

WARNING, PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT, AND ATTITUDE CHANGE¹

ROBERT APSLER AND DAVID O. SEARS

University of California, Los Angeles

To test the hypothesis that forewarning would facilitate attitude change under conditions of high personal involvement and inhibit change under low involvement, an experiment was conducted in which both forewarning and personal involvement were manipulated in a 2 × 2 design. The interaction was significant and in the expected direction. Unanticipated incidental findings suggested additional complexities with the variable of personal involvement.

The effects of forewarning on attitude change have been investigated recently in several studies. The term "forewarning" describes two rather different kinds of prior warnings to subjects. One involves forewarning the subject of the specific position which the communicator is about to advocate (Freedman & Sears, 1965; McGuire & Millman, 1965; Sears, Freedman, & O'Connor, 1964). The other warns him that the intent of a forthcoming communication is to change his attitude, but does not provide him with information about the topic or position of the communication (Kiesler & Kiesler, 1964; McGuire & Papageorgis, 1962; Mills, 1965; Mills & Aronson, 1965). Some experiments have embodied both types of warnings in the same manipulation (Allyn & Festinger, 1961; Deaux, 1968; Papageorgis, 1967). The present study is concerned with the first kind of forewarning.

The effects of this first type of forewarning obtained so far seem complex, as McGuire (1966) has noted. Freedman and Sears (1965) found that warning reduced the persuasive impact of a communication which came several minutes later. On the other hand, Deaux (1968) and McGuire and Millman (1965) found that positive attitude change was produced by the warning itself under some conditions.

But why should forewarning have any effect at all upon the success of attempts at persuasion? It might simply act as a sensitizer that multiplies whatever response the subject would have manifested upon receiving

the communication had he received no warning. Thus a subject likely to resist persuasion will resist it even more when forewarned, whereas a subject likely to change will change even more when he is forewarned. This is the implication of the Sears et al. (1964) finding that highly committed subjects strengthened their prior opinions when forewarned of an impending debate, whereas weakly committed subjects moderated their opinions. However, the effects of forewarning and commitment on persuasion are not clear from that experiment, since the procedure was terminated before persuasive communications were actually presented to the subjects.

The present experiment was intended to test this basic reasoning. Instead of strength of commitment, though, a variant of issue involvement (cf. Miller, 1965) was manipulated, as a way of varying resistance to change. The version manipulated here might be called "personal involvement." People are likely to become personally involved with an issue when they expect it to have significant consequences for their own lives. And when, on such an issue, a position is advocated that would have some obvious unpleasant personal consequences, forewarning should help block influence by accentuating the subject's resistances. This may account for the Freedman and Sears (1965) finding that warning reduced persuasion. Their communication was titled, "Why teenagers should not drive"—clearly a highly involving issue to most of their teenage Californian subjects.

With low involvement, on the other hand, the subject is normally more susceptible to persuasion. A warning may then cue the subject to be receptive to the forthcoming com-

¹ This study was supported by a National Science Foundation grant to the second author.

munication, to be attentive, to scan it carefully for pertinent arguments and facts, and so on. Indeed, McGuire and Millman (1965), who found warning did not block persuasion, used issues that were relatively low in involvement, rather remote from the subject's day-to-day personal concerns (e.g., recognition of Cuba, or the difficulties of developing a cure for cancer).

Thus, the specific hypothesis tested in the present study was that warning and personal involvement would interact in producing attitude change. That is, warning was expected to reduce change under conditions of high personal involvement, and to facilitate change under conditions of low personal involvement. Both warning and personal involvement were experimentally manipulated.

METHOD

Eighty undergraduate females in an introductory psychology class at UCLA were randomly assigned in equal numbers to conditions in a 2×2 factorial combination of personal involvement and warning. After they filled out a "before" attitude measure, involvement and then warning were manipulated. All subjects then read the same persuasive communication and answered a final questionnaire.

Subjects met in groups of no more than six, which were heterogeneous with respect to experimental condition. The experimenter explained that the study was a replication of earlier experiments on the efficiency of reading versus listening, but dealt with material which would be important to subjects, in order to test some new learning theories. For this reason, the experimenter had gotten from his advisor proposals made by the Faculty Commission on Undergraduate Instruction. The experimenter then said,

In addition, we are curious about student opinion on these proposals. So, before I give you one of the proposals to read, could you fill in this short questionnaire and give us some indication of your reactions to the ideas discussed by the Commission.

The questionnaire contained nine items relevant to undergraduate academic life. Each was rated on a horizontal line 15 centimeters in length which was labelled with a standard 7-point agree-disagree scale. One item was later repeated to provide a measure of attitude change, while the others were filler items.

Subjects were then given a five-page booklet. The first page contained both the involvement and warning manipulations. The beginning paragraph on the first page emphasized the importance of the Commission. The second paragraph introduced the involvement manipulation. The high- and low-involvement conditions were intended to differ primarily in the extent to which the position advocated

in the persuasive communication would affect the subject personally. For high-involvement subjects the passage read,

The proposal which you will read has been endorsed by the Commission and will undergo testing in the spring of 1967. The test will consist of applying the proposal to one-half of the lower division and one-third of the upper division required courses in each department of Letters and Sciences.

Thus the test would begin a year later, and would be likely to affect all the subjects personally, coming when most were in their sophomore year. The comparable low-involvement passage read, "The proposal which you will read has been endorsed by the Commission and has a planned target date of 1978." Obviously this would be unlikely to affect even the subject's younger siblings.

Half of the subjects in each involvement condition were then warned of the position to be advocated by the communication. The third paragraph on the same page stated, "This particular proposal suggests the replacement of undergraduate professors in some courses with supervised teaching assistants." This was omitted for the no warning subjects.

Subjects were told not to go beyond this first page for 5 minutes. The delay was introduced because Freedman and Sears (1965) had found warning more effective in blocking influence when some time elapsed between warning and presentation of the communication. Subjects were told that the restriction was necessary so that everyone would begin reading together and the experiment could be standardized. In order to make a 5-minute delay seem reasonable, the bottom of the first page contained a short questionnaire with such innocuous items as, "Do you prefer a good book or a good speech?" The experimenter mentioned that the questions "will help us to understand reading-listening differences." Most subjects required 1-2 minutes to complete the first page. Since they were tested in individual partitioned cubicles, they then had to wait several minutes without being able to see or talk to other subjects, or read anything aside from this first page. This presumably provided an opportunity for effects of the warning to develop. At the end of 5 minutes subjects were instructed to read the proposal. Exposure time was standardized by having the subjects wait for the experimenter's signal (which was given when the entire group had finished reading) before going on to the final questions.

The proposal, titled "Replacement of Undergraduate Professors in some Courses with Supervised Teaching Assistants," was two pages long. It advocated the substitution of teaching assistants for undergraduate professors and presented several rather convincing arguments. The suggestion, though an extreme one, was plausible for two main reasons. The campus was in its last semester before changing to the quarter system, a change attended by much talk about massive educational reform. Also, the role of teaching assistants was being reevaluated

publicly by the university because of the so-called Berkeley riots and the associated complaints about undergraduate teaching. Informal postexperiment interviewing revealed little serious suspicion about the proposal.

The 14 items on the final questionnaire were of the same agree-disagree form as those on the initial questionnaire. Two items were included to check on the involvement manipulation: "I am very concerned with the issues discussed in the proposal," and "The use of teaching assistants matters to me personally." The main dependent variable, attitude change, was measured by repeating the same item given in the premeasure. And derogation of the communicator was measured with two items: "The Commission presented the major arguments for and against their proposal, and "The written proposal is heavily biased." These five items were embedded in nine filler items which dealt primarily with writing style.

All subjects appeared to accept the stated nature of the experiment. During postexperimental questioning, some subjects acknowledged recognizing similarities between the pre- and posttest, but no subject expressed suspicion that attitude change was the key measure.

RESULTS

The involvement manipulation successfully aroused feelings of concern in subjects under high-involvement conditions. An analysis of variance on the item regarding how much the issue concerned the subject yielded a significant main effect for involvement ($F = 5.10$, $df = 1/76$, $p < .05$). On the other check item, the high-involvement subjects indicated that the issue "mattered to them personally" to a greater extent, but the difference was not statistically significant. However, the two items together seem to indicate that the involvement manipulation was successful. Analysis of the "concern" item also revealed an unexpected interaction between involvement and warning ($F = 4.10$, $df = 1/76$, $p < .05$). The involvement manipulation was more ef-

fective under warning than no warning conditions, though no reversal occurred.

As predicted, warning produced more attitude change than no warning under low involvement, and less change than no warning under high involvement. This is shown in Table 1. The interaction was significant ($F = 7.00$, $df = 76$, $p < .01$) Warning had no significant main effect on attitude change.

Two incidental findings were something of a surprise. Attitude change was expected to be greater under low involvement than under high involvement. However, there was no significant difference. And derogation of the communicator was greater under low involvement than under high. An analysis of variance run on the summed ratings of the two derogation items yielded a significant main effect ($F = 4.22$, $df = 1/76$, $p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

The attitude-change findings support the interaction hypothesis that warning reduces change under high-involvement conditions and facilitates change under low-involvement conditions. The involvement manipulation had two unanticipated effects, however. There was no more attitude change under low involvement than under high involvement, and the communication was actually derogated significantly more under low involvement than under high.²

Although the crucial interaction prediction regarding attitude change corresponds to our own prediction, the unanticipated effects cast some doubt upon the rationale behind the central hypothesis of the study. That rationale was based upon the assumption that high involvement would increase resistance to change. Since it did not, alternative interpretations for the effects of this involvement manipulation must be considered. The effects of situationally manipulated involvement have often proved to be complex. For speculative purposes, let us here consider two possibilities, with the hope that they may pertain to involvement variations more generally.

² All three of these effects appear to be quite stable within these data. The entire experiment was first run with $n = 40$, then repeated with another 40 subjects. Each of these effects appeared in both sets of data.

TABLE 1

Condition	<i>M</i> attitude change		
	High involvement	Low involvement	Total
Warning	1.5	2.4	1.9
No warning	1.8	0.7	1.2
Effects of warning	-0.3	1.7	

Note.— $n = 20$ in each cell. The larger the score, the greater the amount of change in the advocated direction on a 16-point scale.

The simpler possibility is that the low-involvement subjects may have perceived the task (to read and evaluate a proposal) as similar to an academic exercise. In class exercises they have been trained to read and evaluate very critically new material that ordinarily affects them only remotely. In contrast, the task was not purely academic for the high-involvement subjects. It is possible that students are trained to invoke their critical faculties on material remote from their personal lives, and are less experienced in doing so for more personal issues. Greater personal involvement may thus be somewhat disorienting or distracting (Festinger & Mac-coby, 1964), and subjects' responses may be more erratic, sometimes appearing to be less discerning.

A more complex possibility proceeds from the observation that presentation of a shift in university policy resembles a *fait accompli* situation. The least painful way to respond to such shifts may be to accept the policy change, impute good intentions and wise reasoning to the policymakers, and invent rationalizations for their actions. In general, though, one would assume that such acceptance of a *fait accompli* depends on prior choice or on commitment to the responsible agency (Brehm & Cohen, 1962). These subjects were told of policy changes that would take place soon and that would affect them personally, under circumstances that would indicate that policy changes were beyond their control. Yet college students may well retain a sense of choice about their chosen institution, particularly when (as in the case of UC students) their academic records would have permitted them to entertain several other alternatives. This sense of choice would perhaps lead them to support and justify the institution's changes of policy, even though they might have no direct say in the changes themselves.

This reasoning ought to apply equally to all conditions, however, since choice of the institution should have been about equally common in all. Hence one would expect some tendency to try to justify the institution's actions in all conditions. And it should be accentuated in the warning conditions, according to our original reasoning about fore-

warning. This indeed is consistent with the findings of the low-involvement conditions: some positive change under no warning, and considerably more with advance warning, when presumably there was enough time to work out adequate rationalizations for this policy shift.

This simple reasoning is less satisfactory in accounting for the outcome under high involvement. But more dissonance ought to be created, given a foolish policy shift by an institution to which one is committed, when the shift has clear negative personal consequences. The immediate response might be to reduce dissonance by supporting the institution, as in Zimbardo's (1960) high-response-involvement conditions. Perhaps the extra time for thought provided by the forewarning clarifies the personal disadvantages of the new policy, with dissonance thus becoming so great that antagonism to the proposal begins to replace endorsement of it.

In short, according to this explanation, dissonance was created by the combination of commitment to the institution and learning of an apparently foolish policy shift by the institution. This was resolved in most cases by justifying and rationalizing the policy shift; that is, by positive attitude change. Attitude change occurred particularly when dissonance was mild (low involvement, and thus small likelihood of negative consequences to oneself personally) and with enough forewarning that appropriate rationalizations could be worked out. However, with extreme dissonance (high involvement, and enough forewarning to figure out the possible negative consequences for one's own personal life) the subject began to reject the proposal.

However plausible this rather complicated post hoc explanation, it is evident that personal involvement did not have the simple effects expected from it. Despite these complexities, it should be emphasized that the effects of warning on attitude change were as expected. The tangle of the many versions of "involvement" must remain for later research to unravel.

The other apparent quirk in the data was the greater success of the involvement manipulation in producing personal concern about the issue under forewarning than under

no warning conditions. Actually, this would be expected from the same reasoning that yielded the basic hypothesis of this study. Warning subjects learned several minutes earlier than no warning subjects the specific nature of the proposal which they had been told would affect them. The warning subjects, therefore, had more time to consider the implications of the proposal, and to become aware of the considerable change the proposal would make in their own relationships to the faculty. Forewarning thus probably does tend to rationalize the subject's response to new information. It gives him the time to deliberate, and to make a response consistent with his prior cognitions.

REFERENCES

- ALLYN, J., & FESTINGER, L. The effectiveness of unanticipated persuasive communications. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1961, **62**, 35-40.
- BREHM, J. W., & COHEN, A. R. *Explorations in cognitive dissonance*. New York: Wiley, 1962.
- DEAUX, K. K. Variations in warning, information preference, and anticipatory attitude change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1968, in press.
- FESTINGER, L., & MACCOBY, N. On resistance to persuasive communications. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1964, **68**, 359-366.
- FREEDMAN, J. L., & SEARS, D. O. Warning, distraction, and resistance to influence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1965, **1**, 262-266.
- KIESLER, C. A., & KIESLER, S. B. Role of forewarning in persuasive communications. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1964, **68**, 547-549.
- MCGUIRE, W. J. The current status of cognitive consistency theories. In S. Feldman (Ed.), *Cognitive consistency: Motivational antecedents and behavioral consequences*. New York: Academic Press, 1966.
- MCGUIRE, W. J., & MILLMAN, S. Anticipatory belief lowering following forewarning of a persuasive attack. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1965, **2**, 471-479.
- MCGUIRE, W. J., & PAPAGEORGIS, D. Effectiveness of forewarning in developing resistance to persuasion. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1962, **26**, 24-34.
- MILLER, N. Involvement and dogmatism as inhibitors of attitude change. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 1965, **1**, 121-132.
- MILLS, J. Opinion change as a function of the communicator's desire to influence and liking for the audience. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 1966, **2**, 152-159.
- 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.
- PAPAGEORGIS, D. Anticipation of exposure to persuasive messages and belief change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1967, **5**, 490-496.
- SEARS, D. O., FREEDMAN, J. L., & O'CONNOR, E. F., JR. The effects of anticipated debate and commitment on the polarization of audience opinion. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1964, **28**, 615-627.
- ZIMBARDO, P. G. Involvement and communication discrepancy as determinants of opinion change. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1960, **60**, 86-94.

(Received November 17, 1967)