

## Desire for Control and Reaction to Proattitudinal and Counterattitudinal Arguments

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*The role of motivation for control in an individual's reaction to persuasive arguments was examined. Subjects scoring either high or low on an individual difference measure of "desire for control" (DC) were exposed to a position on the Equal Rights Amendment with which they either initially agreed or disagreed. It was found that more often high-DC subjects exposed to a proattitudinal message changed their attitudes in the direction advocated than did low DC subjects. Conversely, more often low-DC subjects exposed to counterattitudinal arguments changed their attitudes in the direction of the advocated position than did high-DC subjects. The findings suggest that a motivation to control events may be operative in some attitude-change situations.*

Several investigators have proposed cognitive-motivational processes to account for attitude-change phenomena. Cognitive dissonance theory (cf. Festinger, 1957), for example, posits the existence of a motivation to bring certain dissonant cognitions into harmony through the alteration of one of those cognitions. Reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) maintains that individuals are motivated to reassert threatened freedoms by altering their

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attitudes in a direction opposite that of the threatening advocate. There also exists research indicating that attitude change reported by subjects in laboratory experiments may be influenced by an impression-management motive (Hass & Mann, 1976). That is, subjects may be motivated to report attitudes that they believe will yield the greatest amount of rewards in the setting.

Another cognitive source of motivation that may be related to attitude-change phenomena is the motivation to control the events in one's life. Several psychologists have theorized about the motivation for control. DeCharms (1968), for example, describes personal causation as man's "primary motivational propensity" (p. 269), and White (1959) suggests that much of man's behavior can be traced to an innate "effectance motivation." It seems reasonable to suggest that a situation in which one individual intentionally attempts to change the attitude of another is one condition in which the motivation for control is likely to be operative. An individual who is the target of a direct persuasive effort (e.g., a campaign speech) is aware that the persuader is attempting to manipulate his or her attitudes and feelings. Under such conditions a potential determinant of the persuader's effectiveness is the extent to which the target individual is willing to allow the other person to influence his or her attitudes. It can be suggested that the extent to which the target individual is motivated to control the source of his or her own attitudes is thus likely to play a role in how receptive the audience member is to the persuader's message.

One way a speaker might enhance the persuasiveness of his or her message, therefore, is to first lower the audience members' desire to control their own messages and/or to convince these persons that accepting these new attitudes is not tantamount to a lowering of one's personal control. Alternatively, a speaker might select certain audiences that differ along the desire for control dimension in order to increase his or her persuasiveness for that particular audience. It is this latter possibility that will be explored in the present investigation.

Recently, Burger and Cooper (1979) designed the Desirability of Control (DC) Scale to measure individual differences in the motivation to control the events in one's life. The DC scale is a 20-question instrument that presents general and specific examples of situations in which individuals might desire control. Subjects are asked to respond with the degree to which they feel each statement (e.g., "I prefer a job where I have a lot of control over what I do and when I do it") applies to them. The scale has been found to account for significant proportions of variance in learned helplessness, gambling, and hypnosis experiments as well as to display acceptable psychometric properties of internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and discriminant validity (Burger & Cooper, 1979).

If control motivation is operative in some attitude-change situations, then it is reasonable to expect subjects high and low in this motive to respond differently to attitude-change procedures. More specifically, it was reasoned that these persons would respond differently to arguments with which they initially agreed or disagreed. Persons high in the desire for control should be motivated to control the arguments presented and the attitudes generated (by themselves and others) on a controversial issue. The high-DC person presented with arguments advocating a position he or she initially disagrees with can be expected to be minimally persuaded by these arguments for two reasons. First, high-DC persons should be motivated to maintain a sense of control over their own attitudes and are therefore more likely to base their final attitudes on what they perceive as self-generated arguments, rather than allow themselves to be influenced by the arguments of others. Second, the high-DC person should find the counterattitudinal speaker threatening. The speaker seeks to influence persons to a viewpoint on an issue on which the high-DC person him- or herself would prefer to influence others in the opposite direction. In other words, in such a situation the high-DC person should sense that his/her control is being usurped or threatened. As such, the high-DC person should be motivated to reject the speaker's arguments.

On the other hand, high-DC persons who receive arguments advocating a position they already adhere to should perceive the arguments they use to arrive at their position as self-generated and should not feel as motivated to reject the advocate's arguments. Thus high-DC persons should perceive proattitudinal arguments as reinforcing and within their control. This should result in increased attention and acceptance of the arguments and hence the advocated position. Consequently, it is anticipated that high-DC persons will display greater attitude change in the direction of the advocate's position when presented with proattitudinal arguments than when presented with a counterattitudinal position.

Persons low in the desire for control can be expected to show the opposite pattern of attitude change. The motivation to control events should be minimally operative for these low-DC individuals. Without this motivational influence, the persuasiveness of the arguments should play a dominant role in determining the amount of attitude change. Low-DC subjects presented with arguments advocating the opposite viewpoint from that originally held should change their attitudes more than low-DC subjects presented with a viewpoint to which they already adhere. According to a persuasive-arguments interpretation of attitude change (e.g., Vinokur & Burnstein, 1974), subjects receiving the counterattitudinal arguments have a larger number of arguments from a broader range of viewpoints upon which to base their final attitudes than do subjects exposed

to only one (a like-minded) viewpoint. Low-DC subjects receiving counterattitudinal arguments should base their final attitudes upon both pro- and counterattitudinal arguments and should therefore show more attitude change toward the advocated position than do low-DC subjects receiving only proattitudinal arguments. This prediction thus contrasts with the prediction for high-DC subjects, for which the motivation for control interferes with the processing of the information.

Based upon the preceding theoretical notions, the following two hypotheses were tested: (1) High-DC persons presented with proattitudinal arguments should change their attitudes in the direction of the advocate's position more than will low-DC persons; (2) low-DC persons will alter their attitudes more when presented with counterattitudinal arguments than will high-DC persons.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Eighty-six undergraduates in four introductory communication classes served as subjects. Ten subjects had to be dropped from the study because they were not present for the second half of the experiment, leaving 76 subjects for the final analyses.

### *Procedure*

During the first experimental setting all subjects completed a questionnaire that inquired about the subject's opinions on several controversial issues of national importance. All items were answered on 9-point scales. Following this, subjects completed the Desirability of Control (DC) Scale (Burger & Cooper, 1979).

The item from the attitude questionnaire with responses best resembling a bimodal distribution was selected for the second part of the experiment. That item was "The Equal Rights Amendment should be added to the United States Constitution" ("strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"). Approximately 3 weeks after the initial contact, all subjects were given a copy of a three-page typed speech to read. The class instructor distributed the materials for both parts of the investigation and made no reference to the earlier data collection when presenting the materials for the second half of the study. To compare responses for the first and second

sessions, a space for the subject's name was provided on each of the questionnaires. All subjects provided this information.

It was explained to all subjects that the speech was written by a graduate student and that it was their task to read the speech carefully and answer some questions about it. In reality, two speeches were randomly distributed within each class. One speech strongly advocated the adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment while the other took a strong anti-ERA stand. An equal number of arguments were presented in each speech and care was taken to present arguments of approximately equal persuasiveness. After reading the speeches, subjects were presented first with an item phrased identically to the first session's item asking the extent to which they supported the ERA. This was followed by a series of 9-point items asking the extent to which the subject found the speech writer to be sincere, enthusiastic, biased, informed, offensive, prominent, persuasive, accurate, and interesting.

## RESULTS

Subjects were divided through a median-split method into high- and low-DC halves, based upon their scores on the DC Scale. In addition, subjects were divided through a median-split on their initial ERA attitudes. This latter division was combined with the pro- or anti-ERA speech variable to create an initially agree-initially disagree (with the speech position) variable. The results were thus analyzed within a 2 (DC level) by 2 (agree or disagree) design.<sup>2</sup> Later analyses revealed that neither the subject's initial position nor whether the subject received a pro- or anti-ERA speech alone affected the amount of attitude change found.

The most powerful statistical test that might be employed for the analysis of the final attitude measure is an analysis of covariance using the subject's initial attitude as the covariate. Unfortunately, while most subjects changed their ERA stands by two or fewer scale points, a few subjects reported postspeech positions several scale points different from their initial positions. These subjects' scores would therefore make the interpretation of the results of an analysis of covariance somewhat questionable. Rather than drop these subjects from the sample, it was decided

<sup>2</sup>Subjects reporting scores of 6 or higher on the initial attitude measure were placed in the anti-ERA category, while subjects with scores of 5 or less were placed in the pro-ERA category. Subjects scoring 105 or lower on the DC Scale were placed in the low-DC category, while subjects with scores of 106 or higher were placed in the high-DC category. When combined with the speech variable, the following cell sizes were created: high-DC, initially agree, 20; high-DC, initially disagree, 16; low-DC, initially agree, 20; low-DC, initially disagree, 20.

that a nonparametric test using the scores of all the subjects in the sample, while less powerful, would be a more appropriate statistical procedure.

Accordingly, the percentage of subjects within each of the four cells who reported some positive attitude change (the attitude reported during the second session was more in the direction advocated in the speech than it was on the initial measure) was calculated. These percentages are presented in Table I. Consistent with the analysis provided earlier, more high-DC than low-DC subjects were persuaded by the speech in the initially agree condition ( $\chi^2 = 3.96, p < .05$ ). Conversely, more low-DC than high-DC subjects were persuaded in the initially-disagree condition ( $\chi^2 = 4.05, p < .05$ ).

To aid in the interpretation of these findings, each of the ancillary measures was then subjected to a 2 (DC level) by (initially agree or disagree) analysis of variance. The results of these analyses found that subjects who initially agreed with the speech writer's viewpoint found the writer to be significantly more sincere [ $F(1,72) = 4.81, p < .03$ ], more enthusiastic [ $F(1,72) = 8.64, p < .004$ ] and more accurate [ $F(1,72) = 6.26, p < .01$ ] than did subjects who initially disagreed with the advocated position. No other main effects for the agree-disagree variable were found, and no main effects were found on any of the measures for the DC variable.

Four significant interactions emerged on the offensive [ $F(1,72) = 5.68, p < .02$ ], biased [ $F(1,72) = 4.81, p < .03$ ], persuasive [ $F(1,72) = 4.10, p < .05$ ], and prominent [ $F(1,72) = 4.70, p < .03$ ] measures. Results of subsequent Newman-Keuls tests revealed that subjects in the high DC-disagree condition viewed the speech writer as more offensive and more biased ( $p < .05$ ) and less persuasive ( $p < .10$ ) than did subjects in each of the other three conditions, which did not differ significantly from one another. In addition, subjects in the high DC-agree condition perceived the speech writer as more prominent ( $p < .05$ ) than did subjects in the other three conditions, which again did not differ significantly from one another.

Table I. Percentage of Subjects Changing Attitudes in the Direction of the Advocated Position

	Initially agree	Initially disagree
High-DC	50	31
Low-DC	20	65

## DISCUSSION

The results tend to support the notion that a motivation to control events may be operative in some attitude-change situations. Subjects found to be generally high in the motive for control were more often persuaded by a speech they initially agreed with than were low-DC subjects. Although the use of the nonparametric analyses restricts the interpretation of the results to the number of each type of person persuaded rather than to the amount to which persons were persuaded, this finding is consistent with the expectation that high-DC persons prefer to be in control of their own attitudes and will therefore resist influence attempts by others advocating a counterattitudinal position. That these high-DC subjects receiving counterattitudinal arguments found the speech writer to be more offensive, more biased, and less persuasive than did other subjects indicates that high-DC subjects were also motivated to reject the counterattitudinal arguments.

On the other hand, subjects found to be generally low in the motive for control were more likely to be persuaded by a speech with which they initially disagreed than were high-DC subjects. This finding is consistent with the expectation that, in the absence of a strong motivation for control, subjects would base their final attitudes on arguments consistent with their view as well as new arguments in conflict with their initial position. This finding was probably also influenced by a ceiling effect. It should be noted, however, that the potential for a ceiling effect was equally present for the high-DC subjects and therefore cannot account for the results.

While the present investigation dealt with general individual differences in the motive for control, the findings suggest that situational manipulations of this motive may also be effective in increasing or decreasing attitude change through persuasive messages. Manipulations that decrease the receiver's motivation for control of his or her attitudes or decrease the perception of overt influence, while increasing the perception of self-generated arguments, will probably lead to increases in attitude change.

In addition, the results of the present investigation suggest that a speaker may increase the effectiveness of his or her message by selecting audiences perceived to be composed of large numbers of high-DC persons who lean toward the advocated position or low-DC persons who initially disagree with the speaker. Thus the findings suggest the identification of a subset of the population that is potentially more susceptible to initially counterattitudinal messages than are the rest of those receiving such

messages. That is, individuals extremely low in the desire for control, who are also unexposed to the arguments held by the majority within the culture, may represent the "weak-willed" who are unable to resist conversion by initially counterattitudinal arguments from extreme political and religious leaders. Such speculation suggests a practical avenue for further investigation into the control motivation – attitude change link.

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