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Who says we are bad people?

The impact of criticism source and attributional content on responses to group-
based criticism

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Abstract

We investigated the interplay between the source of criticism and the attributional content of their message on behavioral responses to group-based criticism. Studies 1 and 2 revealed that outgroup critics were more effective when their criticism included internal attributions (to the ingroup's character) rather than external attributions (the ingroup's circumstances), whereas there was no effect of attributional content for ingroup critics (a significant Source x Content interaction). Study 3 explored the role of audiences in responses to outgroup criticism. The results indicated that the positive effects of internal versus external attributions were only evident when an outgroup audience was witness to participants' responses. Furthermore these effects were mediated through concerns about the ingroup's image. Together these patterns suggest that responses to criticism depend not just on the identity of the critic, but also on what they say and who is watching. People may be surprisingly responsive to outgroup criticism—particularly when inaction might lead others to perceive them as “bad people”.

Keywords: group-based criticism, attributions for failure, intergroup sensitivity effect, group image concern, environmental behaviour.

Who says we are bad people?

The impact of criticism source and attributional content on responses to group-based criticism

Criticism is an important tool for stimulating change within groups. Criticism provides objective information about the behavior of one's group, and—provided that criticism is taken on board—it has the potential to initiate reform of sub-optimal behavior and practices. However, previous research has noted that criticism is often met with defensiveness and rejection, meaning that criticism is more often a “missed opportunity” for creating positive change (see Hornsey, 2005). This is because criticism threatens the group's positive self-image and may undermine collective self-esteem. Other research, however, suggests that threat to the public image of one's group can elicit actions intended to reform the group rather than simply defend its current practices (e.g., Iyer, Schmader & Lickel, 2007). Thus, it seems that group-directed criticism might sometimes provoke negative reactions but that at other times it might stimulate positive change. From both theoretical and practical points of view, it is important to understand the factors that determine which of these two responses occurs in response to group-directed criticism.

One key factor that determines responsiveness to criticism is the identity of the critic. Research on the intergroup sensitivity effect shows that ingroup critics are generally received more positively than outgroup critics—even when the content of their criticism is identical (Hornsey, Oppes, & Svensson, 2002). The reason behind this effect is that ingroup critics are perceived to have different motivations than outgroup critics (Hornsey & Imani, 2004). Ingroup critics are attributed with constructive motives (i.e., genuine desires to improve the group), facilitating acceptance of their message. Outgroup critics are instead attributed with destructive

motives (i.e., attempting to demoralize the group or struggling for inter-group supremacy), leading to resistance and rejection. Thus responses to criticism are said to be driven not by *what* people say, but *why* they are perceived to be saying it.

In most situations, however, this process of attribution is likely to go in both directions: just as targets make attributions about their critic's motives, critics typically make attributions about the causes of the targets' behavior. These attributions may be explicitly communicated, or they may be merely implied by the criticism. Although previous research has examined the attributions targets make about their critics, research has not yet investigated the attributions critics make about and communicate to their targets. With this in mind, the primary aim of the present research was to explore how the attributional content of criticism might further moderate responsiveness to group-directed criticism.

Identity implications of criticism

Although the identity of a source (ingroup versus outgroup) will colour any interpretation of their words, this is unlikely to be the only factor that determines responses to criticism. For instance, while responses to criticism vary according to group membership, praise is received equally regardless of who it comes from (Hornsey et al., 2002; Hornsey & Imani, 2004). This pattern already hints at the idea that message *content* may play an important role in determining responses to feedback in addition to the identity of the speaker. Research also shows that when people are led to believe that ingroup critics actually have destructive motives (i.e., source identity and attributions are disconnected), their criticism is perceived in exactly the same way as if it was coming from an outgroup member (Hornsey et al., 2004). Just as outgroup messages are not always ignored, ingroup critics are also not always attended to.

Along these lines, we suggest that the intergroup sensitivity effect may be contingent on aspects of message content. Previous research shows that criticism from ingroup members can also arouse defensiveness when certain conditions are not met (e.g. constructive motives, inclusive language). Conversely, it seems possible that criticising messages from outgroup members might be effective provided additional criteria are met. With respect to these possible criteria, we focus on the attributional content of critical messages—that is, whether the behavior being criticized is attributed to internal features of the group (i.e., the group’s basic character) or to external features of the context (i.e., the group’s circumstances or opportunities). Before presenting our hypotheses about the combined effects of group membership of the source and attributional content of critical messages, we briefly review the literature on the role of attributions for failure in performance following feedback.

Attribution for failure

Alongside the emerging literature on identity concerns and criticism, there is a substantial literature on the influence of attributions on individual performance following failure. Research in this area generally shows that internal attributions for failure (i.e., attributions to the person’s character, personality traits, or abilities) result in helplessness, reduced persistence, and poorer performance (see Deiner & Dweck, 1978; Dweck, 1975; Nichols, 1978; Peterson, Maier & Seligman, 1993). In contrast, people whose failure is attributed to situation-specific causes (e.g., they followed a sub-optimal strategy, or were not provided with proper opportunities) display more effective coping reactions that result in higher expectations, higher persistence, and increased performance. Thus locating failure internally or externally to the self has implications for whether failure is responded to negatively or positively. This basic finding fits well with the more general literature on internal versus external attributions (see Heider, 1958). Among other things, people routinely prefer to

attribute their failures to external rather than internal factors (e.g. self-serving bias: Miller & Ross, 1975) — something that may be functional, at least in so far as the positivity of the self-concept is concerned (McFarland & Ross, 1982)

The above findings seem to have clear implications for the effective delivery of criticism. Indeed, studies have provided evidence for the negative effects of including attributions to individual character in critical feedback (e.g. Anderson & Jennings, 1980; Clifford, 1986; Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Meyer & Engler, 1986; Weiner, 1985). To date, however, research has not explored how these attributional processes translate to situations of group-based criticism. Although external attributions may elicit more positive responses to individual criticism, it is unclear whether the same necessarily holds in the context of group-directed criticism. Certainly, the same self-serving biases of attribution are evident at the group level, whereby group members attribute the failings of their group externally and its successes internally (e.g., Maass, Ceccarelli, & Rudin, 1996; Taylor & Jaggi, 1974). Yet, there is also some evidence that in intergroup contexts internal attributions for failure can result in more positive intentions to improve. For example, Iyer et al. (2007) found that when an outgroup attributed the ingroup's transgressions to internal factors (i.e., the group's character) this elicited stronger intentions to amend the situation among individual group members. Moreover, this effect was mediated through feelings of shame or anger that arose from perceived threat to the group's image (Study 2; see also Brown et al., 2008).

The above findings introduce a degree of uncertainty about the effects of attributions in the context of group-directed criticism. While group members might ordinarily avoid making internal attributions for their collective failures, failure that is attributed internally by others may threaten the group's image (Weiner, 1993, 2001) and therefore be particularly worthy of a response. Conversely, failures that are

attributed to external causes (i.e., the group's circumstance rather than its nature), may be perceived as one-off events (Gold & Weiner, 2000) with few implications for the group's image and not requiring of any further action. In this way, attributing the negative actions of one's group externally can become an excuse for such problematic behavior (e.g., Doosje & Branscombe, 2003) rather than a motivation for corrective action. Conversely, internal attributions may force group members to re-think current behavior in light of its consequences for the external image of their group (e.g., Iyer et al., 2007).

Interestingly, this analysis suggests that identity concerns, aroused by particular forms of attribution, can motivate reparative action. In contrast, the intergroup sensitivity perspective typically characterizes image concerns as being responsible for defensive *inaction* in the face of criticism (Hornsey & Imani, 2004). Although this seems contradictory, it is important to note that the attributional content of criticism has not explicitly been considered in previous research on the intergroup sensitivity effect. More significantly, however, the apparent divergence may stem from where defensiveness is located—in feelings or in action. While the threat involved in criticism may lead to negative feelings toward the critic and their message, it remains an open question as to whether these negative feelings lead to defensive inaction, or actions designed to demonstrate the unfairness of criticism. Iyer et al.'s (2007) research suggests that negative emotional response to criticism (i.e., shame) can be linked to behavioral intentions aimed at amending the situation (i.e., protest). To resolve this discrepancy, it would seem important to examine behavioral intentions in response to criticism rather than simply feelings about the critic. Accordingly, in the present research we focus on behavior in response to different forms of criticism.

The present research

The primary aim of the present research was to explore how the attributional content of group-directed criticism shapes individual behavioral responses to it. Although considerable research has explored the effect of attributions on responses to interpersonal criticism, these insights have not been integrated into research on intergroup criticism. More important, the interpersonal and intergroup literatures do not always seem to suggest the same thing. Whereas the interpersonal literature suggests that internal attributions for failure produce helplessness, there are examples of intergroup research in which internal attributions have been found to elicit action (e.g., Iyer et al., 2007). One important difference between interpersonal and group-based criticism is that effects of the former context seem to operate through processes of individual motivation (e.g., persistence), whereas effects in the latter context seem to operate through image concerns (e.g., shame). This suggests that responses to critical messages might be moderated by aspects of a situation that determine which of these processes is operating (motivational versus image concerns).

With respect to group-directed criticism, one factor that should determine whether motivational or image concerns are at play is the group membership of the critic. When criticism comes from an ingroup member the context is effectively intra-group. Here, the motivational processes identified in inter-personal settings may simply scale-up to the group level. Accordingly, in line with the interpersonal literature, ingroup critics who make internal attributions for the group's failure should be de-motivating in comparison to ingroup critics who make external attributions. However, when criticism comes from an outgroup member, the context is effectively inter-group. Under these conditions, the motivational processes may give way to concerns about how one's group is being perceived from the outside. Such image concerns should be amplified when the outgroup critic attributes negative behaviour to the internal qualities of the group, because internal attributions imply that

problematic behaviour has tainted the way the group is perceived from the outside. In response to this heightened image threat, people may become motivated to engage in defensive action and engage in positive behaviour to disprove the critic (i.e., Iyer et al., 2007; see also Hopkins, Reicher, Harrison, Cassidy, Bull, & Levine, 2007). When outgroup critics instead make external attributions for poor performance, they may be particularly ineffective at promoting change because these are neither motivating nor threatening to the external image of the group.

In sum, our framework suggests a two-way interaction between the source of criticism (ingroup versus outgroup) and the attributional content of their message (internal versus external). Specifically, our prediction is that ingroup critics will be more effective when they make external attributions for poor performance (i.e., to the conditions or opportunities available to the group) rather than internal attributions (i.e., to the group's basic nature or character). In the case of outgroup critics, however, we expect the opposite pattern of effects whereby internal attributions may be more effective than external attributions. Our reasoning for this prediction is that internal attributions made by outgroup members should be particularly effective at inducing concerns about the group's public image (i.e., that we might be seen as "bad people"), and thus particularly likely to elicit a counteracting response..

To test these predictions, we use the domain of environmental behavior. Environmental information in mass media is frequently presented in an intergroup context, for example representatives of one group providing feedback on the environmental record of another. More often than not this feedback contains criticism. To our knowledge, there has been little research into the effects of such criticism on the audiences' environmental intentions. Thus, the environmental domain represents an ideal testing ground for the question of how willingness to change individual behavior might be influenced by attributions for one's group's poor performance and

the source of such criticism. Answering this question has important practical implications for communication about collectively poor performance (e.g., in the environmental and other domains), but also provides a theoretically important link between the hitherto separate literatures on failure attribution and inter-group criticism. We begin our investigation by exploring the interplay between source of criticism (ingroup versus outgroup) and attributional content (internal versus external) on responsiveness to criticism in Studies 1 and 2. To further unpack the specific role of image concerns in guiding responses to criticism, in Study 3 we consider the role of audiences in the observed effects, and directly test concern for the group's image as a mediating process.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 104 University students (62 female and 42 male, mean age = 20.27, SD = 2.64) approached on campus and asked to fill in a number of short questionnaires (of which this study was one). All participants were British and were paid £2 for their participation. The study had 2 (source of criticism: ingroup vs. outgroup) x 2 (attributional content: internal vs. external) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to each of the four conditions. The key dependent variable was intended amount of donation to an environmental organization (i.e., criticism relevant behavior).

Procedure and Measures

Participants completed the questionnaire together with a number of other short questionnaires on unrelated topics. The order of questionnaire presentation was random. This study was presented as a survey of public attitudes to recycling and other environmental practices.

To manipulate criticism source and content, participants were presented with a fake newspaper article. The article summarized that according to a recent survey, the UK was doing poorly in terms of household recycling (i.e., criticism of the ingroup's environmental record). The article continued with a comment by a British government spokesperson (ingroup source condition) or a European Commission spokesperson (outgroup source condition). In one condition the commenter characterized incentives for recycling in the UK as weak, and stated that the lack of recycling is determined by insufficient facilities and information about them, weak regulations and unstable incentives structure—that is, the ingroup's poor performance was attributed to external causes. In the alternative condition the commenter suggested that the lack of recycling is determined by British people being “irresponsible towards the environment”, and stated that British culture “does not put much value on the environment” and indifference to the environment is a part of British national character—that is, the ingroup's poor performance was attributed to internal causes. This manipulation of attributional content via the representative's comments was reinforced by the title of the article: “Incentives for recycling in Britain are weak” in the external attribution condition, versus “British people are irresponsible about the environment” in the internal attribution condition. On the next page of the questionnaire participants were asked some open-ended questions to make sure that they read and understood the article. Among other things they were asked to identify the affiliation of the commenter and to summarise the essence of their comments.

At the end of the questionnaire, following some filler questions, participants were asked how much money they would be prepared to donate to an environmental organization of their choice. This question was open-ended, and the amount of donation was used as a measure of positive environmental behavior.

Results

In response to the questions designed to check participants' understanding of the article, all participants were able to summarize the article and correctly identified the affiliation of the critic. Donations varied between £0 and £45 ($M=8.66$, $SD=12.12$). No values were more than three standard deviations above the mean, and thus all cases were included in the analysis. We conducted a 2 (attributional content: internal vs. external) x 2 (source of criticism: ingroup vs. outgroup) ANOVA with the intended amount of donation as a dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant interaction effect between source of criticism and attribution for failure, $F(1,102)=6.44$, $p=.013$, $\eta^2_p = 0.06$, (see Figure 1).

Follow-up comparisons demonstrated that participants exposed to an outgroup critic intended to donate marginally more when the critic attributed the ingroup's poor performance to internal ($M=11.33$, $SD=14.43$) rather than external factors ($M=4.70$, $SD=5.32$), $F(1, 102)=3.65$, $p=.059$, $\eta^2_p = 0.04$. Conversely, when participants were exposed to an ingroup critic, participants intended to donate marginally less when the critic attributed performance to internal ($M=6.35$, $SD=8.77$) rather than external factors, ($M=11.63$, $SD=15.28$), $F(1, 102)=2.79$, $p=.098$, $\eta^2_p = 0.03$.

Said differently, within external attribution condition, there was an intergroup sensitivity effect whereby participants exposed to an ingroup critic reported higher intended donations than participants exposed to an outgroup critic, $F(1,102)=4.42$, $p=.038$, $\eta^2_p = 0.04$. Conversely, in the internal attribution condition the reverse pattern of effects was apparent, with participants reporting more positive intentions in response to an outgroup critic than an ingroup critic, although this difference was not significant, $F(1,102)=2.22$, $p=.139$, $\eta^2_p = 0.02$.

Discussion

Study 1 provides initial empirical support for the predicted interaction between criticism source and attributional content. Consistent with predictions, the results

revealed that outgroup critics were more effective at eliciting positive behavior when their criticism attributed poor performance to internal rather than external causes (i.e., the group's character rather than their opportunities). Indeed, the outgroup critic who made internal attributions was at least as effective as the comparable ingroup critic. Also consistent with our predictions, the reverse pattern of effects was apparent for the ingroup critic. Ingroup critics were more effective at eliciting behavior when they attributed poor performance to external rather than internal factors. Although this is consistent with the general finding that external attributions facilitate individual performance following feedback, it should be noted that this difference between internal and external attributions for ingroup critics did not reach significance. Thus, we can say that while making internal attributions clearly helped the outgroup critic, these were not specifically de-motivating when used by the ingroup critic, as was originally expected.

These findings qualify both literatures on which our framework draws. With respect to the literature on intergroup criticism, our findings show that the established intergroup sensitivity effect (Hornsey, 2005), whereby ingroup critics are more effective than outgroup critics, is only apparent when the critical message includes external attributions for poor performance. Thus responses to group-directed criticism do depend on what people say as much on who said it. Our findings also qualify the classic finding from research on attributions for failure and subsequent performance (e.g., Dweck, 1975). Generally this research shows that internal attributions for failure produce helplessness and impaired performance whereas external attributions increase motivation and performance. In comparison, our results show that internal attributions can have different effects on relevant behavior depending on who invokes these attributions (e.g., ingroup versus outgroup). Thus, the processes identified in the interpersonal domain may not simply translate to intergroup contexts. In intergroup

contexts, unique concerns related to social identity are likely to be operating and thus guide responses to critical feedback. In particular, we suggest that the concerns about the group's image are likely to be at the fore when people respond to outgroup criticism, especially when these include internal attributions to the character of the group as a whole.

Although this study revealed the predicted interaction between criticism sources and attributional content it has several limitations. First, and foremost, while the predicted effects were apparent in the data, these were weak. This may be partially attributable to the use of a single item (intended donations) as the dependent measure. The use of a single measure also did not allow us to investigate whether the apparent effects of criticism extended to other relevant behaviors (e.g., recycling intentions). A more important conceptual limitation for the study is that it is unclear whether our ingroup critic was unambiguously perceived as such. That is, although a British government representative is clearly more ingroup to our British participants than a European Commission representative, it is still possible that the ingroup critic may have been perceived by some as an outgroup member (e.g., government). Finally, this study does not provide evidence that participants perceived the manipulation of attributional content in the intended way. While all participants were able to correctly reproduce the message contained in the article, a manipulation check is required to demonstrate that participants internalized the suggested attributions. These limitations are addressed in the next study.

STUDY 2

The aim of Study 2 was to replicate the interaction effect between criticism source and attributional content observed in Study 1. To address the limitations of the previous study, we included a manipulation check of attributional content, a multi-

item measure of environmental intentions and a more precise manipulation of the ingroup vs. outgroup source of criticism.

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 82 British adults (55 female and 27 male, mean age = 35.80, SD = 15.98) recruited via a participant pool. As remuneration for participation, participants were entered into a prize draw for a number of Amazon vouchers worth £10. The study had 2 (criticism source: ingroup vs. outgroup) x 2 (attributional content: internal vs. external) between-subject design. Participants were assigned to conditions randomly. The key dependent variable was intentions to engage in environmental behavior.

Procedure and Measures

Participants filled in an online questionnaire that they accessed via a link sent to them by e-mail. The study was presented as research on public attitudes to recycling and other environmental practices.

On the first page of the questionnaire participants were presented with a fake newspaper article. In all conditions the article was entitled “Britain fails to recycle” and stated (in the same words as in Study 1) that a national survey had revealed that the UK is doing poorly in terms of household recycling. Participants were then presented with a comment from “one of our previous participants” who was identified as either ingroup (“one of our British participants”) or outgroup (“one of our overseas participants”).

As in the previous study, we varied the attributional content of this person’s commentary. In the external attribution condition the comment suggested that the UK lags behind in terms of recycling because “people are not encouraged to recycle”, “incentives are weak”, and there are not enough facilities. In the internal attribution

condition the comment suggested that the reason behind poor recycling is “general attitude to the environment in the UK”, and that “the environment is just not valued in British culture”. On the next page of the questionnaire participants were asked some open-ended questions to make sure that they read and understood the article. Among other things they were asked to identify the affiliation of the commenter and to summarize the essence of their comments. After that, participants were asked to offer their own explanation of the low recycling rates (open-ended question).

Participants then completed a measure of environmental intentions. Six items assessed intentions to behave in an environmentally friendly way—that is, to recycle household waste, actively seek information about recycling and local recycling facilities, use green transport instead of a car whenever possible, conserve water, pay extra for transportation if it is environmentally friendly, and learn more about the state of the environment and how one can help to solve environmental problems. Participants were asked to indicate how likely they were to engage in each of these behaviors during the next month on a 7-point scale (from “very unlikely” to “very likely”). Factor analysis revealed that all items loaded on one factor (eigenvalue 2.48) that explained 41% of variance, the items formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = .71$) and were averaged to form a composite index of environmental intentions. After completing the questionnaire participants were debriefed.

Results

Manipulation checks. In response to the questions designed to check participants’ understanding of the article and the comment, all participants were able to summarize the article, correctly identified the source of the criticism and were able to summarize correctly the meaning of the comment. In order to check the manipulation of attributional content, participants’ own attributions of poor recycling rates were coded by two independent raters, blind to the condition, as either external

(0), internal (1), or containing references to both external and internal causes (0.5). The two ratings were highly correlated ($r(81) = .88, p < .001$), and the average rating was calculated by taking the mean. A 2 (criticism source: ingroup, outgroup) x 2 (attributional content: internal, external) ANOVA was performed on the average rating of attributional content. The only significant effect was that of the attributional content manipulation, $F(1,81)=6.81, p=.011, \eta_p^2 = 0.07$. Participants in the internal attribution condition were more likely to invoke internal explanations for low recycling rates ($M = 0.51, SD = 0.44$) than participants in the external attribution condition ($M = 0.31, SD = 0.37$). Thus, the manipulation was successful – it made participants focus more on a particular type of attribution (internal vs. external).

Main analysis. A 2 (criticism source: ingroup, outgroup) x 2 (attributional content: internal, external) ANOVA was performed on the environmental intentions measure. The analysis revealed a significant interaction effect between the criticism source and attributional content of their message, $F(1,81)=5.81, p=.037, \eta_p^2 = 0.06$ (see Figure 2). Consistent with the previous study, follow-up comparisons revealed that participants exposed to an outgroup critic reported stronger intentions to engage in environmental behavior when the group's poor performance was attributed to internal factors ($M=5.44, SD=1.19$) rather than external factors ($M=4.53, SD=1.11$), $F(1,81)=6.20, p=.015, \eta_p^2 = 0.07$. Conversely, when participants were exposed to an ingroup critic, there were no differences in intentions according to whether internal or external attributions were made ($M_{\text{internal}}=5.11, SD=1.21; M_{\text{external}}=5.27, SD=1.00$), $F(1,81)=0.21, p=.651, \eta_p^2 < 0.01$.

Said differently, within external attribution condition, there was an intergroup sensitivity effect whereby participants exposed to an ingroup critic reported stronger intentions to engage in environmental behavior than participants exposed to an

outgroup critic, $F(1,81)=3.89, p=.052, \eta_p^2 = 0.05$. Conversely, in the internal attribution condition there was no difference in intentions according to source of criticism, $F(1,81)=0.96, p=.33, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$.

Discussion

This study replicates the effects of Study 1. As in the previous study, attributing the ingroup's poor performance to internal rather than external causes (i.e., British people's character rather than their facilities) increased intentions to engage in environmental behavior when this criticism came from an outgroup source. Although we originally predicted the reverse pattern for ingroup critics, with internal attributions reducing behaviour relative to external attributions (in line with the motivation and performance literature), as in the previous study there was no effect for attributional content in this condition. The combined implication of these patterns was that the intergroup sensitivity effect emerged only when criticism included external attributions for the group's poor performance. When the critic instead attributed the poor performance to the group's basic character (i.e., made internal attributions), outgroup critics were as effective as ingroup critics in eliciting positive behavioral intentions.

Consistent with our framework, these patterns suggest that the combination of an outgroup critic and internal attributional content may lead concerns about the group's public image to override typical motivational processes observed in response to critical feedback (e.g., Dweck, 1975) and the defensive rejection that typically drives the intergroup sensitivity effect (Hornsey, 2005). Despite the supportive evidence generated by the previous two studies, one aspect of our theorizing remains untested. Specifically, we have yet to confirm the underlying process behind these effects. Accordingly, a final study was designed to explicitly test the role of collective

image concerns in explaining the surprisingly positive responses to outgroup critics who make internal attributions observed across the previous two studies.

STUDY 3

In developing our perspective, we suggested that concerns about the group's positive image are likely to be particularly salient in intergroup contexts, and that these image concerns should be heightened when the outgroup critic makes internal attributions for the ingroup's poor performance. This is because internal attributions communicated by an outgroup critic convey the message that the ingroup's poor performance is tarnishing their external reputation. If responses to internal attributions made by outgroup critics are driven by image concerns, as we suggest, then an additional factor that should be relevant to determining such responses is the audience who is witness to both the initial criticism and subsequent responses to it.

Previous research provides evidence that groups are concerned with their image and often make efforts to manage the impression that they make on outgroups. For example, research has demonstrated that criticism from an ingroup source is perceived negatively when it is communicated to an outgroup audience (Ariyanto, Hornsey, & Gallois, 2006; Elder, Sutton, & Douglas, 2005; Hornsey, De Bruijn, Creed, Allen, Ariyanto, & Svensson, 2005). The negativity presumably comes from the fact that "airing dirty laundry" to outgroup members breaches the rules of strategic image management. Image concerns are not only revealed through group members' negative reactions to criticisms exposed to an outgroup audience. There is evidence that many aspects of group identity are presented strategically depending on the available audience, including perceptions of discrimination (Postmes, Branscombe, Spears, & Young, 1999), identification with the group (Ellemers, Barreto & Spears, 1999), ingroup bias (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Rijsman, 1988), and group stereotypes (Klein & Azzi, 2001). Moreover, these effects are not limited to self-report measures.

Recent research has demonstrated that individuals will alter their public behaviour in order to refute negative stereotypes of their group held by others when such external perspectives are made salient (Hopkins et al., 2007). This evidence suggests that outgroup opinions can become a catalyst for behavior change as a result of increased concern with group's public image and resulting attempts to manage that image.

Along the above lines, it could be expected that the previously observed responsiveness to outgroup critics who make internal attributions should be particularly evident when such responses are also being observed by an outgroup audience. This combination of factors should create the conditions under which people are most worried about the image of their group, and most motivated to repair it by demonstrating relevant behavior to the outside world. However, if criticism and responses to it are observed only by an ingroup audience, this motivation to engage in image maintenance (and the opportunity to do so) is likely to be diminished. Criticism witnessed only by ingroup audience does not harm group's external image, and behavior demonstrated to ingroup audience cannot feed back into that image.

To test these predictions, our final study manipulated the audience who was witness to participants' responses (ingroup versus outgroup) in addition to the attributional content of the critic's message. Given that responses to ingroup critics have been relatively unresponsive to variations in attributional content, and given the focus of our theorizing on strategic responding to outgroup criticism, the present study focused on outgroup critics only.¹ In this context, we hypothesized that there would be an interaction between the attributional content of outgroup criticisms and the audience who witnesses responses to criticism. Consistent with the previous studies, we expected that outgroup criticism that included internal attributions for poor performance would be more effective at eliciting relevant behavior than outgroup criticism including external attributions. However, we predicted that this effect would

only be observed when an outgroup audience is also witness to the initial criticism and individual responses to it. That is, we predict a two-way interaction between the attributional content of outgroup criticism (internal versus external) and the audience that observes the criticism and individual responses to it (ingroup versus outgroup). As an additional test of the process underlying these effects, this study also included an explicit measure of collective image concerns.

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 76 British students (52 female and 21 male, mean age = 21.14, $SD = 6.95$) approached on campus and asked to complete a questionnaire. The study had a 2 (audience: ingroup vs. outgroup) x 2 (attributional content: internal vs. external) between-subject design. In this study, the source of the criticism was held constant—all participants were exposed to an outgroup critic (an overseas participant, as in the previous study). Participants were assigned to each of the four conditions randomly. The key dependent variables were intended recycling rate, intended volunteering for environmental organizations and concern for Britain's environmental image.

Procedure and measures

The study was presented as research on public attitudes to recycling and other environmental practices. Participants completed their questionnaires in the presence of a research assistant who explained that they are assisting on a project conducted by “a researcher who was visiting the University”. On the cover page of the questionnaire participants read a message from this “visiting researcher”, who introduced herself and explained the purpose of the study. In the ingroup audience condition, the researcher had British name, mentioned that she was visiting from another British University, and said that the results of the study would be reported to

the “British council of social research”. In the outgroup audience condition, the researcher had a non-British name (one of five European nationalities was used randomly), mentioned that she was visiting from a non-British University (a name of a University from the country corresponding to the researcher’s nationality was given), and said that the results would be reported to a funding body based in the same country (e.g. Dutch council of social research). Thus participants were led to believe that their responses would be scrutinized by and fed back to members of the ingroup (British researchers and British research institutions) or members of an outgroup (a foreign researcher and research organization; see Postmes et al., 1999, for a similar audience manipulation).

On the next page, attributional content was manipulated in the same way as in Study 2. That is, participants read the same newspaper article about poor recycling rates in Britain, and the same comments from “one of the previous participants” that explained poor recycling either by national character and values (internal attribution) or weak incentives and poor facilities (external attribution). In all conditions the person who commented on the article was non-British and a particular nationality was specified. Again, one of five European nationalities was used randomly; the nationality of the commenter was always different from the nationality of the researcher mentioned on the cover page to avoid arousing participants’ suspicion.

Following questions designed to check participants’ understanding of the article and the critic’s comments, participants were asked to suggest their own explanation of the low recycling rates. After that, participants completed a measure of the concern with Britain’s environmental image, and reported what percent of their household waste they were going to recycle during the next year, and how many hours a month they would be willing to volunteer for an environmental organization of their choice. The last two questions were open-ended, and the responses were used as the

measures of intended recycling rate and intended volunteering respectively. To measure concern with Britain's environmental image four items were used: "It is important that Britain maintains positive environmental image in international opinion", "It is vital for Britain to be perceived as an environmentally friendly country", "It is important that Britain is seen as a country with strong environmental credentials", and "It is important that efforts on sustainability undertaken by Britain are recognized internationally" ($\alpha = .92$). Participants responded to these items on 7-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Responses to the four items were averaged to produce a single measure of image concern. After completing the questionnaire participants were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Manipulation checks and preliminary analyses. All participants were able to summarize correctly the meaning of the article and the commentary. As in the previous study, participants' responses to the open question about the causes for poor recycling rates were coded by two independent raters who were blind to the experimental condition. The two ratings were highly correlated ($r(75) = .90, p < .001$), and the average of the two ratings was calculated. A 2 (attributional content: internal, external) x 2 (audience: ingroup, outgroup) ANOVA was performed on the average rating. The only significant effect was that of the attributional content manipulation $F(1,71) = 4.19, p = .045, \eta_p^2 = 0.06$. Participants in the internal attribution condition were more likely to invoke internal explanations for low recycling rates ($M = 0.63, SD = 0.36$) than participants in the external attribution condition ($M = 0.43, SD = 0.44$). Thus the manipulation of attributional content was successful.

Prior to the analysis the variables were checked for outliers. No outliers were found on the intended recycling rates. One case was classified as an outlier on the intended volunteering measure (i.e., fell more than three standard deviations above the

mean). This case was excluded from the corresponding analysis. The correlation between the two dependent measures did not reach significance: $r(74) = .19, p = .112$.

Primary analysis

A 2 (attributional content: internal, external) x 2 (audience: ingroup, outgroup) ANOVA on intended recycling rates revealed a significant interaction between attributional content of criticism and audience, $F(1,73)=6.61, p=.012, \eta^2_p = 0.09$ (see Figure 3). Follow-up comparisons revealed that when participants were led to believe that their responses would be scrutinized by an outgroup member, criticism that included internal attributions for poor performance elicited intentions to recycle a higher percent of their household waste ($M=66.43, SD=24.35$) in comparison to criticism that included external attributions ($M=48.53, SD=28.22$), $F(1,67) = 5.08, p = .028, \eta^2_p = 0.07$. When participants were instead lead to believe that their responses would be scrutinized by a fellow ingroup member, responses to criticism did not vary as a function of attributional content ($M_{external}=56.20, SD_{external}=25.17, M_{internal}=44.17, SD_{internal}=19.19$), $F(1,73) = 1.99, p = .162, \eta^2_p = 0.02$. Said differently, internal attributions for poor performance elicited stronger reported intentions to recycle when participants believed that an outgroup audience was witness to their responses rather than an ingroup audience, $F(1,73) = 8.10, p = .006, \eta^2_p = 0.11$. When external attributions were made, there was no difference in responses according to audience, $F(1,73) = 0.79, p = .337, \eta^2_p = 0.01$.

The same analysis on intended volunteering also revealed a significant interaction between attributional content and audience, $F(1,73)=6.62, p=.012, \eta^2_p = 0.09$. Again, when the audience for responses was outgroup, exposure to internal attributions increased reported intentions to volunteer ($M=8.18, SD=7.48$) relative to

exposure to external attributions ($M=3.91$, $SD=5.17$), $F(1,73)=4.53$, $p=.037$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$. When the audience was ingroup there was no difference according to the attributional content of the criticism ($M_{external}=5.59$, $SD_{external}=5.83$; $M_{internal}=2.41$, $SD_{internal}=5.23$), $F(1,73)=2.32$, $p=.132$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$. Again, this was also due to an effect of audience within the internal attribution condition, $F(1,73) = 8.27$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.11$, that was not evident in the external attribution condition, $F(1,73) = 0.65$, $p = .424$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$.

We repeated this analysis on concern for the environmental image of the group. This revealed the same two-way interaction, $F(1,74)=6.78$, $p=.011$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$ (see Figure 4), which was due to an effect of attributional content of criticism when the audience was outgroup, $F(1,74)=9.32$, $p=.003$, $\eta^2 = 0.12$. In the presence of an outgroup audience, criticism that included internal attributions for poor performance aroused stronger concerns about the image of the group than criticism that included external attributions ($M_{internal}=5.77$, $SD=1.10$ versus $M_{external}=4.58$, $SD=1.44$). When the audience was ingroup, there was no effect of attributional content ($M_{external}=5.31$, $SD=1.29$; $M_{internal}=5.04$, $SD=0.94$), $F(1,74)=0.44$, $p=.509$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$. Again, this interaction was partly driven by an effect of audience within the internal attributions condition ($F(1,74) = 3.73$, $p = .057$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$); which reversed when external attributions were made ($F(1,74) = 3.11$, $p = .082$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$).

Mediation

The above analyses show that the combination of internal attributions for poor performance and the presence of an outgroup audience produced the strongest concerns about the public image of the group. This combination of factors was also associated with heightened intentions to perform criticism-relevant behaviors (e.g., recycle or volunteer time to environmental organizations). Given these parallel

effects, it was possible that image concerns mediated the effects observed on behavioral intentions. To explore this possibility we conducted two mediated moderation analyses (Muller, Judd & Yzerbyt, 2005). These analyses were run in three steps. First we regressed the intention measures (the dependent variables) on attributional content (the moderator), the audience (the independent variable) and their interaction. Second, we regressed concern for group image (the mediator) on the same predictors. Finally, we regressed intentions measures on audience, attributional content, their interaction, concern for group image (centered) and the interaction between concern for group image and the attributional content.

The results of these analyses met the conditions for a mediated moderation, suggesting that the combined effect of attributional content and audience on intentions was mediated through image concerns. Briefly, the interaction between audience and attributional content was a significant predictor of both intended recycling rate ($\beta = .517$ $p = .013$) and intended volunteering ($\beta = .508$ $p = .013$). This interaction was also a significant predictor of the concern for group image ($\beta = .509$ $p = .011$). Finally, the effect of the concern for group image on intended recycling rate was significant after controlling for the other predictors ($\beta = .549$ $p = .002$), and the interaction between the audience and attributional content was reduced with the mediator included in the equation ($\beta = .294$ $p = .160$). This demonstrates a significant pattern of mediation on recycling rates via identity concerns ($z = 2.04$, $p = .041$).

When this analysis was repeated on intended volunteering as a dependent variable, the effect of the concern for group image was also significant after controlling for the other predictors ($\beta = .311$ $p = .049$), and the significance of the interaction was also reduced when the mediator was included ($\beta = .389$ $p = .063$). Although this suggests mediation, the Sobel test was not reliable in this instance ($z = 1.59$, $p = .111$).

Discussion

Consistent with the previous two studies, this study again shows that outgroup critics are more effective at stimulating positive behavior when their criticism includes internal rather than external attributions for the ingroup's poor performance. However, this study also shows that this increased effectiveness is limited to contexts in which participants believe their responses to criticism will also be witnessed by an outgroup audience. When the audience for responses was instead ingroup, internal attributions no longer elicited more positive behavior. More important, and consistent with our theoretical perspective, the results also provide evidence that image concerns were responsible for these effects. When criticism that included internal attributions was combined with the presence of an outgroup audience, reported concerns over the public image of the group were highest. More important, mediation analysis confirmed that these concerns were responsible for the heightened behavioral intentions under the same conditions, at least in so far as recycling intentions are concerned. This suggests that participants reported environmental behaviour was motivated by desires to maintain the positive image of their group to the outside world.

General Discussion

The present research brings together several hitherto unconnected lines of investigation: research on group-directed criticism, research on attributions for failure and their effects on performance (Studies 1 and 2), and research on management of group images (Study 3). Each of these lines of research suggests different factors that are likely to affect responses to negative feedback. The literature on group-directed criticism, for example, suggests that the identity of the critic is a key factor in determining responses: ingroup critics are accepted more readily than outgroup critics. The literature on attributions for failure suggests that external attributions (e.g.,

opportunity) are likely to produce more resilient performance than internal attributions (e.g., ability), which typically engender helplessness and reduced motivations. Research on the management of group images suggests that audience composition is an additional factor: the presence of outgroup audiences can stimulate concerns about how one's group is perceived from the outside. Our research suggests that these factors are not simply additive in their effects. Rather, they interact—often in ways that appear counterintuitive.

The principle finding of the present research is that outgroup critics can be surprisingly effective at stimulating relevant behavioral change when their criticism includes reference to the ingroup's character (i.e., internal attributions), rather than the ingroup's opportunities and incentives (i.e., external attributions). To understand this effect, which was replicated across two studies (Studies 1 and 2), we explored the context within which participants' responses were given (Study 3). This revealed that the effectiveness of outgroup criticism including internal attributions was limited to contexts in which participants believed that their responses would be scrutinized by an outgroup audience. This suggests that concerns about the public image of one's group might guide responses to different forms of criticism. Indeed, there was evidence that public image concerns mediated participants' responses to criticism in Study 3.

Together, these findings show that the impact of group directed criticisms depends on *who* is delivering the message, but also on *what* is being said, and *who* is observing the reaction.

Theoretical and practical implications

Although our studies confirm that group membership of the source influences reactions to criticism (see Hornsey, 2005), they also demonstrate that the intergroup sensitivity effect is not universal. Instead, it appears that when outgroup criticisms reference the internal qualities of the ingroup, reparative action is more likely than

defensive rejection. This finding also contrasts sharply with previous research on person- vs. situation-related attributions of performance in educational settings (e.g. Dweck, 1999; Kamins & Dweck, 1999). At least when coming from an outgroup source, or when responses are observed by an outgroup audience, character-based criticisms seem to be motivating rather than undermining.

It is important to note that the present research departs from previous work on the effects of attributions in feedback in a number of important respects. Principally, we explored the effects of group-directed rather than person-directed criticisms. This may account for the different patterns of results we observe. In collective settings, there are a number of strategies that one may use in response to criticism that preserve the personal self but still allow the criticism to be heard. For example, an individual may decide that although criticism applies to the group as a whole, he or she personally is exempt from this criticism. Future research could investigate more closely the defensive strategies that people use to negotiate their way through the negative implications of internal attributions for poor performance, both for the individual self and the collective self. For example, it seems likely that highly identified group members would be less inclined to draw such sharp distinctions between the individual self and their group. Accordingly, the apparent responsiveness to outgroup members who criticize the character of one's group that we have observed may be less likely among more highly identified samples. Future research may find it interesting to explore this possibility.

The present findings also appear to diverge from the previous literature on intergroup sensitivity effect. In particular, the previous research suggests that reactions to outgroup criticisms are normally more negative than to similar criticisms voiced by ingroup members. Contrasting from this picture, our results suggest that outgroup criticisms may be taken on board when these threaten the group's public

image. In this respect, participants in our studies seemed to be more willing to change their behavior rather than risk the group's reputation. However, when interpreting these findings, it is important to note the difference between the dependent measures used in the present research and those employed in the previous research on group-based criticism (behavioral vs. affective measures). It is entirely possible that participants exposed to outgroup criticism that includes internal attributions evaluated both the message and the critic negatively. They may have also disagreed with the criticism. But in spite of these negative evaluations, they nevertheless may have been willing to demonstrate that the critic was wrong through their own behavior. In fact, the observed change in behavioral intentions may be a *result* of a negative affective reaction (an attempt to prove the critic to be wrong, and thus undermine *the critic's* image). The future research could investigate this suggestion.

It should also be noted that previous research on group-based criticism used messages that did not include explicit attributions of wrongdoing. Although the criticism in most studies was phrased in a way that would seem fairly internal (e.g. in previous studies Australians were criticized for their racism, Hornsey & Imani, 2004), these qualities were not explicitly attributed either to national character (i.e. internal attribution) or to historical and political circumstances (external attribution). It is possible that since people are normally reluctant to attribute their groups' wrongdoings to internal causes (Doosje & Branscombe, 2003), participants in previous research implicitly read external attributions into the message. The present research differs from the previous studies in that it explored the effect of attributions directly by explicitly manipulating them.

More generally, our findings provide an important theoretical link between research on perception of group-directed criticism and research on failure attributions and their effect on subsequent performance. The findings demonstrate that the effects

observed within each of these lines of research can be better understood in combination, and draws attention to the interplay between message source and content in the context of group-directed criticism. At an applied level, present research offers some practical implications for stimulating sustainable behavior, as well as encouraging behavior change in other applied domains. Criticism coming from outgroup sources has the potential to inspire behavior change, if it follows certain rules, such as attributing group's failure to internal and stable causes.

Our findings also show how image concerns can play an important role in determining reactions to group-directed criticisms. Participants demonstrated stronger reparative intentions when internal attributions for prior poor performance came from an outgroup source, particularly when outside observers were also witness to the criticism and responses to it. The fact that the combined effects of criticism context (i.e. audiences) and attributional content were mediated through concerns with the group image (Study 3) suggests that positive individual behavior might sometimes be a strategic tool for collective image-management (Hopkins et al., 2007). This raises an interesting question about the nature of the behavioral intentions we assessed, and about the role of strategic processes in social psychological phenomena more generally.

In line with previous research, we show that participants' self-reports can be significantly affected by their perception of the audience and its agenda (e.g., Postmes et al., 1999). This includes the identity of the researcher who poses the question (Barreto, Spears, Ellemers, & Shahinper, 2003). Typically, however, audience effects are not taken into account in the process of reporting and interpreting psychological research. It could be argued that if behavioral intentions were motivated by image concerns, then these are unlikely to represent participants' "true" intentions. Although this remains an open question, there is no logical reason why behavior cannot be both

strategically motivated and genuine at the same time. For example, strategic concerns may initiate intentions to respond in a particular way, but the enactment of these intentions may lead to internalization. To resolve this issue it would be important to explore responses to criticism over time and across contexts (i.e., in private as well as public).

Conclusion

This paper explored the interaction between the source/ audience of criticism and the attributional content of critical messages on individual intentions in relevant domains (i.e., recycling intentions in the context of environmental criticisms). Contrary to what might have been expected from considering each of these factors in isolation, our studies revealed an important, and more complex, interplay between attributional content, source, and audience factors. Principally, outgroup sources were most effective at eliciting positive intentions when they implied internal causes for the ingroup's failure, whereas the effectiveness of ingroup sources was not affected by the implied attributions. Similarly, criticisms containing internal attributions elicited more positive intentions when an outgroup (rather than ingroup) audience was witness to individual responses. Importantly, the latter effect was mediated by the concern for group image, suggesting that participants did not react against the criticism but instead were prepared to take it on board and act accordingly in order to repair the image of their group. The results provide an important theoretical link between the research on group-directed criticism and literature on failure attribution: they demonstrate that in case of group-directed criticism effects are contingent on both *who* is voicing the criticism, *what* is being said, and *who* is observing reaction.

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Footnotes

1. It should also be noted that audience effects on ingroup criticism have been extensively investigated in previous research (Ariyanto, Hornsey, & Gallois, 2006; Hornsey, De Bruijn, Creed, Allen, Ariyanto, & Svensson, 2005).

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Intended amount of donation to an environmental organization as a function of criticism source and attributional content (Study 1).

Figure 2. Environmental intentions as a function of criticism source and attributional content (Study 2).

Figure 3. Intended recycling rate as a function of audience and attributional content (Study 3).

Figure 4. Group image concern as a function of audience and attributional content (Study 3).