

Resistance to Persuasion

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Summary

Since the 1940s, persuasion processes and the resistance to such processes have been extensively studied, becoming integral components within society affecting everyday life from of marketing and advertising to politics to health. Persuasion and its resistance naturally stemmed from research on attitudes and their formation. The process by which people can form attitudes is either through individual processes or persuasion processes. Regardless of if attitudes are already held, they can either follow along the persuasion process or resist it. Persuasion and its resistance occur for the same reasons: people want to be accurate, defend their self-consistency, or react to the social environment. Knowing why people become persuaded or resist it led to deeply researching how these processes occur. Processes and techniques related to the likelihood of successful resistance include retrieving prior attitudes; selective exposure; bolstering initial attitudes; selective memory; biased processing; derogation of the source, content, or message and persuasive attempt; and counter-arguing, which includes forewarning and inoculation techniques. Although researchers have been prolific and steadfast in determining these facets of resistance, there are more emerging topics that are rife for the exploration. Such topics include more social motives for resistance, the mechanisms underlying successful resistance processes and techniques, how often resistance occurs, what combinations of processes and techniques engender reliable resistance, and the consequences (both individual and interpersonal) of resistance. All in all, the future for this line of work is promising and timely. Everyday life will continue to provide situations that call for the psychology of resistance to persuasion.

Keywords: resistance to persuasion, attitudes, personality, social, resistance processes, resistance techniques

Subjects: Social Psychology

Introduction

Persuasion and its resistance counterpart are important in a multitude of contexts, including marketing and advertising (e.g., television, radio, and online ads), management (e.g., supervisors communicating to employees), politics (e.g., political campaigns and policy implementation), health (e.g., lifestyle recommendations and public service announcements about vaccinations), child development (e.g., parent and child or student and teacher communication), and stereotyping and prejudice (e.g., anti-racism and anti-sexism training). Given the widespread relevance of persuasion, it is not surprising that psychologists have endeavored to understand how people form and change their attitudes and beliefs (Albarracín, 2020; Albarracín & Shavitt, 2018; Albarracín et al., 2019; Albarracín & Vargas, 2010; Johnson et al., 2005, 2019). In this

context, understanding people’s resistance to persuasion is critical and involves consideration of why and how people resist persuasive efforts, along with factors that might diminish this resistance.

This article covers why people maintain their attitudes and resist persuasion, proceeding in the order of the cognitive processes involved in resistance. Figure 1 shows the stages of persuasion along with the processes of resistance at each stage. As shown, resistance arises when messages are in opposition to prior attitudes, which are activated when people learn about the topic of the message. These attitudes can lead to resistance in the form of selective exposure to messages that support these prior attitudes. From here, people who come into contact and pay some degree of attention to a counter-attitudinal message must counter-argue the message to reduce persuasion. This model is similar to prior stage models (Albarracín, 2002, 2020; McGuire, 1972, 1985), but calls attention to different processes of resistance (see Figure 1). Following Figure 1, this article describes: (a) retrieving and bolstering initial attitudes, (b) selective exposure, and (c) persuasion, a point at which biased processing and counter-arguing arise. This article closes with a discussion of areas of research that need further examination.

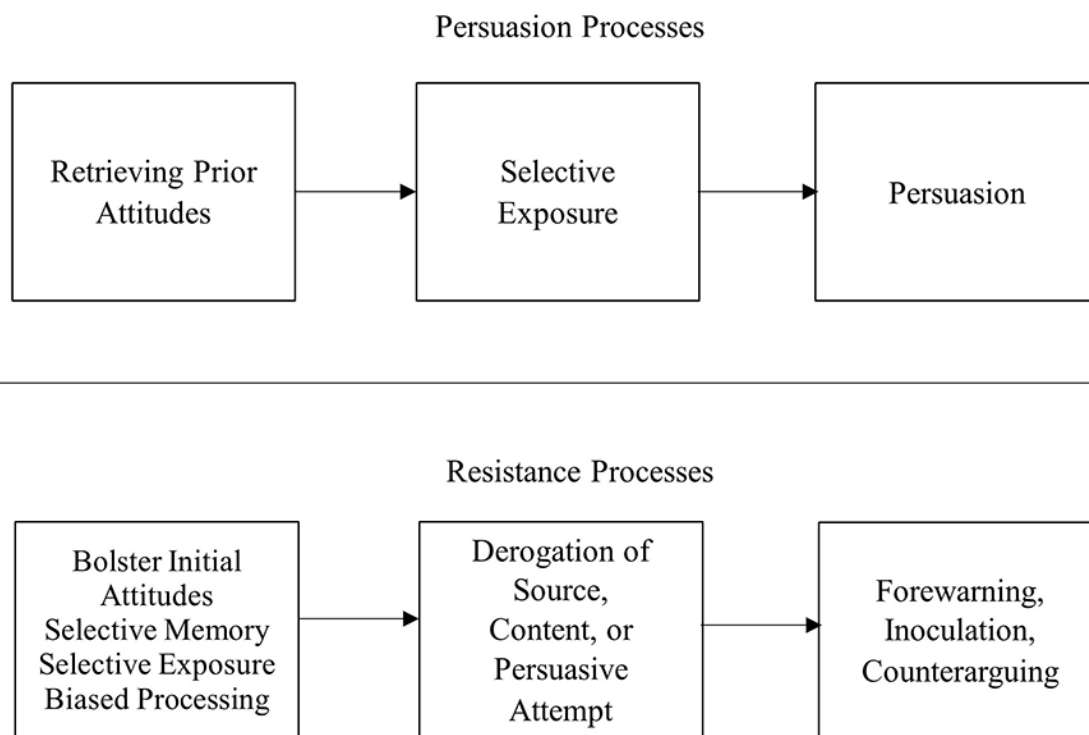


Figure 1. The top half depicts the process to persuading individuals. The bottom half depicts resistance to persuasion at each stage of the persuasion process.

Why People Resist Persuasive Efforts

The same reasons for persuasion underlie resistance to persuasion: accuracy, defense, and social motives. Accuracy motives involve the desire to hold correct information; defense motives entail the protection of one's self-consistency; and social motives comprise impression formation and how people change attitudes in reaction to others.

Accuracy Motives

When individuals have accuracy motives, they seek to reveal and understand the truth, which often serves an adaptive function in decision-making processes (Kunda, 1990). In some cases, factual information presented in a persuasive message may be more important than the recipients' original attitudes, particularly when the information may lead to desirable real-world outcomes such as getting a better job or investing funds successfully. For example, a person who expects to receive a prize for being correct is more likely to seek accurate information even if it does not align with their original attitudes (Jonas & Frey, 2003). Alternatively, people may find that their own attitudes are already correct and neither change in response to a message nor resist it (Albarracín et al., 2004, 2011).

Defense Motives

Defense motives comprise the need to defend the integrity of the self, which often involves the need to be consistent and maintain equilibrium. Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), for example, explains that holding two conflicting attitudes or conflicting behaviors and attitudes can produce dissonance, defined as the unpleasant feeling of arousal that follows a conflict. This unpleasant arousal in turn motivates dissonance reduction, which may occur in one of several ways: changing attitudes, changing behaviors, incorporating new cognitions, or not thinking about the conflict (Festinger, 1962). For example, if people originally held a positive attitude toward foods with a high carbohydrate content and then receive a message that consuming fewer carbohydrates is healthier, they may become more negative toward these foods as a way of reducing dissonance. An alternative would be for people to change behaviors. People could reduce carbohydrate intake as a way of aligning attitudes and behaviors. In the first two cases, the personal changes are a response to the motivation to reduce anxiety about the inconsistency (Aronson, 1969, 1999; Briñol et al., 2019; Harmon-Jones et al., 2009; McBroom & Reed, 2007; Zanna et al., 1980). However, self-defense can also lead to resistance. People may incorporate new cognitions such as, "I seldom eat foods high in carbohydrates" and maintain their original attitudes and behaviors by simply ignoring the new information. In other words, the defense motives involved in resolving dissonance may increase persuasion in the first two cases, but increase resistance in the last case.

Defense motives may trigger resistance to persuasion at any stage of information exposure and processing. For example, people may distract themselves and not properly digest the information contained in a persuasive message. Alternatively, they may listen to the persuasive message but

quickly forget the information because it does not align with their initial attitudes (Elkin & Leippe, 1986; Zanna & Aziza, 1976). Additionally, they may judge the persuasive message to be irrelevant and either attend to it less closely (Festinger, 1957; Gosling et al., 2006) or shift their attention to their own attitudes (Cooper & Hogg, 2007). Even if they attend to the persuasive message, they may trivialize it, affirm their preexisting values, and dismiss the persuasive message (Simon et al., 1995). Lastly, they may encode the information contained in the message but not *accept* it (Beauvois et al., 1993; Beauvois & Joule, 1996; Joule & Beauvois, 1997).

Defense motivation can stem from enduring personality traits. For example, traits like need for cognition and dogmatism can trigger resistance (Albarracín, 2020; Albarracín & Mitchell, 2004; Rucker et al., 2004). People with high need for cognition are able to resist weak messages (Haugtvedt & Petty, 1992; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). People with more dogmatic personalities also appear to resist persuasion more than do those with less dogmatic personalities. Two prominent examples of how dogmatic religious beliefs increase resistance can be found in Milgram's research on responses to authorities (1974). Both Milgram (1974) and Bock and Warren (1972) found that people who are religiously dogmatic were less likely to be persuaded by authority, a finding also demonstrated with the general construct of dogmatism (Ehrlich & Lee, 1969; Miller, 1965; Rokeach, 1954; Tormala & Petty, 2004). According to these studies, dogmatic beliefs form a strong mental model that is resistant to persuasion. However, there are contexts that reduce resistance within people who are dogmatic as well, also concerning authority. Dogmatism is inversely related to open-mindedness, so if an authority figure who is positive in one's life is being persuasive, then people who are dogmatic will more likely listen without engaging in resistance processes (Kemp, 1962; Norris, 1965). That is, they are more close-minded and accepting due to the authority of the persuader. Therefore, there is support for personalities also engendering defense motives and self-consistency.

Social Motives

Social motives that trigger both persuasion and resistance to it include the needs for social cohesion and freedom. To begin, persuasion recipients may want to make a good impression on the source by attending to and processing their arguments, subsequently leading to persuasion (Shavitt et al., 1994). Social identity theory, for example, suggests that people want to be accepted and will hold group-level attitudes and beliefs as their own (Tajfel, 1981; Turner, 1982). More generally, changing attitudes in a way not congenial with one's groups may lead to loss of social capital and therefore produce resistance (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Wood, 2000).

One's connections with others, however, may also activate or deactivate resistance. If someone is being persuaded by an out-group member, the recipient's connection to the in-group could override the persuasion process, reducing the desire to attend to and agree with the persuasive arguments. Alternatively, if someone is attuned to normative influence, they may be persuaded (Gopinath & Nyer, 2009). Aside from resistance motivated by social acceptance, reactance theory (Brehm, 1966; Steindl et al., 2015) has interesting implications for the social threats that persuasive messages may pose. In particular, perceiving that a persuasive message restricts one's freedom in a particular area can lead to the desire to regain that freedom by acting in a way that is

contrary to the message recommendation (Brehm, 1966; Steindl et al., 2015; Worchel & Brehm, 1971). Naturally, not all persuasion is restrictive, but certain components of persuasive attempts make them more threatening to recipients' freedom. These factors include controlling and forceful language (Miller et al., 2007), social agency (e.g., human-human contact compared to text or image contact; Roubroeks et al., 2011), the threat being introduced at the beginning of the persuasive message (vs. the end; Silvia, 2006), and loss-framed messages (Cho & Sands, 2011).

As was the case for defense motives, social motives are also associated with personality. First, people who are high in authoritarianism are sensitive to who the source is and how threatening the message is. In particular, authoritarians seek trust and power for themselves and value trust and power in others. Consequently, they are likely to be persuaded by sources with a high standing in the social hierarchy (e.g., celebrities, qualified experts) (Altemeyer, 1988; Johnson & Steiner, 1967; Johnson et al., 1968). Second, threatening messages can make authoritarians feel less confident and thus decrease resistance to persuasion (Lavine et al., 1999). Third, authoritarians often desire to spread their knowledge, a goal known as social vigilantism. People with this goal are likely to practice their arguments and strengthen their original attitudes, which make them more resistant to persuasion (Saucier & Webster, 2010).

Stages of Resistance to Persuasion

As explained before, resistance to persuasion may occur at different points of the process in Figure 1, and involve (a) retrieving and bolstering prior attitudes, (b) selecting congenial messages, or (c) processing the persuasive message, which in turn involves bias; derogating the source, the message, or the persuasive attempt; and counter-arguing.

Retrieving and Bolstering Prior Attitudes

The first stage of resistance to a persuasive message involves attitude retrieval. Attitudes can be strong initially for a variety of reasons, but the most enduring ones are accessible (Zanna et al., 1980), certain, and low in ambivalence (Visser et al., 2006); coherent and consistent (Bobrow & Norman, 1975); high in attitude-relevant knowledge (Davidson et al., 1985); and rooted in cognitive elaboration (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Visser et al., 2006; Wegener et al., 2004).

Selective memory is a phenomenon by which people remember only certain, and often self-consistent, information, and it plays an important role in bolstering attitudes. Often, this consistent information is more readily available and will come to mind with more fluency, thus conferring resistance to persuasion attempts (Cagley & Roberts, 1984; Chaiken & Stangor, 1987; Levine & Murphy, 1943; Read & Rosson, 1982). There are several examples of how people remember their attitudes and appear to instead forget or not use counter-attitudinal information. First, people who recall autobiographical memories consistent with their attitudes and then read a counter-argument are more likely to remember their original attitudes than they are to remember the counter-argument (Lydon et al., 1988). Second, people who have a positive attitude toward a medication and use it but later receive information that the medication may be ineffective may still recommend the medication to others, as a way of maintaining self-

consistency (Hochman et al., 2016). Internally, however, their physiological responses suggest that they perceive the conflict (Hochman et al., 2016). These findings, however, are qualified by the results of a meta-analysis on selective memory (Eagly et al., 1999) showing a small and heterogeneous effect. For example, one important moderator that increases selective memory is personal relevance, with higher relevance leading to larger effects (see also Eagly & Chaiken, 1995).

Selecting Congenial Messages

The bias by which individuals choose information that is aligned with their attitudes is known as selective exposure (Klapper, 1960; Mills et al., 1959; Sears & Freedman, 1967), which much like other resistance processes, stems from cognitive dissonance. Specifically, instead of addressing the dissonance counter-attitudinal information can cause, people can outright prevent dissonance by selecting sources of information that are congenial with their attitudes. For example, people with known attitudes toward a topic are likely to select news consistent with their point of view, and, across the board, show a moderate preference for congenial over uncongenial information (Hart et al., 2009).

Selective exposure is, of course, a highly successful way of resisting persuasion. A number of studies have demonstrated increased resistance persuasion when individuals selectively expose themselves to congenial information (Brannon et al., 2007; Brock & Balloun, 1967; Frey, 1964). Selective exposure may also enforce the perception that one's attitude has consensus because individuals only encounter information that is in line with their attitudes (Tsfati & Chotiner, 2016).

In many cases, however, selective exposure may seem unnecessary or not be appealing. Even though high attitude confidence may remove the need for more information (Fransen et al., 2015; Moreland & Levine, 1989; Zuwerink Jacks & Cameron, 2003), confidence may also backfire. For example, defensive confidence is the degree to which people trust their ability to defend their attitudes. In a study examining defensive confidence, participants were allowed to choose either pro- or counter-attitudinal articles about abortion and euthanasia (Albarracín & Mitchell, 2004). Both trait and experimentally induced defensive confidence led to differences in selection. Specifically, people with high defensive confidence were less likely to choose pro-attitudinal articles, counter to the notion of congenial selective exposure. Further, those with high defensive confidence were also more likely to experience attitude change (e.g., if they were pro-choice, they became less likely to endorse abortion after reading pro-life messages). All in all, selective exposure is a strong route to resisting persuasion, but there are deviations from it that lower defensive success.

Persuasion Processes

Biased Processing

People receive messages through a subjective and biased lens (Fransen et al., 2015; Lord et al., 1979). First, people often have attitudes and beliefs toward a topic before they receive a message about it and tend to weight their own attitudes heavily. One such instance is when people already have amassed knowledge about a topic, have cemented their attitude, and are presented with a counter-attitudinal message whose arguments appear less valid because they are inconsistent with prior knowledge and attitudes (Ahluwalia, 2000). Second, optimistic bias increases resistance to persuasion in contexts such as health and safety. Although people can logically understand the causal ordering of health behaviors and subsequent health and well-being, they are less likely to believe that the causal process will apply to them (Sharot, 2011; Shepperd et al., 2013; Weinstein, 1982, 1987, 1989). This bias can be a great defense against persuasive efforts because it allows people to ignore their susceptibility to negative outcomes.

Derogating Sources, Messages, and Persuasive Attempts

People can defend from persuasive messages by attacking the source, the message content, and the technique. The source attack or derogation process was first identified by Hovland and Weiss (1951). In the original study, participants were presented with an argument by one source and then received another argument about the source. The argument about the source decreased the credibility of the original message and the source by which it was presented. In turn, participants were less likely to be persuaded by the argument, an effect that has held in multiple studies since (Compton & Pfau, 2008; Petty et al., 1995; Tannenbaum et al., 1966; Wegener et al., 2004; Zuwerink & Devine, 1996). By derogating the source of the message, message recipients can strengthen their original attitudes and avoid experiencing dissonance (Petrocelli et al., 2007; Venturo, 1988; Visser et al., 2006).

Similar to source derogation, people can engage in content or message derogation to resist persuasion. One particularly salient context to derogate messages occurs when people receive a threatening message (e.g., news about health condition prognosis). For example, individuals can derogate the message by saying that it was an exaggeration, not credible, or personally irrelevant (Breznitz, 2013; Thompson et al., 2011, 2017). Naturally, message derogation increases the probability of resisting a message, but becomes harmful in many domains. For example, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has affected over 280,000,000 individuals worldwide. Although the effect is widespread and severe, according to a Pew Research Poll, 31% of U.S. residents think that other U.S. residents are overreacting to the pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2020). If that 31% were approached with valuable information, they might simply derogate the message.

Counter-Arguing

Counter-arguing is the primary way of reducing agreement with a persuasive message, and forewarning and inoculation are specific techniques that increase counter-arguing. Forewarning involves either telling a person that they will need to defend their thoughts against counter-arguments, or telling them what topic a message will discuss (McGuire & Papageorgis, 1962; Wood & Quinn, 2003). Although this idea is simple, the execution is nuanced, resulting in various outcomes. For example, in some paradigms, participants are told that they will read a message that is either in favor of (no forewarning) or against (forewarning) their attitudes. Participants learn that they will have some time before reading a message and can thus prepare for it, either with or without warning that the message is counter-attitudinal (Baron et al., 1973; McGuire, 1964). Findings have revealed that the time interval does not affect forewarning (Banas & Rains, 2010; Pfau et al., 2006). However, the content and repetition of the message influenced resistance, with more specific counter-attitudinal contents and more repetition leading to more resistance. Moreover, the forewarning produces irritation, which then leads to retrieving counter-arguments (Frantz & Janoff-Bulman, 2010; Janssen et al., 2010), and explains forewarning effects (Wood & Quinn, 2003).

Inoculation theory (McGuire, 1961) rests on some of the same theoretical pathways as forewarning. According to the metaphor, the inoculation works just as a vaccine would within the human body, such that a small dose of a foreign virus injected into the body increases immunity against the virus. In the persuasion context, people initially receive a weak persuasive message opposed to their attitudes as well as messages in favor of their attitudes. Later, they receive the full persuasive message against which they have been immunized and are less persuaded because they generated counter-arguments ahead of time. The effect of inoculation has been reliably demonstrated and confirmed in a meta-analysis of 54 studies (Banas & Rains, 2010). This synthesis showed that when people have practice counter-arguing persuasive attempts, they can apply those skills to novel persuasive attempts and resist their influence (Banas & Rains, 2010; Pfau et al., 2006). Moreover, inoculation appears robust across threat (i.e., knowing that someone will try to persuade you), timing (e.g., 1 day vs. 7 days), and issue involvement (i.e., the importance of the topic to the receiver), and has been applied to various domains, including risky behaviors in young adults (Parker et al., 2012), conspiracy theories (Bonetto et al., 2018), gender equality (Flood et al., 2018), online misinformation (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019), and politically motivated acts of violence (Ivanov et al., 2018).

Future Directions

Although research on resistance to persuasion is far beyond its nascent years, more work remains. A first avenue of future work concerns the social motives of resistance to persuasion, an area that this article demonstrated has been small. One path to pursue involves the idea of vicarious hypocrisy—if others in one's in-group engage in hypocritical behaviors, one may experience hypocrisy and change a behavior that produces conflict (Focella et al., 2016; Steindl et al., 2015). Analogously, seeing an in-group member who fails to resist persuasion may increase the observer's motivation to resist as a way of reaffirming the in-group's "true" values.

Additionally, people may resist persuasion to fit in with their in-groups. One may simply resist a persuasive effort when others from their group have also resisted it, without much processing of the content or without any need to derogate the communication source. Relatedly, power differentials in society may also bring about resistance. For example, people who belong to a marginalized group may resist persuasion and give greater weight to their group's attitude as a form of defense against oppression. These issues may be addressed in future research.

A second area of future work entails studying the mechanisms that make specific resistance processes (see Figure 1) more or less successful. For example, selective exposure could work for a variety of reasons, including strengthening of attitude-consistent memories, strengthening beliefs about the self, increasing knowledge about a certain attitude object, or increasing bonds with close others who also share one's attitudes. The pathways to successful resistance, however, remain an open research question.

Another future direction involves how often people resist persuasion. Individuals likely vary in the frequency with which they resist persuasion in everyday life. Most work has targeted participants within a lab setting, reducing ecological validity. However, work could be done, for example, to understand resistance efforts in high-quality versus low-quality romantic relationships as they are lived. Resistance may be higher in the low-quality romantic relationships and have important consequences for the interactions and well-being of romantic partners.

In a similar vein, existing research does not currently illustrate how different resistance processes combine to produce effects. Often, research will test single persuasion and resistance processes and techniques. However, in everyday life, persuasion and its resistance are likely not so cleanly used. If processes and techniques are used in combination, what combinations do people gravitate toward and do certain combinations work better together in resisting persuasion? Future research could help illuminate the answers to such questions.

A final future direction in this area involves the consequences of resistance. There is a small collection of studies of the effects of resistance for individuals, showing, for example, that resistance efforts strengthen original attitudes (McGuire & Papageorgis, 1961; Tormala, 2008). However, more work could uncover moderators of these consequences. For example, a negative or positive relationship between the persuader and the recipient could strengthen or weaken the original attitude. Further, there are likely social consequences of resistance to persuasion. Resisting persuasion, for example, may decrease the quality of future interactions or interpersonal liking between individuals.

All in all, the future for this line of work is promising and timely. Everyday life will continue to provide situations that call for the psychology of resistance to persuasion. As was made clear through this article, a plethora of reasons explain resistance and the ways by which people resist persuasion. This knowledge may come as a service to society in contexts that benefit from understanding and either increasing or decreasing resistance to persuasion.

Further Reading

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