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Distinction defeats group member deviance:

The unlikely relationship between differentiation and newcomer conformity

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Abstract

I investigate how newcomers' tendencies to conform to the group strategy are influenced by group members' presentation of differentiating status-based information. Theory suggests that increasing the salience of status-based differentiating information incites the cognitive processes of social comparison. These processes motivate low-status individuals to become high-status, and imbue high-status individuals with the power to deviate from low-status associations. With the presentation of competence-based information, a newcomer will conform to the strategies of a higher competence group, despite the validity of the strategy, but will likely deviate from the strategies of a lower competence group if the validity of the strategy is in question.

KEYWORDS: newcomers; groups; conformity; social identity theory; social comparison

Distinction defeats group member deviance:

The unlikely relationship between differentiation and newcomer conformity

On the 16th of December, 1998, the Futures and Options Association (FOA) announced the placement of four new board members on the FOA's board of directors. Yew-Meng Fong was the second to be introduced by the Chairman¹:

Yew-Meng Fong, a Malaysian, graduated from the London School of Economics in 1975. After receiving his degree in Economics he trained with Coopers & Lybrand, London and was admitted to membership of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales in 1978. He joined Continental Bank as General Manager (Singapore) in 1987, and then moved to Goldman Sachs & Co. in 1989.

Fong's introduction was ostensibly more embellished with impressive status-based cues than his three counterparts. To the extent that work-relevant status cues confer a perception of work-related competence, the aforementioned introduction may qualify Fong as a high status member among his group and the entering newcomers. The veterans may also be introduced to a newcomer in the same manner. These introductions are common practice in legitimating newcomers to organizational groups; however, their effect on newcomers' strategic behaviors may be a bit more nuanced.

Upon entering an organization or organizational team, newcomers are often abstracted, anxious, and uneasy about their acceptance by veterans (Louis, 1980; Wilder & Thompson, 1980). Consequently, newcomers will categorize their group members to digest new information and surroundings (Moreland, 1985). Given that high levels of ability legitimate newcomers, competence level is one such factor that illuminates the boundaries between group members (Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008). Furthermore, increasing the salience of

¹ The Futures and Options Association. (1998, December 16). *FOA Elects New Board Members* [Press release]. Retrieved from www.foa.co.uk/external/releases/981216.pdf

differentiating competence-based information accentuates delineations among the group (Moreland, 1985). Competence-based biographical introductions may incite the cognitive processes of comparison due to the announcement of salient differentiating characteristics.

Without actually seeing veterans perform the task, newcomers may use objective cues to assess their competence against other members (Festinger, 1954). If after assessing the veterans, the newcomer's competence level pales in comparison, an inherent psychological drive to obtain a positive self evaluation motivates the newcomer to try and identify similarities and be accepted in the group (Ellemers, et al., 2008; Festinger, 1954). Conversely, if the newcomer deems that she is comparatively higher status, the pressure to protect her superiority is manifested in attempts to make the group more like herself (Festinger, 1954).

Newcomers who want to align themselves with veterans will likely conform to group strategies despite the logical strategic option. Newcomers who want veterans to be more like themselves will likely deviate from group strategies to mirror their own positions. Given that the presentation of competence-based biographical information intensifies a process of delineating, comparison, and conformity; can we expect to see more conforming or deviant newcomer behavior after a newcomer is subjected to these legitimating introductions? The present research explores this prospect.

This finding would have implications for the performance of mixed newcomer and veteran teams. If asymmetric competence levels lead to one-member control, the quality of strategic decisions will likely decrease (Watson, Michaelsen, & Sharp, 1991). If newcomers consistently align with veterans, newcomer insights will likely go unheard. Thus, empirical results of the effects of these introductory statements will benefit the literature on newcomer socialization as well as the managers who employ these socialization tactics.

A PsycINFO literature search using the terms ‘Groups’ and ‘Newcomer,’ or ‘New member,’ yielded 177 results (searched terms within keywords). I filtered out articles with non-organizational contexts and reviewed the resulting 80 articles. Articles that were relevant to conformity, social comparison, or deviance were included in the literature review. A title search of ‘conformity’ and ‘group’ yielded 162 results. Recent studies (from 1980-2009) were analyzed for the review. Similar small searches were conducted for the terms ‘competence,’ ‘social comparison,’ and ‘social identity.’ To examine the effects of the presentation of biographical information on a newcomer’s tendency to conform to or deviate from group strategies, I highlight the relevant literature on differentiating information and social comparison. Next, I use social identity theories to explain how perceptions of dissimilar competence levels drive group members to compare themselves. Then, I explain how differentiating information illuminates delineations and comparison, and motivates a stronger urge for conformity. Finally, I show how these effects of social comparison are manifested in actions of conformity or deviance among newcomers.

Social comparison and differentiating information

Festinger (1954) suggests that people aim to acquire information about themselves through comparisons with others. Self-information is relative (Festinger, 1954), as one can only decide if she is fast, slow, intelligent, or attractive in relation to other people (Stapel & Tesser, 2001). By making these comparisons, individuals are generally motivated to obtain a positive self-evaluation (Tesser, Sorrentino, & Higgins, 1986). Thus, individuals will likely highlight the differences between themselves and lower status groups. Tajfel and Billings (1974) and Tajfel (1982) extend Festinger’s propositions through social identity theory, contending that people seek inclusion in high status groups to enhance their self-evaluation. In an inter-group context,

this inherent drive for comparison leads team members to compare and contrast attributes between different factions of groups.

Ellemers, Wilke and Van Knippenberg (1993) contend that there are two ways in which group members achieve their goal of higher status: an individual can obtain membership in a group of higher status or upgrade the status of their group as a whole. In an organizational context, these motivations can manifest themselves in actions of conformity.

Newcomers' are particularly inclined to compare themselves against others (Moreland, 1985). Social comparison is associated with uncertainty, and a newcomer's feelings of stress, novelty, and change are conducive to comparative behaviors (Stapel & Tesser, 2001). The group may also compare the newcomer's ability against the potential demands the group has faced. In Moreland and Levine's psychological process model, the group evaluates newcomers to identify a newcomers' potential to perform group tasks (Moreland & Levine, 2002). Group members gauge the degree to which they should trust newcomers, and salient cues regarding reputation, knowledge and ability, and perceived commitment help newcomers assess the trustworthiness of the newcomer (Moreland & Levine, 2002).

Stapel and Tesser (2001) also suggest that self-activation incites comparative behavior. Because individuals engage in comparisons to acquire more information about themselves (Festinger, 1954), an individual that is focused on facts regarding his self will be more inclined to compare to acquire this information (Stapel & Tesser, 2001). By extending this proposition a bit further, I surmise that an individual can ignite these comparisons by stating competence-based information related to her self. Thus, self-activation is one way in which the presentation of status-based information leads to the social process of comparison.

The presentation of differentiating information illuminates social categories within a group (Moreland, 1985). By delineating firm boundaries regarding different group factions, differentiating information motivates behavior related to the salient delineations. For example, in a study involving the election of new members into a club, members were more likely to vote along religious lines when religious preferences had recently been discussed (Festinger, 1947). Considering the importance of competence to group activity, the presentation of competence-based information may illuminate the dissimilarity of competence levels, and pressures to eliminate these differences will likely manifest themselves in actions of conformity.

Competence-based cues as a differentiating measure. Festinger (1954) proposed a firm distinction between a persons' inherent abilities and another persons' opinion about the said abilities. In the present study, competence is regarded as the *perception* of abilities that may lead to task performance. This distinction suits the current context. When organizational team members welcome a newcomer, they are generally unaware of the newcomer's *actual* ability to perform the task in question. That is— team members have yet to witness the outcome of the task-performance or the task-performance in process (Festinger, 1954). Thus, team member's evaluations of newcomer competence are merely based on perceptions arising from competence-based cues.

Positive perceptions of competence are vital to personal self-esteem (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995), and people are motivated to behave in ways that help them maintain a positive self-evaluation (Tesser, et al., 1986). Thus, perceptions of competence may motivate individual behavior. Because competence is one of the core dimensions of social judgment (Kervyn, Yzerbyt, Demoulin, & Judd, 2008), perceptions of individuals' competencies are also very important ingredient for groups (Crocker, Blaine, Luhtanen, Hogg, & Abrams, 1993; Luhtanen

& Crocker, 1992). Perceptions of the collective group competence positively affect group solidarity (Blanz, Mummendey, & Otten, 1995; Ellemers & Van Rijswijk, 1997). Furthermore, Burleson, Levine, and Sampter (1984), Hill (1982), and Libby, Trotman, and Zimmer (1987) suggested that overall group competence is bounded by the abilities of the group's most competent member. As competence is an important characteristic for the social interactions of teams, team members are driven to maintain levels of ability, or opinions of this level of ability, that allow out-groups to view them in a positive light.

Competence can confer a status to individuals that show ostensible capabilities. Newcomers engage in sense-making and revisit the hierarchy within groups, by judging their competence against others in the group (Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980; Karakowsky, McBey, & Miller, 2004). Consequently, newcomers search for indicators of competence, and they also signal their competence to others by flagging their past accomplishments (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994). Thus, considering its cognitive impact and association with status, perception of competence can have a huge bearing on intergroup behavior (Bradley, 1980).

Social comparison and conformity

Public displays of group loyalty aid newcomers as they vie for acceptance (Jetten, Hornsey, & Adarves-Yorno, 2006). Often, the sanctions for not conforming to a group ethic is high—Torrance (1993) suggests that people who deviate from prevailing paradigms are often subject to ridicule, rejection and/or condemnation. Thus, conformity, defined as the “tendency to structure an ambiguous situation in accordance with what other people suggest” (Solomon E. Asch, 1956; Castelli, Vanzetto, Sherman, & Luciano, 2001; Cialdini, Trost, Gilbert, Fiske, & Lindzey, 1998), becomes a crucial tool in a newcomer's arsenal.

Conformity is highly prevalent in groups, and has often been considered a function of group size (S. E. Asch & Guetzkow, 1951). More nuanced studies have improved upon this notion. Latane and Wolf (1981) contend that the psychological effect of group members' influence may be driven by the status, power, and ability of the source, and not just the number of the group. In an Asch-type conformity experiment, Insko (1985) found that the group size effect is mediated by concern for being right and being liked.

Newcomers are often motivated by both of these informational (being right) and normative (being liked) pressures. In a situation involving 'informational influence,' a person with limited information identifies a group by its salient status-infused characteristics and depends on this high-status reference group to determine the correct, or 'right' path (Hornsey, Majkut, Terry, & McKimmie, 2003). Conversely, a person who is normatively influenced seeks acceptance and primarily acts to avoid sanctions and/or discrimination (Hornsey, et al., 2003).

Objective, information-based, awareness has been shown to increase conformity (Insko, 1985). Informational influence is highly internalized, and will affect both a person's private and public behavior, whereas normative influence is assumed to be the weaker influence (Hornsey, et al., 2003). The normative pressures to be accepted and avoid censure are more likely to alter a person's public rather private face (Hornsey, et al., 2003). Furthermore, although fear of condemnation is common, in some cases, a person's need to be right may override their need for acceptance (Hornsey, et al., 2003).

Given the strength of salient information in governing the strategies that a group member will conform to, subtle information-based cues may dictate conformity in groups. In fact, Jetten, Hornsey, and Adarves-Yorno (2006) found that a person in a relatively higher status group will strategically portray herself as more likely to conform to the group, as compared to a person in a

lower status group. Salient competence-based clues will enhance social comparison processes by illuminating the differences among in-group members.

Hypothesis development

When opinions about abilities within a group are dissimilar, a member will tend to change her position to ally herself with the group (Festinger, 1954). Factors that increase the salience of differences, increasingly drive the group toward this uniformity (Festinger, 1954).

Differentiating competence-based biographical information is one such factor. I predict that when competence-based information is presented, a newcomer that presents low status biographical information will conform to the veterans' strategy when given high status biographical information about all group members.

H1: A relatively low status newcomer is more likely than a relatively high status newcomer to conform to veteran strategies when competence-based biographical information has been publicly presented about each group member.

When competence levels within a group are dissimilar, the member with higher perceived competence will increasingly tend to deviate from positions that do not coincide with her own (Festinger, 1954). Thus, a newcomer that presents high status biographical information will try to deviate from a low-status veterans' strategy.

H2: A relatively high status newcomer is more likely than a relatively low status newcomer to deviate from veteran strategies when competence-based biographical information has been publicly presented about each group member.

Overview of the experiment

The experiment tests the effects of the presentation of competence-based biographical information on newcomers' decisions to control or cooperate with group strategies. The

experimental design is a 2 x 2 factorial of Veteran Group Status x Biographical Information. In the Veteran Group Status condition, the group is either high or low status. In the Biographical Information condition, biographical information is either given publicly or privately.

---Table 1 about here---

Method

Participants. Eighty-four graduate students (42 female and 42 male) at a large Midwestern university take part in the experiment all on the same day. All participants are told they can accrue up to \$15 for their performance in the experiment. Before the experiment begins, participants are randomly assigned to 3 person same-sex teams. Each team consists of 1 research participant and 2 confederates. Six different confederates rotate in pairs of 2 to fulfill all of the conditions.

Pilot Test. In a pilot test, 40 college-aged participants are handed sheets with two different companies' stock performance measures. They are asked to determine which company stock they would choose if they were going to sell the stock exactly one year from now. After their selection, the experimenter prompts them to declare whether they felt that determining the superiority of one company over the other was a relatively easy or difficult decision. Based on this testing, stock profiles are selected so that the decision between companies is mildly easy, as one seems superior to the other. Additionally, they rank several universities, job titles, and accomplishments based on the high or low statuses they imbue.

Materials and procedure. On the day of the experiment, each research participant that enters the lab is met by an experimenter who ushers them into a small room, gives them an instruction sheet, and explains that the other two group members have already arrived. On the way to the room, the experimenter explains that the participant was recruited to fill in for a

member that left the university and that the group had actually met two times before. The experimenter then reassures the participant that the group members will inform the participant about the project. Upon entering the room, the experimenter seats the participant at the 6 o'clock position at a circular table. The first and second confederates are seated at the 12 o'clock and 3 o'clock positions respectively with identical instruction sheets in hand.

In the private information condition, the experiment prompts the members to sign a sheet with biographical information (name, undergraduate institution attended, field of study, and recent work experience). The experimenter then hands this paper to the first confederate. Each of the two confederates signs the paper then passes it to the last person, the research participant. In the high status condition, this information will reflect high status affiliations. In the low status condition, this information will reflect low status affiliations. The participant will be cognizant of her counterparts' affiliations, but will not have to publicly declare differentiating information about herself. After she signs the paper, the paper is put to the side and the next section of the experiment begins.

In the public information condition, the experimenter presents the new member and casually prompts each member to introduce herself based on name, undergraduate institution attended, field of study, and recent work experience. Before leaving the room, the experimenter explains that she will return in 15 minutes. The first confederate casually assures the group that they should begin and introduces herself using the guidelines given. The second confederate follows with her own introduction. The research participant finishes with the last introduction.

The high in-group status script is as follows:

Confederate 1: Well, I guess I'll start. My name is Ashley Davis. I did my undergrad at Stanford University. I'm getting my masters in molecular biology...let's see what else did she say... oh, and I recently worked at the Center for Disease Control as a Senior Research Associate.

Confederate 2: I guess I'm next. I'm Jessica Allen. I went to Yale for undergrad, but I was a Rhodes Scholar, so I was at Oxford before I came to study here. I'm now getting my Ph.D. in Political Science, and I worked at the United Nations working on developing economic policies for South American countries before I came back for my Ph.D.

[The research participant will introduce herself next using the same format]

The low in-group status script is as follows:

Confederate 1: Well, I guess I'll start. My name is Ashley Davis. I did my undergrad at Clemons College. I'm getting my masters in Theatre...let's see what else did she say... oh, and I recently worked at a community theatre in my hometown this summer before school started.

Confederate 2: I guess I'm next. I'm Jessica Allen. I actually went to a community college, then transferred to San Diego State. I'm now getting my masters in art therapy, and I haven't really had a job since college, but I do some waitressing from time to time.

[The research participant will introduce herself next using the same format]

In the non-information condition, the experimenter presents the new member and prompts each member to introduce herself by name only. Before leaving the room, the experimenter explains that she will return in 15 minutes.

The first confederate then fills the newcomer in to the group activities.

Confederate 1: In the past two meetings, they gave us different tasks to do. First, we had to brainstorm about the size of the market for pizza, then we had to play against a computer in a game of chess. We just voice each of our opinions on the strategy we want to take, and they give us money based if our group strategy is correct. If we are all correct, we each get \$10. If none of us are correct, we don't get anything, but we all need to have some the same strategy. If the last person to voice her opinion disagrees with one or both of us, our final group opinion is the opinion of that last person. Ashley played the last person in our first meeting, I played it in our second, and I guess that you are the last person now for our last meeting. Ok, so let's read this last case and make some money!

The group then reads the instructions on the sheet. The instructions prompt the group to choose which of two stocks they will invest money in (see Appendix B). Six-month stock

performance charts are provided for each company. Both selections are convincing, but one definitely appears superior (refer to Pilot Testing). After, reading through the information, the first confederate acknowledges the time, and encourages the group to make their decisions. The first confederate selects the less obvious choice (Company XYZ), the second confederate confirms this decision, but does not seem confident. The group then prompts the research participant to make her and the group's choices (conform or deviate). If the research participant selects Company ABC, she has chosen to deviate from the group's strategy. If she selects Company XYZ, she has chosen to conform to the group's strategy. The instructions explain that the participants should not discuss this decision during or after the decision has been made. The experimenter comes in after 7 minutes and announces the end of the session. As the experimenter collects the sheets, she announces that the chosen path was the correct answer. The research participant is paid \$15 and is dismissed first.

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Table 1

Experimental Design

2 x 2 factorial design

Biographical Information

| | | Biographical Information | |
|------------------|------|--------------------------|----------------|
| | | Information | No Information |
| Group Competence | Low | A | B |
| | High | C | D |

Appendix A

Confederates Script.

The high in-group status script is as follows:

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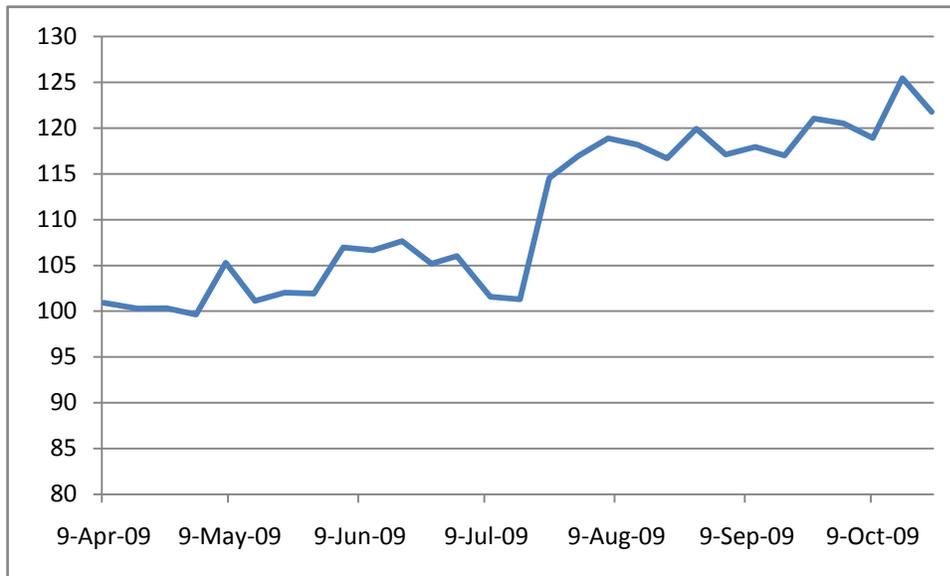
The first confederate then fills the newcomer in to the group activities.

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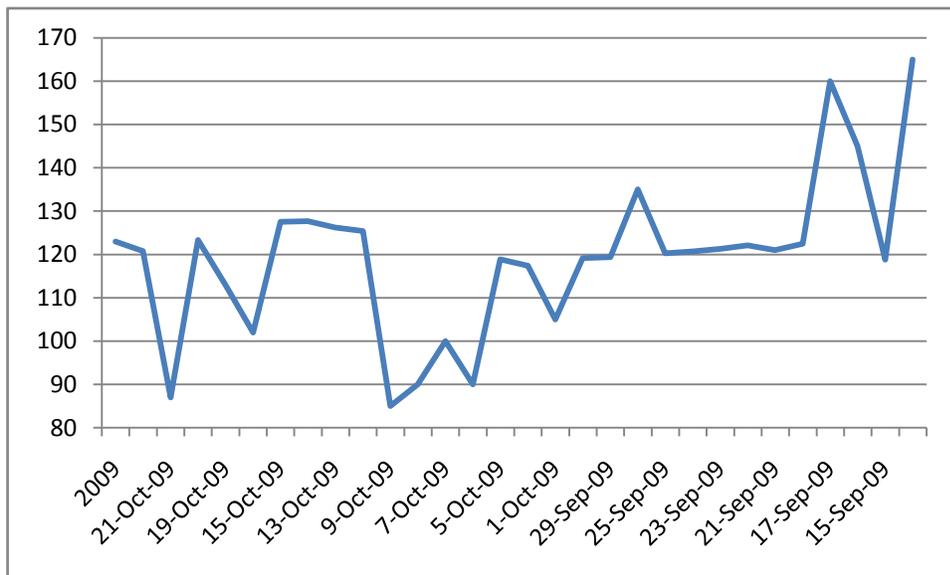
Appendix B

Using the company charts below, please choose which company stock will yield the best profit a year from now:

Company ABC



Company XYZ



Circle Company selected:

ABC XYZ

