



Group communicators, perceived entitativity, and persuasion: A self-validation analysis



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Expectations of validity were greater for a high than a low entitativity group.
- An entitative communicator validated thoughts more than a non-entitative source.
- Greater validation was linked to persuasion that was based more on thoughts.
- Key effects of entitativity were moderated by differences in Need for Cognition.

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ABSTRACT

The extent to which a group is cohesive or entitative has been shown to play a key role in how much perceivers attend to and process group-relevant information. However, less is known about how entitativity may guide the metacognitive perceptions that people produce toward a group. The current research examined how group message sources that differ in entitativity can influence how confident people are in their thoughts about a communication. In Study 1, participants rated a highly entitative group as more likely to present valid information compared to a low entitativity source. Consistent with these beliefs, Study 2 participants were more confident and had attitudes that were more reflective of their message-related thoughts when source entitativity was high rather than low. Furthermore, the results of Study 3 suggest these self-validation effects may be contingent on high processing motivation and ability. Implications for the study and practice of persuasion are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Throughout daily life, many of the persuasive communications we encounter originate from groups such as companies, governing bodies, and political parties. One common characteristic of groups that has received considerable research attention is perceived entitativity. Entitativity has been conceptualized as the extent to which a group is viewed as a cohesive, singular unit (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; cf. Campbell, 1958). For example, a family or a group of friends should often be viewed as more entitative than shoppers in a store or people who work in the same office building.

Previous research has shown that group entitativity can influence perceivers' attitudes by guiding how much they process information (for a review, see Hamilton, Sherman & Castelli, 2002). For example, Rydell and McConnell (2005) found that when group members were described as "highly organized" with a "common goal" (high entitativity),

participants engaged in more effortful processing of a subsequent message compared to when the source was described as "loosely organized" with "separate goals" (low entitativity). While several studies have found similar effects on information processing (e.g., McConnell, Sherman & Hamilton, 1997; Clark & Wegener, 2009), less research has identified other ways in which group entitativity can influence attitudes. The aim of the present studies was to examine how entitativity may guide persuasion through a different, metacognitive mechanism—by validating the thoughts that people have toward information that a group communicates.

The extent to which people feel confident in their thoughts has become one of the most widely studied constructs in research on persuasion. In support of the self-validation hypothesis (Petty, Briñol & Tormala, 2002), thought confidence has been shown to carry important implications for the nature of the attitudes that people form in response to persuasive messages. In particular, a wealth of research suggests that people form attitudes that are stronger and based more on the central merits of an issue when they are relatively confident as opposed to unconfident in their thoughts (see Briñol & Petty, 2009).

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Many common persuasion variables have been identified as capable of inducing confidence or validating peoples' reactions to information—including the perceived credibility of a communicator (Briñol, Petty & Tormala, 2004; Clark & Evans, 2014; Tormala, Briñol & Petty, 2006). For example, after carefully processing a persuasive message, participants in a study by Tormala et al. (2006) were given information about the credibility of the source. Participants expressed greater confidence and their attitudes toward the issue were more reflective of their thoughts when the source was portrayed as high rather than low in credibility. The predominant explanation for these effects centered on how credible communicators are expected to present information that is valid or accurate. Therefore, people can trust and have greater confidence in their thoughts when they learn that a source possesses rather than lacks credibility.

With regard to group communicators, perceptions of entitativity might trigger similar validity-related beliefs and have the ability to induce confidence in thoughts. However, no research in the literature has identified these potential self-validating effects. For instance, groups which are organized, cohesive, and have members that work together, should be expected to offer information that is more valid or cogent compared to groups which lack these key traits associated with entitativity. If this is true, then it stands to reason that highly entitative groups may hold the potential to induce confidence and validate the thoughts that message recipients produce in response to their advocacies. Conversely, groups which are low in entitativity may be more likely to elicit expectations that their information is specious rather than valid. In turn, these sources may initiate doubt and a decreased reliance on thoughts when forming attitudes toward an issue.

2. Research overview

Three studies were conducted and published research on self-validation was used to approximate sufficient sample sizes. The aim of Study 1 was to test the prediction that highly entitative group communicators evoke stronger expectations of message validity compared to less entitative sources. Study 2 was an initial test of our primary hypothesis that highly entitative communicators should trigger greater self-validation than low entitativity groups. Lastly, the goal of Study 3 was to extend upon the previous findings by examining individual differences in Need for Cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) as a moderator of these group entitativity effects.

3. Study 1

In Study 1, participants received a description of a group that was designed to manipulate perceived entitativity. Participants were then asked to imagine a message from this group and reported expectations regarding validity of the information and perceived group entitativity. We predicted that the participants would report higher expectations of message validity and greater perceived entitativity in the high compared to low entitativity condition.

3.1. Method

3.1.2. Participants and design

Sixty-three University of Iowa undergraduates participated in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (low vs. high entitativity).

3.1.3. Procedure

Participants were seated at a computer station upon arrival to the lab. Following completion of an unrelated experiment, participants were asked to carefully read a description of a group ("Group A"). One of two group descriptions was received (low vs. high entitativity) and participants rated the group on several scales. Subsequently, participants were thanked and debriefed.

3.1.4. Independent variable

Group entitativity was varied using a manipulation developed by Welbourne (1999) and utilized in several additional investigations (e.g., Rydell & McConnell, 2005; Clark & Wegener, 2009). In the low entitativity condition, the description read as follows:

Members of Group A rarely act as a single unit. This group is loosely organized with no specific purpose or intention. Members of Group A engage in behaviors that help them move toward their own separate goals. Members of Group A might behave in different ways with different underlying intentions motivating their actions.

Conversely, the following description was provided in the high entitativity condition:

Members of Group A tend to act as a single unit. This group is highly organized with a specific purpose or intention that drives the group's behaviors. Members of Group A engage in behaviors that help the group move toward their common goal. Although members of Group A might behave in different ways, their actions are motivated by similar underlying intentions.

3.1.5. Dependent measures

3.1.5.1. Expected validity. After reading the group description, participants were asked to "Imagine if Group A presented information on an issue" and then rate the group on two 9-point scales (1 = *not at all* to 9 = *very much*). These items were: "To what extent would you expect Group A to..." (1) "offer valid information on the issue?" and (2) "give strong arguments in support of their position?" Responses to these measures were reliable ($\alpha = .82$). Hence, they were averaged to form an index of validity expectations.

3.1.5.2. Perceived entitativity. Participants also completed a 16-item questionnaire developed to assess perceptions of group entitativity (see Rydell & McConnell, 2005). This inventory was comprised of items such as "How similar are members of this group?" and "How organized do you think this group is?" Participants responded to each question on a 9-point scale, higher numbers reflected greater entitativity, and one item was reverse-scored. Ratings on the 16 items were highly inter-correlated ($\alpha = .94$) and were averaged into a single composite.

3.2. Results and discussion

The indices of expected validity and perceived entitativity were submitted to separate one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests. The ANOVA on perceived entitativity showed stronger perceptions among participants who received the high ($M = 6.53, SD = .98$) compared to the low entitativity ($M = 4.12, SD = 1.37$) description, $F(1, 61) = 62.41, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .51$. The ANOVA conducted on the index of expected validity also showed a main effect of the manipulation, $F(1, 61) = 28.72, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .32$. Consistent with our conceptualization, participants expected the high entitativity group ($M = 6.55, SD = 1.30$) to present information that was more valid and cogent compared to the low entitativity group ($M = 4.51, SD = 1.66$). Building from this finding, Study 2 served as an initial examination of how the perceived entitativity of a source may hold implications for self-validation in persuasion.

4. Study 2

As shown in Study 1, a highly entitative source should often be expected to present information that is more accurate, valid, or cogent compared to a non-entitative group. Due to these validity-related beliefs, people may then be likely to trust and rely upon their own

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