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What is Persuasion?

Scholars have defined persuasion in different ways. Persuasion, according to communication scholars, is:

- a communication process in which the communicator seeks to elicit a desired response from his receiver;
- a conscious attempt by one individual to change the attitudes, beliefs, or behavior of another individual or group of individuals through the transmission of some message;
- a symbolic activity whose purpose is to effect the internalization or voluntary acceptance of new cognitive states or patterns of overt behavior through the exchange of messages;
- a successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom;

Combining these definitions, we have:

Persuasion is a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behavior regarding an issue through the transmission of a message, in an atmosphere of free choice. There are five components of the definition.

1. **Persuasion is a symbolic process.** It takes time, consists of a number of steps, and actively involves the recipient of the message.

Many assume that persuasion is like a boxing match, won by the fiercest competitor. In fact persuasion is different. It's more like teaching than boxing. Think of a persuader as a teacher, moving people step by step to a solution, helping them appreciate why the advocated position solves the problem best.

Persuasion also involves the use of symbols, with messages transmitted primarily through language with its rich, cultural meanings. Symbols include words like freedom, justice, and equality; nonverbal signs like the flag, Star of David, or Holy Cross; and images that are instantly recognized and processed like the Nike Swoosh or McDonald's Golden Arches. Symbols are persuaders' tools, harnessed to change attitudes and mold opinions.

2. **Persuasion involves an attempt to influence.** Persuasion does not automatically or inevitably succeed. Like companies that go out of business soon after they open, persuasive communications often fail to reach or influence their targets. However, persuasion does involve a deliberate attempt to influence another person. The persuader must intend to change another individual's attitude or behavior, and must be aware (at least at some level) that she is trying to accomplish this goal.

For this reason, it pushes the envelope to say that very young children are capable of persuasion. True, a mother responds to an infant's cry for milk by dashing to the refrigerator (or lending her breast, if that's her feeding preference). Yes, we have all shopped in toy stores and watched as 2-year-olds point to toys seen on television and scream "I want that." And we have been witness to the pitiful sight of parents, who pride themselves on being competent professionals, helplessly yielding to prevent any further embarrassment.

Yet the baby's cry for milk and the toddler's demand for toys do not qualify as persuasion. These youngsters have not reached the point where they are aware that they are trying to change another person's mental state. Their actions are better described as **coercive social influence** than persuasion. In order for children to practice persuasion, they must understand that other people can have desires and beliefs, recognize that the persuadee has a mental state that is susceptible to change, demonstrate a primitive awareness that they intend to influence another person, and realize that the persuadee has a different perspective than they do, even if they cannot put all this into words (Bartsch & London, 2000). As children grow, they appreciate these things, rely less on coercive social influence attempts than on persuasion, and develop the ability to persuade others more effectively (Kline & Clinton, 1998).

The main point here is that persuasion represents a conscious attempt to influence the other party, along with an accompanying awareness that the persuadee has a mental state that is susceptible to change. It is a type of social influence. Social influence is the broad process in which the behavior of one person alters the thoughts or actions of another. Social influence can occur when receivers act on cues or messages that were not necessarily intended for their consumption (Dudeczak, 2001). Persuasion occurs within a context of intentional messages that are initiated by a communicator in hopes of influencing the recipient. This is pretty heady stuff, but it is important because if you include every possible influence attempt under the persuasion heading, you count every communication as persuasion. That would make for a very long book.

3. **People persuade themselves.** One of the great myths of persuasion is that persuaders convince us to do things we really don't want to do. They supposedly overwhelm us with so many arguments or such verbal ammunition that we acquiesce. They force us to give in.

This overlooks an important point: People persuade themselves to change attitudes or behavior. Communicators provide the arguments. They set up the bait. We make the change, or refuse to yield. As D. Joel Whalen (1996) puts it:

You can't force people to be persuaded—you can only activate their desire

and show them the logic behind your ideas. You can't move a string by pushing it, you have to pull it. People are the same. Their devotion and total commitment to an idea come only when they fully understand and buy in with their total being. (p. 5)

You can understand the power of self-persuasion by considering an activity that does not at first blush seem to involve persuasive communication: therapy. Therapists undoubtedly help people make changes in their lives. But have you ever heard someone say, "My therapist persuaded me"? On the contrary, people who seek psychological help look into themselves, consider what ails them, and decide how best to cope. The therapist offers suggestions and provides an environment in which healing can take place (Kassan, 1999). But if progress occurs, it is the client who makes the change—and it is the client who is responsible for making sure that she does not revert back to the old ways of doing things. Of course, not every self-persuasion is therapeutic. Self-persuasion can be benevolent or malevolent. An ethical communicator will plant the seeds for healthy self-influence. A dishonest, evil persuader convinces a person to change her mind in a way that is personally or socially destructive.

Note also that persuasion typically involves change. It does not focus on forming attitudes, but on inducing people to alter attitudes they already possess. This can involve shaping, molding, or reinforcing attitudes, as is discussed later in the chapter.

4. **Persuasion involves the transmission of a message.** The message may be verbal or nonverbal. It can be relayed interpersonally, through mass media, or via the Internet. It may be reasonable or unreasonable, factual or emotional. The message can consist of arguments or simple cues, like music in an advertisement that brings pleasant memories to mind.

Persuasion is a communicative activity; thus, there must be a message for persuasion, as opposed to other forms of social influence, to occur.

Life is packed with messages that change or influence attitudes. In addition to the usual contexts that come to mind when you think of persuasion—advertising, political campaigns, and interpersonal sales—there are other domains that contain attitude-altering messages. News unquestionably shapes attitudes and beliefs.

Art—books, movies, plays, and songs—also has a strong influence on how we think and feel about life. Artistic portrayals can transport people into different realities, changing the way they see life.

Yet although news and art contain messages that change attitudes, they are not pure exemplars of persuasion. Recall that persuasion is defined as an attempt to convince others to change their attitudes or behavior. In many cases, journalists are not trying to change people's attitudes toward a topic. They are describing events to provide people with information, to offer new perspectives, or entice viewers to watch their programs. In the same fashion, most artists do not create art to change the world. They write, paint, or compose songs to express important personal concerns, articulate vexing problems of life, or to soothe, uplift, or agitate people. In a sense, it demeans art to claim that artists attempt only to change our attitudes. Thus, art and news are best viewed as borderline cases of persuasion. Their messages can powerfully influence our worldviews, but because the intent of these communicators is broader and more complex than attitude change, news and art are best viewed as lying along the border of persuasion and the large domain of social influence.

5. **Persuasion requires free choice.** If, as noted earlier, self-persuasion is the key to successful influence, then an individual must be free to alter his own behavior or to do what he wishes in a communication setting. But what does it mean to be free? Philosophers have debated this question for centuries, and if you took a philosophy course, you may recall those famous debates about free will versus determinism.

There are more than 200 definitions of freedom, and, as we will see, it's hard to say precisely when coercion ends and persuasion begins. I suggest that a person is free when he has the ability to act otherwise—to do other than what the persuader suggests—or to reflect critically on his choices in a situation.

Persuasion Versus Coercion

How does persuasion differ from coercion? The answer may seem simple at first. Persuasion deals with reason and verbal appeals, while coercion employs force, you suggest. It's not a

bad start, but there are subtle relationships between the terms—fascinating overlaps—that you might not ordinarily think of.

Philosophers define coercion as a technique for forcing people to act as the coercer wants them to act, and presumably contrary to their preferences. It usually employs a threat of some dire consequence if the actor does not do what the coercer demands (Feinberg, 1998, p. 387). Tom's boss, Debbie's professor, and Elizabeth's classmates pushed them to act in ways that were contrary to their preferences. The communicators employed a direct or veiled threat. It appears that they employed coercion.

Things get murkier when you look at scholarly definitions that compare coercion with persuasion. Mary J. Smith (1982) takes a relativist perspective, emphasizing the role of perception. According to this view, it's all a matter of how people perceive things. Smith argues that when people believe that they are free to reject the communicator's position, as a practical matter they are free, and the influence attempt falls under the persuasion umbrella. When individuals perceive that they have no choice but to comply, the influence attempt is better viewed as coercive.

Effects of Persuasion

Miller (1980) proposed that communications exert three different persuasive effects: shaping, reinforcing, and changing responses.

Shaping. Attitudes are “shaped” by associating pleasurable environments with a product, person, or idea.

Reinforcing. Contrary to popular opinion, many persuasive communications are not designed to convert people, but to reinforce a position they already hold.

Changing. This is perhaps the most important persuasive impact and the one that comes most frequently to mind when we think of persuasion. Communications can and do change attitudes.