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Group identity and positive deviance in work groups

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ABSTRACT

This study examines why and how identity cognitions, including group identification and individual differentiation, influence the positive deviance of employees. We identify the risk-taking intention of employees as a critical psychological mechanism to overcome stigma-induced identity threat of positive deviance. The analysis of data collected from 293 members comprising 66 work teams reveals that the relationship between individual differentiation and positive deviance is partially mediated by risk-taking intention. The indirect effect of group identification on positive deviance through risk-taking intention is also significant and positive in groups with low conformity pressure, whereas the same indirect effect is neutralized in groups with high conformity pressure. The current analysis offers new insights into the way the group context and the identity cognition of members explain the development of positive deviance and workplace creativity.

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As creativity and innovation are critical to a successful performance in knowledge-based society, recent studies underscored the role of deviant behavior in organizations (Krau, 2008). Deviance is viewed as a propitious basis of creativity and innovation rather than merely a harmful behavior, because creative and innovative processes often require individuals to deviate from existing norms and status quo (Appelbaum, Iaconi, & Matousek, 2007). By focusing on the positive side of deviant behavior, scholars have labeled the act of disregarding significant norms of the referent group to achieve socially desirable ends such as *positive deviance* (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004).

Despite the increasing importance of positive deviance, research on the psychological and group processes underlying this phenomenon remains lacking. By drawing on social identity theory, we examine the positive deviance in relation to the identity cognition of individual members, including group identification and individual differentiation (Van Knippenberg, 2000). Group members may act either in terms of their group membership or as independent individuals; these distinct identification processes of individual members may significantly affect the likelihood for them to engage in positive deviance (Janssen & Huang, 2008). Considering that deviation from norms may generate stigma or negative sanctions in work groups, it is important to elaborate on the necessary cognitive beliefs or psychological states to overcome the stigma-induced identity threat from groups and to successfully initiate constructive deviant behaviors (Major & O'Brien, 2005; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004).

Rather than assuming the direct, main effects of identity cognition on positive deviance, we explore a potential intermediate psychological state and group context to further clarify the relationship between identity cognition and positive deviance. Specifically, we identify risk-taking intention as a mediator of the relationship, because the most evident barrier to positive deviance in a group setting involves social risks associated with violating group norms (Mertens, Recker, Kohlborn, &

Kummer, 2016; Warren, 2003). In addition, we isolate group conformity pressure as a group-level contingency that attenuates the effect of risk-taking intention in mediating the relationship between identity cognitions and positive deviance. Individuals will unlikely take risks in a group, which pressures its members to conform to other members (Stangor, 2004).

The current study makes the following contributions. First, we theoretically identify and empirically examine the psychological mechanism (i.e., risk-taking intention) through which identity cognitions increase positive deviance. Second, we further propose a boundary condition of such mediated relationship by proposing that the mediating role of risk-taking intention may vary across teams with different levels of conformity pressure on members. The investigation of this contextual contingency may elaborate the understanding on when identity cognition facilitates or hampers positive deviance. Finally, the current effort to include group conformity pressure extends the positive deviance literature by employing a multilevel approach (Morrison, Wheeler-Smith, & Kamdar, 2011; Vadera, Pratt, & Mishra, 2013). In the present study, we broaden the focus of previous research, which is mostly confined on the individual-level relationship involving positive deviance, by examining the role of group-level conformity pressure in shaping the individual-level relationship between identity cognition and risk-taking intention and subsequent positive deviance.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Effects of identity cognition on positive deviance

Positive deviance is an “umbrella term” (Warren, 2003) encompassing a diverse group of related behaviors, such as principled organizational dissent (Graham, 1986), whistle-blowing (Near & Miceli, 1985), exercising voice (Morrison et al., 2011), prosocial behaviors (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986), and functional or creative disobedience (Brief, Buttram, & Dukerich, 2001). Although positive deviance is broadly defined to include various behaviors with constructive intention to improve performance, its key elements are rule-breaking, norm-violation, and breaking the “red tape,” which put them in the same category (Vadera et al., 2013).

Given that deviation from norms may generate stigma or negative sanctions in work groups, positive deviance may be critically affected by the identity cognition of members. Thus, the present study examines positive deviance in relation to identity cognition by drawing on social identity theory. We focus on the two complementary types of identity cognition, namely, group identification and individual differentiation. The former refers to the self-perceptions of individuals that they are part of a group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), whereas the latter is the extent to which individuals distinguish themselves from other group members in terms of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Janssen & Huang, 2008). The empirical results of the effects of individual differentiation on positive deviance consistently show that individual differentiation is positively associated with positive deviance (Janssen & Huang, 2008; Tse & Chiu, 2014). However, the empirical results of group identification in relation to constructive deviance are quite mixed with positive (Morrison et al., 2011; Venkataramani & Tangirala, 2010), insignificant (Janssen & Huang, 2008; Tse & Chiu, 2014), and negative relationships (Umpress, Bingham, & Mitchell, 2010).

Based on their divergence and idiosyncratic perspectives, people with a strong sense of individual differentiation are unlikely to be constrained by established paradigms and norms, and thus, they can question the status quo of their organization and spontaneously consider alternatives (Janssen & Huang, 2008). Individual differentiation may drive group members to engage in change-oriented, risk-taking behaviors. Members with strong individual differentiation can challenge the assumptions behind established frameworks of group thoughts and routines rather than take them for granted, and they feel free to take risks associated with novel solutions (Tse & Chiu, 2014). Thus, individual differentiation is expected to facilitate positive deviance. Our first hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 1. Individual differentiation is positively related with positive deviance.

Individuals with strong group identification cognitively categorize themselves as group members (Ashmore, Deaux, & Mclaughlin-Volpe, 2004) and perceive themselves in terms of the values, goals, attitudes, and behaviors they share with other members (Swaab, Postmes, & Spears, 2004). The controversy in this identification rests on whether identified members are motivated toward either norm-following or -breaking. When group identification strongly influences the social motives of members, they tend to seek cooperative and pro-social alternatives, thereby adhering to group norms and status quo (De Cremer, 2001; Desivilya & Eizen, 2005). Meanwhile, highly identifying members may be motivated to “bend the rules” (Vadera et al., 2013, p. 1264) or deviate from norms as far as the group benefits by changing a troubling situation (Venkataramani & Tangirala, 2010). By considering these ambivalent implications of group identification toward positive deviance, we do not expect any direct main effect but propose that the relationship is moderated by the nature of a given group context.

Mediating role of risk-taking intention

The inconsistent findings regarding the relationship between identity cognition and positive deviance highlight the importance of investigating mediating mechanisms. By focusing on the psychological state that develops positively deviant behaviors, we examine the role of risk-taking intention of group members as a plausible mediating mechanism. The willingness to confront social risk reflects a psychological readiness to initiate positive deviance (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). For example, Madjar, Greenberg, and Chen (2011) demonstrated a positive association between willingness to take risks and radical creativity. Morrison (2006) also determined a positive relationship between risk-taking propensity and likelihood to engage in prosocial rule-breaking. Positive deviance often involves significant risks because it may not be necessarily rewarded but often punished for going against established rules or practices (Jones, 1998). Individuals must move outside their comfort zone beyond the boundaries of their psychological safety net when engaging in positive deviance (Morrison, 2006). Hence, risk-taking intention may be a key driver of positive deviance.

We further propose that risk-taking intention mediates the relationship between identity cognition and positive deviance. People generally prefer to maintain congruent identity and behavior. Thus, individuals may approach risk in ways fitting their self-identity. For example, the group identification level of a member, which indicates the psychological prominence of group membership, may determine whether a person takes risks and violates current norms (Tyler & Blader, 2003). However, the aforementioned debate exists on whether members acting in terms of membership are motivated toward either norm-following or -breaking to benefit their group (Vadera et al., 2013). Thus, we expect an overall neutral effect of group identification on risk-taking without specific contingencies.

By contrast, members with strong individual differentiation may approach risk differently to achieve their goals or cultivate their own judgment regardless of compatibility with group values or norms (Damaraju, Barney, & Dess, 2010). Risk-taking involves deviation from status quo and group expectations or norms, thereby, engendering the stigma of failure (Fu, Tsui, & Dess, 2006). Members with strong individual differentiation are less sensitive and tend to accept such stigma from a group compared with members with strong group identification because they place higher importance on their own judgment and beliefs. Therefore, members with individual differentiation may develop strong risk-taking intention and undertake proactive and risk-taking behaviors rather than resorting to defensive and risk-averse strategies. Thus, we propose the following mediation hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. Risk-taking intention mediates the positive relationship between individual differentiation and positive deviance.

Moderating role of group conformity pressure

The relationship between identity cognition and risk-taking intention is likely affected by group conformity pressure. Group conformity pressure is the extent of social influence on members, which involves a forced change in their belief or behavior to fit in with a group (Janis, 1972). Groups enforce conformity norms by rewarding conforming members with acceptance and approval and by threatening non-conformers with rejection and sanctions. However, the efficacy and potency of group conformity pressure differ among members with various identity cognitions.

Highly identified members tend to be more susceptible to group contexts and care more about avoiding negative social stigma during in-group interactions than those with strong individual differentiation (Mandel, 2003). The former tend to cherish group membership and prioritize group conformity pressure, and thus, they will likely avoid social risks associated with contradicting group norms (Brewer & Silver, 2000). Thus, members with strong group identification may comply with rules under high group conformity pressure to serve a group. By contrast, members of groups with low conformity pressure who have strong group identification become willing to take risks and bend the rules to benefit their group. Thus, we identify group conformity pressure as a critical boundary condition that affects the willingness of group-identified members to take risks and their resulting choices between rule-complying and -bending behaviors. However, those with strong individual differentiation have a sense of self-determination and stand up for what they believe is right regardless of the group norms and conformity pressure. Thus, we propose that group conformity pressure moderates the effect of group identification but not that of individual differentiation:

Hypothesis 3. Group conformity pressure negatively moderates the individual-level relationship between group identification and risk-taking intention such that group identification is more negatively related to risk-taking intention when group conformity pressure is high than when low.

Mediation moderated by group conformity pressure

We assume an overall neutral main effect of group identification on positive deviance without specific contingencies. By extending Hypothesis 3, which isolates group conformity pressure as a contingency that changes the relationship between group identification and risk-taking intention, we further propose a moderated mediation hypothesis. As group conformity pressure accentuates a potentially negative association between group identification and risk-taking intention (Hypothesis 3), this pressure may negatively moderate the indirect effect of group identification on positive deviance through risk-taking intention.

When group conformity pressure is low, members with strong group identification tend to be less restrained by negative social stigma and are willing to take risks and bend rules as they believe that such deviant behaviors generate positive consequences for a group (Vadera et al., 2013). Members with strong identification will likely make alternative assessments “in terms of the consequences for the specified group” (Venkataramani & Tangirala, 2010, p. 585), thereby actively changing a troubling situation beyond the status quo to facilitate the achievement of a group goal, particularly without conformity pressure. Conversely, with high group conformity pressure, members with strong group identification become concerned about the negative social stigma and act in line with their group norms. We proposed our fourth hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4. Group conformity pressure negatively moderates the indirect effect of group identification on positive deviance through risk-taking intention, such that the indirect effect is more negative when group conformity pressure is high than when low.

Methods

Research setting, participants, and procedures

To test the current propositions, we collected data from four companies (semiconductor equipment manufacturing, flat panel display equipment manufacturing, vacuum technology, and marine and fire insurance companies) in Korea. The current data collection was supported by the top management of these companies with between 100 and 300 employees. The human resource (HR) managers of these companies identified participating work teams and encouraged their participation. All companies employed a team-based structure and team-level, performance-based incentives. Members of the same team were physically collocated and interacted daily. The participants performed various functions, including sales, HR, finance, research and development, production, and quality control. We visited these companies and asked participants to fill out the questionnaires during their regular work hours and collected the completed survey in person.

Of the 68 supervisor surveys and 459 employee surveys distributed, 66 supervisor (97% response rate) and 359 employee questionnaires (78% response rate) were returned. After excluding questionnaires with missing information and those failing to match supervisor ratings, the final analysis sample was comprised of 293 employees from 66 work teams (64% response rate). The final sample included 186 employees from 41 groups in Company 1, 30 employees from 6 groups in Company 2, 62 employees from 14 groups in Company 3, and 19 employees from 5 groups in Company 4. The average team size is 4.4, and team size ranges from 2 to 10.

For the employee sample, the education levels of participants were high school (10.9%), 2-year college (41%), bachelor's degree (41.3%), and graduate degree (5.1%). Their job positions were staff (21.8%), senior staff (21.2%), assistant manager (28.3%), department manager (24.6%), and deputy general manager or higher (4.1%). The average organizational tenure of the participating employees was 4.63 years ($SD = 3.70$) with an average age of 33.03 years ($SD = 5.13$), and 12.6% were women. For the supervisor sample, the average organizational tenure was 10.22 years ($SD = 5.84$), and the average age was 41.19 years ($SD = 4.18$). Supervisor education levels were high school (13.4%), two-year college (28.4%), bachelor's degree (44.8%), and graduate degree (11.9%). Their job positions were department manager (26.2%) and deputy general manager or higher (72.3%), and 3% of the supervisors were women.

Measures

Data were collected from two sources to reduce concerns related to similar source bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Employees completed a questionnaire, which included group identification, individual differentiation, risk-taking intention, and group conformity pressure measures, as well as demographic information. Supervisors completed a separate survey wherein they rated the positive deviance of their subordinates. Study variables were assessed using multi-item scales with acceptable reliability. All items were measured on a Likert-type scale ranging from one (*strongly disagree*) to six (*strongly agree*).

Group identification. We assessed the group identification of team members using a three-item measure ($\alpha = .91$) developed by Sheldon and Bettencourt (2002). The scale included the following items: "I feel included in this group," "I feel well-integrated into this group," and "I feel a sense of belongingness within the group."

Individual differentiation. To assess individual differentiation, we adopted the three-item measure ($\alpha = .88$) developed by Sheldon and Bettencourt (2002). The items were "I feel like I stand out within this group," "I feel unique as I participate in this group," and "I feel distinct and separate within this group."

Risk-taking intention. By adopting items from previous studies (Andrews & Smith, 1996; Weber, Blais, & Betz, 2002), we used a three-item scale ($\alpha = .81$) to measure the risk-taking intention of

members. The items included “In my work, I prefer to play safe when I develop ideas (reverse),” “I am a risk-taker when it comes to proposing ideas,” and “I prefer to think conservatively when I develop ideas (reverse).”

Group conformity pressure. The groupthink measure by Henningsen, Henningsen, Eden, and Cruz (2006) includes two subscales, namely, pressure to conform and self-censorship, and each subscale comprised four items. We adopted the first subscale to assess group conformity pressure. The four items ($\alpha = .84$) are “In my group, (a) members feel the pressure to go along with other group members, (b) members feel that they need to conform to the other members, (c) each member is pressured to make the decision everyone else favors, and (d) members seem pressured by other members to make a specific decision.”

Positive deviance. To assess positive deviance, we used four items ($\alpha = .85$) developed by Galperin (2012), which include “This employee did not follow my orders to improve work procedures,” “This employee disagreed with others in the work group to improve the current work procedures,” “This employee disobeyed my instructions to perform efficiently,” and “This employee reported a wrong-doing of another person in the company to bring about positive organizational change.”

Control variables. In addition to the study variables described above, we included several control variables in the statistical analyses. Specifically, we controlled for company, gender, age, and tenure at the individual level, and female proportion and group size at the group level of analysis because these variables may significantly influence the interpersonal and task-related processes of individuals in a group setting (Amabile, 1996; Becker, 2005).

Data aggregation

We investigated multilevel dynamics that involve a group-level variable as a cross-level moderator. We checked various aggregation statistics before aggregating the individual-level ratings of members on group conformity pressure to the group level. Within-group agreement among members was evaluated by computing r_{wg} (James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984). The mean r_{wg} value for group conformity pressure was .82, which indicated a strong within-group agreement (LeBreton & Senter, 2008). We then estimated the intra-class correlation (ICC) statistics. The ICC1 and ICC2 statistics for group conformity pressure were .23 and .51, respectively, with a significant group effect ($F[65, 227] = 2.05, p < .001$). Overall, these group-level psychometric properties of the group conformity pressure scale provide empirical justifications for group-level aggregation. All other study variables were operationalized and analyzed at the individual level.

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis

To examine the empirical distinctness of the study variables, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted with maximum likelihood estimation. The results confirmed the five-factor structure ($\chi^2 (df = 125) = 397.18, p < .001, CFI = .90, RMSEA = .08$), which fits the data better than any alternative factor models. For example, the CFA of a four-factor model in which risk-taking intention and positive deviance load onto a single factor produced a significantly worse fit ($\chi^2 (df = 129) = 624.95, p < .001, CFI = .82, RMSEA = .12$). Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations among all study and control variables. The correlations among the three company dummy variables are quite high; thus, the three company dummies are mean-centered before their use in further statistical analyses (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations: Individual level ($N = 293$).

| Variables | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|-------------------------------|----------|-----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|----|
| 1. Company 1 | .63 | .48 | – | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Company 2 | .09 | .29 | -.41** | – | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Company 3 | .21 | .41 | -.68** | -.16** | – | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Gender | .13 | .33 | -.01 | -.08 | .00 | – | | | | | | | |
| 5. Age | 33.03 | 5.13 | -.22** | .24** | .07 | -.28** | – | | | | | | |
| 6. Tenure | 4.64 | 3.70 | -.20** | .48** | -.21** | -.05 | .47** | – | | | | | |
| 7. Group Identification | 4.53 | .97 | -.07 | -.00 | .08 | -.11 | .04 | -.02 | – | | | | |
| 8. Individual Differentiation | 3.45 | 1.09 | .05 | -.14* | .10 | -.02 | -.17** | .19** | – | | | | |
| 9. Risk-taking Intention | 3.52 | .70 | -.01 | .04 | .02 | -.26** | .16** | -.03 | .18** | .30** | – | | |
| 10. Group Conformity Pressure | 3.07 | .54 | -.19** | .26** | -.02 | .16** | .05 | .14* | -.14* | -.05 | -.05 | – | |
| 11. Positive Deviance | 2.77 | .92 | .02 | -.11 | .04 | -.10 | .26** | .09 | .15* | .24** | .23** | .02 | – |

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Comparison of the hypothesized and alternative models

The present theoretical propositions were tested by performing multilevel structural equation modeling using Mplus 6.1 (Muthen & Muthen, 1998-2007), which allowed an omnibus test of multi-step mediation effects in two-level data (Preacher, Zhang, & Zyphur, 2011). To assess the constructs, we used the scale means of the corresponding items employed in this study. In testing the hypothesized effect of individual differentiation on risk-taking intention and positive deviance, we also included the path from group identification to control (and also contrast) its effect on the mediator and the outcome variables. The hypothesized structural model exhibited a reasonable fit to the data: $\chi^2 (df = 14) = 36.18, p < .001, CFI = .83, RMSEA = .07$.

To verify the possibility that a theoretically plausible alternative model provides an improved explanation of the present data, we compared two alternative models against the hypothesized model, as reported in Table 2. The first alternative model examined the possibility that the mediating role of risk-taking intention is only partial rather than full. To explore this possibility, we added two paths representing the direct effects of group identification and individual differentiation on positive deviance. As reported in Table 2, the partial mediation model with the two additional direct effect paths improved the model fit significantly, exhibiting a better fit to the data ($\chi^2 (df = 12) = 18.36, p < .001, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .04$) with a significant chi-square change ($\Delta\chi^2 (df = 2) = 17.82, p < .001$). The second alternative model tested the possibility of the non-mediated direct effects model, in which group identification, individual differentiation, and risk-taking intention directly predict positive deviance without the hypothesized mediated relationship. Model 2 exhibits a poor fit to the data ($\chi^2 (df = 18) = 49.77, p < .001, CFI = .76, RMSEA = .078$). Thus, we adopted the partial mediation model (Alternative Model 1) as it has a better fit and provided a theoretically plausible explanation of the current data.

Tests of hypotheses

The results of the better-fitting, partial mediation model are presented in Figure 1. Among the control variables that were included, gender indicated a highly significant relationship with risk-taking intention ($\beta = -.21, p < .001$), suggesting that female employees reported lower risk-taking

Table 2. Comparison of alternative structural models.

| Structural Models | χ^2 | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> | CFI | RMSEA | AIC |
|--|----------|-----------|----------|------|-------|----------|
| Hypothesized structural model (Full mediation model) | 36.183 | 14 | .001 | .830 | .074 | 3012.270 |
| Alternative model 1: Partial mediation model | 18.366 | 12 | .105 | .951 | .043 | 2998.200 |
| Alternative model 2: Direct effect model (Group Identification, Individual Differentiation, and Risk-taking Intention predicting Positive Deviance) | 49.772 | 18 | .001 | .757 | .078 | 3011.909 |

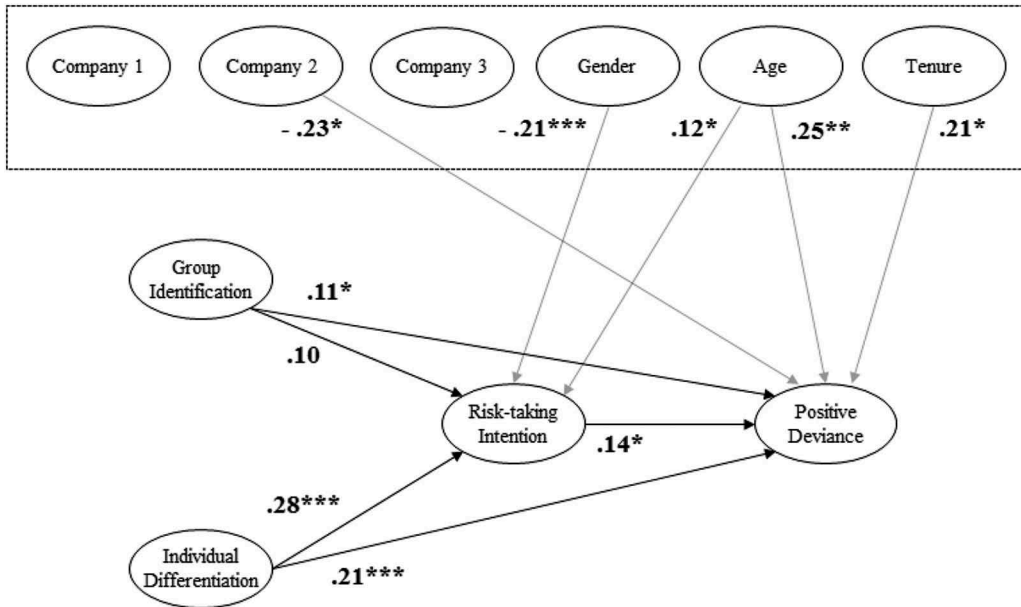


Figure 1. Results of structural equation modeling.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

tendency than their male counterparts. Age showed significant positive relationships with risk-taking intention ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$) and positive deviance ($\beta = .25$, $p < .001$). Company tenure also has a significant positive relationship with positive deviance ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$).

Hypothesis 1 suggests a direct, positive effect of individual differentiation on positive deviance. As expected, the analysis showed that individual differentiation exerted a significant, positive effect on positive deviance ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$), confirming Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 posits the mediating role of risk-taking intention in the relationship between individual differentiation and positive deviance. Risk-taking intention was positively related to positive deviance ($\beta = .14$, $p < .05$). Moreover, the indirect effect of individual differentiation on positive deviance through risk-taking intention was also significant ($b = .039$, $p < .05$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported. Although we did not hypothesize, group identification has a significant direct effect on positive deviance ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$). However, its indirect effect through risk-taking was insignificant.

Hypothesis 3 proposes that group-level conformity pressure negatively moderates the individual-level relationship between group identification and risk-taking intention. We estimated a slope-as-outcome model in HLM to test this cross-level moderation hypothesis. Model 3 in Table 3 reports that the cross-level interaction between group identification and group conformity pressure was significant ($\gamma = -.25$, $p < .05$), supporting Hypothesis 3. However, individual differentiation failed to show any significant interaction with group conformity pressure ($\gamma = .06$, *ns.*). We further probed the significant cross-level interaction by comparing the slopes associated with high and low group conformity pressure conditions (Aiken & West, 1991). Consistent with our expectation, Figure 2 shows that group identification is negatively related to risk-taking intention with high group conformity pressure ($b = -.07$, $p < .05$) but positively related to risk-taking intention with low group conformity pressure ($b = .23$, $p < .05$).

Hypothesis 4 suggests distinct conditional indirect effects of group identification on positive deviance through risk-taking intention at different levels of group conformity pressure. To test this hypothesis, we used the PROCESS procedure based on a bootstrapping procedure (Hayes, 2013), which provides a test for the entire moderated mediation model in an integrated analysis instead of testing it in a piecemeal fashion. The current analytic procedure to test the conditional indirect

Table 3. Hierarchical linear models predicting risk-taking intention.

| Variables | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|---------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| <i>Individual-level Process</i> | | | |
| Company1 | .14 | .15 | .09 |
| Company2 | .26 | .23 | .17 |
| Company3 | .14 | .15 | .08 |
| Age | .02* | .02* | .03* |
| Gender | -.59*** | -.61*** | -.43* |
| Tenure | -.01 | -.01 | .01 |
| Group Identification (GI) | | .07 | .08 |
| Individual Differentiation (ID) | | .24*** | .22** |
| <i>Group-level Process</i> | | | |
| Gender Proportion | | | -.09 |
| Group Size | | | .04 |
| Group Conformity Pressure (GCP) | | | .01 |
| <i>Cross-level Moderation</i> | | | |
| GI * GCP | | | .24* |
| ID * GCP | | | .07 |
| Pseudo R ² | | .09 | .10 |

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

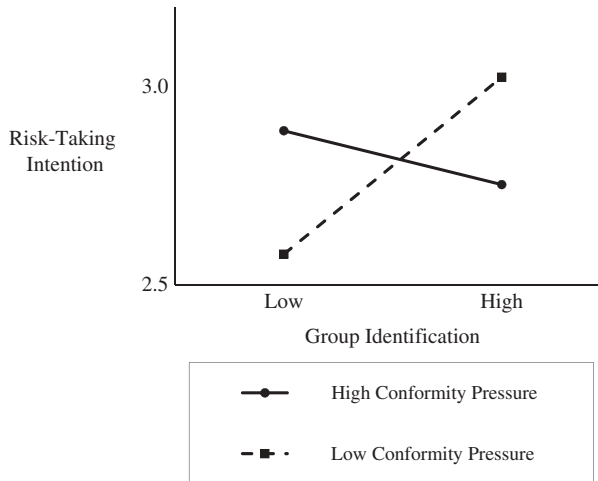


Figure 2. Cross-level moderation by group conformity pressure.

effects cannot accommodate the nested, multi-level data structure; thus, we performed the PROCESS analysis using the individual scores of group conformity pressure as reported by members and found a positive indirect effect of group identification on positive deviance with either low or medium group conformity pressure, but not when it was high (see Table 4). To further validate the moderated mediation pattern, we assigned the same group-level mean of the aggregated group conformity pressure to members from the same group and performed the same analysis. Table 4 reports results consistent in that the indirect effect of group identification was positive with either low or medium group conformity pressure, but not when it was high. These alternative moderated mediation analyses of the current multi-level data supported Hypothesis 4.

Discussion

Positive deviance represents innovative behavior for change and improvement targeted to identify and solve problems regarding existing work practices and processes (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin,

Table 4. Moderated indirect effects of group identification on positive deviance.

| Independent Variable | Mediator | Dependent Variable | Moderator Level | Effect | Boot SE | 95% bias-corrected CI |
|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---|--------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Group Identification | Risk-taking Intention | Positive Deviance | Group conformity pressure (individual perception) | | | |
| | | | Low | .0447 | .0213 | (.0123 .0993) |
| | | | Medium | .0246 | .0139 | (.0037 .0603) |
| | | | High (aggregated) | .0045 | .0150 | (-.0234 .0384) |
| | | | Low | .0447 | .0214 | (.0120 .0985) |
| | | | Medium | .0246 | .0139 | (.0042 .0603) |
| | | High | .0045 | .0151 | (-.0236 .0373) | |

Note. Bootstrap sample = 10,000.

2010; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). Nonetheless, this pivotal process toward challenging status quo and changing existing behaviors may be hindered by the possible stigma-induced identity threat that group members often experience in taking social risks and initiating positive deviance in work teams. By drawing on social identity theory, we isolate the identity cognition of members as a fundamental determinant of positive deviance. We further elaborate this process by identifying risk-taking intention as an intermediate psychological state and group-level conformity pressure as a cross-level, contextual moderator. Our empirical analysis based on multi-source field data considerably confirmed the current theoretical propositions. Below, we discuss the theoretical contributions of this study and identify the limitations that can guide future investigations.

Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the emerging literature on positive deviance by examining the relationship between identity cognition and positive deviance. We specifically investigated group identification and individual differentiation, which constitute the two complementary types of identity cognitions (Brewer, 1991). By extending prior studies that focused on the main effect of identity cognition on positive deviance (Janssen & Huang, 2008; Vignoles, 2011), we theorized and empirically demonstrated how identity cognitions influenced positive deviance by examining risk-taking intention as a significant psychological state required for positive deviance. Similarly, our analysis confirmed that the individual differentiation of group members (but not group identification) exerted a significant positive effect on positive deviance by increasing the members' risk-taking intention.

The current results confirmed that when individuals perceive themselves as different in a group, they engage in positively deviant behaviors accompanied by their willingness to take social risks. Creativity and innovation are viewed as positive deviances, especially when focusing on their social underpinnings (Kusa, 2006). To perform creatively in work teams and organizations, individuals should tolerate the sense of marginality or social isolation when breaking away positively from the established norms and pursue unconventional solutions (Appelbaum et al., 2007). In this regard, appreciating individual differences is a critical resource for creativity in a group; moreover, collective engagement in discovering and appreciating positive deviants may be a critical first step toward identifying and adapting unique solutions for desirable social and behavioral changes (Pascale et al., 2010, pp. 3–11). To transform social inertia toward creativity and innovation, change agents should consider the emergence of positive deviance from complementary types of identity cognition in social settings.

For group identification, unlike our expectation, the direct effect of group identification on positive deviance was positive but not mediated by risk-taking intention. The current analysis also demonstrated that the effect of group identification on positive deviance is contingent on the group context. Individuals with strong identification with their group were susceptible to group conformity pressure (Ellis & Fisher, 1994). Thus, they are willing to take risks and exhibit positive deviance with low group conformity pressure. A low level of group conformity pressure operated as a situational

contingency signaling that a group and other members tolerate deviant behaviors instead of forcing them to conform to the decision of others or the group. By contrast, the effect of individual differentiation on risk-taking intention was unaffected by group conformity pressure. The current findings highlight the importance of investigating contextual contingencies and boundary conditions that can liberate members from group constraints and normative pressures, thus increasing their positive deviance. This approach also enriches the theoretical understanding of the emergence of positive deviance and creativity by applying a multi-level framework (Mertens et al., 2016).

This study offers new theoretical insights by specifying “how” and “when” positive deviance can be enhanced in work groups by members with different identity cognition. Positive deviance is the behavior of individuals that departs from social and normative expectations (Pascale et al., 2010). Hence, this construct cannot be fully understood without considering the multi-level dynamics involving a person and his/her context. By identifying group conformity pressure as a group-level contingency for individual-level relationships involving positive deviance, the present study responds to the call for additional research attention to multilevel theorizing and investigation of positive deviance (Morrison, 2011; Vadera et al., 2013). Future studies can further extend the current multi-level approach.

One notable pattern related to the current set of control variables is the highly significant effect of gender on risk-taking intention, which suggests that women reported considerably less willingness to take risks and consequently lower deviant behavior in work groups. According to Brown, Olkhov, Bailey, and Daniels (2015), gender differences incur unequal and unfair social punishments when norms for emotional expression are violated. Specifically, compared with men, women are more harmed when they violate emotional norms by displaying incongruent emotions; thereby, they pay greater social cost for their affective deviance (Brown et al., 2015). Similarly, female employees can be unfairly treated and more severely penalized when they exhibit deviant behaviors (even positive ones) than male employees; thus, they are socialized to avoid taking social risks in the workplace. This potential gender difference involving risk-taking and social deviance may negatively affect women and constrain their creativity. This speculation should be further investigated conceptually and empirically.

Practical implications

The current analysis also provides important practical implications for practicing managers aiming to encourage positive deviance and creative endeavors among employees. First, managers may allow a certain degree of individuation and psychological independence of employees to promote positive deviance (Janssen & Huang, 2008). The present data showed that individual differentiation significantly drives positive deviance by enabling employees to stand for their own ideas even when they have to disagree with their coworkers, thereby accepting social risks. When group members lose their individuality (de-individuation) and accept group mind, to pursue normative behavior for social approval, they will unlikely produce dissenting ideas, unique perspectives, and unconventional solutions (Franzese, 2013).

Second, managers must identify and remove workplace barriers to positive deviance. In group settings, particularly in cohesive groups, members are exposed to substantial psychological burden and intimidation by negative group forces, which prevent them from realizing positively deviant behaviors (cf., groupthink; Janis, 1972). One factor we identified is group conformity pressure, which operates strongly among members who are loyal and identified with a group. Group conformity pressure may intensify the fear of possible stigma-induced identity threat in groups and inhibit individual members from taking risks, thereby diminishing constructive improvement and change efforts. By contrast, as demonstrated by our moderated mediation analysis, positive deviance can be promoted among members with strong group identification when group conformity pressure is maintained at a low level. Given that positive deviance and constructive rule violation are foundations of organizational creativity and innovation (Acharya & Taylor, 2012), the management should set systematic interventions to minimize hindrances and build work contexts tolerant of and conducive to positive deviance.

Study limitations

The present findings should be interpreted with caution considering the following limitations of the study. First, data were collected at a single point in time and the direction of causation remains ambiguous. For example, increased interpersonal deviant behavior can reinforce individual differentiation and further promote the willingness to take social risks. Further studies should ascertain the causal direction or potential reciprocal causation of these constructs.

Second, owing to practical limitations in collecting field data, we could not use the full scale often with multiple sub-dimensions for the current study variables, which compelled us to use brief measures focusing on the core domain of each construct. The use of these abbreviated measures can simplify potentially complex and multi-dimensional constructs as rather simple and unidimensional ones. Further studies should replicate these current findings with a rigorous research design based on full scales to retain the complexity of given conceptual domains and accompanying phenomena.

Third, the current data were collected from Korean organizations. Thus, the cultural values of Korea could affect the current pattern of results. The Korean society is often called “collectivist,” meaning that the group takes precedence over the individual (Cho, Mallinckrodt, & Yune, 2010), and the loyalty of employees to an organization is valued in Korean firms. This collectivist tendency and distinct culture of Korean firms could affect the current empirical findings on group identification and conformity pressure. Further empirical studies in diverse national and cultural settings should bolster the generalizability of the multilevel dynamics of positive deviance observed in the present study.

These limitations reveal the directions for further research efforts to enrich the understanding of positive deviance in work teams and organizations. The present study offers meaningful theoretical and practical contributions by isolating an intervening mechanism underlying the relationship between identity cognition and positive deviance, as well as a group-level contingency, which modifies such relationship. Notwithstanding, each of the construct in the current theoretical model and proposed relationships among constructs can involve considerably complex dynamics. Their relationships can manifest in different ways depending on a number of moderating contingencies. Further theoretical and empirical endeavors may address this conceptual complexity and potential additional moderating contingencies to overcome the simplification of a given phenomenon. For example, in the present study, positive deviance largely focused on performance improvement. However, positive deviance can take different forms toward various purposes, such as facilitating self-improvement, helping others learn, and ensuring full consideration of issues. Future work can expand the current work to involve these various forms of positive deviance as a promising direction. Finally, further studies should explore alternative mediating processes and moderating contingencies across levels of analysis and extend to the organization level to include organizational contingencies. These organizational contingencies may include culture, strategy, and reward systems that directly shape or operate as boundary conditions of positive deviance of employees.

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