

CONCERN FOR PERSONAL REPUTATION WITHIN GROUPS:
THE EFFECT OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND FEAR
OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

LA PREOCCUPAZIONE PER LA REPUTAZIONE PERSONALE
NEI GRUPPI: L'EFFETTO DELLA VISIBILITA'
E DELLA PAURA DI ESCLUSIONE SOCIALE

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Abstract

Literature shows that concern for personal reputation varies as a function of both individual and contextual factors, with entitativity of the group to which a person belongs emerging as a key antecedent of individual's concern for personal reputation. The present research focuses on a further antecedent of the phenomenon, that is, accountability to the group. We presented participants with a high entitative ingroup and manipulated accountability (vs. anonymity) of their response to other ingroup members. Results showed that being accountable to the ingroup determines higher concern for personal reputation, and this relation is mediated by the fear of social exclusion.

Keywords: reputation, fear of exclusion, accountability

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Riassunto

La letteratura mostra che la preoccupazione per la reputazione personale varia in funzione di fattori individuali e contestuali: l'entitatività del gruppo al quale un individuo appartiene è risultata essere un antecedente fondamentale della sua preoccupazione per la reputazione. Questa ricerca focalizza l'attenzione su un ulteriore antecedente di questo fenomeno, ovvero la visibilità del proprio comportamento rispetto al gruppo. Abbiamo presentato ai partecipanti una situazione in cui l'ingroup era descritto come molto entitativo e successivamente manipolato la visibilità (vs. l'anonimato) delle loro risposte rispetto agli altri membri del gruppo. I risultati hanno mostrato che, quando le risposte sono visibili agli altri membri del gruppo, le persone si preoccupano maggiormente per la propria reputazione, e questo fenomeno è mediato dalla paura di esclusione sociale

Parole chiave: reputazione, paura di esclusione, visibilità

Concern for Personal Reputation within Groups: The Effect of Accountability and Fear of Social Exclusion

Personal reputation – meant as a set of information, beliefs, evaluations and attitudes that a community shares about one of its members (Bromley, 1993; Emler, 1990) – represents a fundamental aspect of group life. In fact, within groups people form impressions of each other, compare and adjust these impressions with other members of the community in order to build precise representations of each other. Such representations are fundamental because they facilitate coordination within groups, by creating behavioural expectations about other individuals before interacting with them. This allows people to approach cooperative partners and, by contrast, to avoid potentially threatening ones (Baumeister, Zhang and Vohs, 2004; Dunbar, 2004). This is why reputation is a resource in social life from both the societal and the individual point of view.

Personal reputation is not stable, rather it is built and modified through communicative exchanges within a specific community: Indeed, sharing information about a person represents the key ingredient for reputation building (Bromley, 1993; Emler, 1990). Nonetheless, this information sharing is the result of the individual's attempt to manage strategically his/her impression in the eyes of (relevant) others: Individuals are in fact

motivated to present themselves in a positive way, so they constantly engage in impression management strategies to create a positive “face” (Goffman, 1959). Such an attempt to alter their impression as a function of the social context is the reason why individual’s public behaviour can drastically diverge from what they would do under conditions of anonymity, that is, when their reputation is not at stake (Reinstein and Riener, 2012; Van Vugt and Hardy, 2010).

Possessing or not a good and valued reputation within one’s own group is highly relevant. On the one hand, having a good reputation allows individuals to create and maintain social interactions, as well as to access social resources such as, for instance, more job opportunities, more chance of being accepted into appealing groups, and of acquiring respect and centrality in the group (De Cremer and Tyler, 2005; Engelmann, Over, Hermann and Tomasello, 2013; Fehr and Fischbacher, 2003; Milinski, Semmann and Krambeck, 2002; Stiff and Van Vugt, 2008). On the other hand, reputation represents a useful cue to distinguish potential partners who are likely to reciprocate cooperation against those who are likely to betray these expectancies (e.g., Blau, 1964; Thibault and Kelley, 1959). Thus, individuals know that engaging in positive reputation building is a worthwhile effort (Krasnow, Cosmides, Pedersen and Tooby, 2012).

Whereas a great bulk of research has dealt with the consequences of a good or bad reputation (e.g., Gordon, 1989; Reinstein and Riener, 2012; Semman, Kranbeck and Milinski, 2005), only few studies have directly investigated whether and how some individual and/or contextual characteristics are likely to determine the individuals’ attention to their reputation, thus making them more (or less) concerned about it. In fact, whereas it is well ascertained that individuals strive to make a good impression in order to acquire respect and inclusion within groups (e.g., De Cremer, 2002; Ellemers, Pagliaro and Barreto, 2013; Goffman, 1959; Tyler and Blader, 2000), results from recent studies suggest that individuals’ concern for their reputation may be less stable than one might imagine (De Cremer and Tyler, 2005; see also Anderson and Shirako, 2008). Although achieving a positive social image seems to be a universal worry (Ybarra, Park, Stanik and Lee, 2012), it is not surprising that individuals may be not always concerned for reputation to the same degree in different social context and according to their individual inclinations. In a seminal work on this topic, De Cremer and Tyler (2005) found that individuals’ concern for reputation is not stable, rather, it varies. When investigating the antecedents of such variations, Cavazza and colleagues suggested and found that both individual (Cavazza, Guidetti and Pagliaro, 2015) as

well as contextual features (Cavazza, Pagliaro and Guidetti, 2014) may determine the amount of concern for personal reputation people feel within the groups. For example, individuals guided by a prevention focus (Higgins, 1998) – that is, individuals driven by security (vs. growth and development) needs – and those more sensitive to approval from generalized others (Leary and Baumeister, 2000) are more concerned about their reputation, and these effects are due to self-monitoring tendencies (Cavazza et al., 2015). As regards the contextual antecedents of individual concern for reputation, Cavazza and colleagues consistently found that the entitativity (Campbell, 1958) of the group one belongs to is at stake in this process. Abundant literature shows that not all social aggregates are perceived as real groups or communities. In order to be perceived as a “coherent entity”, a social aggregate must possess several features, such as for instance a high degree of interaction, common goals, common outcomes and group members similarity (Lickel et al., 2000). Hamilton and Sherman (1996) mutated the term “entitativity” from Campbell (1958) in order to indicate that the “groupness” of social aggregates may largely vary and has an impact on several psychosocial phenomena. Researchers showed that entitativity has important consequences in terms of needs that group membership fulfils (e.g., Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino and Saccchi, 2002; Crawford and Salaman, 2012). Based on these findings, Cavazza and colleagues (2014) suggested and found that individual’s concern for reputation is higher among high (vs. low) entitative groups, and this is the case because such groups are likely to elicit stronger fear of social exclusion in case of deviance.

The aim of the present research was to advance the understanding of the contextual antecedents of concern for reputation. Reputation by definition is a matter of impression management, thus we believed that a further factor that may potentially determine the amount of concern for reputation people feel within their groups is their accountability to other ingroup members. Abundant literature suggests that individuals’ perception and behavior are strongly influenced by the presence of others, and this is likely to occur because people strive to avoid censure and acquire a positive evaluation from others (e.g., Baumeister, 1982; Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Individuals in fact strategically adapt their behavior when they are accountable (vs. anonymous) to other ingroup members (inter alia, Barreto and Ellemers, 2000, Deutsch and Gerard, 1955; Leary and Kowalski, 1990).

Thus it seems reasonable to expect that this attention to significant others’ judgment reflects on a stronger concern for reputation. Indeed, studies on the effect of reputation showed that generosity is enhanced

when acting under the eyes of someone else (even when the eye is just drawn, see Bateson, Nettle and Roberts, 2006), and that concern for reputation is actually responsible for the enhanced generosity (e.g., Wu, Balliet and Van Lange, 2015). However, behavior visibility do not always lead to generosity, because some people may be motivated to appear altruistic, while others are motivated to appear as an average person (Jones and Linardi, 2014 called those people “wallflowers”). This findings suggests that visibility is a crucial condition for raising concern for reputation (and not necessarily for transforming it in altruistic behavior).

We aimed to test this suggestion and extend our knowledge on the antecedents of concern for reputation by comparing a situation in which participants thought to be accountable and visible to other ingroup members with a situation in which they were completely anonymous to them. Based on the above reasoning, we advanced that accountability contributes to elicit concern for personal reputation. In particular, we hypothesized that, under accountability (vs. anonymity) condition, participants would show higher levels of both fear of social exclusion (Hp1) and concern for personal reputation (Hp2). Moreover, in line with Cavazza et al.’s (2014) findings, we expected the effect of accountability on concern for personal reputation to be mediated by the fear of social exclusion (Hp3).

The Present Research

Participants and Procedure

A total of 59 students from the University of Chieti-Pescara took part in the main study on a voluntary basis (40 women and 19 men). Their *mean age* was 23.41 (*SD* = 2.92). After completing the study, participants were thanked and fully debriefed.

We adapted the procedure developed by Cavazza et al. (2014). We presented participants with a paper-and-pencil questionnaire, introduced as an investigation of concerns and goals young people have in their social lives. Drawing on Cavazza et al.’s (2014) findings, we asked participants to think about a high entitative group, that is, their close friends. To this end, we relied on the procedure developed by Castano, Yzerbyt, and Bourguignon (2003): Participants were told that there are features that, more than any others, unite people together (e.g., goals, interests, past experience, etc.). Then they were asked to think carefully about their group of close friends and to write down at least five features that its members have in common with each other, in terms of sharing, experience, goals, and interests. In this way, relying on previous findings (see,

Cavazza et al., 2014), we kept entitativity of the ingroup constant and high.

We then manipulated participants' accountability vs. anonymity. In the *accountability condition*, participants were told that, after the research session, they would be called to discuss the results of the study with some of their close friends. Thus, we asked each participant to write down his/her name, and the names of three close friends, so that they would have been contacted in the future for a brief discussion. On the contrary, in the *anonymity condition*, we told participants that their response would be treated in an anonymous and reserved way. Thus, in both conditions, they were asked to think about their close friends, but only in the accountability condition they were faced with a situation in which their responses would be visible to these friends.

Participants then completed a series of five items aiming at assessing their fear of social exclusion (e.g., "I am afraid that my friends can exclude me"; "If my friends do not consider me one of them, I'd be sorry"; "The idea of not being fully included in my group of friends scares me"; answer scale from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*; alpha = .83).

Finally, participants completed the Italian version of the Concern for Reputation scale (De Cremer and Tyler, 2005). This scale consists of seven items (e.g., "I am rarely concerned about my reputation"; "I do not consider what others say about me"; "I find it important that others consider my reputation as a serious matter"; alpha = .84). Participants expressed their degree of agreement on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*absolutely disagree*) to 5 (*absolutely agree*), so that the higher the score, the stronger one's reputational concern.

Results

A preliminary correlation analysis showed that, as in previous research (Cavazza et al., 2014), fear of social exclusion and concern for reputation were significantly related ($r = .68$; $p < .001$). In order to test our hypotheses, we performed two one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), with the experimental condition (accountability vs. anonymity) as the between participants factor, and fear of social exclusion and concern for reputation as dependent variables, respectively.

The first ANOVA showed a significant effect of the experimental condition on the fear of social exclusion, $F(1,57) = 5.67$, $p = .02$, partial eta squared = .09. Inspection of means showed that, in line with Hp1, participants expressed higher levels of fear of social exclusion when their response were accountable to other ingroup members ($M = 3.91$; $SD = 0.63$) than in the anonymity condition ($M = 3.37$; $SD = 1.04$).

Similarly, the subsequent ANOVA showed a significant effect of the experimental condition on the concern for reputation, $F(1,57) = 9.78$, $p = .003$, partial eta squared = .15. Inspection of means showed that, in line with Hp2, participants were more concerned for their reputation when their response were accountable to other ingroup members ($M = 3.97$; $SD = 0.66$) than in the anonymity condition ($M = 3.33$; $SD = 0.88$).

To test whether the effect of the manipulated accountability on participants' concern for reputation is mediated by the fear of social exclusion, we used the regression approach. A first set of linear regressions ascertained that manipulated accountability significantly predicted both the fear of social exclusion (beta = .30; $p = .02$) and concern for reputation (beta = .38; $p = .003$). Then, a further regression showed that the fear of social exclusion was a reliable predictor of the concern for reputation (beta = .68; $p < .001$). Finally, when controlling for the fear of social exclusion (the proposed mediator), the effect of the manipulated accountability was strongly reduced (beta = .19; $p = .05$), while the effect of the fear of social exclusion was almost the same (beta = .63; $p < .001$). To test whether this reduction was significant, we used PROCESS, the SPSS macro developed by Hayes (2013), in order to examine the effects of manipulated accountability on concern for reputation via the mediation of the fear of social exclusion. The overall model was significant (R-squared = .50, $F(2, 56) = 28.25$, $p < .001$). We followed the procedure described by Hayes (2013) for estimating indirect effects and checked whether the reduction in the direct effect could have been attributed to our proposed mediator using bootstrapping with 1,000 resamples to compute 95% confidence intervals (CIs). CIs that do not contain 0 denote statistically significant indirect effects. In line with Hp3, the indirect effect of accountability on concern for reputation was significant (indirect effect = .31, 95% CI; LLCI: .0705, ULCI: .6672).

Discussion

Individuals are concerned for their reputation, because it determines a number of social and material benefits within groups and communities. Nevertheless, recently it has been advanced that this concern for reputation is not stable, rather it varies as a function of both individual and contextual factors. The main aim of this paper was to further investigate the antecedents of concern for personal reputation, by focusing on the possible role of accountability (vs. anonymity) within groups. Results supported our hypothesis, by showing that when accountable to other ingroup members, individuals feel more concerned about their personal reputa-

tion. This concern is guided by the fear of being excluded by relevant others.

The present findings confirm that contextual features may contribute to the effort we put in monitoring our reputation within significant groups.

We are inclined to consider this finding strongly important from an applied point of view, since it can be useful in understanding some dynamics in the group regulation processes. For instance, accountability to other group members may be detrimental for group production in tasks that require cognitive divergence, since individuals may censure their creativity in order not to be judged by others. In this vein, future studies could be directed on the one hand to investigate whether other group properties, such as group size or its social status (minority vs. majority), may impact on concern for personal reputation. Furthermore, previous research consistently showed that people strive more for making a positive impression when they strongly identify with their own group (e.g., Barreto and Ellemers, 2000), thus we are inclined to believe that identification may moderate the effect we highlighted here as well.

On the other hand, future research should also clarify the distal consequences of being concerned for personal reputation, for example examining the strategies that individual concerned for their reputation put in action in order to gain a positive view within their groups, or by examining the consequences of such a concern on individual's cognitive load or well-being more in general.

A further, worthwhile direction for future studies would be to consider multi-method approaches for studying the relationships we have identified, in order to confirm our results in a more ecological setting. In fact, despite the experimental procedure we used has been widely adopted in previous literature, it would be good in the future to test the present hypotheses in a more natural setting. One possible strategy would be to create a group setting in which individuals are allowed to interact, and to measure indirect indicators of concern for personal reputation – for instance, non-verbal cues such as gaze duration, the number of interactions, and so on. Another intriguing possibility would be to consider, from a qualitative point of view, the characteristics of the group that individuals spontaneously recall during the manipulation of entitativity, in order to understand whether different aspects – e.g., shared beliefs, shared events in the past, future joint projects – may moderate the effect on concern for reputation.

On the overall, the present study contributes to the understanding of the motivations underlying individual concern for reputation, and open

new intriguing lines of research that are worth of attention in order to better understand intragroup processes.

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