Source Expertise, Source Attractiveness, and the Processing of Persuasive Information: A Functional Approach

Kenneth G. DeBono
Union College

Richard J. Harnish
Michigan State University

Male undergraduates high and low in self-monitoring listened to either an expert or attractive male source deliver a counterattitudinal message supported by either strong or weak arguments. As expected, high self-monitoring individuals agreed with the expert source regardless of the quality of the arguments presented but agreed with the attractive source only when he delivered strong arguments. By contrast, low self-monitoring individuals agreed with the attractive source regardless of the quality of the arguments presented but agreed with the expert source only when he delivered strong arguments. Cognitive response and recall data suggested that high-self-monitoring individuals were systematically processing the attractive source's message and were heuristically processing the expert source's message, whereas low self-monitoring individuals were systematically processing the expert source's message and were heuristically processing the attractive source's message. We discuss the role of source variables in persuasion settings, the determinants of an information-processing strategy, and the functional underpinnings of attitudes.

The decade of the 1980s has witnessed a renewal of interest in persuasion, social influence, and persuasion-related phenomena (e.g., Zanna, Olson, & Herman, 1987). Researchers are once again addressing the question "Who says what to whom with what effect?" first adopted by Hovland and colleagues as an organizing principle for persuasion research (Smith, Lasswell, & Casey, 1946). Although the paradigmatic assumptions made by present-day persuasion researchers and those made by researchers active during past peaks of persuasion research are different (cf. McGuire, 1985), certain persuasion-related variables have received attention regardless of the theoretical orientation of the time. One such enduring variable is the source of the message.

The current cognitive perspective of persuasion processes (e.g., Chaiken, 1987; Eagly & Chaiken, 1984; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b) suggests that source variables play multiple roles. Under conditions of low personal involvement, source variables tend to be used via heuristic (Chaiken, 1980, 1987), or peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b), processing strategies to assess the validity of a persuasive message. That is, when a persuasive message does not impinge directly on individuals' plans or goals, recipients, in the interest of cognitive economy, tend to rely on source variables (to the extent that they are available) and not on the content of the message itself to decide whether the attitude position advocated is valid (e.g., Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981). Thus, under noninvolving conditions, individuals are more likely to agree with an expert than with a nonexpert source (Petty et al., 1981), with a likable than with a nonlikable source (Chaiken, 1980), and with an attractive than with a nonattractive source (Pallak, 1983) regardless of the quality or the strength of the arguments presented.

When a persuasion situation is personally involving, however, recipients tend to engage in more systematic (Chaiken, 1987), or central route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b), processing because of an increased need to know and understand the message's content; they focus more attention on the arguments presented than on who said them. Indeed, under these circumstances, source variables tend to have little if any direct impact on the persuasiveness of the message; rather, people tend to be persuaded by the cogency of the arguments used (Petty et al., 1981).

Finally, there are times when source variables themselves can affect people's motivation to engage in effortful processing. For example, Heesacker, Petty, and Cacioppo (1983) found that when subjects were moderately involved with an issue they were more likely to evaluate systematically a message presented by an expert than by a nonexpert (see also Puckett, Petty, Cacioppo, & Fisher, 1983).

Interestingly, previous, more functional models of persuasion have also suggested the possibility that source variables can affect an individual's motivation in a persuasion situation. For example, in his model of three processes of attitude change, Kelman (1958, 1961) proposed that the source variables of attractiveness and expertise can, under specific conditions, make a persuasion situation more personally involving than it otherwise may be. In particular, he suggested that for individuals who define themselves through relationships with others, who are concerned that they play roles appropriate for their social circumstances, and who are concerned that they maintain satisfying relationships with others, a persuasion situation involving an attractive source should be particularly motivating and in-

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kenneth G. DeBono, Department of Psychology, Union College, Schenectady, New York 12308.
volving. Moreover, he proposed that under such conditions, attitude change will occur via the process of identification (Kelman, 1958, 1961), whereby individuals agree with the source because they wish to define themselves by their relationship with the source and wish to maintain that relationship.

Similarly, Kelman (1958, 1961) proposed that when individuals are concerned that their actions and beliefs are congruent with their important values, a persuasion situation involving an expert source becomes motivating and personally involving. Moreover, he suggested that under such circumstances, attitude change occurs via the process of internalization, whereby individuals agree with the source because the message is perceived as being congruent with important values.

This characterization of influence processes suggests that when the interpersonal needs of individuals can be satisfied by a message's source, source variables, because of the increased involvement they engender, may motivate recipients to process more systematically a persuasive message. That is, if a source variable does indeed make a persuasion situation differentially involving for different people, then, all else being equal, individuals should be differentially motivated to analyze and scrutinize the content of the persuasive message.

To evaluate this possibility, however, it is first necessary to identify individuals for whom, theoretically, the source variables of expertise and attractiveness should be differentially involving. Recent investigations and theoretical formulations of the psychological construct of self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974, 1987; Snyder & Gangestad, 1986) suggest that it may identify successfully these two types of people. High self-monitoring individuals, as identified by their relatively high scores on the Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder, 1974; Snyder & Gangestad, 1986), typically strive to be the type of person called for in each situation in which they find themselves. They are concerned about and are adept at tailoring their behavior to fit social and interpersonal considerations of appropriateness (cf. Snyder, 1987). More important, the attitudes of high self-monitoring individuals seem to serve a social-adjustive function (DeBono, 1987; Snyder & DeBono, 1987, in press). That is, high self-monitoring individuals are concerned that their beliefs are the appropriate ones to hold given their social circumstances, and their attitudes tend to be responsive to those of important others in their social environs. Thus, it could be argued that high self-monitoring individuals may find a persuasion situation involving an attractive source particularly personally involving and may, as a consequence, become motivated to process systematically what the source has to say.

In contrast, low self-monitoring individuals, as identified by their relatively low scores on the Self-Monitoring Scale, typically do not attempt to mold their behavior to fit situational and interpersonal considerations of appropriateness. Rather, these individuals tend to guide their behavioral choices on the basis of relevant inner sources such as values, feelings, and dispositions and are concerned that their behavior be an accurate reflection of their underlying values, feelings, and dispositions (cf. Snyder, 1987). In addition, the attitudes of low self-monitoring individuals may serve a value-expressive function (DeBono, 1987; Snyder & DeBono, 1987, in press). That is, low self-monitoring individuals are concerned that their attitudes express important values and find information concerning the relations between their attitudes and values particularly important. Thus, low self-monitoring individuals may find a persuasion situation in which an expert source is delivering a message particularly involving and may, in turn, systematically process the message.

This study, designed to address these hypotheses, constitutes a partial replication of Kelman's (1958) classic study on the processes of compliance, identification, and internalization. Participants heard a persuasive message from either an expert male source operationalized, as in Kelman (1958), as a distinguished professor; or from an attractive male source operationalized, again as in Kelman (1958), as an honors student leader whose opinions reflected those of the majority of students. In addition, we varied the quality of the arguments. For some, the source presented strong, cogent arguments in support of his position. For others, he presented weak, specious arguments.

We expected that high self-monitoring individuals would agree with the attractive source only when he presented strong arguments, as we hypothesized that they would systematically process the attractive source's message. Furthermore, we expected that high self-monitoring individuals would heuristically process the expert source's message and agree regardless of the types of arguments presented.

In contrast, we expected that low self-monitoring individuals would agree with the expert's message only when he presented strong arguments, as we hypothesized that they would systematically process his message, but that they would agree with the attractive source regardless of the type of arguments presented because they would more heuristically process his message.

In addition, we expected that additional indicators of information-processing strategy (i.e., cognitive responses and number of arguments recalled) would support these interpretations.

Method

Participants

One hundred Michigan State University male undergraduates participated for extra credit toward their grade in introductory psychology. On the basis of a median split of their scores on the 18-item Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986) obtained as part of a larger questionnaire study conducted earlier in the quarter, we classified 52 participants as high self-monitoring individuals and 48 as low self-monitoring individuals.

Procedure

We informed participants that the psychology department was gathering students' reactions to various campus issues and that, in this session, the topic would be the calendar put out by Motion, Michigan State University's female pom-pom squad. At the time of the study, the calendar was a controversial issue because it pictured various members of the pom-pom squad scantily dressed (e.g., in bathing suits) and posing with prominent male members of the campus community (e.g., the university president).

We told participants that before their reactions were solicited, we would ask them to listen to the tape-recorded opinions of campus community members. Those randomly assigned to the expert condition believed that the message came from Dr. Leonard Charles, a nationally known, well-published research psychologist specializing in the effects of the print media on attitudes and beliefs. Those assigned to the attrac-
tive source condition believed that the message was made by Leonard Charles, an honors senior at Michigan State very active in student government and presently the chair of the Michigan State University chapter of the Student Poll. We also told participants in this condition that although Mr. Charles would be speaking in the first person, the views he would express were based on the consensus opinion of Michigan State students as assessed by a recent student poll.

Within each source condition, we randomly assigned participants to hear one of two versions of the message. In both versions the source expressed the opinion that the calendar was a poor idea. In the strong-argument condition he said that the calendar promoted sexist attitudes and further reinforced the stereotype of women as sex objects. Moreover, he stated that the calendar tarnished the progressive and enlightened image of the university because people would reevaluate the values emphasized by the university after seeing prominent male officials posting with the women from the pom-pom squad.

In the weak-argument condition the source said that he thought the calendar gave free advertising to the swimwear manufacturers. In addition, he argued that the parents must wonder if their investment in their daughter’s education was worthwhile, if they (the daughters) have nothing better to do than pose in swimsuits. Finally, he made the point that the calendar would draw too much attention away from the athletes at sporting events, as people would focus more on the pom-pom squad.

After listening to the message, we asked participants to complete a questionnaire that asked numerous questions about the controversy. Embedded within this questionnaire was our prime dependent variable, a 7-point scale (1 = worthless, 7 = valuable) on which participants rated a 7-point scale (1 = worthless, 7 = valuable) on which participants rated how valuable they thought the calendar was.

Following completion of the questionnaire, we gave participants 7 min to list all the thoughts, ideas, and associations they had in response to the arguments they heard and then asked them to indicate which thoughts were favorable toward (i.e., supported) the speaker’s position and which were unfavorable toward (i.e., did not support) the speaker’s position.

Finally, after completing two filler tasks, we asked participants to recall as many as possible of the arguments that the speaker used.

Results

Postmessage Attitudes

We predicted that high self-monitoring individuals would be persuaded by the expert source regardless of the quality of the arguments used but that they would be persuaded by the attractive source only when he used strong arguments. In contrast, we expected that low self-monitoring individuals would be persuaded by the attractive source regardless of the quality of the arguments used but that they would be persuaded by the expert source only when he used strong arguments. Table 1 shows the mean postmessage attitude scores as assessed by the worthless-valuable measure (lower scores indicate less favorable attitudes toward the calendar). A 2 x 2 x 2 (Self-Monitoring X Source X Argument Strength) analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a main effect for argument strength, F(1, 92) = 22.61, p < .001, such that people were more persuaded by the strong arguments (M = 3.63) than by the weak arguments (M = 4.61). In addition, the analysis revealed a significant Self-Monitoring X Source interaction, F(1, 92) = 12.70, p < .001. This main effect and interaction, however, were qualified by the presence of a significant Self-Monitoring X Source X Argument Strength interaction, F(1, 92) = 32.73, p < .001. Post hoc analyses using Duncan’s (1955) multiple-range procedure indicated that, as expected, high self-monitoring individuals were responsive to the quality of the message arguments only when listening to the attractive source. In particular, they formed significantly less favorable attitudes toward the calendar after hearing the attractive source deliver strong arguments than after hearing him deliver weak arguments. In contrast, their postmessage attitudes after listening to the expert source appeared not to be affected by the quality of the arguments. In both argument-strength conditions, they formed relatively unfavorable attitudes toward the calendar.

This pattern of data was reversed for low self-monitoring individuals. Unlike their high self-monitoring counterparts, they appeared to be sensitive to the quality of the arguments only when the source was presented as an expert. That is, they formed significantly more unfavorable attitudes toward the calendar after hearing the expert deliver strong arguments than after hearing him deliver weak arguments. After listening to the attractive source, however, their postmessage attitudes did not differ as a function of argument strength; in both cases they formed relatively unfavorable attitudes toward the calendar.

Cognitive Response Analysis

The postmessage attitude data are suggestive of the types of information processing high and low self-monitoring individuals might have been doing in response to the message. That is, it appeared as though high self-monitoring individuals were systematically processing the attractive source’s message but that they were more heuristically processing the expert source’s message. In contrast, low self-monitoring individuals seemed to be systematically processing the expert source’s message and heuristically processing the attractive source’s message.

If this characterization does indeed capture accurately the in-

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Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-monitoring propensity</th>
<th>Argument strength</th>
<th>Mean Postmessage Attitude Scores</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Expert source</td>
<td>4.07&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attractive source</td>
<td>3.31&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Expert source</td>
<td>3.50&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attractive source</td>
<td>3.64&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Lower scores indicate more unfavorable attitudes toward the calendar.

<sup>a</sup> n = 13.  <sup>b</sup> n = 12.  <sup>c</sup> n = 11.

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1 Students’ initial attitudes seemed to be generally favorable toward the calendar. A pretest sample of high and low self-monitoring men (N = 13) indicated that they thought the calendar was relatively valuable (M = 5.17, SD = 0.83) on a 7-point scale (1 = worthless, 7 = valuable). Thus, the message was constructed to argue against the worth of the calendar.

2 We used Duncan’s multiple-range test for all pairwise comparisons at the .05 level of significance.
Mean Proportion of Favorable Thoughts

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Self-monitoring propensity</th>
<th>Argument strength</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Expert source</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Attractive source</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Expert source</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Attractive source</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
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</table>

In contrast, low self-monitoring individuals had proportionally more positive thoughts in response to the strong arguments than to the weak ones when the source was described as an expert; in the attractive source condition, there was no significant difference in the proportion of positive thoughts as a function of argument strength.

These data provide additional support for the notion that high self-monitoring individuals were systematically processing the attractive source's message and were heuristically processing the expert source's arguments, whereas low self-monitoring individuals were systematically processing the expert source's message and were heuristically processing the attractive source's message. This conclusion was further supported by an examination of the relation between the thoughts listed and postmessage attitudes. The correlation between the proportion of favorable thoughts and postmessage attitudes was negative for high self-monitoring individuals who listened to the attractive source (r = −.51) and for low self-monitoring individuals who listened to the expert source (r = −.59). For high self-monitoring individuals who listened to the expert source and for low self-monitoring individuals who listened to the attractive source, the correlations were −.08 and −.10, respectively. Moderated regression analyses—predicting postmessage attitudes from thoughts listed, self-monitoring classification, and message source—showed that the thought–attitude relation differed significantly among the four experimental conditions, F(3, 92) = 3.36, p < .05.

Recall Analysis

The number of items recalled was submitted to a 2 × 2 × 2 (Self-Monitoring × Source × Argument Strength) ANOVA. As no significant effect involving argument strength emerged, Table 3 displays the mean number of items recalled collapsed across levels of argument strength. This analysis revealed a significant Self-Monitoring × Source interaction, F(1, 92) = 5.93, p < .02. Posthoc analyses indicated that high self-monitoring individuals recalled significantly more after listening to the expert source than after listening to the attractive source. The amount recalled by high self-monitoring individuals, however, did not differ significantly as a function of source, although high self-monitoring individuals who listened to the attractive source did recall significantly more than low self-monitoring individuals who listened to the attractive source.

| Table 3 | Mean Number of Items Recalled
<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-monitoring propensity</td>
<td>Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert</td>
<td>Attractive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>3.27*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>3.29b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* n = 26.  b n = 24.
Discussion

What role do source variables play in the persuasion process? The results of this study suggest that to begin to arrive at a satisfactory answer to this question, one must take into account not only the situational variables that influence the role that source variables play, as previous researchers have done (cf. Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b), but one must also take into account relations between a message's source and its recipient.

In particular, high self-monitoring individuals did not attend to the attractive and expert sources with the processes of identification and internalization, respectively, this speculation may be unjustified. In particular, high self-monitoring individuals did not agree with the attractive source and low self-monitoring individuals did not agree with the expert source solely because of characteristics those sources possessed, as one would expect if the processes of internalization and identification provided the best explanation for the results (see Kelman, 1958, 1961). Rather, the characteristics the sources possessed seemed to have motivated individuals to direct attention to the message content, and persuasion was more a function of the cogency of the source's arguments. In fact, source variables per se were relatively unimportant as ultimate determinants of persuasion in this case.

Intriguingly, attitude change was generally more likely to have occurred when the source did not offer rewards that met the needs of the message recipient. Regardless of the strength of the arguments presented, low self-monitoring individuals who listened to the attractive source and high self-monitoring individuals who listened to the expert source changed their attitudes in the direction of the position advocated. However, and importantly, this attitude change appeared to have occurred via heuristic, or peripheral route, processes. The thoughts generated by high self-monitoring individuals listening to the expert source and low self-monitoring individuals listening to the attractive source tended not to be a function of the strength of the ideas presented, the thoughts were unrelated to postmessage attitudes, and the amount that those individuals could recall appeared not to be affected by who was delivering the message.

An important consequence of this type of processing concerns the duration of the attitude change and the extent to which the changed attitude can be expected to be related to behavior. Unlike attitude change induced by systematic processing (or central route processes), research has suggested that attitude change achieved via heuristic (or peripheral route) processes generally tends to be of a relatively short duration (Petty, Cacioppo, Haugtvedt, & Heesacker, 1985, cited in Petty & Cacioppo, 1986b) and that resulting attitudes tend not to be related significantly to behavior (Cialdini, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1981; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983).

Therefore, although ostensibly these results indicate that if a persuasion practitioner can know the social and interpersonal needs of an audience, a persuasion attempt will more likely be successful if a source is chosen that cannot fulfill those needs, this change will be successful ultimately only if the goal of the change agent is to induce short-term, nonbehaviorally related attitude change. To the extent that a change agent is interested in persisting, behaviorally related attitude change (a more likely scenario), a source that can fulfill the social and interpersonal needs of the audience may more likely achieve this goal, providing that the source can present strong, cogent arguments to support the advocated change. Of course, additional research will be necessary to evaluate these possibilities. In any event, the results of this study suggest that it is important to recognize the complex relations between the social and interpersonal rewards offered by a source and the social and interpersonal needs of an audience to appreciate fully the impact of source variables in interpersonal influence settings.

In addition to furthering researchers' understanding of the role of source variables, this study may also shed some light on issues concerning the processing of persuasive information. Although cognitive conceptualizations of the persuasion process have been highly successful in delineating the strategies individuals will adopt to process persuasive messages (Chaiken, 1987; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b; Sherman, 1987), recent reviews have suggested that the variables that influence strategy choice have not been identified satisfactorily (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Chaiken, 1984). As the results of our study, along with those of others (DeBono, 1987; DeBono & Telesca, 1987), suggest, one determinant of information-processing-strategy choice may be the extent to which aspects of the message environment facilitate the achievement or fulfillment of interpersonal plans, goals, and needs. That is, whether a message is perceived to be relevant to the functional underpinnings of one's attitudes (DeBono, 1987; DeBono & Telesca, 1987; Snyder & DeBono, in press) or, as in this study, a message source is perceived to be capable of providing certain rewards, when some aspect of the
persion situation impinges on personal plans and goals, individuals appear to become motivated to process the message more carefully and systematically. In contrast, when the message environment offers little that can aid in the achievement of personal plans and goals, individuals appear unwilling to expend the cognitive effort to process the message systematically; rather, they tend to use heuristics, or peripheral route processes, to the extent that they are available (DeBono & Telecasa, 1987).

That the fulfillment of interpersonal plans, goals, and needs may be an important link in the search for variables that influence processing strategies is consistent with the growing awareness that to understand completely, at a theoretical and practical level, attitudes, persuasion, and attitudinally related processes, it is imperative to understand the motivational, or functional, bases of individuals’ attitude and belief systems (DeBono, 1980; Herek, 1987; Snyder & DeBono, 1987, in press; Shavitt, in press).

References


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