The Many Faces of Rebels

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To illustrate a principle you must exaggerate much and you must omit much
(Walter Bagehot)

Serge Moscovici started his 1976 book, Social Influence and Social Change, with the above quote. Even though it is not immediately clear for the naive reader how this quote relates to the content of the book, it quickly becomes apparent that Moscovici is not referring to processes relating to understanding conformity, dependence and minority influence. Instead, he is commenting on our practices when conducting research in this field. What is the exaggeration that Moscovici is referring to?

Before answering this question, it is important to assess what Moscovici’s book was trying to achieve. One of the main aims of his book was to examine the tension between the pressure of conforming versus the forces pushing for innovation and change. Of course, no one will dispute the omnipresence of these two opposing forces that guide our individual and group behaviour on a daily basis. Given this, why is it that social scientists have been more interested in what makes people conform than in what makes them defy authority and group pressure? Or as Moscovici put it: why do we exaggerate conformity and downplay processes relating to rebellion?

We do not have to look far to understand what Moscovici is referring to. For example, why is it that we are more interested in understanding why 12 per cent of participants in the classic Asch line study conformed on all trials than in the 24 per cent of participants who never conformed at all (Asch, 1951)? Why do we focus on explaining the 63 per cent of participants taking part in Milgram’s study in 1963 who delivered what they thought was the maximum shock of 450 volts to a learner, and not on the 37 per cent of participants who insisted at some stage in the study that they did not want to
continue shocking the learner? Finally, why is our theorising geared towards understanding why groups do not appreciate ‘black sheep’ and the conditions under which such ‘black sheep’ are evaluated most negatively? Why do we not instead focus on our liking for rebels and mavericks who challenge group norms and do not appear to be afraid of standing out (Bellah et al., 1985; Hornsey & Jetten, 2004)?

Many of the most famous figures in psychology (e.g., Asch, Milgram, Zimbardo) spent their careers examining conformity and obedience pressures within groups. It is true that these studies have captured the attention of a generation of researchers for a good reason. These researchers tried to understand how obedience and conformity could lead to the destructive consequences witnessed during World War II. Coming to terms with the Holocaust, these studies reveal many important insights in the psychology of dissent, deviance, difference and defiance within groups and have clearly enhanced our understanding of the consequences of conformity (Farr, 1996).

However, some of the conclusions from these classic studies have been taken out of context; they have been interpreted as showing that conformity is the default in groups and that rebellion is generally not welcomed, is suppressed, and at times is actively punished by others in the groups. This has led to a psychology that has focused on the positive value that groups place on loyalty and uniformity and it paints a rather dark picture of groups’ perceptions of dissent, deviance, difference and defiance: as detrimental forces within groups, as reflections of a lack of group loyalty, as a sign of disengagement, or as delinquent behaviour.

Still, this general message would not be a problem if it was accurate. But is that the case? Or is it, as Moscovici suggests, that we may have exaggerated the extent to which individuals and group members conform, are obedient, and are intolerant of difference and deviance of others? In Moscovici’s words: ‘It is difficult to explain why social psychology has been so obsessed with dependence’ (Moscovici, 1976, p.18). Or on a lighter note: ‘The French say “cherchez la femme”; social psychologists say “look for the dependence, and everything will be explained”’ (Moscovici, 1976, p.19).

The main objective of this edited book is to provide a counterforce to the dominant message emerging from social psychological research that groups strive for conformity, homogeneity and sameness, with little respect for deviance, dissent, difference or defiance. Even though the pressure for conformity is without doubt a dominant force in group life, we have perhaps exaggerated the extent to which it affects group processes. That
is, in our desire to understand conformity, we have perhaps unavoidably neglected and downplayed the important role played by those who are dissenting, deviant, different or defiant in group life. These individuals are not just a nuisance and trouble-makers. In many cases they are just as important for the functioning of the group as members who are trying hard to fit in and work for the group – indeed, they are often the same person. But why is it that we have been so captured by conformity in groups and why have we developed a dogma that deviance is detrimental for groups?

**Do Social Psychologists have a Problem with Rebels?**

Compared to other social scientists, it appears that social psychologists appear to be especially concerned about the negative effects of rebels in groups. For example, sociologists often point to the important function that deviance plays in group life and the beneficial effects of deviance. Emile Durkheim (1958) highlighted that deviance and crime are important activities within any healthy society. He argued that, in the process of responding to deviance, group members come together and bonds become tighter. It also enhances an understanding of the collective consciousness of a community, demarcates group boundaries, provides structure to groups, and clarifies important rules and norms that guide collective behaviour. In responding to deviance, groups’ perceptions of being in control and being in charge of the way social change manifests itself are enhanced. It is therefore not surprising that sociologists like Erikson (1966) emphasise that groups need deviants. What is more, he argues that societies often develop institutions to sustain some level of deviance in society. At times, societies even ‘recruit’ deviants because they fulfil an important function. Rather than perceiving deviants as threats to the social order, deviants are part and parcel of the society and their presence stabilises society because it keeps these societies vibrant. If one takes this as a starting point, societies’ behaviour is aimed at keeping deviance *within bounds*, rather than eroding it completely. Erikson (1966) quotes Aldous Huxley to make this point:

Now tidiness is undeniably good – but a good of which it is easily possible to have too much and at too high a price. . . The good life can only be lived in a society in which tidiness is preached and practised, but not too fanatically, and where efficiency is always haloed, as it were, by a tolerated margin of mess (Erikson, 1966, p.13).
This view is very different from the way social psychologists approach deviance. In the latter view, deviants undermine stability and, in order to restore stability, groups would be better off to get rid of these individuals as quickly as possible. The differences between these views may appear subtle, but they point to a fundamentally different assumption: sociologists perceive deviants as part of a healthy society – even nourishing this society – whereas social psychologists perceive them as separate from it. Indeed, in the latter view, healthy group life can only resume without deviants.

As a final comparison, sociologists are quick to point out that the broader contexts in which behaviour occurs affect whether the act is perceived as deviance or not and that there are no objective criteria in establishing whether an act is deviant. Erikson highlights that ‘behaviour which qualifies one man for prison may qualify another for sainthood’ (1966, p.5). Sociologists will point out that there are more similarities than differences between the deviant and conforming group members because they both operate in the same community, culture or group, guided by the same rules and principles. Research on witchcraft hysteria has, for instance, revealed that those who were identified and accused of witchcraft held very similar norms and values as their prosecutors (Mather, 1866). Social psychologists, on the other hand, study deviance in settings where deviance is clearly defined; both the deviant and the conforming member will have no difficulty knowing who is who and where they each stand within the group.

**The Consequences of an Analysis Defining Rebels as Problems**

In noting that social psychologists and sociologists appear to approach and theorise the issue of deviance in a different way, the basic assumptions underlying the study of rebels in groups become salient. More specifically, and contrasting from sociology, social psychological literature has tended to lead to the suggestion that: (a) conformity is the default within groups and that dissent and deviance rarely occur; (b) dissent, deviance and defiance are the opposite of conformity and loyalty; and (c) those who depart from the status quo are perceived as trouble-makers, and that groups feel they would be better off without them. Let’s examine these points in greater detail.

When looking at the way social psychologists have described the way groups respond to deviance, we often highlight that deviants are threatening to the group’s identity and cohesion. The underlying assumption appears to
be that the group’s goal is to make everyone similar. People being out of step, being different and breaking group rules is not just a nuisance, it also undermines the group identity and group equilibrium. No wonder group members are predicted to be harsh on those who dissent and are different.

But is this really what happens? We think that rebels may indeed often be downgraded, if not outright rejected and excluded, but this is certainly not an automatic group response. Looking around us, the groups that we find ourselves in on a daily basis are full of individuals who disagree with others in the group (even challenge key norms of groups). They consist of people who speak their mind and at times throw a tantrum because they just do not agree with the group’s course of action. Indeed, people may speak up and dissent from important group norms not because they want to be difficult and destructive, but because they care for the group and its future (Hornsey, 2006; Packer, 2008). Importantly too, this is not just one or two, or even a handful of individuals in a group who can be conceived of as engaging in rebellious behaviour, it is all of us who behave in this way (albeit perhaps not all of the time). So, rather than assuming that the majority of group members are conformist and that the group negatively evaluates anyone who is not, we actually all appear to be dissenters, deviants, different and defiant at least part of the time while being in groups that matter to us. So, when are we deviant and when are we a loyal group member? Are the two all that easy to distinguish?

To illustrate to what extent there appears to be a mismatch between the social psychological portrayal of group member behaviour and reality, just consider what the world would look like if we placed such a strong emphasis on conformity as suggested in the literature. That is, groups would consist of sheep anxiously avoiding deviating from the majority opinion, too afraid to share their personal opinions with others in the group for fear of facing rejection. They would want to show their loyalty to the group by downplaying their individuality and by emphasising that they would fight and die for the group and follow the group wherever it would lead them. It is not just that we personally have never been in such an Orwellian or sect-like group, it is probably fair to say that such groups appear to be the exception rather than the rule. These types of groups are more likely to be found in horror or science fiction movies than matching any kind of reality. What is more, and as Durkheim (1958) argues, even if such groups were commonly found, members would very quickly want to find someone breaking the rules, because groups need rebels:
Imagine a society of saints, a perfect cloister of exemplary individuals. Crimes, properly so called, will there be unknown; but faults which appear venial to the layman will create there the same scandal that the ordinary defence does in ordinary consciousness. If, then, this society has the power to judge and punish, it will define these acts as criminal and will treat them as such (1958, pp. 68–9).

If we accept that conformity is not the default within groups – that group members may at times be harsh towards deviants, but at other times admire them, enjoy their company and like to hear their thoughts – and that we have all been rebels within some of our most valued groups, why does the psychological theorising about rebels appear to be separate and distinct from group process research? Put differently, why is our reasoning about dissent, deviance, difference or defiance not better integrated with our theorising on group processes in general? As outlined above, there may be good historical reasons for this. However, aside from the fact that we paint a picture of group life that seems removed from reality, there are at least three broader consequences of this development that are cause for concern.

First, by assuming that the reduction of deviance is the goal of most groups, we fail to understand social change. Indeed, social change would not be possible if there were no rebels and deviants: groups need deviants to move forward. By developing a psychology where deviance is the exception, detrimental to group life, and conformity is adaptive and normative, we can explain only stability and the process of restoring the current status quo (Moscovici, 1976). As Turner (2006) argues, this is consequential:

Social psychology spends too much of its time explaining how society is reproduced, how the present recapitulates the past and very little on the other half of the problem, how and why society changes, how the future is created in the social present. Such a huge distortion of the defining problem cannot but harm the science and indeed it does (p. 45).

Second, by focusing on groups being intolerant of deviance, dissent, difference and defiance, we paint a rather dark picture of group life. In this view, groups are portrayed as being intolerant and dogmatic (see Spears, 2010, for a recent discussion). Groups are certainly not seen as places where creativity can flourish, critical self-examination can ever be encouraged or respect for difference will be commonplace. The view of groups as negative, oppressive and limiting influences on individual expression is too simplistic and has for too long stood in the way of
developing a proper understanding of how individuality can be the result of
group life rather than being harmed by it (see Hornsey & Jetten, 2004; Jetten
& Postmes, 2006).

Finally, and related to the previous points, a psychology that perceives
conformity and sameness as the norm and rebellion and deviance as the
problem fails to take into account individual group members’ agency.
Individual group members are not passive bystanders when their groups
punish deviant group members. They are active agents who make decisions
on how they want to act within groups and how they position themselves
within these groups. It is only when we abandon the idea that groups want
their members first and foremost to blindly conform that we come to
understand not only how individual agency is possible within groups, but
also how it is formed, shaped and achieved within groups (see Reicher &
Haslam, 2006).

The Present Book

In the last few years, there is a renewed interest in processes relating to
dissent, deviance, difference and defiance within groups. Interestingly,
much of this research tends to break with traditional views portraying
groups as stifling evil forces that undermine individual agency. Instead,
these recent accounts have focused on expressions of dissent, deviance,
difference and defiance as normal and often healthy aspects of group life.
Researchers have emphasised that group members actively engage with
other group members, strive for individual distinctiveness within the group,
and negotiate and challenge the group norms. Indeed, many researchers
argue that a lack of difference and dissent can lead to stagnant and
suboptimal group culture, with potentially disastrous consequences. In
short, research has moved away from the view that deviance, dissent and
defiance in groups are problematic and unwelcome by definition. Instead,
researchers have developed a more refined and complete account of these
processes by highlighting the negative as well as the positive functions of
dissent, deviance, difference and defiance in groups.

The aim of this book is to bring together researchers at the forefront of
this development. Indeed, in many ways, what we aim to achieve is precisely
what Moscovici set out to do more than 30 years ago. We build on his
theorising, and our contributors have developed some of these insights in
new and exciting ways. However, it is also fair to say that we aim to do more
than re-examining questions and re-opening this debate. We also noticed
that some of these ideas have developed, at times quite independently, in many different domains of social, developmental and organisational psychology. This has led to the development of new questions and new insights. It is time to take stock of these insights and to bring together these new approaches to the study of rebels and integrate them with classic views on rebels in groups. Such an approach has the potential to help us develop a refined research agenda, one where rebels are firmly positioned within the psychology of group life.

Structure of this Book

This book consists of four sections concerned, respectively, with: (a) dissent; (b) deviance; (c) difference; and (d) defiance within groups. Even though we recognise that the boundaries between these four types of deviants are blurred, we chose to bring them together under these headers to do justice to the diverse ways in which rebels have been examined.

Part I: Dissent in groups

In the first section we bring together contributions that examine dissent within groups, with a particular focus on the positive function of dissent. Dissent can contribute to a diverse range of outcomes. Charlan Nemeth and Jack Goncalo give a historical overview of minority research. They provide a counterpoint to the idea that dissenting group members are detrimental to the group and offer compelling evidence that dissent in groups can, under some conditions, enhance group creativity and productivity. They conclude that rogues and rebels ‘liberate us from conformity and, more importantly, they stimulate us to think more divergently and creatively’.

Fabrizio Butera, Céline Darnon and Gabriel Mugny challenge the prominent assumption in social psychology that dissent rarely occurs. They review their recent research on effective learning and examine the conditions under which dissent can promote learning. They show that dissent is beneficial for learning when mastery goals are activated. In contrast, performance goals seem to be associated with mostly negative learning outcomes. These findings have important practical implications for the way learning contexts should ideally be structured.

Floor Rink and Naomi Ellemers highlight how newcomers in groups are perceived. They focus on the reasons why, and the conditions under which, new group members are inclined to adapt to existing ways instead of voicing
their dissent. Additionally, they examine some of the factors that are likely to make existing group members more or less open to the dissent and change represented by new group members. Their chapter is a compelling demonstration of the idea that there is no blanket rejection of newcomers; group members may be influenced by newcomers’ views, even though they may not evaluate the newcomer positively and have no further interest in them. 

*John Levine* and *Hoon-Seok Choi* also examine the conditions under which newcomers are able to change the groups they enter. They offer an opportunity/threat analysis, based on group socialisation theory, of the conditions that are likely to facilitate and inhibit such influence. They then summarise several studies showing that new members can indeed serve as agents of minority influence by changing the task strategies of the groups they enter and, in some cases, the performance of these groups. These findings sensitise us to the fact that people on the periphery of a group can, in some cases, be important sources of innovation and social change.

**Part II: Deviance in groups**

The second section brings together researchers that have examined deviance and in particular how deviance is perceived by other group members. In addition to recent research on responding to so-called ‘black sheep’, other types of deviance within groups are discussed. Importantly, the contributions in this section focus on groups in different contexts (e.g., organisations, political settings, ideology-based groups) and a range of samples including children, employees and small task groups.

The section starts with a chapter by *Thomas Morton*, who provides a powerful demonstration that, at times, group members can embrace deviants when they bring a strategic advantage for the group. Starting from the observation that groups realise at times they will need to change to survive, Thomas reviews research showing that those who deviate from traditionally held beliefs are ideally placed to lead a group in new directions. Deviance is not only tolerated in such contexts, it is even rewarded by other group members with a higher likelihood that group members will endorse such deviants for leadership positions.

The chapter by *Jolanda Jetten, Aarti Iyer, Paul Hutchison* and *Matthew Hornsey* also shows the important role of the broader context in determining responses to deviance. They point to the *a priori* moral stance of the group and identify the conditions when high identifiers are most likely to want to downplay the negative consequences of serious rule violations by
other ingroup members. These authors focus on the ways groups that take the moral high ground turn a blind eye to deviance and thereby defy pressure from outsiders to punish those who have been in the wrong.

Dominic Abrams and Adam Rutland focus on social inclusion and exclusion during childhood and investigate how children become aware of, and interpret, deviance in intergroup relationships. They set out a developmental model of subjective group dynamics which holds that, as children get older, they also become more responsive to prescriptive norms and cues that these norms are relevant in a particular situation. They use this understanding to reflect on how other ingroup members will respond to deviants, reflections that go on to affect their own responses to deviance.

In the final chapter of this section, Matthew Hornsey and Jolanda Jetten discuss impostors within groups; that is, people who make public claims for group membership that are contested or even outright fraudulent. They identify different types of impostors and outline the psychological motivations behind these varied forms of impostorism. Literature is reviewed emphasising the dark side of impostors in terms of their potential to cause psychological and material damage to the group. It is also noted, however, that by pretending to be something they are not impostors can serve a purpose in terms of flushing out people’s hidden prejudices, pretensions and vanities.

Part III: Difference in groups

The researchers brought together in the third section examine the interplay between standing out from the group versus conforming to the group.

Radmila Prislin, Cory Davenport and John Michalak show that perceptions of others within groups are affected not just by whether people have a majority or minority opinion, but also by whether this position was only recently acquired. For instance, it was found that those who previously took a minority position had little tolerance for different positions once they were themselves in the majority. In other words, today’s rebel can become tomorrow’s authoritarian enforcer of group norms. In so doing, they demonstrate the fluid, dynamic and temporal nature of group dynamics.

The next chapter by Jessica Salvatore and Deborah Prentice is concerned with the way self-expressions as an individual can be consistent or not with broader contextual and cultural influences. They make the important point that what may look like independence may, rather paradoxically, be an expression of self-definitions that are conforming to broader cultural
values. In that way, their chapter illustrates the power of the context in defining conformity and non-conformity.

Working from the perspective that minority opinion expression can have both positive consequences (e.g., reduction of decision-making biases) and negative consequences (e.g., ideological extremism) for the group as a whole, Kimberly Morrison and Dale Miller focus on factors that are likely to trigger minority opinion expression. They introduce a model that distinguishes those minorities who deviate in a direction consistent with the group prototype (‘descriptive norm deviants’) from those who deviate in a direction inconsistent with the group prototype (‘prescriptive norm deviants’). They go on to argue that descriptive norm deviants, because of their greater conformity to the prototype, may think of themselves as superior to other group members and are more willing to express their opinions than non-deviants or prescriptive norm deviants. This provides an interesting counterpoint to the standard assumption that minority opinion holders will bite their tongue in the face of majority opposition.

Finally, Georgina Randsley de Moura, Dominic Abrams, José Marques and Paul Hutchison discuss the effects of being different and standing out in the context of responding to leaders. They differentiate future leaders from current and ex-leaders and report research findings suggesting that anti-normative behaviour is accepted more from future leaders than from other types of leaders. In their analysis, they draw attention to group members’ perceptions that future leaders are often most suited to facilitate social change and that non-normative behaviour is under such conditions rewarded rather than punished.

**Part IV: Defiance in groups**

In the final section, contributions are brought together which examine the way that individuals within groups or groups as a whole stand up and show defiance. This is an area of research that examines most explicitly the conditions under which individuals rebel against authority and when groups defy societal pressures because they believe it is their moral obligation to do so. The chapters in this section include the examination of responses to those who are defiant but also the processes that lead individuals to engage in rebellion.

The first chapter by Benoît Monin and Kieran O’Connor discusses responses to moral rebels. They show that those who resist pressures to
conform are, at times, resented by those who chose to be obedient. This is because moral rebels threaten those who did conform on previous occasions. Moral rebels arouse cognitive dissonance among those who would conform and they are unwanted reminders of the fact that those who conformed also had the opportunity to rebel. This chapter nicely illustrates that when we downgrade rebels, it is not so much their behaviour that is the problem. Rather, their behaviour threatens the self and makes us very aware of our own inability to stand up for our moral beliefs.

In the next chapter, Dominic Packer emphasises that defiance of the status quo can be motivated by group loyalty and that high group commitment does not always mean blindly following group norms. In particular, highly committed group members may resort to defiance when they are concerned about the group’s course of action or the behaviour of other group members. The chapter nicely illustrates the diverse ways in which group members express their group loyalty and how individual agency is part of that process.

Janet Near and Marcia Miceli examine responses to those who take a moral stance against corrupt or inappropriate elements of the group culture. While previous models of whistle-blowing in organisations have identified some variables that may cause observers of perceived wrongdoing to report it, these models often overlook that whistle-blowing can only occur when employees first decide that the organisational activity that they observed constitutes wrongdoing, and label it as such. In this chapter, an integrated model of whistle-blowing is presented as well as a series of propositions for empirical testing. These have the potential to inform our research agenda enhancing our understanding of when whistle-blowing behaviour is most likely to occur.

The final chapter by Alexander Haslam and Stephen Reicher examines the perspective of those who defy conformity pressures. They make the important point that our theorising in social psychology has been informed by the assumption that conformity is the dominant response to group pressure. However, they not only note that defiance is more prevalent than we may think, but also point out how people’s propensity to stand up for their beliefs is inherent to any social change process. Some of the dynamics observed in the BBC prison experiment are testament to these points. This chapter finishes with the conclusion that in many ways encapsulates the core message of this book; that as researchers we appear to have become prisoners of our own theorising that has focused on conformity and not enough on individuals’ ability, need and motivation to rebel.
References


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