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**Persuasion in psychology**

# On the social psychology of social influence and persuasion: thinking and identity

**Michael Platow**

When studying social influence and persuasion, social psychologists seek to identify fundamental, underlying principles of behaviour that can help build a more complete picture of the complexities of human nature. We do *not* approach the study of social influence with the goal of obtaining a final 'to do' list that will guarantee successful results across a variety of situations; however, those who are interested in the potentials that psychology can offer to our understanding of social influence and persuasion should find this article a good introduction.

## Three broad approaches to understanding social influence and persuasion

There exist three broad approaches to understanding social influence within social psychology. The first considers social influence to be the outcome of not thinking. A simple statement of this approach is, 'if we'd only think, we would not be influenced by others.' From this approach, social influence is the domain primarily of tricksters and con-artists: if so, then it makes complete sense to develop an approach to social influence along the dimension of thinking or not.

The second broad approach effectively builds upon the first. It does so by first developing upon two potential outcomes of social influence: compliance and internalisation. With compliance, people go along with the social influence agent despite not truly accepting the agent's influence

attempt. This would occur, for example, when people publicly go along with others while privately believing something else; it also would occur in those unscrupulous cases of con-artists. Internalisation, by contrast, is the true believing and acceptance of the influence agent's communications; here people honestly and privately (not just publicly) take on board as truth the views of the influence agent. The dimension of thinking versus not thinking can link compliance and internalisation: not thinking often leading to compliance and thinking often leading to internalisation.

The third broad approach to understanding social influence represents more of a qualitative leap beyond the other two. First, its domain falls primarily within a thought-leads-to-internalisation process. Second, and more importantly, it considers social influence as a context-dependent social-psychological process. Thus extracting the individual to be influenced from that context so as to understand influence and persuasion simply makes no sense. For this third approach, the key feature of the social context is that of mentally accessible (cognitively salient) group memberships, along with the concomitant social identities people derive from these group memberships. In fact, as we will consider more fully below, the simple version of this approach is that people are influenced by fellow members of situationally-meaningful groups to which they belong; in other words, we are

influenced by in-group members, but not by out-group members, and this represents true internalisation and not mere compliance.

Below we consider each of these three approaches in turn.

### Not thinking: tricking us

As we observed above, this first approach considers not thinking to be the primary cause of social influence. It is an approach that builds upon the assumption that people rely on mental short-cuts to thinking as they go about their everyday lives, with this reliance leading people to be influenced by others, even if it is to their own detriment (as in the case with con-artists). To be sure, such tricking does occur. Moreover, those studying this approach of social influence have (slightly at odds with our opening observation) been able to develop a list of context cues that serve as mental shortcuts.

One item on the list is *liking*. If we like the influence agent, we will be more likely to be influenced by him or her, regardless of the content of the influencing communication. *Social proof* is another item from the list. Here, if we see others adopting the attitudes or behaviours of the influence agent, then this serves as a type of proof that the agent must be correct — if others are doing it, it must be true. So, again, we will be more likely to be influenced in the presence of social proof than in its absence, regardless of the content of the influencing communication. The list continues, with similar influence processes unfolding from *authorities*, with greater influence from an authority than a non-authority ('Trust me, I'm a doctor'); and under *scarcity*, with greater influence occurring when items are in short supply ('Hurry, buy one now, only 10 left in the store!'). The final two tricks on the list are *reciprocity* ('Look, I'm doing this

favour for you so you should go along with what I'm asking') and *commitment* ('You've already agreed to this smaller request, you clearly have no problem with this in general, so why not sign on to the whole thing.').

In many ways, this list does, in fact, represent truth. These are actual tricks that honest salespeople and not-so-honest con-artists use with considerable success. For most social psychologists, however, this list leaves us wanting because it provides us with little to no understanding of:

- (1) why people are influenced, even when they are thinking;
- (2) when people will be tricked (that is, a clearer understanding of the social context and what the relationship is between the influence agent and the person being influenced); and
- (3) whether people believe that they have been tricked (that is, whether this is compliance or actual internalisation).

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### Not thinking leading to compliance; thinking leading to internalisation

To address the problems posed by the first approach, social psychologists have developed an expanded analysis of social influence that considers influence as deriving from both thinking and not thinking. This analysis, called the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Model), assumes that there are two paths (or routes) to social influence and persuasion, termed the 'peripheral route' and the

'central route'. These are not meant to represent neurological pathways, but more metaphorically relate to the mental processes that underlie influence.

Influence that emerges through the peripheral route is akin to that described above. Here, rather than focusing on the content of a communication and being persuaded by, for example, the strength of the arguments, people are assumed to rely on peripheral cues in the situation. Peripheral cues include many of the things on the list described above, plus others. So, for example, the credibility of the communicator and the sheer number of arguments put (regardless of their quality) can serve as peripheral cues. The Model further assumes that social influence will emerge via the peripheral route when people are unable (for example because of time constraints) or unmotivated (because, for example, the issue is not sufficiently important) to think. Thus, rather than putting in

thought to consider the argument strength, people are likely to be more influenced by, say, a highly credible source than a non-credible source. This form of influence has more in common with compliance than with internalisation.

Influence that emerges via the central route, by contrast, represents the outcome of systematic thinking about the content of the communication. Thus, when the arguments are strong, people will be persuaded; when the arguments are



weak, people will not be persuaded. This form of processing occurs when people are able and motivated to think, and leads to influence that has more in common with internalisation than with compliance.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model has been successfully put to the test in many formal experiments.

group memberships can be anything on which people can be identified (and identify themselves) as the same or similar to others, including gender, nationality, ethnicity, sport team supporter, health status, and professional group, to name just a few potential examples. Our behaviour is thus determined by an

Our behaviour is ... determined by an interaction between our personal identities (who we are as unique individuals), our social identities (who we are as group members), and the context in which we find ourselves. Importantly, when our social identities become mentally accessible (cognitively salient), we are likely to behave in accord with the norms and values of that salient social group.

### The importance of understanding the person in context

Despite receiving substantial support, empirical and theoretical caveats have been observed in the Elaboration Likelihood Model. People are *not* independent agents, processing information as computers might. We have prior attitudes based upon our social positions as individuals and group members; and these independently affect our perceptions of argument strength and, hence, the degree to which we will be influenced by any particular argument.

Psychologists must take into account people's prior attitudes, the factors that formed (and continue to form) these attitudes (including prior social influence and persuasion), as well as the nature of the social relationship between the influence agent and those being influenced. Toward this end, social psychologists began by building into their analysis an important reality of life: we are members of social groups as much as we are unique individuals, and these groups define specific relationships we may have with influence agents as well as providing us with a basis for forming *a priori* attitudes. These

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### Social identity and group membership: thinking and internalisation

The third approach to the understanding of social influence that we will consider is called Self-categorisation theory. This theory places causal focus on how people define themselves in any particular social context. The key psychological process assumed to produce these self-definitions relates to the similarities and differences people perceive they have with others. When similarities outweigh differences, people are likely to see themselves as sharing group membership with others (for example, 'we Australians' in contrast to 'those Americans'); when the differences outweigh similarities, people are likely to see themselves as unique individuals (that is, 'me' in contrast to 'you'). Thus, the outcome of these

similarity judgments can lead people to define themselves in any given context, at any given time, as unique individuals *or* as group members. This variability in self-definition is important because the theory proposes, in its simplest form, that social influence emerges from communications from fellow in-group members and not out-group members.

Of course, we are all members of a variety of different groups, and who is an in-group member in one situation may be considered to be an out-group member in another. Remember, this is a psychological analysis, so group memberships are not conceptualised in sociological terms (for example, internal structure, constitution, nature of interpersonal interdependence), but in psychological terms based upon perceived similarities and differences. What matters for this psychological analysis is that, in whatever context we find ourselves, the features that are in that situation and what we bring to that situation (for example, motives and goals) lead us to define ourselves at that time as members of one group or another (or as unique individuals). This variability in self-definition and self-categorisation (that is, self-understanding as a group member) is assumed to be highly fluid in nature, so that people can and do quickly shift between one self-definition and another. Social influence depends on the nature of people's current self-definition, and whether or not it incorporates the influencing agent.

Self-categorisation theory further assumes that people expect to agree with others whom they see as similar to themselves, which, for this analysis, are fellow in-group members but not out-group members. When disagreement with in-group members occurs, uncertainty arises, leading people to work to rectify this uncertainty. One way to achieve this is to alter one's original view to align it with others, producing agreement instead of disagreement and uncertainty. This altering of one's

original view is the influence process, and is assumed to be true influence in the sense of internalisation rather than mere compliance. This latter point is as important because our intuitions may lead us to see group-based

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influence as simply conformity (for example, we go along so as not to be ostracised), but not from this analysis (as we will see more fully below).

Yet another laboratory experiment was conducted to test the importance of group membership on social influence. That experiment provides strong evidence in support of the role of shared group membership in producing social influence. It tells us that we think about communications from in-group members and are persuaded if the communications present strong rather than weak arguments; this is not the case with communications from out-group members. That study, however, and many similar others, is *judgmental* in nature. Basically, the social influence was measured along attitude scales, while actual behaviour was completely ignored. This allows the studies to remain open to criticisms of mere compliance from demand characteristics in the study (that is, participants just doing what they think they are expected to do) and impression management (that is, participants just doing what they think they ought to do so as to look good for the experimenter). To overcome these potential criticisms, my students and I have conducted two very simple studies of group-based social influence in which we obtained behavioural measures and measures less under people's conscious control.

The first study we conducted was an analysis of *canned laughter*. Canned laughter is the recorded laughter placed on many television situation

comedies to cue people that something is funny (as a form of social proof) and encourage audience laughter. The clear purpose of canned laughter is to influence others to laugh too. In our experiment, we brought university

students into our laboratory and asked them to listen to an audiotape of a stand-up comedian. The tape they listened to either had canned laughter dubbed over it, or had no audience laughter at all. If non-thinking social proof is all that is needed to effect influence, then people should laugh more in the presence of canned laughter than in its absence. However, we added one important twist. We told half of the participants that the recording was made in front of an in-group audience (in this case, students from their same university), and the other half that the recording was made in front of an out-group audience (supporters of a disliked political party). If the self-categorisation theory analysis of social influence is correct, then our participants should laugh primarily in the presence of canned laughter from fellow in-group members. And this is exactly what happened. By contrast, when hearing canned laughter from supposed out-group members, participants' overall levels of laughter were no higher than not hearing any laughter at all (that is, the complete absence of social proof). This same pattern also translated into participants' subjective ratings of the comedic material as well as the comedian's potential for success.

Finally, a sceptic can still see the canned laughter study as one in which participants may have been intentionally suppressing their overt laughter so as not to be associated with the disliked political party. To overcome this, we conducted a second



study in which participants were twice exposed to a *painful stimulus* during which we measured their physiological arousal associated with the painful experience. The results were clear: participants were physiologically calmer when reassurance came from a fellow in-group member than when it came from an out-group member (which was no better than not being reassured at all). In other words, social influence followed from in-group but not out-group members, even on this non-reactive measure in a known pain situation. In fact, the non-reactive nature of the measure is the important feature of this study – the very fact that it is quite difficult intentionally to control galvanic skin responses increases our confidence that we observed true internalisation, and not mere compliance.

### Conclusions

Social psychologists have approached their study of social influence and persuasion in three broad ways. What is clear from this review is that people are influenced by others not just when they fail to think, but when they think as well; and this influence entails not simply mere compliance, but true internalisation too. What should also be clear is that each of the three

approaches presented in this article develops this understanding just a little bit further. In analysing the social influence context, we must consider not simply thinking and not thinking, but the group-based relationship that the person being influenced has with the influence agent. ●

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