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# Persuasion

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## Introduction

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Implicitly or explicitly, persuasion underlies much of mass and human communication theory and research. Persuasion is a special case of the larger study of social influence. Social influence may be defined as creating, changing, or reinforcing the cognitions, affective states, or overt behaviors of another person. Persuasion involves an intentional communicative act that excludes force (i.e., coercion) and achieves private acceptance. At a minimum, a successful persuasive attempt generates some type of cognitive, affective, or behavioral modification in the target. In the following discussion, we begin by defining several important terms and types of persuasion research, examine different research paradigms, explore the variables that influence persuasive strategies, and offer a sample study.

## Definitional Issues

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The concepts of *attitude*, *belief*, and *behavior* are inextricably linked to persuasion. *Attitudes* are evaluative tendencies regarding some feature of the environment and can typically be phrased in terms of like and dislike or favor and disfavor (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). *Beliefs* are assessments that something is or is not the case. Thus, beliefs are expressed as true/false or exists/does not exist. For example, “I like the Miami Dolphins” expresses my attitude toward the team, whereas “I think the Dolphins will go to the playoffs next year” expresses a belief. *Behavior* refers to observable actions. If I bet on the Dolphins making the playoffs, I engage in a behavior.

The extent to which attitudes predict behaviors has long been controversial, and many have claimed that attitudes are, at best, only modest predictors of behaviors (Lapierre, 1934; Wicker, 1969). A meta-analysis by Kim and Hunter (1993), however, demonstrates that, so long as the attitude is relevant to the behavior observed, attitudes are highly correlated with behaviors ( $r = .86$ ) when measurement problems are taken into account. A meta-analysis by Cooke and Sheeran (2004) found that attitude-behavior consistency certainly exists and is moderated by a number of indicators of attitudinal strength. Crano and Prislín (2006), however, note that behavioral manifestations of attitudes may not occur if performance of the behavior would violate the norm of self-interest (c.f., Lehman and Crano, 2002).

## Types of Persuasion Research

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Research on persuasion can be divided into at least three categories. First, research has focused on the pragmatic issue of isolating those factors that enhance or inhibit persuasion.

The second category involves explaining *why* persuasive messages are persuasive. Several theories of persuasion attempt to address this issue. Finally, researchers have investigated the selection or generation of persuasive messages. Much of this final type of research has been done under the label of compliance-gaining.

## Factors Affecting Persuasion

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The effectiveness of persuasive attempts can be influenced by a vast array of variables. We will focus on three broad groups that have attracted the bulk of research on persuasive efficacy: source effects, message effects, and recipient characteristics.

*Source effects* refer to perceptions of sources that make them more or less influential. Aristotle's *ethos*, now more commonly referred to as source credibility, refers to perceived believability. The persuasive advantage held by credible sources has long been recognized (e.g., Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Perceived competence (or expertise) and trustworthiness are commonly recognized as contributing to perceptions of source credibility, although others have argued for additional dimensions of source credibility (e.g., Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz, 1969; McCroskey and Young, 1981; Self and Roberts, Chapter 32, this volume).

Other source effects include social power (e.g., French and Raven, 1959), authority (e.g., Milgram, 1974), attractiveness (e.g., Chaiken, 1979), liking (e.g., Ragan, 1971), demographic (e.g., Cantor, Alfonso, and Zillman, 1976), and attitudinal similarity (e.g., Woodside and Davenport, 1974). Generally speaking, we are more likely to be persuaded by sources we perceive to be powerful, in authority, attractive, likable, or similar to us than by sources we perceive as not possessing these traits.

Characteristics of messages such as discrepancy, language intensity, message sidedness, and the quality and quantity of evidence provided also influence persuasiveness. *Discrepancy* refers to the distance between a target's existing attitude and the position advocated by a message (Aronson, Turner, and Carlsmith, 1963). *Language intensity* refers to the degree to which the language used deviates from neutrality. Language intensity can be manipulated through the use of adverbial qualifiers ("That is a pretty good/good/excellent idea") or through the use of metaphors, especially those that have violent or sexual content ("Current policies are raping the poor and middle-class while providing welfare for the rich"). As is the case with many message variables, language intensity interacts with other variables (such as prior attitude toward the topic, characteristics of the source, and receiver expectations) in persuasive situations (c.f., Burgoon, Jones, and Stewart, 1975; Miller and Burgoon, 1979).

*Message sidedness* refers to whether one side or both sides of an issue are presented. Research indicates that two-sided messages are more persuasive, so long as the opposing side is explicitly refuted (O'Keefe, 1999). Providing evidence is most effective when the targets are involved in the issue (Stiff, 1986; see also Reinard, 1988, and Reynolds and Burgoon, 1983, for reviews of this literature), although some findings suggest strong arguments with evidence are consistently more effective regardless of audience involvement (Park, Levine, Kingsley, Orfgen, and Foregger, 2007).

Research has also examined the effectiveness of specific *message types and persuasive strategies*, especially fear appeals (e.g., Boster and Mongeau, 1984; Witte, 1992). Other examples of specific strategies that have been investigated include altercasting (Weinstein and Deutchberger, 1963), foot-in-the-door (Freedman and Fraser, 1966), door-in-the-face (Cialdini et al., 1975), low-ball (Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, and Miller, 1978), moral obligations (Schmitt, 1964), and that's-not-all (Burger, 1986).

Often the intent of the persuader is to *prevent* the message recipients from changing their attitudes if they are subsequently exposed to a persuasive message. When prevention of message acceptance is the goal, refutational message strategies were found to be effective under certain conditions (e.g., Pfau, Kenski, Nitz, and Sorenson, 1990; Pfau, Van Bockern, and Kang, 1992).

The persuasive impact of messages also depends upon characteristics of the *recipient* of the message. A wide array of individual difference variables have been found to be related to persuasive impact. Mere exposure to (Zajonc, 1968; see Bornstein, 1989, for review) or mere thought about (Tesser, 1978) issues or things can produce attitude change. Also, the recipient's gender (Eagly, 1983), intelligence (Rhodes and Wood, 1992), and personality traits, including self-esteem (Rhodes and Wood, 1992) and argumentativeness (Levine and Badger, 1993), appear to influence persuasion. Dillard and Nabi (2006) discuss how individual differences in emotional reactivity to cancer messages influence receptivity to persuasive and counter-persuasive messages in cancer prevention and detection. Johnson and Eagly (1989) and Cho and Boster (2005) distinguish between outcome-relevant involvement, value-relevant involvement, and impression-relevant involvement, and how each of these functions differently in affecting persuasion.

## Theories of Persuasion

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A number of theories have been advanced to explain how, when, and why people are persuaded. Although no one theory can entirely explain persuasion, each is useful in understanding some aspect of persuasion.

*Behavioristic learning* theories represent one approach to explaining persuasion. Applications of classical, operant, and vicarious conditioning may result in persuasion (e.g., Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Miller, Burgoon, and Burgoon, 1984; Staats and Staats, 1958).

Other theories argue people are motivated to maintain *consistency*. Heider's (1946) balance theory and Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance are examples of consistency theories. *Dissonance theory* is noteworthy for a number of reasons, including its emphasis on counter-attitudinal advocacy. In the traditional persuasion paradigm, the persuader is the primary source of persuasive messages (Miller and Burgoon, 1973). The persuader generates and transmits a persuasive message to the persuasive target. In counter-attitudinal situations, the persuasive target is induced to become the primary symbolizing agent (Miller and Burgoon, 1973). That is, the persuasive target generates a message advocating a position different from the one he or she privately holds. Under certain conditions, this active encoding approach has been found to be an extremely effective persuasive strategy.

Dissonance theory is also noteworthy for generating a tremendous amount of research and theory development. The theory generated many important lines of research, several alternative interpretations of the theory, and a number of theoretical alternatives to dissonance theory.

*Self-perception* (Bem, 1967) was originally advanced as an alternative to dissonance theory. Bem argued that, under certain conditions, people infer their attitudes from observing their own behaviors. Thus, we "discover" our own attitudes in much the same way we would make attributions about the attitudes of another person—we make inferences based on observed behavior. Research suggests that self-perception best explains pro-attitudinal effects, whereas dissonance theory explains counter-attitudinal effects (Fazio, Zanna, and Cooper, 1977).

Another theory originally advanced as an alternative to dissonance is *self-presentation*. Self-presentation comes from the symbolic interactionist perspective. Although this approach has received more attention in psychology than in the communication discipline, it offers intriguing explanations and hypotheses concerning persuasion and a variety of interpersonal outcomes (c.f., Leary, 2007; Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Interestingly, after 50 years of reinterpretations, alternatives, and critiques of the theory, some psychologists have argued for a return to original interpretations of dissonance (c.f., Joule and Azdia, 2003).

*Social judgment theory* (Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall, 1965; see Granberg, 1982, for review) assumes that people perceive persuasive messages in much the same way they make judgments about physical stimuli. It predicts a nonlinear relationship between discrepancy and attitude change, where the optimal degree of discrepancy is a function of the target's ego involvement with the topic.

The *cognitive response approach* (Petty, Ostrom, and Brock, 1981a, 1981b) and the *theory of planned behavior* (Ajzen and Fishbein, 2000, 2005) assume that targets of persuasive messages actively evaluate those messages, whereas research on heuristics (Cialdini, 1993; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974) assumes that persuasion is a result of mindless decision rules. The *elaboration likelihood model* (ELM; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) attempts to integrate these approaches by arguing that all persuasion can be viewed as being along a continuum defined by cognitive effort. The ELM, however, has proven controversial on several grounds, including its conceptualization of argument quality and failure to specify which of several "peripheral" routes to persuasion might be used (e.g., Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Park et al., 2007; Stiff, 1986). The systematic-heuristic model has been advanced as an alternative to ELM (Chaiken, 1987).

Of these approaches, the theory of planned behavior has generated an especially large number of studies applying the theory to a wide number of situations. In part, the theory argues that attitudes, along with subjective norms and subjective notions of behavioral control predict behavioral intentions. Intentions, along with perceived and actual behavioral control, predict behavior. Tests of the model have repeatedly shown intentions to be a significant predictor of subsequent behavior. See, for example, Sheeran's (2002) meta-analysis of other meta-analyses. In addition, other elements of the model have been shown to predict intentions (Armitage and Conner, 2001).

## Message Selection and Generation

Most traditional persuasion research is based on the experimental manipulation of an experimenter's preestablished and pretested message on an audience. However, a program of research arose based not on persuasive exposure, but instead on the selection or generation of message strategies used in influencing others. Based on Marwell and Schmitt's (1967) classic study of the typology of compliance-gaining message strategies, Miller, Boster, Roloff, and Seibold's (1977) research on compliance-gaining message selection has stimulated a good deal of research. Most compliance-gaining research has sought to either identify and classify the types of message individuals use to influence others (e.g., Cody, McLaughlin, and Jordan, 1980; Kearney, Plax, Richmond, and McCroskey, 1985) or determine the situational (e.g., Dillard and Burgoon, 1985; Miller, 1982; Miller et al., 1977) and individual difference variables (e.g., Boster and Levine, 1988) that influence compliance-gaining message selection or generation. Reviews of this literature are provided by Seibold, Cantrill, and Meyers (1986) and Wheelless, Barraclough, and Stewart (1983). Some research has investigated both what strategies people use and if those strategies work (Levine and Boster, 2001). Unfortunately,

few conclusions can be drawn from compliance-gaining research. To date, methodological debates (e.g., Boster, Stiff, and Reynolds, 1985; Burleson et al., 1986; Wiseman and Schenck-Hamlin, 1981) have been a dominant feature of this literature.

## Research Methods in the Study of Persuasion

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As with any research, the design, procedure, and analysis of persuasion studies are dictated by the questions one poses and the hypotheses one tests. Perhaps the most basic methodological issue to be addressed is whether an experimental or a nonexperimental design will be used.<sup>1</sup> As we noted earlier, a great deal of persuasion research seeks to identify specific source, message, or receiver factors that enhance or inhibit persuasive effectiveness. This focus on the identification of specific causal variables in persuasion makes experimental research particularly useful. Although there are exceptions, classic studies of both source and message effects on persuasion and attitude change have relied heavily on experimental methods (e.g., Aronson et al., 1963; Hovland and Weiss, 1951).

### Experimental Research

Why the reliance on experimental methods? Experimental designs allow the researcher the *control* necessary to precisely specify and manipulate the source or message characteristics they are interested in comparing. Suppose a researcher interested in the persuasive effects of fear appeals develops hypotheses suggesting that the claimed likelihood of occurrence of some frightening event will be related to compliance with the message. The researcher might then construct a prototype persuasive message suggesting this frightening event will occur unless the receiver complies with some requested behavior. By using this message as a template, and varying only the probability of occurrence of the frightening event, the researcher creates experimental messages that differ *only* in the characteristic of interest.

The experimenter manipulates or controls levels of the independent variable, possibly including a “control” group or groups that do not receive any manipulation. Research participants are then randomly assigned to experimental conditions. Random assignment ensures that “any” participant might be assigned to “any” experimental or control condition; it helps ensure that any results are effects of the variables of interest and not things brought to the study by the participant. After exposure to the experimental messages, measurements of compliance (the dependent variable) are made and compared across different experimental “conditions.”

Taken together, the consistency of procedures across experimental conditions, the random assignment of participants to conditions, and the strict control of the stimuli (in this case the variations of the persuasive message) help ensure the internal validity of the experiment (*internal validity* refers to whether a stimulus—manipulation of the independent variable—had a known effect in the study being conducted). To the researcher conducting experimental research in persuasion, the most important and fundamental question is, “Were the observed differences in the dependent variables due to variations in the manipulated independent variables?” In the example above, “Were variations in compliance due to variations in the claimed likelihood of occurrence of the frightening event?” A well-designed and -executed experiment allows us to answer “yes” to these questions with a high degree of confidence. The experiment allows us to study the *causal relationships between variables*, but does so in often very unnatural settings (i.e., the laboratory). As such, it may suffer from problems of *external validity*, a question of the extent to which the results can be generalized to other settings and populations.

## Nonexperimental Research

Whereas research on the effects of source and message variables lends itself to the manipulation inherent in experimental studies, the question of how receiver characteristics are related to persuasion is often examined via *nonexperimental* investigations. Although receiver characteristics (gender, sex role, intelligence, age, aggressiveness, or other individual difference variables) generally cannot be manipulated or randomly assigned in nonexperimental studies, they can be measured. Thus, the most basic approach to the study of these receiver variables has been to measure the characteristic of interest in a collection of people who are then exposed to some type of persuasive stimulus. Responses to the message are then compared. For example, we expose women and men (or older and younger, cognitively simple and cognitively complex participants) to the same persuasive message and compare their responses. Differences in responses are attributed to differences in the previously identified and measured independent variable.

Clearly, the internal validity of research of this type is more suspect than that of a true experiment. In an experiment, we take steps, including randomization and random assignment, to ensure that our experimental groups differ *only* as a result of planned exposure to the persuasive message (or another independent variable under the experimenter's control). Thus, differences in the outcome measures are attributable to differences in the manipulated independent variable. In an investigation of receiver variables, we begin with groups we know are *already* different on at least one characteristic and then expose them to the same persuasive stimulus. Differences apparent in outcome variables are attributed to the preexisting differences in the measured receiver variable. For example, if men and women are exposed to the same persuasive message and evidence different degrees of attitude change, the researcher might attribute those differential responses to the measured independent variable of gender. However, reasonable alternative explanations for the results might be that men and women differed on some factor in addition to biological sex (sex role, or interest in or knowledge of the topic, for example), which might be the true explanation of the differences in attitude change.

## Quasi-Experimental Research

Many persuasion studies have both manipulated *and* measured independent variables. These types of study are referred to as *quasi-experimental* designs. Quasi-experimental designs have actively manipulated experimental variables, but, rather than using random assignment, also rely on comparisons made across groups created via at least one measured independent variable, as in nonexperimental research discussed earlier (Cook and Campbell, 1979). Although quasi-experimental research has been used in many areas of persuasion, many studies on personality and persuasibility provide clear examples of quasi-experimental designs (see, for example, several studies reported in Hovland and Janis, 1959). The sample persuasion study we discuss later in this chapter is an example of a quasi-experiment.

## Attitude Measurement

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Another important decision in conducting research in persuasion is the nature of the dependent variable. The majority of persuasion research in the past has used self-reports of attitudes as the dependent variable. Without a doubt, one reason for the popularity of self-report measures is the apparent ease of administration. Theoretical questions about the nature of attitudes and the related issues of their valid and reliable measurement have generated a number of different approaches to and techniques for attitude measurement. Probably

the most common techniques of self-report measurement of attitudes involve the use of semantic-differential scales, developed by Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957). The semantic-differential scale consists of a series of items bounded by “bipolar” terms, usually separated by seven equal spaces that participants use to evaluate an attitude or belief statement. One advantage of the semantic differential is that the same scales can be used to measure attitudes toward a variety of different topics. As the different attitudes are measured similarly, direct comparisons are possible.

Another reason for the popularity of self-report measures of attitudes is the assumption (either explicit or implicit) that cognitive variables, including those generally considered to be components of attitudes, serve as “causes” or antecedents of subsequent behaviors. Although the nature of the attitude-behavior relationship was proven controversial (see Kim and Hunter, 1993, for a review), assuming that cognitive or affective restructuring precedes behavioral change has provided at least an implicit justification for the use of self-report measures of attitudes as the dependent variables in persuasion studies.

Responding to findings of frequent weak relationships between attitudes and subsequent behavior, Fishbein and associates (e.g., Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) utilized measures of behavioral intentions. As a part of this approach to measurement, participants are asked how they *intend* to behave in situations relevant to the attitude being measured. Not surprisingly, the measurement of behavioral intentions increases correspondence between self-reports of attitude and subsequent behavior.

A number of affective indicators of attitudes have also been utilized. A sampling of these approaches includes galvanic skin response, pupillary response, and facial electromyographic activity (Himmelfarb, 1993).

Another alternative is to simply measure the overt behavior itself, without resorting to measures of attitude (or relying on this observation of behavior as an indicator of related attitudes). This is not always as simple as it might seem. Problems include isolating the behavior or set of behaviors of interest, selecting which behavior or behavioral array is theoretically most relevant, and operationalizing the behavioral observations.

Ultimately, the dependent variables and their operationalizations must reflect the theoretic or pragmatic interests of the researcher. What would be the most appropriate variable in, for example, a study of political persuasion? The conspicuously simple answer is voting behavior. In many cases, this might also be the correct answer. However, depending on the interest and theoretic rationale of the researcher, affect toward the candidates, knowledge and beliefs about the candidates, or voting intentions might be as or more appropriate dependent variables. Even in research guided primarily by pragmatic concerns, such as that being conducted on behalf of a political candidate, attitudes, beliefs, or behavioral intentions might be the most appropriate measures of interest.

## A Sample Study of Argumentativeness and Resistance to Persuasion

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Research on resistance to persuasion has primarily focused on two distinct domains. First, some researchers have examined the effects of messages intended to instill resistance. Much of this research is based upon McGuire’s inoculation construct (Papageorgis and McGuire, 1961). In the inoculation paradigm, participants are exposed to a message that both motivates them to counterargue future persuasive attacks and provides refutational content to assist them in this process.

Applications of inoculation in resistance to political attack messages (Pfau et al., 1990) and smoking initiation among adolescents (Pfau et al., 1992) have documented the effectiveness of this technique.

Second, other researchers examined characteristics of message receivers that make them more susceptible or resistant to persuasive appeals. For example, research has explored the effects of gender (e.g., Eagly, 1983), self-esteem (e.g., Rhodes and Wood, 1992), and propensity to counterargue (e.g., Stacks and Burgoon, 1981) on persuasibility. This research suggests that some individuals may be naturally more resistant to persuasion than others.

One individual difference that should have implications for resistance to persuasion is argumentativeness. Drawing upon the work of Infante and his colleagues on argumentativeness (e.g., Infante, 1981; Infante and Rancer, 1982) and the cognitive response approach to persuasion (e.g., Greenwald, 1968; Petty et al., 1981a, 1981b), it is reasonable to advance argumentativeness as an important recipient factor influencing persuasion. Kazoleas (1993) found that highly argumentative individuals were more difficult to persuade, but Levine and Badger (1993) found that highly argumentative people were more easily persuaded.

## Explicating Argumentativeness

The proposed sample study looks at persuasibility as a function of an individual's level of argumentativeness and his or her initial agreement with a message. It is argued that the conflicting results obtained in previous research might be a result of argumentativeness by message agreement interaction. To explain why this should be the case, the cognitive response approach to persuasion, argumentativeness, and two studies must be discussed.

The cognitive response approach to persuasion is predicated on the view that the persuasive effect of an externally produced message is attributable to the thoughts generated by exposure to the message (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981). That is, recipient thoughts or cognitive responses "mediate" and explain message effectiveness. To the extent that a message generates pro-message thoughts on the part of the receiver, the receiver will be swayed to the position advocated by the message. If, on the other hand, a message generates unfavorable thoughts (i.e., is counterargued), then less persuasion will result. Extensive counterarguing can result in attitude change opposite to message recommendations (i.e., a boomerang effect). From this perspective, any variable that systematically affects the nature of cognitive responses should systematically affect persuasion. *Argumentativeness* should be one such variable (Kazoleas, 1993; Levine and Badger, 1993).

Argumentativeness is a personality trait that reflects an individual's inherent tendency to approach or avoid arguments. *Argumentativeness* is conceptualized as a generally stable trait that predisposes the individual in communication situations to advocate positions on controversial issues and to attack the positions other people take on these issues (Infante and Rancer, 1982).

High-trait argumentative people are thought to differ from their less argumentative counterparts in several ways. For example, arguing is associated with more learning, less egocentric thinking, more accurate social perspective-taking, more creativity, and better problem-solving and decision-making (Johnson and Johnson, 1979). Better arguing skills are also directly related to leadership skills (Schultz, 1982).

Another way high- and low-trait argumentative people differ is in how they process messages. High-trait argumentative people, by definition, tend to refute other's ideas (Infante and Rancer, 1982). The refutation of others' arguments has both cognitive and behavioral elements. In order to effectively dispute another's position on an issue, one must first identify weakness in the other's argument and generate counterpoints. Such refutational thoughts are labeled counterarguments in the persuasion literature (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981).



Two studies hypothesized that, owing to highly argumentative people's proclivity toward counter-argumentation, highly argumentative individuals should be more difficult to persuade than their less argumentative counterparts (Kazoleas, 1993; Levine and Badger, 1993). Kazoleas's results were consistent with this hypothesis, but Levine and Badger found the opposite. Highly argumentative subjects in the Levine and Badger study showed significantly more attitude change than their less argumentative cohorts.

Important differences in the messages used in these two studies may explain these conflicting results. Kazoleas (1993) exposed participants to three persuasive advertisements. These messages encouraged moderation in drinking, opposing the clean air act, and avoiding exposure to the sun. Levine and Badger's (1993) study used persuasive speeches given in public speaking classes. The topics of the speeches were chosen by participants' classmates.

Suppose that highly argumentative individuals generate more cognitive responses, but, counter to Kazoleas's (1993) and Levine and Badger's (1993) reasoning, do not always generate more negative ones. Specifically, although such individuals should generate more counterarguments when faced with an objectionable message, they may generate more pro-message thoughts when faced with an acceptable message. Such reasoning may explain the conflicting findings. Highly argumentative individuals may be more or less resistant to persuasion depending on a certain set of conditions.

Unfortunately, neither Kazoleas's (1993) nor Levine and Badger's (1993) designs allowed for a direct test of this reasoning. The information that is available, however, seems consistent with this speculation. In the Kazoleas study, the mean attitude scores suggest few subjects favored the positions advocated. Also, the largest effects were found for the topic (anti Clean Air Act) with which the participants least agreed. That is, the more the participants disagreed with the message, the more resistant were the argumentative subjects.

In the Levine and Badger (1993) study, sources were allowed to select their own topics, and they seemed to pick topics they favored. Examination of initial favorability scores showed that most of them favored most topics. Thus, participants in the Levine and Badger study may have heard only pro-attitudinal persuasive presentations.

Thus, there is reason to expect that the relationship between argumentativeness and resistance to persuasion is moderated by initial agreement with the message. Based on this reasoning, one might propose that the predicted effect of argumentativeness instilling resistance to persuasion is valid for positions that targets would not readily endorse. Alternatively, one might predict an effect such as that obtained in the Levine and Badger (1993) study for pro-attitudinal messages. Argumentativeness should lead to less resistance to pro-attitudinal messages. This reasoning allows us to posit that:

- H<sub>1</sub>** : Initial agreement with a persuasive message will moderate the effects of argumentativeness on resistance to persuasion such that:
- H<sub>1a</sub>**: For counter-attitudinal messages, low-trait argumentative people will report more attitude change in the direction of the message recommendations than high-trait argumentative people, but
- H<sub>1b</sub>**: For pro-attitudinal messages, high-trait argumentative people will report more attitude change in the direction of the message recommendations than low-trait argumentative people.

## Method

In order to test our hypothesis, we would need to expose high- and low-argumentative subjects to pro- and counter-attitudinal messages. This would produce four experimental

conditions. Comparing the degree of attitude change in the different conditions would allow for a test of our hypothesis that initial agreement moderates resistance to persuasion, and our sub-hypotheses of specific effects.

## Participants

Participants in this study would be selected on the basis of a pretest. This pretest would assess their argumentativeness, as well as their opinions on a variety of potentially controversial issues.

## Pretest

At the beginning of the semester, each participant would be asked to complete a questionnaire containing the 20-item Argumentativeness Scale (Infante and Rancer, 1982) and an opinion survey. By comparing their responses to the argumentativeness scale with the group median, each participant would be classified into one of two equal-size groups: high in argumentativeness or low in argumentativeness.

The opinion survey would contain a variety of topics and three sets of items for each topic. These sets of items would assess the participants' positions on each topic, knowledge of the topics, and views of the topics' importance. The first set of items would be a measure of initial attitudes. The latter two sets of items, intended as measures of prior knowledge and issue involvement, respectively, would be included for control purposes.

For the experiment, the topic with the most variance in initial attitude (i.e., most controversial) would be utilized. Participants who were neutral on the topic would be excluded from the study. For the purpose of illustration, suppose we chose the topic of legal abortion. Some participants would be pro-life, whereas others would be pro-choice. As we are interested in pro- and counter-attitudinal messages, participants who were neutral or undecided would be excluded from the study.

## Procedure and Measurement

Selected participants (either high or low in argumentativeness, who were either pro-choice or pro-life) would be randomly assigned to experimental conditions in which they would listen to a speech that would be either pro-choice or pro-life in nature. This procedure would create both pro-attitudinal messages (pro-choice participants listening to pro-choice messages, and pro-life participants listening to pro-life messages) and counter-attitudinal messages (pro-choice participants listening to pro-life messages, and pro-life participants listening to pro-choice messages). As participants are either high or low in argumentativeness, this creates four quasi-experimental conditions: high argumentative people exposed to a pro-attitudinal message, high argumentative people exposed to a counter-attitudinal message, low argumentative people exposed to a pro-attitudinal message, and low argumentative people exposed to a counter-attitudinal message.

Immediately following the persuasive speech, experimental participants would complete the opinion survey a second time. The responses to the initial attitude items would be subtracted from the post-speech attitude measures for the topic. This would serve as the dependent measure.

## Results

The data would be analyzed via  $2 \times 2$  analysis of variance with argumentativeness (high and low) and message-attitude agreement (pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal) as the independent

variables, and attitude change as the dependent variable. If the hypothesized interaction was found, the data would be consistent with our hypothesis.

## Research Methods Revisited

The design used in this hypothetical experiment is an example of a quasi-experimental design. It has one measured independent variable (argumentativeness). Assignment to the high- and low-trait argumentativeness conditions is clearly not random. Assignment decisions would be made on the basis of responses to the measured variable of trait argumentativeness. Further, categorizing a continuous variable such as argumentativeness is less than ideal for statistical reasons. Our other independent variable, pro-attitudinal versus counter-attitudinal messages, is manipulated, but we have to recognize that the manipulation is based indirectly on measures of prior agreement and disagreement.

Now consider the validity of our hypothetical study. Earlier in this chapter, we noted how characteristics of design influence the internal validity of persuasion research. An additional concern might be the generalizability of the findings (external validity). For example, our study uses only one experimental topic (legalized abortion) and one message for each message agreement condition. This raises concerns about the degree to which the results can be generalized to other topics or to other messages on the same topic (Jackson and Jacobs, 1983). This is especially problematic if the abortion topic is being used, as people are so polarized on the issue.

Another concern is the way in which the experimental conditions are created. The pro-attitudinal condition comprises both pro-life participants (listening to a pro-life message) and pro-choice participants (listening to a pro-choice message). By collapsing these two groups into one experimental condition, we have implicitly assumed the two subgroups are equivalent. Whether this is the case is actually an empirical question. If the subgroups are not significantly different on the dependent measure, our decision to combine them is defensible. Otherwise, an alternative analysis to diagnose the nature and effects of nonequivalence would be appropriate.

Rather than presenting a perfect hypothetical study, one in which the experimenter has complete control and unlimited resources, we have tried to present a doable study that exemplifies some of the issues, problems, and even pitfalls often experienced by persuasion researchers. Our study certainly would not provide an unequivocal and complete answer to the problem. It should, however, contribute to our knowledge on how argumentativeness is related to resistance to persuasion.

## Summary

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In much the same way, this chapter as a whole offers only a superficial and incomplete overview of persuasion research. We hope, however, that it provides some important information on what we know about persuasion and how persuasion research is conducted. We note by way of concluding that persuasion is a type of social influence that can take many forms. Those forms often dictate the types of methodological decision made. Persuasion research is also guided by a number of theoretical perspectives, each offering a different methodological perspective to its study.

## Note

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- 1 Much of the commentary on design issues in this chapter draws heavily from the work of Donald Campbell and his associates (Campbell and Stanley, 1966; Cook and Campbell, 1979).

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