

The Magnet and Iron Filings Model of Intergroup Attraction

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ABSTRACT The aim of the study was to present the magnet and iron filings model of intergroup attraction. The model presented in this study is theoretical and it is likened to the magnetic attraction between a magnet and iron filings. This theoretical study looked at stages of intergroup attraction and associated consequences. The stages of intergroup attraction discussed are group stability, group attraction, group dysfunction and group bonding. The argument presented by the model could be used in educational, health, family, community, organisational, and political settings. The model seeks to strengthen capacity building initiatives in groups and organisations. Future studies on the magnet and iron filings model of intergroup attraction could focus on empirical research on the usefulness of the concept in applied settings.

INTRODUCTION

Models are used to explain the behaviour of individuals and groups (Franco and Rouwette 2011). They are used to simplify human interactions. Models are used by organisational consultants to diagnose problems in human relations and to prescribe effective interventions that would correct or improve human transactional systems in groups (Franco and Rouwette 2011). Society is riddled with social problems that need creative solutions. Social scientists have to come up with models that could be utilised by community and organisational leaders in resolving conflict and empowering groups. Models are used in health, educational, social, political and economic settings (Schellinck and White 2011). The models are theoretical but they could be validated in statistical terms (Schellinck and White 2011). In the social sciences, models are generally used as paradigms upon which reality is constructed (Franco and Rouwette 2011). In this study, a theoretical model was used to understand the behaviour of people in groups and organisations. The theoretical model was based on the behaviour of groups in society. The interpersonal attraction of individuals in society and in organisations was likened to the attractive force between a magnet and iron filings.

THE MAGNET AND IRON FILINGS CONCEPT IN GROUPS

The concept of magnet and iron filings in understanding human groups could augment models of organisational development. Inter-

group attraction occurs when independent groups become attracted to each other (Vos and van der Zee 2011). The process involves interpersonal attraction which is based on similarity of interests, physical appearance, attitudes, cultural background, race, ethnicity, values and personality (Behrend and Thompson 2011). The magnet group is hypothesised as an undesirable group in this study. It is a group that attracts the iron filings group. In this study, the iron filings group is made of up members who are likened to iron filings that are attracted to a magnet. The iron filings get attracted to the magnet when exposed to it. The magnet is a group that is considered to be strong and influential while the iron filings group is considered to be weak and easily influenced. In a social setting, the magnet is a group that lives in bad social environments that are avoided by society. The undesirable social environments could be brothels, hideouts, illicit drug outlets, underground slums, and some other wicked places. The magnet, as a group is associated with nefarious activities as perceived by the iron filings group. The iron filings group does not like the magnet and hence it works hard to avoid contact with the magnet. The magnet, as a group, does not view themselves negatively. They regard themselves as a group that serves a function or fulfils a role that society ignores. Their activities are guided by their values which might run counter to the values of the iron filings group. In an organisational setting, the magnet group could operate as a legally registered entity that pays tax but in the eyes of the iron filings group, the magnet should be loathed and ostracised. This constitutes intergroup competition, rivalry and

aggression (Cikara et al. 2011). The magnet group could be a powerful business organisation with tentacles of influence locally and internationally. It is conceptualised in this study that intergroup hostility could be evident among competing groups but members in both groups could find common interests resulting in interpersonal attraction. It is hypothesised that intergroup attraction, if not controlled, will ultimately lead to the complete absorption or extinction of the iron filings group. This could happen through mergers and acquisitions in organisations. In an organisational context, the magnet group could be a serious competitor that is regarded as a threat to the existence of the iron filings group. The negative terminology that is used by the iron filings group to describe the magnet group underlines the degree of hatred and delegitimisation of the competitor. The iron filings group could regard its major competitor as unethical, offering substandard service and corrupt. The leaders of the iron filings group could actively discourage their members from joining the magnet group in search of greener pastures. In society, the iron filling group could eventually have members joining groups that they initially despised due to the overwhelming influence of the magnet group. The magnet group is conceptualised as strong and tempting although its influence and attractiveness is downplayed by the iron filings group.

Social Influence and Social Compliance between the Magnet and the Iron Filings

The model theoretically explains how human groups move towards the magnet. Theoretical models illustrate group processes (Schellinck and White 2011). The groups become iron filings and the magnet in the processes of intergroup attraction. The intergroup attraction is a naturally occurring bond between groups that are deemed to be different by society. Intergroup attraction could be facilitated by members of the magnet group who could induce members of the iron filings group to like their group and their activities. It is not uncommon in industry rivalry for organisations to attract talent by offering highly competitive rewards that would leave financially unstable organisations in the doldrums unable to retain both skilled and unskilled employees (Sharma and Gadenne 2010). Members of the iron filings group could be influenced by the pre-

vailing economic environment to look for better opportunities offered by the magnet group (de Hoyos and Green 2011). Turnover among both general and managerial employees of the iron filings group could happen despite huge corporate investment in employee development (Carraher 2011). Brain drain is common in Africa and Asia to such an extent that European and US labour markets are experiencing a huge influx of prospective employees from developing regions or emerging economies (Burch and Reid 2011). The magnet group could use expansive and expensive marketing strategies to out-compete the weaker organisation, the iron filings group, in electronic and print media (Chu et al. 2011). Aggressive marketing by the magnet group can drive the iron filings group out of business. The iron filings group as a new entrant to the market or a small-to-medium enterprise will struggle to break even in business (Loane and Bell 2011). The magnet group as a well established organisation or financially strong group, can dominate the industry (Christensen 2011). Social influence by the magnet group and social compliance by members of the iron filings group could illustrate the magnitude of the force of attraction between the two groups. Social compliance happens when individuals in a group act like what others in the group are doing without considering the consequences of the action (Ingo et al. 2011). Individuals who show high social compliance in a group will also show high levels of suggestibility (Ingo et al. 2011). They can be manipulated by powerful others and they readily obey instructions from people with power and social influence (Morselli and Passini 2011). Members of a group with high social compliance are tempted by immediately available rewards. If social influence appeals to sensual gratification, members of the iron filings group are more likely to accept the reward. They might not honour the life philosophies or principles of behaviour approved by their group (Levy 2011). Individuals who cannot delay gratification are usually hedonistic and live in the present (Mendl and Paul 2011). It is conceptualised in the magnet and iron filings model of intergroup attraction that members of the iron filings group value the here and now and would readily agree to go with groups that provide immediate reinforcement and benefits such as cash, liquor, drugs, novel sex, and sensual gratification (Romer et al. 2010). There is time value of money in the

iron filings group. There is group consensus among members of the iron filings group that money spend now has more utility value than money spend on larger purchases in the distant future (Lahav et al. 2011). Individuals who are unwilling to defer gratification are not particularly tied to any one group that keeps on promising them a brighter future which is not physically present to satisfy their present needs (Ku-nzendorf et al. 2010). They discount the future and invest in the present (Lahav et al. 2010). Group loyalty in the iron filings group goes to leaders who understand and provide for the present needs of the group (Podsakoff et al. 2010). The iron filings group is made up of members who are loosely attached to the group and its leadership.

The Magnet and Iron Filings Model Stages of Intergroup Attraction

The hypothesised model has four stages of intergroup attraction. The stages conceptualised are group stability, attraction, dysfunction, and bonding. Intergroup attraction between the magnet and the iron filings is expected to gradually go through these stages. It is theorised that the process is naturally occurring or it is facilitated by group action. In natural attraction, there is affinity between groups whilst in facilitated attraction the attraction between the magnet and iron filings is achieved through learning. Interpersonal attraction can be learned through the reciprocity principle (Whitchurch et al. 2011). The theoretical stages are explained below in terms of the magnet and iron filings model of intergroup attraction.

Group Stability Stage

The magnet and iron filings groups are conceived to be relatively stable at this stage since groups are generally stable in their youthful or formation stages (Carvin 2011). The iron filings group, as conceptualised in this paper, has members that are unstable and loosely attached to the group. The members are loyal to the leader but could be easily influenced away from their leader and group. The group is intact when leaders constantly monitor members of the group. The leaders are concerned that members might leave the group. From the outside, the group looks intact and functioning smoothly. Members of the iron

filings group could be young and ambitious. The members could be old but looking for change and novelty. Members of the magnet group have a strong allegiance to the group. They are coordinated and adhesive. The magnet group is powerful and guided by strong group values. In a social setting, the values could be antisocial, liberal, unhealthy, deviant, irreligious, or immoral. Powerful groups could be loathed (Schellinck and White 2011). In contrast, the magnet group could be famous but despised by the iron filings group. In reciprocation, the magnet group could despise the iron filings group. However, both groups could view themselves as stable at the group stability stage.

It is theorised that the groups can remain intact and separated but they do have a natural affinity for each other. This intergroup attraction might not be realised at this stage or it could be denied by the leaders and members of both groups. The groups would not recognise similarity of interests or functions. However, members of both groups could sense that they have something in common sooner or later although there could be a perceived or socially constructed barrier between the two groups. There is a wide gap between them. The gap could be widened through the action of group leaders to keep members away from the undesirable group (Sharma and Gadene 2010). However, the magnet group needs to recruit members of the iron filings group. The magnet group would need to attract members of the iron filings group in order to increase group membership and group strength. This enables the magnet group to be more powerful and more influential (Bwalya et al. 2011). The iron filings group has members who are dissatisfied with the group because of its weakness. Members of the iron filings group are attracted to the more powerful magnet group. They need to find something more exciting outside the group. They might have the motivation to leave but have no plans or ideas of fulfilling their fantasies as yet.

At the group stability stage, both groups look stable but polarised towards change (Brewer 2011). The magnet group intends to attract members outside the group. In a natural setting, the magnet and iron filings have the magnetic potential to attract each other. The denser material pulls the less dense material to its side. The group that is more powerful attracts members from the less powerful group (Leftwich and Sen 2011). At group stability stage, the two groups are psy-

chologically “charged” in the same manner that the magnet and iron filings are magnetically charged to attract each other. However, at this stage of intergroup attraction, the groups remain physically stable and distinct.

The figure below illustrates the “group stability stage” of intergroup attraction. The iron filings group is represented by four unshaded circles and the magnet group is represented by one shaded circle. The direction of attraction is from left to right in all the stages of intergroup attraction.

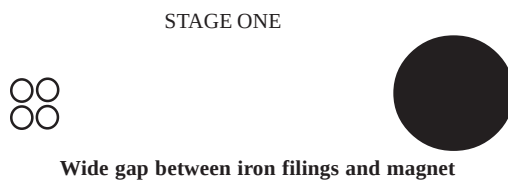


Fig. 1. Group stability

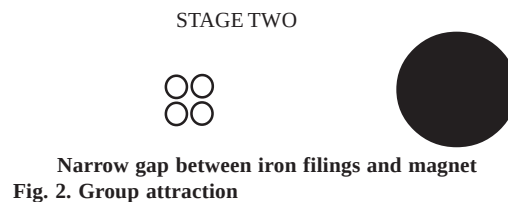
Group Attraction Stage

At this stage, the two groups realise that they need each other. Group members of both groups can imagine what their relationship with members of the other groups will be like. Through vicarious experience, they fantasise satisfying relationships. Their minds transcend time and space and go beyond present realities. Human capacity to engage in abstract thinking enables members of the magnet and iron filings groups to have intergroup attraction fantasy that can traverse temporal distance, spatial distance and social distance (Lieberman and Trope 2008).

The iron filings group moves towards the magnet group at the group attraction stage. The movement is gradual though; it starts with one or two member being attracted to the magnet group. Even though the member who crosses the floor is chastised by the group, through learning processes in the group, other members could follow suit.

Subliminal learning could facilitate intergroup attraction (Pessiglione et al. 2008). Members of both groups could subconsciously learn of the pleasure that can be derived from the opposite group. The members in both groups can actively learn through agents from the opposite group that they could find life-fulfilling ambitions in the opposite group. Members of both groups will gravitate towards each other to live their dreams. In a practical sense, it is more members of the

iron filings group that will move towards the magnet group. The weaker group is attracted to the stronger group. The magnet group members seek to incorporate members of the iron filings group into their group. Member defection or deviance on both sides could be reported but it is the iron filings group that will be worse affected by the intergroup attraction. The figure below demonstrates intergroup attraction the at group attraction stage

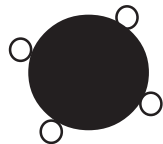


Group Dysfunction Stage

The iron filings group at this stage is disturbed by the attraction of its members by the magnet group. The dominant group exerts influence on the weaker group (Loane and Bell 2011). The intergroup attraction leaves the iron filings group unable to carry out its functions. The group becomes dysfunctional and may cease to operate. If it operates, it would perform below its optimum capacity. It is conceptualised that the group might rely on skeleton staff to carry out its duties. The morale in the group will be low and loyalty to the leader would be low. There is discontent among members and the group becomes unproductive. Dissatisfied groups are less productive (Crane and Plastow 2010). The members could leave the group in large numbers or they could be with the group but behaving as they wish. There would be no central point of group control. Allegiance to the group and obedience to authority figures in the group could be low or non-existent among members. The iron filings group could file for bankruptcy or liquidation. The group becomes extinct unless it finds alternative strategies to become the magnet group itself and attract members from weaker groups in the same manner it was disturbed and disoriented by the machinations of a dominant group (Loane and Bell). On the other hand, the magnet group grows from strength to strength as it acquires more members from the iron filings group. If the iron filings group were an urban community or rural village, such a community could suffer from

moral decadence. If young people leave the village or migrate overseas, the elderly community could experience the empty nest syndrome. The figure below illustrates the attraction of members of the iron filings group by the magnet group.

STAGE THREE



The magnet is surrounded by iron filings

Fig. 3. Group dysfunction

Group Bonding Stage

There is complete intergroup attraction when the two groups bond together. It is conceptualised that the iron filings group merges with the magnet group and when that happens the iron filings group ceases to exist as a separate entity. It is acquired by the dominant group, that is, the magnet. The acquisition results in the iron filings group losing its identity and trade mark. Leaders of the iron filings group could be incorporated in the dominant group. This is likened to mergers and acquisitions in organizations (Shook and Roth 2011). The leaders could resist the temptation of leaving their group as the members did. Instead, they could remain to negotiate a management buyout with the shareholders of the magnet group. They could have plans to rebuild the company and revive the fortunes of the company but that usually results in change of name and identity since new investors could come with new demands (Park and Jan 2011). In any case, the iron filings group would not be the same again due to the influence of new investors in the organization (Park and Jan 2011).

If the leadership of the iron filings group fears a reprimand by stakeholders, they could leave in search of greener pastures offered by a magnet group. In a complete bonding, the iron filings group becomes part and parcel of the magnet group. When a magnet attracts iron filings, the iron filings become part of the magnet. The iron filings will be charged and act as the magnet themselves. They will attract other objects to the magnet. There will be no distinction between former members of the iron filings group and original members of the strengthened magnet

group. The bonding results in the formation of a compound that is hard to break. The organisational behaviour of members of the new magnet group would be the same (Park and Jan 2011). Members of the strengthened magnet group can wear same colours, cultivate the organisational culture and will work towards the promotion of a vibrant organisational climate. Former members of the iron filings group would not like to be associated with their former group, the iron filings group. They will speak the language of the new group and identify with the values of the acquiring group. The figure below shows that bonding of the two groups results in one compound group.

STAGE FOUR



The iron filings become part of the magnet

Fig. 4. Group bonding

The illustration of the four stages of intergroup attraction is theoretical. The magnet and iron filings are electronically charged to attract each other. The model is a metaphor of intergroup attraction. The stages could be used in applied settings to deal with specific issues that arise from intergroup attraction.

APPLICATION OF THE MAGNET AND IRON FILINGS MODEL

The magnet and iron filings model of intergroup attraction can be used in educational, health, family, community, organisational and political settings. In fact, the model can be applied in several fields as long as there is unbalanced influence between groups. It is theorised that intergroup attraction in such situations becomes inevitable. The iron filings group insulates its members against the magnet group. Insulation protects materials from the magnetic field. Industrial machines that are properly insulated are reliable to use and last longer in the workshop. Magnetic induction is a process through which ferromagnetic materials that were initially neutral to a magnetic field will be turned into a magnet. The materials are stroked to get magnetised. At the end of the induction processes, iron filings will behave like the magnet. In inter-

group attraction, human effort is involved in exposing the iron filings group to the influence of the magnet group. This could be through advertisement, word of mouth, friendship formation, courtship, and the use of mediators. Intergroup attraction potential between groups is ignited by human interaction processes. The possibility of using the magnet and iron filings model of intergroup attraction in various settings is explained below.

(a) Educational Setting

In an educational setting, learners will constitute the iron filings group. Teachers are afraid that pupils could be exposed to bad environments. There are gangsters, child traffickers, and places where children are not allowed to go. The teachers protect the children against bad influence (Bethel 2004). In the process, the educational system imparts values to students that will protect the students from bad influence. The magnet group, in contrast, sees schools as a market for their products and activities. Some of the children could be used by the magnet group to sell illicit products in schools. Children could be used to entice other children in several schools. The magnet group could recruit school children to night clubs. The magnet group can sell illicit drugs and alcohol to learners through surreptitious means. Child abusers could view the school as a source for human trafficking, supply of cheap labour, and sexual exploitation of children (Walters and Davis 2011). The magnet group would not mind that the children were underage and that it is against the law. Even among university students who are above the legal age of consent, or age of majority, they could still be abused by the magnet group resulting in disruption or discontinuation of studies. If the insulation against the effect of the magnet is not strong in a school situation, many pupils could quit school to join the magnet group. Teachers need to identify various magnet groups in their environment and incorporate prevention information in the school's life orientation curriculum.

(b) Health Setting

Disease prevention information is needed to avert a health crisis (Najera et al. 2011). Health educators face the challenge of discouraging people from engaging in health risk behaviours.

There are places that make people susceptible to diseases and groups of people who expose others to infection. Some groups of people can deliberately infect others without remorse. The iron filings group is made up of people who are vulnerable to diseases. They need to be targeted in health promotion programmes. The magnet group is made up of people who have health risk lifestyles and live in health risk environments. Health educators protect members of the iron filings group from joining members of the magnet group. Health objectives are achieved when people avoid health risks and take action to engage in health-protective behaviours. The public is educated to prevent HIV and AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, cholera, cancer, bilharzias and many other diseases that are acquired from the environment or through human negligence (Najera et al. 2011). If a community fails to adhere to disease prevention information, it will be vulnerable to diseases. The magnet group in a health setting is made up of "most-at-risk populations" who can spread the disease to others such as sex workers and their clients, injecting drug users, men who have sex with men and prisoners (Ruf et al. 2011). It is common for communities to abandon health interventions that are provided free of service by public health educators (Najera et al. 2011). Due to the influence of the magnet group, communities could relapse in their health prevention initiatives (Bard 2011).

(c) Family Setting

At a family level, the magnet and iron filings concept refers to parents as leaders and children as the iron filings. The children as iron filings need to be protected from the magnet, that is, destructive forces in society (Sturges and Hanrahan 2011). When parents fail to protect their children, the family will be dysfunctional. Children become delinquent and crime-prone (Sturges and Hanrahan 2011). Both male and female children might have unwanted children in adolescence. As a result of the uncontrolled effect of the magnet on the iron filings, the children can leave home and choose to live with criminals and other groups with dubious reputation (Calvete and Orue 2011). They can join people who are disapproved by parents and in some situations, they work with people from the magnet group to harass or steal from their parents (Sturges and Hanrahan 2011). This criminal

behaviour of children is likened to the iron filings that will eventually behave like the magnet itself after the induction process.

(d) Community Setting

Communities are exposed to the magnet through developmental projects that are carried out in the area. Community leaders would need to preserve the social decorum of society (Kasomo 2010). The leaders could be village heads, elders, religious leaders and traditional leaders. Community leaders guard against the transgression of culture, religion, taboos, and morals. Criminal activities and indulgence are despised by community leaders. When strangers come into the community as project teams, soldiers, road construction workers, soccer players or athletes in camp and other similar groups living in temporal shelter such as tents, community leaders warn their members against moral transgressions. It is a common feature to find married members of the community, the iron filings, sneaking into these roadside camps—the magnet, for extramarital sex (Leatherman 2011).

(e) Organisational Setting

Managers insulate their members against the magnet by stepping up team development training programmes in organisations. Employees as iron filings can be lost to a competitor organisation (Jaaskelainen 2011). The magnet expands its capacity by absorbing the iron filings. Training and development in organisations will focus on identification of organisational weaknesses and the need to build organisational capacity against competitors.

(f) Political Setting

The politics of a country are largely dominated by two major political parties that alternate in leading the country in most parts of the word (Jou 2010). Small parties emerge towards elections but they soon vanish after elections. Like iron filings, they cannot stand the attractive force of the magnet. The two dominant political parties will wrestle for membership until one loses members to the more powerful contender. The struggle for power and influence in the political sphere can be simplified and better understood through the use of the magnet and iron filings model of intergroup attraction.

Limitations of the Study

This study is a theoretical exposition of the possibility of using the magnet and iron filings model of intergroup attraction in various fields. The model is hypothetical; it needs to be verified through empirical research. The research designs could be qualitative, quantitative or observational in nature. As it is, a philosophical approach could utilise the model without the need for obtaining empirical data and use of statistical analyses to validate the model. Models are not exhaustive; they only provide an alternative way of looking at phenomena.

CONCLUSION

The stages of the model can help practitioners working with groups identify risk factors that make groups vulnerable. The identification of the magnet and iron filings in groups provides a starting point in group capacity building processes. The assessed strengths and weaknesses of groups will assist training consultants in diagnosing training and intervention needs that are necessary for group or organisational development. The model seeks to strengthen capacity building initiatives in organisations and the development of organisational strategies against member or employee attrition. Future studies could focus on empirical research on the magnet and iron filings in applied settings.

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