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Intergroup and intragroup dynamics of communication: Identity validation, trust, and action

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ABSTRACT

A key function of communication is to signify values and norms. In this paper, we tour some of our recent research as well as new evidence on social psychological processes affecting the impacts of group communication and its implications for so-called Intergroup Communication Principles. We contend that communication within *and* between groups is subjectively interconnected, specifically through the process of subjective group dynamics. These dynamics affect how groups respond to leaders (or groups) that depart from prevailing norms, when these communications initiate a norm shift rather than inviting opprobrium, and whether communication by outgroup members can break down prejudice. Using new evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic, we examine which communications are most trusted in an intergroup hierarchy, showing the critical role of local identity. Finally, we describe field studies demonstrating how group norm communications can promote prosocial environmental behavior. We conclude that group-based communication is likely to be strongly directed toward occupying the center ground of communicative practice that groups' responses to their members are motivated by the desire to reinforce the validity of the group's norms, and their receptiveness toward leaders is dependent on the leader's advancement of the group's subjective validity.

Intergroup communication can entail many aspects. It can be communication between members of different groups, communication by their leaders or delegates. It can be communication about different groups or their members. It may be about intergroup differences or relations, or it may be about exchanges of goods, services, or other resources. It may be explicitly intergroup, or only implicitly intergroup whilst being directed entirely toward ingroup members or outgroup members.

Keblusek et al. (2018) proposed a two-pathway model of inter- and intra-group communication in which they proposed that 'intra- and intergroup processes are always operating simultaneously' (p. 79), and their model depicts how these two different pathways may complement or intersect. Our focus in this paper is to develop that proposal with a more strongly integrative proposition. Our general question is, *what connects social identity and group-related communications*? The answers we offer can generally be considered as elaborations, with some caveats, of three of the eight Intergroup Communication Principles (ICP) updated by Giles (2023; see also Belavadi & Giles, in press; Emler & Giles, 2024; and most recently, Giles et al., Prologue to this volume). The eight principles focus on how ingroup members use communication to: I, define; and II, explain their distinctiveness; III, interpret messages from outgroups; IV, justify reactions to outgroups; V, strategically adopt communication practices of privileged groups; VI, undergo defeatist psychological reactions to outgroup narratives

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that undermine them; VII, negotiate norms by attending to ingroup deviants; and VIII; be led by ingroup members whose prototypicality enables them to spearhead social change.

Specifically, we consider how groups may seek to occupy the center ground of communicative practice (ICP V), how groups include or marginalize members through reinforcement or denigration of their groups' norms (ICP VII) and whether and how leaders may gain purchase over the positions and parameters of what acts and communications are acceptable within and between groups (ICP VIII). These three Principles (Giles et al., Prologue of this volume) are quoted in full here, and we revisit them with proposed modifications in the Conclusion section.

> **V**: Ingroup members of social disadvantaged and marginalized groups will strive, and sometimes be strategically encouraged (especially with the 'allyship' and support of dominant or socially advantaged groups), to acquire the privileged group's communicative practices. The privileged group can, ironically in reactance, move communicatively away from what would be construed as identity-threatening tactics.
>
> **VII**: Through the communicative creation and expression of group norms in their social networks and media platforms, ingroups can control and negotiate the normativity in everyday life, enabling their members to recognize deviancies by others that can lead to discrediting and marginalizing such offenders.
>
> **VIII**: Individuals who convincingly express best normative communicative practices, values, and world views of their ingroup, can emerge as trusty leaders, thereafter, having the potential to fashion more distinctive cultures, social change, and justice movements with a stronger sense of community.

Drawing strongly on subjective group dynamics theory (Marques et al., 2001) we explore two propositions. First that communications by or about group members are judged not only in terms of their veracity but often – or even more so – in terms of their implications for the value attached to ingroup membership. Second that communications are regarded as inherently more trustworthy, dependable, and valuable the more they clarify or enhance ingroup norms. In this sense, we slightly dodge the focus on 'intergroup' communication and prefer instead to refer to group-based or group-related communication, holding that, psychologically if not behaviorally, these invariably combine intergroup and intragroup aspects in what is, psychologically, a single process.

These two propositions can be supported by evidence from a wide range of sources, though we will draw primarily on elements of our own research and theorizing to argue for their plausibility. A full literature review is well beyond the scope of this paper, and instead we simply want to show that several very different sources of evidence converge to underpin our case. Moreover, if one asks the question, 'why does intergroup communication matter?,' the answer is that it has material consequences for decisions that almost always imply either convergence or divergence between groups, resulting in a change in outcomes for each. We emphasize that these propositions have both theoretical and, perhaps more importantly, practical implications.

We begin by outlining the social identity approach to social influence before widening the analysis to explain how the intergroup and intragroup components of communication are addressed in subjective group dynamics theory (Marques et al., 2001). We offer examples of lab studies that show that the two components (intergroup and intragroup) are necessarily and dynamically connected, and then consider counter-intuitive examples of cases where extreme attitudes or behaviors are interpreted as acceptable or even welcome, including the phenomenon of deviance credit. We further consider evidence that such processes scale up so that they can operate simultaneously at the level of groups and individuals. Next, we draw on our research during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring which group-level sources of communication were most trusted and why. Finally, we present some behavioral research that considers the role of different influence sources on environmentally consequential action, showing how communications that cue ingroup identity can be an effective route for normative influence.

The social identity approach to social influence, and intragroup versus intergroup communication

Social identity approach: an historical perspective

Social identity theory addresses the role of social and self-categorization in motivating intergroup attitudes and behavior. As originally proposed, the theory argued that when people view one another in terms of social category memberships they desire positive self-evaluation via the evaluation of their ingroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It also laid the foundation for developments that addressed the cognitive underpinnings of social identity, the implications of different social structural aspects of group membership, and the ways in which language embodies and represents social identity (see Turner & Giles, 1981; Turner et al., 1987). Despite the tremendous advances in each of these areas, the first couple of decades in which social identity research blossomed left a great many important questions unanswered.

During that period of research, the focal concern for social identity theorists was to provide a powerful counter to individualistic theorizing about groups (Tajfel, 1978). In particular, theories of social cognition (e.g. person perception, and stereotypes) were viewed as overly reductionist and somewhat mechanistic. Social identity theory required us to attend to ways in which cognitions about individuals could be transformed when those individuals were viewed as members of groups (Abrams & Hogg, 2004; Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

Researchers quickly adopted the idea that when people's group memberships are relevant to a particular situation or social comparison their self-concept, perceptions of others and motivations would all be transformed. Importantly, they would be transformed in ways that meant they would be common across all members of that group. There follows (and still is) a large number of new sets of measures and constructs relating to the 'social' or 'collective' self (e.g. collective self-esteem, Jetten et al., 2002; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; collective narcissism; Cichocka, 2016; intergroup or group-based emotions; Mackie et al., 2008). Yet, the outcomes of interest tended to remain the same – individual group members' attitudes, stereotypes, and intergroup biases of various sorts. A vast volume of work was being conducted in parallel to understand how intergroup contact might improve intergroup attitudes. Here again, a distinction began to be drawn between interpersonal and intergroup contact (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Brown & Hewstone, 2005), and contact that might be framed by contrasting, complementary, or common group memberships (S. L. Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000).

Self-categorization theory: implications for language and communication

Turner et al. (1987)'s self-categorization theory set forth explicit cognitive principles that could explain when group memberships would be salient as well as implications for the self-concept. A fuller application of social identity and self-categorization theory to social influence came a little later (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Turner, 1991), and it is here that some interesting challenges emerge in some of the assumptions of the underpinning theory, particularly in relation to language and communication.

Strong versions of self-categorization theory hold that when social identity is salient, the self becomes depersonalized such that it is indistinguishable from the ingroup prototype (Hogg, 1992; Turner et al., 1987). The more salient the intergroup comparison or contrast becomes, the more depersonalized the members of the groups will be (Postmes & Spears, 1998; Reicher et al., 1995). Put another way, the more we cognitively differentiate between two categories, the less we differentiate within each of the categories. The persuasive advantage that ingroup members have over outgroup members thus grows if intergroup differences are emphasized.

These arguments appear logical and compelling but, unfortunately, they do not fit neatly with reality. For a start, the question of how minorities become influential (Moscovici, 1976; Mugny, 1982) is difficult to address if one assumes groups will always polarize away from one another. Second, the question of how groups ever change their positions, views, inclusiveness, or other attributes is only

ever answerable in terms of changes in the social context (e.g. presence, size, or status of the outgroups), and never in terms of internal communications within the groups. Finally, and perhaps most problematic, is that social influence, as a form of intergroup communication, is viewed as a process in which a source affects a target in ways that do or do not prompt convergence with the source. Other aspects of communication are often ignored, such as the idea that intergroup relationships themselves may be the focus of the communication or that the outcomes might not be captured as a unidirectional flow of influence, or indeed that the intended audience of the communication might not be the 'target' of the communication.

The interconnectedness of multiple social identities

A different European tradition of research, emerging from the work of Moscovici, Mugny, and particularly Doise (1986), adopted a different set of propositions, in particular, about the way social categorization could function. It seems possible and defensible to argue that sometimes greater differentiation at one level of analysis (e.g. between groups) might either be orthogonal to or even commensurate with differentiation at another level (e.g. within groups or between individuals, Doise & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1989).

This insight opens the door to a host of new possibilities and ones that can map more easily onto the experiences most of us can share from everyday life. People hold multiple roles simultaneously and it is necessary to orchestrate the layering and interconnectedness of these through time, relationships, and contexts (complex social identities, Brewer, 1991; Deaux et al., 1995; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). The challenge of sustaining a positive social identity cannot then be met solely by the anonymous and abstract differentiation of outgroups from ingroups in ways that make one feel good about oneself, but by actively finding ways to validate the positivity of that identity not only to oneself but also in the eyes of others (see Levine & Abrams, 2025). In this sense, then, intergroup communication is not just communication with outgroups, but also communication about group members, group attitudes, or group values that serves to define one's position in an intergroup relationship, which itself may be embedded in relationships with higher or lower-order groups. It may be directed at outgroup members, ingroup members, or both. In any case, it has an impact on the intergroup relationship by strengthening, sustaining, or weakening intergroup distinctions.

Subjective group dynamics

Ingroup norms validation as a reason for ingroup members' derogation

Taking these perspectives into account, subjective group dynamics theory (SGD, Abrams et al., 2004; Marques et al., 2001) explicitly addresses the ways in which intragroup and intergroup dynamics work together. Specifically, the theory proposes that members of groups seek sources of validation for their ingroup's norms vis-à-vis those of other groups because these sources help to sustain a positive social identity. However, such a validation requires some means of legitimization. The theory addresses two common situations.

In one situation, most groups subscribe to the same generic set of norms (e.g. politeness and honesty). In that case, validity is sought by ensuring that one's own group is a better exponent of those norms than others (we are more correct, valid, virtuous, etc., than them). The situation is quite different; however, when groups have opposing values or norms surrounding an important issue (Republicans vs. Democrats, Christians vs. Atheists). Here, it is quite simply a question of finding ways to uphold the greater validity of one's own group's norms (we are right, they are wrong). Not only that such validation needs to come from within the group, it may even be preferable if it comes from an external source, ideally the outgroup(s) itself.

One of the first demonstrations of this principle was the experimental work on the 'black sheep effect,' which focuses on adherence to generic norms. Marques et al. (1988) asked students to evaluate

ingroup (Belgian) or outgroup (North African) students who behaved in a likeable or unlikable way. Judgments of both ingroup and outgroup unlikable individuals (deviants) were more negative than those of respective likeable (normative) members, but this difference was significantly larger when judging *ingroup* deviants. Moreover, the derogation of ingroup deviants was more intense than that of outgroup deviants.

This readily replicated finding (e.g. Tang et al., 2023) was surprising because it overturned the assumption, based on social identity theory, that the more salient their social identity is, the more people will generally favor all ingroup members over all outgroup members. Critically, across most of these studies it is the contribution to the validity of ingroup norms of the deviant member's attitudes or behavior *relative* to that of other group members' that drives these effects. For example, Marques et al. (2001) showed that when the distribution of attitudes within the ingroup's normative members is quite homogeneous, there is less derogation of the deviant, than when the normative members are more heterogeneous. The explanation for this is that the threat to the validity of the ingroup's norms is greater when there appears to be less consensus within the group, and hence a deviant member's position becomes especially problematic.

Deviation toward or away from the outgroup

A further series of studies explored the intergroup implications of intragroup judgments in a different way. Small group research would hold that any deviant is likely to be the target of persuasive efforts by others (to conform), or else face sanctions or rejection from the group (Schachter, 1951; Shaw, 1976; Wesselmann et al., 2014). However, SGD theory would hold that this might only be the case if the deviation actually threatens ingroup validity.

To examine this question more directly, further research focused on oppositional norms (e.g. norms of different countries, teams, or organizations with competing goals). It emerges in these situations that ingroup deviants who oppose the group's norm by deviating toward that of the outgroup ('anti-norm' deviants) are highly derogated. In contrast, those who deviate with the same magnitude of difference from the ingroup norm but away from that of the outgroup ('pro-norm' deviants) are generally evaluated almost no differently than normative members. Across multiple studies, we established that these effects are not due to cognitive distortion or misperception of the deviants' positions but instead are attributable to the implied validation that the different group members lend to ingroup norms (Abrams et al., 2000, 2002). Moreover, when people are judging outgroup normative and deviant members, they tend to strongly favor the anti-norm deviant but derogate the normative and pro-norm deviant similarly.

Real-world examples of these oppositional norm situations are easy to bring to mind. Political parties are gleeful when an opposing party member expresses approval for their policy (or even better, defects; Travaglino et al., 2014) and they are often swift to condemn 'traitors' in their midst who express even mild approval of the opposing party's policies. Thus, contrary to traditional accounts of small group dynamics, some types of deviant ingroup members are readily assimilated and, contrary to self-categorization theory, some types of deviant outgroup members are evaluated exceptionally positively.

From subjective group dynamics to group communication

Thus far, we have proposed that people's intragroup communication is frequently engaged with the intergroup relationship in mind. What evidence do we have that this is the case? It is well known that group members direct more communication toward deviants to conform (Wesselmann et al., 2014) and may ostracize them (Rudert et al., 2023). Often, however, such members cannot simply be ignored or eliminated from the group, nor is it feasible or permissible to directly derogate other ingroup members. Consequently, according to SGD theory, group members are likely to resort to symbolic marginalization of the deviant in order to

sustain subjective validity of the ingroup norm. This is certainly observable in people's reactions to those who exhibit characteristics that break from existing norms around gender roles (Abrams et al., 2000; see also Palmonares, this volume). For example, Marques et al. (2001) showed that ingroup members express more willingness to persuade ingroup deviants when the group's status is insecure or if they attach more importance to the norm. Highlighting the role of the communicative context, subsequent research showed that the black sheep effect becomes amplified when people feel more accountable to ingroup members (Abrams et al., 2007; Marques et al., 1998).

A series of studies by Frings and colleagues examined communication dynamics more closely. Frings et al. (2010) engaged participants in an intergroup online decision-making task involving oppositional norms, during which participants encountered an ingroup deviant who endorsed the outgroup's preference. Even in conditions where the costs of directly trying to persuade the deviant were high, the combination of normative support and attaching importance to the outcome of the decision-led group members to engage in more persuasive (as opposed to other types of) communication with the deviant.

Frings and Abrams (2010) further determined that persuasive efforts were motivated primarily by the need to establish subjective validity rather than mere ingroup uniformity. Participants in their study had the opportunity to communicate with either an outgroup member or an ingroup deviant who endorsed the outgroup's norm. Results showed that – although both the ingroup deviant and outgroup normative members presented the same objective challenge to the ingroup norm – participants were significantly more likely to choose to communicate with the ingroup member. They were also more likely to be persuasive and inquisitive than other types of communication (highlighting differences between the deviant and the ingroup norm) and were more likely to do so when they regarded the norm as being important. In line with SGD theory, increases in the subjective validity of the ingroup norm were mediated by group members' use of difference-oriented communication toward the ingroup deviant.

In the same vein, Frings et al. (2012) demonstrated that an ingroup deviant presents an opportunity to reinforce ingroup norms, so long as the person has the resources to try to influence that individual, thus invoking a challenge response. This study also found that an outgroup deviant could reinforce the subjective validity of the ingroup's norm and create a challenge response – a prediction that contradicts social identity theory and variants such as uncertainty identity theory (Hogg, 2007) but is consistent with SGD theory. Other studies drawing from intergroup contact theory also showed that it is (imagined) contact with an atypical (or anti-normative) outgroup member that most likely reduces intergroup threat and prejudice (Yetkili et al., 2018), and that encountering non-stereotypical outgroup member's biographies can also be a highly effective method (Goodbun & Abrams, 2025).

Taken together, this series of studies illustrates that much of the motivating force in group-based communication may be associated with the opportunity people detect to reinforce the subjective validity of ingroup norms in an intergroup context. They will use communicative opportunities with either ingroup or outgroup members and with traitors or with extremists, if it serves that purpose.

Developing an understanding of the intergroup–intragroup nexus – 'group nous'

As noted earlier, much of the psychological research into group processes focuses on outcomes such as prejudice and discrimination or collective protest, stereotypes, or group cohesion. Theorists have considered the qualities that determine whether sets of people are perceived as a group (Lickel et al., 2000), and what types of intergroup structures they endorse (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Some have focused on the processes through which group members are socialized (Levine & Moreland, 1994). However, there has been less attention to lay understandings of how group *processes* operate, particularly in intergroup contexts. Realizing that it could be group membership rather than individual personality or preferences that energizes social inclusion and exclusion is a vital part of social

survival (Abrams & Christian, 2007). Thus, both social knowledge and perspective taking are essential if missteps are to be avoided.

Perhaps, for adults at least, these processes are so intuitive that we forget to interrogate them. Yet for children, engaging in these group-based dynamics requires the development of important new skills if they are to navigate social relationships successfully. Social rejection is costly and painful (Büttner et al., 2024; Williams, 2001). On starting school, perhaps most children's first regular encounter with groups, children will discover that there are often at least two different audiences for their actions – ingroup *and* outgroup members – and that both audiences might be very aware of the other's reactions.

The developmental subjective group dynamics model (DSGD, Abrams et al., 2003) provided the foundation for a series of studies that examined how children make inferences about intergroup and intragroup responses to deviance, and how those inferences might underpin their ultimate reactions and evaluations to those deviant individuals. The DSGD model holds that one of the skills picked up during middle childhood (through socialization and cognitive maturation) is the development of 'group nous,' i.e. know how intragroup and intergroup relations work together. Specifically, with age and social experience children will gain awareness that group members will a) be biased toward their respective groups, b) expect other members to hold the same biases, and c) selectively include normative and derogate deviant (anti-norm) members. Finally, d) this awareness predicts the child's own intergroup and intragroup behavior (Abrams, Rutland, et al., 2008). Consequently, children do not become less biased against outgroups as they progress toward adolescence, but rather they express their ingroup favoritism through the selective appreciation (and derogation) of specific ingroup and outgroup members who are more (or less) validatory of ingroup norms (Abrams, 2011). With age, the positive correlation between intergroup differentiation and intragroup differentiation strengthens (Abrams, Palmer, et al., 2014) so that by adolescence most young people understand that communications toward specific individuals within groups are often deeply contingent on relationships between ingroups and outgroups.

For example, during the 2004 European Football Championship when England and France were major rivals, Abrams et al. (2009) asked British children to evaluate peers who were either English or French, and most of whom expressed normative support (i.e. that their own side was the best and should always be supported) but one of whom expressed anti-norm deviance (that whilst supporting their own team they would also applaud if the opposing team played well). This study also measured children's theory of mind (Perner & Wimmer, 1985) and new measures of theory of social mind and group norm understanding were included, along with measures of children's overall evaluation of the two groups and their inferences about how peers would react to each individual member. Results showed that with age, the more children showed overall ingroup favoritism, the more strongly they also differentiated their evaluations of normative and deviant group members. Importantly, these evaluations were in opposing directions when judging ingroup versus outgroup members (i.e. against the deviant ingroup member but in favor of the deviant outgroup member vis-à-vis their normative counterparts). Moreover, children's perspective taking and group norm understanding predicted their expectations of how peers would evaluate those individuals, which in turn predicted their own evaluations of normative and deviant group members.

Convergent with evidence from a large set of related studies (e.g. Mulvey et al., 2014), this research supports the DSGD model's contention that understanding the interconnection between intragroup and intergroup relationships is a social-developmentally acquired skill. That skill enables group-based communication, whether directed toward ingroup or outgroup members, to sustain positive social identity by validating ingroup superiority in an intergroup context.

Group-based communications and change at the macro and meso levels

Other than instances of personal intergroup contact, true intergroup communication might be a rather rare event. That is, we rarely see an entire group engaging in a wholesale communicative act with

another group (perhaps sports team supporters baiting to their opponents in a stadium would be one example, see also Giles & Stohl, 2016). Consequently, a great deal of intergroup communication must be conducted through group agents or representatives, one common avenue being through their leadership. For several reasons, what leaders can do with group-based communication is different from what followers and regular group members might do.

A second common type of intergroup communication is between groups at different levels of power or structural status (e.g. committees with subcommittees, countries with states, and organizations with teams). Whether such hierarchical communications are conceptualized as intragroup or as intergroup (i.e. as envisaged in the common in-group identity model, S. L. Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) seems moot, because it is unquestionably group-based and has implications for group members' social identity. In principle, however, the same motivation to validate social identity could be at work at multiple levels of group membership.

Leadership and social change

Leaders are particularly important beacons of group identity (see Haslam et al., 2011; Hogg, 2001), partly because of their visibility, because of their perceived prototypicality, but also because of their positional power and authority. A crucial aspect of leadership is what leaders communicate to and about their group, and especially about its relationships with other groups. Indeed, it seems likely that much of what leaders try to do involves placing their group as positively as possible in an intergroup context, such as a CEO reporting on whether a company has gained or lost market share, or a political party leader who seeks to make favorable comparisons with other countries or parties as a way of garnering support.

Yet leaders also have unique opportunities, specifically to spearhead a change of direction for the group. Hollander (1958) argued that leaders may gain idiosyncrasy credit as a result of their accrued contributions to the group, but the particular types of idiosyncrasy were not clear. Later work identified 'innovation credit' as a greater leniency granted to incoming future leaders for expressing anti-normative views, as compared to deviant ingroup members, past, and present leaders, which empowers and gives them more freedom to innovate (Abrams, Rutland et al., 2008). But ingroup leaders (not outgroup) are also granted 'transgression credit,' namely are more likely than deviant members to be forgiven for breaking rules that bind both groups (Abrams et al., 2013). Transgression credit arises not only in the context of sports and competitions but also in business and university life, for example, with a greater tolerance and even reward for ingroup leaders who engage in bribery or blackmail (Randsley de Moura & Abrams, 2013). Put another way, while contempt is reserved for outgroup members and leaders, especially those who transgress (see also Bilewicz et al., this volume), it is likely to be suspended for even the most errant of ingroup leaders. Still, there are some important boundary conditions for transgression credit. For example, the leader must be viewed as acting in the group's interests (Packer et al., 2018), and as not crossing significant moral boundaries such as racism (Abrams, Travaglino et al., 2014).

Overall, ingroup leaders accrue the perception of being more prototypical of the group (in terms of their typicality and representativeness of the group and its ethos as a whole) and have a perceived right to be supported (that is, the authority conferred on them simply by occupying a position of power – elected or otherwise). These two mechanisms of *accrual* and *conferral* combine to offset the usual constraints that group members apply to deviants, and do so sufficiently powerfully that even anti-norm or transgressive deviance by the leadership is tolerated. These forms of 'deviance credit' (Abrams et al., 2018) are fundamental to ingroup leaders' capacity to change the direction of the group as a whole. Leaders may also deviate in the pro-norm direction (e.g. becoming very extremist and oppositional toward outgroups), and these same processes seem even more likely to underpin group members' acceptance of such leadership.

The staggering frequency with which CEOs, political leaders, and others in leadership roles seem enabled to engage in extreme, reckless, and ultimately often illegal acts tells us much about the ways in

which intragroup communication in an intergroup context may serve to protect the subjective validity of the group. It seems likely that a group's tolerance of its leader's deviance is a crucial aspect of its ability to sustain the assertion to external groups that its own way is the right way. Whether this is manifested as Republican voters' tolerance of Donald Trump's numerous transgressions, or progressive activists' defense of Hugo Chávez's increasingly authoritarian practices in the name of anti-imperialism, the purpose served is to reject moral or political objection to the group's status and power by competing groups. For example, Davies et al. (2022) conducted a 3-wave longitudinal study of Republicans' judgments about the potential sharing of false information, nepotism, and abuse of power prior to and following the 2020 US Presidential election. They perceived these acts as less unethical when committed by Trump (as had been the case) than when viewed in isolation. Republican's tolerance was related to the extent that they perceived Trump as advancing their social identity and was not mitigated by his loss of the election.

Group-based communication is most robustly conveyed in natural language rather than survey questionnaire responses (see also Beukenboom, this volume). To capture this type of more direct group-based communication, Davies et al. (2024; Study 1) examined the Twitter/X posts of Conservative and Labour Members of Parliament (MPs) in response to Boris Johnson's unlawful prorogation of Parliament in 2019 and his publication of an Internal Market Bill that would break international law in 2020. They also compared these with posts responding to a non-leader, Dominic Cummings, who infamously broke coronavirus lockdown rules during the UK's first lockdown in 2020. As public expressions of attitudes by individuals who define themselves as group members (i.e. as MPs), social media posts are clearly directed not only toward ingroup and outgroup members but also to the wider public, presumably reflecting efforts to reinforce or undermine the validity of the group's attitudes or behavior. Consistent with the deviance credit model, Conservative, but not Labour, MPs were more accepting of Johnson's, but not Cummings', transgression.

A second study used machine learning to examine the semantic themes among the general public's supportive versus unsupportive posts in response to Boris Johnson's unlawful prorogation of Parliament (Davies et al., 2024; Study 2). Amongst those expressing support for Johnson, a key theme was their desire for Brexit to be delivered and to respect the democratic outcome of the 2016 EU referendum vote. Johnson personified the Brexit movement as the figurehead of the 'Vote Leave' campaign in 2016 as highlighted in his 2019 General Election campaign slogan to 'Get Brexit Done.' For supporters, Johnson's unlawful prorogation of Parliament advanced the movement by stifling opponents of his Brexit policy to facilitate its passing into law. Their communications were consistent with previous research showing that support for transgressive political acts is more likely to be supported when directed at outgroup opponents (Walter & Kutlaca, 2023) and reflect both the conferral and accrual elements of processes involved in deviance credit.

Deviant groups in society

There are many times when it is not an individual group member, but an entire group that seems to break ranks with others (Belavadi et al., 2020). What happens if one department in a university opposes a policy or rule that is otherwise unanimously supported by other departments? What happens when one country opposes a resolution that the rest of the United Nations wishes to carry? Members of such organizations must deal with the social identity implications of their own and other groups' departures from the norms or objectives of the superordinate organization. Any stance adopted by a group within that structure are de-facto 'intergroup' communication.

The subjective group dynamics in these situations may then be analogous to those that research has demonstrated to operate in intragroup communications within intergroup contexts (e.g. Abrams et al., 2000). Sanctions imposed on deviant countries or groups might therefore serve similar functions as the derogation or persuasive efforts directed at deviant individuals within groups in intergroup settings.

To test these ideas, Abrams et al. (2022) proposed a 'deviant ingroup protection effect' – or 'Rogue State Effect' as we had originally preferred to name it. The question was whether reactions

to anti- and pro-norm deviances would scale up from the individual to the group level or whether, just as people protect deviant leaders, they might also protect deviant ingroups in defense of the subjective validity of their social identity. In this series of studies, when participants believed one of the various groups within an overarching superordinate in-category (e.g. countries within the E. U., states within the U.S.) held a deviant position they judged that group negatively (if anti-normative) or favorably (if pro-normative). When judging outgroups within out-categories, they did the exact opposite. Fully consistent with SGD, participants who identified more with the in-category or the ingroup differentiated more strongly in their evaluations of deviant versus normative groups; they also perceived the in-category and ingroup validity to be higher. However, if the deviant anti-norm position was held by their own specific ingroup, it was no longer derogated. Although in-category identification and validity were still positively related, ingroup identity and validity were no longer positively related to in-category validity. Ultimately, consistent with deviance credit to leaders, participants protected their ingroup social identity and ingroup validity even when it undermined the validity of the overarching category to which their group belonged.

This series of studies revealed important aspects of how the intergroup context can strongly shape what people will and will not tolerate from their own groups, and perhaps why group members – particularly political party loyalists – continue to defend ingroup acts that would in principle be considered morally or ethically indefensible when perpetrated by one group against others (Gilliland et al., 2023). Deviant minorities within a larger system of groups are likely to be the focus of others' attention (see Mullen, 1991), making their members' social identity intensely salient. Defending the subjective validity of the ingroup may then become a paramount objective (Levine & Abrams, 2025). Such motivation may account for why some work teams, organizations, and even nations are willing to publicly defend their own engagement in acts that are regarded as problematic or extreme by other groups.

Communication and trust during the COVID-19 pandemic

Various discussions have considered when or whether the group or the individual self has primacy in people's perceptions and decisions (see L. Gaertner et al., 2012). However, the preceding discussion highlights that identities are likely to be nested and multiple, so the more practical issue is why different levels of group membership might take primacy at particular times. An important context in which these matters became not only focal but also critical to survival was during the COVID-19 pandemic when governments strove to direct, constrain, or organize people's behavior against a background of huge uncertainty, confusion, and constant change.

The Beyond Us and Them project (Abrams, Broadwood, Lalot, Davies Hayon, & Dixon, 2021) surveyed over 39,000 people across the UK during 2020–2021 to understand their perceptions and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. One set of questions, fielded during the 3rd wave of the pandemic between May and June 2021, focused directly on the question of communications and in particular how people responded to communications from national versus local sources (see also Jucks & Hendriks, 2021). At that time, there were 25,000 new cases every day, and full relaxation of rules had been suspended in order to achieve a higher level of population vaccination. Tensions between national and local levels were also increasing. National rules seemed decreasingly fit for local application, and changes and differences between rules for different localities and times, as well as questionable adherence to the rules by national politicians themselves, had made these tensions even more apparent.

We consider these communications, whilst directed at individuals, to be group-based, and, thus, as both intergroup and intragroup because of the inevitable nesting of the two sources. According to our theoretical stance, receptiveness to these sources of communication should be associated with people's desire to reduce their uncertainty and achieve subjective validity. Because the local level is the more immediate 'ingroup' we would expect it, generally, to have primacy.

Initial analyses (Abrams, Broadwood, Lalot, & Davies Hayon, 2021) revealed that UK government communications were perceived as being nearly twice as accessible and easy to find as local government communications. Yet despite this disparity, just over 50% of people viewed UK government communications as having low levels of credibility or honesty and as failing to meet their needs, with less than 20% attributing high levels of honesty, credibility, or empathy to these communications. By contrast, closer to a third had these negative views of local government communication, and about 25% had clearly positive views. Thus, people clearly faced a dilemma: their more trusted sources of communication were less able to provide transparent and accessible information than their less trusted source. These findings also chimed with complementary analyses across multiple UK national surveys from other sources (Davies et al., 2021). Across the pandemic as a whole, trust in *national* politicians had only ever surpassed distrust for a month or so at the start of the pandemic and then declined steadily for the next year. In contrast, the percentage of people who expressed trust in *local* politicians was sustained across the entire period and surpassed the percentage who expressed distrust at all times.

Two further important findings emerged in the Beyond Us and Them data. One was that people who lived in areas with their own devolved administrative powers (Scotland, Wales, and Manchester in particular) were least favorable about UK national government communications. The second was that people who identified more strongly as British were more positive toward both national and local communications, whereas those who identified more strongly with their local area were only more positive toward local communications. We returned to these data to conduct new analyses for the present paper, aiming to clarify the nature of the relationship between national and local social identity on the one hand, and perceptions of national and local communications on the other. We focused on two facets of communication that conveyed trustworthiness, which Mayer et al. (1995)'s trust model depicts as benevolence and integrity. Specifically, we asked whether communications by national and local government were honest, credible, showed empathy, and corresponded to the community's needs (i.e. its focus). We also considered the perceived accessibility of communications since our preliminary tests found UK government communications to be easier to find on average.

We used structural equation modeling to account for covariances between constructs. This analysis showed that although British identity and local identity were positively correlated, they independently contributed to more positive evaluations of communications from both UK national government and local government. As shown in Figure 1, each level of identity (British/local) influenced perceived trustworthiness of the communications from the corresponding level of government 4 to 5 times more than the other level of identity did. In other words, local identity most strongly influenced trust in local government communications and British identity most strongly influenced trust in UK government communication. Importantly, we observed that identification with each level has a stronger linkage to the perceived socially valued aspects of communication (its honesty, credibility, and empathy) than to the more evaluatively neutral aspects (its accessibility). Detailed results are reported in the Appendix.

In other work (Lalot et al., 2022; Lalot, Abrams, Heering, et al., 2023; Lalot, Abrams, Jessop, et al., 2023) we showed that compliance with COVID behavioral rules and vaccine uptake were dependent on trust in political authorities – especially among respondents who lacked other more egoistical motivations to comply (e.g. out of personal concern). Moreover, consistent with Frings et al. (2012)'s work showing that subjective validation is an approach/challenge process, trust is similarly an avenue for pursuing positive identity goals (Lalot et al., 2025). The current findings suggest that such trust is not necessarily rooted in the veracity of the communication itself, but endorsing its trustworthiness is a means of strengthening the subjective validity of a salient social identity vis-à-vis other groups.

Group-based communication and environmental action

A powerful mode of social influence, particularly when there is ambiguity or uncertainty, is the activation of social norms (Sherif, 1936). Based on the social identity and subjective group dynamics

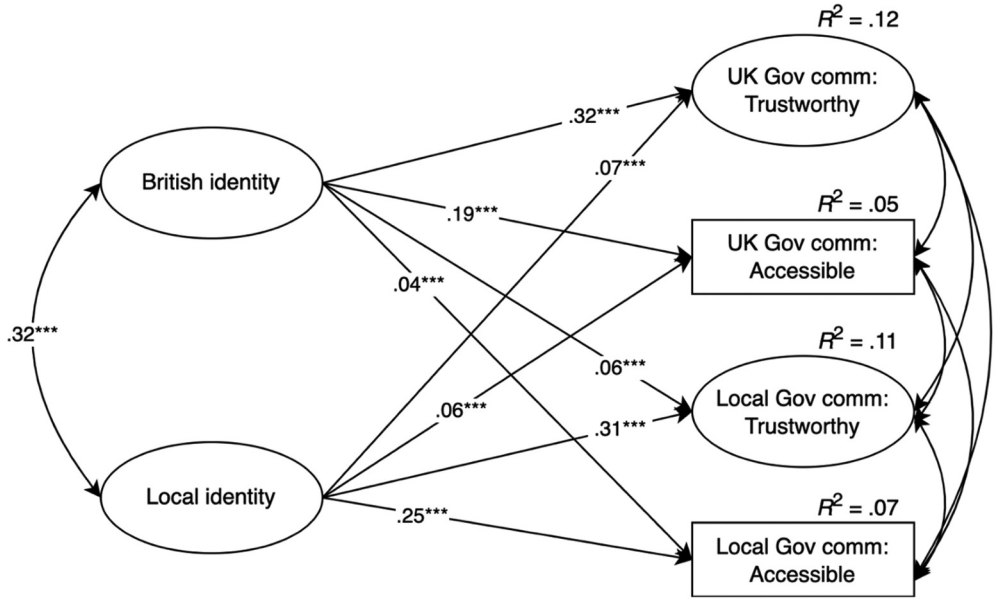

Figure 1. Communication and trust during COVID-19: relations between identity and perceived communication trustworthiness and accessibility. . Numbers reported are standardized loadings. *** <.001. Comm = communication.

approaches to social influence, it can be argued that much of what passes for interpersonal influence is often framed in an intergroup context, at which point it becomes group-based influence.

Indeed, when forming new norms, responding to conformity pressure, or engaging in group decision making, people generally gravitate toward the ingroup's prototypical position in contrast to that held by outgroups (Abrams et al., 1990). And while advertising often refers to social consensus as a vehicle for persuasion ('8 out of 10 owners said X made a difference'), this generally does not convey anything about the individuals, but rather depicts 'others' as a majority ingroup to which the target individual implicitly belongs (see Goldstein et al., 2008). Arguably then, such intragroup communication is likely to involve an implicit or explicit outgroup and hence to gain its power by being both inter and intragroup.

In a series of studies, we considered whether group-based normative influence could convince people to change their environmental behavior under conditions of uncertainty (e.g. Emeakaroha et al., 2014), Specifically, in Canterbury, UK, there are railroad crossings at which the barriers are down for periods of 2-3 min at a time regularly throughout the day. Car drivers then sit with their engine idling, often in long queues of traffic, contributing significant levels of noise and air pollution to the local environment (heavily populated by pedestrians, shops, and cafes). We wanted to find ways to encourage drivers to switch off their engines whilst waiting for the barriers to rise.

Across a series of field experiments, we tested a number of different theory-based interventions, including the use of 'watching eyes' signs (Meleady et al., 2017) and reputation/moral inducement ('Show others you care'), neither of which had a positive impact on the baseline levels of engine idling of around 72% of vehicles (Mahmood et al., 2019). We reasoned that different types of normative communications might be influential. In one study (Player et al., 2018), signs were held near a railroad crossing with three different messages. One conveyed a descriptive norm: 'When barriers are down 25% of motorists turn off their engines!.' In the other two conditions, weinvolved prescriptive norms. In the in-group prescriptive deviance condition, the message was, 'When barriers are down some Canterbury residents don't turn off their engine!.' In the outgroup, prescriptive deviance condition the message stated, 'When barriers are down some Canterbury visitors don't turn off their engine!.' Compared to a baseline (no message) condition, these three interventions collectively reduced engine

idling significantly. However, individually, only the ingroup prescriptive deviance condition differed significantly from the baseline, with drivers more than twice as likely to switch off their engines compared to the baseline (the outgroup prescriptive deviance condition also differed marginally). The important point here is that it is by drawing attention not to the desirable behavior, but to relevance of deviant behavior to the ingroup that we had an impact.

In a much larger scale study, conducted over a six-week period and involving over 6000 vehicles (Abrams, Lalot, et al., 2021), we examined the impact of norms in more detail and compared an ingroup norm message ('Join other responsible drivers in Canterbury: turn off your engine when barriers are down') with baseline measures and messages that either emphasized outcome efficacy ('You will improve air quality') or self-regulation ('Think about your actions'). All three messages reduced engine idling but the normative message was the most effective. More importantly, reductions in idling were accompanied by measurable improvements in air quality. Finally, only in the norm condition, we found that as the number of vehicles in a queue increased the proportion of those who switched off their engines also increased. In other words, the normative ingroup influence accelerated when drivers were observed by a larger number of other drivers.

Conclusions and agenda for future research

At the outset, we argued that Keblusek et al. (2018)'s dual-pathway model of intergroup and intragroup communication could be developed in ways that more strongly reflect the psychological integration of these two elements of group-based communication. This integration is achievable through the application of subjective group dynamics theory.

Using this theory we answer the question, 'What connects social identity and group-related communication?' by elaborating tenets V, VII, and VIII of the Intergroup Communication Principles (see Giles et al., Prologue of this volume). Principle V's highlighting of strategic deployment corresponds to SGD theory's primary motivational tenet – that people seek subjective validation of their ingroup's norms and practices. Yet we would elaborate the principle to apply it to both marginalized *and* dominant groups, because one route all groups use to achieve communicative power is to claim that they best represent prevailing generic norms. Consequently, we propose that Principle V could helpfully be modified (see italicized text) as follows:

> **V**: *Group members seek widespread validation of their communicative practices, either as widely socially accepted or as superior to competing or alternative practices. Socially* disadvantaged and marginalized groups will strive, and sometimes be strategically encouraged (especially with the 'allyship' and support of dominant or socially advantaged groups), to acquire a comparatively privileged group's practices. The privileged group can either assert its own dominance of those practices or, ironically in reactance, move communicatively away from what would be construed as identity-threatening tactics.

Principle VII invokes the central mechanism proposed in SGD theory (which has its roots in Durkheimian theory regarding the role of deviance as a crucial indicator of normative boundaries in society). We would slightly elaborate the principle, however, to incorporate the fact that the battle for normativity also involves endorsing deviant members from both ingroups and outgroups where they serve to validate ingroup norms.

> **VII**: Through the creation and expression of group norms in their social networks and media platforms, ingroups can control (and negotiate) normativity in everyday life, enabling their members to recognize *aspects of deviancies by other ingroup or outgroup members that imply whether they will be discredited and marginalized, or welcomed and accommodated by other members of each group.*

Principle VIII considers the question of leadership. We agree that ingroup leaders have a particularly privileged position in being able to innovate and mobilize their groups, but the current statement of Principle VIII seems overly optimistic. It would be valuable to recognize that such leaders are not necessarily trust*worthy* (they might be wholly Machiavellian, for example), and may well foster extremism and intergroup conflict just as readily as virtuous and peaceful or constructive trajectories.

What we agree on is that ingroup leader's latitude may be fundamental for their communicative capacity to mobilize change. Therefore, we suggest the following more qualified statement:

> **VIII**: Individuals who express, convincingly, best normative practices, values, and world views of their ingroup can emerge as *ambassadorial* leaders, *whose positional and representative power thereafter augments their* potential to fashion *(or not)* more distinctive cultures and social change *(whether for virtuous or nefarious ends), through which to define and validate ingroup social identity and strength of community.*

We contend that attending to the dynamic relationship between intergroup and intragroup differentiation is central to understanding behavior and attitudes that could be construed by insiders solely as intragroup or solely as intergroup but which, as a psychological process, almost always has both aspects at play. Importantly, we recognize that these dynamics do not have a standard form but may vary a good deal between contexts, cultures, and types of intergroup relationships. Here, for example, the distinction between wider societal or generic norms versus oppositional norms becomes especially important as the same processes (striving for subjective validity) can potentially result in quite different outcomes depending on the frame of reference within which they are judged.

We also call attention to the development of lay understanding of such dynamics. There is a social-developmental pathway through middle childhood to adolescence in the general understanding of inter- and intragroup dynamics ('group nous'). Yet it is also the case that adults have to learn the specific rules of the game (the relevant norms and their centrality to different groups) whenever they encounter a new intergroup context (e.g. when traveling abroad or negotiating with different organizations). How are such rules learned? This is done in part through observation, making inferences from indirect encounters with outgroup members, or even using internet intelligence, but more likely through communication with either in-group or out-group members, experiencing, and dealing with the factors that drive social inclusion and exclusion or ostracism, which provide the necessary insights.

Future research in a wide range of areas, such as extremism, organizational behavior, international relations, intergroup contact, and peace and conflict will benefit from the more integrated approach to group-based communication that we are advocating here. By attending to both the intergroup and intragroup implications of communication, as well as its oppositional or generic normative focus, each of these areas will be able to progress in new directions. A salient example is the apparently chaotic flow of tariff negotiations and positions on the war in Ukraine expressed by Donald Trump's administration during 2025. Bearing in mind the multiple audiences, reputation management pressures (Emler, 1990), and the simultaneous intergroup and interpersonal relationships in negotiations (Stephenson, 1984), some of the inconsistencies and policy oscillations may be less surprising. Pronouncements were made on ingroup and outgroup behavior in the context of public meetings with foreign leaders, sometimes in the Oval Office in the full glare of live media coverage. There were multiple audiences in play simultaneously – the Republican base within the US, outgroups within the US (variously defined as Democrats, radical activists, Communists, and so forth), national outgroups (the EU, China). These communications were 'group-based' in the fullest sense. They include admonishments or praise toward individual group members for errors or achievements, as well as comments on whole groups and their motivations. They also involved continual reiteration of Trump's own prototypicality and representativeness of the whole of America (i.e. as an ambassador of the generic norm to 'Make America Great Again'). Applying a subjective group dynamics perspective to these communications helps to provide a more complete social and psychological account of the motives and goals they serve.

We believe that group-based communications and the subjective group dynamics that might underpin them can have important societal consequences at the macro and meso levels, as described above, but also at the micro level in terms of individual actors and their actions. Corruption is a global challenge, and a critical issue is what will be the optimal routes to tackle it. Detection and punishment are difficult enough, and efforts are sometimes focused on improving the criminal justice system, but these approaches invariably assume that individuals act for amoral or immoral reasons (i.e. devoid of principle). If instead we turn to the group dynamics and normative frames that foster corrupt or

extreme action, we may be in a better position to recognize the basis of, and hence prevent such practices. A fascinating area for future research would be to compare and test conditions that might have these outcomes. For example, might restorative and reparative justice techniques incorporate efforts to expose the group dynamics that may have underpinned illegal acts, enabling both offenders and victims to adopt a more nuanced perspective on questions of responsibility and blame?

Finally, environmental degradation is self-evidently a consequence of noncooperative human behavior – the exploitation of resources for parochial or personal ends at the expense of the survival of the human race. Persuading people to change their behavior and equipping persuaders (politicians, scientists, commentators, and others) to do so require fundamental changes in the framing of the problem, which is where group-based communication becomes so critical. Future applied research should make fuller use of our knowledge about the role of subjective group dynamics in group-based communication both in conceptualizing the challenge and in developing effective interventions to change behavior (see also Giles et al., this volume). In summary, we hope that further research will make use of SGD theory's perspective on Intergroup Communication Principles to investigate these and other important avenues for intervention. On the one hand, these could provide better levers to use group-based communication for constructive ends, and on the other, they could give better insights as to when group-based communications are signaling the approach of new dangers or problems in society.

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Appendix

The present research complied with the Ethical Standards of the APA and BPS and was approved by the University of Kent Psychology Ethics Panel (#202015917941676525)

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Respondents were recruited to complete an online survey through two complementary channels: via Qualtrics Panels and via social media and distribution by partnering with local councils and charities. The full sample included 9,007 participants but 83 failed an attention check and were excluded from analysis. This resulted in a sample for the analysis of $N = 8{,}924$, among which 3620 men, 5253 women, and 37 non-binary or undisclosed, of a mean age of 45.24 ($SD = 16.67$).

Measures

Identity. Two items measured social identity at different levels. We focus here on the British identity ('I feel British,' 'Being British is important to me') and the local identity ('I feel personally connected to [place],' 'I feel like I belong in [place]'), 7-point Likert scale, 1 = None at all, 7 = A great deal.

Government communication. Respondents were asked to what extent they regarded communication by the UK government and (separately) by their local government as 'honest and credible,' 'showing empathy,' 'accessible to me, and easy to find,' and 'corresponding to what my community needed.' These were answered using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Not at all, 2 = A little, 3 = A moderate amount, 4 = A lot, to 5 = Completely.

Results

We tested a structural equation model where British identity and local identity were designed as predictors and perceived trustworthiness and accessibility of the UK and local government communications as outcomes. We included both the measurement model and the regression model. In terms of measurement, we used the single item of "accessible to me" as indicator of communication accessibility and created a multi-item latent score of communication trustworthiness based on "honest and credible", "showing empathy", and "corresponding to what my community needed". Each identity type was entered as a latent score based on the two relevant items.

This model showed excellent fit statistics, $\chi^2 = 1634$, $df = 41$, $p < .001$, CFI = .981, RMSEA = .066, 90% CI [.063, .069], SRMR = .014. The measurement model revealed no issue and all standardized loadings were greater than .84 (Table A1).

Although British identity and local identity were positively correlated, they independently contributed to more positive evaluations of both UK government and local government communications (Table A2). Their effect on

Table A1. Measurement model.

Latent variable			-test	-value	Standardized β
UK_eval =~					
item1	1.000				.847
item2	1.021	.010	101.95	<.001	.868
item3	1.031	.010	106.92	<.001	.894
Local_eval =~					
item1	1.000				.875
item2	1.043	.009	120.76	<.001	.903
item3	1.053	.009	123.15	<.001	.911
British ID =~					
item1	1.000				.880
item2	1.163	.019	62.67	<.001	.954
Local ID =~					
item1	1.000				.951
item2	1.003	.013	79.58	<.001	.935

Eval = evaluation of communication trustworthiness. ID = identity.

Table A2. Regression model.

Regression			-test	-value	Standardized β
UK_access ~					
British ID	.180	.011	16.22	<.001	.186
Local ID	.055	.011	5.04	<.001	.058
UK_eval ~					
British ID	.262	.010	26.29	<.001	.319
Local ID	.055	.009	5.93	<.001	.069
Local_access ~					
British ID	.043	.011	3.87	<.001	.044
Local ID	.236	.011	21.68	<.001	.245
Local_eval ~					
British ID	.051	.009	5.55	<.001	.064
Local ID	.237	.009	25.90	<.001	.305
Covariances					
British ~~ Local ID	.440	.018	24.76	<.001	.321
UK_access ~~ UK_eval	.627	.013	46.49	<.001	.641
UK_access ~~ Local_access	.560	.014	39.82	<.001	.467
UK_access ~~ Local_eval	.369	.011	32.27	<.001	.389
UK_eval ~~ Local_access	.408	.012	33.70	<.001	.417
UK_eval ~~ Local_eval	.452	.011	41.26	<.001	.585
Local_access ~~ Local_eval	.698	.013	51.97	<.001	.736

Access = perceived communication accessibility. Eval = evaluation of communication trustworthiness. ID = identity.

communication trustworthiness was generally greater than on perceived communication accessibility. Furthermore, each form of identity influenced perceived trustworthiness of the communications from the same-level government 4 to 5 times more than the other form of identity did – that is, local identity mostly influenced local government, and British identity UK government communication trustworthiness.