CHOICE SHIFTS AND GROUP POLARIZATION

A choice shift occurs when, after a group’s interaction on an issue, the mean attitude of group members differs from the members’ mean initial attitude.

Group polarization occurs when the choice shift is in the same direction as the inclination of the mean initial attitude: for example, if on some issue, the initial attitude of the average member is positive (negative), then the subsequent attitude of the average member after group discussion will be more positive (negative).
Simple Escalation

We may categorize choice shifts as either involving an increasing (escalating) or decreasing (de-escalating) change in the mean attitude of group members:

a. Positive Escalation

b. Negative Escalation

c. No Escalation
Risky Shifts -- Escalation

Research on choice shifts and group polarization originated with Stoner’s (1961) finding on choice dilemmas (issues in which a level of acceptable risk on a course of action is being debated) in which he reported that the decisions of groups involved higher levels of risk-taking than the decisions of individuals.

This finding, known as the “risky shift,” stimulated a large number of studies.

“Rarely in the history of social psychology has a single study stimulated as much research as the master’s thesis by Stoner (1961) which reported the discovery of “the risky shift.” Its conclusion that groups are riskier than individuals was widely interpreted as being contrary to the findings of previous research on the effects of groups on individuals. It challenged conventional wisdom, and it appeared to have implications for those responsible for making important decisions involving risk.” (Cartwright 1971)
Initial Positions

Mean Initial Position

+ 0 -

Final Positions

Mean Final Position

Initial Positions -> Final Position(s)
Social Decision Scheme Theory

Social decision scheme theory postulates that group decisions can be understood in terms of the initial distribution of attitudes and a decision scheme, or decision rule, that members use to obtain a decision.

Given a demand for a group decision, disagreement triggers the employment of a particular decision rule: majority rule, the arithmetic mean of initial attitudes, the median of initial attitudes, the most extreme initial position, and so on.

Different rules may be involved depending on the initial distribution of attitudes in a group. Choice shifts arise when decision-making rules produce a group decision that differs from the mean initial attitude of group members; the direction and magnitude of a choice shift is the byproduct of the decision rule.
Social Influence Network Theory

Individual changes of opinion on an issue depend on the influence network that exists or is formed in the group.

The initial positions of group members do not provide a reliable fix on the interpersonal influence network that is formed on in a group.

Group polarization and escalation are not reliable and ubiquitous phenomena. Choice shifts are reliable and ubiquitous.

Revised opinions are constrained by the range of group members’ initial opinions on an issue.