The Impact of Social Categorization on Persuasion Effectiveness

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In the current research, the precise impact of persuasion attempts from out-group members is examined. Based on different streams of research, both a relatively smaller persuasive effect of out-group members and a differentiation away from the out-group can be hypothesized. In a series of four experiments, we find convincing evidence for the differentiation expectation; persuasion attempts from out-group members led to opinions opposite from the out-group opinion, irrespective of the nature of the group categorization. Furthermore, we show that persuasion attempts from in-group members only influence attitudes when an intergroup context is made salient.

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The Impact of Social Categorization on Persuasion Attempts

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research examining social categorization effects on persuasiveness, has mainly focused on understanding the precise impact of persuasion attempts from in-group members on attitudes. It has been argued that in-group membership can serve as a cue for systematic processing (Mackie Worth and Asuncion 1990; Van Knippenberg 1999), because in-group members are more similar and usually share the same opinions. This causes people to process information from in-group members in a more systematic way than information from out-group members. As a consequence, people are relatively more persuaded by strong arguments from in-group members than by weak arguments from in-group members, whereas they are relatively unpersuaded by both strong and weak arguments from out-group members. This implies that persuasion attempts from out-group members are relatively less influential than persuasion attempts from in-group members, and do not (or to a lesser extent) influence attitudes.

However, research examining the impact of out-group members within other domains, suggests that people do show strong reactions towards out-group members. People have a strong tendency to differentiate themselves from out-group members in terms of resource allocation (less points or credits for the out-group), and evaluations of group members (evaluate in-group and out-group members as even more different than they already are; Jetten, Spears and Postmes 2004). Furthermore, recent research examining the impact of group membership in relation to product evaluations (Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005; White and Dahl 2006, 2008), shows that people tend to avoid products that are associated with dissociative out-groups.

The above described research shows that people tend to differentiate themselves from out-groups in terms of resource allocation and product preferences, but remains silent about the precise impact of persuasion attempts from out-groups. In the current research, we examine whether out-group members are either less persuasive (i.e., have relatively less influence on attitudes, as is suggested by the research showing stronger persuasion effects of in-group members) or whether people differentiate their attitudes after persuasion attempts from out-group members (as is suggested by the research showing differentiation tendencies in other domains). A crucial test to gain more insight in the exact impact of persuasion attempts from out-group members, is to examine the impact of persuasion attempts that differ in opinion valence. A differentiation effect does not predict differences in responses to weak versus strong arguments from out-group members, and this previously found result is thus in line with both a differentiation effect and a difference in persuasiveness effect. However, a differentiation effect predicts that people will report attitudes that are clearly different from the one stated by the out-group member. This implies reporting a positive (product) attitude after a negative recommendation, and a negative attitude after a positive (product) recommendation. If the out-group member is less persuasive than the in-group member, this does not predict a flip of attitudes in a direction that is clearly different from the out-group member, but rather a relatively neutral opinion.

We tested these predictions with four experiments. In the first three experiments, we manipulated recommendation valence (positive versus negative) and group membership (in-group versus out-group). Across these three experiments, we used different manipulations of group membership. This had two purposes, first of all, this increases the reliability and generalizability of the results. And second, the type of group manipulation is quite easily open to alternative explanations (unknown to the researchers, a particular group might for example be a dissociative out-group for the participants). Showing the hypothesized effects with different types of group manipulations (one of which was a minimal group paradigm; Billig and Taifel 1973) rules out such group specific alternative explanations. In these three experiments, respondents read the (positive or negative) opinion of either an in-group or an out-group member about a specific painting. After seeing a picture of the painting themselves, respondents were asked to indicate their opinion about this painting (seven-point scale, 1=ugly, 7=beautiful). Results of the three individual studies showed that people were more positive about the painting after a positive in-group recommendation than after a positive out-group recommendation (in line with previous research). These studies also showed that people were more positive about the painting after a negative out-group recommendation than after a positive out-group recommendation, which is in line with a differentiation effect. Furthermore, a pooled analysis over these three studies also showed that respondents were more positive about the painting after a negative out-group recommendation than after a negative in-group recommendation. Together, these studies and the pooled analysis over these three studies provide convincing evidence that people react to persuasion attempts from out-group members by differentiating their own attitude away from the out-group member, and that this effect is caused by pure social categorization.

Remarkably, none of the studies showed any difference in attitude after the positive versus the negative in-group recommendation. In the final experiment, we examined whether this was caused by a lack of salience of shared (in)group membership (Wilder 1984). We argued that a recommendation from an in-group member can be perceived on a more interpersonal level as a recommendation from a stranger rather than on an intergroup level (as a recommendation from a fellow in-group member). Confronting people with the existence of the out-group should make the intergroup context relatively more salient and subsequently also highlight the fact that someone belongs to the in-group. In this study, we confronted half of the respondents with out-group members, and we found the expected effect of recommendation valence (more positive after a positive than after a negative in-group recommendation), which was again absent in the condition where respondents were not confronted with the out-group.

These set of studies showed that out-group members have an important impact on attitudes in an unexpected manner. This is important to take into account with regard to persuasion attempts (such as word of mouth) and advertisement campaigns, just like the finding that in-group membership only has an impact on attitudes.

REFERENCES


