Encyclopedia of Human Relationships

Persuasion

Persuasion is a communicative act in which messages are conveyed with the intention of changing the attitudes or beliefs of others who retain free choice over their response to the message. Persuasion is usually construed as intentional and is thus a type of, but not synonymous with, social influence, which captures a broader range of means by which people affect one another's attitudes and behavior (e.g., social norms, social learning). In addition, persuasion is noncoercive and is thus dependent on the reactions and choices of the recipient. The importance of the intentions of persuaders (usually called *sources*) and the reactions of recipients highlight the fact that they are in a relationship where both players hold at least some power. This entry describes the basic features of persuasion and how persuasion dynamics operate in relationships with groups, romantic partners, and families.

Factors that affect the efficacy of attempts to change attitudes are typically divided into four types: characteristics of the source (e.g., credibility or expertise), message (e.g., number or quality of arguments), recipient (e.g., motives or personality), and context (e.g., close or distant relationships). Changes in attitudes predict changes in behavior, most strongly when the attitude is at the same level of specificity as the behavior (e.g., attitudes toward a specific candidate predict voting for that candidate more strongly than attitudes toward that candidate's political party). Most knowledge about persuasion comes from studies of short interactions (e.g., experimenter/participant, participant/participant), rather than in the context of preexisting and presumably more important relationships (e.g., friends, romantic partners, families). As a result, the factors considered to influence persuasion tend to consider individuals separately rather than as part of a relationship dynamic.

Greater persuasion is observed when recipients generate more (both in number and magnitude) positive thoughts in response to persuasive messages. If given sufficient attention, higher quality arguments in persuasive messages are more likely to lead to attitude change. To the extent that individuals have the ability and motivation to process persuasive messages in some depth, they have more positive thoughts in response to and are more persuaded by stronger (i.e., more cogent) arguments than weaker arguments. However, to the extent that messages are not deeply processed, stronger arguments may not be preferred over weaker ones. Variables that affect the level of processing include distraction (decreases), time pressure (decreases), personal involvement with the issue (increases), and need for cognition (increases). When individuals are not processing a message carefully, they become more likely to rely on peripheral cues or heuristic decision rules (i.e., mental short cuts) in determining the worth of an argument (e.g., "experts can be trusted," "I agree with people I like"). However, attitude change occurring as a result of deeper processing is more likely to lead to behavior change and is more resistant to counterarguments.

Relational Motives

Although accurately evaluating the validity of an argument is an important motivation in processing persuasive messages, people possess relationship-relevant goals that can be prioritized over objective accuracy. Recipients in close relationships are at times motivated to hold attitudes that are consistent with their partners' perspectives and/or that serve to sustain the long-term health of the relationship. Individuals in romantic relationships, for instance, often hold biased and overly positive views of the partners and relationship, which satisfy relationship if not accuracy concerns. Further, the types of persuasive messages employed between close relationship partners differ from the messages used by distant others, advertisers, and experimenters; people in ongoing relationships can draw on their knowledge of one another, as well as the relationship.

Persuasion through Connection to Groups

Although personal attitudes are a strong predictor of behavior, another important influence is the expectations of a social group (i.e., social norms). For example, during a shared meal, individuals tend to match the amount they eat to the amount eaten by others regardless of their own level of hunger, and people tend to express ex-

plicit attitudes toward social groups that are consistent with current social norms (e.g., egalitarianism). Thus, persuasive messages are not only successful when targeting a person's attitudes, but can also produce behavior change by influencing an individual's perceptions of group norms. For example, changing perceptions of the nature of alcohol consumption norms on a college campus has been shown to shift drinking behavior in the direction of those perceived norms. Changing perceptions of group norms is especially likely to lead to behavior change for individuals who identify strongly with the groups in which those norms hold.

Persuasion in Romantic Relationships

In general, feeling identified with the source of a message increases the persuasive power of that message. Recipients exhibit greater attitude change when they like a source, when they perceive a source as similar to themselves, and when they perceive a source as physically attractive. Individuals are especially likely to change their attitudes to agree with their romantic partners, particularly when they are made aware of differences in attitudes and the issue is central to the partner but less important to the self. Although romantic partners tend to be relatively high in similarity, underlying differences in beliefs frequently become salient due to partners' high degree of mutual dependence (e.g., raising children together brings differing views of parenting to the forefront). Persuasion is a common part of the resolution of conflicting needs during relational conflict. For example, people (especially women) indicate greater use of persuasion with romantic partners than with same- or other-sex friends.

Persuasion during the resolution of disagreements in romantic relationships tends to involve greater use of indirect forms of communication. Relative to strangers, romantic partners discussing a disagreement spend less time directly addressing issues and offer less strong arguments. However, romantic partners do exert more pressure on each other for change than strangers. One common, indirect form of persuasion in romantic relationships is the giving and withdrawal of love. Close relationship partners are more likely than less close partners to refer to the relationship when they construct persuasive messages, noting, for instance, that a particular decision would be good (or bad) for the relationship. Referencing the relationship in this manner is an effective influence strategy and increases attitude change. Nevertheless, more satisfied couples tend to use more direct influence strategies, such as the generation of rational arguments.

The degree of persuasion used in conflict resolution varies as a function of couple type. Validating couples tend to exhibit moderate levels of positive and negative behaviors during conflict. These couples appear to use little persuasion during initial stages of conflict and increase their persuasion use as the conflict builds, with persuasion use receding during the final compromise stage. Volatile couples exhibit high levels of positive and negative behavior during conflict, and they use the highest levels of persuasion throughout the conflict. Avoiding couples demonstrate low levels of positive and negative behaviors, and they use little persuasion throughout all stages of conflict.

Persuasion in Families

Persuasion is ubiquitous in family relationships. This form of influence appears to be particularly important in children's internalization of the values of their family and community. Although both power assertion and love withdrawal are common forms of child discipline, induction (or providing reasons for behavior modification) is most likely to lead to private acceptance of behavioral standards. In particular, calling attention to the consequences of a child's actions for others may be the best strategy for encouraging internalization. Children also engage in attempts to persuade parents, and children at least as young as age 3 are able to influence their parents' decision making, including the manner in which parents resolve sibling conflicts.

Generally speaking, powerful or authoritative sources are more persuasive than less powerful/authoritative ones. Power in relationships can come from a variety of sources: the ability to give rewards, the ability to exact

punishments, a legitimate position of authority, social desirability (referent power), or expertise. In hierarchical relationships (such as parent-child), some types of power (e.g., expertise) may lead to greater attitude change than other types of power (e.g., compulsion) because they enhance internalization.

Persuasion as a Bidirectional Process across Time

As noted, most knowledge about persuasion comes from research assuming that the persuasive process is unidirectional and time-limited. In reality, relationship partners exist in a continual feedback loop in which each tries to influence the other, altering and adapting their persuasive messages in response to the persuasive messages of the other. For example, distressed romantic couples tend to reciprocate negative acts with other negative acts. This cycle has been described as a "black hole" of negativity because each negative act compounds in a way that makes it increasingly difficult to respond with anything other than negativity.

Only one study has directly examined mutually reciprocal persuasion in real family systems. In a study of persuasion in family car-buying decisions, mothers and fathers were shown to have a unique, relational persuasion dynamic between them beyond their persuasive tendencies as individuals. That is, marital partners' detailed knowledge of each other appeared to allow them to adopt persuasive strategies with each other that they did not use with other individuals (including their own children). Further, persuasion around spending decisions was shown to be highly reciprocal between mothers and fathers. That is, being open to a marital partner's persuasion increased the effectiveness of one's own persuasive attempts. This research highlights the unique persuasive dynamics that can exist in close relationships, and it suggests that a relational approach is likely to be generative for researchers interested in persuasion and social relationships alike.

- persuasion
- attitude change
- partners (relationships)
- close relationships
- behavior change
- attitudes
- types of power

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See also

- Communication Processes, Verbal
- Conflict, Family
- Conflict, Marital
- Conflict Resolution
- Dialectical Processes
- Family Communication
- Interpersonal Influence

Further Readings

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