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KEYWORDS: Newcomers, Social Categorization, Opinion Diversity

The pain is worth the gain:

The advantages and liabilities of agreeing with socially distinct newcomers

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### Abstract

The impact of newcomer's social similarity and opinion agreement with oldtimers is examined. Much of the research about newcomers has ignored the role of social similarity, generally conflating newcomer status with out-group status. The current investigation addresses this confound by manipulating the social similarity of the newcomer to oldtimers, as well as the level of opinion agreement among the two. We find that there is a divergence between how socially validated oldtimers feel and their performance. In groups with in-group newcomers those that ally with the newcomer feel socially validated, yet perform worse than those who do not ally with the newcomer, whereas allies of out-group newcomers feel less socially validated, but actually perform quite well. We argue that allying with an out-group newcomer can represent a threat to one's social relationships with fellow in-group members (Phillips, 2003), which leads to an increased task focus that results in superior performance for oldtimers in the group. Implications for understanding the impact of newcomers on groups will be discussed.

Key words: newcomers, social similarity, opinion ally

### The pain is worth the gain:

#### The advantages and liabilities of agreeing with socially distinct newcomers

Across many species of pack animals, biologists have observed a fierce intolerance towards newcomers. Packs of gray wolves, for example, are known to chase and attack any foreign wolf that intrudes upon their territory, sending a clear message that the newcomer is not welcome. Although organizational newcomers aren't likely to receive such hostile welcomes, they, too, often face difficulty integrating themselves into a functioning group. At other times, however, groups are eager to harness the new ideas and skills that newcomers offer. In both cases, reactions to newcomers often depend on the ways in which they differ from existing group members (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). For example, "oldtimers" may categorize newcomers based on whether they agree or disagree with their opinions (see Prislin & Christensen, 2002, for a discussion of newcomers as a function of their impact on the majority-minority coalitions of a group). Reactions to these potential opinion alliances can further vary according to whether oldtimers view the newcomer as socially similar or distinct from themselves.

Unfortunately, much of the research about the impact of newcomers has ignored the role of social similarity, generally conflating newcomer status with out-group status. This confound leads to the question of whether oldtimers' reactions to newcomers are due to their newcomer status or to the fact that they belong to a social out-group. Ziller (1965) has documented that newcomers often induce a task orientation among the groups they join, but it is unclear whether this is merely because they are newcomers or because they are perceived as a social out-group. The current investigation addresses this confound by manipulating the social similarity of the newcomer. Furthermore, we look at the impact of opinion agreement among newcomers and oldtimers. Because newcomers may differentially influence subjective (e.g., social validation

and social identification) and objective (e.g., performance) outcomes, both criteria are examined as we consider the influence of newcomers on group interactions.

We expect allies of in-group newcomers to feel validated by opinion agreement with a socially similar other and become further entrenched in their views. Consequently, they will regard their experiences in the group positively and place more esteem on their personal contributions. However, in this state of contentment and confidence, we believe allies of in-group newcomers will be less motivated to reconcile the disparity of opinions between themselves and other group members, ultimately resulting in sub-par performance.

In contrast, allies of out-group newcomers may feel uncomfortable with a link that ties them to an out-group member and differentiates them from their fellow in-group members. Although social risks may be attached to allying with socially distinct newcomers, the ensuing discomfort may have positive implications. More specifically, we predict that allies of socially distinct newcomers will be motivated to retain their social bond with other in-group members. They could ostensibly approach this in one of two ways—they could sever their alliance with the newcomer by reneging their prior opinion. This may be difficult to do after publicly stating their opinion. More likely, they would reconcile the opinion difference between themselves and their in-group colleagues by trying to uncover the reasons for the disparity in their opinions. Motivated to act, this drive towards reconciliation will transition the individual's previous social focus to one that is more task-oriented, yielding superior levels of performance. In sum, we anticipate an overall divergence between social validation and performance; allies of in-group newcomers are expected to feel the best, yet perform the worst, whereas allies of out-group newcomers will feel the worst, but actually perform the best.

## Methods

The study involved 242 active members of sororities and fraternities at Northwestern University. The current study utilized a 2 (social similarity; in-group vs. out-group) X 3 (opinion agreement; newcomer has no opinion ally, 1 opinion ally, or 2 opinion allies) between-subjects design (see Figure 1). Only members of two sororities or two fraternities participated at any given time, yielding groups that were always of the same gender. Participants' distinct social identities were made salient by large banners with their sorority/fraternity names posted on opposite walls of the laboratory and by requiring participants to sit on the side of the room corresponding to their sorority/fraternity. To further reinforce their unique identities, participants also wore nametags with their sorority/fraternity name written on them.

Upon entering the lab, participants were presented with the Murder Mystery task (Stasser & Stewart, 1992) in which they were given twenty minutes to examine evidence and make an individual decision regarding the most likely suspect. Participants were asked to abstain from any discussion before meeting with their groups. After making their individual decision, the experimenter assigned the participants to three-person groups of a shared social identity and told them they would have twenty minutes to come to a group decision regarding the most likely suspect; after five minutes, a fourth person, the newcomer, joined the discussion. Social similarity (in-group vs. out-group) was manipulated according to whether the newcomer joining the group was from the same or different sorority/fraternity as the other three group members. Opinion agreement was operationalized as whether newcomers joined groups in which they had zero, one, or two opinion allies concerning who they chose as the most likely suspect.

Once the group reached a decision, each of the group members individually completed a post-discussion questionnaire, assessing their opinions of other group members, perceptions

about the group discussion process, levels of social identification with their sorority/fraternity, and their final belief regarding who really committed the murder.

### Results

Of 242 participants, 50 viable 4-person groups were composed that adhered to the experimental conditions. Drawn from the relevant conditions of the 2 X 3 design, we examined the 150 “oldtimers” that were either allies or non-allies of the newcomer based on whether they agreed in their pre-discussion choice of the murder suspect. This distinction (ally vs. non-ally), as well as the social similarity of the newcomer (in-group vs. out-group), comprised the two between-subjects factors in our analyses below.

Four measures of social validation capturing both perceptions of interpersonal validation and opinion validation (i.e., perceived acceptance, personality conflict, how interested the group was in what they had to say, and the importance of their contributions to the group discussion), were collapsed into a combined variable representing the individual’s perception of social validation (SV) by peers in the group ( $\alpha=.71$ ). Four social identification measures were also combined to create a new variable representing the individual’s overall degree of social identification with their fraternity or sorority ( $\alpha=.89$ ), (see Table 1 for cell means).

To compare the subjective and objective outcomes of the group discussion process, we transformed the combined measure of social validation and final decision accuracy to  $z$  scores. The  $z$  scores were submitted to a 2 (opinion: ally vs. non-ally of the newcomer ) X 2 (social identity of newcomer: in-group vs. out-group) X 2 (social validation vs. performance) mixed model analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with repeated measures on the third factor. Prediscussion decision accuracy was used as a covariate in the analysis and was a significant predictor ( $F(1,143) = 18.38, p \leq .0001$ ) of the repeated measures. A significant social similarity

by repeated measures interaction,  $F(1,145) = 5.67, p \leq .02$ , was qualified by a significant three-way interaction,  $F(1,143) = 6.72, p \leq .01$ .

Separate two-way interactions between social similarity and opinion agreement were conducted on performance and social validation. For performance there was only a significant main effect for social similarity  $F(1,143) = 4.95, p \leq .05$ , such that significantly more oldtimers in the out-group-newcomer condition were correct (69.01%) than oldtimers in the in-group-newcomer condition (55.84%). For SV, there was a significant main effect of social similarity, such that oldtimers in the in-group-newcomer condition ( $M = 6.03, SD = .73$ ) felt more socially validated than oldtimers in the out-group-newcomer condition ( $M = 5.84, SD = .91$ ),  $F(1,145) = 4.28, p < .05$ . In addition, there was a marginally significant interaction effect,  $F(1,145) = 3.63, p < .06$ . To explicate the meaning of this interaction, we conducted focused, planned contrasts (see Table 1 for mean values). Looking within the in-group-newcomer condition, there was no difference in SV for allies versus non-allies ( $t < 1$ ); however, allies were less accurate in their final decision than non-allies,  $t(75) = 1.89, p \leq .03$  (one-tailed, controlling for individual prediscussion accuracy). In the out-group-newcomer condition, the contrast revealed that allies of the newcomer experienced less SV than non-allies,  $t(70) = 2.06, p \leq .02$  (one-tailed, controlling for individual prediscussion accuracy), yet there was no difference between them in terms of final decision accuracy ( $t < 1$ ). Oldtimers' feelings of social identification with their sorority/fraternity mirrored the trends of SV. Within the in-group-newcomer condition, there was no difference between allies and non-allies ( $t < 1$ ), whereas allies of an out-group newcomer identified with their sorority/fraternity significantly less than the non-allies,  $t(70) = 2.75, p \leq .005$  (one-tailed).

## Discussion

The previous analyses reveal the provocative paradox that while allies and non-allies of in-group newcomers enjoy greater social validation, they are least likely to solve the murder mystery. In contrast, allies of out-group newcomers feel least validated, but are more likely to arrive at the correct answer. What can account for the concomitant drop in SV and social identification, yet simultaneously explain the superior performance of allies of out-group newcomers? We believe that allying with an out-group newcomer can represent a threat to one's social relationships with fellow in-group members (Phillips, 2003). This threat was manifested by these allies' insecurity regarding the value of their opinions and the stability of their interpersonal relationships. Seeking to protect those valued relationships, allies are thus motivated to reconcile the opinion difference that exists between themselves and the other in-group members, facilitating a more concerted task focus. Although agreeing with an out-group newcomer may be socially painful, the task-focus induced by the alliance ultimately yields greater accuracy, not just for the ally but for all group members. In essence, non-allies reap the benefits of the ally's social discomfort, thus accounting for the finding that non-allies experience greater levels of social validation and identification than the ally, yet still solve the task with the same level of accuracy.

In contrast, allies of an in-group newcomer appreciate the validation of their socially similar ally. They become further entrenched in their views and overconfident of their opinions. In fact, the data reveal that within the in-group-newcomer condition, allies believed that they contributed significantly more than the non-allies. Perhaps this self-importance reinforced their commitment to potentially flawed opinions, explaining why allies' decisions were significantly less accurate than non-allies' opinions. Social identification did not suffer for allies in this



circumstance because their disparate opinions were aligned with a member of their social in-group. Lacking the social threat of allying with an out-group member, they were less motivated to reconcile the clash of opinions between themselves and other group members, resulting in sub-par performance.

Taken together, our findings suggest that the pasture is greenest for non-allies of out-group newcomers. Within their groups, these individuals are insulated from the social threats of allying with a socially distinct newcomer, but can depend on the troubled ally to act as taskmaster and lead their group to victory. For all others, however, there appears to be a trade-off between the social comfort afforded by allying with an in-group member and the liability that such security poses in terms of performance. Consequently, while allies of out-group newcomers may experience distress, when it comes to mastering the task, the pain is worth the gain.

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Figure 1

Experimental design of original 2X3 study: Social identity X Number of opinion allies and loyalty (L)

|                                    |           | <u>Newcomer's # of Opinion Allies</u>                             |   |   |
|------------------------------------|-----------|---|---|---|
|                                    |           | 0 allies  | 1 ally  | 2 allies  |
| <u>Social Identity of Newcomer</u> | In-group  | <b>I<sub>1</sub>I<sub>1</sub>I<sub>1</sub> I<sub>2</sub></b><br>1 | <b>I<sub>1</sub>I<sub>1</sub>I<sub>2</sub> I<sub>2</sub></b><br>2 | <b>I<sub>1</sub>I<sub>2</sub>I<sub>2</sub> I<sub>2</sub></b><br>3 |
|                                    | Out-group | <b>I<sub>1</sub>I<sub>1</sub>I<sub>1</sub> O<sub>2</sub></b><br>4 | <b>I<sub>1</sub>I<sub>1</sub>I<sub>2</sub> O<sub>2</sub></b><br>5 | <b>I<sub>1</sub>I<sub>2</sub>I<sub>2</sub> O<sub>2</sub></b><br>6 |

Table 1

Performance, Social Validation and Social Identification by Opinion Agreement and Social Similarity

| Opinion Agreement     | In-group Newcomer |             | Out-group Newcomer |             |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------|
|                       | Ally              | Non-ally    | Ally               | Non-ally    |
| Performance           | 50.0%             | 58.8%       | 73.9%              | 66.7%       |
| Social Validation     | 6.13 (0.71)       | 5.98 (0.75) | 5.56 (1.16)        | 5.98 (0.73) |
| Social Identification | 6.11 (1.05)       | 6.34 (0.80) | 5.57 (1.41)        | 6.30 (0.84) |

Note: Performance is presented in terms of the percentage of oldtimers that chose the correct suspect. Standard deviations are in parentheses.