

Attitude change as a function of threat to attitudinal freedom and extent of agreement with a communicator*

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Abstract

Subjects who previously expressed either partial or full agreement with an attitudinal position were exposed to a low- or high-threat essay advocating the position. Anonymous post-communication measures of opinion indicated a reactance effect (negative attitude change) only for subjects who (1) read the high-threat essay, and (2) previously expressed complete agreement with the communicator. Theoretical implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

According to reactance theory (Brehm, 1966; Brehm and Brehm, 1981; Wicklund, 1974; Worchel and Brehm, 1970), when behavioural freedoms are threatened or eliminated, motivation is aroused to restore and/or confirm those freedoms. Applied to attitude change processes, the theory predicts resistance to a persuasion attempt that restricts the freedom to hold an opposing view. Data from a number of studies demonstrating negative attitude movement in individuals exposed to forceful persuasive communications are consistent with this analysis (e.g. Heller, Pallak and Picek, 1973; Wicklund and Brehm, 1968).

Results from several studies, however, have raised an issue requiring an extension of the theory. In each study (Snyder and Wicklund, 1976, Experiment 1; Wicklund and Ferris, reported in Wicklund, 1974; Worchel and Brehm, 1970), subjects were partitioned on the basis of their pre-communication attitudes. It was found that a forceful communication produced a shift away from the recommended position only among subjects who initially *agreed* with the communicator. Among subjects who initially *disagreed* with the communicator, there was either a slight

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change toward the position being advocated, or no change at all. The absence of negative attitude change among subjects who initially disagree with a communicator generally has been explained in terms of the notion of prior exercise of freedom (Wicklund, 1974). It is reasoned that an initial statement of disagreement constitutes a pre-communication exercise of the freedom not to agree. Presumably, this exercise increases security about having the freedom, which in turn reduces the perceived threat value of the forceful message and, ultimately, the amount of reactance that is aroused.

Although, to date, initial position effects have been demonstrated only for subjects with opinions on opposing sides of an issue, there is reason to believe that they might also be obtained for subjects who generally agree with a communicator's position, but vary in the extent to which their views are coincident with it (see Brehm and Brehm, 1981, pp. 125-135, for a discussion). Specifically, attitude resistance may be found among subjects initially expressing complete agreement with a forcefully presented communication, but not among subjects initially expressing moderate agreement. In terms of the prior exercise notion, subjects initially taking the more moderate stance have established their freedom not to take the communicator's (extreme) position ahead of time. One goal of the present research was to test this initial position hypothesis.

A second purpose of this investigation was to examine reactions to a freedom-threatening event under private (anonymous) conditions. It has been argued that reactance is strictly a public phenomenon, stemming from a desire to present oneself as independent (Baer, Hinkle, Smith and Fenton, 1980; Heilman and Toffler, 1976). According to this essentially impression management view, resistance behaviours are engaged in only to project autonomy to relevant others (persons who have observed freedom threatened or eliminated), and do not reflect motivation to restore freedom *per se*. Evidence of private resistance would be directly contrary to this interpretation, and provide additional support for reactance theory as it was originally formulated (Wright and Brehm, 1982).

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were thirty-seven male and nineteen female undergraduates from the introductory psychology subject pool at a large university in the United States. At the beginning of the semester approximately five hundred students attended a mass testing session where they received (among other things) a twenty-item questionnaire asking them to express their opinions on a series of issues and to indicate how important each issue was to them personally. Subjects were selected for the experiment proper if they (1) indicated general agreement with (a position of 6 or above on a 10-point scale, where 1 = completely disagree, and 10 = completely agree) and (2) placed some importance on (a position of 5 or above on a 10-point scale, where 1 = completely unimportant and 10 = extremely important) the following statement: 'Contraceptives should be freely available to (university) students through the student health centre'. All participants received one credit hour towards fulfilling their experimental requirements.

Procedure

Subjects were run in three group sessions. In order to minimize contact between the experimenter and subject, and for the sake of efficiency, most instructions were written.

As subjects arrived, they were asked to seat themselves at least one seat apart from the nearest person. Once all were present, instruction booklets were passed out. Subjects were told to read and follow the instructions. The booklets described the study as an investigation of communication and attitudes being conducted out of the Survey Research Centre at the University of Michigan. It was stated that data collected at this university would be sent to the research centre in Michigan and there combined with data from eleven other universities prior to analysis.

Following this general introduction was a statement of informed consent and a short explanation of the subject's task. Ostensibly, during the previous summer a number of students had written brief essays on a variety of topics for the present project. Students had been assigned topics, but had not been told what to write. Subjects were to read the essay on the following page of the booklet, and then answer a few questions about it.

The essay each subject read was one of two advocating the free availability of contraceptives through the student health centre. One essay (High Threat) contained pressure statements such as 'you *have* to believe' and 'you have to go along with my position'. The other essay (Low Threat) had identical arguments and sentences, but the high pressure phrases were replaced statements like, 'I strongly believe' and 'I feel very strongly about my position'.

Following the essay was a questionnaire containing the dependent measures, which subjects were to complete. To insure the perception of privacy, subjects were to (1) make certain that their names or any identifying marks were removed from the questionnaire before they turned it in; (2) tear the questionnaire from the rest of the booklet when they were finished and seal it in a non-descript envelope that was provided; and (3) drop the sealed envelope into a large box in the front of the class with those of the rest of the group. Subjects were told that the envelopes would be forwarded directly to the research centre in Michigan. (In reality, each questionnaire was coded covertly so that it could be identified once the session was over). When all subjects had finished, dropped their envelopes into the collection box, and returned to their respective seats, the experimenter conducted a complete debriefing. None of the subjects expressed suspicion about the procedure, or reported having doubts about the privacy of their responses.

Dependent measures

On the questionnaire, subjects were asked to (1) indicate the extent to which they agreed with the contraceptive statement (10-point scale: 1 = completely disagree, 10 = completely agree); (2) indicate how much the (essay) author tried to pressure them into agreement (10-point scale: 1 = not at all, 10 = a great deal); (3) rate the author's use of language (7-point scale: 1 = very poor, 7 = very good), organization of material (7-point scale: 1 = very poor, 7 = very good), forcefulness of presentation (7-point scale: 1 = very mild, 7 = very forceful), and clarity (7-point scale: 1 = very unclear, 7 = very clear); (4) indicate the author's opinion

on the contraceptive issue (10-point scale: 1 = completely disagrees, 10 = completely agrees); and (5) rate the author's expertise on the issue, sincerity, and open-mindedness (all on 7-point scales: 1 = not at all, 7 = very).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To test the initial position hypothesis experimentally it was necessary to categorize subjects in terms of their initial attitude ratings. Therefore, subjects with pre-communication values of six through eight were classified as being in moderate agreement with the contraceptives statement and subjects with pre-communication values of nine and ten were classified as being in strong agreement with the contraceptives statement.

The effectiveness of the threat manipulation was examined by means of 2 (moderate initial attitude, extreme initial attitude) \times 2 (low threat, high threat) analyses of variance performed on subjects' responses to the questions of perceived pressure to agree and forcefulness of the essay author's presentation. As expected, only threat main effects were found on these measures. High threat subjects felt more pressured by the essay, $F(1,52) = 50.74, p < 0.001$, and thought the essay was more forceful, $F(1,52) = 12.84, p < 0.001$, than low threat subjects.¹

Table 1. Perceived pressure to agree, forcefulness of presentation, and mean attitude change

Experimental groups	N	Pressure to agree	Forcefulness of presentation	Attitude change
Low threat-extreme (9-10)	18	5.27	4.27	-0.56
High threat-extreme (9-10)	15	8.42	5.33	-1.93
Low threat-moderate (6-8)	11	4.00	4.17	-0.55
High threat-moderate (6-8)	12	9.33	5.73	0.67
MS _e		4.78	1.81	5.52

Higher numbers indicate greater pressure to agree, greater forcefulness, and attitude change toward the communicator's position.

Mean attitude change scores for each condition are presented in Table 1. As can be seen, they are generally congruent with expectations. The initial attitude \times threat interaction, the best test of the hypothesis, proved to be reliable, $F(1,52) = 4.10, p < 0.043$. Simple effects tests indicated that the interaction was due primarily to the difference between change-scores in the high threat-extreme and high threat-moderate conditions, $t(52) = 2.86, p < 0.01$. The pair-wise comparison between high threat-extreme and low threat-extreme conditions approached significance, $t(52) = 1.67, p < 0.10$. Although there was a tendency for greater persuasion in the high threat condition than in the low threat condition for subjects with moderate initial attitudes, the pairwise comparison was not reliable.

The initial position hypothesis also was examined by computing product moment

¹All analyses originally were performed including sex of subject as a factor. Since that variable produced no reliable effects, it is ignored in the present report.

correlations between initial attitude and attitude change under high threat and low threat conditions. As expected, a significant correlation, indicating greater negative change for subjects with more extreme initial positions, was obtained in the high threat condition ($r = -0.47$, $p < 0.01$), but not in the low threat condition ($r = -0.07$, n.s.).

Further analysis produced group differences on four other measures. On the 'sincere' and 'organized' items there were threat main effects (p 's < 0.008 and 0.03 , respectively), with high threat subjects viewing the essay author as less sincere (M s = 6.01 and 5.02), and the essay less organized (M s = 3.84 and 3.05), than low threat subjects. There was an initial attitude \times threat interaction on the 'open-minded' question ($p < 0.02$), due primarily to high threat-extreme subjects' low open-mindedness ratings ($M = 2.13$). Responses on that measure in the other conditions were more moderate ($3.55 \leq M$ s ≤ 4.00). Finally, an initial attitude main effect was obtained on the item asking the essay author's opinion on the contraceptive issue ($p < 0.02$). Subjects with moderate initial attitudes thought the author's opinion was less strong ($M = 9.70$).

Initial attitude and reactance

The attitude change data in this study indicates a clear difference in the impact of the high threat communication upon subjects who had and had not previously expressed full support for the communicator's position. Whereas subjects with extreme premeasures exhibited negative attitude change in response to the high threat message, subjects with moderate premeasures appear to have been slightly persuaded by it. These results are highly consistent with the hypothesis that attitude resistance can be reduced not only by an initial statement of disagreement with a communicator, but also by an initial statement that agrees with, but does not completely endorse, the communicator's position (Brehm and Brehm, 1981; Wicklund, 1974).

While these results accord with predictions derived from the prior exercise of freedom notion, some alternative interpretations of them can be considered. For example, because high threat subjects viewed the communicator as less sincere and less organized than did low threat subjects, it might be argued that these factors account for the negative attitude change which was obtained. Presumably, the less desirable the communicator is perceived to be, the more motivated subjects could be to disassociate themselves from him or her by way of their personal attitude ratings (Heider, 1958). However, this explanation cannot account for the attitude change results in the high threat-moderate condition. If perception of disorganization and insincerity caused high threat subjects to move away from the communicator's position, they should have done so irrespective of initial position.

A stronger case for this type of argument can be made on the basis of subjects' open-mindedness ratings, which tracked more closely attitude change across experimental conditions. To explore this possibility, product moment correlations were computed between perceived open-mindedness and attitude change both within and cross experimental conditions. If perceptions of open-mindedness were responsible for degree of attitude change, positive correlations between these measures should be found. In fact, none of the correlations even approached reliability (e.g. high threat-extreme condition: $r = -0.13$, n.s.; Total sample: $r = 0.04$, n.s.); therefore, the explanation again appears untenable.

An interpretation which does not fall outside the bounds of reactance theory but may alternatively account for these attitude data has been proposed recently by Brehm and Brehm (1981, pp. 131–135). They suggest that initial position effects may occur not because subjects who initially disagree with a communicator experience relatively little reactance, but, instead, because those individuals can exercise their freedom to disagree in a way that subjects who initially agree cannot. Specifically, whereas subjects who initially agree can exercise freedom to disagree only by moving away from their original position, subjects who initially disagree can exercise that freedom by adopting any position that does not *fully* endorse the communicator's view. Thus, it is possible for the latter subjects to exhibit positive attitude change and still resist the communicator by not giving in completely.

At this point, there is no evidence available which allows a clear determination of whether this or the prior exercise interpretation of (these and other) initial position effects is more viable. On the one hand, studies by Snyder and Wicklund (1976) in which prior exercise was explicitly manipulated indicate compellingly that a prior exercise of freedom *can* reduce reactance effects. However, in the studies they report the exercise took place immediately before subjects received a persuasive communication. As Brehm and Brehm (1981) point out, this has not always been the case in studies where initial position effects have been obtained (e.g. the Worchel–Brehm study), which may present a problem for a prior exercise interpretation of them. That is, if an exercise of freedom takes place several weeks (or more) before subjects are confronted with a forceful message, one might question how effective it could possibly be in increasing security and reducing reactance. In view of this concern, the more parsimonious explanation that Brehm and Brehm propose has some appeal. Interesting goals of future research will be to specify areas of disagreement between these two perspectives and determine empirically if and when each is explanatory.²

Reactance as impression management

The present attitude data clearly conflict with the view that resistance to a forceful communication only reflects a desire on the part of subjects to project autonomy (e.g. Heilman and Toffler, 1976). Special pains were taken in this study to insure that subjects perceived their responses as private: (1) subjects were run in groups where they sat at least one seat apart from the nearest person; (2) subjects were

²Since in previous studies demonstrating initial position effects subjects were not partitioned as sensitively as subjects in this study, questions might be raised as to how they were able to demonstrate initial position effects at all. That is, presumably, responses of subjects who moderately agreed with the communicator should have worked against the hypothesis. A close inspection of the protocols of these investigations reveals one possible explanation: In at least two of the studies, it appears that subjects were, in fact, disproportionately extreme in their views on the experimental issue. Worchel and Brehm (1970) report that approximately 76 per cent of their participants held initial opinions within five points (on a 25-point scale) of endpoints. Snyder and Wicklund (1976) did not report how extreme their subjects were, but the issue they used concerned marijuana usage, which at the time most students had strong views about. Unfortunately, Wicklund (1974) did not provide enough information to determine what subjects' opinions were like in the Ferris–Wicklund experiment. If most subjects in previous studies were extreme in their initial views, the counter influence of responses of the few subjects with moderate views could easily have been masked.

provided with cover sheets to conceal their responses from other individuals in the room; (3) no names or identifying marks were allowed on the questionnaires, and (4) subjects were led to believe their questionnaires were to be mixed with hundreds of other unmarked questionnaires prior to analysis. Contrary to what would be expected on the basis an impression management interpretation of reactance, significant between-group differences in attitude change, congruent with a reactance analysis, were obtained. These results lead to the conclusion that, while concerns for appearance certainly can exist and influence behaviour in an experimental setting, they cannot blanketly account for attitude change in the context of a reactance paradigm.

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RÉSUMÉ

Des sujets qui, antérieurement, avaient exprimé un accord partiel ou complet avec une position attitudinale étaient exposés à un essai bas ou haut en menace dans le sens de la position. Des mesures anonymes d'opinion après la communication de l'essai ont montré un effet de réactance (changement négatif d'attitude) seulement pour les sujets qui (1) avaient lu le message haut en menace et (2) avaient antérieurement exprimé un accord complet avec l'émetteur. Les implications théoriques sont discutées.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Versuchspersonen, die vorausgehend ihre volle oder teilweise Uebereinstimmung mit einer bestimmten Einstellung ausgedrückt haben, bekamen einen Text zu lesen, der diese Einstellung in mehr oder weniger bedrohendem Masse ausdrückt und verteidigt. Ein anonymer Posttest bezüglich der inkriminierten Einstellung zeigte einen Reaktanz-Effekt (negativer Einstellungswandel) nur bei den Vpn, die 1/ den hochgradig bedrohenden Text vorgelegt bekamen und 2/ vorausgehendvolle Uebereinstimmung mit der angezeigten Einstellung ausgedrückt haben. Die theoretischen Implikationen werden diskutiert.

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