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Internalization of conflict and attitude change

JUAN ANTONIO PÉREZ* and
JUAN MANUEL FALOMIR
University of Valencia

and

GABRIEL MUGNY
University of Geneva

Abstract

In a 2 x 2 x 2 design, eighty smokers were exposed to an anti-smoking appeal attributed either to an expert source (superior status) or a minority source (inferior status). Subjects were either allowed or not to smoke during the experiment. In addition subjects had to memorize part of the appeal and a recall task either followed after reading the appeal (completed task) or not (uncompleted task). The results show that the expert source produces more attitude change than the minority when the tension induced by the source is weakened (either by the opportunity to smoke or task completion). In contrast the minority has more impact when subjects are not able to smoke or when the task is not completed, which is to say when the conflict has been internalized. An explanation of these effects is offered in terms of the more defensive forms of resistance involved with respect to sources of superior status compared to more assertive forms with respect to minorities.

INTRODUCTION

Several authors have taken the view that the influence of superior status sources such as majorities or those with high credibility derives from a different process to that involved when the source has inferior status as, for example, when it is a minority (Levine and Russo, 1987; Maass and Clark, 1984). According to this point of view superior status sources influence in terms of a process of social comparison centring the attention of the target on his or her relation with the source and

*Address for correspondence: Juan Antonio Pérez, Facultad de Psicología, Universidad de Valencia, Av. Blasco Ibáñez, 21, E-46100 Valencia, Spain.

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activating a convergent form of thought which leads the target of influence either to conform to the majority response (Moscovici and Personnaz, 1980) or to centre its cognitive activity around the majority (Nemeth, 1986; Legrenzi, Butera, Mugny and Perez, 1991). In contrast the positive influence of minority sources depends upon a process of validation consisting of a greater centration on the content of responses (Moscovici and Personnaz, 1980) and a divergent functioning (Nemeth, 1986) which leads the target to a constructive integration of minority viewpoints (Mugny and Perez, 1991). Latent changes arise from the impossibility of resolving the conflict induced by a minority on the overt or relational level. A key idea is thus that of the internalization of conflict which induces a greater cognitive salience to the contents of the minority position.

However, it is necessary to recognize that empirical verification of this process of validation is limited and measures of the existence of the process itself are rare, not withstanding the demonstrations by Guillon and Personnaz (1983) and Tesser, Campbell and Mickler (1983) that differing degrees of attention are accorded to the contents of majority and minority sources respectively. It remains to be determined whether a superior source can produce the same type of influence as a minority source if targets can be induced to engage in a process of validation, this being understood as an intense focus on the arguments in a message. It is not possible on the basis of previous studies to decide whether the difference between sources derives solely from the fact that one focuses more on the source and the other more on the message content. To determine this it would be necessary to equalize the degree of attention given to the arguments in a message. If the difference is due to different socio-cognitive processes, the influence of sources of different status should continue to differ.

How can the degree of attention given to the arguments of a particular source be made to vary and correspondingly how can the same degree of attention be induced to content deriving from sources of different status? One solution to this problem could be provided by the Zeigarnik (1927) effect according to which an uncompleted task creates a state of tension and a need to complete the task (Lewin, 1935). This furnishes the methodological possibility of increasing the degree of attention given to a persuasive message, psychologically rendering its content more salient. In effect, when the task is completed tension should reduce; when it is interrupted the system remains in a state of tension such that the subject's attention continues to be centred on the task and the subject remains ready to take it up again.

The question of the influences of minority versus high status sources can also be approached from the point of view of relational stress. In order to explain the modes of thought induced by these different kinds of source, it has been argued (Maass, 1987; Nemeth, 1986) that opposition to a majority entails more arousal than opposition to a minority, and this impedes influence. Performance is better at intermediate levels of arousal (Yerkes and Dodson, 1908). Within the framework of the paradigm which we employed with regard to smoking, we manipulated degree of tension/arousal by allowing or forbidding subjects, who were all smokers, to smoke during the experimental session.

If the Zeigarnik procedure centres the target's attention on the arguments contained in a persuasive message and increases arousal independently of the status of the source, our prediction is that this should favour minority influence rather than the influence of a high status source, in so far as the former supposes the internalization

of conflict and the latter its relaxation. Similarly, it is expected that the option of smoking reduces the tension associated with a high status source and increases its impact, while it should counteract the impact of a minority.

METHOD

Experimental design

In a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ design, smokers were exposed to an anti-smoking appeal attributed either to an expert source (high status) or to a minority source (low status). Subjects either were or were not given the option of smoking during the experiment. In addition subjects had to memorize a part of the appeal, and the recall task was either introduced immediately after reading the appeal (completed task) or right at the end of the experiment (uncompleted task).

Subjects

The experiment was carried out with 80 smokers (55 females and 25 males), 10 to each condition. All were students attending a Spanish university; their average age was around 21 years. On the average they smoked 15 cigarettes a day. Subjects participated in groups of four, all subjects in the same group being in the same smoking (permitted versus not) and task completion (completed versus uncompleted) condition but in each group the text given to two subjects was attributed to the expert source while that given to the other two was attributed to the minority source.

Pretest

Subjects began by indicating their age, identity, number of cigarettes consumed per day, how long they had been smokers (in months), number of attempts at giving up smoking (and how long any successful attempts had lasted), and the strength of their intention to stop smoking on a seven-point scale.

Persuasive message and sources

Subjects then read an anti-smoking message attributed to a group of professors of political economy (high status, expert source) or to militant members of a minority group (low status source). The text was presented as recently published in the 'letters to the editor' column of a national periodical. The message (*cf.* Perez and Mugny, 1992) consisted of a strong attack on smoking/tobacco poisoning and was based on several socio-economic arguments. The following four extracts are illustrative: 'the smoker does not smoke because of an natural need for tobacco. He smokes because a false need has been created in him'; 'the smoker purely and simply enters into the game of the tobacco industry and advertising, and ends up being a veritable accomplice'; 'the smoker's freedom is an illusion. It is obvious that to smoke is none other than to enter into the mesh of a vicious circle of production-marketing-

consumption': 'it is necessary to increase the duty on tobacco to such a degree that it becomes totally dissuasive'.

Uncompleted versus completed task

After reading the text, subjects were presented with a new copy of the text on which four fundamental arguments against tobacco (see above) were underlined. Subjects were given two minutes to memorize these fully and at the end of this time the texts were retrieved. The experimenter then had the subjects wait in silence for four minutes and with nothing to do under the pretext of studying the relation between forgetting and the time elapsing after having learned something. The objective was to make salient the task of memorizing the arguments while also creating a certain tension by delaying the recall task. After this waiting period half the subjects were given a blank sheet on which to write down the content of the four arguments they had been asked to memorize (completed task); the other half were not given the opportunity at this point of writing down the arguments (uncompleted task).

Possibility of smoking

At the start of the experiment, half the subjects were given the opportunity of smoking, ashtrays being placed on the tables to encourage them. All the subjects in this condition did in fact smoke during the course of the experiment. For the other half, nothing was said about the possibility of smoking and the ashtrays were removed beforehand. If the question was raised or someone was on the point of lighting a cigarette, subjects were simply informed that so far as it was known smoking was not permitted in this area, pointing out the 'No smoking' signs posted on the walls in the area of the experiment (these notices were removed for the other condition). No subject in this condition did in fact smoke during the experiment.

Dependent variables

Subjects answered several questions on the memorization task and then 20 items on the theme of tobacco among which was embedded the key question measuring again the intention to stop smoking (on a seven-point scale). As in our previous studies (Pérez and Mugny, 1992) we focus in the results upon changes in expressed intention to stop smoking between pre-test and post-test. In addition subjects were asked to describe the authors of the anti-tobacco text in terms of various seven-point bipolar scales.

RESULTS

Image of the source

As regards perception of the source, it emerged that when the source was presented as expert it was perceived as more scientific, majority, expert, representative, integrated, realist and coherent than when it was presented as a minority (all differences, $p < 0.05$).

Psychological effect of completed versus uncompleted task

The manipulation of this variable seemed to have functioned as expected. Thus, more subjects thought they remembered the content to be memorized in the uncompleted task conditions ($m = 56.57$ per cent) than in the completed task conditions ($m = 43.92$ per cent; $F(1/72) = 5.419$, $p < 0.03$). More of them also tended to think they had made an effort to recall in the uncompleted task conditions ($m = 55.35$ per cent) than the completed task conditions ($m = 44.88$ per cent; $F(1/72) = 3.488$, $p < 0.07$). The psychological state resulting from the uncompleted task is thus that of a greater tension and more attention given to content.

Change in intention to stop smoking

Changes in intention to stop smoking between pre- and post-test were subjected to a square root transformation in order to give less weight to some extreme changes which appeared. The means thus adjusted are given in Table 1. A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVA produced two significant interactions. The first was between the identity of the source and the opportunity to smoke or lack of it during the experiment ($F(1/72) = 6.216$, $p < 0.02$). It appeared that when subjects could smoke the minority lost all the impact it had when subjects could not smoke (m s respectively -0.29 and $+0.45$; $t = 2.563$, $df = 72$, $p < 0.02$). Matters were different for the expert source which had more impact ($m = +0.38$) than the minority when subjects could smoke during the experiment ($t = 2.310$, $df = 72$, $p < 0.03$). Though the expert source appeared to exercise less influence when subjects could not smoke ($m = +0.10$), none of the relevant comparisons reached statistical significance.

Table 1. Mean change in intention to stop smoking as a function of source of persuasion, opportunity to smoke and task completion

Task	Opportunity to smoke		Source	
	No	Yes	Expert	Minority
Completed	No	Yes	+0.34 (0.73)	+0.32 (1.11)
Completed	No	Yes	+0.70 (1.01)	-1.06 (0.73)
Uncompleted	No	Yes	-0.14 (1.37)	+0.59 (0.85)
Uncompleted	No	Yes	+0.06 (0.66)	+0.47 (0.65)

Positive values = positive influence; standard deviations in parentheses; $n = 10$ for all cells.

The second interaction occurred between the identity of the source and the uncompleted versus completed character of the memory task ($F(1/72) = 12.681$, $p < 0.001$). The expert source generated more change when the recall task took place before the recording of attitudes about tobacco ($m = +0.52$) than when it took place after ($m = -0.04$; $t = 1.936$, $df = 72$, $p < 0.06$), and more than the minority under the same condition ($m = -0.37$; $t = 3.065$, $df = 72$, $p < 0.01$). In contrast the minority source induced more influence in the uncompleted task condition ($m = +0.53$) than when the memory task was completed before the attitude measures were presented ($m = -0.37$, $t = 3.100$, $df = 72$, $p < 0.01$) and more than the majority in the same condition ($m = -0.04$, $t = 1.971$, $df = 72$, $p < 0.06$).

DISCUSSION

High status sources do not obtain their influence in the same way as low status sources. The results showed that a manipulation based on the Zeigarnik effect can maintain tension and attention to the content defended by different kinds of source but it only increases the influence of a minority source. These results confirm that minorities achieve their influence by virtue of the internalization of conflict which creates in subjects a particular focus on the arguments presented. Moreover, if the tension created by the confrontation between the subject and the minority is relieved in some other way, for example if subjects are able to smoke, the potential change disappears. This effect is reminiscent of certain properties of the phenomenon of catharsis; the smoker, by the act of smoking, is liberated from the potential tension produced by the persuasive anti-tobacco message. If this does not happen, a deep change is produced in the subject, a conversion. For the expert source, the effect is the opposite; impact is obtained when subjects are freed from pressure, and in this case it is observed relative to the minority particularly when subjects are able to smoke in the 'completed task' condition.

What does this inversion mean in terms of the processes involved? It concerns attitudes in which the subject is strongly concerned, which is the case with tobacco; the targets of influence activate various forms of resistance to avoid change. It is in the nature of these resistances that it is appropriate to look for the differences between one type of source and another (Hass, 1981). It is possible that resistance takes on a defensive character in the face of a high status source, subjects trying to protect their own attitudes by closing themselves to contrary points of view by virtue of the threat of change which these entail because they are advocated by a high status source. In contrast, resistance can take on a more assertive character in the face of a low status source. In this case the target of influence would turn against the arguments of the source to deny them any validity, doing so in such a manner that it is the source and not the target himself which changes position.

In other terms the subject avoids as far as possible the adverse arguments of expert sources but actively tackles those of minority sources. These inclinations are illustrated in studies on selective exposure to information (cf. Frey, 1986) where subject prefer exposure to divergent information over exposure to consonant information when the arguments seem to them weak or to be associated with a low credibility source. When they have less confidence in their own position or when the adverse information comes from a high status source, they close themselves to all new information, giving preference to information which is consonant with or reinforces their initial attitude.

Why do both defensive and assertive strategies end in producing change? Studies carried out within the framework of reactance theory (cf. Brehm and Brehm, 1981) can help us to understand the boomerang effect produced by defensive resistance. These show that an argument is felt to be more assertive when it emanates from a high status source than when it originates from a low status source (Holtgraves, Srull and Social, 1989). Interpreted as more injunctive on behaviour, a message from a high status source is more likely to produce reactance and a negative influence. Other studies show, however, that as soon as subjects have directly or indirectly restored their liberty, resistance can disappear. In our study the option given to subjects to smoke during the experiment and the completed task provided them

with the opportunity to restore their liberty. Reactance then diminished, their defensive attitude against the threatening message from the expert source disappeared which led to an increase in its influence. This boomerang effect did not appear in the case of minority source either because the latter produced less reactance or because the resistance it aroused was less of a defensive than an assertive nature.

Finally, why does an assertive resistance also have the paradoxical effect of facilitating change? One explanation could be that a strategy of affirmative resistance implies greater exposure to the content of other's claims and thus that positive effects which appear are engendered by mere exposure (cf. Zajonc, 1968). These paradoxical effects are moreover similar to those of denial with respect to which it has been possible to show that the fact of leading subjects to deny the credibility of a minority source increases its influence but not the influence of a high status source. These effects are consistent with a process of social crypto-amnesia, which is to say the emergence within us of ideas we have forgotten we had previously heard from someone else. We know in effect that minority ideas are better accepted when they are dissociated from the source (cf. Mugny and Pérez, 1991), which is more likely for a low than a high status source. Whichever is the case, this experiment shows that the internalization of conflict is a useful notion for the understanding of attitude change phenomena. Future research should devote more attention to the meanings specific to conflicts and the mechanisms of their elaboration which vary according to the nature of tasks and sources (Pérez and Mugny, 1993) and which are more likely to be multi-process than single-process (Chaiken and Stangor, 1987).

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