"After the Discussion, I am Even More Confident in My Point of View": An Overview of Studies of Group Polarization

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Abstract

The polarization of the population in Russia is reflected in the psychological state of society. The article deals with the phenomenon of "group polarization". First, we define the phenomenon formulated in the framework of social psychology. Next, we presented the main theories that explain the mechanism of action of this phenomenon. Further, we considered in more detail psychological experiments aimed to study group polarization empirically. Separately, we considered studies that also established the features of group polarization, but were carried out in related social sciences. The examples of recent events that took place in Russia illustrate the process of group polarization in modern society in the period from 2014 to 2020. Based on the described studies, we formulated the need for a more detailed empirical analysis of this phenomenon in the current conditions of society in Russia. Finally, we outlined the main ways related to the study of the connection between group polarization and the psychological state of society and people's behaviour.

Keywords: group polarization, psychological state of society, social and political events.

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Introduction

The polarization of the population in Russia is reflected in the psychological state of society (Levedev, Gordyakova, 2019). In the process of society's development, various issues arise that require discussion and subsequent decisions. Discussions take place at different levels — they can be held within the same family, or these issues can be raised among colleagues. Finally, quite often, sensitive issues are also brought up for discussion in the sphere of mass communications. Although mass communications are rather a broad name for a large variety of sources of information, most of our country's residents still prefer television. Among television programs, various so-called "Political talk shows" are presented. Studies that have been associated with this genre of programs have shown that in the course of such talk shows, as a rule, the presenter seeks to develop a common point of view with the guests and "feel-good" generic style is usually taking place (Lauerbach, 2007). However, this is not always the case. Sometimes people who discuss some problems do not come to a common point of view, but, on the contrary, become even more confident in the correctness of their position. Why is this happening? The answer to this question was investigated by social psychologists, who suggested using the term "group polarization" to explain this phenomenon.

Group Polarization as an Object for Research in Social Psychology

Group polarization is defined as "the tendency for members of a group discussing an issue to move toward a more extreme version of the positions they held before the discussion began. As a result, the group as a whole tends to respond in more extreme ways than one would expect given the sentiments of the individual members prior to deliberation". (APA Dictionary of Psychology).

The first comparison of a person's opinion alone and a person's opinion in the process of group discussion, date back to the 60s of the XX century. So, in J. Stoner's studies, it was noted that people who make decisions in a group usually do it riskier than when they make decisions on their own (without discussing them in groups). (Stoner, 1961). Subsequently, research continued by J. Stoner demonstrated that people who tend to make less risky decisions in the course of group discussion, on the contrary, become riskier (Stoner, 1968).

Later, it was found that subjects who had formed their own point of view in the process of group discussion only strengthened it (Moscovici, & Zavalloni, 1969). This phenomenon has been named "group polarization".

In the meta-analysis, which was devoted to the study of the process of group socialization, D. Isenberg considers two main theories that are associated with this phenomenon: *social comparison* and *informational influence* (Isenberg, 1986).

Social Comparison Theory and Group Polarization

Social comparison theory was first proposed by G. Sanders, R. Baron and suggested that person who is in a group is more motivated to have high and more positive ratings from other group members (Sanders, Baron, 1977). To do this, at the beginning of communication in a group, the person monitors which ideas are more popular with group members, and which, on the contrary, are less popular. After that, the person begins to adhere to the point of view that is characteristic for the members of his group. However, people in the group often take not just a position of

the group members, but its extreme form. It is so that the rest of the group members pay their attention to the person. So, in empirical studies, this theory received its confirmation. For example, a study of J. Sieber and R. Ziegler (2019) demonstrated that if people knew how other participants in the experiment felt about the problem under discussion, they were more likely to be group polarized. Besides, if elements of persuasive argumentation were used in the discussion process, then the research participants paid more attention to them if they demonstrated a high level of motivation.

Information Influence and Group Polarization

This approach was based on the fact that in the process of discussion, people pay attention to the arguments that are "presented" to them during the discussion of the problem. If in the group, at the beginning of the discussion, there is a point of view that the majority of people adhere to, then the arguments that will be expressed during the discussion will be related to this position. If a person supports an unpopular point of view, then in the process of group discussion he will pay attention to the arguments "against", otherwise if he supports the point of view of the majority, then he pays attention to the arguments "for". That is, as a result of such a discussion, people who took the position of a minority under the influence of arguments can change their position towards the position of the majority. Empirical studies that were devoted to testing this theory also confirmed it. Referent informational influence theory explains group polarization as conformity, through self-categorization, to a local in-group norm which is polarized as a result of the in-group being located towards an extreme of the salient comparative context or social frame of reference. (Turner et al., 1989).

Contemporary Studies of Group Polarization

Group polarization often becomes an object of study in the study of rather controversial issues. For example, 129 students took part in one of the studies, who were divided into

43 groups. All participants read the text, which described the need to decriminalize smoking marijuana. After that, the study participants were asked to note how much they know something about the topic of the article on the Likert scale (1 — I don't know, 9 — I know well). Also, participants were asked what they personally think about decriminalizing marijuana on the same scale (1 — definitely against, 9 — definitely for).

Initially, the researchers obtained the following results: a minority opposed the idea of decriminalization, a slightly larger fraction expressed a neutral position, the majority supported this idea.

After that, the participants were given materials that contained information on the decriminalization of marijuana. The materials consisted of 16 texts, 8 of which were common to all participants, and the remaining eight materials were different — some contained materials that express a position "for" decriminalization, others, on the contrary, a position "against" decriminalization. The researchers noted that in this way, people who later took part in the study could use the information that was contained in these materials.

After preparing to discuss this issue, the researchers divided the participants into groups (3 people each) and gave instructions that they should discuss within the group the issue of decriminalizing marijuana. It was necessary to discuss this issue until the group came to a consensus. Time for discussion was limited — participants were given no more than 30 minutes. It turned out that the entire discussion took an average of 12 minutes. The results showed no statistically significant difference between people who considered themselves competent in this matter compared to those who were less competent.

Additionally, it was found that members of the discussion group who held more extreme positions contributed more to the discussion than members who did not occupy such positions. In general, groups in which there were people in "extreme" positions were not more polarized than groups in which such people were absent. However, the researchers note that the groups were prone to polarization. This study also noted that the minority could influence

the process of group polarization, but empirical data were not obtained (Lyn, 2009).

In the conditions of modern interaction of people, information and communication means are acquiring an increasing role. Researchers in the field of group polarization are also interested in how the transition from "offline" to "online" communication affects group polarization. One study examined how computer communication (anonymous or not) affects this process. So, the researchers concluded that the *identified* face-to-face computer-mediated communication in certain conditions leads to *weaker group polarization*. In contrast, *anonymous* face-to-face computer-mediated communication increases the level of group polarization (Sia et al., 2002).

Besides, researchers are interested in issues related to the political preferences of people. Thus, in another study, it was found that the polarization of Americans associated with their adherence to the party increases over time and affects not only political views but also their daily life. Adherents of one political party expose adherents of another political party even more than, for example, members of another race (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

Research of Polarization Processes in Russia

Today, there are various areas of research into group polarization associated with the study of this phenomenon in the inhabitants of Russia. One of these areas is the study of the question of the influence of Russian residents on the process of elections in the United States. For this, the records of 1239 Twitter users of various political orientations were studied. The study included records from the end of 2017. Researchers found that interaction significantly changed various indicators of attitudes towards politics and people's behaviour (for example, their self-esteem on the scale "liberal" — "democrat"). However, in general, the researchers note that most often they interacted with residents of Russia with strong ideological homophily within their Twitter network, high interest in politics, and high frequency of Twitter usage. In addition, the methods used made it possible to reveal that interaction with "trolls" (people

who disseminate information containing insults, remarks, or one that causes strong disagreement in society) in the Twitter space may not have so much impact on the respondents, since they communicated, mostly with already very polarized voters (Bail et al., 2020).

Besides, studies of polarization in various historical periods are also widespread. So, in one study, it was found that before the First World War, the views within one political movement were different: for example, some believed that war was one of the ways to revive the country, while the other part believed that it was just one of the ways to abolish democratic institutions. The views within the movement and the ways of interacting with people were different: if the moderate right believed that dialogue could be used for interaction, then the extreme right believed that tight control was needed to help achieve their goals. This polarization led to the development of conflicts within this movement and the collapse before the 1917 revolution (Loukianov, 2016).

Studies of polarization were also related to the political sphere. Thus, in one of the studies, using the extended polarization index of Aleskerov-Golubenko (demonstrates a desire to vote for one or another party), it was established that polarization in the State Duma of the Russian Federation was associated "with tension in relations with the executive branch. The more pronounced the tension, the more polarized the State Duma was. The less the tension was expressed, the less the State Duma was polarized" (Aleskerov, Oleynik, 2016, p. 2).

The Current State of the Problem of Polarization of Russian Society

Researchers in related disciplines (for example, in sociology) also study the degree of polarization of society in a particular country. In Russia, several sociological agencies conduct polls, the results of which demonstrate a fairly large degree of polarization of society. In particular, the Levada Center regularly asks respondents the question "Are things in the country going in the general right direction today, or is the country moving down the wrong path?" The answers also reveal interesting trends in the polarization of people's opinions. For the pe-

riod from 2014 to 2020, it can be admitted that the number of respondents who hold the position "Difficult to answer" does not exceed 20 per cent of the total number of respondents (Assessment of the current situation in the country, 2020).

According to the data published by the analytical centre (https://www.levada.ru), one can draw attention to the fact that since March 2014, the polarization of opinions of Russian residents about how things are in Russia differ significantly. It is probably due to an important event for Russia — the annexation of Crimea to Russia. This issue, starting from the very first options for its discussion and up to the present day, causes a large number of discussions in society. The expediency, necessity, legality of this connection are discussed.

But it was this topic that demonstrated how different and polar the opinions of people on issues related to the life of their country could be. In 2016, the gap between judgments about the direction of the country became smaller (probably, it is due to the proceedings on the possible use of doping by athletes from Russia). In June 2018, again, the number of people who agree and disagree with the statement about the path of development of Russia becomes approximately the same — an important political event related to the Russian Federation is taking place — Russia heads the U.N. Security Council (https://www.levada.ru).

One of the latest events that indicates the connection between the level of polarization of society and the attitude to the processes that take place in it is the arrest of S.I. Furgal. Then people who disagreed with this decision began to take part in various collective protests. According to sociological data, which were published, 47% of the total "Rather positively" refer to people who take part in the protests. Also, the respondents almost equally (a difference of 2 per cent) agree with two opposing statements related to the explanation of this event. According to the first point of view, the arrest of S.I. Furgal is a way to "remove" a politician who enjoys the authority and respect of people. The second point of view is formulated that this person really violated the law, and there are no political reasons for this arrest (Protests in Bashkiria, 2020).

Conclusions

The listed events demonstrate to researchers a rather interesting tendency — polarization becomes especially noticeable when important events take place within the country and abroad. In periods when there is a high level of polarization in society, the level of people's trust in the authorities (the president, the State Duma, etc.) can also change.

In general, polarization is associated with the reaction of people to certain events and can be a predictor of the psychological state of society. In this case, it becomes possible to develop a system of indicators, which will be based on average estimates of representatives of polarized groups. Moreover, then the higher the level of polarization, the more accurate the assessment of the psychological state of society can be.

The level of polarization can be associated with the desire (or lack of desire) to participate in various types of collective activities, as shown by previous events. Therefore, in future studies, it is necessary to investigate in more detail the connection between the reactions of people who share different (polar) points of view and their individual psychological and socio-psychological characteristics and readiness to act. The results of such research can serve as the basis for the development of models of behavior of people who hold opposite points of view.

Funding

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«После обсуждения я еще больше уверен в своей точке зрения»:
обзор исследований групповой поляризации

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Аннотация. Поляризация населения находит свое отражение в психологическом состоянии российского общества. В статье рассмотрен феномен «групповой поляризации». Дано определение, сформулированное в рамках социальной психологии. Приводятся основные теории, которые объясняют механизм действия данного феномена. Более подробно рассмотрены эксперименты, проведенные в психологии, цель которых заключалась в эмпирическом исследовании групповой поляризации. Отдельно рассматриваются исследования, которые также устанавливают особенности групповой поляризации, но были проведены в смежных социальных науках. На примерах недавних событий, которые происходили в России, проиллюстрирован процесс групповой поляризации в современном обществе в 2014–2020 гг. Сформулирована необходимость более подробного эмпирического изучения данного феномена в России. Обозначены основные векторы исследования взаимовлияния групповой поляризации, психологического состояния общества и поведения людей.
Ключевые слова: групповая поляризация; психологическое состояние общества; общественно-политические события