Persuasion as Social Interaction

Radmila Prislin
San Diego State University, USA

Attitudes are typically changed through persuasion. Persuasion has been traditionally examined as a process within which a source's verbal messages, emitted to a target, aim to change the target's attitudes. With the exception of research on the sleeper effect, a typical persuasion study involves a one-time delivery of a message followed by a one-time assessment of the target's reaction. This paradigm does not allow for change in initial reactions or for the development of social relations. Influence, as currently conceived in persuasion research, is asymmetrical, static, and for the most part relationship-free.

I propose a conceptualization of persuasion as social interaction. In this conceptualization, persuasion involves bi-directional exchanges between a source and multiple targets that extend over a period of time. Emerging from these interactions are social relations that define the source's and targets' positions on such important social dimensions as numerical status, power, and prestige. Importantly, the dynamic nature of interactions that evolve over time allows for change in social relations and consequently, change in status, power, and prestige. Influence, as conceived within this framework, is symmetrical, dynamic, and relationship-laden. This conceptualization resonates with a long-advocated social contextualization of attitudinal phenomena (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), and recent theorizing on socially situated cognition (e.g., Smith & Semin, 2004; 2007) and social influence (Mason, Conrey, & Smith, 2007).

The inclusion of multidirectionality of influence and time in a persuasion model erases traditional source-target distinction. Feedback loops transform a source to a target and vice versa. An important implication of this conceptualization is that in the persuasion process, reactions of an agent traditionally designated as a source are as dependent on the reactions of the agents traditionally designated as targets as it is the other way around. Among others, source's attitudes toward the issues under consideration and source's advocacy should be shaped by the relationships that emerge from the source-target interactions.

This proposition has been examined in a series of studies in which a persuasion source attempted to influence multiple targets (confederates) to adopt his or her position on important social issues. As the source advocated his or her position, targets initially provided positive feedback that placed the source in the numerical majority or negative feedback that placed the source in the numerical minority. Subsequent feedback on the source's continuing advocacy either kept initially established numerical status stable or reversed it (majority↔minority). These studies revealed that the social context that emerged from persuasive interactions affected the source's a) attitudes and attitude strength, b) motivation to continue with persuasive attempts, and c) persuasive efficacy. Implications for theorizing about the dynamics of persuasive influence are discussed.