

## <CT>Reputational concerns as a general determinant of group functioning

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<C-AB>**Abstract:** To understand a group's (dys)functionality, we propose to focus on its members' concerns for their reputation. The examples of prosocial behavior and information exchange in decision-making groups illustrate that empirical evidence directly or indirectly suggests that reputational concerns play a central role in groups. We argue that our conceptualization fulfils criteria for a good theory: enhancing understanding, abstraction, testability, and applicability.

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<CB>**General determinants of group functioning.** When does a group do better than we would expect from the sum of its individual members, when worse? This is the ultimate question many researchers ask, whether they are concerned with group performance, information exchange and decision-making in groups, or prosocial and antisocial behavior (cf., Allport 1962). A major achievement of Baumeister et al.'s stimulating paper is that they bridge these fields that too often are regarded as distinct, instead of capitalizing on each other's knowledge.

Baumeister et al. suggest what they call "differentiation of selves" as a general determinant for the functioning of groups in different contexts: the more individual group members become differentiated selves, the better the group functions. Baumeister et al. offer a variety of factors that make selves differentiated, such as group members having distinct roles and specialization; being individually identifiable, accountable and responsible; getting individual rewards; and being in competition with each other. Yet, important questions remain. How do these factors differ in effectiveness across different group contexts? What are the psychological mechanisms underlying their effects?

Clearly, Baumeister et al.'s framework is a useful step towards a greater understanding of groups. Yet, we propose an alternative conceptualization as a general determinant for group functioning: Reputational concerns. Our conceptualization might do equally well in terms of (a) enhancing understanding, and (b) applicability to important social settings. However, it might do even better in terms of (c) abstraction (i.e., parsimony, the notion of explaining a lot with a little) and (d) testability – all of which have been emphasized as criteria for a good psychological theory (Van Lange 2013).

**<CB>Reputational concerns.** Anthropologist Ralph Linton (1945, p. 9) wrote that “there is very little organized human behavior” which is not to some degree directed towards fulfilling the “need for eliciting favorable responses from others”. Indeed, concerns about one’s own reputation have since, under different terms, been recognised as a prime human motive in the biological, behavioral, and social sciences. Baumeister (1982) himself suggested the relevance of what he called “self-presentational motives” for different social phenomena. More recent empirical evidence indicates the importance of reputational concerns in groups – both explicitly and implicitly.

Firstly, in the broad domain of prosocial behavior, the role of reputational concerns is explicitly recognized by different research traditions. In behavioral economics, prosocial behaviour is seen as partly driven by the “image” or “signaling” motivation that one is a good person (Ariely et al. 2009). Evolutionary accounts argue that concerns to build a reputation as a trustworthy cooperation partner enable indirect reciprocal helping within a group (Nowak & Sigmund 2005). Also in social psychology it has been demonstrated that a motivation to present oneself in a good light is decisive for prosociality, for example in research on “moral hypocrisy” (Batson et al. 1997).

Secondly, in the field of information exchange in decision-making groups reputational concerns are addressed rather implicitly, even though behavior in such situations is recognized as serving different individual and group goals (De Dreu et al. 2008). It has been argued, for example, that group members aim to gain status or influence within the group (Wittenbaum et al. 2004). Empirical research, although not directly addressing this, also implies reputational concerns are a motive in information exchange. Group members’ communication is driven by their wish to be seen as having comprehensible reasoning (Faulmüller et al. 2012), and they tend to adjust the information they share so

that they are perceived as more competent (Mojzisch et al. 2014), both leading to biased information exchange. When group members are familiar with one another and, hence, have to worry less about their social acceptance within the group, communication becomes less biased (Gruenfeld et al. 1996).

These examples illustrate that empirical evidence either directly shows a central role of reputational concerns in explaining group functioning or can be interpreted in that light. Many other examples can be found, ranging from Hollander's (1958) "idiosyncrasy credit" – the idea that status can be earned by conforming to the group's expectations and used up by deviant behavior – to empirical evidence that "impression management" could underlie the increased effort weak performers show in group settings (Kerr et al. 2005). In sum, many group phenomena seem to be driven at least partly by the attempt to be seen favorably by others.

A focus on reputational concerns allows a more flexible view on group functioning across time than the two sequential steps Baumeister et al. advocate: first cohesive identification, later differentiation. Reputational concerns can explain why the same person within the same group can contribute both positively and negatively to this group's functionality – not depending on the group's long term development, but varying with contextual factors. For example, a timid team member in a company might not mention any ideas at the team's brainstorming session out of fear of appearing stupid (reputational concerns as impairment for group functioning). But within the same meeting, this person might contribute generously to the team's collection of charitable donations out of fear of appearing stingy (reputational concerns as enhancement for group functioning). And reputational concerns can partly explain why moderators of individual behavior can have different effects in groups (Faber et al. 2015).

**<CB>Practical aspects.** For these theoretical and empirical reasons, we propose reputational concerns as a general determinant of group functioning in different contexts. Furthermore, we argue that such a focus fulfils the two more practical criteria for a good theory mentioned above: testability and applicability. In empirical research, reputational concerns usually are easy to operationalize. And they can be addressed in interventions ranging from small group to state level. Letting citizens develop their own cooperative norms in local communities (Van Lange et al. 2013) or implementing policy

interventions that nudge behavior that benefits the individual or the whole group (Thaler & Sunstein 2008) may serve as examples.

We do not argue that reputational concerns are sufficient to explain all cases of groups being more or less than the sum of their members. But we are confident this motive deserves broad theoretical, empirical, and practical consideration.

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