

Persuasion and Social Psychology

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It has been often said that attempts to change the minds of others are as old as human speech. Across the centuries, persuasion, rhetoric and the manipulation of the human mind have been of great interest to politicians, educators, writers and philosophers. In contrast to this long history, the study of persuasion in social psychology is relatively recent. Social psychology is a very young science, which established itself as a discipline during the Second World War. From its very beginning the subject of persuasion has been of one of its great interests, and today, studies of persuasion occupy and preoccupy much of social psychology as they overlap and interlink with other major topics like influence processes, attitudes and attitude changes, convergence and deviance, compliance with group norms, communication and propaganda.

If we examine textbooks of social psychology, we find in each a section or subsection on persuasion. In addition, the recent publication of *The Persuasion Handbook: Developments in Theory and Practice*, edited by Dillard and Pfau (2002), at 874 pages supposedly reflects the state of the art in this field. The editors point out that it was only in the middle of the 20th century that 'social scientific methods, employing a blend of logically grounded theory plus systematic observation, had grown increasingly prevalent' and that the handbook 'embraces the younger communication science perspective' (pp. ix–x). Conceptually, this perspective originates in monumental studies of mass persuasion, attitude measurement and prediction of behaviour that were carried out on the American soldier during the Second World War. This work became the basis of studies later developed by Carl Hovland and which, after the War, became known as the famous Yale Communication Program. The program took as its point of departure Lasswell's formula of persuasion: 'Who says what, to whom, and with what effect?' The program and the research it engendered in the 1950s and 1960s attracted many talented social psychologists in the USA. The model of communication based on this program states that 'being persuaded' refers to situations that modify recipients' behaviour by symbolic transactions (messages). These could be linked with coercive force and an appeal to the

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reason and emotions of the person being persuaded (Miller, 1980/2002). This model presupposes that an individual, using logical reasoning, accepts and evaluates information, processes information and, from this, arrives at logical conclusions. Classical theories in experimental social psychology, like dissonance, attitude change, the inoculation approach and the elaboration likelihood model, among others, are creative developments of this scientific model.

Yet however impressive this model, it tells only one side of the story of persuasion in today's social psychology, where there are now competing perspectives on persuasion. They not only stem from diverse conceptual presuppositions, but they turn attention towards the meaning of persuasion in modern complex societies, technology and the media. These perspectives place emphasis not on changes of attitude, but on communication, social influence and group processes. The collection of articles in this issue brings out these diverse approaches in social psychology. Broadly, it encompasses social psychological studies based on the research of attitudes and attitude changes on the one hand, and those based on studies of influence and communication on the other.

Richard Petty and Pablo Briñol review a contemporary experimental social psychological perspective that places emphasis on explaining the psychological processes that underlie successful attitude changes. They also describe a theoretical framework that enhances an understanding of the conditions under which the different processes are more likely to influence people's judgements, and they carefully explore variables underlying the relevant psychological processes. The authors group the persuasion processes into meaningful categories and thus provide a guide that organizes and facilitates access to key findings in this literature.

Most contributors to this issue examine persuasion in terms of social influence processes and communication, but they approach them from different perspectives. Jorge Jesuino focuses on the relationship between social influence and persuasion, and contrasts American models of influence studies with European ones. The latter models bring group processes and polarization into focus. Jesuino maintains that studies of persuasion should give scope to the construction of meaning by the subjects – to dialogical constructivism, for example, along the lines of such scholars as Piaget, Bakhtin, Vygotsky and Moscovici.

Martin Bauer, in his approach, argues that the focus of social influence on inter-subjectivity is only half the story, and he suggests that social influence theory should, in addition, include the idea of inter-objectivity. He develops the argument of social influence based on the phenomenon of the 'fait accompli', to which social psychology must pay attention in this contemporary technological society where things and artefacts mediate most inter-personal relations.

Another approach is that taken by Margarita Sánchez-Mazas, who argues that the key to understanding persuasion is the struggle for social recognition and the human aspiration to live in dignity. According to Sánchez-Mazas the social conflict is rooted in injustice, social exclusion and the contempt of others. Showing that the denial of social recognition may take destructive forms like passivity or violence, she presents theoretical arguments for encouraging active and legitimate forms of persuasion in the struggle for social recognition and dignity.

While persuasion is as old as human speech, it undergoes changes in the histori-

cal process. These take different forms under diverse socio-cultural conditions. Stéphane Laurens, analysing influence phenomena like possession, hypnosis, suggestion, sleepwalking and mesmerism, shows that they are embodied in perspectives of influence within various socio-historical situations. He points out that while certain effects of influence lead to obedient and arbitrary submission to authority, conformity and persuasion where the influenced individual is passive, other effects, though rare, and almost always neglected, show the opposite. Influence can stimulate creativity, intelligence, critical thought or sharpness of the senses.

Clélia Nascimento-Schulze calls attention to the importance of the study of persuasive communication in highly complex contemporary societies, particularly in the transmission of an understanding of science to the public. For example, the fast-developing Brazilian society is making various attempts to draw public attention towards science. Initiatives have included conferences, magazine articles and media attention as well as involvement by the science museums themselves. Scientific knowledge and innovations are viewed as accelerators of the economic development of the country. Whether such initiatives can be deemed 'good' or 'bad', education or persuasion, is open to question.

Changes in the general public's experience and our perceptions of time reflect the fact that our present societies are permanently connected by the net of information technologies. Modern media come up with new methods of persuasion and they present contemporary societies with fresh challenges. Helene Joffe explores the links between visual material and persuasion and emotions such as fear, disgust or empathy. She highlights a number of the under-explored aspects of persuasion and possibilities offered by the media.

Li Liu refers to specificities of Chinese culture. The cosmology of *yang/yin*, based on two forces regulating the universe, also marks social life and relations between the self and others. Such opposite but complementary forces as superior/subordinate, self/other and the individual/society are dialogically interdependent in the process of communication and persuasion. The process of communication and persuasion is, in turn, the key to achieving harmony and to resolving conflicts in everyday interactions. Modern Chinese history is characterized by ideological confrontation, destruction and reconstruction. The contesting ideological, political and economic systems of traditional Confucianism, orthodox Marxism and western capitalism coexist in contemporary China.

In addition to the main themes relating to social attitudes and influence processes, there are other ideas being discussed in this issue. Most contemporary social psychology emphasizes the pre-eminence of conscious thought in the study of influence, neglecting the unconscious. While the existence of unconscious processes has been well known for a long time, it has not been an object of systematic examination. As Serge Moscovici (1993) argues, social psychology finds the unconscious disturbing and has excluded the unconscious from its studies, because it breaks 'the ancient codes of decorum that protected a respectable psychology from the intrusion of madness and crowd psyche upon its domain' (p. 39). However, more recently, there has been a renewed interest in the unconscious in the study of persuasion and influence, to which several authors draw attention, as well as in automatic processes in persuasion (Jesuino, Laurens, Marková).

Persuasion is a phenomenon that takes place amid the broad context of communication, and connects with other phenomena like the 'fait accompli' (Bauer), 'rhetoric' (Scarantino), 'suggestion' and 'hypnosis' (Laurens), 'learning processes' (Petty and Briñol) and 'propaganda' (Marková), among others. It is through the study of these phenomena that social psychology reaches beyond its own discipline to link with, and contribute to, other social sciences and the humanities.

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