

Short Note

Framed and misfortuned: identity salience and the whiff of scandal

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Abstract

In this study a questionnaire was administered via e-mail to Dutch social psychologists. We asked to what extent respondents felt that a widely published plagiarism scandal involving a Dutch psychologist affected themselves and the image of their profession. As predicted, findings indicate that the impact of the scandal was dependent on the salient identity of both the perceiver ('social psychologist' or 'psychologist') and the stimulus target ('clinical psychologist' or 'psychologist'). Respondents were more affected by the plagiarism scandal when the self-category that was made salient matched the category of the target of the scandal. Copyright © 1999 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

On 15 August 1996 a shock rippled through the psychology community in the Netherlands. A well-read weekly magazine accused a Dutch professor of clinical psychology, of international fame, of plagiarism.¹ Texts from a popular, best-selling book he had published would have been copied word for word from a book that was written by somebody else. In the weeks that followed similar articles were published and more cases of plagiarism (in other books by the same author) came to light. The scandal received intense media attention and many wondered to what extent the affair would hurt the credibility of science in general and the image of psychology in particular.

At the height of this media attention, in the first two weeks of September 1996, we decided to use this plagiarism scandal to test the hypothesis that 'self-relevant'

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¹Throughout this article we decided to use neither the name of the person who was accused of plagiarism nor the university to which he was affiliated. It is believed that the plagiarism affair at least temporarily damaged the image of the university involved. Because of this, people affiliated to this university asked us not to be too explicit about the person and institution involved in the scandal.

information has more impact on subsequent judgments than information that is 'self-irrelevant'.

Whereas the concept of self-relevance has classically been conceived in terms of relatively stable attributes of the person, such as traits or attitudes (see e.g. Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Markus & Smith, 1981), we explore the effects of self-relevance in a more social sense, namely in terms of the common social category membership that the perceiver shares with others (Turner, 1987). We argue that self-relevance extends beyond the specific individual to that which occurs to fellow category members. To be more specific, scandals involving an outgroup member may be dismissed more easily as irrelevant to the self. Conversely, the misdemeanour of an ingroup member is more likely to be seen as relevant to the self (see Stapel, Reicher & Spears, 1994). Especially when this misbehaviour is extreme, it will be perceived as a potential threat to the image of one's ingroup and will thus be attended to closely (see Marques & Pauz, 1994). One of the truisms of modern social psychology is that we have multiple 'social identities' (Turner, 1987) and thus multiple others may be perceived as 'similar' or 'relevant' to us. Given this diversity of possible social identities, it is important to know which identity is activated at a given time. Whether social psychologists view an article about a plagiarist clinical psychologist as relevant or irrelevant to the self may thus be determined by whether their social identity is narrowly defined ('social psychologists'), so as to exclude the plagiarist, or broadly defined ('psychologists') to include the plagiarist.

To summarize, the present study was designed to evaluate the prediction that defining the target of a plagiarism scandal as a member of a salient self-category will enhance the perceived impact of this scandal on relevant self-related judgments.

We tested this hypothesis by asking our colleagues, Dutch social psychologists, over electronic mail to what extent they felt this scandal was personally relevant and to what extent they thought the plagiarizing scandal would affect the 'image of our profession'. As a first manipulation the professor of clinical psychology who was accused of plagiarism was given either a relatively broad or narrow identity. In the introduction to the 'survey questions', the plagiarist was presented as either a 'psychologist' or a 'clinical psychologist'. As a second manipulation, participants' identity as either 'social psychologists' or as 'psychologists' was made salient. When participants identify themselves as psychologists, a scandal implicating a 'psychologist' or a 'clinical psychologist' involves an ingroup member. Similarly, when participants identify themselves as social psychologists, a scandal implicating a 'psychologist' bears an ingroup relationship to them. When, however, participants identify themselves as social psychologists, a scandal implicating a 'clinical psychologist' can be defined as involving an outgroup member. It was hypothesized that when the target of the plagiarism scandal bears an ingroup relationship to the respondent, the scandal would have a larger (more negative) impact on judgment than when there is an outgroup relationship between the target of the scandal and the respondent.

Because in the present study we used a real-life case, we could also test our self-relevance hypothesis using real-life indicators of the categorical relation between the target of the plagiarism scandal and the participants in our e-mail survey. We predicted that the impact of the scandal would be relatively more pronounced in ratings of respondents whose identity was similar to the accused because they were affiliated to the same *university* or because their professional *status* was similar to the target (full professor).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were PhD students, post-doctoral fellows, assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors affiliated to (applied) social psychology departments of universities in The Netherlands. The questionnaire was sent to 131 e-mail addresses, which were allocated randomly to conditions. Eighty-nine questionnaires were returned. Five of the returned questionnaires were not completed properly. Eighty-four (65 per cent) could be included in the analyses.

Design and independent variables

The study consisted of a 2 (Social identity of target: psychologist, clinical psychologist) \times 2 (Social identity of respondent; psychologist, social psychologist) between subjects design. The combinations of the design result in three 'ingroup conditions' (target psychologist–respondent psychologist, target psychologist–respondent social psychologist, and target clinical psychologist–respondent psychologist) and one 'outgroup condition' (target clinical psychologist–respondent social psychologist). One feature of this design is that it allows the same target stimulus (i.e. the plagiarist clinical psychologist) to be either an ingroup or outgroup member depending on the manipulated identity of both the target and the respondents. This provides a more stringent test of the self-categorization notion that identity and its effects are context dependent.

Social identity of respondents

Social identity as a 'psychologist' or as a 'social psychologist' was subtly manipulated by titling and introducing the e-mail questionnaire as a survey among 'PSYCHOLOGISTS in the Netherlands' or 'SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGISTS in the Netherlands'.

Social identity of target of scandal

After the introduction described above, the text continued with a short description of the accusations (copying texts from other books) that were made against the protagonist in the plagiarism scandal. The name of the target person was given and this person was described as either a 'psychologist' or a 'clinical psychologist'.

Dependent variables

Participants were asked two questions about the plagiarism scandal: 'To what extent do you feel personally affected by the plagiarism scandal' (1 = 'not at all', 7 = 'very much') and 'To what extent do you think the plagiarism scandal damages the image of our profession?' (1 = 'not at all', 7 = 'very much'). These questions are referred to hereafter as the 'personal relevance' and the 'image' questions respectively.

Procedure

Participants received the questionnaire and sent us their answers over e-mail. Answers that were sent more than 7 days after the questionnaire was sent out were treated as non-responses. Five weeks after the study was completed, all the participants were thanked, debriefed, and received a written summary of the findings over e-mail.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Effects of manipulations

Table 1 presents the means of the dependent measures as a function of target's and the respondents' social identity. We tested our prediction that there was a general 'ingroup-outgroup information' effect as *a priori* contrast analysis (see Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). In this analysis, comparisons were made between, on the one hand, the three 'ingroup' cells (target psychologist-respondent psychologist, target psychologist-respondent social psychologist, and target clinical psychologist-respondent psychologist) and, on the other hand, the one 'outgroup' cell (italicized in Table 1: target clinical psychologist-respondent social psychologist). This contrast analysis resulted in a significant effect for the personal relevance measure, $F(1,80) = 8.61, p < 0.01$, and the image measure, $F(1,80) = 11.02, p < 0.01$.

Effects of status and university variables

To test our predictions concerning the impact of the status variable on respondents' judgments, we first classified them into three groups: (i) PhD students and post-docs ($n = 41$), (ii) assistant and associate professors ($n = 32$), and (iii) full professors ($n = 11$). An ANOVA revealed the predicted effect of this status variable for the personal relevance question, $F(2,81) = 4.53, p < 0.05$. For the image question, this effect was only marginally significant, $F(2,81) = 2.55, p = 0.08$. For both measures the effect of status was mainly caused by the fact that the ratings of full professors

Table 1. Mean ratings of the impact of a plagiarism scandal as a function of social identity of the target of the scandal and social identity of the respondent

Social identity respondent	Psychologist		Social psychologist	
	Psychologist ($n = 20$)	Clinical psychologist ($n = 22$)	Psychologist ($n = 19$)	Clinical psychologist ($n = 23$)
Personal relevance of scandal	3.2 _a	3.0 _a	2.9 _a	<i>1.9_b</i>
Impact of scandal on profession	4.4 _a	4.4 _a	4.2 _a	<i>3.2_b</i>

Note: Scale range is from 1 to 7. Higher scores indicate that the plagiarism scandal is perceived to have more impact. Means where ingroup identity is salient are in normal type. Means where outgroup identity is salient are in italic. For each of the two measures means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < 0.05$.

(personal relevance $M = 3.9$, image $M = 5.0$) were significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) than those of the PhD-PostDoc group ($M = 2.5$ and $M = 3.8$) and the Assistant-Associate group ($M = 2.5$ and $M = 3.9$). To test our predictions concerning the impact of the respondents' affiliation on their judgments, we formed two groups: (1) respondents affiliated to the same university as the accused ($n = 12$) and (2) respondents affiliated to a different university than the accused ($n = 72$). An ANOVA revealed the predicted effect of this university factor for both the personal relevance question, $F(1,82) = 8.86$, $p < 0.01$ and the image question, $F(1,82) = 5.68$, $p < 0.05$. The ratings of respondents affiliated to the same university as the accused ($M = 3.8$ and $M = 5.0$) were significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) than the ratings of the respondents who were affiliated to another university ($M = 2.5$ and $M = 3.9$).

These findings provide strong support for the prediction that defining the target of a scandal as a member of a salient self-category will enhance the impact of this scandal on relevant self-judgments. Dutch social psychologist felt they were more affected by a plagiarism scandal involving a fellow psychologist when they categorized themselves in terms of the same category as the target of the scandal. Both our experimental manipulations (social identity of target and social identity of respondents) and our investigations of the impact of 'status' and 'university' of the respondents were effective in demonstrating the importance of self-categorization in judgment. These data clearly suggest that depending on the salient identity of both the perceiver and the stimulus target, the same event can be relevant or irrelevant to the self. Thus, it is the socially defined relationship between perceiver and target which renders information relevant and significant (see also Stapel *et al.*, 1994; Turner, 1987). It seems that if this relationship is framed in such a way as to include the guilty party in the ingroup, we are more likely to feel 'framed' (included and tainted) by their misfortune.

The findings of the present study are all the more intriguing because they seem to suggest that certain manipulations may make expert investigators of social influence (i.e. social psychologist) victims of the phenomena they investigate. On the one hand, this may be disconcerting because it demonstrates that our knowledge does not inoculate us against the effects we study. On the other hand, the robustness of this effect despite our insider knowledge provides further reassurance of the robustness of our knowledge.

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