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Derogating benevolent behavior of deviant in-group members: group processes within a real-life sample of heterosexual Christians

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ABSTRACT

How do people evaluate potentially good and desirable behavior by others? We investigate how participants ($N = 154$) evaluate a couple that wants to adopt an orphan that would otherwise die. We collected data from heterosexual Christians in two cities in the Dutch Bible belt. We manipulated whether the adoptive-parents-to-be were a heterosexual couple or a lesbian couple and whether the couple self-identified as devout Christians or not. Using a subjective group dynamics account, we predicted and found that participants evaluated the lesbian couple in more negative terms than the heterosexual couple, especially when this couple was also Christian. These findings illustrate how positive behavior is derogated when displayed by in-group deviants.

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People's values and religious beliefs can influence how they feel about others that do not conform (strictly) to these beliefs. For example, Christians often have more negative evaluations of homosexuals than non-Christians, and many Christians reject homosexuals who have romantic relationships or raise children within those relationships (e.g., Ford, Brignall, VanValey, & Macaluso, 2009; Fulton, Gorsuch, & Maynard, 1999). But why do (some) Christians reject homosexuality? The most obvious answer would be that it is prescribed in the Bible—concisely summarized by the well-known conservative Christian slogan “God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve”.

How would conservative Christians respond to lesbian couples that also identify as Christians? Following the rationale above, one would expect Christians to reject them regardless of whether or not these couples identify as Christians. This can be described as in-group favoritism; people have more positive evaluations of individuals who belong to the same group.

However, people also sometimes negatively evaluate their in-group members, especially when these in-group members deviate from important group norms (e.g., Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Martinez-Taboada, 1998; Marques, Abrams, & Seródio, 2001; Marques, Yzerbyt, &

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Leyens, 1988). In fact, in the current paper, we will demonstrate that conservative Christians have the *most negative* evaluations of a lesbian couple that also identifies as Christian and that these evaluations are even lower than their evaluations of a non-Christian lesbian couple. More specifically, we demonstrate that behavior that would otherwise be considered as desirable (i.e., adopting an orphan child) is evaluated very negatively when displayed by in-group deviants (i.e., lesbian Christians). We argue that these negative reactions are a consequence of threats to the conservative Christians' in-group (e.g., Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, & Marques, 2003; Marques, et al., 1998). We focus specifically on a well-known social psychological theory—*subjective group dynamics* (e.g., Marques et al., 1998)—to explain this observation.

The theory of subjective group dynamics (SGD, e.g., Abrams, Marques, Brown, & Henson, 2000; Marques et al., 1998) explains when and why people derogate in-group deviants and is based on two premises: First, people want to maximize and sustain intergroup differentiation. This means that people want their group to be clearly distinct from other groups. Second, people want to maximize and sustain “the relative validity of prescriptive in-group norms through intragroup differentiation” (Abrams et al., 2000, p. 906). This means that people want their in-group members to adhere to the prescriptive group norms. These two premises explain that although people usually favor in-group members over out-group members, they also differentiate between in-group members. In-group members who adhere to group norms are favored over deviant members who do not follow the norms (Abrams et al., 2000; Marques et al., 1998). People even favor deviant out-group members over deviant in-group members, a phenomenon called “the black sheep effect” (Marques et al., 1988).

In-group deviants are derogated because they reduce the distinction between people's own group and relevant out-groups and also undermine the norms of the in-group (Abrams et al., 2000). Thus, deviants can undermine a group's positive distinctiveness, as well as the positivity of the group. This can lead other group members to “express hostility towards deviants, redefine the deviants' status in the group, and ultimately, ostracize them” (cf. Marques et al., 1998, p. 437). For example, Chekroun and Nugier (2011) demonstrate that French students felt more ashamed and embarrassed when a fellow French student lit up a cigarette in a non-smoking area than when a Belgian student did so. Furthermore, French students felt a higher need to persuade the French student to change his/her behavior than to persuade the Belgian student. The black sheep effect is a way in which people reconcile their need to see their in-group in a positive light with the fact that one of their fellow group members did not adhere to the norm (e.g., Pinto, Marques, Levine, & Abrams, 2010).

Derogation of deviant in-group members may be particularly present in morally laden situations and that deviation from moral norms may lead to especially harsh evaluations (e.g., Cramwinckel, Van den Bos, & Van Dijk, 2015). Moral norms are prescriptive norms, and people tend to discriminate against others who deviate from moral norms (Abrams, Rutland, Ferrel, & Pelletier, 2008; Marques et al., 1998; Rutland, Killen, & Abrams, 2010). Furthermore, in-group morality is very relevant for one's self-concept, and people have a strong need to belong to moral groups (Brambilla, Sacchi, Pagliaro, & Ellemers, 2013; Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008; Pagliaro, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2011). In-group members are evaluated on the moral quality of their behaviors, while morality seems to be less important for the evaluation of out-group members. Apparently, this difference occurs because out-groups do not constitute

a big part of one's identity, and the moral quality of the behavior of out-group members is therefore less relevant for the self. As a consequence, people may be less tolerant of norm deviations in the moral domain, in particular performed by an in-group member (e.g., Cramwinckel et al. 2015; Marques et al., 1998).

This notion has interesting consequences for how people evaluate benevolent behavior by deviant in-group members. One implication is that even when people perform behavior that could be considered as moral, their simultaneous deviant status may undermine the positive distinctiveness and the prescriptive norms of the in-group (Abrams et al., 2003; Marques et al., 1998). For example, imagine a couple that wants to adopt an orphan whose family died during a natural disaster. This orphan would die if it would not be adopted. Most people probably agree that adopting this orphan is a good and desirable thing to do. Christians may consider the adoption to be especially praiseworthy, because it fits with the Christian values of taking care of people in need.

Now consider the following: The couple adopting the orphan is a lesbian couple, consists of two Christian women. How would you expect conservative Christian participants to react now? The women in this couple could be devout Christians, pray everyday, frequent church, and try to follow the Ten Commandments. At the same time, their mere existence as a same-sex couple deviates from the Christian value that men and women are destined to be together. As such, the lesbian Christian couple deviates from important norms of conservative Christians and thereby undermines the group's positive social identity from within the in-group (Marques et al., 1998). Not in spite of their being Christian, but exactly because of it. Furthermore, the fact that this lesbian couple deviates from important norms of the Christian in-group should be especially clear when Christian values are salient (Marques et al., 1998). Thus, the negative response to a lesbian couple wanting to adopt an orphan should be stronger when this couple explicitly identifies as Christian. We therefore hypothesize that heterosexual Christians will evaluate lesbian couples more negatively than heterosexual couples and will have the most negative evaluations of lesbian couples that explicitly identify as Christians.

We test this hypothesis using the scenario outlined above, where we focus on reactions of heterosexual Christians and measure their evaluations of a couple wanting to adopt a baby that would otherwise die. We manipulate whether this couple is heterosexual or lesbian, and whether this couple explicitly identified as Christian or not.

Method

Participants and design

Participants were approached in the city center of Ede and Lunteren, two cities in the Netherlands that are located in the "Bible Belt", a strip of land where a relatively high number of conservative Christians live. A sample of 155 heterosexual Christian participants (86 women) completed the questionnaire. Ages ranged from 17 to 67 years, with a mean of 34.16 years ($SD = 10.93$). Education levels ranged from primary education (44 participants) to secondary education (98 participants) and post-secondary education (13 participants). This was representative of the Dutch population (Statistics Netherlands [CBS], 2012). Participants were randomly allocated to one of four conditions of our 2 (religiosity of couple: Christian vs. non-religious) \times 2 (sexual orientation of couple: lesbian vs. heterosexual) between-participants design, with 37 to 40 participants per cell.¹

Procedure

Potential participants were handed a flyer with the link to the online study. The study was created via the website www.EnqueteMaken.nu. On this website, participants read an informed consent form, after which they were presented one of four scenarios about a couple that was planning to adopt an orphan child from the Philippines. All participants read that in 2013, an earthquake had hit the Philippines and tens of thousands of lives were lost during this disaster. This disaster left many children as orphans, who had no chance of survival unless they would be adopted by foreign couples. After this general introduction, our manipulations followed.

In the *heterosexual couple condition*, participants read about a married couple, “Simon and Mariëlle” (i.e., a typical Dutch male and female name, respectively), that was planning to adopt one of the children that was orphaned. For example, in this condition, participants read: “I’m confident that we will be an amazing mommy and daddy”. In the *lesbian couple condition*, participants read the same scenario but about a different married couple: “Simone and Mariëlle” (i.e., two typical Dutch female names) that was planning to adopt one of the children that was orphaned. In this condition, participants read sentences such as “I’m confident that we will be two amazing mommies”.

Furthermore, in the *religious couple condition*, participants read “We are both Christians and we, as devout Christians, feel it is our duty to help one of these children”. In the *non-religious couple condition*, participants read “We feel it is our duty to help one of these children”. Importantly, the phrasing of all scenarios was similar apart from the names of the couple and the two target sentences. Hereafter, the first of three manipulation checks followed, which asked participants to write down the names of the couple.

Subsequently, the main dependent variables were assessed. Participants indicated their evaluation of the adopting couple by stating their agreement with 27 statements on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much so*). We combined these 27 items into an reliable *adoptive parents evaluation scale* ($\alpha > .99$). An overview of all items, as well as means and standard deviations, can be found in Table 1. Subsequently, two manipulation checks followed: Participants were asked whether the future adoption parents were (i) a man and a woman or (ii) two women, and whether the future adoption parents were (i) Christians or (ii) this was unknown/not mentioned. One participant failed one or more of these manipulation checks and was therefore excluded from the main analyses, leaving a final sample of 154 participants.

Hereafter, demographic variables such as age, gender, education level, religion, and nationality were collected. We measured *Religiosity* with four items ($\alpha = .91$; Sethi & Seligman, 1993): “How important is religion to you?”, “How often do you read holy scripture?”, “How often do you pray”, and “How often do you attend religious activities or services?”. Answers to the first item could be given on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not important at all*) to 7 (*very important*). Answers to the last three items could be given on an 8-point categorical scale ranging from 1 (*more than once a day*) to 8 (*never*). Because these items were measured on different answering scales, they were standardized before being combined into the religiosity scale. The first three items were reverse coded, so that higher numbers represented a higher importance of religion. *Lesbian/Gay attitudes* were measured with 16 items of the Homosexuality Attitude Scale ($\alpha = .98$; Kite & Deaux, 1986). An example item is “I wouldn’t mind if one of my friends was gay or lesbian”. Answers could be given on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 7 (*agree completely*). Finally,

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for adoptive parents evaluation scale and separate items

	Heterosexual couple		Lesbian Couple	
	Religious couple	Non-religious couple	Religious couple	non-religious couple
	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)
<i>Adoptive parents evaluation scale</i>	6.22 (.28)	5.43 (.30)	1.99 (1.09)	2.62 (.61)
<i>Separate items</i>				
<i>To what extent do you think the adoption is...</i>				
Heartwarming	5.70 (.74)	4.95 (.82)	2.10 (1.06)	2.84 (.97)
Acceptable	6.14 (.42)	5.53 (.55)	1.93 (1.25)	2.42 (.95)
Repulsive (r)	1.78 (.42)	2.08 (.62)	5.53 (1.20)	5.08 (.71)
Good	6.19 (.46)	5.38 (.54)	1.90 (1.30)	2.34 (.71)
Objectionable (r)	1.16 (.37)	1.78 (.53)	5.78 (1.33)	5.29 (.84)
Admirable	6.73 (.45)	5.98 (.70)	2.00 (1.54)	2.84 (1.08)
Naturally	5.78 (.53)	5.05 (.64)	1.43 (1.03)	1.66 (.67)
Unacceptable (r)	1.30 (.46)	1.98 (.48)	5.83 (1.38)	5.47 (.76)
Unusual (r)	1.59 (.55)	2.48 (.55)	6.15 (1.03)	5.76 (.82)
Disgusting (r)	1.00 (.00)	1.15 (.36)	5.65 (1.48)	4.87 (.93)
Pleasant	5.78 (.58)	4.98 (.58)	1.75 (1.15)	2.39 (.64)
Obnoxious (r)	1.35 (.48)	2.23 (.58)	5.88 (1.28)	5.24 (.85)
Moral	6.49 (.51)	5.55 (.55)	1.40 (1.03)	1.95 (.90)
<i>To what extent does the adoption makes you..</i>				
Happy	5.76 (.60)	4.93 (.62)	1.88 (1.04)	2.32 (.66)
Restless (r)	1.38 (.49)	2.00 (.45)	5.68 (1.29)	5.16 (.72)
Angry (r)	1.41 (.50)	1.90 (.50)	5.45 (1.26)	4.89 (.95)
Enthusiastic	5.51 (.56)	4.93 (.66)	1.88 (1.07)	2.50 (.69)
Irritated (r)	1.46 (.51)	2.15 (.53)	5.70 (1.36)	5.11 (.86)
<i>To what extent do you think...</i>				
You agree with the adoption	6.16 (.50)	5.58 (.50)	1.88 (1.38)	2.29 (.80)
Your moral values are similar to Simon(e) and Mariëlle	5.84 (.44)	5.10 (.59)	1.80 (1.07)	2.63 (.82)
You have a lot in common with Simon(e) and Mariëlle	5.70 (.66)	4.80 (.76)	1.70 (.88)	2.42 (.68)
You have the same ideas and values as Simon(e) and Mariëlle	5.95 (.40)	5.15 (.53)	1.75 (.98)	2.55 (.86)
You could be friends with Simon(e) and Mariëlle	5.19 (1.20)	4.00 (1.20)	1.60 (.71)	2.55 (.65)
Simon(e) and Mariëlle are good people	6.43 (.50)	5.58 (.55)	2.35 (1.25)	3.47 (.89)
Simon(e) and Mariëlle adopt a child out of selfish reasons	1.46 (.56)	2.35 (.70)	6.13 (.85)	5.37 (.59)
Simon(e) and Mariëlle are religious	6.08 (.60)	3.90 (.90)	1.70 (.99)	2.08 (.63)
Simon(e) and Mariëlle adopt a child out of goodness of their heart	6.35 (.63)	5.23 (.73)	2.28 (1.30)	3.61 (.97)

Note. Items with (r) were reverse coded before they were included in the adoption evaluation scale, such that higher scores on the adoption evaluation scale indicate more positive ratings.

participants indicated their own sexual orientation, could write down remarks about the study, and were thanked for their participation.

Results

Checks on religiosity of participants

Only participants that self-identified as Christians were included in our final sample (see Footnote 1). Because we collected data in the Bible Belt, we assumed that Christians in

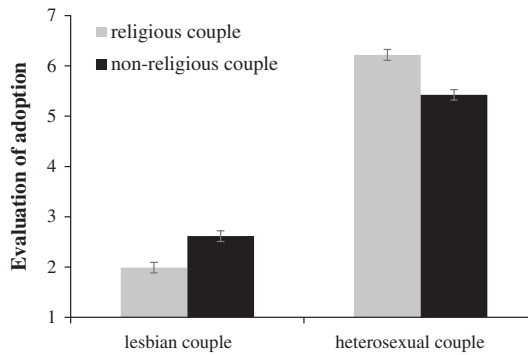


Figure 1. Evaluation of adoptive parents, as a function of sexual orientation and religiosity of the couple. *Note.* Higher numbers indicate more positive evaluations; error bars are plotted one standard error above and below the mean.

our final sample would be relatively conservative. The religiosity measures support this assumption. Participants considered religion as important in their lives and rated it well above the midpoint of the 7-point scale ($M = 5.66$, $SD = .97$). Furthermore, 86% percent of participants visited religious activities or services for once a month or more, 82% of participants prayed once a day or more, and almost 45% of participants read holy scripture once a month or more.

Main analyses

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) with our sexual orientation and religiosity as independent variables and the adoptive parents evaluation scale as the dependent variable yielded a significant main effect of sexual orientation, $F(1, 150) = 1104.83$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .88$, indicating that the heterosexual couple was rated more positively ($M = 5.81$, $SD = .49$) than the lesbian couple ($M = 2.30$, $SD = .93$). As expected, this effect was qualified by a significant sexual orientation \times religiosity interaction, $F(1, 150) = 45.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .23$. We did not observe a significant main effect of religiosity of the couple, $p = .443$. Figure 1 shows these effects.

To interpret the interaction, we inspected the simple main effects. This demonstrated that when participants read about the adoption by a heterosexual couple, their evaluations were more positive when the couple was religious ($M = 6.22$, $SD = .28$, 95% CI [6.01, 6.43]) rather than non-religious ($M = 5.43$, $SD = .30$, 95% CI [5.22, 5.63]), $F(1, 150) = 27.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$. In line with subjective group dynamics and our hypothesis, the reversed pattern was observed when participants read about the prospective adoption by a lesbian couple: Now their evaluations were *less* positive when the couple was religious ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 1.09$, 95% CI [1.78, 2.20]) rather than non-religious ($M = 2.62$, $SD = .61$, 95% CI [2.41, 2.83]), $F(1, 150) = 17.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$.

Simple main effects also demonstrate that when people read about the adoption by a Christian couple, they had more positive evaluations of the couple when the couple was heterosexual ($M = 6.22$, $SD = .28$, 95% CI [6.01, 6.43]) rather than lesbian ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 1.09$, 95% CI [1.78, 2.20]), $F(1, 150) = 787.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .84$. When people read about the adoption by a non-Christian couple, the pattern was similar (but less strong), with participants having more positive evaluations of the couple when the couple was heterosexual

($M = 5.43$, $SD = .30$, 95% CI [5.22, 5.63]) rather than lesbian ($M = 2.62$, $SD = .61$, 95% CI [2.41, 2.83]), $F(1, 150) = 356.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .70$. These findings also fit with subjective group dynamics because deviants (i.e., the lesbian couple) were evaluated more harshly when they were in-group members (i.e., Christians) rather than out-group members (i.e., non-Christians).²

Additional analyses

Covariates

To control for the possible influence of people's attitudes toward homosexuals and their religiosity, and thereby reduce error variance, we performed a GLM analysis with our two manipulations (sexual orientation and religiosity of the couple) as independent variables, importance of religion and lesbian/gay attitudes as covariates, and the adoptive parents evaluation scale as the dependent variable. Results mimicked those reported under Main Analyses but were somewhat stronger than the results reported earlier. More specifically, we observed a significant main effect of sexual orientation, $F(1, 148) = 1341.48$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .90$, indicating that our participants evaluated the heterosexual couple more positively ($M = 5.73$, $SD = .49$, 95% CI [5.61, 5.86]) than the lesbian couple ($M = 2.39$, $SD = .93$, 95% CI [2.27, 2.52]). We also observed a significant main effect of religion, $F(1, 148) = 3.99$, $p = .048$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, indicating that our participants evaluated the religious couple more positively ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 2.27$, 95% CI [4.03, 4.28]) than the non-religious couple ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.49$, 95% CI [3.84, 4.10]). These effects were qualified by a sexual orientation \times religiosity interaction, $F(1, 148) = 60.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .29$. Furthermore, lesbian/gay attitudes were significantly related to evaluations, $F(1, 148) = 52.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .26$, such that more positive lesbian/gay attitudes were related to more positive evaluations ($b = .39$, 95% CI [.28, .49]). No significant main effect of the importance of religion was observed.

To interpret the sexual orientation \times religiosity interaction, we inspected the simple main effects. This demonstrated that when participants read about the prospective adoption by a heterosexual couple, their evaluations were more positive when the couple was religious ($M = 6.17$, $SD = .28$, 95% CI [5.99, 6.35]) rather than non-religious ($M = 5.30$, $SD = .30$, 95% CI [5.12, 5.47]), $F(1, 148) = 46.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .24$. The reversed pattern was observed when participants read about the prospective adoption by a lesbian couple: Now their evaluations were *less* positive when the couple was religious ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.09$, 95% CI [1.96, 2.32]) rather than non-religious ($M = 2.64$, $SD = .61$, 95% CI [2.47, 2.81]), $F(1, 148) = 15.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. Participants thus had the most negative evaluations of the lesbian couple that identified as Christian.

Simple main effects demonstrate that when people read about the adoption by a Christian couple, they had more positive evaluations of the couple when the couple was heterosexual ($M = 6.17$, $SD = .28$, 95% CI [5.99, 6.35]) rather than lesbian ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.09$, 95% CI [1.96, 2.32]), $F(1, 148) = 984.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .87$. When people read about the adoption by a non-Christian couple, the pattern was similar (but less strong), with participants having more positive evaluations of the couple when the couple was heterosexual ($M = 5.30$, $SD = .30$, 95% CI [5.12, 5.47]) rather than lesbian ($M = 2.64$, $SD = .61$, 95% CI [2.47, 2.82]), $F(1, 148) = 445.46$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .75$. These findings demonstrate that deviants (i.e., the lesbian couple) were evaluated more harshly when being in-group members (i.e., Christians) rather than out-group members (i.e., non-Christians).

Subscales

Although we combined all dependent variables into one scale, face value may suggest different theoretical subconstructs. More specifically, there are 12 items that seem related to participants' evaluations of the prospective adoption (items "heartwarming" to "moral" in Table 1, Cronbach's $\alpha = .99$), 5 items that seem related to participant's emotional reactions (items "happy" to "irritated" in Table 1, Cronbach's $\alpha = .99$), 4 items that seem related to perceived similarities between participants and the adoptive parents (items "your moral values are similar to [Parent 1] and [Parent 2]" to "you could be friends with [Parent 1] and [Parent 2]" in Table 1, Cronbach's $\alpha = .98$), and 4 items that seem to be related to evaluations of the adoptive parents (items "[Parent 1] and [Parent 2] are good people" to "[Parent 1] and [Parent 2] adopt a child out of goodness of their heart" in Table 1, Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$).

All subscales strongly correlated with each other, with Pearson's correlations ranging between $r = .957$ and $r = .993$ (all p 's $< .001$). This means that between 91% and 98% of the variation in one of the subscales may be accounted for by the other subscales (r^2 's .91–.98). Therefore, we considered it more appropriate to combine items into one general scale, rather than dividing them into separate subscales.

However, to further explore the underlying structure of the items in more detail, we also performed a principal components analysis (PCA). Results demonstrated that a one-component solution provided the best fit. More specifically, 92% of the variance was explained by the first component, which had an eigenvalue of 24.86. All subsequent components had eigenvalues below .47 (and therefore below the critical cutoff point of eigenvalue > 1). The scree plot also displayed a sharp drop after the first component. Furthermore, all items loaded strongly ($> |.856|$) on this first component. All in all, this supports the notion that all items reflect the same underlying construct. Therefore, we think our data are best interpreted by performing analyses on the general scale, rather than separate subscales.

Discussion

Our study demonstrates an interesting phenomenon: Behavior that is generally be seen as admirable and praiseworthy (i.e., adoption of an orphan) becomes negatively evaluated if displayed by in-group deviants. More specifically, Christians in the Dutch Bible Belt evaluated a scenario of a couple that wanted to adopt a child that was orphaned during a natural disaster and that would otherwise die. As expected, people had more positive evaluations of the heterosexual couple than of the lesbian couple. Of most interest to our current line of reasoning, and in line with subjective group dynamics, the lesbian Christian couple was evaluated most negatively (and thus even more negatively than the non-Christian lesbian couple).

These findings build on work on subjective group dynamics (SGD), which explains when people will derogate deviant in-group members (e.g., Abrams et al., 2003; Marques et al., 1998, 2001). We demonstrate that heterosexual Christians derogate a lesbian couple that wants to adopt an orphan child. In line with SGD, derogation is strongest when the lesbian couple explicitly identifies as Christian. Previous work demonstrated that people derogate in-group deviants especially when deviants show immoral behavior, and thereby undermine moral norms. For example, Abrams and colleagues (2008) demonstrated that children have more positive evaluations of children that adhere to moral norms such as fairness (e.g., turn taking and sharing with others) and derogate others that undermine these

moral norms (e.g., by being selfish). We extend this work by demonstrating that people not only derogate in-group deviants when they display immoral behavior, but also when they display behavior that would otherwise be considered as highly normative and moral.

Our findings may be relevant for understanding and reducing prejudice within (religious) communities. One might be inclined to perceive people who respond negatively to homosexuals and lesbians as bigoted and hateful. However, we suggest a more nuanced story: These negative reactions may be caused by a perceived threat to the in-group identity. Heterosexual Christians have the most negative evaluations of a couple that is not only lesbian, but also Christian. This could mean that this couple is perceived as deviating from the in-group (by being Christian but also lesbian), which is more threatening than deviating from the out-group (by being non-Christian and also lesbian), and therefore leads to harsher evaluations (e.g., Marques et al., 1988; Pinto et al., 2010). This interpretation can have important implications for the reduction of negative reactions. For example, buffering the (personal and social) identities of religious people may make them more resistant to threats, which may lead to less prejudicial responses toward gay and lesbian Christians. It may be interesting for future research to investigate whether conservative Christians become more tolerant of deviating members of their congregation (e.g., lesbians or homosexuals) after engaging in-group or self-affirmation (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014). If so, this may offer religious leaders tools to increase tolerance within their community, for instance, by including affirmational elements in their sermons.

One may wonder whether sexual orientation or religiosity was the most salient social identity. Was the lesbian Christian couple considered deviant for being lesbians rather than heterosexuals, or because they were Christians rather than non-Christians? Our study was not designed to investigate which of these two social identities was the most important to our participants, but rather to test our assumption that conservative Christians would have the most negative evaluations of lesbian couples that also identified as Christian. To make matters more complicated, having a heterosexual identity is a keystone in the Christian tradition (remember the slogan about Adam and Steve?), which makes it difficult to disentangle these two identities. Nonetheless, we found negative evaluations of in-group deviants regardless of whether we considered sexual orientation or religiosity to form the most prominent in-group.

A somewhat related point concerns the salience of the manipulated couple's religiosity. In the Christian condition, the couple's religious affiliation is very salient ("We are both Christians, and we, as devout Christians, feel it is our duty to help one of those children"). In the non-Christian condition, religious affiliation was not made salient ("We feel it is our duty to help one of those children"). So our experimental manipulation may have contrasted a salient Christian group membership and adherence to Christian norms, with non-salient group membership. This increased salience of Christianity may have triggered more negative reactions toward those who undermine important Christian norms (i.e., the lesbian Christian couple who wanted to adopt a child). In fact, this understanding of our manipulations fits perfectly with a subjective group dynamics account. According to SGD, the evaluation of deviant in-group members should be most negative when "attention is focused on in-group norms" (Marques et al., 1998, p. 977), and salience of in-group norms should thus lead to increased intragroup differentiation.

The dependent variable in this study (the adoptive parents evaluation scale) was formed out of a large number of different items, measuring different aspects of evaluation. The

adoption itself was evaluated, as were emotions about the adoption, the couple's character, and people's similarities with the couple. See Table 1 for a complete overview of the items. The univariate interaction effects between the manipulated orientation and religiosity of the couple were significant for all items separate (all p 's < .005), meaning that we found evidence of the derogation of the lesbian Christian couple on all 27 items. This is interesting because it seems to contrast earlier findings that Christians reject homosexual acts but not homosexual people (e.g., Ford et al., 2009). How to explain this difference? One possible reason that we found derogation on every item may be that it was impossible for participants to see the couple separate from their behavior. The women in the couple were having a romantic relationship with each other and wanted to raise a child within this relationship. This particular scenario may have undermined group norms so strongly that it was no longer possible for our participants to view the women separate from their (intended) behavior. We suggest that the extremely negative evaluations were a way in which participants coped with this aversive scenario and protected their own identities from being tainted by the "sinning" couple.

We occasionally used the term "threat" to describe the aversive state people experience when being confronted with deviant in-group members. Important to note is that we have not measured (the perception of) threat in this study. Therefore, it would be an interesting and relevant direction for future research to investigate experienced threat more directly.

Finally, basic social psychological phenomena are often investigated in laboratory settings with student samples. Although these studies provide relevant insight into fundamental social psychological processes, they also raise criticisms regarding generalizability to other samples and settings (e.g., Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). The current study used a non-student sample that was collected in the streets of two Dutch cities and that may better reflect the Dutch population than the average student sample. For instance, only about 8 percent of the current sample completed post-secondary education, which is a relatively good reflection of higher education levels in the Dutch population (CBS, 2012). Importantly, our results offer strong support for the process of subjective group dynamics. For example, the mean difference between evaluations of the heterosexual couple and the lesbian couple is approximately 3.5 points on a 7-point scale, with an effect size of .88 for this main effect, which is extremely large. This increases confidence that important social psychological phenomena are relevant for understanding of our daily lives. The current findings suggest that derogating benevolent behavior of deviant in-group members by heterosexual Christians may be among these phenomena.

Notes

1. We report how we determined sample size, data exclusions, manipulations, and all measures in the experiment. We aimed to collect data from two hundred participants. We stopped the recruitment of participants after we achieved this goal. Because our hypotheses were explicitly about heterosexual Christian participants, we had to exclude the data from 45 non-heterosexual participants and/or non-Christian participants from our analyses, leaving a sample of $N = 155$ heterosexual Christian participants.
2. One might wonder whether there were sex differences or gender differences in our results, because men and women sometimes differ in their attitudes toward homosexuals (e.g., Kite & Whitley, 1996). Running a GLM on the evaluation scale with sex added as an extra between subject factor demonstrated that sex did not qualify the results. Although there was a main

effect of sex, with women having somewhat more positive evaluations ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.91$, 95% CI [4.05, 4.33]) than men ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.80$, 95% CI [3.73, 4.06]), $F(1, 146) = 7.07$, $p = .009$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, there were no significant two-way or three-way interactions between our experimental manipulations and participants' sex (all p 's $> .846$).

Furthermore, running the main analyses for men and women separately yielded similar results for both sexes, with a significant interaction between sexual orientation and religiosity of the couple, for men, $F_{\text{men}}(1, 65) = 16.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$, and women, $F_{\text{women}}(1, 81) = 25.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .24$. This effect seemed somewhat stronger for women than for men, but this may have also been due to the fact that there were more women ($n = 85$) than men ($n = 69$) in our final sample. These results are in line with the results of a meta-analysis which demonstrated that although men have more negative attitudes about homosexuals than women do, men and women have similar attitudes about lesbians (Kite & Whitley, 1996). We did not measure participants' gender identities, so we could not include those in the analyses.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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