



Preference-consistent information repetitions during discussion: Do they affect subsequent judgments and decisions?



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined the decisional impact of information repetition during discussion
- Selective repetition influenced recipients' preferences in Experiment 1
- Selective repetition influenced recipients' decisions in Experiment 2
- The effect was found in written and face-to-face discussions (with a confederate)
- Perceived preference of the discussion partner mediated these effects

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ABSTRACT

During discussions, people typically introduce more information supporting their preferences as compared to information conflicting with these preferences, and they also repeat the former information more often than the latter. Although this preference-consistent discussion bias has been shown across several studies, its consequences for subsequent decisions have largely escaped attention. In particular, it is unclear whether selectively repeating preference-consistent information increases the likelihood that the recipient decides in accordance with the speaker's preference. From a rational point of view, information repetitions constitute redundancy and, hence, should not affect the recipient's decision. By contrast, in two experiments we demonstrate that selectively repeating information in favor of a particular decision alternative changes preference ratings in favor of this alternative (Experiment 1) and makes a decision for this alternative more likely (Experiment 2). This result is shown for written discussion protocols (Experiment 1) and for face-to-face discussions with a confederate (Experiment 2).

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Group discussions usually do not consist of an open and unbiased exchange of information, but rather are characterized by general asymmetries (for an overview, see Mojzisch & Schulz-Hardt, 2006). One of these asymmetries is the discussion bias in favor of preference-consistent information. In group discussions, group members systematically introduce and repeat more information consistent with their pre-discussion preferences as compared to information that is inconsistent with these preferences (e.g., Dennis, 1996; Faulmüller, Mojzisch, Kerschreiter, & Schulz-Hardt, 2012; Mojzisch, Grouneva, & Schulz-Hardt, 2010). In other words, each group member talks more about advantages of her preferred alternative and disadvantages of her non-preferred alternatives than about disadvantages of the preferred and advantages of the non-preferred alternatives.

At least two reasons for this bias have been demonstrated so far: On the one hand, Faulmüller et al. (2012) showed that this bias is fueled by group members' motivation to be understood by the other group members: In their attempt to explain their initial preference to the other group members, they systematically refer to preference-consistent rather than preference-inconsistent information. On the other hand, Mojzisch et al. (2010) provided evidence indicating that this bias can also be due to the evaluation bias in favor of preference-consistent information: Because preference-consistent information is generally evaluated as being more important and more reliable than preference-inconsistent information (e.g., Edwards & Smith, 1996), group members might exhibit this bias as a by-product of the attempt to communicate the most reliable and relevant pieces of information.

The discussion bias in favor of preference-consistent information might have direct decisional implications: Exhibiting this bias might help group members to get their preferred decision accepted by others, because selectively mentioning positive aspects of the preferred alternative and negative aspects of the non-preferred alternatives should

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positively influence the other group members towards this preferred alternative. However, this decisional implication of the preference-consistent discussion bias has, so far, largely escaped attention in group research. Therefore, we will empirically address this impact in the present research, with a particular focus on the role of this bias in information repetitions.

1. Preference-consistent discussion bias: Does it matter for subsequent judgments and decisions?

At first glance, it is highly plausible that discussing information in favor of a particular alternative should make it more likely that other group members become convinced of that alternative, as this is a clear instance of informational social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). However, a closer look reveals that such a straightforward prediction can only be made for the *introduction* of information: If a group member selectively mentions all the positive aspects of a preferred alternative and withholds all its disadvantages (which would be an extreme case of preference-consistent information introduction), other group members should develop a strongly biased representation of this alternative – at least to the extent that this information is new to them – and, hence, should be more in favor of this alternative as compared to a situation where they become aware of both advantages as well as disadvantages of this alternative.

However, what about the *repetition* of preference-consistent information? From a rational point of view, simply repeating pieces of information adds nothing to their informational value; it just produces redundancy. Hence, because the profile of the alternatives (i.e., the number of advantages and disadvantages of each particular alternative) remains unaffected, exhibiting a preference-consistent repetition bias should not make it more (or less) likely to get one's preference adopted by the other group members. On the other hand, knowing that group members *should* ignore redundant repetitions does not necessarily mean that they *do* in fact ignore them. In an experiment by Schulz-Hardt, Brodbeck, Mojzisch, Kerschreiter, and Frey (2006), the magnitude of the preference-consistent repetition bias was significantly and negatively correlated with the quality of the final group decision. The task used in this study was a hidden profile decision case. In a hidden profile (Stasser, 1988), no group member can detect the superiority of the best decision alternative prior to discussion; this can only be achieved by pooling the group members' diverse knowledge. As a consequence, in a hidden profile, group members typically start the discussion with suboptimal preferences, and solving the hidden profiles requires correcting these preferences. Hence, the negative correlation between preference-consistent repetitions and decision quality found by Schulz-Hardt et al. (2006) could indicate that a preference-consistent repetition bias makes the maintenance of suboptimal preferences more likely. However, due to the correlational nature of the finding, it is also possible that "smarter" groups might have solved the hidden profile more often and might have had "smarter" discussions, in that they avoided preference-consistent redundancy, without the one having a causal effect on the other. To the best of our knowledge, such a possible causal impact of preference-consistent repetitions on subsequent decisions in groups has not been tested yet.

2. Repetition effects in other contexts

In spite of the above-mentioned research gap in the group information pooling literature, repetition effects have been investigated in some other fields of (social) psychology. For example, research on the so-called "mere exposure" phenomenon (Zajonc, 1968) investigates whether (and how) the repeated presentation of a stimulus can increase preferences and liking for that particular stimulus. On the one hand, it has been shown that such effects of pure repetition can be observed for very different types of stimuli, like objects, words, situations, persons, or products. On the other hand, robust and substantial mere

exposure effects require certain conditions like, for example, complexity of the stimulus, a delay between stimulus presentation and judgment about the stimulus, and a low conscious awareness of having already been presented with the stimulus (see, for example, the meta-analysis by Bornstein, 1989). These conditions are quite the opposite of what is usually present in information pooling and collective decision making research, where (a) the items (e.g., the attributes of the different candidates for a position) are relatively simple, (b) participants usually know whether or not an item has already mentioned by others (often, such repetitions are even introduced with phrases like "as ... has already said, ..."), and where (c) the final decision has to be made immediately after the group discussion. In addition, even if mere exposure effects were at play in group information pooling, their decisional impact would be unclear. Whereas the repetition of positive attributes of the preferred alternative might increase their weight, the impact of negative attributes of the nonpreferred alternatives would decrease, as a consequence of the fact that repeated exposure would make these attributes more tolerable. Hence, if we find that a repetition bias in favor of preference-consistent information shifts judgments and decisions in favor of this preference, then there is reason to believe that such effects are different from what we currently know as mere exposure effects.

In principle, the same arguments also apply to a related line of research, namely the effects of repetitions of persuasive messages on attitudes. Here, it has been shown that repeating persuasive messages can lead to attitudinal changes towards the position advocated in the message, compared to a situation where the message was presented only once (e.g., Cacioppo & Petty, 1979).¹ Subsequent studies showed that these attitudinal changes occurred because repetitions improved the participants' understanding of the persuasive message (Cacioppo & Petty, 1985). However, whereas this mechanism is highly plausible in a situation where, like in this research tradition, a complete statement consisting of various arguments and interrelations between arguments is repeated as a whole, it is very unlikely to occur in the group information pooling context because, even if group members might, from time to time, give longer statements, they usually do not repeat these complete statements. Instead, rather simple and unequivocal items like "the candidate has particularly strong mathematical abilities" are discussed, and repeating a particular item should hardly help to understand its implications. Hence, if we would be able to find a decisional impact of a repetition bias in collective information pooling, it would probably be largely different from the above-mentioned effects of message repetitions on attitudes.

Finally, although not forming a coherent line of research, some studies in the literature have dealt with effects of repeating pros and cons of different decision alternatives (more or less similar to the ones that form the basis of a preference-consistent discussion bias) on subsequent judgments and decisions about these alternatives. For example, Wilson and Miller (1968) manipulated the repetition rate of prosecution versus defense arguments in a simulated court trial. Similar to the findings from mere exposure research, repetition of arguments only shifted the participants' judgments in favor of the position advocated in the argument if a delay (of one week) between argument presentation and final judgment was introduced. In line with this, Chalmers (1971) found no consistent effects of repeating positive versus negative traits on evaluative judgments about the persons that were being described by these traits (in this study, all conditions were run without delay between stimulus presentation and judgment). In contrast, Unkelbach, Fiedler, and Freytag (2007) found such immediate repetition effects: In their study, participants gave higher preference ratings for stocks when they were exposed to more success information and gave lower

¹ In both mere exposure and attitude change research it has been demonstrated that, if the number of repetitions becomes very high, initial positive effects of repetition on liking and attitude change can vanish or even reverse (Bornstein, 1989). However, because these numbers are usually not reached during group discussions, we abstain from discussing these findings here.

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