Public Interest Communications: A Social Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

Public interest communications sheds light on how leaders and groups can optimize their social change efforts through strategic and science-based communication that serves the public good. This article examines how insights from the social psychological fields of social influence and intergroup relations can inform public interest communications, drawing on the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the Context-Comparison Model, majority and minority influence processes, and Social Identity Theory. Overall, these social psychological insights could be applied to advance both the research agendas and the practice of the growing discipline of public interest communications.

Introduction

Social change is an inevitable aspect of human evolution. We are on a fast track of social change that is steaming forward at full force. Although we cannot stop the wheels of evolution and social change from turning, the *direction* of social change can be steered by leaders and groups. Numerous social movements illustrate this idea. Take the environmental movement, which has gained considerable traction through the efforts of organizations like the Sierra Club and Greenpeace and leaders like Al Gore and Bill McKibben. Despite the persistent political controversy surrounding the scientific issue of climate change, the green message has slowly

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percolated into the consciousness of society. Many businesses, educational establishments, and organizations have sustainability plans and green policies that consider environmental impact--a trend that was almost nonexistent even two decades ago.

How can we steer the direction of social change? A key component of instituting social change is strategic communication within and between groups (Seyranian, 2013). Although there is a burgeoning literature on social change communication (see Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006), relatively little is known about *how* leaders and groups can optimize their social change efforts through communication (Fiol, Harris & House, 1999; Seyranian & Bligh, 2008) and which social psychological variables may be implicated in this process. To address this gap, the intersection of public interest communications and social psychology will be examined with an emphasis on how the fields of social influence and intergroup relations can help to shed light on the growing discipline of public interest communications.

Public interest communications

Public interest communications is a type of strategic communication campaign that strives to bring about positive behavioral change that is based on the public interest (Fessmann, 2016). A key point is what constitutes public interest? To answer this question, we can recall the wisdom of ancient Greek philosopher Plato (2000) who firmly held that all humans are motivated by the pursuit of the good. However, definitions of what comprises the public good may be relative, varying across individuals, time, cultures, environments, and entities. In practice, the public good often seems to be up for debate, negotiation, and voting.

For example, elections are often competitions between candidates who are espousing their platforms for a group. Platforms are often pitched as representing the public good. Group members vote for a version of *who we should be*, *what we should stand for*, and *where we should be heading* as a group. Take the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump communicated very disparate versions of how they viewed the public good and what it means to be an American (Seyranian, 2016). *Who's right and who's wrong about their visions of the public good?* Individuals tend to answer this question by supporting a vision of the public good based on their social identifications (e.g., Democrat, Republican, Green), thereby voting largely along party lines (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002) and vested interests (Crano, 1997). However, it is important to note that philosophical relativism about the public good is not what is meant by the idea of public interest communications.

Fessmann (2016) draws on the ideas of the philosopher Rawls (1971) on the *original position* to suggest that the public interest may be ascertained by the following thought experiment: Consider the idea that you could be reborn into any group or segment in society over which you have no control but must live in. How might an idea, policy, campaign, or social change initiative look and feel for all the different segments of society you could be reborn in? In other words, is it

in the highest good for all? Does it promote well-being and justice across the different groups of society or does it singularly serve the narrow interests of some members of society at the expense of other members and groups? This thought experiment asks individuals to walk a mile in *everyone's* shoes. It may help people to tune into more altruistic and biospheric values (de Groot & Steg, 2008) and evoke feelings of empathy and perspective taking for the human experience, thereby inciting more prosocial and cooperative behavior (Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981).

Public interest communications promotes the expansion of the business-as-usual model of advancing the plight of specific individuals and groups to more broadly analyzing implications from all human angles through a broad 360-degree view. It encourages collectives to band together and enact visions of social change that focus on the advancement of all of humanity. In this way, individuals may transcend narrow definitions of who we are in terms of intergroup competitions between us and them and focus on how social change can benefit us at the level of humanity (see *transcendent social identity framing* below). In this way, public interest is not a zero-sum game but an outlook that seeks a win-win solution for all factions based on a foundation of values that precludes the denigration of any group and advocates equal rights for all. As Linda Hon (2016) puts it, public interest reflects the viewpoint of ethicists who espouse *shared values and human rights* over vested interests that purposefully seek to downgrade human rights--such as dignity, freedom, equality, and quality of life, including health and safety--of individuals and groups (in Fessmann, 2016).

Public interest communications and psychology

An important goal of public interest communications is not only to influence individuals' attitudes, but also to enact positive behavioral change on public interest issues (Fessmann, 2016). Positive behavioral change could include encouraging individuals to adopt healthier lifestyles like healthy eating or quitting drugs, or inspiring people to reap the psychological benefits of communing with nature and living a more sustainable lifestyle. These types of positive behavioral changes may translate into higher levels of overall well-being, thriving, and happiness.

For example, Corral-Verdugo and colleagues' (2011) research evidenced a positive relationship between sustainable behavior and happiness. Given the potential for public interest communications to address and elevate well-being, it aligns with the important field of positive psychology, which seeks to understand the ways in which people are most likely to thrive, find meaning and fulfillment in their lives and communities, and secure well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Public interest communications can be construed as a form of *positive communication* with the goal of communicating to enhance the well-being of humanity.

Public interest communications also shares common ground with the field of social psychology. Social psychology is the study of how people are influenced by the real or imagined presence of others (Aronson, Wilson, & Sommers, 2016).

A branch of social psychology--social influence--may be particularly informative for public interest communications. Social influence has been a major preoccupation of social psychology since its inception (Crano, 2000). Substantial research has been conducted on topics such as conformity, persuasion, attitude change, leadership, and majority and minority influence to understand the way that people come to share opinions, attitudes, norms, values, and behavior. Most relevant to public interest communications, the social influence literature contains rich insights concerning the conditions under which individuals change due to exposure to communication. The most relevant insights for advancing public interest communications research and practice are highlighted below.

Linking attitudes and behavior: the role of vested interest

An attitude is "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 1). Attitudes can be formed concerning just about any entity (e.g., Costco), person (e.g., Beyoncé), place (e.g., Sicily), or topic (e.g., climate change). Social psychologists have long considered attitudes a central variable in predicting behavior (Allport, 1935), but decades of research suggest that the relationship between attitudes and behavior can be weak (Eagly & Chaiken, 1998). Put another way, attitudes pack a punch in predicting behavior but the punch is more akin to lightweight's jab than a heavyweight's knockout. The relationship between attitudes and behavior is considerably strengthened by considering third variables (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005), such as the extent to which the attitudinal topic or object is held with high vested interest (Crano, 1983).

Given that both attitudes and vested interest play an important role in predicting behavior (Crano & Prislin, 1995), public interest communications could target both attitudes and behavior concerning the topic of public interest while also capitalizing on the motivating power of vested interest. Vested interest refers to an individual's stake in a matter (Crano, 1983). However, vested interest could be expanded to not only include the benefits of the public interest issue for the self, but also to include benefits to significant others (friends, family, loved ones), and the different strata of society. These three types of vested interest could be termed *personal vested interest* (the self), *relational vested interest* (close others such as family members, relatives, and friends), and *social vested interest* (collectives, groups, and organizations).

For example, a public interest communications campaign promoting healthy eating choices could target attitudes (e.g., healthy eating is good) and behaviors (e.g. what are healthy eating behaviors), while simultaneously underlining how this public interest issue serves the three types of vested interest. The campaign could emphasize *personal vested interest,* such as vibrant health,

increased physical attractiveness, and youth for the self. It could also target *relational vested interest* by highlighting the reduction of illness (e.g., diabetes, heart disease) that comes with healthy food consumption, which would reduce burdens of care necessary for sick loved ones. Another way to target relational vested interest may be to underline how the individual could model healthy eating behaviors and inspire spouses, friends, and family to eat healthy and live longer. Social vested interest could be targeted by underlining how healthy eating behaviors could promote good health, which may decrease the need for health care services and eventually reduce healthcare premiums. It could also reduce demand for unhealthy processed foods and support more healthy industries like produce production and organic farming. Future research is warranted to examine the effectiveness of broadening the scope of the attitude-vested interest-behavior for public interest communications.

Persuasion: The Elaboration Likelihood Model

Attitudes are not static. They are dynamic and subject to the influence of environmental and social conditions. Attitudes can *polarize* by moving toward the original evaluation or *depolarize* by moving away from the original evaluation. Either way, any movement in attitudes resulting from influence reflects *persuasion*. The field of persuasion reflects a long tradition of research in social psychology, which began with Hovland and the Yale Group's seminal work in the 1950s (McGuire, 1996). More contemporary theories of persuasion are based on a dual process model of persuasion (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Caccioppo, 1986), which seek to delineate the conditions under which attitude change occurs and its link to behavioral change. One of the most widely researched dual process models in persuasion is the *Elaboration Likelihood Model* (ELM) (Petty & Caccioppo, 1986), which is reviewed below because it offers useful guidelines on how to construct effective persuasive communications (e.g., Rucker & Petty, 2006) that are highly relevant to public interest communications.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model holds that persuasion occurs on an elaboration continuum that ranges from a high to low amount of thought (Petty & Caccioppo, 1986). Individuals operate on the high end of the elaboration continuum when they have the motivation, ability, and resources to process a message. On the high end of the elaboration continuum, individuals employ the *central route* of processing, which is a highly effortful process of attitude change that results from additional thoughts that are generated concerning the merit of a message (high elaboration). In contrast, due to low motivation or ability to process, individuals on the low end of the elaboration continuum employ the *peripheral route*, which is a less effortful process of attitude change that considers the associations and cues relevant to a message (low elaboration). For low elaboration, message quality is less important and peripheral cues are more prominent. Peripheral cues involve heuristics (Chaiken, 1980) or simple decision rules in forming judgments, such *as a scarce product is more desirable*. They also consist of factors like source cues (e.g., celebrity status).

While both routes of processing are capable of instituting attitude change, the strength of the resulting attitude varies considerably as a function of which route is employed to achieve attitude change (Petty & Wegener, 1998). Attitude change that emerges via the central route (versus the peripheral route) tends to be strong, more resistant to later persuasion, and a stronger predictor of behavior (Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995). In practice, however, persuasion is likely influenced by both central and peripheral processes (Petty & Briñol, 2012).

Multiple roles hypothesis

The elaboration likelihood model postulates the *multiple roles hypothesis*, which suggests that a variable can institute attitude change in various ways along the elaboration continuum (Petty & Wegener, 1998). First, a variable such as source expertise could act as a *peripheral cue* during low elaboration. Take, for example, an editorial advocating for cap and trade that was written by a policy expert. Individuals using expertise as a peripheral cue may become more positively inclined towards cap and trade because the expert source advocated the policy rather than because they closely attended to message arguments and rationales.

Second, the same variable (e.g., expertise) could cease to act as a peripheral cue and serve as an *argument* to help determine the merits of a position under conditions of high elaboration. Let us continue the cap and trade example. An individual may scrutinize the facts of the editorial concerning cap and trade, while also considering that a policy expert is advocating the position. If the expert is found to help the merit of the message or to bolster message quality, it might influence attitudes.

Third, a variable may *bias* the way that the message is processed, particularly during high elaboration. For instance, an individual may closely attend to the editorial's arguments about cap and trade and come to believe the message arguments because of its source (policy expert) rather than its merit. Fourth, a variable can also *bolster* the elaboration likelihood, particularly during moderate elaboration levels. Consider an individual who more closely examines an editorial after learning that it was written by an expert. Overall, an important point that emerges from the multiple roles hypothesis is to consider both the level of elaboration and how variables such as source expertise can play disparate roles at different levels of the continuum. In this way, persuasion may be optimized at different levels of the continuum (Rucker & Petty, 2006).

Formation versus change contexts

A further refinement of ELM's predictions emerges from considering whether a public interest issue represents an attitude formation or an attitude change context (Chaiken, Wood, & Eagly, 1996). *Attitude formation* contexts are situations where people have weak and relatively inaccessible pre-existing attitudes, if they have an attitude at all. On the other hand, in *attitude change* contexts, individuals have well-established pre-existing attitudes that are accessible and strong (Crano & Seyranian, 2009). A public interest issue may represent either an attitude formation or attitude change context and this distinction alters the persuasion landscape.

For example, the results of Kumkale and colleagues' (2010) meta-analysis suggested that a credible source is particularly effective in an attitude formation context, but not during an attitude change context. These findings also fit neatly with another line of research that examined the influence of source credibility on attitudes formed either through direct or indirect experience concerning a topic. In Study 1 of Wu and Shaffer's (1987) research, participants either tasted peanut butter (direct experience) or received information about peanut butter (indirect experience) prior to being exposed to a testimonial about peanut butter ostensibly by a high or low credibility source. Results indicated that a highly credible source was more likely to exert influence for those with indirect rather than direct experience.

Arguably, direct experience with the attitude object creates an attitude change context whereas an indirect experience is more closely aligned with attitude formation. Therefore, it may be more important to stress source credibility when individuals are exposed to a *new* public interest issue when the public's attitudes are in formation and individuals have had little direct experience with the topic. Overall, the take-away message for the field of public interest communications is that the attitude formation or change context may be important to consider when crafting messages because it can (and should) change the framing of the message. More details about what type of framing to employ in these different contexts is further outlined in the majority and minority sources section below.

Formation and change contexts are also important for behavior. Some behaviors may be relatively new to an individual's behavioral repertoire (e.g., going to the gym) whereas others may be more ingrained (e.g., eating a donut every morning). Recent social psychological research suggests that behaviors that are more ingrained and performed routinely with goal directed action become *habits* (Wood & Rünger, 2016). Habits are automatized behaviors that emerge as a function of associative learning and cues in the environment. Given that they are automatized behavioral patterns, habits may interfere with behavioral interventions and even cause them to fail (Webb & Sheeran, 2006). Therefore, public interest communications practitioners and researchers seeking to institute or test positive behavioral change should also closely consider the formation versus change context of behavior. That is, is the campaign targeting a newly formed behavior or striving for behavioral change? Are old habits in place that may interfere with the new positive behavioral change? Would the public interest campaign be more likely to succeed through the encouragement of newly formed habits? Incorporating insights from the psychology of habits (Wood & Rünger, 2016) into public interest communications may increase their effectiveness.

Applying ELM to public interest communications

The robust literature on ELM offers significant insights for optimizing persuasion and constructing effective messages (see also Rucker & Petty, 2006). First, given that public interest communications seeks to enact behavioral change and that high elaboration is more closely associated with behavioral change (Petty et al., 1995), it may be particularly important to target audiences for public interest communications who can engage in high message elaboration. For example, promoting water conservation behaviors may be more effective with messages targeted

at individuals who are more likely to think about the message and alter their attitudes (and behavior) about water use. Another option may be to motivate the audience to process a message, thereby increasing the chances of influencing behavior. For example, highlighting the vested interest (personal, relational, social) of a topic may help to spur more elaboration (Petty & Wegener, 1998).

Second, it is important to design messages that consider message-related variables at the high end of the elaboration continuum. During high elaboration, individuals are most likely to consider the merit of the message and its arguments and logic. In line with the multiple role hypothesis, peripheral cues may operate as a message argument under high elaboration. Therefore, it may be particularly important for public interest communications to focus on constructing a strong message with consideration of how source and message characteristics may be construed during high elaboration. Further insights on what constitutes strong message quality is offered below (see *social identity framing*).

Third, Rucker and Petty (2006) indicate that messages should be empirically verified for effectiveness prior to deployment to the public. This is particularly important given that exposing the public to poor quality messages may cause harm (Fessmann, 2016). For example, messages may backfire with boomerang effects such that the audience adopts an opposing position to the one advocated by the message (Hovland, Janis & Kelly, 1953). Empirical verification may be sought through an experimental design that pits the public interest message against either a control condition (no message) and/or a comparison condition (alternate message on the same topic). Optimal designs include administration of measures before (pre-) and after (post-) message exposure to examine change. It would also be ideal to include at least two post-tests (immediate and delayed) to assess short and long-term effects (for an exemplar of this experimental design, see Seyranian, Sinatra, & Polikoff, 2015).

Drawing on the suggestions of Rucker and Petty (2006), various dependent variables should be tested to establish message effectiveness. These may include attitudes concerning the topic, strength of attitude, message elaboration (thought listing task and valence), attitudinal certainty, thought confidence, and behavioral intentions. Additionally, given that emotions play an important role in persuasion (Petty & Briñol, 2015), it may also be fruitful to include measures of emotions (see Seyranian, 2014, as an exemplar). Finally, if the message targets behavioral change, it is important to test whether behavioral change ensues both in the short and long term.

Sources: who is communicating?

The type of source that is associated with a message plays an important role in persuasion. Major source characteristics that have emerged from persuasion research include *source credibility* (trust and expertise; for a review of this line of research, see Pornpitakpan, 2004), *source attractiveness* (e.g., Berscheid & Walster, 1974), *ingroup and outgroup status* (e.g., David & Turner, 1999), *leaders* (Seyranian, 2014) and *majority and minority* status (Crano & Seyranian, 2009). Overall, sources that have more persuasive muscle are those high in credibility, attractiveness, part of the audience's ingroup (fellow group member) or represent a majority (under some circumstances) (see Petty & Wegener, 1998). Given that controversial issues and social change initiatives usually begin with ideas put forth by a minority (Moscovici, 1994), it may be particularly important for the field of public interest communicators to closely consider insights from social psychological research on minority versus majority influence.

Majority and minority sources

Although in common parlance the terms majority or minority tend to refer to ethnicity or race, in the social psychological literature, the terms have a broader meaning (Seyranian, Atuel, & Crano, 2008). A minority usually refers to a person or group who is counter-normative, distinctive, and does not go along with the majority group opinions or viewpoints. Arguably, social change usually begins with ideas put forth by a minority. For example, Copernicus would have been a minority in his time for advancing the counter-normative idea that the earth resolves around the Sun. Minorities tend to be smaller than the majority in terms of size and they possess less power to force the acceptance of their position (Seyranian et al., 2008). Despite this, they are far from impotent sources of influence.

A highly nuanced view of when and how minority versus majority sources exert influence is provided by the *Context-Comparison Model* (Alvaro & Crano, 1997; Crano, 2000; Crano & Seyranian, 2009). The model underlines the importance of considering the attitude formation versus change context of the topic. A public interest issue would fall under *attitude formation* when it involves a topic that is relatively new to the public (e.g., labelling genetically engineered foods) or consists of an issue where individuals have weaker attitudes (e.g., euthanasia). For attitude formation topics, the model predicts that a minority would have the persuasive advantage over a majority because people have not yet formed strong attitudes about an attitude object and they have little to defend. Without a strong belief or norm in place, the rarity of a minority source can captivate the audience's attention (Crano, 2000). After all, few people want to take the risk of defying group norms and standing up to the group with a minority position. Minority sources may spark interest and incite wonder: Why is this minority willing to go out on a limb to advance his or her position? What is so important? What does he or she have to say? Thus, the ability of the minority source to capture attention may produce message elaboration with the goal of understanding the minority's position.

This type of close message scrutiny can lead to subsequent attitude change and persuasion (Baron & Bellman, 2007; Crano & Hannula-Bral, 1994; Martin & Hewstone, 2003). Recall that attitudes that are formed via high elaboration are usually stronger and more predictive of behavior (Petty et al., 1995). As such, if an individual has not had much prior exposure to a public interest issue, a minority source could have a persuasive advantage over the majority and potentially incite positive behavioral change. This is particularly true if the minority's message does not pose a threat to the identity of the group (Crano & Seyranian, 2009).

During attitude change contexts, the minority's ability to exert influence changes drastically. Its potential impact is attenuated, indirect, and delayed. Why? During attitude change, individuals harbor attitudes with high levels of investment. Their attitudes are strong, more certain, and more resistant to persuasion (Petty et al., 1995). For instance, consider public interest issues such as global climate change. If individuals hold strong attitudes about global climate change, then the ingroup or outgroup status of source becomes important. A message from an outgroup member-- that is, an individual who does not possess membership in the group--is unlikely to shift strong attitudes. Why would an outsider have any persuasive muscle when it comes to how we should run our environmental affairs? In contrast, ingroup members (those who *do* have membership in the group) possess the potential to influence fellow ingroup members. When a message is from an ingroup member, individuals may further consider: Does this source represent the majority or the minority of our group? A message from an *ingroup majority* will likely spur elaboration because the majority is typically seen as a legitimate source of information. If the ingroup majority's message is strong, its sheer pressure will likely institute immediate attitude change. This is because the individual is motivated to maintain group membership and may not want to risk becoming a minority by disagreeing with majority.

The persuasion landscape is different for an *ingroup minority* source. The context-comparison model predicts that fellow ingroup members do not tend to incite the same type of scoff (at least at first) as outgroup members should they occupy a minority position. Individuals tend to be more lenient and polite with fellow ingroup members. For this reason, they may give the minority source a polite hearing and even process the message. However, there is little chance that this message scrutiny will directly change attitudes. After all, the message is still from a minority source and aligning oneself with the source might pose risks to the self. Siding with the ingroup minority (especially if it is unpopular) could awaken the wrath of the majority in the form of ridicule, ostracism, or humiliation. Although individuals may not outwardly change their attitudes due to an ingroup minority message, the fact that they have closely processed the minority message may have unintended consequences. Message content has percolated through the individual's mind. Thus, minority ideas may eventually influence attitudes directly through delayed effects or they may exert indirect influence on peripheral but related attitudes (Crano & Chen, 1998).

This helps to explain why social change initiatives are often not adopted overnight. When groups possess strong attitudes about an issue, minorities do not possess the ability to force compliance like a majority. At best, their influence is subtle within a group at first and has the potential to become more pronounced and widespread over time with consistent messaging efforts

(Moscovici, 1994). Overall, minorities certainly can impel social change during attitude change, but at a snail's pace. Social change may be a long and arduous process of consistently exerting influence over a long period.

An important take-away point for public interest communications is to pre-test the attitude formation versus change context of the public interest at hand for the audience and then to strategically employ ingroup and outgroup minority and majority sources to optimize the influence potential. Although considerable research supports the predictions of the context-comparison model (see Crano & Seyranian, 2009), the focus of research efforts has been on examining attitudes as an outcome. Future research is warranted to better comprehend the model's ability to predict behaviors.

Message content: what is being said

Surprisingly, the field of social influence has paid less attention to the *essence* of persuasion communication than to the conditions under which strong or weak messages are persuasive. Social influence studies generally operationalize strong message quality through participant pre-tests of strong versus weak arguments (e.g., Martin, & Hewstone, 2003), but this approach begs the question of what theoretically accounts for message quality (Areni, 2003). In fact, social influence studies have been criticized for obscuring the *substance* of message quality (Areni, 2003) and overlooking *what* is being communicated (Hopkins & Reicher, 1997; Meyers, Brashers, & Hanner, 2000; Mucchi-Faina, Maass, & Volpato, 1991; Reicher, Hopkins, Levine, & Rath, 2005).

It is argued here that the content constituting message quality is clearly of importance and merits study. Strong message quality helps to determine whether a source can exert immediate and long-term attitude change (Crano, 2001). Research shows that message quality is more influential than source attractiveness, occupational status, and expertise when people are motivated to process majority or minority messages (e.g., Garlick & Mongeau, 1993). Factions of decision-making groups may win or lose depending on which argumentative patterns (e.g., consistency) are employed during group discussions (Meyers et al., 2000). Moreover, specific aspects of speech such as linguistic abstractness may facilitate influence (Sigall, Mucchi-Faina, & Mosso, 2006). Taken together, this implies that *what is being communicated* is a significant variable in the social influence process.

Deciphering the essence of persuasive communication will enable the development of a more precise prescriptive model of effective change communication (Meyers et al., 2000), which will not only be of relevance to practitioners, but it may also provide public interest communications researchers with a theoretical basis of defining message quality in research. The social identity perspective and the social psychological literature on intergroup relations may provide a substantive direction for the development of such a prescriptive model.

Social identity framing

Social identity framing theory (Seyranian, 2013) outlines a specific communication formula and set of communication devices that helps to create support and mobilization for social change by leveraging the power of the group (Seyranian, 2014). It draws on the social identity perspective of Tajfel and Turner (1986) to help explain the social influence processes underlying social change. Social identity is the extent to which individuals define themselves in terms of their group memberships and feel emotional attachment to them (Tajfel, 1974). While individuals may be members of multiple groups, they may not necessarily view each group as an important part of who they are. In social identity terms, groups that are not psychologically significant for an individual represent *low identification*. Group memberships that are valued and held as psychologically important involve *high identification*.

High identifiers are particularly likely to be attuned with social identity content. Each group and its concomitant social identity has specific content that defines who the group is and how it is different from other groups. Social identity content reflects the norms (e.g., males should not cry) and sets of attributes (e.g., males are achievement-oriented) that define the group and distinguish it from another group (females) (Hogg & Abrams, 2001; Turner, 1985). The more an individual identifies with a group (e.g., male) and has that group at the forefront of his or her mind (salience), the more that person strives to conform to social identity content (e.g., be like a typical male) (Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003). That is, people think of themselves less in terms of personal characteristics (e.g., extraverted) and more in terms of their own alignment with the norms of the group (Abrams & Hogg, 1990).

Some group members, such as leaders, are particularly influential in setting norms in the groups (Hogg, 2001). Reicher and Hopkins (2001) suggest that leaders actively shape group goals, norms, and values to align with their social change agendas. In this way, leaders act as *entrepreneurs of identity* who are in the business of constructing the content of social identity. Social identity framing builds on these ideas by outlining *how* leaders can communicate and construct social identities during social change (Seyranian, 2013).

Social identity framing is grounded in the idea that social change begins with a vision of what the future should hold. For instance, a CEO may envision a company dominating an unlikely market or a war-time leader may envision a state of security and peace amidst a seemingly endless war. Visions often directly relate to (re)definitions of who the group is, what it stands for, and where it is headed as group. Thus, to achieve a vision of social change, social identity may first need to be deconstructed and then reconstructed to be in line with the vision. As Tajfel (1981) put it, "Social action is often closely related to these redefinitions of who and what one is" (p. 317). Since leaders possess substantial influence in groups, they may be in a position not only to persuasively advocate a vision of social change, but also to frame an alternate social identity for the group that is in line with social change. The identity interpretive frames that leaders may employ tend to follow a three-phase sequence and are collectively termed social identity framing (Seyranian & Bligh, 2008).

The social identity framing sequence seeks to render social identity salient and then strategically employs a specific set of communication tactics during each phase to alter social identity (see Seyranian, 2014, p. 471, for a full list of communication tactics). In the *unfreezing* phase, the communication strives to disrupt the group's attachment to the current version of social identity by stressing the message source's credibility while also expressing dissatisfaction with the current state-of-affairs by airing a series of grievances (social identity unfreezing). In the next phase, the communication focuses on *moving* social identity by negating parts of the previous framing of social identity. Then, a vision of social change is presented along with altered social identity content (norms, values, attitudes, behavior) that *is* compatible with the vision (social identity moving). In the last phase, the communication focuses on *freezing* or solidifying this altered social identity in place by positively affirming the new framing of social identity and encouraging followers to perform this new identity and showcase their commitment to the group through tangible actions that aim to bring the vision into fruition (social identity freezing).

Overall, social identity framing communication tactics involve reinterpreting the group's past in a negative light, highlighting the grievances of the present, redefining who the group is, what the group should stand for, where it is going, and how it will get there (Seyranian, 2013). Social identity framing theory focuses on a comprehensive view of communication by also delineating how message recipients may internalize social identity framing messages (identification, cognitive processing, emotional reactions, values, and stereotypes) and how group characteristics such as a group's majority or minority status may play a part in the influence process (for more details, see Seyranian, 2013).

Research shows that social identity framing messages can incite positive behavioral change. Seyranian and colleagues (2015) conducted a field experiment on residential water consumption and found that a social identity framing message was more likely to decrease residential water usage than a message with water saving tips. Laboratory research has linked social identity framing messages to a host of positive outcomes (Seyranian, 2014).

Social identity framing messages that contain high levels of *inclusive language* are particularly effective (Seyranian, 2014; Seyranian & Bligh, 2008). Inclusive language helps to define social identity and distinguish the group from others. Examples are language referring to: a) *social identity*, which consists of words like "we," "us," and "our" and references to the group name and its symbols (e.g., flags, banners, mascots, anthems, songs, colors, statues); b) *people* within the group (e.g., society, nation); and c) *collectives* (e.g., civilization, community). Seyranian (2014) showed that social identity framing with inclusive language (versus non-inclusive language) is more likely to augment positive leadership perceptions such as charisma, effectiveness, persuasiveness, attraction, prototypicality, and trust; increase confidence and willingness to act for renewable energy; cast the social change initiative normative; and evoke more positive emotions about the social change initiative (Seyranian, 2017).

Future research is warranted to gain a more complete understanding of social identity framing and its potential to represent high message quality. Specifically, more research is needed to: a) understand the broader outcomes of social identity framing (e.g., how individuals cognitively

process these messages), b) study the influence of different types of sources aside from leaders (e.g., majority versus minority sources), c) examine whether the social identity framing phases must be in sequence over time and in temporal order or if they could occur simultaneously in one message; d) empirically verify more social identity communication tactics; and e) test the effectiveness of social identity framing for a variety of public interest issues (e.g., health promotion). Overall, the research to date on social identity framing is encouraging and suggests that it could be a potentially powerful tool for public interest communicators who are seeking to incite collective support for social change.

The malevolent to benevolent spectrum of social identity framing

Social identity framing tactics are not value-laden. That is, they could be employed by any group or leader seeking to bring about social change, irrespective of whether their intentions are positive or negative. Social identity framing could be employed by individuals anywhere on a spectrum of *malevolent* (complete self-interest) to *benevolent* (altruistic and biospheric) intentions for striving toward social change. At the malevolent end of the spectrum, social identity framing may be employed to reframe social identity for gain, social control, domination, or to serve the narrow interests of a limited group of people at the expense of others. Taken to the extreme, autocratic leaders may employ these tactics to frame *extremist social identities* that are based on zealotry and fanatical ideologies and whose social change initiatives do *not* serve the public interest (see Seyranian, 2011 for a full exposition on how leaders frame extremism). Arguably, extremist behavior such as mass shootings, terrorist attacks, wars, cult suicides, which are exhibited by non-abnormal populations (i.e., normal psychological health) likely stems from identification with a strong extremist social identity.

Extremist social identities tend to provide very clear prototypes of who we are (ingroup social identity framing) and how we are different from them (outgroup social identity framing). They tend to heavily emphasize ingroup and outgroup boundaries and communication strongly focuses on differentiating us from them. The ingroup is framed to comprise of a group of self-proclaimed special people who are staunch and loyal adherents to the vision underlying the social identity. Communication efforts strive to frame an ingroup identity that is (morally) superior to the outgroup in some way.

One way to identify extremism is by examining the content of outgroup social identity framing. Extremists employ outgroup social identity framing to demonize an outgroup and view it as an enemy (e.g., Hitler with Jewish people; Young Turks with Armenians during the Armenian Genocide of 1915). They create and perpetuate prejudice by stereotyping the outgroup (e.g., demeaning name calling) and casting all group members as derogatory, low status, or immoral (e.g., criminals). They also promote direct or indirect harm to outgroup members via the promulgation of discrimination and violence.

Along the center of the spectrum are a variety of groups that may be seeking social change with the intention of bettering the circumstances of the ingroup but not necessarily with an intention of harming other groups in the process. These social change agents understand that what

represents a collective good for one group does not necessitate that one downgrades the dignity, status, or well-being of other groups to achieve that collective good. During social change, groups may still engage in ingroup favoritism and competitions with the outgroup while vying for resources, power, and status (Tajfel, 1981). Ingroup social identity framing will likely be employed to align social identity with social change and garner support for the social change initiative. These groups may still engage in outgroup social identity framing but to a much lesser extent than those on the malevolent end on the spectrum. Outgroup social identity framing at the center of the spectrum would not involve direct attempts to demonize and derogate the outgroup. Rather, a preference would be expressed for the ingroup. This suggestion is in line with Brewer's (1999) insight that ingroup love not does necessarily imply outgroup hate.

The benevolent end of the spectrum is where social identity framing meets public interest communications and may represent a form of *positive communication* that aligns with the field of positive psychology. This type of social change communication transcends the idea of us versus them. It no longer emphasizes an intergroup landscape that distinguishes between ingroups and outgroups. *All living and sentient beings are construed as part of the ingroup and the goal is to serve the highest good for all instead of the narrow interests of one group or organization.* Toward this end, individuals may use *transcendent social identity framing* to strive for social change that is in the service of the public interest and is based on a foundation of altruistic or biospheric values (De Groot & Steg, 2008). This type of communication portrays a broad and inclusive we that merges multiple groups into one. It accentuates the similarities and common thread that interconnect all people. It emphasizes union, shared human experience, common norms and values, while highlighting the potential comradery between people. It leans away from underscoring differences. Thus, outgroups are mentioned very little, if at all.

Transcendent social identity framing is in line with the *Common Ingroup Identity Model* (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) because it recategorizes us and them into an inclusive and broad we. For example, instead of framing Democrats versus Republicans or European-Americans versus immigrants/refugees, transcendent social identity framing would recategorize subgroups into a larger, more inclusive group (e.g., American or human). This type of recategorization is exemplified by Martin Luther King Jr. (1959), who noted in a speech on integrated schools, "As I stand here and look upon the thousands of black[1] faces and the thousands of white faces, intermingled like the waters of a river, *I see only one face--the face of the future*" (italics added for emphasis, p. 34).

Servant leaders (Greenleaf, 1977) and authentic transformational leaders (Price, 2002) are more likely to employ transcendent social identity framing. Price (2002) suggests that authentic transformational leaders champion some type of social change that they perceive to be of collective benefit based on altruistic values. Their own behavior, actions, and policies are consistent with these altruistic values. These types of leaders epitomize Maslow's (1954) conceptualization of the self-actualized individual who possess optimal psychological health.

History provides us with numerous paragons of these types of leaders--Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Mother Teresa. Although these leaders all arose from

subjugated groups, they did not strive to only ameliorate the lot for their own groups. They stood as bright and extraordinary exemplars of steadfast dedication to championing the public interest. They spearheaded a message of hope, human rights, equality, and justice for *all* of humanity. Nelson Mandela (1964, para. 151) illustrates the heart of transcendent social identity framing in his famous speech on the docks:

> During my lifetime, I have dedicated myself to the struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

The field of public interest communications may benefit from research efforts to form a scientific understanding of the communication devices that comprise transcendent social identity framing. It is postulated that transcendent social identity framing would not only incite positive behavioral change, but it may also inspire more prosocial behavior and increase overall well-being, such as happiness and flourishing. Future research should closely examine how to empirically distinguish between communication on the benevolent to malevolent spectrum.

Concluding remarks

The emerging field of public interest communications reflects the evolution of the field of communication from efforts to represent one group or organization's interest (e.g., marketing) to advancing the overarching interest of the public. This exposition delineates how social psychological insights could be applied to public interest communications and how it could help to advance the research agenda of this growing discipline. With continued research efforts in this important area, we can develop a more nuanced scientific understanding of how to direct the course of social change toward a happy and positive future for all.

Footnotes

1   In Martin Luther King's (1959) original speech, the term "negro" was employed. The author updated this term to "black" in the quote to reflect modern parlance.

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