

News for Argumentation from Persuasion Effects Research: Two Cheers for Reasoned Discourse

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This paper discusses some broad normative implications for argumentation of two aspects of persuasion effects research (social-scientific research concerning factors influencing persuasive effectiveness). The first is findings concerning the persuasive effects of certain normatively-relevant message variations--variations in such message elements as refutation of counterarguments, citation of information sources, and so forth. The main question addressed here is the degree to which research on these variables suggests some incompatibility between normatively-sound argumentative practice and practical persuasive effectiveness. Put differently, the question is: Given the research evidence in hand, does it seem that advocates face a choice between normatively-sound practice and practical success?

The second is findings (across studies of different persuasion variables) concerning the average size of and variability of the effects on persuasive outcomes of various factors. The main question addressed here is the degree to which there are grounds for supposing that dependably powerful persuasive influences exist that could be at variance with the power of reasoned discourse. Put differently, the question is: Given the research evidence in hand, is there (likely to be) any "magic persuasion bullet" that is so dependably powerful as to trump any influence by reasoned argument?

Notice: If normatively-desirable argumentative practice is commonly incompatible with practical persuasive success, and if persuaders have available ploys that dependably and powerfully sway people, then one might naturally despair for the future of reasoned discourse. But these are empirical questions, and hence this paper examines the relevant research evidence.

Normative Soundness and Persuasive Success: Incompatible?¹

Advocates can sometimes fear that normatively-sound argumentative conduct will undermine their practical persuasive success. But it is an empirical question whether (or to what extent) persuaders in fact face a choice between being (normatively) good and being (practically) effective. Of course, addressing this empirical question requires (inter alia) having some set of normative criteria for argument, and this is no easy matter; there is no universally-agreed set of obvious specific normative standards for argument. Still, I believe that there are at least three broad normative principles likely to enjoy widespread endorsement--and for each of these there exists a substantial

body of empirical research concerning the persuasive effects of adherence to the principle. (These three principles can all be seen as accommodated nicely by the pragma-dialectical approach; see van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984.)

Clarity of Overall Claim

First: It is normatively desirable that advocates be clear about their overall standpoints. That is, the normatively-responsible advocate, rather than obscuring the overall claim or point being advanced, is clear about that claim. A number of experimental studies speak to the question of the persuasive effects of variation in this message property. The relevant studies compare the persuasiveness of two messages that vary in whether the message contains an explicit statement of the advocate's overall conclusion.

A meta-analytic review of such studies has concluded that a dependable overall difference in persuasiveness is associated with this message variation, such that messages containing an explicit statement of the advocate's overall conclusion are significantly more persuasive than parallel messages omitting such a statement (O'Keefe, 2002).² Notice, thus: Arguers do not benefit persuasively--and actually tend to damage their persuasiveness--when they pursue the normatively-questionable course of avoiding an explicit statement of their overall conclusion. Thus with respect to this particular element of normatively-desirable argumentative practice, there is no conflict between being normatively good and being practically effective. Indeed, on the contrary: Normatively-desirable argumentative conduct commonly yields some persuasive advantage.

Explicitness of Supporting Arguments

Second: It is normatively desirable that advocates be explicit about (or be willing to be explicit about) the arguments they advance in support of that overall conclusion. Of course, it's not realistic to ask that every argument be made in a completely explicit form (in which every premise and sub-premise is expressed); what matters is that arguers be capable of making explicit their underlying reasoning. But advocates who provide a more explicit rendition of their argumentation plainly represent greater adherence to this normative ideal.

Two specific forms of argumentative explicitness have received some empirical attention in persuasion effects research. The first is variation in whether the advocate explicitly identifies the source(s) of information and opinion that are offered in the message. A meta-analytic review of such studies found a dependable difference such that messages providing citations to information sources are more persuasive than their less explicit counterparts (O'Keefe, 1998).³ As noted in that review, these studies typically used what would be likely be perceived to be relatively high-quality information sources--which means one cannot be sure that the same effect would obtain were lower-quality sources to be cited. Still, the evidence in hand does indicate that the normatively-desirable practice of identifying information sources will at least sometimes enhance persuasive effectiveness.

The other form of argumentative explicitness relevant here is variation in argumentative completeness--whether the arguer explicitly specifies the underlying bases of claims advanced by the message (provides explicit

articulation of premises and conclusions, supporting information, and so forth). O'Keefe's (1998) meta-analytic review of such studies reported a significant persuasive advantage for messages with more complete supporting arguments.⁴ That is, more complete renditions of an advocate's supporting arguments are likely to be more persuasive than less complete arguments.

Taken together, then, these two lines of research suggest that the normatively-desirable practice of clearly articulating one's argumentative support--concretized here as specifically involving explicit identification of information sources and explicit statement of supporting arguments--will (if anything) commonly make messages more persuasive. Thus with respect to this particular element of normatively-desirable argumentative practice, there is no conflict between being normatively good and being practically effective. Indeed, on the contrary: Normatively-desirable argumentative conduct commonly yields some persuasive advantage.

Responsiveness to Counterarguments

Third: It is normatively desirable that arguers be willing to defend their views against objections (attacks, counterarguments). That is, the normatively-responsible advocate, rather than avoiding opposing arguments, confronts these head-on and attempts to defend against them, presumably by refuting them.

There is an very extensive research literature concerning the relative persuasive effectiveness of ignoring as opposed to refuting opposing arguments. The relevant investigations compare the persuasiveness of (what are called) "one-sided" messages (which present only supporting arguments and so ignore opposing arguments) and "refutational two-sided" messages (which both present supporting arguments and refute opposing arguments). A meta-analysis of studies comparing the persuasive effectiveness of refutational two-sided messages and one-sided messages found a general persuasive advantage for refutational two-sided messages (O'Keefe, 1999a).⁵ Thus with respect to this particular element of normatively-desirable argumentative practice, there is no conflict between being normatively good and being practically effective. Indeed, on the contrary: Normatively-desirable argumentative conduct commonly yields some persuasive advantage.

Summary

In sum, when one looks at the observed persuasive effects of various specific normatively-relevant variables, it appears that, at least with respect to some very general desiderata for normatively-good argumentative conduct, there is at a minimum no incompatibility between certain broad normative standards and persuasive effectiveness--and indeed normatively-sound conduct may often be associated with enhanced persuasion.

A Magic Persuasion Bullet?

I now want to consider persuasion effects research from a different angle, one that is less interested in the specific findings associated with particular variables and more interested in the general pattern of effects across a variety of variables. The question to be addressed is whether there are grounds

for supposing that dependably powerful persuasive influences exist that could be at variance with the power of reasoned discourse. Put somewhat differently, the question is whether, given the research evidence in hand, there is (likely to be) any "magic persuasion bullet" that is so dependably powerful as to trump any influence by reasoned argument. And the claim I want to advance is that to all appearances, there is no such magic bullet. That is, there is no factor that is guaranteed to substantially enhance persuasion. I base this on two general observations that can be extracted from existing meta-analytic reviews of persuasion research. First, the observed effects of various factors on persuasive outcomes are relatively small. Second, those effects display considerable variability from message to message.

Mean Effects of Persuasion Variables

Here are some mean effect sizes, expressed as correlations, drawn from a variety of meta-analytic reviews of persuasion research. (Each of these means is the absolute value of an n -weighted mean r , computed using the $r-z-r$ transformation procedure, using the individual effect sizes reported in each meta-analysis.) The persuasive mean effect of delaying identification of the communicator is .04 (with 10 cases; O'Keefe, 1987). The mean effect of DARE programs on drug attitudes is .05 ($k = 8$; Ennett, Tobler, Ringwalt, & Flewelling, 1994). The mean effect of message framing on decision-making is .02 (Kuhberger, 1998). The mean effect on request compliance of the door-in-the-face strategy is .08 ($k = 88$; O'Keefe & Hale, 1998) and that of the foot-in-the-door strategy is .11 ($k = 33$; Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984). The mean difference in persuasive effects associated with including or omitting explicit conclusions is .09 ($k = 17$) and that for specific versus general conclusions is .15 ($k = 18$; O'Keefe, 2002; for an earlier review with similar findings, see O'Keefe, 1997). The mean persuasive effect associated with variations in language intensity is .02 ($k = 15$; Hamilton & Hunter, 1998). The mean difference in persuasive effects between one-sided messages and refutational two-sided messages is .07 ($k = 42$; O'Keefe, 1999a) and that between one-sided messages and nonrefutational two-sided messages is .03 ($k = 65$; O'Keefe, 1999a). The mean effect of forewarning on persuasive outcomes is .17 ($k = 12$; Benoit, 1998) and that of rhetorical questions is .05 ($k = 18$; Gayle, Preiss, & Allen, 1998).

Plainly, these are small effects (the simple average of these 12 correlations is .07). It appears that in persuasion effects research, one should not expect to find overall mean effect sizes much larger than a correlation of about .20. But one might appropriately wonder whether perhaps larger mean effects would be observed if one were to examine subsets of cases based on possible moderating factors. That is, even if the mean effect of a given variable is relatively small on average, perhaps under specifiable conditions (that is, within a specifiable subset of cases) the observed mean effect would be larger.

It is undoubtedly true that examining subsets of effect sizes could yield larger mean effects. However, the evidence in hand indicates that the difference is unlikely to be dramatic; specifiable subsets of studies commonly do not yield substantially larger mean effects. Consider, for example, the case of the door-in-the-face strategy. The overall mean effect of that strategy is .08 (with $k = 88$), but five moderating factors have been identified (factors that influence the size of the effect). However, even when all five factors are aligned so as to maximize

the strategy's effectiveness, the mean effect is still only .16 ($k = 45$; O'Keefe & Hale, 1998). Similarly, with respect to rhetorical questions, the overall mean effect is .05 ($k = 18$), which increases to .13 under optimal conditions (specifically, when considering only studies with "indirect" rhetorical questions, $k = 7$; Gayle, Preiss, & Allen, 1998).

In short, even when examining subsets of studies in which the effect of a variable is maximized, relatively small effect sizes are to be expected in persuasion research. This suggests that there is no variable (yet identified) that exerts an extraordinarily powerful effect on persuasive outcomes, in the sense of producing (on average) large effects. On the contrary, the variables that have been systematically examined thus far all display the property of producing comparatively small effects.

Variability of Effects Across Messages

Variability from message to message in the observed persuasive effects of a given variable is quite common and substantial. Of course, some variability is to be expected, if only because of human sampling variation; each different study uses a different sample of participants, so naturally there will be variation from study to study in the size of the observed effect. But persuasion meta-analyses commonly find that the observed case-to-case variability is three or four times larger than the amount one might expect on the basis of human sampling variation alone (for analytical details, see O'Keefe, 1999b).

Moreover, such variability persists even when one examines subsets of cases that have been identified on the basis of known moderating factors. Consider again the example of the door-in-the-face strategy. Even when all five known moderating factors are aligned identically so as to maximize the strategy's effectiveness, there is still significant variation from study to study in the size of the effect (see O'Keefe & Hale, 1998, pp. 17-18). Similarly, in studies comparing the persuasiveness of one-sided and refutational two-sided messages, if one examines only studies of public policy messages (that is, if one excludes studies of consumer advertising messages, where the mean effect is smaller), even within that limited subset there is significant study-to-study variability (O'Keefe, 1999a, p. 224).

In short, even under optimal conditions, substantial variability from message to message is to be expected in the effects of a given variable. This suggests that there is no variable (yet identified) that exerts an extraordinarily dependable effect on persuasive outcomes, in the sense of producing the same size effect in message after message. On the contrary, the variables that have been systematically examined thus far all display the property of producing effects that vary considerably from message to message.

Effect Size and Variability Considered Jointly

Taken together, the relatively small magnitudes of persuasion effect sizes and the substantial variability of effects from message to message directly suggest that there is no "magic bullet" in persuasion--nothing that sways people in a powerful and completely dependable way. If such a bullet were available, then one might have doubts about the role of reasoned argument in persuasion. After all, persuaders could simply employ the hypothetical "bullet" stratagem to

ensure persuasive success. But the research evidence in hand pretty clearly shows that there is not (or, more carefully, is not likely to be) any "magic persuasion bullet" that is so dependably powerful as to trump any influence by reasoned argument.

Conclusion

Considered jointly, these two aspects of persuasion effects research offer some reason for optimism about the role of reasoned discourse in human affairs. At least some normatively-sound argumentative practices commonly engender persuasive success, and the role of reasoned argument is unlikely to be undermined generally by any simple stratagem (some "magic bullet").

Of course, this optimism will want to be hedged. There is no claim here that there are no effective-but-normatively-questionable persuasive strategies; there is no claim that normatively-good conduct invariably enhances persuasiveness; there is no claim that reasoned argument always trumps clever ploys. Still and all, both the general pattern of results in persuasion effects research and the findings associated with specific normatively-relevant variables suggest a continuing place for reasoned discourse.

Notes

¹This section is based on a paper presented at the 2002 conference of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation, to appear in the conference proceedings (O'Keefe, in press).

²With a random-effects analysis, the mean effect corresponds to a correlation of .10 ($k = 17$; O'Keefe, 2002); the n -weighted mean correlation (computed using the r - z - r transformation procedure) is .09.

³With a random-effects analysis, the mean effect corresponds to a correlation of .07 ($k = 13$; O'Keefe, 1998); the n -weighted mean correlation (computed using the r - z - r transformation procedure) is .08.

⁴With a random-effects analysis, the mean effect corresponds to a correlation of .14 ($k = 18$; O'Keefe, 1998); the n -weighted mean correlation (computed using the r - z - r transformation procedure) is .13.

⁵With a random-effects analysis, the mean effect corresponds to a correlation of .08 ($k = 42$; O'Keefe, 1999a); the n -weighted mean correlation (computed using the r - z - r transformation procedure) is .07.

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