



The Ethics of Blaming and Praising Group Agents



Internal Interference and Group Agency: On the Coherence Condition

Incoherence and its Effects on Group Agency

Claim

Internal interference poses a problem for the coherence condition for group agents.

Coherence requirements for group agents are overstated and undertheorized.

They cannot account for internal interference originating within the group (e.g., conflicting explicit and implicit attitudes).

This ultimately obstructs plausible responsibility attribution.



Groups – which kind?



Conditions for Group Agency

Agency in organized groups:

- The group has attitudes (beliefs, values, intentions) that are coherent among each other.
- Formed by some decision-making procedure (e.g. voting, board decisions)
- Action-guiding
- They become irreducible to their members.



List & Pettit, 2011; French, 1987; Hess 2014; 2018; Hindriks, 2018; Collins, 2019



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(List & Pettit, 2011; French, 1987; Hess 2014; 2018; Hindriks, 2018; Collins, 2019)



Groups as Agents in their own right

Employees A, B, and C decide whether to forgo a pay rise to invest the money in installing workplace safety measures. They vote on two premises:

	Serious danger?	Effective measure?	Pay-sacrifice?
A.	Yes	No	No
B.	No	Yes	No
C.	Yes	Yes	Yes
			
	Yes	Yes	No



Coherence and Agency – The Literature

A group agent needs a Rational Unified Point of View (RVP), which forms the proper basis of deliberation (Rovane, 1998: 23)

A group agent's commitments form a rational, coherent profile, a logically integrated complex of commitments about fact and value. (Björnsson & Hess: 2017: 277)

The group agent must ensure that its beliefs and desires form a coherent whole, especially where they are close to action. (Collins, 2025:939)

Rational unity is an internal normative standard of agency itself (Rachar, 2024: 392)

Coherence is demanded for agency as a very basic requirement.



University: Incoherent on discrimination



Equal opportunity

- Truly anonymous application, merit based
- Secure against discrimination
- Formally decided, publicly endorsed, actually put into practice (List & Pettit, 2011)



Discriminatory climate

- Persistent climate of discrimination
- Glass ceiling, tacit barriers to senior roles
- Irreducible to members, group specific
- Tacit, implicit programs (Rachar, 2024)

Explicit and implicit attitudes and practices conflict, constitutive ends remain fulfillable.

→ **Internal interference in group agents**



Explicit vs Implicit Programming of the Group

Programming as higher-order causation: the group sets up structures so that certain outcomes are *likely* without micro-managing each action. (Pettit, 2007, Rachar, 2024)

My approach:

- Incoherence as structure, not a one-off mistake.

It is structurally generated via incentives, informal norms, cultures, and toleration (Hess, 2018, 37; forthcoming).



Implicit attitudes

- Acknowledged, but undertheorized.
- Often understood as supporting explicit attitudes in the background.
- List and Pettit: Organizational culture can help secure the general attitudes needed for control. (2011: 146)
- Hess: organization includes not only explicit incentive schemes and formal statements, but also tacit elements like real “power structure, peer expectation, office culture, and unpublished practices” (2018: 37)
- Hindriks and de Haan describe ethos as belonging to the collective agent and forming part of its rational point of view. The latter is described as preserving the coherence of corporate attitudes (2026: 9)
- Collins detects possible tension, saying that the culture constrains the real-world instantiation of formal procedures, but thereby, they get aligned. (2023: 13)



Coherence

To count as an agent, a group must exhibit at least a modicum of rationality. And so its members must find a form of organization that ensures, as far as possible, that the group satisfies attitude-to-fact, attitude-to-action, and attitude-to-attitude standards of rationality.”

(List & Pettit, 2011, 37)



The Coherence Condition

Three 'standards of rationality' must be satisfied at some minimal level for agency:

1. **Attitude-to-fact:** standards on perceptual evidence in relation to perceptual representations, etc.
2. **Attitude-to-action:** standards that rule in favor of actions that are required or permitted by the agent's representations and motivations.
3. **Attitude-to-attitude:** standards that rule out failures of consistency (e.g., representations that take propositions to be true that are not co-realizable); they rule out means-end failures, combining representations about goodness, desirability, or rationality itself with attitudes that breach such values.

(List & Pettit, 2011, 20; de Haan, 2026)



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State and process requirements

For determining attitude-to-attitude rationality, are we assessing the state the agent is in or the processes it undergoes to react to its states?

- **State requirements:** be a certain way at a given time. → Have coherent attitudes that are co-realizable.
- **Process requirements:** do something over time, e.g. to include forming and revising beliefs. → Make attitudes align, if they don't. Make state requirements superfluous.

(Kolodny, 2007)

“If a reasoning agent fails to be rational, then the fact that it self-corrects, recognizing its failure in a manner open only to a reasoning agent, will provide a ground for continuing to view it as an agent”

(List & Pettit, 2011: 31)



What is implied in coherence requirements?



What do we even capture as states and processes of a group agent?

- Explicit attitudes the group has formed through voting, etc.
- Implicit and tacit norms, climates, atmospheres, etc.



The problem

State requirements coherence view: internal interference looks like a breakdown of agency too quickly. Exclusive for most group agents, which remain instrumentally functional towards their constitutive ends. It remains desirable to understand them to be agential for responsibility attribution. (Silver, Keynote)

Process requirements coherence view: in need of an account of how internal interference comes about in the first place by including implicit attitude formation.

- Maintenance processes may need to be drastically adapted to account for the tacit cultures and climates present in many group agents.
- Implicit attitudes are (if at all) considered to be part of the RPV or have received very little attention in comparison.
- Internal interference remains undertheorized.





Possible Objections



Weakness of will

Weakness of will often describes that an attitude is not translated appropriately into the corresponding action or acting against better judgment. It presupposes a relatively unified point of view and mostly describes one-off events. (Silver, 2025; Flowerman, 2024).

„Joseph did *f* rather than *e*, even though he was convinced that *e* was the better thing to do all things considered.“
(SEP, 2025)

But in the university case, both attitudes are followed by corresponding action, but there are two original attitudes (wills) that cause conflicting actions. It is a persistent phenomenon, rather than a one-off event.



Manipulation



Accounts of manipulation and its effects on agency are very well discussed, but mostly overlook group agents. Their focus is on **individual agents**. (Mele, 2019; McKenny, 2004; Hayi, Cuypers, 2007)
E.g: The evil neuroscientist.

When discussed, they focus on groups that are manipulated by **external actors or circumstances** they have no influence on. (Collins, de Haan, 2024)

E.g.: New legislation the group agent needs to react to, another company spying.

→ **Internal** interference is focused on **groups** and them being the origin of interference.



Plain lying or hypocrisy

Hypocrisy and lying mostly require (individual) bad faith and intentional deception.

A group lies only if it states that p , believes that p is false, and intends to be deceptive in stating that p . (Lackey, 2020)

Here, the university sincerely implements anonymous admissions while its institutional climate (tacit norms, routines) pulls in the opposite direction.

It is not clear whether the group is even aware of the interference.



Rogue members

Group agents do represent their own culture or structure:

This is imposed on members, making them use group-specific language, concepts, resources, relationships, etc.

They extend beyond formal procedures, including unintentionally developed and tacit elements. (Hess, forthcoming)

“Individual member action, dissident or not, constitutes group activity when it is implicitly programmed for by the group.” (Rachar, 2024, 398)



Summary

- Group agents as internally conflicted and possibly remain agents.
- The coherence condition is often state-focused, overstated, and undertheorized.
- Internal interference poses problems to standard accounts of group agency.
- What we need instead is a more fine-grained account of explicit and implicit attitude formation, of internal interference, and of the processes through which group agency is maintained even under conflict.



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