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Persuasive

Communication

JAMES B. STIFF

PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION

James B. Stiff

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*This book is dedicated to Gerald R. Miller,
a good friend and mentor.*

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Preface

My primary motivation for writing this book was to have a textbook for my students that reflects the way I organize the persuasion literature in my persuasion courses. Instead of organizing the literature around classic theories, I prefer an organization that emphasizes important issues. Thus, unlike many persuasion textbooks, there are no chapters in this book that are devoted to the Theory of Reasoned Action, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Social Judgment Theory, and the like. Instead, you'll find a review of essential characteristics of persuasion, and a discussion of how these characteristics are effectively used in persuasive transactions.

To be sure, there are thorough reviews of the classic theories of persuasion in the chapters that follow. However, I introduce these theories where they are informative about a particular substantive issue. For example, in Chapter 1, where the concept of an attitude is defined, I introduce the Theory of Reasoned Action because it provides some insights into the definition of an attitude. I revisit the Theory of Reasoned Action again in Chapter 3, where it also informs the discussion of the relationship between attitudes and behavioral intentions. Cognitive Dissonance Theory is introduced in Chapter 4 where I examine the influence of behavior on attitudes and attitude change. Thus, in the pages that follow, you'll find a discussion of many important theories of persuasion when they are relevant to the issue under consideration.

Two additional features of the book bear mentioning. First, the book is not intended to be an encyclopedic review of prior persuasion research. Such reviews are already available. Instead, I review enough research to clearly explain the issue under consideration, but not so much that the ideas under discussion become lost in a surfeit of studies. For most topics I describe a typical study in the research area and then summarize the important findings of studies in that area. Finally, where it was possible to summarize the findings of an area without becoming embroiled in a methodological debate, I avoid the

debate and focus on drawing substantive conclusions about the literature. Sometimes, however, substantive conclusions are affected by researchers' methodological choices. In these cases, I examine the methods and describe their influence on a study's findings.

There are three major sections in the book. The four chapters in Part I discuss fundamental issues in persuasion research and lay the foundation for the topics discussed later. Chapter 1 defines several essential concepts of persuasion and draws distinctions among several types of persuasive activity. The broad definition of persuasion presented in Chapter 1 reflects the diversity of the types of communicative activities that are examined in subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the research methods that are most common to persuasion investigations. The book is written for students who have a basic knowledge about social scientific research methods and Chapter 2 is meant as a review of, rather than an introduction to, these methods. In my persuasion classes, I generally review fundamental issues in research methods to ensure that students are informed consumers of the investigations we discuss. For students with an advanced understanding of research methods, Chapter 2 may be the least valuable part of the book. For students with more limited experience, Chapter 2 may be essential to understanding the literature reviews that follow.

The next two chapters examine the relationship between attitudes and behavior, which are the focus of many theories of persuasion. Consequently, researchers have devoted considerable effort to investigating the relationship between them. In Chapter 3 I consider the conditions under which attitudes predict behavior. In Chapter 4 I turn the table and describe the conditions under which behaviors affect attitudes.

Having described the basic elements of persuasion research, I focus attention on the essential features of persuasive transactions in the four chapters of Part II. Chapter 5 examines features of persuasive sources, Chapter 6 describes persuasive message characteristics, Chapter 7 discusses important characteristics of message receivers, and Chapter 8 reviews persuasive settings.

Part III of the book examines three contemporary approaches to persuasion theory. In these chapters I examine how the concepts and research findings described in Parts I and II have been integrated into theoretical perspectives for studying persuasive communication. Chapter 9 describes cognitive models of persuasion, Chapter 10 discusses models of interpersonal compliance, and Chapter 11 examines models that have been effectively applied in media influence campaigns. Each of these three chapters reflects contemporary programs of persuasion research that have evolved from knowledge of the basic elements of persuasion that were examined in Part II of the book.

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FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES IN PERSUASION RESEARCH

This section introduces the essential concepts of persuasive communication. Chapter 1 introduces and defines persuasive activity. Chapter 2 reviews the research methods that are common to persuasion research. Included in this review are criteria for evaluating the quality of research investigations. Chapter 3 investigates the relationship between attitudes and behavior and answers the question, "Under what conditions do attitudes predict behavior?" Chapter 4 concludes this part of the book by describing the conditions under which changes in behavior will produce attitude change.

Concepts, Definitions, and Basic Distinctions

LOOKING AHEAD . . .

This chapter introduces the concept of persuasion and provides a definition of the persuasion process. Following this, two related definitions of the attitude construct are discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of functional approaches to studying attitudes and the role of attitudes in the development of theories of persuasion.

As a connoisseur of late-night “junk TV” I routinely subject myself to the worst that television advertising has to offer. I am often amazed by the number and variety of advertisements that can be aired in a single commercial break. Not too long ago, I watched seven different messages during one break. One ad encouraged me to purchase a particular brand of batteries and another described the many household uses for baking soda. Of course, there were the obligatory late-night beer and pizza commercials. However, there was also an ad that promoted the virtues of labor unions, and, because it was an election year, there were two political advertisements. One campaign ad encouraged me to vote for a neighbor who was running for the U.S. House of Representatives, and another supported a proposition to create a state holiday in memory of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.

There were marked differences in the style, substance, and objectives of these advertisements, but they shared one important characteristic; they were all intended to persuade late-night television viewers like myself. The goals of these different television advertisements underscore the variety of functions that persuasive messages can serve.

For example, the baking soda commercial was designed to teach viewers about "new uses" for an old product. The beer and battery advertisements were intended to reinforce buying decisions and promote "brand loyalty." The pizza and political advertisements promoted a specific behavior, that is, voting for the candidate or proposition, or calling to order a late-night pizza. Finally, the union advertisement was designed to project a favorable image of organized labor.

The variety of goals and message characteristics apparent in these television commercials is evidence of the large number of communicative options available to people in everyday persuasive transactions. The diverse nature of this type of communication is also reflected in the variety of academic fields, ranging from communication and social psychology to political science and advertising, that study persuasive messages and their effects. Given the professional and intellectual diversity of people interested in this process, the term *persuasion* has taken on a number of different meanings. Thus, a clear definition of the concept of persuasion seems a logical way to begin a review of this literature. After describing the persuasion concept, I examine the concept of an attitude, which has been the conceptual cornerstone of many theories of persuasion. Finally, I integrate these concepts by examining the functions that attitudes serve in the persuasion process.

DEFINING PERSUASION

Miller (1980) recognized the breadth of communicative activities that are potentially persuasive. To reflect this range of persuasive activities, he advocated a definition of persuasion that is broader than the definitions reflected in prior reviews of the literature (Insko, 1967; Kiesler, Collins, & Miller, 1983; C. W. Sherif, M. Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965; Triandis, 1971). Specifically, G. R. Miller (1980) defined persuasive communication as *any message that is intended to shape, reinforce, or change the responses of another, or others*. This definition limits persuasive activity to intentional behavior. Though many activities might ultimately affect the responses of others, this discussion of persuasive activity will only consider communicative behaviors that are *intended* to affect the responses of others. Although one can argue that all communication is by its very nature persuasive, Miller identified three dimensions of persuasive activity; the processes of response shaping, response reinforcing, and response changing. A description of each process will provide a more complete understanding of this definition.

Response Shaping Processes

In the autumn of 1975, Jimmy Carter was virtually unknown to American voters. Because he was a newcomer to the national political scene, few people could correctly identify him as a former Governor of Georgia. In January 1976, a Gallup poll indicated that fewer than 5% of Democratic voters supported Jimmy Carter for their party's presidential nomination (Gallup, 1977). Ten months later he was elected President of the United States.

In the short time between the January Gallup poll and the November election, Americans witnessed one of the most remarkable persuasive campaigns in American politics. As a relative unknown and an outsider to Washington politics, Jimmy Carter enjoyed the advantages of anonymity while his advisors methodically introduced him to the American public. Together, they successfully created an image of Jimmy Carter as an intelligent, honest, and competent alternative to the Watergate-ravaged Republican party. Like many mass media campaigns, the Carter campaign was designed to foster positive responses to a new stimulus object. In this instance, the stimulus object was Jimmy Carter and the *response shaping process* was the creation of a favorable image.

G. R. Miller (1980) argued that this emphasis on response shaping processes is important because we are routinely exposed to new objects, people, and issues that require our evaluation. For example, the concept of nuclear safety did not exist in the early 1930s, but shortly after the advent of nuclear power, people began to develop favorable and unfavorable opinions about the use of nuclear energy. Today, fears of "meltdowns" and proper waste disposal are central features of most discussions about nuclear safety.

The Gulf War provided another example of the importance of response shaping processes. In January of 1990, few Americans had ever heard of Saddam Hussein. A year later, most Americans were convinced to support a war and destroy much of his country. This transformation was largely caused by the images created by President Bush and relayed through mass media. Hussein was characterized as an evil dictator and the second coming of Adolph Hitler. These images were so powerful that they motivated Americans to support a war in a region of the world that 12 months earlier was largely unknown to them.

Response shaping processes are also critical for people entering new professions. Large corporations develop extensive socialization and training programs that shape the desired values, goals, and objectives of new employees. Though less formally established, socialization

processes are prevalent in smaller businesses and religious and social organizations as well.

Like socialization, many response shaping processes take place through social learning (cf. Bandura, 1977; J. K. Burgoon, M. Burgoon, G. R. Miller, & Sunnafrank, 1981). Social learning theories describe how people form responses to stimuli by modeling the behaviors of others and observing the positive and negative outcomes associated with a model's behavior (see Chapter 11, this volume).

Though notable situations provide the clearest examples, response shaping processes are typical of everyday persuasion. We routinely develop impressions about people we meet and form opinions about new consumer products. Although they are not considered in traditional, change-based definitions of persuasion, response shaping processes are a prominent feature of human social influence.

Response Reinforcing Processes

More than 500,000 self-help groups offer support to people who are coping with crises, role transitions, or problems (Naisbitt, 1982). Many of the 15 million Americans attending these self-help groups are recovering alcoholics and drug addicts who meet across the country in the basements of churches and community centers. For many people these weekly meetings provide the only meaningful encouragement they receive as they struggle to maintain their sobriety (Cline, 1990, p. 74).

Like many self-help groups, Alcoholics Anonymous reinforces the sobriety of alcoholics and assists them on the road to recovery. For most alcoholics, the decision to stop drinking is just the first step in the recovery process. Self-help groups provide social support and reinforce the decision to remain sober. These support activities reflect the *response reinforcing* dimension of G. R. Miller's (1980) definition of persuasive communication.

Response reinforcing processes are also the mainstay of the advertising industry. Although some advertising campaigns introduce new products and services, most advertising dollars are spent maintaining "brand loyalty." Findings of recent research suggest that advertising may be most effective in maintaining rather than creating brand loyalty. Tellis (1987) concluded "that advertising is more effective in increasing the volume purchased by loyal buyers than in winning new buyers" (p. 22). Recognizing that repeat customers are critical to their success, advertisers fill the mass media with jingles and slogans that increase the salience of products ranging from toothpaste to Cadillacs. Airline commercials promote frequent flyer programs that offer substantial rewards

for returning customers. These commercials are an excellent example of the response reinforcement dimension of persuasion.

Likewise, politicians recognize the importance of reinforcing the opinions and values of their constituents. As political campaigns near election day, politicians spend a disproportionate amount of their time in precincts and districts where they enjoy widespread support. Returning home to friendly districts, political candidates reinforce existing political opinions and motivate people to go to the polls on election day.

Response reinforcing processes extend well beyond self-help groups and persuasive campaigns; they play a central role in the development of our social, political, and religious institutions. Most religious services, for example, are designed to reinforce belief in a prescribed doctrine and maintain lifestyles consistent with that doctrine. Elementary and high school curricula in the United States reinforce the positive attributes of capitalism while describing socialist and communist economic and political systems much less favorably.

Like the response shaping function, the response reinforcing dimension of persuasion has not been emphasized in traditional definitions of persuasion. However, G. R. Miller (1980) emphasized the importance of response reinforcing processes in his broad-based definition of persuasive communication.

Response Changing Processes

After breaking up with her boyfriend, Debbie left home on the East Coast to start summer school at a college in California. She was optimistic, if also a bit apprehensive, about her upcoming adventure. Her parents expected her to do well in the school environment, as she had dealt quite successfully with high school and the first year in a local college. Before summer school began, though, she was befriended by a group of youths who suggested that she get to know members of their informal organization dedicated to promoting "social ecology and world peace." Within a month she was spending all her spare time with the group. Only at this point was she told by them that the group was associated with a small religious cult with an elaborate and arcane theology. She was asked by the group's leader to adopt its idiosyncratic beliefs and leave school. Interestingly, she agreed to all of this without hesitation, and began to devote herself full time to raising funds for the cult. For the next three months her parents could not locate her. In the midst of their anxiety, they could offer no explanation as to why she "threw away" the family's values and her own stake in her future. Five years later Debbie described the period as a difficult but meaningful time, and the friends she made there as the best she ever had. (Galanter, 1989, pp. 4-5)

Debbie's story is just one illustration of the dramatic changes in personal and religious values that often coincide with cult indoctrination. Each year, thousands of adolescents and young adults abandon their traditional values, along with their family and friends, to become members of religious and political cults. In fact, recent estimates indicate that, in the United States, there may be as many as 5,000 cults and cult-like organizations involving more than 3,000,000 people (Allen & Metoyer, 1987).

The belief, value, and lifestyle changes that cult members experience clearly reflect the *response changing* dimension of persuasion. Though these changes are often extreme, marking a critical event in a person's life history, indoctrination into cults and cult-like organizations employs the same basic processes of attitude change underpinning many of our daily interactions.

Reliance on a charismatic leader, manipulation, and coercion are some of the persuasive characteristics that distinguish cults from other highly cohesive groups and organizations (MacHovec, 1989). Though perhaps more extreme, the persuasive strategies employed by cults are often reflected in mainstream political communication as well. For example, both politicians and cult leaders are often described as charismatic, and, like cult leaders, politicians have been known to use coercive strategies to achieve their goals. Although significant differences distinguish politicians from cult leaders, it is worth considering the similarities of many of their underlying influence strategies.

Although some response alteration experiences are sudden and extreme, as in the case of indoctrination into cults, most response changing processes evolve slowly over time. Consider, for example, two significant statements by Robert Kennedy about the United States' military involvement in Viet Nam: In 1964, he stated, "This kind of warfare can be long-drawn-out and costly, but if Communism is to be stopped, it is necessary. And we mean to see this job through to the finish" (Shannon, 1967, p. 101); whereas in 1966, Kennedy said, "A negotiated settlement means that each side must concede matters that are important in order to preserve positions that are essential" (Shannon, 1967, p. 101).

Because he helped shape America's Viet Nam policy as a member of the Kennedy Administration, his public opposition to the war in February of 1966 reflected a dramatic change in Robert Kennedy's position and signaled a clean break from the policies of the Johnson Administration. Johnson's open-ended commitment to ground troops in Viet Nam coincided with a growing number of casualties and a worsening of the conflict. Kennedy concluded that an American victory was not imminent and that our national interests would be best served by