



FlashReport



When can shared attention increase affiliation? On the bonding effects of co-experienced belief affirmation

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ABSTRACT

There is significant evidence suggesting that shared attention, or the perception of synchronous co-attention, can impact *intrapersonal* outcomes such as memory, affect, motivation, judgment, and behavior (Shteynberg, 2015). The *interpersonal* effects of shared attention, however, are not well-known. That is, we do not know if, and when, sharing attention changes feelings of closeness to the co-attende. In an experiment with 447 participants, we examined whether sharing attention increased affiliation irrespective of the co-attended stimulus (the stimulus-independent hypothesis), or based on the co-attended stimulus (the stimulus-dependent hypothesis). The results substantiated the stimulus-dependent hypothesis, confirming that the effect of shared attention on affiliation depends on the stimulus under shared attention. More specifically, whereas belief-affirming messages under shared attention increased felt closeness to the co-attende, belief-disaffirming and mixed messages under shared attention did not increase felt closeness to the co-attende. In all, the findings suggest that sharing attention to belief affirming messages creates a unique situational context that enhances relational closeness.

1. Introduction

Whether sharing a meal with family, listening to a lecture with classmates, or watching a sports game with friends, shared experiences are woven into the fabric of everyday life. Such experiences involve a perception of shared attention—a perception of synchronous co-attention to a specific stimulus with one's ingroup. Rooted in the theory of shared attention (Shteynberg, 2015), this perspective holds that objects of shared attention—that is, objects co-attended to simultaneously—receive greater cognitive resources and hence undergo deeper processing (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Craik & Tulving, 1975). Accordingly, studies have found that shared attention on stimuli increases memory recall (Eskenazi, Doerrfeld, Logan, Knoblich, & Sebanz, 2013; He, Lever, & Humphreys, 2011; Richardson et al., 2012; Shteynberg, 2010), cognitive elaboration (Shteynberg et al., 2014; Shteynberg, Hirsh, Galinsky, & Knight, 2014), and behavioral learning (Shteynberg & Apfelbaum, 2013). Relatedly, studies have shown that shared experiences of valent stimuli amplify attitudes towards those stimuli (Boothby, Clark, & Bargh, 2014; Boothby, Smith, Clark, & Bargh, 2016; Shteynberg, Bramlett, Fles, & Cameron, 2016).

The theory of shared attention (Shteynberg, 2015) is an account of the above findings. The theory holds that maintaining common ground

(Clark, 1985), or what is mutually known, is critical to communication. Thus, prioritizing specific aspects of the environment and focusing attention on what is simultaneously co-attended to with a close other is particularly important (Shteynberg, 2015). As such, shared attention theory posits that directing greater cognitive resources to targets of shared attention builds common ground, which facilitates subsequent interaction among group members. Specifically, if group members cognitively prioritize the stimulus to which they are simultaneously co-attending, each stays abreast of the other, arriving at novel mutual knowledge at the same time.

1.1. Shared attention and affiliation

Whereas researchers have focused on the intrapersonal consequences (e.g., memories and attitudes towards co-attended stimuli) of shared attention, interpersonal outcomes of shared attention have largely escaped conceptual and empirical focus. For instance, we do not know if, and when, shared attention changes feelings of closeness to the co-attende.

Critically, feelings of interpersonal affiliation with the co-attende are conceptualized as a precursor to the shared attention state itself. That is, perceiving the co-attende as an ingroup member is

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foundational to the emergence of shared attention (Boothby et al., 2016; He et al., 2011; Shteynberg, 2015). However, it is possible that felt closeness to the co-attende is not only an input to, but also an output of, the shared attention state. This possibility is both conceptually and practically significant as it would suggest that shared attention is a critical part of an affiliative cycle—affiliation with the co-attende increases shared attention, and shared attention increases affiliation with the co-attende.

Upon what conceptual grounds should we expect a causal connection between shared attention and greater affiliation with the co-attende? Below we formulate two different theoretical arguments that underpin two distinct hypotheses.

First, given that the human capacity for shared attention is thought to facilitate future interaction (Shteynberg, 2015), it is possible that the perception of shared attention would heighten feelings of affiliation in order to motivate the very future interaction that it facilitates. That is, as the shared attention mechanism aligns mutual knowledge among co-attendees that eases communication, it may also increase affiliative feelings among co-attendees that motivates them to engage in that communication. This *stimulus-independent hypothesis* suggests that there is a direct causal connection between the perception of shared attention and greater affiliation that is independent of stimulus content. This hypothesis is consistent with recent findings in the joint attention literature, suggesting that joint eye gaze to a neutral task increases social bonding (Wolf, Launay, & Dunbar, 2016).

Second, there may be a causal connection between the perception of shared attention and greater affiliation as long as the stimulus, when amplified by shared attention, increases affiliation. For instance, given the causal connection between belief affirmation and greater feelings of affiliation (Crocker, Niiya, & Mischkowski, 2008; Gottman, 2011; Stinson, Logel, Shepherd, & Zanna, 2011), we should expect that shared attention on belief affirmation would amplify its effects on affiliation, thereby increasing affiliation with the co-attende. This *stimulus-dependent hypothesis* is consistent with previous shared attention research showing that the perception of synchronous co-attention on a valent stimulus amplifies the effect of that stimulus on emotions (Shteynberg et al., 2014) and attitudes (Boothby et al., 2014; Boothby et al., 2016; Shteynberg et al., 2016).

1.2. Stimulus-independent vs. stimulus-dependent hypotheses

In sum, according to the stimulus-independent hypothesis, shared attention should lead to greater affiliation with the co-attende irrespective of stimulus content—meaning that shared attention has a direct influence on affiliation. Put differently, evidence for the stimulus-independent hypothesis would suggest that the perception of shared attention, and not the stimulus under its focus, is what drives greater affiliation with the co-attende. Conversely, according to the stimulus-dependent hypothesis, shared attention should lead to greater affiliation with the co-attende by amplifying the stimulus in focus and hence its effects. For instance, when shared attention is focused on a belief-affirming stimulus (Crocker et al., 2008; Gottman, 2011; Stinson et al., 2011), belief affirmation and hence its effects are amplified, yielding greater feelings of affiliation towards the co-attende.

2. Current study

We conducted a study with 447 participants from the University of Tennessee (72% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 18.75$, $SD = 1.35$). In order to manipulate shared attention, we randomly assigned participants to either a shared attention condition ($n = 228$), where the participant and confederate co-attended synchronously (i.e., together at the same time), or to a non-shared attention condition ($n = 219$), where the participant and confederate co-attended asynchronously (i.e., one after the other). As we will describe below, we also manipulated whether participants co-attended to a belief-affirming message ($n = 144$), a belief-

disaffirming message ($n = 151$), or both a belief affirming and disaffirming message ($n = 152$). The affirming and disaffirming condition allowed the experimenters to appear neutral to the debate, as neither side was given preference. We reasoned that under shared attention, this neutral stance would lead to greater affiliation under the stimulus-independent hypothesis, but not under the stimulus-dependent hypothesis. In a fully crossed, between-subjects design this amounted to six conditions, with a minimum of 69 participants per condition. We report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions.

Our aim was to collect as many participants as possible over the course of two semesters, which we estimated to be over 400 participants. Assuming the smallest effect size of interest ($f = 0.25$), our study would require 128 participants as calculated by G*Power 3.1 (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007; ANOVA fixed effects, numerator $df = 1$, number of groups = 6, $\alpha = 0.05$, $1 - \beta = 0.80$). Our final sample included 447 participants.

We manipulated belief-affirmation and/or disaffirmation by gathering information regarding the participant's belief in the origins of the human species (i.e., evolution vs. creation), and then randomly assigned participants to either receive a message that affirmed their belief or disaffirmed their belief, or both. For example, if a participant reported that they believe that humans evolved, they were either exposed to a message that affirmed (pro-evolution), or disaffirmed their belief (pro-creation), or both messages. Conversely, if a participant reported that they believe that humans were created, they were either exposed to a message that affirmed (pro-creation), or disaffirmed their belief (pro-evolution), or both. In all, we created six conditions across co-attentional synchrony (synchronous, asynchronous) and message type (affirming, disaffirming, affirming & disaffirming).

According to the stimulus-independent hypothesis, shared attention should lead to greater affiliation with the co-attende irrespective of the stimulus content. Hence, under the stimulus-independent hypothesis, synchronous (vs. asynchronous) co-attention should increase affiliation across all stimuli conditions (affirming, disaffirming, and affirming/disaffirming). Conversely, according to the stimulus-dependent hypothesis, synchronous (vs. asynchronous) co-attention should lead to greater affiliation only when the stimulus under shared attention is belief affirming, resulting in the amplification of belief affirmation on affiliation.

2.1. Procedure

Participants were welcomed into the lab, where they were instructed to sit next to another participant (who was actually a confederate). After giving consent, both individuals completed a questionnaire that assessed their endorsement of a specific belief: creationism versus evolution. Both individuals also privately reported to what degree they believe in creationism, evolution, or another theory, in which case they were asked to specify. Participants were only included in the study if they chose creationism or evolution (not other), allowing us to clearly affirm or disaffirm their belief at a later point. Forty-one participants endorsed other beliefs and were excluded from the study (synchronous conditions: $n = 16$; asynchronous conditions: $n = 25$), resulting in a sample consisting of 69.6% pro-creation beliefs ($n = 331$) and 30.4% pro-evolution beliefs ($n = 136$).

After completing the questionnaire, participants were brought into a room where they were seated at a small table sitting adjacent to one another. The participant worked collaboratively with the confederate on Silvia et al.'s (2008) creativity task for 3 min, after which they received positive feedback. We used this task to evoke the minimal affiliation necessary for shared attention (Shteynberg, 2015). Participants then completed three items assessing feelings towards the confederate in particular¹ giving us a measure of affiliation to the co-attende that

¹ Confederates-affiliation items: How much did you like your partner? How much did you enjoy working with your partner? How much would you like to complete this task

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