

## EFFECT ON OPINION CHANGE OF SIMILARITY BETWEEN THE COMMUNICATOR AND THE AUDIENCE HE ADDRESSED<sup>1</sup>

JUDSON MILLS AND JERALD M. JELLISON

*University of Missouri*

An experiment tested the hypothesis that a communication will be more persuasive when the audience thinks the communicator felt similar to the audience he addressed than when the audience thinks the communicator felt dissimilar to those he addressed. College women read the same communication with varying introductions. Some were informed that the communicator was a musician and those in the audience he addressed were music students, some that the communicator was an engineer and those in the audience addressed were engineering students, some that the communicator was a musician and those in the audience were engineering students, and some that the communicator was an engineer and those in the audience, music students. In confirmation of the hypothesis, agreement with the communicator's position was greater when he was similar to the audience he addressed.

People tend to be more persuaded by a communication the more similar they think the communicator is to themselves (Brock, 1965; Burnstein, Stotland, & Zander, 1961; Weiss, 1957). One reason that a similar communicator is more persuasive than a dissimilar communicator may be that the similar communicator is more attractive. A number of studies have shown that similarity increases attractiveness (Byrne, 1961; Byrne & Nelson, 1965; Jellison & Mills, 1967; Jones & Daugherty, 1959; Smith, 1957), and if a communicator is attractive, his attempts to persuade will be more successful (Mills & Aronson, 1965).

Another possible reason why similarity affects the persuasiveness of a communicator has been suggested by Hovland, Janis, & Kelley (1953).

In certain matters persons similar to the recipient of influence may be considered more expert than persons different from him. An individual is likely to feel that persons with status, values, interests, and needs similar to his own see things as he does and judge them from the same point of view. Because of this, their assertions about matters of which the individual is ignorant but where he feels the viewpoint makes a difference (e.g., about the satisfaction of a given job or the attractiveness of some personality) will tend to carry special credibility [p. 22].

A recent study by Bersheid (1966) on the effect of communicator-communicatee similarity on opinion change can be explained in

terms of differences in perceived expertness on the particular issue. She found that a communicator who was similar in values which were relevant to the particular issue was more persuasive than a communicator who was similar in values which were irrelevant to the issue.

In addition to the effect of similarity on a communicator's attractiveness and perceived expertness on the topic, it is also possible that a similar communicator is more persuasive than a dissimilar communicator because similarity affects the perception of a communicator's sincerity, his motivation to communicate honestly. A similar communicator may be expected by the audience to be more sincere with them because they assume he feels a commonality with them and is more concerned about their welfare. Of course, if the audience thinks the communicator is unaware that he is similar to them, this effect should not occur. As long as the audience thinks the communicator felt similar to those who he thought would receive his communication, he should be perceived as more sincere in what he says. The effect should occur even if the audience that actually receives the communication is not the same as the audience the communicator addressed. It should not be necessary for the communicator to be similar to the actual audience if it is not the audience he addressed.

An experiment was conducted to test the hypothesis that a communicator will be more

<sup>1</sup> This study was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation.

persuasive when the audience thinks he felt similar to the audience he addressed than when the audience thinks the communicator felt dissimilar to those he addressed.

### METHOD

College students read a speech favoring general education under four experimental conditions. In one condition the communicator was described as a musician and those in the audience he addressed as music students. In a second condition the communicator was described as an engineer and those in the audience as engineering students. In a third condition the speaker was described as a musician and those in the audience as engineering students, and in a fourth condition the speaker was described as an engineer and those in the audience as music students. Agreement with the communicator's position was measured after the subjects had rated his personality characteristics and completed a test of memory for what they had read.

The subjects were 218 freshman and sophomore women in eight psychology classes at Stephens College.<sup>2</sup> The experiment was conducted during the regular class sessions. Within each of the eight classes subjects were randomly assigned to the four experimental conditions with as near to an equal number as possible in each condition.

After he had been introduced by the instructor the experimenter told the subjects that the study concerned impression formation. Each of them would read a speech and then rate the personality characteristics of the man who delivered it. Booklets were distributed containing a fictitious speech arguing that every college student should receive a broad, general education. The introduction to the speech stated that the speaker was visiting a small Midwestern university in connection with the dedication ceremonies of a new auditorium building (the musician to give a performance, the engineer because he was the chief acoustical engineer).

In the musician-music students condition, the introduction stated that the speech was presented at an assembly of freshman students in the school of music of the university, and that the speaker had been a professional pianist for the past 10 years since his graduation from the school of music of this same university.

In the engineer-engineering students condition, the introduction stated that the speech was presented at an assembly of freshman students in the school of engineering of the university, and that the speaker had been a professional acoustical engineer for the past 10 years since his graduation from the school of engineering of this same university.

In the musician-engineering students condition, the introduction stated that the speech was presented at an assembly of freshman students in the school of engineering of the university, and that the speaker

<sup>2</sup> Thanks are due to John Ludeman and Davida Olinger for their assistance in making their classes available for the study.

had been a professional pianist for the past 10 years since his graduation from a conservatory of music.

In the engineer-music students condition, the introduction stated that the speech was presented at an assembly of freshman students in the school of music of the university, and that the speaker had been a professional acoustical engineer for the past 10 years since his graduation from an institute of technology.

When the subjects had finished reading the speech booklets, the booklets were collected and each subject was given a rating form with the same code number as on their speech booklet. The subjects were asked to indicate how well various characteristics applied to the speaker by circling a number on a scale from 0 (extremely inappropriate) to 20 (extremely appropriate) for each characteristic. The characteristics were: biased, competent, earnest, frank, friendly, impartial, likeable, obliging, selfish, sincere, sympathetic, and unconventional. The subjects were told that their ratings would be kept completely confidential and were not asked to put their names on the rating forms.

After the subjects had completed the rating forms the experimenter told them that there was more to the study than he had mentioned at the beginning. He said that another purpose was to study the relationship between impressions of a person and memory for what the person had said. He was now going to pass out a memory questionnaire to determine how well they could recall exactly what the speaker said in the speech. He explained that he could not reveal this earlier because if he had they might have made a special effort to memorize the speech. The subjects were warned that the memory test was difficult.

The rating forms were collected and each subject was given a booklet for the memory test with the same code number as on their speech booklet and rating form. The subjects were not asked to put their names on the memory test booklet. The first section of the booklet contained 24 multiple-choice type questions with three alternatives each. The subjects were instructed to choose the word or phrase that completed each statement in the way which was closest to what was said in the speech.

Two items were included in the memory questionnaire to check whether the information designed to manipulate the independent variables was understood. These were:

- The speaker is a professional \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. educator
  - b. engineer
  - c. pianist

- The speech was presented at an assembly of students in the school of \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. education
  - b. engineering
  - c. music

For the question concerning the profession of the speaker, three subjects in the engineer-engineering

students condition and three subjects in the engineer-music students condition failed to choose alternative b. For the question concerning the school at which the speech was presented, one subject in the engineer-engineering students condition and four subjects in the musician-engineering students condition failed to choose alternative b, and three subjects in the musician-music students condition and one subject in the engineer-music students condition failed to choose alternative c. These 15 subjects were excluded from the analysis of the results.

After all the memory test booklets were distributed, the experimenter interrupted the subjects and said he should have mentioned that the last page of the booklet was included to get their personal reactions to some statements in order to see if there was a relationship between personal reactions and memory. Some of the subjects invariably turned to the last page, and the experimenter immediately cautioned everyone not to look at the last page until they had answered all of the memory items, and not to return to the memory items once they had begun to give their personal reactions. The last page contained 10 Likert-type items concerning general versus specialized education with seven alternatives from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Six of the items were pro general education and the other four were anti general education. A measure of favorability to general education was calculated by assigning scores from +3 to -3 to the alternatives for each item and then summing over the 10 items; the more positive the score, the greater the favorability to general education.

After the subjects had answered all the items in the booklet, the experimenter asked them to write a few sentences on the back describing their reactions to the study. He told them they could say anything they wanted about the study. The comments of one subject in the engineer-engineering students condition indicated suspicion about the procedure; this subject was excluded from the analysis of the results. Finally, before dismissing the subjects, the experimenter explained the necessity of their not discussing the experiment with anyone.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before presenting the results for the measure of agreement with the communicator's position, it should be mentioned that the conditions did not differ in recall of the content of the speech. Analysis of variance of the number of correct answers on the memory test did not yield any significant differences. The subjects averaged approximately 15 correct answers out of the 21 items dealing with the content of the speech.

From the hypothesis it was expected that the subjects would agree more closely with the communicator's position in the musician-music students condition and the engineer-

TABLE 1  
MEANS FOR THE MEASURE OF AGREEMENT WITH THE COMMUNICATOR'S POSITION

| Communicator | Audience addressed |                     |
|--------------|--------------------|---------------------|
|              | Music students     | Engineering student |
| Musician     | 10.1 (53)          | 6.0 (51)            |
| Engineer     | 7.4 (48)           | 8.2 (50)            |

Note.—The higher the score, the greater the agreement with the communicator's position. *N*s given in parentheses.

engineering students condition than in the musician-engineering students condition and the engineer-music students condition. The means for the measure of favorability to general education for the four experimental conditions are presented in Table 1. It can be seen from Table 1 that, as expected, agreement with the communicator's position was greater in the musician-music students and engineer-engineering students conditions than in the musician-engineering students and engineer-music students conditions. Analysis of variance revealed that the interaction between profession of the communicator and type of audience addressed was significant beyond the .05 level ( $F = 4.22$ ,  $df = 1/198$ ). Neither of the main effects approached significance. The results provide good support for the hypothesis that a communicator will be more persuasive when the audience thinks he felt similar to the audience he addressed than when they think he felt dissimilar to those he addressed.

The hypothesis was based on the assumption that a communicator will be perceived as more sincere in what he says when the audience thinks he felt similar to those he addressed than when they think he felt dissimilar to those addressed. The adjectives "earnest," "frank," and "sincere" were included among the characteristics on which the subjects rated the communicator as a possible check on this assumption. Analyses of variance did not reveal any significant differences in the ratings for these adjectives or for any of the other characteristics: biased, competent, friendly, impartial, likable, obliging, selfish, sympathetic, unconventional. Since the subjects were asked to rate how well the characteristics generally applied to the com-

municator and not how well they specifically applied when he was giving the speech, the ratings do not provide a very sensitive test of the assumption. It was not assumed that a communicator who felt similar to his audience would be perceived as a more sincere person in general but only that he would be perceived as communicating more sincerely in the particular situation.

Although there is no evidence from the ratings that the communicator was perceived as communicating more sincerely when he was similar to those he addressed, it is difficult to account for the differences in agreement with the communicator's position without making this assumption. The interaction between the profession of the communicator and the type of audience addressed cannot be explained in terms of differences in the communicator's attractiveness. It is also difficult to account for the results in terms of differences in perceived expertness on the topic.

If the speech which was supposedly addressed to music students had been concerned with the education of musicians and the speech which was supposedly addressed to engineering students concerned with engineering education, then the results could be explained by differences in perceived expertness. A musician will undoubtedly be perceived as more expert concerning the education of musicians and less expert concerning engineering education than an engineer. However, the speech which was supposedly addressed to music students was exactly the same as the speech supposedly addressed to engineering students. It did not contain any specific mention of either music or engineering but argued that every college student should receive a broad, general education. Also, the items which were

used to measure agreement with the communicator's position were exactly the same in all conditions and did not include any reference to either music or engineering.

#### REFERENCES

- BERSCHIED, E. Opinion change and communicator-communicatee similarity and dissimilarity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1966, 4, 670-680.
- BROCK, T. C. Communicator-recipient similarity and decision change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1965, 1, 650-654.
- BURNSTEIN, E., STOTLAND, E., & ZANDER, A. Similarity to a model and self-evaluation. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1961, 62, 257-264.
- BYRNE, D. Interpersonal attraction and attitude similarity. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1961, 62, 713-715.
- BYRNE, D., & NELSON, D. Attraction as a linear function of proportion of positive reinforcements. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1965, 1, 659-663.
- HOVLAND, C. I., JANIS, I. L., & KELLEY, H. H. *Communication and persuasion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953.
- JELLISON, J. M., & MILLS, J. Effect of similarity and fortune of the other on attraction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1967, 5, 459-463.
- JONES, E. E., & DAUGHERTY, B. N. Political orientation and the perceptual effects of an anticipated interaction. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1959, 59, 340-349.
- MILLS, J., & ARONSON, E. Opinion change as a function of the communicator's attractiveness and desire to influence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1965, 1, 173-177.
- SMITH, A. J. Similarity of values and its relation to acceptance and the projection of similarity. *Journal of Psychology*, 1957, 43, 251-260.
- WEISS, W. Opinion congruence with a negative source on one issue as a factor influencing agreement on another issue. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1957, 54, 180-186.

(Received July 12, 1967)