



Loyalty to the group and intragroup position

JUST imagine: Your boss asks you to run a series of special training days for other employees. At first you feel rather flattered that your boss is considering you for this task. But you soon realise that there are costs involved: for one, it is clear that you are expected to prepare for the training in your own time, for no extra payment. What would you do if this happened to you? Would you take on the job without a second thought? Or, would you agree to do it with a mind to how it would help you get that promotion you are after? Or, would you tell your boss to find someone else for the job?

One of the factors in your decision in this example, and many others like it, will be your position within the organisation. To what degree are you 'prototypical'?

Position within groups

People who are prototypical of their group, best represent what the group stands for as



JOLANDA JETTEN, winner of the Society's Spearman Medal 2004, outlines her research.

a whole (Turner, 1985). People who are less prototypical are more peripheral to the group because they represent the group less well. To give an example from the animal world, a robin would be seen as a prototypical bird as it matches the defining features of what a bird is (e.g. sings, is able to fly, lays eggs). In contrast, a penguin is a more peripheral example of the bird category as it matches some defining features (e.g. has wings and lays eggs) but not all (not able to fly). Similarly, if we think of employees in a hospital, doctors and nurses are perceived to be more prototypical than other groups of employees, like the hospital's cleaners, porters and catering staff.

What this example also shows is that prototypicality within a group is often associated with status. Doctors are not only perceived to be more prototypical and central in a hospital than porters, they also have higher status. In line with this, research shows that prototypical group members are more likely to be group leaders than are peripheral group members (Hains *et al.*, 1997). They are also more successful in eliciting attitude change in

others (van Knippenberg *et al.*, 1994), and they are most likely to define the norms and standards within the group that others then follow (Oakes *et al.*, 1999). Those who are at the edge of a group, perhaps because they are newcomers, junior, or in other ways not matching our concept of what the group embodies, are less influential.

Prototypicality and identity security

We all have joined new groups and have been peripheral group members at times. We know what a stressful experience this can be. Differences in group members' perceived prototypicality within a group are associated not only with differences in perceived identity security, but have also been found to affect self-esteem (Jetten *et al.*, 2002). Newcomers often feel less respected (Branscombe *et al.*, 2002), more anxious, and less confident than established group members (Moreland, 1985). One reason for this might be that peripheral group members and newcomers feel pressured to assimilate to the group and to change their behaviour to become more in

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Research on group processes and intergroup relations: www.ex.ac.uk/psychology/seorg

ESRC-funded research on peripheral group membership (Jetten *et al.*, 'Intragroup status as determinant of normative behaviour and norm-enforcement'):

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line with established group members (Louis, 1980). Occasionally, extra pressure is put on new or peripheral group members by forcing them to prove their loyalty to the group – for example, by engaging in acts of aggression against an ‘enemy’ (e.g. in youth gangs; Short & Strodtbeck, 1974).

One factor that is likely to influence people’s responses to insecure positions within a group is the meaning they attribute to being ‘on the periphery’. Someone can be peripheral in a group because other group members reject them. But people might also be peripheral because they are new to the group and are in the process of being accepted. Others still may choose to be at the edge of the group because they anticipate leaving the group (e.g. those close to retirement, those that took on a job somewhere else), because they have no desire to be a core group member (e.g. because it would involve greater responsibility and commitment), or because the group is not well-respected and they would rather not belong to it (e.g. inmates in a prison; being an employee in a corrupt organisation). Obviously, people in each category will feel very different about being peripheral. It is against this background that peripheral group members’ actions must be understood.

Who is most loyal?

Traditionally, researchers have been most interested in core members of the group. The main reason for this is that group action often seems to be initiated by those at the group’s centre. In this view, peripheral group members are thought of as passive group members – they are followers but never instigators. In line with this view, our own research shows that prototypical group members are more responsive to the needs of the group and more willing to act in ways that further the group’s interests than peripheral group members are. Whereas prototypical group members respond to threats to the group with increased loyalty, peripheral group members are prone to bale out as soon as the group is under attack. It may not be that peripheral group members are simply more passive, rather that they are not motivated to defend the interests of their group (Jetten *et al.*, 1997). Indeed, peripheral group members can at times behave in ways that actively damage the group (e.g. by criticising or betraying it; Lewin, 1948).

But is that all there is to say about

peripheral group members? Anecdotally, we know of instances when it is those who are least central in the group who are most likely to display loyalty and to defend the group. For example, many African Americans gave their lives in World War II to defend a country that marginalised them. Peripheral status can also encourage people to aspire to standards of the group even more strenuously (Noel *et al.*, 1995). Consider the last words of a Glasgow-born Scot, Lieutenant General Sir John Moore, serving in the British army.

As he lay mortally wounded by a blast of grapeshot at the battle of Corunna in 1809 he certainly had no doubts about whom he was serving. He died saying: I hope the people of England will be satisfied. I hope my country will do me justice. (Paxman, 1999, p.44)

We know many more examples of people who are not most typical of their group, but who are most likely to endorse the group’s goals, actively protect its integrity and are most loyal to the group.

Strategic behaviour

The question at the beginning of this article – how your prototypicality in the organisation will influence whether or not

‘Peripheral group members are prone to bale out as soon as the group is under attack’

you take on the extra work – now seems less than straightforward. On the one hand, prototypical group members seem most committed to their group, no matter what. On the other hand, the behaviour of peripheral group members is much more difficult to predict. Indeed, the variability in their behaviour is what makes them so interesting to study. In my research, my colleagues and I have examined the conditions that determine whether peripheral group members become motivated to work for their group, and when they are likely to bale out.

We expected that a crucial variable in determining the behaviour of peripherals would be the future they see for themselves in the group. Although group members may have the same position within a group at a given point in time, their experiences in the group are likely to differ in important

ways depending on the future prospects in that group.

To demonstrate this point, we conducted a number of studies. In one of these, student participants were told that they were peripheral to the student group (ostensibly on the basis of a personality questionnaire). Hereafter, they were told that clinical psychologists had created a personal profile for them predicting their future within the student body. In one condition, they were reassured that, although they did not match the student body well at the moment, the clinical psychologist thought that they were the type of person who would have little difficulty in becoming more accepted by other students in the future. In the other condition, participants were told that the clinical psychologist feared they would remain quite marginalised in the student group in the future.

Following this information, we measured whether students were motivated to help out with a subsequent task that would benefit the student body. Our findings showed that those who expected to become more prototypical in the future set aside more time to help out than those who knew they did not have a future in the group. Thus, those who were confident that they would be accepted became motivated to display ‘good behaviour’ to their group, whereas those who did not anticipate becoming more accepted became less engaged in group activities (see Jetten *et al.*, 2003).

Other studies show that prototypical group members, because of their greater security within the group, express relatively high levels of group loyalty across contexts – regardless of who is watching and without thought to the strategic value of their actions. In contrast, peripheral group members are more strategic in expressing group loyalty to others in an attempt to gain greater acceptance. For instance, we conducted an online survey via the BBC science website in order to test our thinking across a wide range of groups. We asked participants to think of a specific group of which they were a member and keep that group in mind while responding to the questions. The groups people considered came from a broad range of categories, including social groups (e.g. sports teams, group of friends), work or study groups, social categories (e.g. sexual orientation, gender, nationality), and belief-based groups (e.g. church group, political group).

Across these different groups, people who saw themselves as prototypical group members displayed high levels of loyalty, regardless of the context. People who were peripheral, however, were more inclined to display loyalty when they felt their behaviour was monitored by senior group members than when they did not feel monitored. This study illustrates the strategic behaviour of peripherals: loyalty is expressed to the extent that they are accountable to other group members (Jetten *et al.*, 2005).

We concluded that peripheral group members appear to be highly responsive to the social context, and their behaviour is often tailored to maximise social advantage. The idea that peripheral group members are sometimes even forced to engage in such strategic behaviour in order to get ahead is nicely illustrated in Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi*, when the writer talks about the behaviour of lions in the circus:

It is interesting to note that the lion that is the most amenable to the circus trainer's tricks is the one with the lowest social standing in the pride, the omega animal. It has the most to gain from a close relationship with the super-alpha trainer. It is not only a matter of extra treats. A close protection will also mean protection from the other members of the pride. It is this compliant animal, to the public no different from the others in size and apparent ferocity, that will be the star of the show, while the trainer leaves the beta and gamma lions, more cantankerous subordinates, sitting on their colourful barrels on the edge of the ring.

In line with our research, for peripheral group members, protecting their position within the group appears to be contingent on publicly demonstrating good group

member behaviour. Fulfilling the group's expectations and flattering senior group members are often expected to lead to greater rewards for these peripheral group members (Vonk, 1998).

What would you do?

So, would you sacrifice your time for the boss? It is likely that your answer to the question depends first on your position within the organisation. If your position is relatively secure (e.g. permanent contract), or if you feel prototypical or relatively senior, your decision on whether to organise these training sessions would be made without strategic considerations of what the boss might think of you. Rather, feelings of personal duty and commitment to the organisation might guide you to agree to the extra work, or feelings of security within the organisation might lead to the opposite decision (Jetten *et al.*, in press).

However, the nature of the decision would change considerably if you were a newcomer, contract-worker, or peripheral employee in this organisation. Your more precarious position would lead you to pay close attention to the social value of taking on extra work. For instance, your decision would be affected by whether you already have your eye on a job at another company, whether the boss also said that this is going to help to make a case for your promotion, or whether this would mean that other employees would appreciate your help and would be more accepting of you in the future. More so than prototypical group members, peripheral group members may have to address and balance these considerations. Indeed, keeping up the appearances may occasionally have an obvious strategic advantage when one is living on the edge.

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DISCUSS AND DEBATE

When do people want to be peripheral and when do they want to be prototypical?

Are peripheral group members more likely to bully other group members, or are they typically victims of bullies?

When does strategic group behaviour on the part of peripheral group members backfire?

People can sometimes choose to be peripheral in society (e.g. subcultures). What are their motives?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. Send letters to psychologist@bps.org.uk or post on the forum via www.thepsychologist.org.uk.

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