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Trends and Prospects in Persuasion Theory and Research

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Systematic thinking about persuasion dates at least as far back as the fifth century B.C.E., to Greek scholars such as Protagoras, Gorgias, Plato, Isocrates, and (especially) Aristotle. And in subsequent years persuasion received continuing attention from a variety of scholars within a broadly humanistic tradition (for a review, see Conley, 1990). But in the first part of the twentieth century, the development of social scientific methods provided new avenues to the illumination of persuasion. The social scientific study of persuasion is often traced to Carl Hovland, a Yale University psychologist who, following World War II, initiated a systematic program of persuasion research (see, e.g., Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). On a great many topics in persuasion research, the first work was done by Hovland or his associates (though historical accuracy compels some notice of the persuasion research that considerably predated Hovland's, e.g., Knower, 1936; Lund, 1925; Schanck & Goodman, 1939).

Over the last 50 years, social scientific persuasion research has flowered. Indeed, relevant research has been conducted in a great many academic fields. Nearly all the social sciences (including communication, psychology, sociology, political science, and anthropology) and related applied endeavors in which social scientific questions and methods appear (such as advertising, marketing, public health, medicine, law, business, education, environmental studies, and so on) contain research focused on persuasion. This surely reflects the pervasiveness of persuasion in human affairs. The marketplace, the courtroom, the campaign trail, the boardroom, the family—in all these settings (and more) human decision making is shaped by persuasive communication.

This chapter discusses three broad recent developments in the social scientific study of persuasion and social influence. Some aspects of these developments are already rather well along and have begun to bear significant fruit; others are on the horizon and offer substantial promise. But all testify to the continuing vitality of persuasion theory and research.

Beyond Attitude Change

In its most basic form, persuasion involves changing persons' mental states, usually as precursors to behavioral change. Of the various mental states that might be implicated in persuasion, attitude (understood as a person's general evaluation of an object) has been the center of research attention. Correspondingly, persuasion has often been conceived of as fundamentally involving attitude change. This might involve a change in the valence (positive or negative) of the evaluation or a change in the extremity of the evaluation (as when an attitude changes from extremely negative to only slightly negative).

Thus understood, attitude change is obviously an important aspect of persuasion. All sorts of decisions, from what products to buy to which candidate to support, are plainly subject to changes in attitudes. But in various ways persuasion research has seen a broadening of interest beyond this usual focus, as reflected specifically in interests in three other sorts of outcome variables.

Other Attitude Properties

First, properties of attitude other than valence and extremity have come to be recognized as potentially important foci for persuasive efforts. That is, rather than influencing the direction or extremity of an attitude, a persuader might want to influence some other attribute of the attitude, such as its salience (prominence, accessibility), the confidence with which it is held, the degree to which it is linked to other attitudes, and so forth (for discussions of some such attitudinal properties, see Bromer, 1998; Eagly & Chaiken, 1998; Petty & Krosnick, 1995; Roskos-Ewoldsen, 1997). For instance, where receivers already have positive attitudes toward one's product, the persuasive task may be to ensure that those attitudes are salient (activated) at the right time, perhaps by somehow reminding receivers of their attitudes. So, for example, a manufacturer of food products may not particularly care whether people are thinking of its products while driving, but it does care what attitudes are activated when people are shopping for groceries—so it places advertising displays in supermarkets precisely in order to engage existing positive attitudes at the point of purchase.

A number of such attitudinal properties have been grouped together under the general heading of "attitude strength" (for some discussions, see Bassili, 1996; Eagly & Chaiken, 1998, pp. 290–292; Petty & Krosnick, 1995; Raden, 1985). Conceptualizations of attitude strength vary, but a useful illustration is provided by Krosnick and Petty's (1995) proposal that attitude strength is best understood as an amalgam of persistence (stronger attitudes are more persistent than are weaker ones), resistance (stronger attitudes are more resistant to change than are weaker ones), impact on information processing and judgments (stronger attitudes are more likely to affect such processes than are weaker attitudes), and impact on behavior (stronger attitudes will have more effect on behavior than will weaker ones). Consider, for instance, that two persons might have attitudes toward a particular political candidate that were equally positive (say, with a rating of 6 on a scale of 1 to 7) but differed in strength: Pat's positive attitude is weakly held, liable to fluctuate from moment to moment, not very resistant to persuasion, and not very strongly connected to behavior, whereas Chris's (equally positive) attitude is more strongly held, more stable

over time, less likely to be altered by counterpersuasion, and more likely to be expressed in corresponding behavior (such as voting for the candidate, working in the candidate's campaign, and so on). Therefore, even though Pat and Chris have identical attitudes in one sense (they have the same overall evaluation), their attitudes are rather different in other ways (Chris's is stronger than Pat's). In such a circumstance, obviously, the candidate would like to strengthen Pat's attitude—not necessarily to make the evaluation more extreme, but to make the attitude better anchored, more stable, more connected to behavior, more resistant to counterpersuasion (in short, to make it more like Chris's attitude). To put the matter more generally, persuaders sometimes will have an interest in influencing not merely the valence and extremity of an attitude but also its strength.

Other Mental States

Second, mental states other than attitude have been recognized as potential persuasion targets. Two examples of such states are normative considerations and self-efficacy.

Normative Considerations. Various kinds of beliefs about norms can be relevant targets for persuaders. For instance, people's beliefs about "descriptive norms"—perceptions of what most people do—may influence actions and thus be a focus for persuasive efforts (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991). For instance, college students appear commonly to overestimate the frequency of drug and alcohol use on their campuses (Perkins, Meilman, Leichliter, Cashin, & Presley, 1999). Such overestimation can in turn lead students themselves to engage in excessive drug and alcohol use (because of a belief that "everybody is doing it, so it must be okay"). Obviously, then, persuasive interventions aimed at correcting such misperceptions of descriptive norms might be helpful in reducing drug and alcohol abuse (Haines & Spear, 1996; Miller, Monin, & Prentice, 2000; Steffian, 1999).

Similarly, what the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) terms the "subjective norm"—the person's perception that significant others desire the performance (or nonperformance) of the behavior—may be a persuasion target. For instance, one way of persuading a smoker to quit may be to convince him that others who are important to him (his spouse, his children, his best friend) think that he should quit. That is, by altering the receiver's conception of what significant other people think the receiver should do, the receiver's conduct may be influenced.

Self-Efficacy. Self-efficacy (or perceived behavioral control), the person's perception of his or her ability to perform the behavior, is another mental state that has come to be seen as an important potential focus for persuasive efforts (see Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1986). Sometimes the barrier to a receiver's compliance seems not to be a negative attitude or negative norms, but rather a perceived inability to perform the action successfully. For instance, a person might have a positive attitude toward engaging in regular exercise and have positive normative beliefs about that activity, but might nevertheless not even try to exercise regularly because she believes that she is incapable of exercising regularly (because exercise is too time-consuming, doesn't fit her schedule, requires too much specialized equipment, and so forth). It is easy to imagine how a perceived inability to perform the behavior might underlie failures to exercise, use condoms, quit smoking, and so forth.

Research is only beginning to accumulate concerning how persuaders might address such self-efficacy concerns; there is some indication, for example, that modeling (showing someone successfully performing the behavior) and rehearsal (giving persons an opportunity to practice the behavior) can be useful avenues to influencing self-efficacy (Anderson, 1995, 2000; Hagen, Gutkin, Wilson, & Oats, 1998; Maibach & Flora, 1993; Weisse, Turbiasz, & Whitney, 1995).

Behavioral Outcomes

Third, some lines of research have focused directly on behavioral outcomes, as in studies of the foot-in-the-door and door-in-the-face strategies. (For a general discussion of such strategies, see chapter 12.) Research that is focused on behavioral outcomes serves as a reminder that even when persuaders seek to change mental states (such as attitudes, normative beliefs, or self-efficacy perceptions), influencing mental states is only a means to an end. Behavioral change is commonly the ultimate goal. In a sense, studies emphasizing behavioral outcomes approach persuasion effects from a direction exactly opposite to that taken by research emphasizing mental states: Instead of first centering on attitude change and subsequently taking up the question of how attitudes are related to actions, these lines of research center on behavioral effects and then take up the question of what mental-state mechanisms might account for the observed behavioral effects.

Summary

In sum, persuasion research has come to recognize that attitude change is not the only outcome variable of interest. Although persuasion research has typically focused on attitude change, increasing attention is being given to other outcomes—and, correspondingly, to new mechanisms of persuasion. After all, the means by which one might influence attitudes are not necessarily the same as the means by which one might influence other outcomes. One may hope that the continuing attention of researchers to these additional outcome variables will lead to new understandings about means of social influence.

Context-Specific Research

Persuasion research has generally been aimed at developing concepts, findings, principles, and theories that are useful across a wide range of persuasion settings. Of course, any particular persuasion study commonly involves some particular context of persuasion: The study examines consumer advertisements, or appeals on some public policy question, or arguments about a legal case, and so on. Still, the research aim has typically been the development of findings not bound to any particular persuasive circumstance. However, an increasing amount of persuasion research has been appearing in studies addressed at specific contexts of application, with corresponding development of context-specific concepts and models. (For some discussions of such contexts, see chapter 16 by Klingle, chapter 17 by Baxter and Bylund, chapter 18 by Hirokawa and Wagner, and chapter 19 by Seiter and Cody.)

A useful example is provided by the articulation of various "stage" models of health related behavior, exemplified by the transtheoretical model of health behavior (so named because putatively it integrates a number of different theoretical perspectives). The transtheoretical model (sometimes called the "stages of change" model) identifies a number of distinct stages in a person's adoption of a given health-related behavior such as engaging in an exercise program (see Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984; Weinstein, Rothman, & Sutton, 1998). In the precontemplation stage, a person is not even thinking about undertaking an exercise program anytime soon; in the contemplation stage, she is at least seriously thinking about doing so; a person in the preparation stage is ready to change and may have undertaken planning or other preparatory action (such as signing up for a health club); in the action stage, she is undertaking the exercise program; finally, a person who continues to engage in exercise for some time is said to be in the maintenance stage.

Stage models offer the prospect of shedding light on persuasion, because of their potential usefulness in suggesting how best to tailor persuasive efforts to a particular audience. For example, for persons in the precontemplation stage, the persuader's challenge will presumably be to get receivers thinking about the target behavior (i.e., moving persons from precontemplation to contemplation). By contrast, for people in the preparation stage, the persuader will want to help people translate their plans and intentions into actions. (For some examples of investigations of the effectiveness of stage-matched health interventions, see Jamner, Wolitski, & Corby, 1997; Naylor, Simmonds, Riddoch, Velleman, & Turton, 1999; Quinlan & McCaul, 2000.)

As another example of context-specific research, consider investigations of the persuasive effects of negative political campaign advertisements that attack a political candidate without necessarily even mentioning the preferred candidate. Studies of the effects of negative political advertising are commonly not especially concerned with contributing to general cross-context understandings of persuasion processes, but rather reflect a specific interest in illuminating this one facet of political campaigns (see, e.g., Basil, Schooler, & Reeves, 1991; Garramone, 1985; Haddock & Zanna, 1997; for a review, see Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, & Babbitt, 1999). Indeed, quite independent of whatever light such studies might shed on persuasion processes generally, they are valuable contributions to an understanding of how persuasion works in this particular setting.

One may detect in these developments an implicit recognition of the potential limits of general models of persuasion. No single theoretical view of persuasion is likely to provide a complete, wholly detailed account of every single possible persuasion circumstance—and such should not be asked of a persuasion theory. It's enough that a general theory of persuasion offers broadly useful concepts and principles that are helpful in a variety of circumstances, even if insufficient to answer every possible question about any given persuasion setting. But this in turn suggests that particular persuasion contexts may demand correspondingly particular treatment—context-specific concepts, context-specific principles.

Of course, the study of a specific persuasion context may both feed and be fed by general theorizing about persuasion. A nice example is provided by research on inoculation mechanisms, that is, mechanisms for making receivers resistant to counterpersuasion. Several studies have examined how general understandings of inoculation might be applied to the specific problem of creating resistance to negative political advertising; the

research suggests that the effects of such ads can be blunted if, before they appear, the candidate "inoculates" voters by engaging in appropriate rebuttal of the attacks (see, e.g., Pfau & Burgoon, 1988; Pfau, Kenski, Nitz, & Sorenson, 1990). Previous general research on inoculation guided the context-specific work concerning inoculation against negative campaign ads—and the context-specific work in turn has provided additional general information about inoculation processes. (For more on inoculation, see chapter 15.)

The Complexity of Persuasion Effects

Persuasion phenomena are complicated, making the development of dependable generalizations rather difficult. For example, it is difficult to identify any particular persuasion tactic that is effective in all situations. Indeed, the research literature on persuasive effects contains many examples of apparently inconsistent findings. One researcher's study finds that better liked communicators are significantly more persuasive than less well liked ones, whereas another study finds no such effect; one investigation reports that stating the message's conclusions explicitly significantly enhances persuasion, whereas a subsequent study fails to obtain a significant effect, and so on. But several recent developments in the study of persuasion have helped to identify some of the sources of such complexities, thus providing a basis for better understanding how and why such diverse effects might arise. These developments are expressed briefly in the following three subsections.

Moderating Factors

First, a given persuasion variable can produce different effects under different conditions; a variable might significantly influence persuasive outcomes in one circumstance, but have relatively little effect in another. For instance, acknowledging potential counterarguments (arguments against the advocated view) has different effects depending on the message's topic: It reduces the persuasiveness of messages concerning public policy questions, but not the persuasiveness of consumer product advertisements (O'Keefe, 1999a). Many studies of persuasive effects can be described as a search for possible moderating factors, that is, factors that alter the impact that one variable has on another.

This general idea is particularly prominent in dual-process models of persuasion such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; see also chapter 5). The ELM sketches two broad avenues to persuasion: (1) a "central route" in which receivers carefully process message arguments and (2) a "peripheral route" in which receivers rely on mental shortcuts ("heuristics") as a means of reaching a conclusion. One important moderating variable that affects which route is activated is the receiver's degree of involvement with the topic. As involvement increases, reliance on heuristics decreases and close message processing increases. From the point of view of the ELM, it makes perfectly good sense that, for example, the communicator's likability will sometimes have a substantial influence on persuasiveness but on other occasions will play a very small role. When involvement is relatively low, communicator likability may have considerable impact (because receivers decide whether to agree with the message by using the shortcut

of whether they like the communicator). When involvement is high, however, the persuasive effect of likability will presumably be muted (because receivers will be paying more attention to the details of the message's arguments). One of the signal contributions of the ELM is to have systematized a number of apparently inconsistent findings by distinguishing central-route and peripheral-route persuasion processes.

Multiple Roles for Variables

Second—and also closely connected with the ELM—it has become clear that a given variable might play different roles in persuasion in different circumstances (for general discussion of this point, see Petty, 1997; Petty & Wegener, 1998). As a simple example, consider the impact of variations on the sheer length of a written message. Message length might play a role in persuasion by serving as a cue for a heuristic such as "longer messages probably have more good arguments." That is, receivers might rely on message length as a shortcut for deciding whether the advocated view has merit (see, e.g., Wood, Kallgren, & Preisler, 1985). Alternatively, message length might influence how much attention the receiver pays to the message (more specifically, might influence the audience's motivation to process the message's arguments closely). For example, on a complex technical subject, receivers might decide not to pay much attention to a short message (reasoning that it wouldn't be likely to provide the necessary detail), whereas a longer message would engage their attention (see, e.g., Soley, 1986).

Again, notice that such variations in the role played by a given variable can lead to apparently inconsistent results across studies. Longer messages might produce enhanced persuasion when receivers rely on message length as a shortcut to reaching a conclusion about the advocated position, but length might have little systematic effect on persuasive outcomes when it influences the audience's motivation to process the message (because closer processing of the message does not necessarily guarantee greater persuasiveness of the message, and the audience's close scrutiny might uncover weaknesses in the advocate's argumentation).

Message-to-Message Variability

Third, above and beyond the first two complexities, accumulating empirical evidence suggests that there is message-to-message variation in the persuasive effects of message variables. That is, even taking into account known moderating factors, a given message variable (for example, high versus low fear appeals, as discussed in chapter 13 by Cho and Witte) will not necessarily have identical effects in every message; rather, the effect is likely to vary from message to message (see Jackson & Jacobs, 1983; O'Keefe, 1999b).

The existence of such variability points to a potential weakness in the kind of research design that has commonly been used in experimental persuasion studies. In the most common sort of design, an abstract message category is represented by only one concrete message. So, for instance, in studies of the relative persuasiveness of high and low fear-appeal messages, researchers have usually compared one particular low fear-appeal message against one particular high fear-appeal message (the experimental counterpart of the low fear-appeal message, identical in every way except for the fear-appeal variation).

In this "single message" research design, each message category (such as "high fear appeal") is represented by only one sample message. But the effect of variations in fear-appeal level is likely to be different from one case to another and from one message to another. To put the point more generally, the effect of a given experimental message manipulation (such as fear-appeal level) in the one particular message being studied is likely to be different from the effect of that same variation in other messages. Thus a single-message research design leaves something to be desired insofar as generalization is concerned; gauging the overall effect of a message variation requires examining its effect in multiple messages, not just a single one. In other words, dependable generalization across messages requires multiple instances.

One way to obtain multiple-message research evidence is through the inclusion of multiple messages in a single study. For example, suppose a researcher wanted to investigate the relative effectiveness of two different kinds of political attack ads: those focused on the opponent's issue positions and those focused on the opponent's image or character. Rather than comparing just one particular issue-attack ad with just one particular image-attack ad (where the results might reflect peculiarities of the ads in question), the researcher could gather a large number of examples of each kind of ad and compare the average persuasiveness across the two sets of ads. Such multiple-message evidence would obviously provide a better basis for generalization than would a single-message design.

A second way to obtain multiple-message research evidence is through collating results across a large number of existing single-message studies. The most systematic procedures for such collation are to be found in meta-analytic statistical procedures. Meta-analysis is a family of procedures for producing a quantitative summary of a set of existing research studies (for a general introduction, see Rosenthal, 1991). In a sense, a meta-analysis is a "superstudy" that combines the results of earlier separate investigations.

A meta-analysis can provide information not only about the overall average result (across all the studies) but also about the results within subsets of studies. In particular, the existing studies can be subdivided based on levels of a suspected moderator variable, and the results within these subgroups can then be compared. For example, consider the question of whether the effectiveness of the door-in-the-face (DITF) strategy depends on whether the two requests were made by the same person or by two different people. In some DITF studies, the same person made the two requests, whereas in other DITF studies different people made these requests. Thus, some indication of the role of this variation as a potential moderator of the effect of the DITF strategy can be obtained by subdividing the studies, assessing the results within each subset, and then comparing the results. (As it happens, this moderator variable does make a difference: The DITF strategy is more successful when the same person makes the two requests than when different persons make them; O'Keefe & Hale, 1998.)

Meta-analyses are not easy to do, and analyzing multiple-message evidence—whether obtained across studies, that is, meta-analytically, or within a single study—raises some complicated issues concerning the appropriate statistical analysis to be employed (for some discussion, see Brashers & Jackson, 1999; Hedges & Vevea, 1998; Jackson, 1992; Jackson & Brashers, 1994; Jackson, Brashers, & Massey, 1992). Obviously, however, meta-analysis offers an appealing way of synthesizing the results from many individual persuasion studies (for some examples, see Allen & Preiss, 1998).

Summary

Taken together, the three complexities mentioned here—the importance of moderator factors in persuasion, the multiple roles that a persuasion variable can play, and the existence of message-to-message variability in persuasive effects—quite naturally underscore the problems of generalizing about persuasion processes and effects. Each of these complexities suggests that the results of any single persuasion study may need to be held rather tentatively, while the development of increasingly deep understandings of persuasion phenomena will require continuing systematic research attention.

The Future

To some extent, the near-term future in persuasion research will likely involve further articulation of some of the developments discussed here: increasing attention to outcomes other than attitude change, encouraging more context-specific studies, and developing greater sensitivity to matters of generalization (multiple-message studies, meta-analyses, and so forth). As in any research endeavor, there will undoubtedly be developments that cannot be foreseen, but two specific research subjects bear watching: (1) visual aspects of persuasion and (2) computer-mediated persuasion.

Persuasion research has typically focused on linguistic aspects of messages, such as whether the message discusses counterarguments or explicitly states the advocate's conclusion. By comparison, relatively little attention has been given to nonlinguistic features such as visual images; yet visual message elements might substantially influence persuasive effects (for some general treatments, see Messaris, 1997; Scott, 1994).

This is a particularly complex subject, especially as printed linguistic messages are also visual images. That is, printed text is itself a visual object (even if there are no accompanying pictures); there appears to have been little systematic persuasion-related research addressing these visual aspects of text. (The idea that printed text is a visual object is certainly familiar to any student who has fiddled with a term paper's margins so as to affect the apparent length of the paper, or to any job applicant who has chosen a particular font so as to make a resume look more professional.)

Additionally, of course, a printed message might contain nontextual (that is, nonlinguistic) visual material, such as pictures or drawings. Analyzing such images for argumentative content is notoriously difficult (for some discussion and examples, see Birdsell & Groarke, 1996; Blair, 1996; Fleming, 1996; Lake & Pickering, 1998; Nelson & Boynton, 1997; Oestermeier & Hesse, 2000). Moreover, when a message contains both linguistic and (nontextual) visual material, the relationship between the two may be important. Within a print advertisement, for example, the relationship between the linguistic and nonlinguistic visual aspects of the ad may play an important role in influencing persuasive effects. Within a television commercial, the relationship between visual images, voice-over linguistic content, and printed linguistic content may play a similar role.

The persuasive contributions of visual message elements (or of different relationships of visual and verbal elements in a message) are only beginning to be explored, and confident conclusions are some way off. For some examples of relevant studies, see Areni

& Cox, 1994; Figueiras, Price, & Marteau, 1999; Miniard, Bhatla, Lord, Dickson, & Unnava, 1991; Morrison & Vogel, 1998. Plainly, though, the study of visual aspects of persuasion will be an important focus for future research.

A second, and not unrelated, potential focus for future research is persuasion and computer-mediated communication. Widespread access to computing is a relatively recent phenomenon. The personal computer was introduced in the 1980s, and the first Web browser appeared in 1993. Correspondingly, there is as yet relatively little empirical evidence concerning aspects of computer-mediated persuasion. But obviously, a variety of relevant questions can arise. For example, what makes expert systems (computer-based reasoning systems that model human expert problem-solving) persuasive to users? (See Dijkstra, Liebrand, & Timminga, 1998; Jiang, Klein, & Vedder, 2000.) What elements make interactive or Web-based advertisements effective? (See Bezjian-Avery, Calder, & Iacobucci, 1998; Li & Bukovac, 1999.) How might the physical properties of computer-mediated communication systems influence persuasion processes? (See Moon, 1999.) Though relatively little can yet be said with much certainty about such matters, computer-mediated persuasion is likely to receive increasing research attention in the future.

Conclusion

The developments surveyed here suggest that persuasion research is at once becoming broader (in expanding beyond attitude change as an outcome of interest), deeper (by developing context-specific concepts and principles), and more complex (in recognizing the complexities of persuasion processes and the attendant challenges to generalization). Systematic thought about processes of persuasion can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, but as these developments attest, the study of persuasion continues to be a locus of exciting theoretical, empirical, and methodological developments.

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