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On Being Influenced While Trying to Persuade : The Feedback Effect of Persuasion Outcomes on the Persuader

Radmila Prislin, Shanelle M. Boyle, Cory Davenport, Ashley Farley, Elizabeth Jacobs, John Michalak, Ken Uehara, Farsiar Zandian and Yishan Xu

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Abstract

In two studies, a persuader attempted to influence multiple targets (confederates) to take his or her position on an important social issue. As the persuader advocated his or her position, targets initially provided positive (negative) feedback that placed the persuader in the majority (minority). Subsequent feedback on the persuader's continuing advocacy either kept initially established status stable or reversed it (majority ↔ minority). Initial status and its stability interacted to affect persuaders' certainty, which in turn affected persuaders' efficacy assessed by coding persuaders' videotaped nonverbal behavior and strength of advocacy, respectively (Study 1). Coding and an independent audience's reactions to persuasive "blogs" created by persuaders whose initial status was kept (un)stable replicated the persuasive efficacy findings (Study 2). Thus, persuaders' ability to produce cogent messages is affected by the social context in which they operate.

Keywords

persuasion, source, social influence, majority, minority

It would be difficult to exaggerate the degree to which we are influenced by those we influence.

Eric Hoffer (1902–1983)

The bidirectionality of influence, obvious to Hoffer, has not received much attention in persuasion research. In a typical persuasion study, a persuader delivers a message to targets in an attempt to move them to the position advocated in the message. Targets' reactions are almost never revealed to the persuader, who, even if present, remains detached from the very same context that he or she tries to influence. In this research, we situate persuasive attempts in a social situation that involves multiple targets who provide feedback to the persuader. This feedback creates social structure within which the persuader continues to operate. Continuing interactions over time either maintain or change initial social structure formed when the persuader initially secures, or fails to secure, sufficient social support to claim the coveted majority position. We propose that these dynamic contextual factors that emerge from persuasive interactions should shape the subsequent persuasive attempts. Thus, we contextualize persuasion by examining two relevant but neglected factors in persuasion research: (a) the bidirectionality of influence, which should be evident in the persuader's responsiveness to targets' feedback, and (b) the dynamic nature of influence, which should be evident in reactions unfolding over time.

We propose that persuaders are just as sensitive to social support they receive while exerting influence as are their targets while responding to it. The power of social support in shaping targets' responses to persuasion has been richly documented in social psychological research (Prislin & Wood, 2005). For example, when embedded in supportive as opposed to incongruous social networks, targets are more confident of their attitudes (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 2000; Petrocelli, Tormala, & Rucker, 2007), more likely to resist persuasive attacks (Levitan & Visser, 2008; Visser & Mirabile, 2004), faster to express their opinions (Bassili, 2003), and more likely to act on them (Orive, 1988). Social support should also shape how persuasion is practiced. Even a cursory analysis of politicians, advertisers, proselytizers, and other sage practitioners of persuasion reveals their sensitivity to the social context in which they operate (e.g., Buchanan, 1995; Jowett & O'Donnell, 1992). Yet there is little empirical evidence in persuasion research for persuaders' sensitivity to the social context.

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In a rare experimental demonstration of persuaders' sensitivity to the feedback provided by targets, Cialdini, Green, and Rusch (1992) documented that persuaders whose targets yielded to their advocacy reciprocated by accepting their targets' subsequent advocacy on a new topic. In contrast, those whose targets resisted their earlier persuasive attempts rejected their target's subsequent advocacy. A stronger tendency to reciprocate yielding than resistance suggested that reciprocal agreement may have been driven by impression management (see also Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Leippe & Elkin, 1987; Lundgren & Prislin, 1998). More recently, Prislin, Limbert, and Bauer (2000) demonstrated that targets' feedback could shape not only persuaders' attitudes but also attitude strength. Specifically, persuaders who received positive feedback from their initially unyielding targets strengthened their attitudes, attaching more importance to their preferred attitudinal position and rejecting a wide range of others. Those who received negative feedback from their initially yielding targets widened the scope of acceptable positions, eventually moving away from their originally preferred attitudinal position. This pattern of results nicely illustrates the dynamic nature of persuaders' reactions, which vary according to the feedback they receive from their targets. More important for the purpose of this study, the observed changes in persuaders' attitudinal reactions suggest that persuaders' continuing advocacy may be shaped by their targets' feedback to their initial advocacy.

We propose that persuaders' certainty and their subsequent efficacy should vary with fluctuations in their targets' feedback. We hypothesize that to the extent that they receive positive feedback, persuaders should become certain about the position they advocate and, in turn, able to generate compelling persuasive arguments. The hypothesized boost in certainty in response to targets' positive feedback (yielding), and conversely a decrease in certainty in response to targets' negative feedback (resistance), is grounded in research showing that social support for an advocated position signals that the position is valid (e.g., Festinger, 1950), socially acceptable (e.g., Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), or both. Moreover, effecting persuasion may boost persuaders' certainty just as resisting persuasion boosts targets' certainty about their attitudinal position (Tormala & Petty, 2002). Certainty, in turn, should facilitate production of arguments in support of the advocated position. Other things being equal, the more certain persuaders are, the more efficient they should be in generating compelling arguments for their position.

The hypothesized effect of targets' feedback on persuaders' certainty and persuasive efficacy was tested in a study in which targets' initial feedback placed persuaders in the majority or in the minority in terms of acceptance of their advocacy. Subsequent feedback on the persuaders' continuing advocacy kept initially established persuaders' status stable or reversed it (majority \leftrightarrow minority). Persuaders' certainty and their efficacy were assessed by coding their nonverbal behavior and strength of advocacy, respectively (Study 1). Study 2 assessed efficacy by coding persuasive messages created by persuaders whose initial status was kept (un)stable and by measuring attitude change in an independent audience presented with these messages.

Experiment I

Method

Participants. Participants were 155 undergraduates (78 women, 77 men). They were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions of the 2 (persuaders' initial status: majority vs. minority) \times 2 (stability of initial status: stable vs. changed) design.

Procedure. In each session, one participant and three confederates engaged in a mock political campaign. A total of 17 confederates, extensively trained to act naturally, were assigned to participate in experimental sessions based on their class schedules. This resulted in all confederates participating in all conditions. In an ostensibly random procedure, the participant was selected to play the role of a political candidate and the confederates took the part of voters. The candidate's task was to persuade voters to adopt his or her position on 10 important social issues. In preparation for the campaign, the candidate first indicated his or her position on the campaign issues by answering a short questionnaire. Next, the candidate was invited to go through the issues one at a time, declaring his or her position and offering a few strong reasons for this position. Each time the candidate declared his or her position, the voters communicated their feedback, verbally (dis)agreeing with the candidate's advocacy. It was explained that voters' responses provided feedback to the candidate much like that provided in a real political campaign. Following the last round, the voters and the candidate cast their ballots to decide whether to elect the candidate by a simple majority vote.

The confederate responded to the candidates' statements in a pre-scripted manner that afforded the candidates majority or minority status. To establish *initial majority (minority) status*, two (none) of the three confederates agreed with the participant on the first 5 advocacy rounds. In the *stable conditions*, this 3:1 (1:3) ratio was maintained for all 10 advocacy rounds. In the *change conditions*, two confederates switched from agreeing (disagreeing) to disagreeing (agreeing) in the 6th through the 10th round, thereby changing initial status (majority \leftrightarrow minority) for the participant. After the vote, the participant completed a questionnaire that assessed the efficacy of independent variable manipulations.

With participants' permission, all sessions were videotaped and later coded for certainty and persuasive efficacy. Assessment of certainty required criteria that are valid, nonreactive, and nontautological in that they were observable independent of persuasive efficacy. These requirements excluded the use of self-reports about attitude certainty. Rather, we assessed it indirectly by relying on nonverbal indicators of self-certainty or the sense of confidence about one's general competence and abilities. This indirect measure was chosen based on previous research showing that variations in attitude certainty as a function of social support translate in variations in self-certainty (Clarkson, Tormala, DeSensi, & Wheeler, 2009). Two independent coders assessed the following nonverbal behaviors previously established as indicative of (lack of) self-certainty:

Table 1. Certainty and Persuasive Efficacy as a Function of Persuader's Initial Status and Its Stability (Study 1)

	Initial majority				Initial minority			
	Stable ($n = 42$)		Changed ($n = 38$)		Stable ($n = 37$)		Changed ($n = 38$)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Initial certainty	0.11	0.82	0.12	0.76	-0.09	0.85	-0.14	0.95
Final certainty	0.50	0.59	-0.32	0.80	-0.54	0.92	0.37	0.85
Initial persuasive efficacy	2.64	1.10	2.63	1.12	2.00	1.22	1.97	1.22
Final persuasive efficacy	2.50	1.11	1.87	1.07	1.32	1.31	2.58	1.29

Note: Higher numbers indicate higher certainty and higher efficacy.

self-manipulations or motions of two parts of the body in contact with each other (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993; Timney & London, 1973), object manipulations or motions of a part of the body in contact with an object, with action primarily on the object (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993; Ekman, 1977), and speech disturbances (Manusov, 2005; Marsh, Hart-O'Rourke, & Julka, 1997). Two additional coders assessed persuasive efficacy, relying on verbal behaviors previously established as indicative of the criterion: clarity with which persuaders advocated their position (Baron, 1965; Hamilton, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1990) and strength of their arguments (Johnson, Smith-McLallen, Killea, & Levine; 2004; Stiff, 1986). All behaviors were coded twice: once during participants' fifth advocacy round that established their initial status and again during their last advocacy round that established their final status. Intraclass correlations (.80–1.00) showed satisfactory agreement between coders. Coders were blind to experimental conditions as confederates' responses were edited out of each session.

Measures

Certainty. Lack of certainty was assessed by coding object manipulations, self-touches, and speech disturbances. Standardized scores on these indicators were averaged into an index of (a) initial (Time 1, $\alpha = .73$) and (b) final certainty (Time 2, $\alpha = .70$). For ease of interpretation, certainty scores were recoded so that higher numbers indicate higher certainty.

Persuasive efficacy. Persuasive efficacy was assessed on a 5-point scale (0 = *not at all effective*, 4 = *extremely effective*). This was a single measure reflecting the coders' assessment of both clarity and strength of persuasive advocacy.

Manipulation checks. The effectiveness of initial status and its subsequent stability (change) was evaluated by having participants indicate on a 9-point scale (-4 = *not at all*, 4 = *very much*) the extent to which others in the experimental session agreed with their advocacy at the beginning and at the end of the session, respectively.

Results

Manipulation Checks

Initial status. As intended, participants in the initial majority condition ($M = 2.87$) perceived significantly stronger initial

agreement with their advocacy than those in the initial minority condition ($M = -3.30$), $F(1, 151) = 2480.35$, $p < .001$.

Stability of initial status. The Initial Status \times Stability interaction effect on the estimates of agreement with the participant at the end of the session proved significant, $F(1, 151) = 829.30$, $p < .001$. As intended, participants in the stable condition perceived significantly stronger final agreement when they were initially in the majority ($M = 2.98$) than minority ($M = -3.24$), $t(151) = 19.00$, $p < .001$. Participants in the change condition perceived significantly stronger final agreement when they were initially in the minority ($M = 2.79$) than majority ($M = -2.84$), $t(151) = 19.18$, $p < .001$. In addition, participants in the initial majority condition perceived significantly stronger final agreement when their status remained stable than when it changed, $t(151) = 19.82$, $p < .001$, whereas the reverse was found for participants in the initial minority condition, $t(151) = 20.41$, $p < .001$.

No other effect was statistically significant.

Certainty. A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (initial status \times stability of initial status \times time of measurement of certainty) mixed model ANOVA with time of measurement as a within-subject variable yielded a significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 151) = 31.68$, partial $\eta^2 = .17$, $p < .001$ (Table 1). This interaction was further analyzed within each level of the initial status variable.

Initial majority. A significant Stability of Initial Status \times Time of Measurement interaction, $F(1, 78) = 17.91$, partial $\eta^2 = .19$, $p < .001$, indicated an increase in certainty over time among participants consistently in the majority, $t(151) = 2.55$, $p < .01$, but a decrease among participants who went from majority to minority, $t(151) = -2.74$, $p < .01$. Although there was no significant difference in certainty at Time 1, $t(151) = 0.06$, *ns*, at Time 2, participants consistently in the majority were significantly more certain than those who went from majority to minority, $t(151) = -5.23$, $p < .001$.

Initial minority. A significant Stability of Initial Status \times Time of Measurement interaction, $F(1, 73) = 14.36$, partial $\eta^2 = .16$, $p < .001$, indicated a decrease in certainty among participants consistently in the minority, $t(151) = -2.76$, $p < .01$, but an increase in certainty among participants who went from

minority to majority, $t(151) = 3.17, p < .001$. Although there was no significant difference in certainty at Time 1, $t(151) = -0.31, ns$, at Time 2 participants who went from minority to majority were significantly more certain than participants consistently in the minority, $t(151) = 5.62, p < .001$.

Persuasive Efficacy. A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (initial status \times stability of initial status \times time of measurement of persuasive efficacy) mixed model ANOVA with time of measurement as a within-subject variable yielded a significant main effect of time of measurement, $F(1, 151) = 4.53$, partial $\eta^2 = .03, p < .05$, which was qualified by a significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 151) = 17.17$, partial $\eta^2 = .10, p < .001$ (Table 1). This interaction was further analyzed within each level of the initial status variable.

Initial majority. A significant main effect of time of measurement, $F(1, 73) = 9.12$, partial $\eta^2 = .11, p < .01$, was qualified by a significant Stability of Initial Status \times Time of Measurement interaction, $F(1, 78) = 4.28$, partial $\eta^2 = .05, p < .05$. Further analysis revealed no significant change in persuasive efficacy over time among participants consistently in the majority, $t(151) = 0.64, ns$, but a significant decrease among participants who went from majority to minority, $t(151) = 3.28, p < .001$. Although there was no significant difference in persuasive efficacy at Time 1, $t(151) = 0.06, ns$, at Time 2 participants consistently in the majority were significantly more persuasive than those who went from majority to minority, $t(151) = 4.02, p < .001$.

Initial minority. A significant Stability of Initial Status \times Time of Measurement interaction, $F(1, 73) = 13.43$, partial $\eta^2 = .16, p < .001$, indicated a decrease in persuasive efficacy among participants consistently in the minority, $t(151) = 2.90, p < .001$, but an increase in persuasive efficacy among participants who went from minority to majority, $t(151) = -2.64, p < .01$. Although there was no significant difference in efficacy at Time 1, $t(151) = 0.19, ns$, at Time 2 participants who went from minority to majority were significantly more persuasive than those who were consistently in the minority, $t(151) = 7.79, p < .001$.

Mediational Analysis. To examine whether the effect of initial status and its stability over time affect certainty, which in turn affects persuasive efficacy, first difference scores in the two outcome variables were calculated (e.g., Δ certainty = final certainty – initial certainty). Next, regression analyses testing mediated moderation were performed as recommended by Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt (2005). These analyses revealed that the Initial Status \times Stability interaction, from the set of predictors that also included lower terms, predicted changes in persuasiveness, $B = .51, t(151) = 4.14, p < .001$, as well as changes in certainty, $B = .41, t(151) = 5.63, p < .001$. When changes in certainty were added to the original predictors, their predictive contribution emerged significant, $B = .30, t(151) = 2.00, p < .05$, whereas the contribution of the interaction term was reduced,

$B = .39, t(151) = 3.01, p < .01$. The reduction proved significant, $z = 2.46, p = .01$.

Discussion

These findings demonstrate that persuaders were highly sensitive to the feedback they received from their targets. Initial positive feedback made persuaders certain, whereas initial negative feedback made persuaders doubtful about their advocacy. These initially established levels of certainty changed with fluctuations in targets' support for persuaders' advocacy. Certainty increased with continual support but decreased with loss of initially secured support. A detrimental effect of targets' negative responses was particularly evident among persuaders who never secured majority support for their advocacy. They increasingly resorted to verbal "crutches" (e.g., *umm, err*), "playing" with objects (e.g., pens), and self-touches (e.g., scratching), indicating that their certainty plummeted with the continual rejection of their advocacy. However, when initially rejected persuaders managed to win their targets' support, their certainty soared. Their metamorphosis from doubtful to certain was remarkable with several of these increasingly successful persuaders trying to continue their advocacy even after they won the campaign.

These variations in persuaders' certainty translated into variations in persuasive efficacy. Apparently, securing social support for their advocacy gave persuaders the certainty to generate compelling arguments for their position. The facilitating effect of social support was especially remarkable among initially rejected persuaders who eventually won over their targets. These persuaders' difficult to earn social capital paid high dividends as they became increasingly efficient in their advocacy. Notably, consistently supported persuaders did not become significantly more convincing over time. Rather, they maintained their relatively high initial persuasive efficacy. It is possible that these persuaders did not consider it necessary to invest additional effort into perfecting their already successful advocacy. In contrast to these persuaders, those who were consistently rejected, as well as persuaders who went from majority to minority, lost much of their persuasive efficacy over time. In what appears a vicious circle of persuasive failure, these persuaders became decreasingly convincing in their advocacy with increasingly negative feedback they received. This pattern of findings suggests that persuasiveness is socially regulated.

Experiment 2

It could be argued that in spite of their instructions, coders of persuasiveness in Study 1 took into account not only strength of argumentation but also readily available indicators of persuaders' certainty. To rule out the possibility that the observed variations in persuasiveness were because of the factors other than argument strength, it was important to replicate the findings in a setting devoid of cues about persuaders' certainty. In Study 2, persuasive messages generated by sources whose initial majority (minority) status remained (un)stable were evaluated for persuasive efficacy by (a) two

Table 2. Persuasive Efficacy as a Function of Persuader's Initial Status and Its Stability (Study 2)

	Initial majority			Initial minority		
	Baseline short session (n = 23)	Stable long session (n = 23)	Changed long session (n = 24)	Baseline short session (n = 20)	Stable long session (n = 21)	Changed long session (n = 22)
M	2.67	2.71	1.41	1.71	1.07	2.63
SD	0.84	0.96	0.93	0.81	0.73	0.90

Note: Higher numbers indicate higher efficacy.

independent coders and (b) naïve targets whose reactions constituted a measure of persuasiveness.

Method

In a procedure similar to Study 1, 133 participants acting as political candidates advocated their position on an important social issue. They were randomly assigned to one of the following six experimental conditions: In the *initial majority (minority) condition*, participants received positive (negative) feedback from four of the five confederates acting as voters. This pattern of feedback remained *stable* or was *reversed* halfway through the interaction. After completing their “campaign” among the confederates, participants wrote a blog on the same issue ostensibly to convince an online audience. They also answered questions assessing manipulation efficiency. In contrast to these participants in the “long” sessions, participants in the “short” sessions wrote a blog after having been initially placed in the majority (minority). These short sessions, which ended after participants completed their blogs, served to establish a baseline against which the long sessions were compared.

Persuasive efficacy was assessed in two ways: (a) Two independent coders (.91) rated each blog on a 5-point scale (0 = *not as effective*, 4 = *extremely effective*). In addition, (b) an independent sample of 133 participants evaluated the blogs created in the long (90) and short (43) sessions. Each participant read a blog and indicated how much he or she (dis)agreed with it and would (not) vote for the author (0 = *not at all*, 4 = *very much*). Participants' responses ($r = .80$) were averaged into an index of persuasive efficacy.

Results

Manipulation Checks

Initial status. A 2 (initial status: majority vs. minority) \times 2 (long vs. short sessions) ANOVA revealed only a significant main effect of initial status, $F(1, 129) = 215.85, p < .001$. Participants in the majority conditions ($M = 2.22$) perceived significantly stronger initial agreement with their advocacy than those in the minority conditions ($M = -2.81$).

Stability of initial status. Within the long sessions, the Initial Status \times Stability interaction effect on the estimates of final agreement, $F(1, 86) = 397.93, p < .001$, revealed that participants in the stable condition perceived significantly stronger

final agreement when they were initially in the majority ($M = 2.45$) than minority ($M = -2.46$), $t(86) = 13.25, p < .001$. Participants in the change condition perceived significantly stronger final agreement when they were initially in the minority ($M = 2.64$) than majority ($M = -3.10$), $t(86) = 15.49, p < .001$. In addition, participants in the initial majority condition perceived significantly stronger final agreement when their status remained stable than when it changed $t(86) = 14.97, p < .001$, whereas the reverse was found for participants in the initial minority condition, $t(86) = 13.76, p < .001$.

No other effect was statistically significant. These findings indicate that independent variables were successfully manipulated.

Persuasive Efficacy. A 2 (initial status: majority vs. minority) \times 3 (stability of initial status: baseline vs. stable vs. changed) \times 2 (assessment of persuasive efficacy: coding vs. naïve targets' reactions) ANOVA revealed no significant main or interactive effect of type of assessment. Thus, all subsequent analyses were collapsed across this variable.

A significant main effect of initial status, $F(1, 127) = 9.00$, partial $\eta^2 = .07, p < .01$, was qualified by a significant Initial Status \times Stability interaction, $F(2, 127) = 33.13$, partial $\eta^2 = .34, p < .001$ (Table 2). Looking at the initial majority condition first, there was no significant difference between the baseline and stable conditions, $t(127) = 0.16, ns$; however, both differed significantly from the change condition, $t(127) = 4.96$ and 3.61 for the baseline and stable conditions, respectively, $ps < .001$. Thus, persuasive efficacy remained unchanged after a prolonged support; however, it decreased significantly with loss of support. Looking at the initial minority condition, there was a significant difference between the baseline and stable conditions, $t(127) = 2.35, p < .05$, both of which differed significantly from the change condition, $t(127) = 3.42$ and 5.88 for the baseline and stable conditions, respectively, $ps < .001$. Thus, persuasive efficacy decreased significantly after a prolonged rejection; however, it increased significantly with gain of support. Additional analyses revealed a significantly higher persuasive efficacy among initial majority than minority in the baseline condition, $t(127) = 3.61, p < .001$, and the stable condition, $t(127) = 6.25, p < .05$; however, the reverse was true in the change condition, $t(127) = -4.75, p < .001$.

Discussion

Study 2 replicated Study 1's findings, showing that variations in social support for persuaders' advocacy significantly affected

their subsequent persuasiveness, decreasing it with consistent failure to secure social support and with loss of initially secured support but increasing it as persuaders turned their initial opponents into supporters. Interestingly, the persuasiveness of the sources newly in the majority (minority → majority) and those in the baseline majority condition was comparable, $t(43) = 0.15$, ns. This suggests that gaining social support after initial rejection leveled the field but did not bring any additional benefit beyond that observed in the baseline condition.

Importantly, Study 2 replicated the findings from Study 1 under conditions that provided no information about persuaders' certainty. This indicates that variations in persuasiveness reflected differences in judgments about argument strength rather than differences in perception of persuaders' certainty. It is worth mentioning that this conclusion is supported equally by coders' evaluations and naïve targets' reactions to persuasive messages. Thus, fluctuations in social support among one audience could result in marked differences in a persuader's ability to convince an independent audience.

General Discussion

Our duo of studies provides strong evidence for social regulation of persuasive efficacy. The ability of persuaders to generate compelling arguments is powerfully determined by social responses to their advocacy. Consistent social acceptance of their advocacy boosts persuaders' certainty and maintains their ability to generate cogent arguments. However, when initial social acceptance is followed by rejection, the effect is damaging: Persuaders lose their certainty and in turn become decreasingly efficient in their advocacy.

If losing social support is damaging, never securing it is debilitating. When faced with consistent rejection of their advocacy, persuaders' certainty plummets, resulting in an inefficient advocacy. Yet rejection need not be paralyzing. When persuaders manage to turn initial rejection into acceptance, they show a surge in certainty that enables them to create increasingly compelling arguments.

The powerful effect of social acceptance and rejection in regulation of persuasive efficacy is evident not only in the judgments of trained raters but also in the responses of naïve targets. Our convergent evidence suggests that our findings might generalize beyond laboratory to more naturalistic interactions between persuaders and targets. For example, one of the authors recently observed an advocate of a new neighborhood development struggle to convince initially unyielding community member about its benefits. It was not until a few community members signaled their willingness to accept the development that the advocate turned into an orator whose arguments went beyond those listed in a handout. The increasing community support appeared to make the advocate more persuasive. Most likely, the strength of his messages and the size of the community support were codependent, mutually influencing each other. Our research highlights the relative nature of the persuader–target designation in this and many other “real-life” interactions.

Our findings have important implications for research on persuasion and social influence. The ability to generate a persuasive message is typically thought of as an internal characteristic of a persuader. The persuader generates persuasive arguments whose strength presumably depends on the persuader's knowledge, expertise in the subject matter, understanding of the influence strategies, or another individual difference variable. Our findings document that, other things being equal, it is the social feedback to persuaders' advocacy that powers the strength of their argument. Positive feedback appears to make persuaders “smart.” Notably, positive feedback from initially hard to reach targets appears to make persuaders “smarter” over time. On the other hand, negative feedback, from all targets uniformly, devastates persuaders' ability to generate a compelling message. Persuasiveness, therefore, appears to emerge from interactions between persuaders and their targets.

Interactions and the resultant persuasiveness evolve over time. Most persuasion studies, however, adopt the “snapshot” approach. This approach limits persuasiveness to a single point in time. A typical persuasion study involves a one-time delivery of a persuasive message, followed by a one-time assessment of targets' reactions that are never revealed to the persuader. Influence, as currently conceived in persuasion research, is static and asymmetrical. However, when examined over time, influence necessarily becomes dynamic and reciprocal (Mason, Conrey, & Smith, 2007). Our research begins to document the reciprocity of influence by showing that targets' reactions feed back to affect persuaders' subsequent advocacy. It is possible that other aspects of persuaders' functioning are also sensitive to targets' feedback. For example, persuaders' choice of influence strategies, their perseverance in implementing them, and their motivation to reach new targets may significantly depend on the feedback from their current targets. Only by adopting a temporal approach can future studies address these issues.

In addition to their relevance for research on persuasion, our findings also have implications for a broader field of social influence. This field has richly documented that numerical size plays an important role in influence, with majorities more likely to influence minorities than vice versa (Wood, Lundgren, Ouellette, Busceme, & Blackstone, 1994). The power of majorities to influence originates, among others, from their ability to satisfy targets' informational needs (Asch, 1952; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). When targets seek to understand reality, they are likely to yield to the majority presumably because a socially shared position serves as an argument for reality (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Our findings suggest majorities are able to influence not only because they have social support as an argument but also because social support enables them to generate convincing arguments.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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