The Achilles Heel of Centrality: Group Identification Makes the Central Susceptible to Influence

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Are central consumers more or less susceptible to group-influence than marginals? Five studies show that despite their status and influence potential, central members depend on the group to satisfy belonging needs, which turns them vulnerable to group-influence. This process is likely to manifest with social but not with achievement groups.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The groups and communities to which a consumer belongs influence his attitudes and decisions (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Nowadays, with growing possibilities to form communities online, it is important to understand how groups influence consumers, and in particular who is most influential and who is most susceptible to influence. Our research focuses on the latter, and examines whether susceptibility to group influence (henceforth labeled ‘SGI’) depends on centrality.

Central consumers, defined as those holding a large number of social ties within their group, are known to be “influentials.” Consequently, one may expect them to resist social influence. However, extant research yields mixed findings; some find the central resistant (Hu & Van den Bulte, 2014), others find him susceptible (Lee, Cotte, & Noseworthy, 2010), yet others report no association between centrality and SGI (Iyengar, Van den Bulte, & Valente, 2011). The seemingly opposing findings call for deeper understanding of the conditions under which centrality increases as opposed to decreases SGI.

We propose that centrality may instigate two distinct processes, resulting in opposite effects on SGI. The ‘status mechanism’ lowers the central’s SGI. Compared to the marginal, the central ranks high in the group’s social hierarchy, and therefore should experience more autonomy (Kifer et al., 2013), and less sensitivity to social pressures (Galinsky et al., 2008). Indeed, research demonstrates that centrality and status are negatively associated with conformity (Bellezza, Gino, & Keinan, 2014; Hu & Van den Bulte, 2014). We acknowledge the status mechanism, but introduce a different process via which centrality increases SGI – the ‘group-identification mechanism’.

We posit that centrality increases group-identification, i.e. that the central identifies with the group more than the marginal does (H1). Due to his numerous relationships in the group, the central obtains a strong sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The marginal, in contrast, obtains very limited benefits from the group. Thus, the same group is psychologically more rewarding and appears more appealing to the central than to the marginal. Since group-identification facilitates conformity to group norms (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), the central should exhibit higher SGI than the marginal (H2). If the group-identification process is driven by belonging motives, it may depend on self-construal - the extent to which the self is defined independently of others or interdependently with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Centrality should increase SGI when the individual is interdependent, rather than independent (H3).

Finally, we posit that the group setting may determine whether centrality instigates a status or a group-identification process. Group settings generally bolster belonging motives (Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999). However, groups vary in their effect on status motives. While social groups reward egalitarian behavior and inhibit status motives, achievement groups foster inequality and status aspirations. Therefore, in achievement (social) groups, status mechanism will weigh more (less), and centrality would decrease (increase) SGI (H4).

Study 1 tested the association between centrality and SGI using real social groups. We assigned 175 students to 14 groups, and opened a social networking website for each group. Centrality represented the number of friends that each participant had in his group/social network. During two weeks, aside from freely interacting online, participants responded to opinion polls on their social networking website. The SGI measure was derived from numeric responses to these polls. Prior to expressing their personal opinion, participants saw the cumulative response distribution of preceding respondents from their group. For each participant, we calculated the mean deviation of his answer from the preceding mean opinion, across the 7 polls. Lower deviations indicate greater SGI. Consistent with H2, centrality was negatively associated with deviation from group opinion. In contrast, subjective-status correlated positively with deviation from group opinion. Therefore, a positive association between centrality and SGI is evident, and cannot be attributed to status effects.

Next we explored the effect of centrality on group-identification. Participants in studies 2a and 2b (N2a = 103; N2b = 174) imagined attending a private movie screening with a group of 24 viewers. They rated various aspects of their movie going experience, including how they felt about themselves and about the group of viewers. We told participants in the high (low) centrality condition they were friends with 13 (2) of the other moviegoers. Supporting H1, in both studies central participants showed stronger group-identification than marginals. In study 2a, sense of belonging mediated the effect of centrality on group identification. In study 2b, self-construal moderated that effect. Centrality increased group identification more among interdependents than among independents. Studies 2a&2b demonstrate that centrality increases group identification due to belonging needs. Subjective status, mood, or self-image could not explain these findings.

Study 3 tested whether group-identification mediates the effect of centrality on SGI. Participants (N = 104) imagined residing in a community neighborhood. In the low (high) centrality condition, participants hardly knew any (knew many) of the other neighbors. They imagined voting on three topics during a neighbors meeting. For each topic, participants indicated their preference between two options after learning about the preference of the majority. Supporting H2, central participants showed stronger agreement with the group and greater group-identification than marginal participants. Furthermore, group-identification mediated the effect of centrality on agreement with the group, but subjective status did not. Study 4 (N = 189) employed the same procedure with a self-construal scale. It revealed that among interdependents (independents), centrality increased (decreased) agreement with the group.

Study 5 tested whether group type moderates the effect of centrality on SGI. Participants (N = 207) imagined being tennis club members. Pretest participants perceived club members as tennis fans, so we operationalized SGI using tennis attitudes; more favorable attitudes reflected higher SGI. We described the tennis club as either social or achievement-oriented. Supporting H4, among social (achievement) group participants, centrality enhanced (lowered) tennis attitudes.

Taken together, these studies elucidate the vulnerable side of centrality. Despite their status, central group members depend on the group to satisfy belonging needs, which increases their SGI. The finding that group-identification is more likely to prevail in social than in achievement groups reconciles the seemingly contradictory findings in the literature.

REFERENCES


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