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How to Cope with Resistance to Persuasion?

Abstract: The main goal of this study is to develop a conceptual framework meant (a) to present the essential traits of persuasion, (b) to explain resistance to persuasion (mainly when the persuader tries to shape, reinforce, or change an attitudinal response), and (c) to provide a feasible strategy to overcome the coping behaviors associated with resistance to persuasion. Defined as the communication process in which “someone makes other people believe or decide to do something, especially by giving them reasons why they should do it, or asking them many times to do it”, persuasion ensures a noncoercive social control by shaping, reinforcing, or changing target audience’s cognitions, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Persuasion involves volitional behaviors (that are inextricably intertwined with spontaneous, impulsive, mindless, or compulsive behaviors) and a significant cognitive load. Even if persuasion does not elicit negative feelings like various shortcuts to compliance (coercion, bribery, deception, manipulation of the dominant instincts, etc.), it generates *ipso facto* resistance to persuasion. Public relations specialists and other communication professionals can reduce or cope with resistance to persuasion by creating a low-pressure persuasion context, using evidential reasons, and following evidential rules.

Keywords: persuasion, shortcut to compliance, resistance to persuasion, coping behavior, reactance, need for cognition, evidential reason, evidence-responsive belief

1. Preamble

As Adam Fergusson (1782) insightfully observed, all social establishments are the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design. After countless (un)successful attempts to implement various political plans and following many trials and tribulations, the

Euro-Atlantic countries stumbled upon a socio-political agreement that allows them to evolve as free, pluralistic, and complex societies. According to this arrangement, individuals enjoy the highest degree of autonomy, all interest groups may equally advance their ideas or political agenda in the public sphere, and society is allowed to rise to such a degree of complexity that no power center can control it by coercion.

Inasmuch as people's reason and will are intrinsically imperfect, many human behaviors show—at least in part—the traits of ignorance or malevolence. As such, they have a mixture of positive and negative consequences. Nevertheless, people are permitted to make their own way to happiness on the grounds that some negative consequences (for themselves and their fellows) can somehow be offset and therefore tolerated. In a liberal democracy, interest groups compete against each other to attract public support in order to prioritize their needs and goals. Very often some vociferous minorities annoyingly insist on putting their particular interests on the public agenda although they seem neither important nor urgent. This annoyance is the price we must pay for maintaining social peace. It is not possible to preserve a peaceful climate in our contemporary society unless any interest group strongly believes that it can successfully politicize its own problems. Finally, although any free and pluralistic society has a unique center of power that may regulate it by using lawful coercion, the true ruling power is an “invisible government” (Bernays 1928) that shapes the perceptions, ideas, tastes, opinions, attitudes, and habits of both the masses and the rulers by persuasion, in other words, by symbolic transactions (Miller 2009).

The invisible government of persuaders consists of journalists, public relations specialists, marketers, advertisers, teachers, priests, pundits, and other opinion leaders. They are legion, and their voices are partly concordant and partly discordant. The persuaders act as nodes of a complex, heterogeneous, and self-organizing network of influencers. All of them strive to exert *noncoercive social control* over broad categories of people bringing about *measurable positive reactions* in people's perceptions, cognitions, feelings, attitudes, opinions, decisions, or behaviors. Ultimately, the persuaders try to make the “right impression” on the public (Richards 2016) planting compelling messages (news, stories, interviews, insights, statistical data, comments, analyses, pictures, movies, leaks, etc.) in the media outlets.

2. Research problem

As agents of social control, the influencers shape people's mind by various tools and techniques. In the first instance, most influencers use

persuasion, but, if it does not succeed, they may resort to various *shortcuts to compliance*: coercion, bribery, deception, manipulation of the dominant instincts, etc. In general, the compliance ensured by means of such nonpersuasive shortcuts is apparent and temporary. People influenced in this manner tend to see themselves as victims of an unfair, unwanted, injurious, or manipulative treatment and harbor a grudge against the source of influence. Once enlightened about their condition and able to resist, they will behave in contradiction with the suggestions received.

Sometimes, the agents of social control use a mixture of persuasive and nonpersuasive means of influence. For example, a tax collection agency may urge taxpayers to honestly declare their income and pay the corresponding taxes adding a threatening nuance to its persuasive messages. On the other hand, a car dealer who strives to focus the buyer's attention on the gifts and bonuses added to the car purchased seems to manipulate the buyer's reciprocity or hedonic instinct. Insofar as the target audience perceives that the influencer used some shortcuts to the compliance, the persuasive attempts are prone to fail.

A free, pluralistic, and complex society needs to achieve and maintain a necessary dynamic equilibrium in such a way that the vital interests of individuals, groups, and classes harmonize with each other to the greatest extent. Inasmuch as the harmony of interests relies essentially on the *purity* and *effectiveness* of persuasion, it is useful to determine an *ideal type* of persuasion and several *conditions* that persuasion should meet in order to be successful. The mere fact that persuasion is often replaced or mixed with coercive or manipulative shortcuts to compliance proves that the art of pure, authentic persuasion is difficult to master. The target audience of various persuasion attempts encounters also great difficulties in processing pure persuasive messages. Many times it recognizes but resists the persuasive influence even if persuasion is authentic and the intended responses seem beneficial for its members. Ignoring the persuader's helpful advice, staying home instead of voting, choosing not to purchase or donate, and clinging to the mistaken belief that childhood vaccines cause autism are just a few examples of coping behaviors caused by resistance to persuasion. These undeniable facts should not discourage researchers in their efforts to determine the conditions under which a persuasion attempt free from shortcuts to compliance can succeed in a free, pluralistic, and complex society.

In this context, the main goal of my theoretical study is to develop a conceptual framework meant (a) to present the essential traits of persuasion, (b) to explain resistance to persuasion (mainly when the

persuader tries to shape, reinforce, or change an attitudinal response), and (c) to provide a feasible strategy to overcome the coping behaviors associated with resistance to persuasion. This discursive strategy consists fundamentally in professing evidence-based and evidence-responsive beliefs in a low-pressure persuasion context.

3. What is persuasion?

In order to clarify the meaning of the term “persuasion”, it is convenient to use as starting point a definition which appears in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online*, mainly because it synthesizes the most common utilizations of this term in quotidian language games. Thus persuasion is defined as the communication process in which “someone makes other people believe or decide to do something, especially by giving them reasons why they should do it, or asking them many times to do it” (LDCEO 2015).

If the above-mentioned definition is assumed, all definitions that restrict persuasion to “the tools and techniques of changing people’s minds” (Adams 2017) appear to be too narrow. It is true that, in most cases, persuasion is intended to *change* the target audience’s cognitions, feelings, or behaviors. The numerous cases of conversion from Ovo-lacto vegetarianism to veganism, from intemperance to teetotalism, from militarism to pacifism, from Lutheranism to Catholicism, from Conservatism to Liberalism, from nominalism to realism, from gravity to frivolity, etc. can be regarded as clear evidence of this fact.

It is noteworthy that persuasion is often used in order to *shape* or *reinforce* certain typical responses from the persuadee (cf. Cameron 2009). For example, many inhabitants of an underdeveloped region show indifference to the fact that their fellows leave waste paper and cans on the ground in a public place. Dropping litter does not constitute the object of an attitude and, consequently, elicits no conditioned response. Some environmental activists could try to improve this deplorable situation by persuasion. For this purpose, they may design and implement a communication campaign in order to make a significant part of those inhabitants form a negative attitude or “posture of the mind” (Miller 2009) towards littering. They do not change a target audience’s attitude but shape or create one.

On the other hand, a fast food restaurant operating in a very competitive environment could aim to reinforce its employees’ fidelity. The employees already has a favorable posture of mind toward the

employer, but the competitors may tempt them with higher wages and bonuses. If persuasion attempts to reinforce the employees' attitude of loyalty fails, it is probable that temptation reaches a critical point and some employees would leave the company.

The definition taken from LDCEO also underscores the *volitional* characteristic of persuasion process. In the context of persuasion, both the persuader and the persuadee *decide* to do something. Of course *all* decisions taken by persuasion partners are inextricably intertwined with spontaneous, impulsive, habitual, mindless, or compulsive behaviors that can influence them profoundly. The less the influence of involuntary behaviors, the greater the rationality of decisions. However, no matter how large the influence of involuntary behaviors would be, persuasion involves a conscious (and rational) decision on the part of the persuader and persuadee (Hale et al. 2009). Therefore, the theory of reasoned action provides a satisfactory explanatory frame of persuasion process.

Strangely enough, there is a consensus among the theoreticians of persuasion that the persuader acts as an (ultra)rational, powerful agent while the persuadee is generally regarded as an irrational, powerless victim. As a would-be connoisseur of the *hardwired* mechanisms of persuasion—mechanisms anchored in “the dominant instincts of people” (Bernays 1935, 84) —, the persuader would achieve his goals “with or without facts and reason” (Adams 2017), “even when the subject recognizes the [persuasion] technique [used against him]” (*ibidem*). Some of these pretended hardwired mechanisms are correlated with the *principles of persuasion* formulated by Robert Cialdini when he answered the question “What are the factors that cause one person to say yes to another person?” (Cialdini 2006):

- *Principle of consistency*: Being under constant pressure to make choices, we tend to stick with whatever we have already chosen, assuming all subsequent related choices.
- *Principle of reciprocity*: We are hardwired to be reciprocal; therefore, we tend to pay back what we received from others.
- *Principle of social proof*: We tend to put our trust in things that are popular or endorsed by peers, users, celebrities, and reliable people.
- *Principle of authority*: We follow people who look like they know what they're doing
- *Principle of liking*: We are more likely to comply with requests made by people we like.

- *Principle of scarcity*: We are always attracted to things that are exclusive and hard to obtain; therefore, we tend to link availability to quality.

Unlike Scott Adams, Robert Cialdini admitted that the above-mentioned principles do not describe *click and whirr* mechanisms and do not determine fixed-action patterns (Cialdini 2006). Targeted by a persuasion attempt, any enlightened person can learn how to cope with these mechanisms preserving the freedom of her will. She has a minimum degree of freedom in any persuasion device. More exactly, she is able to reflect critically on his options or alternatives and may behave in sharp contrast with the persuasion principles.

Although people's cognitions, feelings, attitudes, and habits are quite resilient when they are confronted with the facts that seem to contradict them, persuasion must satisfy the persuadee's *need for cognition*. It is true that people don't feel the need to be informed accurately to the same extent, in any context, and they have different cognitive abilities. It is also true that (sometimes) people unconsciously create, by the interpretive process of *confabulation*, "an objectively-false but sincerely-believed narrative that attributes first-person agency and ownership to unconsciously-initiated actions" (Bergamin 2018). Moreover, people very often fall into the trap of personal or collective delusions impervious to self-doubt and opposite facts. However, in spite of these cognitive shortcomings, persuasion needs a solid background knowledge in order to succeed.

Obligated to correlate the persuasion attempts with a minimal body of knowledge, the persuadees are "burdened with processing demands that far exceed [their] time frames and mental capacities" (Rhoads & Cialdini 2009). As "cognitive misers" (Rhoads & Cialdini 2009), they try to optimize their intellectual resources following different route to persuasion according to their motivation, style, and ability to think about the message and arguments provided (Cacioppo et al. 1986) The persuadees follow the *central route to persuasion* when they "scrutinize the information contained within a persuasive message, thinking carefully about that information and relating it to other information they have stored in memory, and modifying their attitudes accordingly" (Levitan & Visser 2008, 641). The persuadees follow the peripheral route to persuasion when they "devote few cognitive resources to scrutinizing the content of a persuasive message" (Levitan & Visser 2008, 641) and modify their attitudes in response to some readily available "cues or heuristics that are unrelated to the actual merits of the message", like the

attractiveness of the source (Booth-Butterfield & Welbourne 2009). As a rule, people with higher cognitive abilities assume higher standards for cognitive clarity and are more likely to elaborate cognitively on issue-relevant information. People with low cognitive capacity experience difficulties in processing semiotic stimuli and responding to the competing demands; therefore they would rely on issue-irrelevant cues or heuristics (Cacioppo et al. 1986; Booth-Butterfield & Welbourne 2009).

Some surprising persuasive outcomes (e.g. Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election) made certain researchers state that facts do not matter a great deal in the persuasion process on the grounds that the "hardwired mechanisms", anchored in "the dominant instincts of people" (Bernays 1935, 84), function effectively despite the lack of accurate data (Adams 2017). Actually, facts really matter. The accurate factual data obviously count in everyday persuasion contexts (e.g. no one can be persuaded to buy potatoes when he wants a car), but they also matter in more complex situation. For example, Donald Trump used wrong, inaccurate data, but he correctly mentioned those facts that mattered for his voters. It is not necessary for a successful persuader to report all facts *flawlessly*, but to refer correctly to the minimal body of facts that count as *good reason* to act for the persuadee.

According to the *communication approach* of persuasion, the persuader obtains the persuadee's compliance following six steps: (1) "Generation of the message, including information on specific goals and ways of reaching these goals; (2) Reception of the message by the target audience; (3) Message comprehension; (4) Message retention; (5) Acceptance or belief in the substance of the message; and (6) Compliant action". (Leventhal & Cameron 1987, 123)

In other words, in the process of persuasion, the persuader has to accomplish the following tasks: (1) to map the influence landscape, *id est* to identify the people who need to be persuaded and can be influenced; (2) to shape others' beliefs about what they want; (3) to mold others' beliefs about the alternatives or options open to them; (4) to gain acceptance for hard decisions; and (5) to achieve a broader impact through mass persuasion (Watkins 2001, 116).

Conceived as a pure symbolic transaction in several essential steps, persuasion seems to succeed by virtue of the evocative force of the messages and the strength of the arguments. However, in many cases, the mental representations evoked by the persuasive messages confront the target audience with an irrational threat or an unexpected benefit. As such, they may bring persuasion closer to the coercive or manipulative

shortcut to compliance. For example, during the periods of uncertainty (like the period 2007-2019), some experts painted a gloomy picture of the economy, while other experts predicted an unstoppable economic progress. They put anxious people in a depressing mood and incited optimistic people to adopt a lavish lifestyle. In both situations, people targeted by persuasion manifested, in part, irrational behaviors like in the case of blatant coercion and manipulation of dominant instincts respectively. It is possible and even recommendable to build and disseminate persuasive messages loaded with emotions or susceptible to stir up emotions. However, the emotional pressure should not alter the main cognitive mechanisms of the target audience.

4. Inescapable resistance to persuasion

Best known for his theory of psychological reactance, Jack Brehm postulated that *all* people have the subjective experience of freedom, and they naturally tend to restore this state of mind *whenever* it is limited or threatened with limitation or elimination. (cf. Hughes 1981, 136) As a tense motivational state, “[p]sychological reactance is experienced along a continuum of magnitude” (Dillard & Meijnders 2009) depending on the following variables: (a) the perceived importance of the free behaviors to the individual; (b) the proportion of free behaviors threatened; and (c) the amplitude of the threat (cf. Dillard & Meijnders 2009; Dillard & Meijnders 2009; Hughes 1981, 136).

From this perspective, the magnitude of reactance would be greater in the Euro-Atlantic countries where citizens are encouraged to make their own way to happiness than in the totalitarian states that hold their citizens for decades or even centuries in servitude. Very probable, people persuaded to change their religion, political ideology, or diet would experience a greater reactance than persons encouraged to try another type of cheese. Finally, people who risk losing their home, job, family, or life if they do not comply face a greater reactance than people who could lose—at most—an unanticipated moment of pleasure.

The magnitude of psychological reactance also depends on the perceived level of coercion. Reactance reaches the highest level when compliance is enforced by brute force, it decreases when violence is legally restraint and decreases even more when coercion takes the form of symbolic violence. Obviously, persuasive communication mixed with coercive or manipulative shortcuts to compliance causes less reactance than blatant coercion, and evidence-based persuasion free of any coercive

or manipulative element would bring on the smallest reactance. Is it possible to create a persuasion situation so that it would not induce psychological reactance at all? Scott Koslow answered “Yes” on the grounds that only some of [persuasion situations] appear to restrict expected freedoms (Koslow 2000, 251). In my opinion, it is highly improbable to persuade a target audience without inducing reactance. Although persuasive communication is not perceived as “pushy” (Carver 1980, 467), and the target audience does not feel any “external social pressure” (Watkins 2001, 121), people persuaded have to cope with the internal conflicts caused by the multiple competing demands (*ibidem*). Even in a pure persuasive situation where only the strength of arguments employed counts, social interactions will link *power* and *resistance* in a coextensive manner (Roux 2007, 60).

Generally disposed to resistance due to the inescapable psychological reactance, the target audience members are motivated to resist persuasion attempts by many specific factors (Watkins 2001, 120-121; Koslow 2000, 251-265; Roux 2007, 68). Concretely, people resist to persuasion when they

- perceive that the persuader has a vested interest in the subject’s choice;
- fear that they could lose a comfortable status quo;
- fear that their sense of competence is questioned;
- fear that the intended change would have negative consequences for some key allies;
- believe that change could endanger their self-defining values and self-image;
- perceive that the persuasive arguments are one-sided, unfair, manipulative, or aggressive;
- perceive that conclusions do not seem to follow from facts;
- perceive that the persuader exerts an unwanted, high-pressure influence;
- perceive that their cognitive resources are depleted and they cannot manage all competing demands.

The impact of each factor is easy to recognize in various sectors of social life. For example, the suspicion that the persuasion agents have special interest in the subject’s choice increases the resistance to persuasion in political life. Unfortunately, the famous saying “The solution to someone’s problem is someone else’s problem” underscore an unpleasant truth. Although politicians declare that they pursue the common good, political life is (at least partially) a bitter struggle for socializing the cost of solving certain collective problems. When a

politician advocate a solution for a specific problem, people rightly fear that they have to support the main part of the costs.

The fear for their comfortable status quo has a demotivating effect for the social scientist who could (and should) participate in lively debates over some thorny social issues. Under the pressure of political correctness, they prefer to decline the invitations to debate in order not to risk losing their job, money, or reputation.

Inasmuch as persuasion imply a power relation between the persuader and the persuadee, the subject of persuasion attempts will have to cope with an inferiority complex. Ultimately, trying to shape, reinforce, or change the others' cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors, the persuasion agents implicitly consider target audience members unable to reach the intended results on their own. As long as persuasion is not bidirectional communication, the persuadee will see themselves treated as incompetent. Being involved in an intricate system of social relationships, the subjects of persuasion could fear the consequences for others they care about: family members, colleagues, neighbors, parishioners etc. The higher the status of a person is, the greater the responsibility for the welfare of others she bears when her compliance is urged.

Because all persuasive messages consist of value-laden propositions, the persuadee tend to weigh the alternatives proposed in regard with his self-image. He cannot risk professing new values, creeds, and manners that contradict the essential attributes of his public identity. If put in a discursive device where only the strength of arguments matters, target audience members abhor any coercive or manipulative short-cut to compliance. All shaky or exaggerated claims, marketing hype, one-sided or unfair arguments, fallacious inferences, and assorted puffery are quickly dismissed by the people who activated their mechanisms of defense (Koslow 2000, 264-265).

Unlike coercion, bribery, and manipulation, persuasion has a much lower success rate in the short run. The clever persuaders know that it is about a normal situation and wait patiently for the intended results to appear in the long run. On the other hand, the impatient and pushy persuaders prefer asking the target audience *many times* to be compliant in doing so, they annoy the public and their influence is dismissed as unwanted.

Last but not least, target audience members may develop resistance to persuasion because they cannot cope effectively with the cognitive load implied by persuasion in a free, pluralistic, and complex society. Being privileged as an eminent tool for social control, persuasion

is used by myriads of social agents that place in the insatiable media outlets a huge number of persuasive messages. The immense clutter of written, audio, audiovisual, multimedia messages defies anyone to expose oneself to the most useful persuasion attempt. As cognitive misers in a world overloaded with utile and junk information, people sometimes reject persuasive influences that are beneficial for them. This is just one of the unintended consequences of the present information overload.

Overt or covert, active or passive, internal or external, resistance to persuasion should be recognized and managed by both the persuaders and persuadees. A useful starting point for recognizing the coping behaviors related to the resistance to persuasion is the list of adolescent coping style and behaviors realized by Joan M. Patterson and Hamilton I. McCubbin (1987, 172-175):

- Ventilating feelings
- Seeking diversions
- Developing self-reliance and optimism
- Developing social support
- Avoiding problems
- Investing in close friends
- Seeking professional support
- Engaging in demanding activity
- Being humorous
- Relaxing

These coping behaviors should remind us that, in general, “the persuasive element of the communication must exceed the target person’s perceived threat to his or her freedom to engage in or not to engage in a particular behavior, or to hold or not to hold a particular attitude” (cf. Hughes 1981, 136).

5. Instead of conclusions: a persuasive strategy to cope with resistance to persuasion

As mentioned previously many times, a free, pluralistic, and complex society can survive and develop only if persuasion predominates over coercion and manipulation. Striving for noncoercive social control, persuasion agents prompt target audience members to form, reinforce, or change some of their cognitions, attitudes, and habits by giving them good reasons to do that. These continuous adjustments constitute a necessary condition for harmonizing the multitude of individual and collective interests in a peaceful manner.

Derived from the psychological reactance, resistance to persuasion can be reduced, but it cannot be eliminated even if persuasion would be free from any (non)coercive shortcut to compliance. People targeted by persuasion always manifest coping behaviors because they constantly have to manage demands that tax or exceed their cognitive resources.

Public relations specialists and other communication professionals could reduce resistance to persuasion by diminishing the influence of some factors that cause it. Above all, they have to create a low-pressure persuasion context in which the persuadee would be able to process the main arguments present in the persuasive message. It does not follow from here that a low-pressure persuasion context requires us to get rid of all emotional cues. Arid argumentation is to the same extent ineffective as the persuasion tainted with maladaptive emotions or (non)coercive shortcuts to compliance. Adaptive emotions energize both the persuader and the persuadee helping them to fulfill their discursive tasks. They could and should be loaded in the persuasive messages.

In order to create a low-pressure persuasion context, it is important to diminish the information clutter that severely depletes the persuadee's cognitive resources. First of all, the persuasion agents should avoid putting their messages in an overcrowded media outlet. Secondly, they should resist the temptation to repeat *ad nauseam* the messages that seem ignored by the public. Thirdly, they should help the recipients of their messages to follow the most appropriate route to persuasion. Cognitive resources are too scarce to be wasted on the central route of persuasion when a peripheral processing of the messages seems to be sufficient. Fourthly, when a serious cognitive processing of messages is necessary, the target audience should get good reasons for the intended change using—as much as possible—evidence-based and evidence-responsive statements.

Given the impossibility to believe a proposition recognized as a false one, we must admit that any rational being has an innate drive not to assent to the falsehood and is prone to form “correct beliefs, namely beliefs whose propositional content corresponds as closely as possible to the state of affairs it describes” (Farte 2016, 67). Aiming to keep his beliefs closer to the truth and objective reality, any rational being tends to be responsive to *evidential reasons*: empirical objects, states of affairs, events, situations, or theoretical, conjectural entities inferred in a reasoned manner from the former (Farte 2016, 67). The frequent exposure to empirical evidence makes persuasion credible and efficient.

People should be aware of their feelings toward empirical evidence. If some pieces of empirical evidence trigger exaggerated,

maladaptative emotions, we must admit that this specific part of the persuasive message is tainted with an irrational ingredient. Inasmuch as people overwhelmed by emotions reason badly and behave irrationally, it is recommendable not to advance persuasion before identifying and eliminating the obstacle. This laborious process of eliminating the obstacles that stand in the way of evidential persuasion can end well only if the persuaders help people establish *personally* logical relationships between certain empirical evidence and certain cognitions, attitudes, and habits. All people can perceive the empirical objects directly, but they have to learn *gradually* the logical relationships between them.

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