The embedding forces of network commitment: An examination of the psychological processes linking advice centrality and susceptibility to social influence

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	We draw on concepts of embeddedness and commitment to explain people's susceptibility to social influence from their personal network. Using two samples and multiple methods (experimental manipulation, social network inventories, and surveys) we assess whether embeddedness in one's social network (i.e., advice centrality) affects susceptibility to social influence, via commitment to one's personal network. We extend concepts of affective, normative, and instrumental commitment to an individual's personal network for this purpose. In Study 1, we experimentally manipulate normative social information and find that central members are more likely to conform to social influence, according to mechanisms of psychological affective and instrumental network commitment. Study 2 tests the robustness of our generalized predictions by considering how advice centrality relates to one's aggregate dyadic network commitments and perceived social influence. Study 2 results indicate that advice centrality positively relates to perceived social influence through relational affective, normative, and instrumental network commitment.

1. Introduction

An individual's susceptibility to social influence can provide both benefits and threats to the individual and their host organization. This susceptibility could have a positive effect on commitment, performance, and employee retention (e.g., Jiang, Liu, McKay, Lee, & Mitchell, 2012; Mitchell & Lee, 2001). Conversely, it is also a mechanism of dependence on collective opinions that might lead to aggregated groupthink processes (Janis, 1983) and also make one more susceptible to suggestion (Asch, 1951). Traditionally, greater centrality within advice networks is believed to enable greater power, influence, and performance (e.g., Chiu, Balkundi, & Weinberg, 2016; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 2001). However, these benefits could have concurrent vulnerabilities if advice centrality makes people more susceptible to social influence.

People are embedded in informal social networks that can influence their attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors (e.g., Burt, 2001; Gibbons, 2004; Granovetter, 1985; McEvily, Soda, & Tortoriello, 2014). Network members can also be influenced through their commitments to dyadic ties (Lawler & Yoon, 1996). However, we know little about how peoples' embeddedness (i.e., centrality) within an advice network, and

their commitment to the personal ties within this network, relates to their susceptibility to social influence. Herein, we examine how advice centrality affects susceptibility to influence from one's personal network via network commitment.

We draw on two samples from professional peer networks to examine how commitment to a personal network relates to one's susceptibility to social influence, and hope to make a few contributions. First, joining recent calls to understand how structural and psychological elements of social networks work together (Casciaro, Gino, & Kouchaki, 2014), we extend commitment research by focusing on a new target of commitment at the individual-level – commitment to one's personal network. Prior commitment research has referenced commitments to one's organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993), occupation (Weng & McElroy, 2012), union (Monnot, Wagner, & Beehr, 2011), team (Kukenberger, Mathieu, & Ruddy, 2015), goals (Klein, Wesson, Hollenbeck, & Alge, 1999), and supervisor (Meyer, Morin, & Vandenberghe, 2015). Surprisingly, personal networks have not been studied as a target of one's commitment.

Second, we consider differences in types of commitment and forms of how these commitments are conceived. In considering forms of commitment, or the ways people psychologically bond with their

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network, we examine the question of commitment both *psychologically* (Study 1) and *relationally* (Study 2). We draw from the literatures on commitment (e.g., Lawler & Yoon, 1996; Meyer et al., 1993), social impact (Latané, 1981) and heuristics (e.g., Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011) to propose a new multi-dimensional structure of network commitment that accounts for different *types* of commitment bonds (i.e., affective, normative, and instrumental: e.g., Meyer et al., 1993) and different *forms* of network commitment aggregation (i.e., psychological and relational). This detailed specification of the construct should help to extend Lawler and Yoon's (1996) dyadic research to outline a broader array of commitments that one can have with their aggregate set of ties in their personal network.

Third, we will explain and empirically assess how these various types and forms of network commitment can make people more susceptible to environmental (i.e., social) influence attempts either directly from the network or from individuals drawing on the network as part of a proactive influence attempt. This will add precision to our understanding of the psychological mechanisms through which the social environment can influence peoples' thoughts and actions (e.g., Carr, Schmidt, Ford, & DeShon, 2003; Jiang et al., 2012). That is, we seek to understand if a basic model of embeddedness, wherein embeddedness affects susceptibility to social influence through commitment (see Fig. 1), holds when considering psychological commitment to one's personal network, and alternatively, relational commitment to one's personal network. This knowledge should help to improve our understanding of the mechanisms explaining the relationship between network characteristics and social influence for individuals embedded within larger social collectives (e.g., Gibbons, 2004; Zagenczyk, Scott, Gibney, Murrell, & Thatcher, 2010). Using both psychological and relational network commitment and multiple-methods helps to support the robustness of our predictions.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Overview of the theoretical model

We examine how structural embeddedness and network commitment make a person more susceptible to social influence. Using an integration of Lawler and Yoon's (1996) dyadic model of relational cohesion and Latané's (1981) social impact theory as a theoretical point of departure, we propose: (1) that structural network embeddedness, conceptualized as in- and out-degree advice centrality, will relate to both psychological and relational forms of affective, normative, and instrumental network commitment; and, (2) that these network commitments will subsequently make a person more susceptible to social influence using an experimental manipulation in Study 1 and a measure of perceived influence in Study 2 (see Fig. 1).

According to the theory of relational cohesion, network dyads will interact with each other more frequently, experience more positive

emotion, develop greater relational cohesion, and engage in more committed behaviors when each dyadic member has high total power. Lawler and Yoon, 1996 (p. 91) specifically state that, "the theory of relational cohesion posits an endogenous process by which the structural potential for cohesion is actualized in 'relational cohesion', that is, in the actors' definitions of the relation as a unifying force in the situation." We interpret this logic to suggest that structural network ties promote a psychologically-based relational cohesion between individuals. When aggregated to the network at large, this logic also provides preliminary support for our proposed link between structural embeddedness and network commitment, an individual's psychological bond with their aggregate personal network.

Extending relational cohesion concepts to one's broader personal network also suggests the linkage between network commitment and susceptibility to social influence. Indeed, "the theory of relational cohesion suggests an avenue by which interpersonal relations become a source of 'social embeddedness' … shaping exchanges, generating informal constraints on malfeasance or opportunism, and reducing 'transaction costs'" (Lawler & Yoon, 1996, p. 105). According to this statement, reductions of malfeasance and opportunism are actualized through social influence in a manner that allows more efficient social exchange and fewer transaction costs. We extend this logic to suggest that relational cohesion serves to align individuals' actions (and intentions) with the objectives of the collective, foregoing more individualistic objectives.

We draw on Latané's (1981) discussion of social forces to extend Lawler and Yoon's (1996) model by aggregating beyond a (dyadic) relational cohesion approach to explain network commitment as an individual-level construct relevant to one's entire personal network. This helps to establish a personal-network-targeted commitment construct and identifies person-level outcomes (i.e., susceptibility to social influence) resulting from such commitment. According to Latané (1981) individuals are impacted by social forces (i.e., other people). These influences will be more potent when social forces are stronger, more numerous, and more immediate. Latané (1981) also asserts that each additional person has a marginally decreasing incremental effect on a social force; and an individual target's experience of the social force decreases as the number of targets of the social force increases. We consider each tie within one's network as a unique social force of influence. When aggregated, we expect these social forces to coalesce and create a greater collective social force of influence on an individual.

In their theory, Lawler and Yoon (1996) have considered network commitment, referred to as relational cohesion, as an affectively-based dyadic bond. Our conceptualization is based on this underlying concept of relational cohesion, but also extends the concept in two ways. First, we consider bonds based on instrumentality (instrumental network commitment) and obligation (normative network commitment) in addition to those based on affect (affective network commitment). Second, we consider different aggregate forms of these dyadic
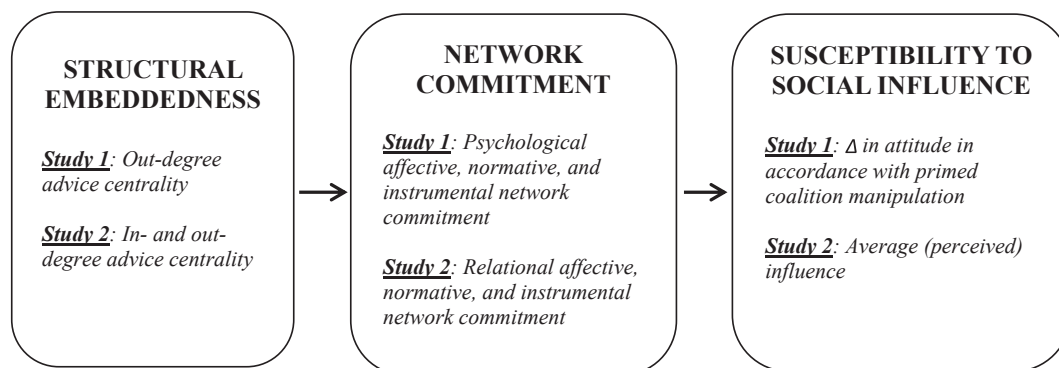

Fig. 1. Conceptual model of the effects of structural embeddedness and network commitment on susceptibility to social influence. *Note: bold headings represent the theoretical constructs and the information in italics represent specific operationalizations in Studies 1 and 2.