

The Processing of Nested Persuasive Messages

Alice H. Eagly

*Department of Psychology
Northwestern University*

In their target article, Kruglanski and Thompson make some interesting points about dual-process persuasion theories. However, I do not think that the point that they choose to emphasize is the most appropriate conclusion to draw from their creative experiments. Before I provide my alternative interpretation, let me note some points of agreement. Kruglanski and Thompson maintain that heuristic (or peripheral) cues and message arguments can both be considered persuasive evidence. It is of course true that both forms of information provide evidence relevant to judging the validity of the position advocated in a persuasive message. Furthermore, as they point out, the relevance of any information (or premise) to a conclusion can be stated syllogistically, as it would be in the probabilistical models of McGuire (1960) and Wyer (1974), although these models are sharply limited in their ability to model the multiple-premise situation existing when several arguments plus other cues produce a conclusion (see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

Kruglanski and Thompson also argue that the distinction between cues and arguments is arbitrary because it reflects a confounding between these two forms of evidence and certain informational parameters. Their claim that there is an association between

informational parameters and the cue versus message distinction surely is valid. However, as I argue, because heuristic or peripheral cues, by definition, exist only with informational parameters set at certain levels, this correlation is not appropriately regarded as a confounding in the sense of an artificial, accidental, or mistaken association. Kruglanski and Thompson further argue that, once these confounded informational parameters are controlled, cues and message arguments function very similarly in their impact on persuasion. In contrast, I argue that such a control violates the defining properties of heuristic cues. Moreover, persuasive information conveyed by a heuristic or peripheral cue does function differently than information conveyed by a complex set of arguments: Dual-process persuasion models capture this important difference.

As Kruglanski and Thompson argue, heuristic cues have indeed been presented more briefly and simply than persuasive arguments. They point out that information pertaining to, for example, source expertise, which has been treated as a heuristic cue, could be presented in a lengthy and complex style. Academicians in particular are accustomed to elaborate source cues because they frequently read academic curriculum vi-

tae to evaluate an individual's expertise and accomplishments. Even though, as in Studies 1, 2, and 3, lengthy source information may be presented along with a conventional persuasive message, it is inappropriate to regard the extensive information about the source as a heuristic (or peripheral) cue. When extensive information is presented about a source, this individual's expertise is not given to recipients for immediate perception as it would be in cue form. In psychology, the term *cue* refers to a stimulus or signal for the perception of some quality or entity. Therefore, a heuristic (or peripheral) cue conveys a quality to be immediately and holistically perceived. More exactly, a cue conveying a quality becomes a heuristic cue in the Heuristic Systematic Model when its impact on inferring message validity is assumed to be mediated by a simple decision rule such as "experts' statements can be trusted." Figure 1 depicts this sequence.

In their long version of the information about the source's expertise, Kruglanski and Thompson did not provide a cue at all, but instead conveyed expertise through a set of arguments. Because these arguments—the components of the résumé-type information—allowed the participants to draw a conclusion about expertise, this source information functioned differently from source information conveyed by a simple cue. From the perspective of the Heuristic Systematic Model or the Elaboration Likelihood Model, long source information would not be expected to produce findings similar to those produced by a heuristic or peripheral cue. The judgmental impact of the long source information on acceptance of the communicator's advocated position would not be mediated merely by a simple decision rule, because inferring the source's expertise from the long, complex information would have required systematic processing. Chaiken thus defined systematic processing as "judging the validity of a message's advocated position by scrutinizing persuasive argumentation and by thinking about this information in relation to other information ... possess[ed] about the object or issue discussed in the message" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, pp. 326–327). Recipients thus judged the validity of the arguments about the source's expertise. In addition, the judgment about source expertise that recipients derived systematically would be linked to the validity of the mes-

sage's conclusion about comprehensive exams by a decision rule such as "expert's statements can be trusted." In summary, a two-step process should be assumed: systematic processing to derive the source's expertise, followed by the use of a heuristic decision rule about trusting experts' statements. This processing sequence is depicted in Figure 2.

In the conditions of the experiments providing long source information, Kruglanski and Thompson presented, in addition to a set of arguments pointing to a conclusion about expertise, a set of arguments pointing to a conclusion about comprehensive exams. An appropriate way to describe such a communication is as two nested persuasive messages, each containing arguments. In other words, two persuasive messages were presented, the first arguing that the source is expert or inexpert, and the second arguing that comprehensive exams should be established. These two persuasive messages were nested in the sense that drawing a conclusion about expertise preceded and facilitated drawing a conclusion about comprehensive exams. Given sufficient motivation and ability, recipients could draw a conclusion about expertise based on systematic processing of the arguments about the source's expertise. Once recipients had drawn a conclusion about expertise, they could also systematically process the arguments about comprehensive exams to take their meaning into account. Finally, to draw a conclusion about comprehensive exams, recipients who had systematically processed the long, complex source information could then take their expertise conclusion into account along with their conclusion about comprehensive exams if they possessed the appropriate decision rule about trusting experts. This processing sequence is depicted in Figure 3. Because only two of the six message arguments were strong, and the two sets of arguments were about the same length, the message arguments would not seriously dampen the persuasive impact of the source arguments.

Given this construal of the long version of the source expertise information as a persuasive message nested within a two-part communication, it is not surprising that manipulations of motivation and ability that ordinarily affect systematic processing—namely, outcome-relevant involvement and distraction—would affect the impact of this source informa-

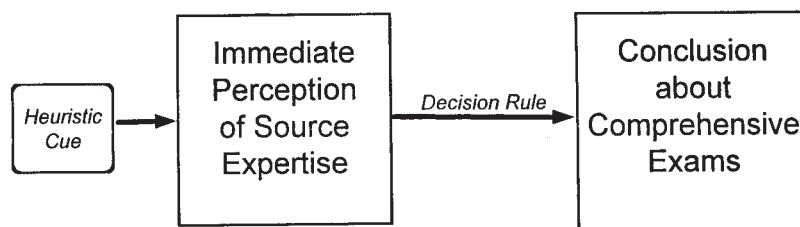


Figure 1. Persuasion by heuristic cue mediated by decision rule.

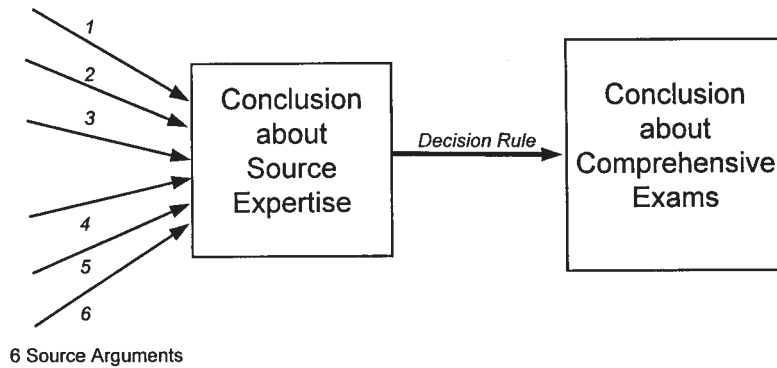


Figure 2. Persuasion by argumentation about source expertise mediated by decision rule.

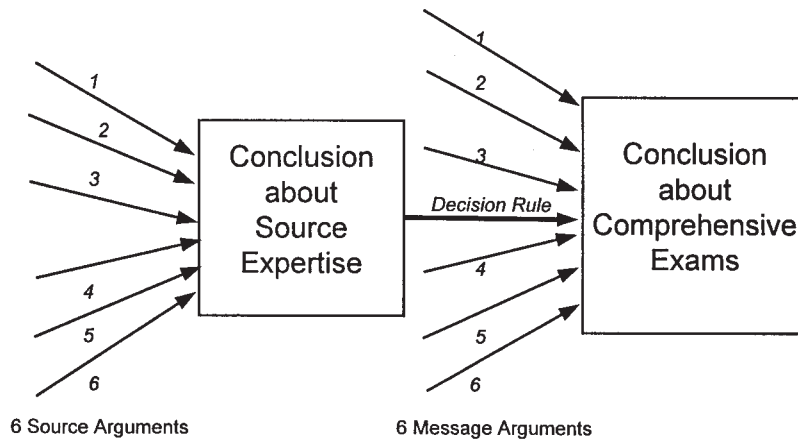


Figure 3. Persuasion by argumentation about source expertise mediated by decision rule and by argumentation about comprehensive exams.

tion. With high motivational involvement or high processing capacity, compared with low levels of these variables, source expertise had a greater effect because the implications of the expertise arguments could be appropriately discerned only with systematic processing. The key to understanding these findings is thus that with the long versions of source information, recipients had to systematically process a set of arguments to discern the source's expertise. In the short version of the source expertise manipulation added in Study 3 (and in most persuasion experiments), systematic processing was not required for recipients to discern expertise, because it was conveyed directly through a cue and thus could be easily taken into account, as depicted in Figure 4. When expertise was communicated by a simple cue in Kruglanski and Thompson's experiment, the impact of the source manipulation on persuasion was unaffected by cognitive load because perception of expertise did not require systematic processing.

Finally, in Study 4, Kruglanski and Thompson show that long, complex arguments that are weak versus strong are impacted by involvement in the typical

pattern of past persuasion experiments, whereas short arguments that are weak versus strong show the pattern typical of heuristic or peripheral cues in these past experiments. Drawing a conclusion from the long version requires much systematic processing, whereas drawing one from the short version does not require much systematic processing. It is thus not surprising that the argument strength of the part of the communication requiring systematic processing affected persuasion only with high involvement, whereas the argument strength of the part of the communication not requiring systematic processing affected persuasion only with low involvement. Although the two-sentence, short version of the message does not quite meet the definition of cue, which should very directly convey the validity of the conclusion, it can be described as departing considerably from the usual, more complex form of argumentation in persuasive messages and as approaching the cue form. Therefore, the short message should produce findings similar to a heuristic cue. With high involvement, the persuasive impact of the short cue-like message would be overwhelmed by the impact of the longer, complex message's strong or weak arguments.

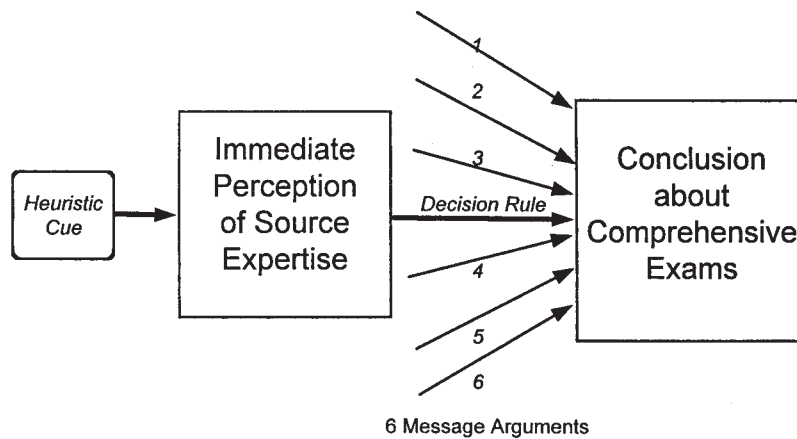


Figure 4. Persuasion by heuristic cue mediated by decision rule and by argumentation about comprehensive exams.

On the fundamental point of whether the Kruglanski and Thompson experiments challenge the dual-mode theories of persuasion, I must reject their claim on the basis of my nested messages analysis of the structure of communications that contain long source information followed by a conventional persuasive message. Persuasive results based on such messages do not challenge the dual-mode principle. Specifically, they do not challenge the claim that, for its persuasive impact to be exerted, complex argumentation is systematically processed by scrutinizing its persuasive argumentation or the claim that, for its persuasive impact to be exerted, information that is simply presented by a cue does not require systematic processing and needs only heuristic processing to exert its impact on persuasion. Distinctive persuasion findings follow from this processing difference.

The persuasion induced by source information (or other validity-relevant peripheral information) that is conveyed by a cue rather than inferred from arguments has distinctive properties for two reasons: (a) because the persuasive information is conveyed by a cue rather than more complex information and (b) because its impact on message validity is mediated by a simple decision rule. These distinctive properties of persuasion mediated by heuristic processing include its reduced vulnerability to manipulations that lessen motivation and ability to process complex information. In contrast, when source information derived from a complex set of arguments is used to infer message validity, as I have emphasized, its impact would be highly vulnerable to manipulations of motivation and ability because systematic processing would be required to discern the communicator's characteristics.

What implications does long, complex source information have for the distinctive consequences of systematically mediated persuasion other than its vul-

nerability to lessened motivation and ability—that is, for the increased persistence of such attitude change, its resistance to counterpersuasion, and its increased consistency with subsequent behavior? These consequences should accrue to the persuasion induced by that part of the total message that was systematically processed. Thus, with extensive source information coupled with a conventional persuasive message (as depicted in Figure 3), the judgment about source expertise should be relatively persistent, resistant to counterpersuasion, and directive of subsequent behavior to the extent that the source information was systematically processed. Because, in a two-step process, the impact of the conclusion about the source's expertise on the persuasiveness of the second message is mediated by a simple decision rule, the impact of the source information on the persistence of persuasion induced by this second message and its resistance to counterpersuasion should be limited and may tend to obey the rules of heuristic or peripheral processing. The reason for this prediction is that the source information, even if complexly conveyed, would not provide cognitions about the message topic itself (e.g., comprehensive exams) that could be persistent over time or be used in subsequent counterarguing or thinking about behavior. However, because the long source information should produce relatively enduring cognitions about the source, recalling this information may produce some protection against subsequent attacks on recipients' attitudes on the message topic (e.g., comprehensive exams) and some guidance for subsequent behavior relevant to this topic.

These experiments make an important point by showing that information that is contextual to the message proper can be complexly presented and thus require systematic processing to be understood. It is properly noted as a limitation of the experiments

testing dual-process persuasion models that they have ordinarily been tested with contextual information that is simply presented in the form of a cue. Whether this simple presentation of contextual information is typical of natural settings is an interesting question. Although I suspect that, especially in venues such as advertising, contextual information is more often presented briefly and simply than extensively and complexly, in other venues (e.g., courts of law) contextual information is more likely to be complexly presented.

In conclusion, Kruglanski and Thompson have brought an interesting class of persuasive messages to the attention of researchers—messages that are nested in the sense that one set of arguments presents the source information (or other contextual information) and the other set presents a position on an issue. Dual-process predictions can be generated for this interesting class of communications, if researchers treat these messages as nested and ask whether each mes-

sage requires systematic processing for its implications to be understood.

Note

Alice H. Eagly, Department of Psychology, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60208. E-mail: eagly@nwu.edu

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