

the role of the agential value heuristic in determining the success of persuasive communication campaigns

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dissertation proposal defense - november 13, 2025

talk roadmap - follow along at anyunchatterjee.com/diss-prop-def.pdf

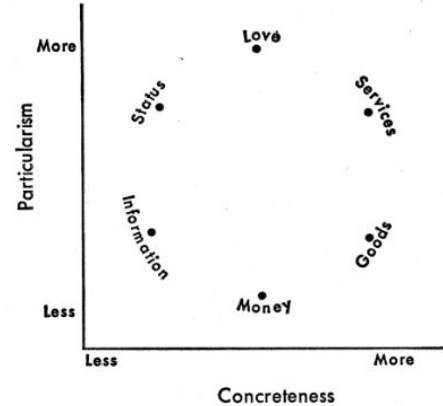
1. interpersonal interaction - how do we decide who to initiate and maintain relationships with?
2. what can interpersonal communication theories explain about persuasion?
3. what do dual processing models explain about interpersonal persuasion?
4. what is agential value and how does it **advance** the three questions asked above?
5. how will i contextualize and operationalize agential value over the next year(ish)?

how do we decide with whom to initiate and maintain relationships?

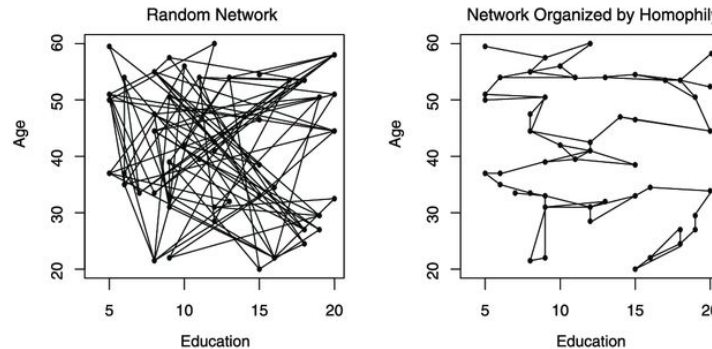
→ **social exchange**: “what are the potential costs and benefits of this relationship?” (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1974; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959)

→ **uncertainty management**: “who is this person and what do they want?” (Berger & Calabrese, 1975)

→ **identity and culture**: “what group do i belong to and what are the norms of that group?” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; McPherson et al., 2001)



six social resources on the particularism and concreteness axes, from Foa, U. G. (1971). Interpersonal and Economic Resources. *Science*, 171(3969), 345–351. JSTOR



network organization via social homophily, from McPherson, M., & Smith, J. A. (2019). Network Effects in Blau Space: Imputing Social Context from Survey Data. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 5, 2378023119868591.

what do theories of interpersonal communication contribute to our understanding of persuasion?

relationship factors which can drive uptake of specified beliefs and behaviors:

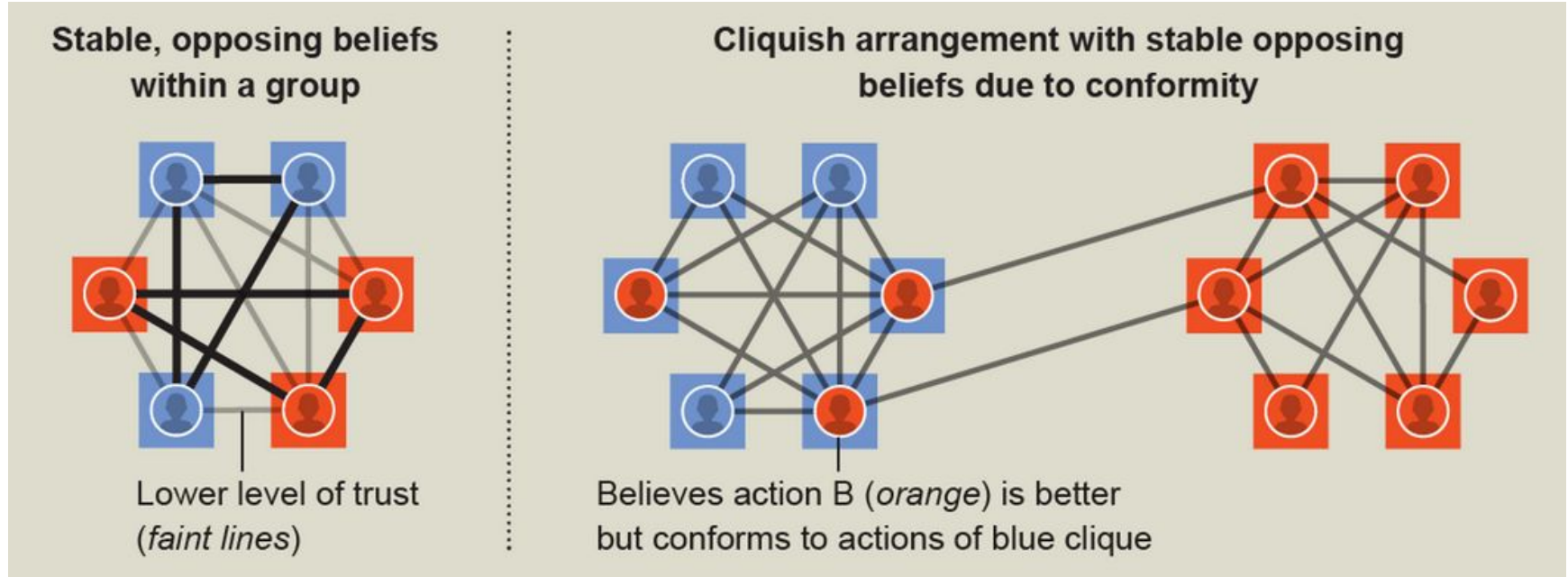
- **altruism** - the perceived drive to benefit others at some cost to the self (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005)
- **reciprocity** - the consistent fulfillment of the expectation that the provision of a resource at an earlier time will be repaid by the provision of a comparable resource at a later time (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005)
- **interpersonal trust** - “the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395) or “a heuristic wager on the predictability and benevolence of others” (Christov-Moore et al., 2023, p. 119)
- **credibility** - credentials, attractiveness, and demographic concordance influence this latent construct, which has historically also been conflated with trust, although it is through to precede and mediate trust (Giffin, 1967; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Wilson & Sherrell, 1993)

social identity → identity protective cognition → network epistemology

(Tajfel & Turner, 1986)

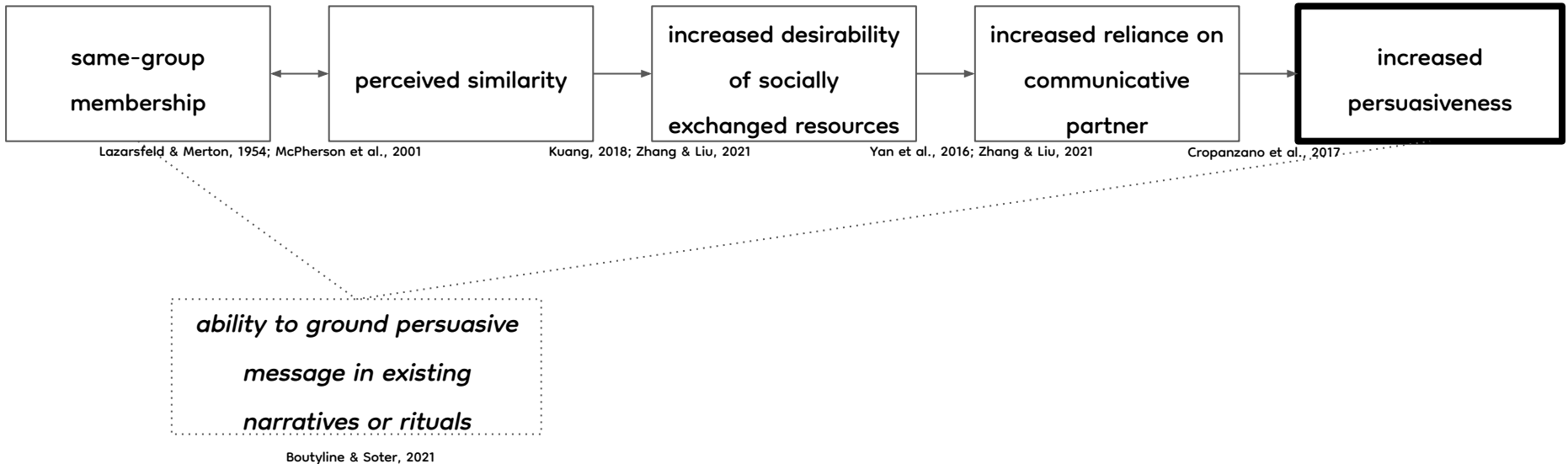
(Kahan et al., 2007)

(Zollman, 2013)



from Weatherall, C. O., James Owen. (2019). *How Misinformation Spreads—And Why We Trust It*. Scientific American.

network epistemology offers a hint to how interpersonal interactions can be more persuasive

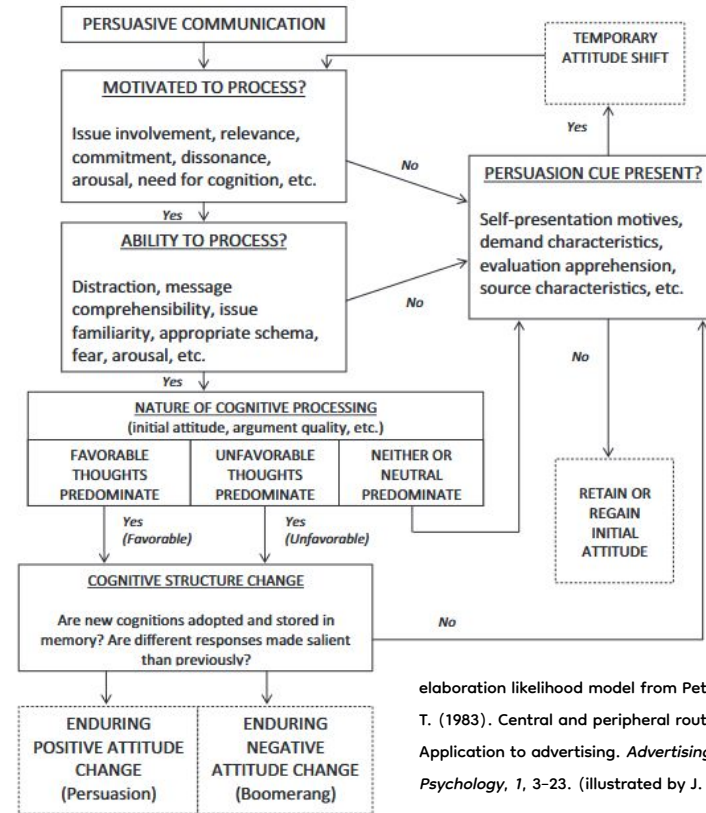


what do dual processing models explain about interpersonal persuasion?

→ the evaluations of resources, uncertainty, trust, homophily, and credibility are necessarily complex social calculations

→ it is unreasonable to expect that humans are constantly making these evaluations systematically

∴ there must be *heuristics* at play which operate at the subconscious and split-second level to ease the cognitive burden of making these evaluations



elaboration likelihood model from Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1983). Central and peripheral routes to persuasion: Application to advertising. *Advertising and Consumer Psychology*, 1, 3-23. (illustrated by J. Kitchen et al., 2014)

the allocation of cognitive resources is affected, at some level, by motivations

individuals will expend cognitive effort to the point where they meet a sufficiency threshold, where they “feel confident that the judgement will satisfy their current operational motives” (Chen et al., 1999, p. 45)

→ **accuracy motivation:** treat all available choices evenly in order to have a highly defensible conclusion (Chen et al., 1999; Kunda, 1990)

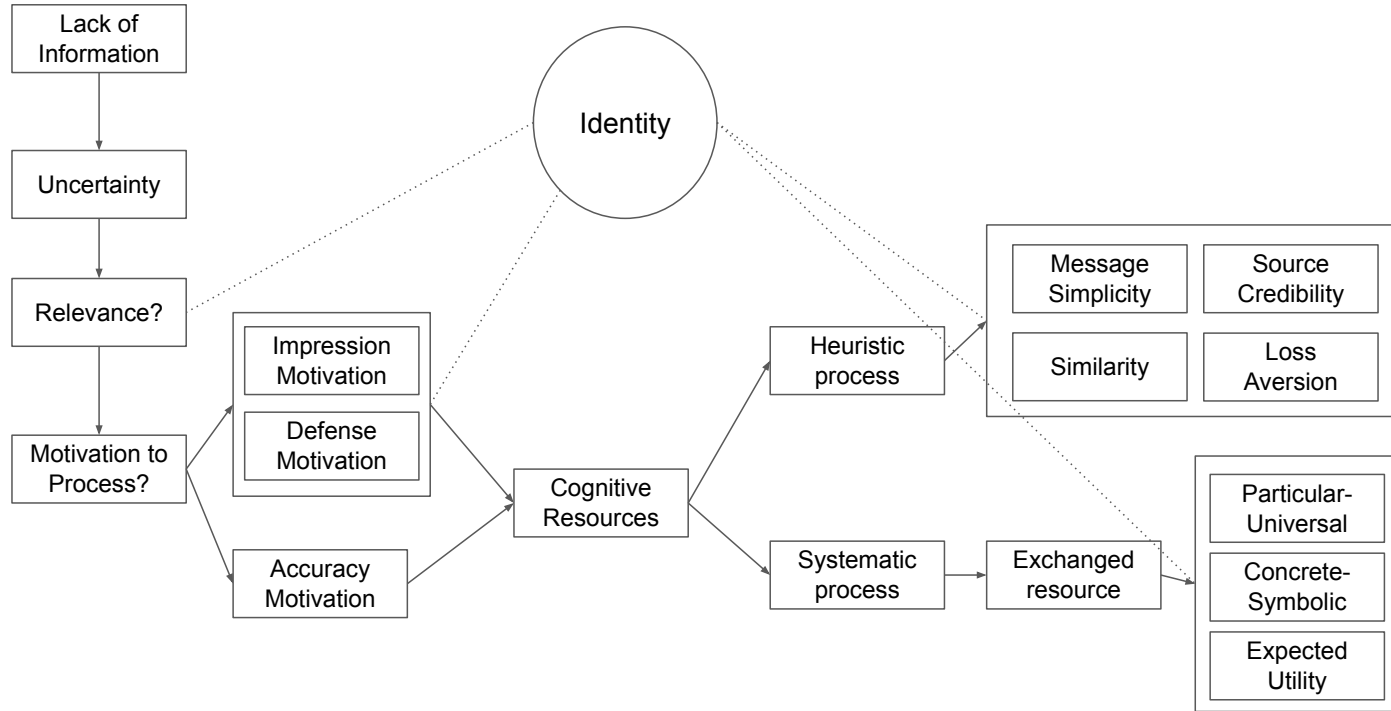
→ **directional motivation:** individual has a desire to come to a conclusion which fits with their existing values and beliefs (Kunda, 1990)

→ **impression motivation:** the desire to fulfill social goals by minimizing disagreement or reducing tension in systems with high uncertainty (Chen et al., 1996)

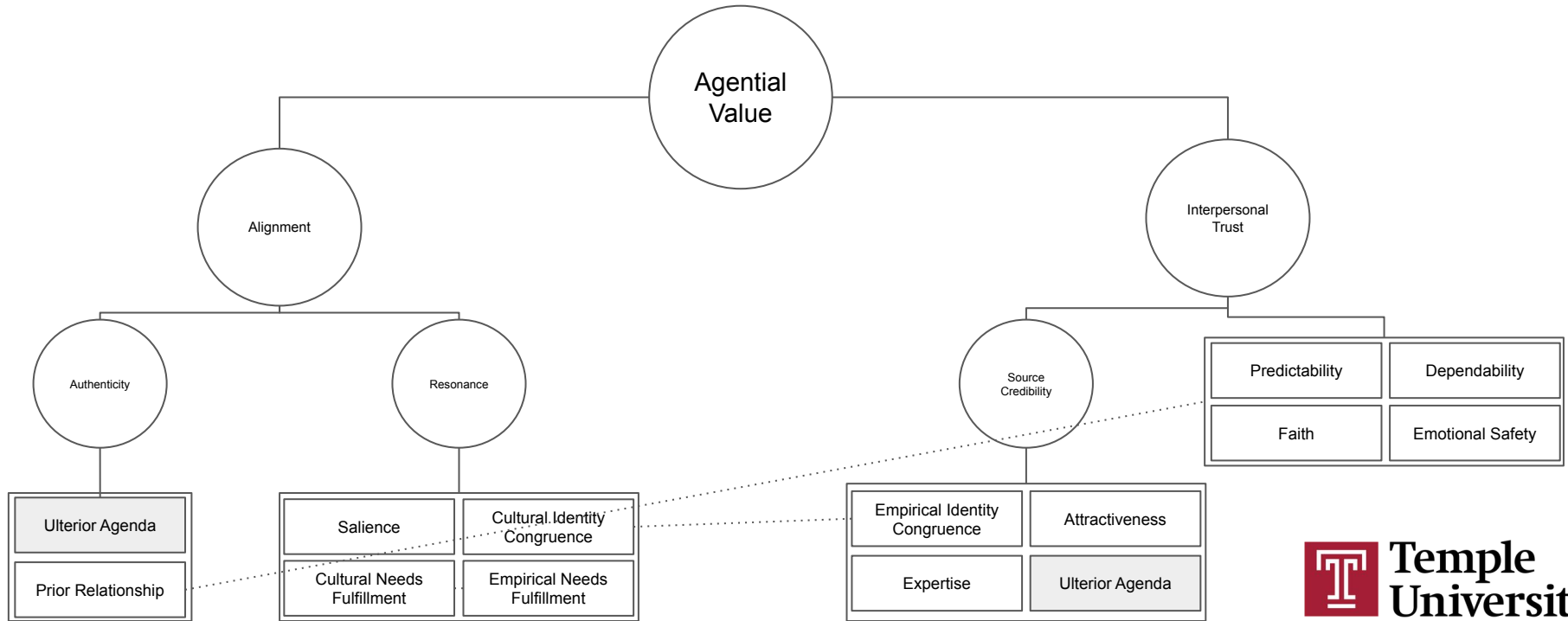
→ an impression threshold exists, where confidence comes from how well a decision allows for interpersonal harmony

→ *is there a value motivation with a value threshold? where individuals are driven to expend differential levels of cognitive effort based on the value an interaction poses to them? social exchange theorists might say yes...*

social choice processing must necessarily rely on identity and the norms that come with it



my theoretical synthesis leads me to the following model of agential value - the heuristic individuals use to assess "who is worth talking to," i.e. the "value" an interaction poses to them



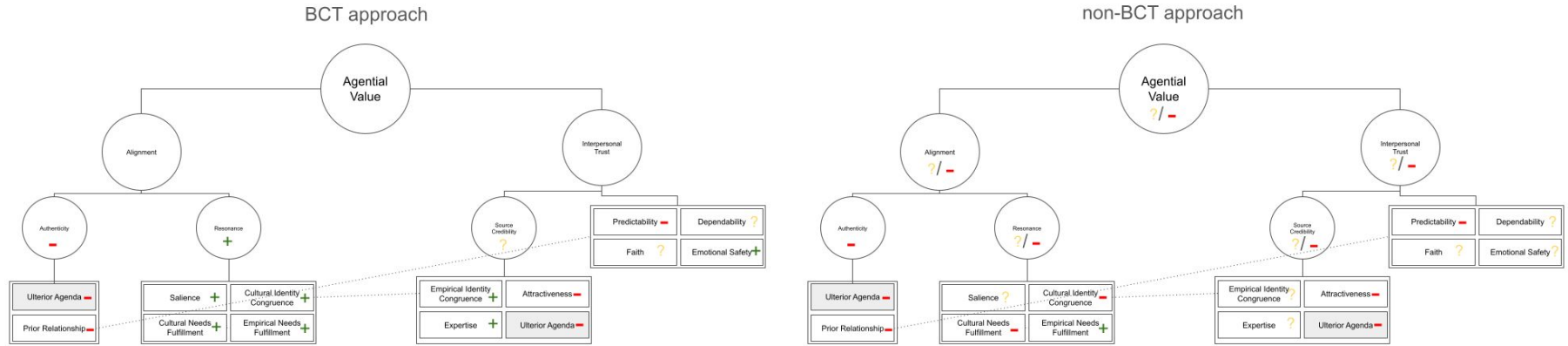
as a theory in progress, there is limited proof beyond theoretical synthesis at this stage. however, some hints that agential value is at play are offered by existing work in the CBPR space

boot camp translation is a model of community based participatory research which aims to include community stakeholders at every stage of translational health messaging creation (Boot Camp Translation | CCTSI, n.d.)

the success rate and fairly robust corpus of bct literature (n=92 as of october 2025) creates an opportunity for appreciative inquiry (Norman et al., 2013; Shalowitz et al., 2009; Westfall et al., 2016)



bct campaigns exemplify attention towards many factors germane to agential value, and boast higher acceptability and uptake among target populations (Norman et al., 2013; Shalowitz et al., 2009)



while i cannot make the claim at this stage that bct campaigns are successful because they trigger a positive agential value assessment, it's clear that they are more routinely building *resonant* campaigns which could be increasing *alignment* between messenger and the messaged

if i'm right about agential value

- this project will generate actionable insights for any kind of interpersonal persuasive campaign (not just in health, but also in politics, science communication, consumer marketing, etc.)
- our understanding of dual processing models will become fundamentally linked with our understanding of interpersonal communication, furthering theories of heuristics and relationship initiation

if i'm wrong about agential value

- i would question the heuristic paradigm itself. given heuristics are inherently nebulous and difficult to observe, to date we primarily discuss their existence based on their observed impact.
- social exchange theorists would need to find a new explanation for how social exchange cognition is actually happening, because it's likely impossible for it happen systematically

major problems in the establishment of *a theory of agential value*

Problem 1. the determination of “who is worth talking to” is necessarily culturally situated: *all humans are embedded in hyper-individualized cultural worlds of symbolic presentations and cues which they are formed by, and which they in turn form* (Bourdieu, 1977; Fuchs, 2020; Mead et al., 2015)

→ we somehow need to figure out a way to operationalize “the degree to which [a] cultural object... connects with the underlying native traditions,” norms and values of a social group (Schudson, 1989, p. 167)

→ the bct case study highlights that alignment is the potentially explanatory difference, making the operationalization of alignment and resonance the first priority

Problem 2. heuristics are famously tricky to measure or even observe because they are part of automatic cognition

→ we need demonstrate the heuristic exists and is impacting split-second decision-making somehow

problem 1 - how do we operationalize deeply cultural factors

this is actually a solved problem in social science methodology → scale development using mixed methods (Carpenter, 2018; DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021)

- step 1.** conduct deep qualitative theory-building work with a narrowly defined group (e.g. semi-structured interviews)
- step 2.** iterate the insights from this qualitative work into a pilotable and quantifiable series of measure (e.g. cognitive testing)
- step 3.** deploy the quantitative measures to develop correlational insights (e.g. large-scale survey deployment)

→ **problem:** if what we are trying to measure is heuristics, will a survey actually capture what we're looking for?

problem 2 - how do we measure heuristics?

there are generally 4 accepted ways to measure heuristics (Bellur & Sundar, 2014)

1. observe biases and errors in objective judgements
 - there are no objectively “correct” judgements in the scenarios this dissertation is concerned with
2. study how people categorize objects and other people
 - this is in-line with what we are trying to do, but if the categories are “would listen to” or “would not listen to” we might lose nuance from quick categorization studies
3. measure which attitudes are more accessible in a given moment
 - not necessarily what this dissertation is concerned with
4. observe media effects on how individuals relate to each other
 - mediated interpersonal communication (i.e. a video of one person talking) may be an appropriate initial study frame

proposed study design

phase 1. semi-structured interviews with community health workers to understand whether alignment is impacting outreach success from their perspectives

potential questions include:

Describe a person you recently conducted outreach with. Did you feel you two were similar in any way? Did it seem like the person was comfortable with you?

What kind of preparation do you do before going out in the field? Do you dress a certain way? Do you speak a certain way?

Have you noticed a trend in which kinds of people seem more receptive to your outreach efforts?

phase 2. grounded theory analysis of interviews to develop testable constructs

phase 3. psychophysiological experimentation using videos of messengers manipulated based on findings from phases 1 and 2 to identify if they had an impact on attention (heart rate, eye tracking), arousal (skin conductance), or affect (facial muscle twitch)

proposed data collection and analysis timeline

	Fall 2025	Spring 2026					Summer 2026			Fall 2026				Spring 2027				
Research Tasks	Dec 25	Jan 26	Feb 26	Mar 26	Apr 26	May 26	Jun 26	Jul 26	Aug 26	Sep 26	Oct 26	Nov 26	Dec 26	Jan 27	Feb 27	Mar 27	Apr 27	May 27
PHASE 1 - LIT REVIEW AND OUTREACH																		
BCT Case Study Review																		
Submit IRB Protocol																		
Stakeholder outreach																		
PHASE 2 - INTERVIEWS																		
Recruitment																		
Semi-Structured Interviews																		
Thematic Analysis																		
PHASE 2 - PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGICAL VALIDATION																		
Psychophys Recruitment																		
Psychophys Data Collection																		
Psychophys Data Analysis																		

proposed writing timeline

	Fall 2025	Spring 2026					Summer 2026			Fall 2026				Spring 2027				
Writing	Dec 25	Jan 26	Feb 26	Mar 26	Apr 26	May 26	Jun 26	Jul 26	Aug 26	Sep 26	Oct 26	Nov 26	Dec 26	Jan 27	Feb 27	Mar 27	Apr 27	May 27
Chapter 1 - Theory																		
Chapter 2 - Case Studies																		
Chapter 3 - Methods																		
Chapter 4 - Results																		
Chapter 5 - Advancements and Next Steps																		
Chapter 6 - Notes for In-Field Application																		

thank you for your attention

all references can be found at

anyunchatterjee.com/diss-prop-def.pdf