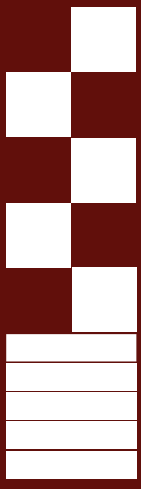
Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons



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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"The Psychology of Belief: A Study of Its Emotional, and Volitional Determinants" (1925)

Frederick Lund

Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology *20, no. 2: pp. 174–96.*

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s, Hovland and his colleagues (1953) conducted what were later characterized as groundbreaking experiments in persuasion. They included the examination of variables such as source credibility, order effects, and channel effects. Order effects dealt with the organization of persuasive arguments. Channel effects involved assessing the relative efficacy of differing modes of presentation (for example, print versus a live speaker). Lowery and De Fleur (1983) later called this work the search for "the magic keys," noting it as one of the "milestones" in mass communication research. A closer read of Hovland, however, would have revealed his extensive citation of work done twenty-five years prior, including that of Frederick Lund (1894–1965), excerpted here.

Born in New Zealand, Lund emigrated with his family to the US, where he became a naturalized citizen in 1918. He took his bachelor's degree at the University of Nebraska (1918) and his master's (1923) and PhD in psychology (1925) at Columbia. He taught for two years at Columbia, spending most of the rest of his career at Bucknell and then Temple University. He also served as director of the Psychological Clinic in Camden, NJ.

As we've seen, researchers in the 1920s and 1930s studied assorted variables in the suggestion process, such as prestige and group suggestion, channel and order effects, and direct versus indirect message design; they even looked at message volume (loudness) and the time of day a suggestion was presented (Parsons 2021).

Lund's 1925 article from the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology and Social Psychology* is just one illustration of this kind of work. It combines a rigorous laboratory study with an eye for real-world application of findings. Cast in terms of belief and persuasion—Lund does not refer to suggestion in the study—it begins with a discussion of the nature of attitude creation in advertising. It then considers various "factors in persuasion," experimentally testing order effects and finding strong support for what he labels "the law of primacy."

Lund also references what later researchers would recognize as Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive consistency: "To have our ideas confirmed appeals to our ego, and our desire for consistency, while to have them attacked is likely to arouse a defiant and militant attitude, since our ideas and beliefs are in many instances so essential a part of our ego that they have become our most cherished possession." He concludes with recommendations on how the findings would be of use in applied settings, from advertising to argumentation in jury trials.—*P.P.*

References

Hovland, Carl, Irving Janis, and Harold Kelley. 1953. *Communication and Persuasion*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lowery, Sharon, and Melvin De Fleur. 1983. *Milestones in Mass Communication Research*. New York: Longman.

Parsons, Patrick. 2021. "The Lost Doctrine: Suggestion Theory in Early Media Effects Research." *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 23, no. 2.

"The Psychology of Belief: A Study of Its Emotional, and Volitional Determinants" (1925)

III. The Determinants of Belief and the Ideal of Rationality

The significant correlation between belief and desire, and the comparatively low correlations between belief and objective measures, leave little doubt as to the moulding influence of emotional factors. But the determination of this important relation does not preclude the absence of other factors instrumental in moulding our belief-attitudes. Nor does it tell us anything about the antecedents of our desires, granting their priority to belief, for our desires as our beliefs do not exist in any *a priori* fashion, but are in most cases the result of conditioning forces continually at work in social and economic relations.

CONSTRUCTION OF A LIST OF BELIEF-DETERMINANTS

In the earlier writings on the subject of belief much interest is shown in its determinants, but in the survey made of these writings no work was found outside of Balfour's "Foundations of Belief"[1] which is definitely devoted to the problem. Even in Balfour's classic work no attempt is made to present anything like a list of determinants. It is acknowledged that any attempt to construct such a list, the present one included, must of necessity be wanting and incomplete, since the forces at work giving form to belief are innumerable. Consequently, such a list will at best amount to a classification of these forces. […]

BELIEF-DETERMINANTS IN ADVERTISING

"The fact that the American people," to quote Poffenberger, "are each year induced to squander millions of dollars in worthless securities through the medium of advertising in some form, and that warnings seem quite ineffective in protecting them, makes one curious about the basis of belief in advertising. It is not enough to say that the American people like to be fooled and that there is no scheme too wild to arouse the confidence of a large proportion of them."[2]

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[1] Balfour, A.J. "Foundations of Belief." Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1895.

[2] Poffenberger, A.T., "The Conditions of the Belief in Advertising," *J. of Applied Psychol,* 1923, 7(1), 1.

Poffenberger agrees that belief is rarely the result of reasoning, and that logic when used comes in only to justify beliefs already established. In testing the relative weight of rational considerations in determining belief he gave fifty-seven students, graduate and undergraduate men, an advertisement of the New Gillette razor with the information and illustrations which the advertisement contained. They were asked to answer seven questions which were made out to test their belief in the new razor and their understanding of it. The answers showed that they were all agreed that the new razor was better than the old, and would in fact rather pay $5 for it than $1 to $2 for the old one. In supporting their belief they cited a statement from the advertisement about the "micrometric control of the blade position," but not one of them could explain how such control was gained, or how it was an advantage. Likewise, they believed the "channel guard" was an improvement, although they could not tell wherein the improvement consisted.

Poffenberger made another experiment which showed that the truth of the statements in an advertisement does not insure the public's belief in them. This is the case when the truth is too startling or surprising to be believed. A trunk advertisement showing a huge elephant standing on a trunk was presented to one hundred people with questions as in the former experiment. The picture was accompanied by signed statements as to the genuineness of the photograph, and as to the trunk being taken from regular stock. Thirty-eight per cent doubted the truth of the advertisement; 24 per cent questioned the genuineness of the photograph; and 21 per cent believed it impossible to construct a trunk which could withstand such weight. Experiments in which other advertisements of the same type were used confirmed the results of the trunk experiment.

"To create belief," Poffenberger concludes, "ideas aroused by an advertisement must not conflict too sharply with the reader's experience," and "must come from an authoritative source." He also contends that "we tend to believe what arouses our desires, our fears, and our emotions generally."[3]

IV. The Law of Primacy in Persuasion

FACTORS IN PERSUASION

In textbooks dealing with composition, oratory, debate, and argumentation, ample attention is given to intellectualistic factors, such as clearness, logic, and understanding, all of which play a part in conviction and persuasion.

[3] Op. cit., pp. 4—9.

Much less attention is given to the importance which attaches to habits of mind, habits of thinking, and common belief. Yet that these are significant factors in persuasion, and imperative in their demands upon the successful speaker, is apparent from data furnished on the subject, and should appear even from a superficial analysis of human motivation. To prove to an audience that the ideas advocated are in accordance with what they already believe is by no means unimportant in the art of persuasion. To have our ideas confirmed appeals to our ego, and our desire for consistency, while to have them attacked is likely to arouse a defiant and militant attitude, since our ideas and beliefs are in many instances so essential a part of our ego that they have become our most cherished possession.

That emotional factors, interests, prejudices, and desires, are elements in persuasion is also recognized by texts on the subject, but not proportionately to their value. The place assigned them should be determined by the results of empirical studies and by such correlations as have been obtained between belief and desire. To take special account of the self-interests of the individual, what is pleasing or displeasing or even what appeals to the vanity, ambitions, jealousies, and hatred of one's auditors or readers, may not seem commendable because of our social ideals and the atmosphere in which we are raised. However, their commendability is an ethical question, and in so far as such emotions and self-interests exist as important factors in persuasion, scientific interests must duly reckon with and account for them. An analysis of the most famous orations will reveal how very largely they depend for their persuasive appeal upon the primary emotions and "lower" impulses. These are usually camouflaged, however, or connected with "higher" motives which are more commendable. The rest is left to the rationalizing power of the individual. Frequently, skillful advertising will take account of the same principle.

Still another important factor in persuasion is the influence of order and arrangement in presentation. Should this follow the traditionally accepted notion of climax order, that is, from weaker to stronger? or should the order be reversed? Is there any significance to be attached to the order in which affirmative and negative arguments are presented? Who has the advantage the one who presents his side of the question first, or the one who presents his last? The experiment described in the next section was made with a view to answer these questions, and as a further means to determine the influence of emotional factors upon belief.

ORDER AS A FACTOR IN PERSUASION

The question of order arose in the first place out of a consideration of the possible influence which discussions pro and con might have upon a group's rating of a given proposition. The study of the effects of such discussions, depending upon their length and the nature of their persuasive appeals, might be a valid approach to securing definite estimations of the conditioning and determining factors in belief and persuasion. What, for example, would be the relative weight of discussions of the purely discursive type, as over against discussions relying mainly on their emotional appeals and question begging epithets? Important group differences depending on age, intelligence, and education, would doubtless become evident in such a study. […]

The subjects in the test were six groups (A, B, C, D, E, F) of Nebraska undergraduate students. There were twenty or more subjects in each group. For all groups a rating of the thirty propositions on the belief scale was first secured by the usual procedure. [...]

The significant thing about the results is not so much the extent to which belief may be conditioned by such influences as the discussions present, but the importance attaching to the *order* in which these influences are present. The consistency with which the first discussion was most effective in determining the final position of the subject, confirms the presuppositions of a *law of primacy in persuasion.* The difference in the extent to which the principle operated, and the difference in the extent to which the subjects could be swayed from their original position, is only added confirmation of the principle. For if primacy is the factor then propositions upon which one has already had ample opportunity to form an opinion should be much less subject to persuasive influences. This must indeed be the case with the proposition on monogamous marriage, much more so at least than with the one on political rights, where the effects of the law of primacy are particularly in evidence.

An examination of the individual ratings of group A and group B reveal the following facts: 48 per cent of the subjects rated the proposition the same after reading the opposed discussion as they had after reading the first discussion; 30 per cent were swayed not more than two points (of a possible 20 points) after reading the second discussion; while 22 per cent changed their ratings on the average thirteen points, ranging from 5 to 20 with an A.D. of 3.4. Thus there was a tendency for 4/5 of the subjects to adhere doggedly to their original position (the position taken after reading the first discussion), while the remaining ones practically all changed their

position from positive to negative or vice versa as the case might be. That the final position taken by four out of five seemed entirely determined by the first discussion may be considered as giving still further emphasis to the suggestion that there is a law of primacy operating in persuasion.

But if such a law is present, how are we to account for it? For an answer to this question we must leave the experimental field and rely on what seems probable in the case. We have noticed that a possible origin of belief and its desirability to the individual is to be found in the contentment and the feeling of stability and adjustment which it yields. Such satisfyingness is nature's device in encouraging belief and a certain amount of unquestioning acceptance necessary to social uniformity and organization. Man is continually therefore seeking points of attachment, and once they are gained he is loath to relinquish his hold. They have become intimate and necessary parts of his ego, and to have them assailed is equivalent to an attack upon his person.

Thus the first time a subject is presented to us we tend to form an opinion, and we do so in accordance with the influences present to shape it. Later such an opinion may gain a certain amount of emotional content if it is contradicted. This follows, not only because of its personal reference, but because we would not have our ideas appear fragile or inconsequential.

Another factor which may be responsible in a measure for the importance of primacy in persuasion is the *ideal of consistency,* an ideal closely related to the ideal of rationality because of its logical implications. We observe the ideal of consistency in the same way as we observe other ideals which have gained general commendation. We feel called upon to be consistent in the same way as we feel called upon to be rational. Once we have committed ourselves we frequently dare not change our positions lest we should be challenged with our former statements.

In accordance with this analysis, the students, having committed themselves after the reading of the first discussion, will remember this rating and will tend to be influenced by their desire to be consistent when asked to make another rating after reading the opposed discussion. But the consistency principle as determined by open commitment is not the only or perhaps even the primary factor as we have seen. A belief may gain a personal connotation though it has never been expressed. To have formed an opinion and inwardly to have yielded to its persuasive influence is sufficient to make it seem *ours* and something to which we owe our allegiance.

The significance which these facts give to primacy as an important constituent in belief and persuasion has certain practical bearings, some of which may be enumerated.

A. The speaker or writer engaged in a debate or dealing with a controversial subject, in observing the importance of primacy, should not follow the climax order in presenting his argument, but should weaken sympathy with his opponent *promptly* by attacking his strongest argument first, thus lessening the force of his adversary's case as quickly as possible.

B. In a debate, other things being equal, the affirmative, or whatever side of the question is first presented, should have the advantage according to the influence of primacy. However, in staged debates the principle is likely to be much less influential because of the more objective attitude taken by the audience toward the issue itself.

C. The advertiser interested in presenting a series of advertisements, which differ in magnitude or attention value, should get the best results by observing the anticlimax order. This point is, in fact, confirmed by the work of H. F. Adams who made an investigation as to the effect of climax, and anticlimax order, in advertising.[4]

D. Whether we are democrats or republicans, Protestants or Catholics, is frequently observed to be a consequence of paternal or ancestral affiliation. However, it is doubtful whether family ties or family considerations are nearly as important determinants as the fact that we *first* become familiar with the beliefs and the defenses of the beliefs of our family.

E. Our form of jury trial, just as our procedure in debates, assumes that both sides are given an equal opportunity. But the existence of such equality is based on logical considerations, and assumes that logical factors will control the decision of the judges or jurymen as the case might be. But our beliefs are rarely if ever fashioned through such dispassionate weighing of pros and cons. While the lawyer of the plaintiff is reviewing his case and making his appeal, the belief of the jurors is already in the process of formation, and they are not to be dissuaded from their position by an equal amount of evidence or persuasive appeal on the part of the defendant's lawyer, according to the law of primacy, which appears as an indubitable factor in persuasion.

[4]Adams, H. F., "The Effects of Climax and Anti-Climax Order," *J. of Applied Pyschol.*, Dec., 1920.