Social influence and discourse similarity networks in workgroups

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ABSTRACT

Adopting a socio-semantic perspective, this study aims to verify the relation between social influence and discourse similarity networks in workgroups and explore its modification over time. Data consist of video transcripts of 45 3-h group meetings and weekly sociometric questionnaires. Relation between tie strength, actor centrality within the influence network, and shared elements of discourse between group members are examined over time. Observed correlations support the hypothesis of a relation between social influence and discourse similarity. Changes over time suggest a similarity threshold above which the relation between similarity and influence is reversed.

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1. Introduction

Social influence and related phenomena, such as leadership and social power, are intrinsic to any human organising process. Social influence has been conceived as a relational process for which interpersonal influence happening at the level of the dyad constitutes a building block (Carter et al., 2015; Friedkin and Johnsen, 2011; Simpson et al., 2015). In workgroups, social influence affects how groups make decision, conduct their work, or shape their understanding of the task and the environment, and more (Johnson et al., 2015; Melamed and Savage, 2016; Pavitt, 2014; Westaby et al., 2016). Interactions and communication are central to social influence (Guastello, 2007; Moscovici, 1988), and discourse is a key component of both. Here, discourse is understood as “a general term that applies to either written or spoken language that is used for some communicative purpose” (Ellis, 1999, p. 81).

The study presented in this paper offers a novel perspective on the interplay between social influence and discourse in workgroups by exploring the relation between social influence networks and discourse similarity networks, a type of network in which relationships between people are established on shared elements of discourse (words, expressions, concepts, topics, etc.). Based on verbal interactions between workgroup members over time, the study offers empirical support for the relation between social relationships and discourse similarity at the dyadic and group levels and confirms the relevance of performing that type of joint analysis to better understand communication phenomena such as interpersonal influence. Our results also highlight the pertinence to consider strength and reciprocity of social ties in the study of discourse similarity. Finally, the longitudinal aspect of the study suggests non-linear co-evolution between the two networks and the presence of a “similarity threshold” above which greater similarity is associated with less influence, a result that could explain some aspects of the evolution of workgroups through time.

2. Structural and discursive approaches to social influence

The study of social influence can be grouped into two broad and generally distinct approaches: (a) a structural approach that understands social influence through relationships between individuals and (b) a discursive approach that identifies influence within the discourse of social actors. In what follows, we present a brief overview of both and argue that each approach must be taken into account to better understand social influence in workgroups.

2.1. A structural approach

The structural approach focuses on the relational aspect of social influence and related concepts, such as leadership and social power. At the dyadic level, the relational proximity perspective theorises that the mere presence of a tie allows for information exchange and shared influence (Rice, 1993). However, numerous studies, starting with Coleman et al. (1957), have found evidence that tie strength must be considered in the study of influence, particularly...
given the relational intensity and reciprocity it implies (Aral and Walker, 2014; Bond et al., 2012). At the group or organisation level, social influence is seen as intertwined with members’ relationship networks and, most importantly, the structures and patterns they create (Carter et al., 2015; Friedkin, 1993; Friedkin and Johnsen, 2011; Saint-Charles and Mongeau, 2009). According to Brass and Krackhardt (2012, p. 355), “the structure of social networks strongly affects the extent to which personal attributes, cognition, and behaviour result in power in organisations.” Methodologically speaking, most studies using this approach employ sociometric questionnaires to gather data on influence relationships or other types of relationships, including friendship, advice, and support.

Network centrality seeks to measure “the prominence or importance of the actors in a social network” (Wasserman and Faust, 1994, p. 170). Degree centrality based on the number of an individual’s incoming and outgoing ties is thought to be related to influence because central people have easier access to resources (Brass and Labianca, 1999). Many studies have shown that actors’ degree centrality within networks is linked to their overall influence within the group or the organisation, such influence being measured through actors’ perceptions of the most influential individuals in their group or organisation or using a variety of performance measures. Beginning with the earliest laboratory studies on communication patterns in task-oriented groups (Bavelas, 1950; Leavitt, 1951), this link has been demonstrated in a variety of contexts, including issue resolution in small organisations (Friedkin, 1993); multicultural teams (Salk and Brannen, 2000); the role of CEOs in mergers and acquisitions (El-Khatib et al., 2015); decision-making in Initial Public Offerings (Owen-Smith et al., 2015); innovation (Ibarra, 1993a); organisational strategies (Boje and Whetten, 1981); online discussion groups (Huffaker, 2010); and more. Nonetheless, the process through which an individual assumes a central position in a network is not yet fully understood.

Researchers have also explored how centrality combines with other factors also correlated with social influence, including formal status (Astley and Sachdeva, 1984); gender and ethnicity (Ibarra, 1993b); political skills (Treadway et al., 2013); trust (Sparrowe and Liden, 2005); and use of strategies, cognitive and communicative abilities, emotional abilities, and performance (Brass, 1985; Brass and Burkhardt, 1993; Emery, 2012; Krackhardt, 1990; Zuchowski, 1987).

These kinds of studies are frequently criticised for focusing on the metaphor of “ties as conduits” (Borgatti and Foster, 2003), which neglects what circulates through the conduits — notably, discourse (Labianca and Brass, 2006; Monge and Contractor, 2003). In light of this criticism, the next section examines studies that have explored the relation between discourse and influence.

2.2. A discursive approach

Beginning with the rhetorical tradition (Craig, 1999) and continuing through a growing contemporary interest in discourse in organisational studies (Barbiero and Monti, 2014), discourse has always been seen as an important means of influence and power. What has been coined “the linguistic turn of the 20th century” (Rorty, 1967) has spurred the emergence of many distinctive, but complementary, fields of study focused on “discourse” (Barbiero and Monti, 2014; Oswick et al., 2010). The various usages of the term “discourse” resulting from the field’s expansion (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Fairclough, 2003; Jian, 2008) have produced a broad concept whose core meaning is that of language used by humans for communication.

The interplay between discourse and influence has been the subject of a significant number of studies, many of which focused on how discourse affects or supports the influence of dominant groups or individuals. Discourse is seen both as inextricably linked with power and an essential tool of manipulation (Aman, 2009; Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 1989; van Dijk, 2006; Wang, 2006). These studies favour predominantly qualitative methods, including variants of discourse analysis (critical, historical, Foucauldian); narrative and metaphor analysis; linguistic analysis, rhetoric, and interaction; and conversation analysis. Q methodology, a combination of discourse and content analysis, and other mixed methods have also been used (Balogun et al., 2014; Clare et al., 2013; Dijk, 2012; Holmes, 2009; Kotwal and Power, 2015; McKenna, 2016).

The diversity of topics and settings in this literature is itself testimony to the scientific and social importance of the relation between discourse and influence. For example, Hardy and Maguire (2016) have questioned the way discourse on risk is intertwined with power issues within organisations. Duval et al. (2015) have shed light on the framing influence of forms imposed on grant applicants (primarily NGOs) by a granting agency for international development. Others have explored (dominant) public policy discourse and debates over issues such as wetland management (Clare et al., 2013). Another research trend is concerned with the “discourse of strategy”, which examines discourse from the perspective of “strategy as practice” (Balogun et al., 2014, p. 176). Other scholars have explored how discourse contributes to the creation or reproduction of status, gender, and other social inequalities, as well as how resistance to dominant discourses is expressed in the workplace, education, public policy, medicine, the media, and sports (Bergvall and Remlinger, 1996; Codo, 2011; Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Ezeifeika and Osakwe, 2013; Kilby and Horowitz, 2013; Mayes, 2010; Menz and Al-Roubia, 2008; Prego-Vazquez, 2007; Toft, 2014; Zanoni and Janssens, 2015).

Organisational studies addressing managers’ influence and leadership abound (Day and Antonakis, 2012), and more recent theorisations have also considered leaders’ discourses (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014; Fairhurst and Cooren, 2009). Transformational and neocharismatic theories (Jordan, 2005; Meda, 2005), which argue that a leader’s influence depends on the ability to frame the situation so as to inspire members, are representative of this literature (Antonakis et al., 2004). This research trend is more concerned with “what makes a good leader” than with exposing power issues hidden in the discourse.

In small group settings, the “dominant discourse” focus is also less prevalent. For example, researchers have examined how discourse influences interactional dynamics during meetings; how chairpersons guide meetings toward specific topics, and how decisions are made (Asmuß and Svennevig, 2009; Barske, 2009; Clifton, 2009; Holmes, 2009; Lazzaro-Salazar et al., 2015). Micro-analytical approaches based on discourse, linguistic, or conversation analysis have frequently been used to explore these issues.

The exploration of conflicts, disagreements, and clique formation as loci of influence has also revealed sequential discourse phenomena in the construction of alliances (Kangasharju, 2002). Nielsen (2008, p. 23) investigated “how interpretational work supports organisational goals and values” in business meetings. Specifically, she shows how this interpretative work is accomplished through employees’ acquisition of organisational language. Inequality and power issues between stakeholders in the context of deliberative small groups or “democracy meetings” have also attracted attention (Lazzaro-Salazar et al., 2015; Vargas et al., 2016). With regard to leadership, Choi and Schnurr (2014) have used discourse analysis to explore different members’ performance of leadership in a leaderless team.

This overview leaves little doubt as to the importance of the interplay between social influence and discourse but, as Krinsky (2010, p. 627) observes, this research trend has tended to neglect relational contexts, including “the relations between the things speakers say”, and treat discourse as static rather than dynamic. In the same vein, Brummans et al. (2008) note that studies on
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