Social Judgment of Abortion: A Black-Sheep Effect in a Catholic Sheepfold

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ABSTRACT. French Catholic participants (N = 340) with high or low religious identification read 1 of 8 scenarios presented as an interview with a female target 2 months after she had had an abortion. The experimental device varied situational pressure (pressure vs. no pressure), the target’s religious social identity (Catholic vs. neutral), and the consequences of abortion for the target (positive vs. negative). The participants then rated the acceptability of the target’s decision. The participants judged abortion more negatively in the no-pressure condition. Moreover, the participants with high religious identification judged abortion more negatively than did those with low religious identification. In partial support of a black-sheep effect, the participants with high religious identification judged the Catholic target more negatively than they judged the neutral one in some conditions (pressure, negative consequences). In other conditions (no pressure, both positive and negative consequences), the participants with low religious identification judged the Catholic target more positively than they judged the neutral one.

Key words: abortion, black-sheep effect, Catholics, judgments, social identity

ATTITUDES RELATED TO ABORTION represent one of the most discriminant psychosocial variables in the realm of social judgment. Many individual variables may explain the processes involved in the judgment of abortion: personality traits (Werner, 1978), ethical ideology (Forsyth, 1980), conservatism (Ho & Penney, 1991), and authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1996, pp. 276–279). My principal aim in the present research was to show that individual attitudes concerning abortion may also be strongly influenced by variables linked to the social identity of the evaluators.

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Religion is an influential variable in the opposition to abortion (Balakrishnan & Chen, 1990; Emerson, 1996; Hollis & Morris, 1992; Jensen, 1997; Regens & Lockerbie, 1993; Stets & Leik, 1993; Woodrum, 1988; Wright & Rogers, 1987). In the case of Catholicism, one may find the official opposition of the Roman Catholic church in the attitudes of traditional Catholics (Adebayo, 1990; Daynes & Tatalovich, 1984; Esposito & Basow, 1995; Granberg, 1991; Kelley, Evans, & Headey, 1993; O’Connor & Berkman, 1995; Tamney, Johnson, & Burton, 1992) and, perhaps, in the propensity to avoid abortion (Ford, Castelnuovo-Tedesco, & Long, 1972; see also Smetana & Adler, 1979). One aim in the present study was to determine how faithful Catholics, who are supposed to be strongly against abortion, would judge a Catholic (vs. a neutral) target who had chosen to abort her pregnancy.

According to social identity theory (SIT; Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), a motivation of positive differentiation generally leads individuals to judge the in-group more favorably than they judge the out-group (Brewer & Kramer, 1985; Messick & Mackie, 1989; Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992; Tajfel, 1982). Recent developments in SIT suggest, however, that another mechanism sometimes supersedes the one just described: When an in-group member engages in devaluated behavior (e.g., failure, deviant conduct), that in-group member may arouse more negative attitudes than does a member of an out-group who engages in similar devaluated behavior. Such a “boomerang” mechanism, suggestively named the black-sheep effect (Marquès & Paez, 1994; Marquès & Yzerbyt, 1988; Marquès, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988), represents a general propensity to express more clear-cut evaluations toward the in-group. Thus, a person may consider the deviant behavior of an in-group member as more devaluated than the similar behavior of an out-group member, because the incriminating behavior of the former is more relevant to the evaluator’s social identity than is the similar conduct of the latter. Relevant norms for group members elicit differential evaluations of the behavior (Marquès et al.). When the evaluator does not consider the transgressed norm very important, a mild in-group bias may emerge; when the norm is relevant to the evaluator’s social identity, a black-sheep effect may appear (Marquès, 1990).

Researchers have suggested that a person’s degree of identification with the in-group significantly affects intergroup processes (see Doosje & Ellemers, 1997; Kelly, 1993; Roccas & Schwartz, 1993; Struch & Schwartz, 1989). Branscombe, Wann, Noel, and Coleman (1993) indicated that a person’s degree of identification with a given group may influence the black-sheep effect. When both the in-group and the out-group targets in that study displayed devaluated conduct, the participants who were strongly identified with a certain group judged the in-group target less favorably than they judged the out-group target. In contrast, those with lower group identification judged the in-group target more favorably than they judged the out-group target (Branscombe et al.).

In the present study, I did not compare an in-group target with an out-group
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Hypothesis 1: Catholics with high religious identification judge abortion more unfavorably than do Catholics with low religious identification.

Hypothesis 2: Catholics with high religious identification judge a Catholic target choosing abortion more negatively than they judge a neutral target choosing abortion (the black-sheep effect).

Hypothesis 3: Catholics with low religious identification judge a Catholic target choosing abortion more favorably than they judge a neutral target choosing abortion (classical in-group bias).

I manipulated two other relevant contextual variables—situational pressure and the consequences of abortion. Researchers have shown that the circumstances of the choice strongly modulate the judgment of abortion. Thus, people may perceive an abortion performed without situational pressure more negatively than they perceive an abortion performed with situational pressure (Esposito & Basow, 1995; Jelen & Wilcox, 1997; Kelley et al., 1993). Situational pressures clearly operate for persons as extenuating circumstances (see Weiner, 1995). In the present research, I compared a target with socioeconomic and affective pressure with a target without that constraint. I formulated the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: The participants judge the targets in the condition with pressure more favorably than they judge those in the condition without pressure.

I also explored how the consequences of abortion affected the participants’ judgments. In the results of classical studies of moral judgment (Piaget, 1932; see also Ferguson & Rule, 1982; Grueneich, 1982; Karniol, 1978; Leon, 1984), people considered consequences less and assumed more subjective responsibility as they grew older. Yet, some researchers have found that adult participants frequently took into account the consequences of a conduct in judging its moral validity (Hermand, Mullet, & Prieur, 1992; Van der Keilen & Garg, 1994; Weber, 1996). Despite recent psychological investigations of abortion (Adler et al., 1990; Major, Richard, Cooper, Cozzarella, & Zubeck, 1998; Miller, 1992), the issue of consequences (e.g., the highly controversial postabortion syndrome of guilt, remorse, and the like often invoked as an argument against abortion) remains highly problematic in everyday discourse (Miller, 1996). In the present research, I analyzed how positive and negative consequences of abortion influenced the participants’ judgment (retrospectively expressed). I (a) expected all participants somehow to distinguish between positive and negative consequences but (b) did not predict whether the resulting judgment would be favorable or unfavorable. Thus, I posited two alternative strategies: In the first, the participants would judge an abortion with positive consequences more favorably than
an abortion with negative consequences. In the second, the participants would judge an abortion with positive consequences less favorably than an abortion followed by negative consequences.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants were 304 traditional French Catholics (205 women and 99 men; median age = 39 years) at a religious meeting during a visit of Pope John Paul II to France.

**Procedure**

Each participant received a booklet that contained different scales, one of eight versions of a vignette, and a measure of religious identification. I presented the vignette as an extract of an interview with Martine, 28 years old, a few weeks after she had an abortion. In the *pressure* condition, Martine made it known that her companion was strongly against the pregnancy and that they did not have enough money to support a child (“Alain was radically opposed to the birth of a child; in actuality, we didn’t have the financial means”). In the *no-pressure* condition, she explained that her companion was not opposed to the birth and that they did not have economic problems (“Alain wasn’t opposed to the birth of a child; in actuality, we had the financial means to support it”).

Then, I indirectly introduced the identity of the target. In the *Catholic-target* condition, the protagonist indicated that she had talked about her problem with a close friend who, like her, was a practicing Catholic and attached great importance to her faith (“I talked with Isa, a close friend who, like me, gives great importance to the faith—I am a practicing Catholic”). In the *neutral-target* condition, the protagonist indicated that she had talked about her problem with a friend with whom she shared certain points of view (“I talked with Isa, a close friend with whom I share some points of view”).

Next, the protagonist explained that she “was two months pregnant when the abortion occurred.” Last, in the *positive-consequences* condition, the protagonist presented the consequences of abortion as positive (“Everything went off rather smoothly, I felt a real relief afterwards, and my life went on as before”). In the *negative-consequences* condition, the protagonist presented the consequences of abortion as negative (“Everything turned out very badly; I felt regret and guilt; I lost all happiness in living; and, since then, something has changed in my life”).

Each participant received one of the eight versions of the story and then rated six items on how moral and reasonable the abortion was—for example, “Martine was right in choosing abortion”; “From a moral point of view, the behavior of Martine was unjustifiable” (reverse scored); and “The choice of
abortion was the most courageous.” The participants made the ratings on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = most unfavorable evaluation, 7 = most favorable evaluation). I summed the items to constitute a unique dependent measure. A preliminary test of this measure indicated that the reliability was acceptable (α = .68).

To estimate the participant’s level of religious identification, I used a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree) validated in an earlier study (Bègue, 1999). The scale included such items as “Most of my best friends share my religious faith”; “Because of my faith, I feel that I belong to a great family”; “I feel different from those for whom religious faith does not represent anything”; and “In general, I have no more in common with believers than with people who do not share my religious faith” (reverse scored). According to a preliminary analysis, that scale had an acceptable reliability (α = .75). The mean score for the scale was 5.18 (SD = 0.98). I then created two groups, one with low religious identification group and one with high religious identification (median split-half method).

I sent the results of the study to the organizers of the meeting. I also sent a description of the study and a summary of the main results to the participants who wished to receive them and had returned a detachable card enclosed in the booklet.

**Results**

I conducted a 2 (religious identification: high vs. low) × 2 (situation: pressure vs. no pressure) × 2 (target: Catholic vs. neutral) × 2 (consequences: positive vs. negative) analysis of variance with unique sums of square on the scale scores. A significant main effect of situational pressure, $F(1, 288) = 8.06, p < .005$, indicated that the participants evaluated abortion as more morally acceptable in the pressure condition ($M = 2.96, SD = 1.26$) than in the no-pressure condition ($M = 2.64, SD = 0.89$). A main effect for religious identification, $F(1, 288) = 41.11, p = .000$, indicated that the participants with low religious identification judged abortion as more morally acceptable ($M = 3.26, SD = 1.16$) than did the participants with high religious identification ($M = 2.50, SD = 0.95$).

An interaction between the religious social identity of the target and the religious identification of the participants, $F(1, 288) = 4.62, p < .03$, indicated that, when the target was Catholic, the participants with high religious identification expressed a more unfavorable evaluation ($M = 2.41, SD = 0.80$) of the abortion than did those with low religious identification ($M = 3.46, SD = 1.18$), $t(69.7) = 5.82, p = .000$. When the target was neutral, this effect was attenuated (but remained significant): The participants with high religious identification judged abortion more unfavorably ($M = 2.60, SD = 1.08$) than did the participants with low religious identification ($M = 3.09, SD = 1.12$), $t(67.9) = 2.78, p < .01$.

A four-way interaction between the variables qualified the effects just noted, $F(1, 288) = 6.61, p < .01$. In the no-pressure condition when the consequences of
abortion were positive, the participants with low religious identification judged the Catholic target more favorably ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.26$) than they judged the neutral one ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.79$), $t(30) = -2.08$, $p < .04$. A similar effect appeared for the same participants in the pressure condition when the consequences of abortion were negative: They judged the Catholic target more favorably ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.10$) than they judged the neutral target ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(32) = 1.99$, $p < .05$. In all other cases, the participants with low religious identification did not distinguish the Catholic target from the neutral one.

The participants with high religious identification used an inverse mechanism. When the consequences of abortion were negative in the pressure condition, those participants judged the Catholic target less favorably ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 0.77$) than they judged the neutral one ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.58$), $t(33.49) = 2.49$, $p < .01$. In all other cases, the participants with high religious identification did not discriminate between the Catholic target and the neutral one.

**Discussion**

The results of the present study provide some support for the formulated hypotheses. The control ascribed to the target determined the judgment of abortion: In support of Hypothesis 4, the participants judged the woman deciding to abort under constraints more favorably than they judged the woman deciding to abort in an elective context. In addition, the strength of religious identification was directly proportional to a negative attitude concerning abortion, as predicted in Hypothesis 1. With regard to the effect of the consequences of abortion, the present results are less clear. The only significant effect of consequences emerged in the interaction with the three other experimental variables. Further investigation, therefore, is necessary.

The results partially supported the hypothesized black-sheep effect proposed in Hypothesis 2. First, the evaluative discrepancy between the participants of high and low religious identification was stronger for the Catholic target than for the neutral one. The general pattern of results suggests that the stake raised by both conditions (i.e., Catholic vs. neutral target) did not have the same relevance for the social identity of those two groups of participants (i.e., with high and low religious identification). More precisely, a four-way interaction indicated that in certain combinations of conditions (pressure and negative consequences), the French Catholic participants with high religious identification judged the Catholic target more negatively than they judged the neutral one (the black-sheep effect). In another respect and in partial support of Hypothesis 3, the French Catholic participants with low religious identification judged the Catholic target more favorably than they judged the neutral one (classical in-group bias) in the no-pressure condition, regardless of whether the consequences of abortion were positive or negative. Although I compared an in-group target with a neutral target (and not with an out-group target), those results are consistent with the black-
sheep effect (Marquès & Paez, 1994; Marquès & Yzerbyt, 1988; Marquès, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988). Moreover, they are consistent with the findings of Branscombe et al. (1993) that the degree of the evaluator’s social identification modulated the black-sheep effect. Such results underline the salience of the evaluator’s religious membership in understanding the processes of the religious “halo” effect (Bailey & Garrou, 1983; Isaac, Bailey, & Isaac, 1995) and the religious boomerang effect (Bailey & Young, 1986).

The present study, one of the first experimental designs conducted in a natural setting and devoted to the black-sheep effect, illustrates the relevance of SIT (Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) in a religious setting. The results emphasize the importance of macrosocial variables (e.g., religious adhesion) in the everyday formation of moral judgment. The results may also encourage social–psychological researchers of religious worldviews to include transversal processes (e.g., SIT) and to equip the study of religious phenomena with conceptual frameworks from experimental social psychology (Deconchy, 1991).

REFERENCES


APPENDIX
Example of Vignette

The following paragraph was extracted from an interview with Martine, 28 years old,
a few weeks after she had an abortion.

I became pregnant. Alain was radically opposed to the birth of a child; in actuality, we didn’t have the financial means. I talked with Isa, a close friend who, like me, gives great importance to the faith—I am a practicing Catholic. I was two months pregnant when the abortion occurred. Everything went off rather smoothly, I felt a real relief afterwards, and my life went on as before.

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