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Adopting a Group Attention Perspective: An Exploration of Moderators and Future Directions

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Shteynberg (this issue) reviews how group attention increases the psychological prominence of the information observed in group settings, serves to better embed descriptive norms making them more dominant in people's cognitions, and acts as an axis of group communication and cooperation. We find the research on group attention compelling and an interesting addition to this special issue on Intersubjective Norms. The findings regarding group attention suggest that it generally functions like a cognitive heuristic (i.e., an automatic process that occurs largely without people's awareness or control). Yet, we question whether there are conditions under which individuals would not use group attention to determine descriptive norms and instead use other methods for focusing their attention (possibly moving them toward more deliberative cognitive processing). In this comment, we aim to highlight and suggest potential moderators of the phenomenon and directions for future research on this topic.

As Shteynberg (this issue) describes, the "group" that one attends to can take many forms. It could be family, one's community, or even mass media. It is possible that the nature and composition of the group could affect whether, and to what extent, group attention is utilized. The size and heterogeneity of the group as well as whether there are

experts or authorities present may be important factors to consider. For example, if we focus on the composition of the group, we would expect individuals are more likely to use group attention when the group consists of people who are of the same ethnicity, cultural background, age, and gender compared with a group that shows more deviation from the perceivers' typical in-group composition on those dimensions. In other words, it might be the case that individuals who are in culturally diverse groups are less likely to utilize group attention than those who are in culturally homogeneous groups. We expect this effect because individuals are more likely to use similar others as a reference group for their own behavior. This idea could be examined experimentally using a paradigm involving different confederate groups that were either similar to the participant or more heterogeneous and comparing the likelihood that a participant uses group attention under each condition. Likewise, it would also be interesting to do a naturalistic observation study to see whether individuals from more cultural homogeneous communities use group attention more than individuals from culturally heterogeneous communities.

The influence of the composition of the group on group attention could have implications for the study of group performance and creativity. Previous research has shown that diversity is about as likely to hamper group performance as it is to improve performance (for a review, see Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). Diversity enhances unique perspectives but it can also impede group function. To devise creative solutions to the problems encountered, group members must attend to unique perspectives and allow others to verify their views (Swann, Kwan, Polzer, & Milton, 2003). Group attention may vary across diverse groups. Groups that best utilize group attention may contribute to considerations of diverse perspectives and, in turn, lead to creative performance. An interesting future direction is to identify factors that improve group attention among diverse groups.

Groups that have a legitimate or trustworthy authority, expert, or leader may also cause individuals to be less likely to use group attention because they are focusing on what the authority is attending to (assuming that the authority is attending to something different than the rest of the group). Research indicates that experts and authority figures are attended to and can be highly influential. Compared with non-authorities, authorities (a) are more persuasive, (b) elicit more change in attitudes, and (c) exert a stronger influence on behavioral compliance (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007). Thus, future research on group attention should examine whether group attention is utilized less when an expert or authority is present.

It might also be worth considering whether the group being attended to is a peer-based group or an aspirational group (see also Morris & Liu, this issue). Humans attend to both peer groups and elite groups as a reference for norms. It could be that group attention is differentially utilized depending on whether an individual is focused on fitting in with a peer group or trying to emulate an elite group. There might be cultural differences in this differential attention. People may be more likely to attend to and gain information from an elite group than from a peer group in cultures with a high-power distance. Future research could tease apart these distinctions providing further insight into the functionality of group attention.

Another area for future research would be to examine the influence of cultural values, such as individualism and collectivism, on group attention. Compared with individualists,

collectivists are more likely to see themselves as being connected to their group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1990). Thus, individuals from collectivistic cultures may be more likely to use and be influenced by group attention in acquiring information about descriptive norms compared with individuals from individualistic cultures. Essentially, collectivists are more connected to and concerned about their social group and where they fit into that social group. Consequently, it is likely that collectivists will be more in tune with what their group is attending to and the implications of that attention for their own behavior. Future research could compare the use of group attention in different cultural groups known to be individualistic or collectivist and it could also examine whether individual differences in individualism—collectivism can predict the use of group attention. Furthermore, the tendency for bicultural individuals to utilize group attention to detect norms may depend on their immediate cultural environment. Conflicting norms exist within bicultural individuals, who have to switch back and forth between two distinct cultures. A future direction for research on group attention could examine how bicultural individuals follow the descriptive norms of the group culture when the salience of another culture is activated in their immediate environment (e.g., Alter & Kwan, 2009; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000).

In addition, there may be situational factors, which can increase or decrease the impact of group attention depending on its functional costs and benefits (Neuberg, Kenrick, & Schaller, 2010). For example, one might think of an academic conference, where everyone is paying attention to the most established and well-known researcher present, looking for an opportunity to make a connection with him or her. Not everyone may get that opportunity, particularly, if there are many with the same intention. If this was the case, it would be better to focus on what the group is *not* paying attention to, or in this case, other potential connections. Consequently, where everyone is attending to and considering the same limited opportunity (e.g., resources, potential friends, romantic partners), paying attention to what the group is *not* paying attention to might provide the individual with untapped opportunities. This parallels the phenomenon of niche selection (Odling-Smee, Laland, & Feldman, 1996). Thinking about group attention in terms of its costs and benefits may be a functional heuristic for thinking about the phenomenon. For instance, building on an earlier example, the information that may be gained from tracking the attention of an authority or expert might be of higher value (i.e., more accurate and useful) than that of many laypersons (the group), hence there are greater benefits to not using group attention.

In conclusion, group attention and its implications for descriptive norms is an area ripe for further research. This research could improve our understanding of the influence of group attention by examining potential boundary conditions for group attention. In this comment, we suggest examining the influence of the composition of the group and situational factors that might influence the extent to which group attention is utilized. Indeed, there are many directions that research on group attention could pursue making this an exciting area of research.

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