COMMUNICATOR CREDIBILITY AND COMMUNICATION DISCREPANCY AS DETERMINANTS OF OPINION CHANGE

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The theory of cognitive dissonance suggests that opinion change is a function of a specific complex interaction between the credibility of the communicator and the discrepancy of the communication from the initial attitude of the recipient. In a laboratory experiment, Ss who read a communication that was attributed to a highly credible source showed greater opinion change when the opinion of the source was presented as being increasingly discrepant from their own. In sharp contrast to this was the behavior of Ss who were exposed to the same communication—attributed to a source having only moderate credibility. In this condition, increasing the discrepancy increased the degree of opinion change only to a point; as discrepancy became more extreme, however, the degree of opinion change decreased. The results support predictions from the theory and suggest a reconciliation of previously contradictory findings.

Recent experiments in the area of communication and persuasion have shown that a number of variables affect the success of an influence attempt. One such variable is the credibility of the communicator. Experimental results have shown unequivocally that there is a positive relationship between the credibility of the communicator and the extent of opinion change (Arnet, Davidson, & Lewis, 1931; Haiman, 1949; Hovland & Weiss, 1952; Kelman & Hovland, 1953; Kulp, 1934). Another variable of obvious importance is the extent of the discrepancy between the opinion advocated by the communicator and the pre-communication opinion of the recipient. However, experiments dealing with this variable have yielded contradictory results. Several investigators have found that the degree of induced opinion change varies as a positive function of the degree of discrepancy (Cohen, 1959; Goldberg, 1954; Hovland & Pritzker, 1957; Zimbardo, 1960). However, other investigators have found evidence for resistance to change when the discrepancy is extreme (Cohen, 1959; Fisher & Lubin, 1958; Hovland, Harvey, & Sherif, 1957).

Some attempts have been made to explain these inconsistent findings. Hovland et al. (1957), for example, have suggested that there is a linear relationship between discrepancy and opinion change only when the audience is not highly involved with the topic of the communication. They assert that when involvement is high, the function is curvilinear—that with great discrepancies there is little opinion change.

A different explanation, based upon the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), was proposed by Festinger and Aronson (1960). They suggested that the apparently inconsistent findings could be explained by an interaction between discrepancy and credibility. According to Festinger and Aronson, when an individual finds that an opinion advocated by a credible communicator is discrepant from his own opinion he experiences dissonance. His cognition that he holds a particular opinion is dissonant with his cognition that a credible communicator holds a somewhat different opinion. The greater the discrepancy between his own opinion and the opinion advocated by the communicator, the greater the dissonance. Generally, a person might reduce this dissonance in at least four
ways: He could change his own opinion to bring it closer to that of the communicator; change the communicator's opinion to bring it closer to his own opinion; seek support for his opinion by finding other people who hold similar opinions; derogate the communicator—that is, make the opinion of the communicator nonapplicable to his own by discounting the ability of the communicator to have a valuable opinion on the topic. However, in most experimental influence situations, a communication is delivered either by a noninteracting speaker or in the form of a written message. Hence, it is impossible for the recipient to influence the communicator's opinion. In addition, the recipient is usually a member of a noninteracting audience. Hence, he is unable to seek immediate social support. Therefore, in this type of situation, the recipient may reduce dissonance by changing his own opinion or by derogating the communicator.

The magnitude of dissonance increases as a function of the discrepancy. Thus, if dissonance were reduced by opinion change alone, then the degree of opinion change would increase as a direct function of the extent of discrepancy. But dissonance can also be reduced by derogating the communicator; as with opinion change, the tendency to derogate the communicator should likewise increase as a direct function of the extent of the discrepancy. Moreover, it seems reasonable to assume that at the extremes, opinion changes and derogation of the communicator are clear alternatives. A person is not likely to change his opinion in the direction of a communicator whom he has sharply derogated; similarly, he is not likely to derogate a communicator who had induced a major change in his opinion.

What conditions will maximize dissonance reduction through opinion change rather than derogation? Credibility seems to be crucial. If a communicator has perfect credibility, he cannot be derogated (by definition). Here, dissonance can be reduced only by opinion change. In this situation, dissonance theory would predict that degree of opinion change would vary as a direct function of the extent of discrepancy. This prediction received support from an experiment by Zimbardo (1960). In this experiment, if the communicator was the best friend of the recipient, she was able to induce the greatest opinion change when the discrepancy was the greatest; this was true even when the advocated position was described previously by the recipient as unreasonable and indefensible.

At the other extreme, if a communicator has no credibility, he can be derogated completely (by definition). In this case, there would be no opinion change regardless of the degree of discrepancy, since a discrepant statement would not arouse dissonance.

Consider a communicator of mild credibility. Here, both opinion change and derogation can be used to reduce dissonance. If a communication is relatively close to the opinion of the recipient, the existing dissonance can be reduced easily by a slight shift in opinion. On the other hand, if the discrepancy is great, a person can reduce dissonance much more easily by derogating the communicator. That is, if the position advocated by a mildly credible communicator is extreme, it may appear quite unrealistic to the recipient. If this were the case, it is unlikely that he would change his attitude very much. Instead, he might reduce dissonance by deciding that the communicator is unrealistic—or stupid, naive, untruthful, etc.

This experiment was designed to investigate the conditions under which changing one's opinion and derogating the communicator are chosen as alternative methods of reducing the dissonance which is created when an individual is exposed to an opinion which is discrepant from his own. Suppose subjects are exposed to persuasive communications at various distances from their original positions, and for some subjects the communicator is presented as highly credible (virtually indisparageable), while for other subjects the communicator is presented as mildly credible (easily disparageable). For each level of communicator credibility, we may predict a different function relating discrepancy to opinion change. Thus, it should be possible to construct a family of curves reflecting opinion change.
change as a function of communicator credibility and degree of discrepancy. In the ideal case—the case of a communicator who is perfectly indisparageable—opinion change should be a linear function of discrepancy. The larger the degree of opinion change advocated, the greater the dissonance, and hence, the greater the opinion change. As the communicator becomes less credible, and derogation becomes a possible avenue of dissonance reduction, we predict that the curve will decline near the extreme end. As the discrepancy becomes large, derogation will be an easier method of dissonance reduction than opinion change, and consequently, there would be little or no opinion change and great derogation of the communicator. As the communicator becomes even less credible, the curve representing opinion change will begin to decline at a point closer to the origin (zero discrepancy). Finally, in the ideal case of zero credibility, the curve should be completely flat. Moreover, the curve for a highly credible communicator should be higher at all points of discrepancy. This follows because a highly credible communicator can arouse greater dissonance and hence induce greater opinion change; dissonance introduced by a communicator of low credibility can be more easily reduced by disparaging the communicator than by changing opinions. (See Figure 1 for theoretical and actual curves.)

**PROCEDURE**

In order to test these hypotheses, an experiment was designed which had the following characteristics:

1. The subjects were exposed to a persuasive communication which was identical for all groups except for the extent of the discrepancy and the credibility of the communicator.

2. The task was such that the original opinions of the subjects fell at the same position on some continuum so that the amount of change advocated could be determined independently of the initial position of the subject.

3. The subsequent opinions of the subjects as well as the amount of derogation of the communicator were measured.

The subjects were 112 female college students. The data from 3 were discarded because the experimental sanction against intercommunication was not observed; one of the subjects announced loudly (within earshot of the others) that she disagreed with the author of the essay. who were paid volunteers for “an experiment in aesthetics.” They met in small groups, ranging in size from two to seven. The subjects were told that the experimenter was interested in studying how people evaluate poetry. They were first asked to rank order nine stanzas from obscure modern poems, all of which contained alliteration. The criterion for ranking was stated ambiguously: “the way the poet uses form to aid in expressing his meaning.” Next, each subject was asked to read a two-page essay entitled “The Use of Alliteration in Poetry.” This communication consisted mostly of general statements about the uses and abuses of alliteration in poetic writing. The final half page consisted of an illustration of the points made in the essay; that is, the ideas stated in the essay were applied in the evaluation of a particular stanza. For each subject, the stanza that was used as an illustration was the one that she had originally ranked as the eighth-best stanza.

For approximately one-third of the subjects there was a small discrepancy between her opinion of the stanza and the communicator’s opinion; for approximately one-third of the subjects there was a moderate discrepancy; and for approximately one-third of the subjects there was an extreme discrepancy. The discrepancy was created by having the communication state that the poem was better than the subject had indicated in her first ranking. The slight discrepancy was established by introducing the stanza as average; the communication asserted that half of the stanzas were better, half worse. The medium discrepancy was established by introducing the stanza as one of the better examples; it was stated that two of the others were superior. The large discrepancy was established by introducing the stanza as the best example of the use of alliteration in the sample. In summary, the subjects were faced with a discrepancy of either three, five, or seven rank-order positions between their ranking of the crucial stanza and that of the communicator.

In each of these three conditions, some of the subjects read communications supposedly written by a highly credible source—an expert on poetry; the others read virtually identical essays, supposedly written by a student. T. S. Eliot was chosen as the expert or highly credible source. It was assumed that his importance as both a poet and a critic would be well known to the subjects and, therefore, that it would be relatively difficult for them to discount his judgment of the poems. In the mildly credible condition, the communication was attributed to a Miss Agnes Stearns, who was described as a student at Mississippi State Teachers College. The subjects were told that Miss Stearns planned to become a high school English teacher—that she had composed the essay and had asked the experimenter (her cousin) to show it to the subjects. In all conditions, subjects were told that the experimenter was interested in seeing whether the communication would help them to evaluate poetry.

After the subjects had read the essay, they were told that their initial ranking was used merely to
TABLE 1

MEAN OPINION CHANGE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communicator</th>
<th>Discrepancy</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Large</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highly credible</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>4.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(16)*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mildly credible</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>1.41</td>
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<td>(21)</td>
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Differences between Conditions of Discrepancy for Each Communicator

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Small-Medium</th>
<th>Medium-Large</th>
<th>Small-Large</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highly credible</td>
<td>2.25*</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>2.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mildly credible</td>
<td>2.42**</td>
<td>2.06*</td>
<td>0.39</td>
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Differences between Communicators for Each Condition of Discrepancy

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Small</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Large</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Credibility—Mild Credibility</td>
<td>2.49**</td>
<td>2.22*</td>
<td>4.37***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* n's appear in parentheses.

** t values.

*** p < .001.

RESULTS

According to the theory, the highly credible communicator should produce greater opinion change when he advocates a more extreme position. The greater the discrepancy between his opinion and the opinion of the recipient, the greater the opinion change. On the other hand, the mildly credible communicator should produce greater opinion change with increasing discrepancy only up to a point; as his position becomes more extreme, recipients will resort to disparagement rather than opinion change as a means of reducing dissonance.

Table 1 shows the mean opinion change in each of the six conditions. It is apparent that the highly credible communicator was more successful in inducing opinion change than the mildly credible communicator at every point of discrepancy. Moreover, in the High Credibility condition, opinion change increases with degree of discrepancy. The mildly credible communicator is not only less able to induce opinion change, but actually induces...
Figure 1 shows a family of theoretical and actual curves for this situation. The degree of discrepancy is plotted on the abscissa, and the degree of opinion change is plotted on the ordinate. We have predicted a different curve for each degree of communicator credibility. The 45-degree line is a theoretical curve representing the “perfectly credible” communicator, perhaps unattainable experimentally. In response to such a communicator, disparagement is impossible, so that opinion change is the only means of reducing dissonance. The horizontal line is a theoretical curve representing the “perfectly incredible” communicator. In this case, the recipient would experience no dissonance regardless of the extent of the discrepancy between his opinion and that advocated by the communicator. The other two curves show intermediate degrees of credibility. These curves are empirical, representing the opinion change of the subjects in this experiment. As the communicator is made less credible, the curve is lowered at all points (since more disparagement takes place at all points, reducing some of the dissonance). Similarly, as the communicator is made less credible, the curve reaches its maximum sooner (as disparagement replaces opinion change as the major method of reducing dissonance).

To some extent, the results involving the derogation of the communicator lend support to this analysis. The results pertinent to derogation are presented in Table 2. It is clear that subjects derogated the mildly credible communicator to a greater extent than the highly credible communicator. This was the case irrespective of the degree of the discrepancy; for each condition of discrepancy, the difference between the derogation of the highly credible and mildly credible communicators is highly significant. These results are not unequivocal, however. As can be seen from inspection of Table 2, there was no difference in derogation among the various conditions of discrepancy in the Mildly Credible condition. These data do not support our theoretical analysis. That is, although we have demonstrated that credibility and discrepancy do interact to produce opinion change as predicted, our analysis suggests systematic differences in the derogation of the communicator within the Mildly Credible condition. Specifically, it was predicted that in the Mildly Credible condition, with high discrepancy, derogation would be used in lieu of opinion change as a means of reducing dissonance. Thus, if our analysis is correct, subjects in this condition appear to have ended the experiment carrying a barrel full of dissonance. This is an unenviable circumstance—for the theorists as well as the subjects. There appears to be no easy theoretical explanation for this datum. Methodologically, it is possible that our measure of derogation was not a very good one. It may have been sensitive enough to induce the subjects to playback the instructions, leaving those in the Mildly Credible condition more derogatory than those in the Highly Credible condition. But our measure may not have been sensitive enough to reflect fine distinctions within the Mildly Credible condition. Similarly, it is well known that college students are often reluctant to make extremely negative statements about a fellow student. That is, in the Mildly Credible condition, there may have been a ceiling effect in the disparagement scale; the degree of derogation may have been maximal even when the communicator’s position was not discrepant. Thus, subjects in this condition may have privately derogated the communicator without expressing it in writing. Although these methodological explanations are convenient from our point of view, they are hardly conclusive. Further research may suggest alternative explanations for these particular results.
Reconciliation of Results with Previous Findings

The main body of results supports the theoretical analysis and suggests a reconciliation of previous contradictory findings. It is a reasonable assumption that each of the previous experiments examined only one of the family of theoretical functions outlined above. We may at least tentatively support such an assumption by a brief analysis of the disparageability of the communicators used in these studies.

Let us first examine some studies which found a linear relationship between opinion change and degree of discrepancy. As previously mentioned, Zimbardo (1960) used as a communicator a person who was not only a close friend of the subject, but one who was also a proven expert in the area of the communication. Clearly, this communicator was highly credible. Hovland and Pritzker (1957) described their communicator as "respected by the recipient, and hence an authoritative source of opinion." Goldberg (1954) used, as an expert, the combined previous judgments of the subject himself and one or more peers. It seems reasonable that such a combined judgment (of from two to four people, including the subject himself) would be difficult to disparage.

In contrast, Hovland et al. (1957), who found decreasing opinion change with an extreme discrepancy, used a communicator without describing him to the subject. To quote the authors, there was "ambiguity about the credibility of the communicator." Fisher and Lubin (1958), who found a similar effect, used a single unexpert peer as a communicator. It seems apparent that such a communicator was relatively easy to disparage.

In Cohen's (1959) experiment the communicator was defined only by a description of the communication. When the communication was described as "difficult and subtle," "arguments . . . related in a complex fashion," Cohen found increasing opinion change with increasing discrepancy. However, when the communication was described as "easy to grasp," he found less opinion change with high discrepancy. It may be assumed that a communicator who has been able to compose a complex, difficult, and subtle argument is perceived as more intelligent and, hence, more credible than a communicator whose argument is simple and easy to grasp. Moreover, it is difficult to disparage a communicator after one has been told that one might not be able to understand the communication, since disliking the communication may be tantamount to failing to understand it.

REFERENCES

HOVLAND, C. I., HARVEY, O. J., & SHERIF, M. As-similation and contrast effects in reactions to communication and attitude change. J. abnorm. soc. Psychol., 1957, 55, 244-252.

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