, I predict that angry reactions will lead the deviant to feel more rejected, whereas happy reactions will lead the deviant to feel more accepted. Because conformity is typically valued and appreciated by groups, a deviant group member may strategically conform to gain (re-)acceptance in a group when they feel rejected. Thus, because angry expressions signal rejection, they may elicit conformity from a deviant individual. However, there may be circumstances when conformity is not effective and/or not valued by a group. I therefore propose that two classes of moderators determine when angry reactions may increase conformity: (a) re-acceptance in the rejecting group needs to be desirable to the deviant and (b) conformity needs to be (perceived as) instrumental. Re-acceptance is desirable when the deviant is motivated to remain a member in the group, and if the deviant depends on re-acceptance to remain a member in the group. Conformity is instrumental when conformity is a viable way of seeking re-acceptance in the group. For this to be the case, the structure of the situation must be such that the group can observe the change in the deviant's behavior, so that they can subsequently re-accept the (former) deviant. In each of the three empirical chapters in my dissertation, I tested different parts of this theory.

In Chapter 2, I focused on the proposed acceptance-signaling and rejection-signaling function of emotional expressions. I tested this idea by measuring the implicit associations between different facial expressions and different conceptualizations of acceptance and rejection. Across six experiments, I found that happy expressions are indeed more strongly linked to acceptance than other emotional

expressions, and that angry expressions are more strongly linked to rejection than other (negative) emotional expressions. Moreover, I found that the emotional expressions need to be presented for only 50ms for these associations to occur. These findings support the idea that happy expressions are interpreted as signs of acceptance and that angry expressions are taken as signs of rejection. Furthermore, these studies indicate that the associations between emotional expressions and degrees of acceptance do not merely follow the differences in valence between these emotions (i.e., expressions of anger triggered rejection-related concepts more strongly than did expressions of other negative emotions).

In Chapter 3, I investigated how multiple emotional reactions to deviance jointly influence the deviant. Given that a group situation (by definition) involves multiple individuals, the other group members' emotional reaction to deviance is not necessarily unanimous. But what should we expect in terms of rejection and conformity if, for instance, only two out of four majority members react with anger to deviance? To investigate this, I systematically varied the number of angry reactions that a deviant received during a simulated interaction, and measured the extent to which the deviant felt rejected and conformed. In Study 3.1, I found that the relation between the number of angry reactions and felt rejection is best described as linear, and that this relation is not dependent on the total size of the majority. Thus, every extra angry reaction makes the deviant feel more rejected. Contrary to the hypothesis, however, I also found less conformity when the deviant felt more rejected. In Study 3.2, I therefore varied whether responses were made publicly or privately (which determines the instrumentality of conformity), and again found that felt rejection increased with every additional angry reaction. Although the overall relation between angry reactions and conformity was again negative in both the public and private decision conditions, closer inspection of the data revealed that this negative relation was not found for participants who felt less anonymous and who were relatively less deviant. These findings suggest that both instrumentality of conformity and the desirability of re-acceptance (less deviance implies more similarity, which produces attraction) are involved in determining whether angry reactions lead to conformity. However, the main finding from Chapter 3 pertains to the numerical relation between angry reactions and rejection: Every single angry reaction to deviance increases the extent to which the deviant feels rejected.

In Chapter 4, I focused especially on investigating the role of the instrumentality of conformity and the desirability of re-acceptance as determinants of whether (unanimous) angry reactions will pressure the deviant into conforming. In Studies 4.1 and 4.2, participants imagined that a majority unanimously reacted emotionally to their deviance. Consistent with the findings in Chapters 2 and 3, I found that angry reactions increased perceived rejection compared to other emotional reactions, and

that happy reactions lowered perceived rejection (i.e., increase acceptance) compared to other emotional reactions. Furthermore, in Study 4.2, I found that when deviants did not have an alternative to the current group (which should increase the desirability of re-acceptance), angry reactions were more likely to trigger conformity than when alternative groups were readily available. Study 4.3 investigated the relations between emotional reactions, perceived rejection, and subjective conformity pressure across recalled real-world experiences with being deviant in a group. Across all situations, stronger angry reactions were associated with more perceived rejection, and stronger happy reactions were associated with decreased rejection. But most importantly, I found that only in cooperative situations (in which conformity is more instrumental because it is more useful, and therefore likely to be more appreciated, when there is a shared group goal), the majority's emotional reactions were associated with differences in conformity pressure: Stronger angry reactions were associated with more subjective conformity pressure, and stronger happy reactions were associated with less conformity pressure. In Study 4.4, I tested the effects of emotional reactions on conformity in real interacting groups composed of three naive participants. Two of these group members were instructed to express anger, happiness, or no emotion during a group problem-solving task. I focused on the third participant in each group, and found that participants who faced two angry group members had relatively less influence in the group. This effect was mediated by perceived rejection. Finally, in Study 4.5, I returned to the simulated interaction paradigm of Chapter 3 and found that angry reactions and the resulting perceived rejection were more likely to elicit conformity from peripheral deviants (for whom re-acceptance is more desirable) than from prototypical deviants. Moreover, I found that the change in opinion that these angry reactions caused was still apparent three weeks later. Together, the findings in this chapter indicate that angry reactions to deviance can elicit lasting conformity if (a) re-acceptance is desirable (Studies 4.2 and 4.5) and (b) conformity is instrumental in gaining re-acceptance (Study 4.3).

## Conclusion

Together, the findings in this dissertation indicate that group members influence each other through the emotional reactions to each others' behavior. Furthermore, this dissertation shows that there is more to the emotional reactions to deviance than previously assumed: These emotional reactions help regulate deviance in groups. More specifically, the most frequently described emotional reactions to deviance – anger and hostility – appear to be functional, in the sense that they can help resolve potential problems associated with deviance by pressuring the deviant into conformity. However, for these reactions to be functional, re-acceptance needs to be desirable to the deviant, and conformity needs to be instrumental.

On the basis of these findings, I propose an extended theoretical model in which emotional reactions to deviance influence the deviant's behavior through two simultaneous motives, retaliation and reconnection, which have opposite effects on conformity: Retaliation decreases conformity, whereas reconnection increases conformity. The relative influence of each of these motives is determined by the two classes of moderators that have been shown in this dissertation to increase the likelihood of conformity after angry reactions: (a) re-acceptance is desirable and (b) conformity is instrumental. Three new insights follow from this model: (i) angry and happy reactions are proposed to have independent and opposite effects on perceived rejection; (ii) when conformity is less instrumental and when re-acceptance is less desirable, angry reactions should decrease conformity relative to happy reactions; (iii) even when angry reactions elicit conformity, the motive for retaliation is also activated. This has implications for the effectiveness of angry reactions in eliciting conformity in both the short and longer term. It implies, for instance, that angry reactions may simultaneously trigger conformity and lead to the devaluation of a group, and that angry reactions may affect behavior in a different context, or lead to the expression of retaliation a different way, such as hostility towards unrelated people (i.e., displaced aggression).

In addition to describing the consequences of emotional reactions to deviance, several more general theoretical conclusions follow from my dissertation. First, the social signals emitted by emotional expressions appear to be more important for the social functionality of emotions on the group level than previously assumed. The social functions of emotions on the group level have primarily been assumed to stem from collective emotional behavior, yet the findings in this dissertation show that emotions may also be involved in two social functions (the demarcation of group boundaries and the resolution of group-related problems) by signaling acceptance and rejection. Considering emotional expressions as social signals of different degrees of acceptance allows for the development of more specific predictions about how emotional reactions may affect a deviant individual's behavior, and when such influence will be functional, than may be obtained from a collective emotion-perspective.

A second implication is that anger may be a more 'excluding' emotion than previously assumed. Typically, contempt is considered to be the prototypical exclusion emotion, whereas anger is considered a coercive or aggressive emotion. This distinction is primarily based on evidence that the two emotions are linked to distinct action tendencies, however, and thus it is primarily based on evidence from the intrapersonal level of analysis. Given that angry reactions consistently led deviant individuals to feel rejected, the findings in this dissertation suggest that, on the

interpersonal level, the two emotions may be more similar in terms of their consequences.

Finally, although happy reactions do not affect the deviant's behavior in the short term, the finding that happy reactions increase felt acceptance allows for some speculation about the longer-term consequences of these happy reactions. Happy reactions may play a role in reinforcing the bond between the group and the individual, for instance, by increasing the deviant's identification with the group. Thus, happy reactions may over time create the desire for re-acceptance that is required for angry reactions to be functional in changing a group member's behavior.