

Forewarnings and inoculation in persuasion



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Persuasion and resistance to persuasion are one of most extensively studied topic areas in social psychology. This topic is covered frequently in social psychology because the effects of persuasion are seen everywhere and are applicable in everyday life. Methods for building up resistance to persuasion include reactance, forewarning and the inoculation effect. How forewarning and the inoculation effect affect persuasion will be outlined for the purposes of this paper. Moreover, the application of these barriers to persuasion has been expounded in areas such as consumer research which will be outlined later. There is extensive research on how forewarning affects persuasion. As the very title of the concept suggests, to be forewarned implies knowing in advance the attempt to persuade (Hogg & Vaughan, 2008). An example of how forewarning affects persuasion can be applied to a pupil wanting to drop out of school. This pupil knows that dropping out of school will more than likely elicit persuasion attempts by his or her parents not to drop out of school so he or she develops a list of counterarguments for every argument that his or her parents might make (Myers, 2008). Persuasion is thus less effective when we know that someone is going to try to influence our beliefs. William McGuire (1962) first coined the phrase attitude inoculation, which is derived from virus inoculation. McGuire (1962) suggested that people can be inoculated against persuasion just as they can be inoculated from a virus by pre-exposing him to weakened forms of the counter-arguments but not so strong as to overcome, his belief defences (p. 25). Empirical research on attitude inoculation came to the fore during the Korean War when McGuire and his colleagues became fascinated in the brainwashing of American soldiers by the Chinese. A small number of American soldiers wished to remain in China

after the war ended. McGuire reasoned this was as a result of these soldiers not being forewarned against Marxist logic (Hogg & Vaughan, 2008).

Empirical Support Freedman and Sears (1965) demonstrated a forewarning effect. Participants in a high school were separated into two groups. One group was warned ten minutes before a lecture began on ¿½Why teenagers should not be allowed to drive¿½. The second group of participants were not forewarned on the subject of the lecture. Results postulated that those participants who were forewarned on the topic of the lecture resisted persuasion. The other group of participants who had not been forewarned did budge in their opinions (Freedman & Sears, 1965). McGuire (1961a, 1961b; Papageorgis & McGuire, 1961; McGuire & Papageorgis, 1962) conducted a series of studies that examined both forewarning and the inoculation effect. These were designed to test how effective different types of prior defences were in making an individual resistant to persuasion when later exposed to ¿½massive doses of counter-arguments¿½ (McGuire & Papageorgis, 1962). McGuire (1961a) differentiated between two barriers to persuasion; the supportive defence and the refutational defence. The supportive defence implies that an individual can resist persuasion by using supplementary arguments to support beliefs originally held. The term refutational defense implies that an individual can resist persuasion by hearing counter-arguments of the belief held and then hear a refutation of these counter-arguments (McGuire, 1961a). These terms stem from the ¿½selective exposure¿½ postulate that people tend to resist persuasion by avoiding being exposed to counter-arguments altogether, rather than by developing arguments for their beliefs (McGuire, 1961a). Earlier research

focused on cultural truisms because it was hypothesised that dissonance would be almost completely unavailable (1961b, p. 26). Moreover, this research was confined to laboratory settings. McGuire (1961a) incorporated four different conditions to examine supportive and refutational defences. These were supportive-only, refutational-only, supportive-then-refutational and refutational-then-supportive. These defences came before the attacks in half of the conditions and after the attacks in the other half. McGuire (1961a) yielded highly significant results. The supportive-only defence was found to be most effective in four of the conditions to strengthen already held beliefs prior to any attack but was the least effective when resisting an attack. Moreover, the refutational-only defence was better than the supportive-only defence in granting resistance to the attack (but only when the attack involved the very counter-arguments refuted.) Additionally, results ascertained that the supportive defence previously established to be unsuccessful in granting resistance to persuasion when used on its own, does play a part in resistance when used in concordance with the refutational defence. McGuire (1961a) describes this as a supportive-plus-refutational defence (p. 193). From this earlier study it is seen how inoculation treatments were superior to supportive-only treatments. In an experiment, McGuire (1961b) had participants rate four cultural truisms, for example, it is a good idea to brush your teeth after every meal if at all possible. Participants in the defence group were allocated to one of two conditions, the supportive defence group or the inoculation defence group. There also existed two control groups. After being exposed to small doses of counter-arguments, results showed that participants in the inoculation defence group were better able to handle a stronger attack on

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their beliefs (McGuire, 1961b). Additionally, half of all participants were forewarned and the other half were not. Results indicated that those in the forewarned conditions would be better able to resist persuasion than those that had not been forewarned. Later research began to apply the inoculation effect to more controversial areas such as politics. Pfau, Kenski, Nitz and Sorenson (1990) applied the use of inoculation strategies in promoting resistance to political attack messages. They were specifically interested in the political communication channel of direct mail. The authors^{1/2} focused on the differences between inoculation messages and post-hoc refutation messages. Inoculation messages are deemed more promising for individuals resisting the persuasive attempts of political campaigns. The results of this study showed that inoculation and inoculation-plus-reinforcement were better strategies than refutational strategies in resisting attitude change toward a candidate following contact with a political attack message. However, there was no difference between inoculation and refutational strategies on attitude change toward position (Pfau et al., 1990). Pfau and colleagues (1997) moved away from research based on the presumption that inoculation involves a threat and instead attempted to question the cognitive processes that underlie inoculation. Previous research acknowledged that the existence of a threat was critical for the inoculation process but not why or how the threat makes you want to resist persuasion (McGuire, 1961a, 1961b, McGuire, 1962; McGuire & Papageorgis, 1961). It is posited that involvement in the attitude object is a crucial component to understanding the cognitive processes produced by threat (Pfau et al., 1997). It depends on how well a receiver is involved with an attitude object that determines his or her motivation to process information on that specific attitude object (Pfau et

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al., 1997). This study was the first to incorporate the three variables of involvement, threat and inoculation together (Pfau et al., 1997). Involvement was measured using the unidimensional Personal Involvement Inventory scale (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Counter-arguing was described as explaining the cognitive process activated by threat (Pfau et al., 1997). Further support was found for the role of threat in the inoculation process but how this process works to resist persuasion is never fully explained by Pfau et al. (1997). The path models produced show some discrepancies about what is fully going on in the process of inoculation. This suggests the inclusion of more variables in future research.

Real-Life applications of Forewarning and Inoculation

Applied research on the processes of forewarning and attitude inoculation has a widespread contribution to make in everyday life. More specifically, this section will focus on political campaigns, smoking prevention, commercial advertising and marketing. Pfau, Park, Holbert and Cho (2001) investigated the ability of inoculation effects to combat party and PAC sponsored issue advertising's impact on the democratic process. The results posited that participants in the inoculation condition saw the viewers of party-sponsored ads as more interested in campaigns, had a better understanding of the candidates and their positions and were more likely to cast a vote (Pfau et al. 2001). The use of inoculation theory has been incorporated by public service advertising campaigns to prevent smoking, drug abuse and sexually transmitted diseases. Inoculation has been shown to reduce such risky behaviour by 30-70% (Botvin, Schinke & Orlandi, 1995; Perry et al., 1980; Evans et al., 1978). Evans, Rozelle, Mittlemark and

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colleagues (1978) examined inoculation on 750 students entering the seventh grade. Based on McGuire's earlier research (1961a, 1961b; McGuire, 1962; McGuire & Papageorgis, 1961), cigarette smoking was conceptualised as the result of persuasive messages in the form of peer pressure, exposure to smokers and the media's influence to smoke cigarettes (Evans et al. 1978). Adolescent non-smokers were inoculated against the negative effects of cigarette smoking by viewing a weak pro-smoking message and then a progressively stronger pro-smoking message. The results of this study indicated that the rate of onset in smoking in the treatment group was significantly lower than the control group (Evans et al. 1978). These results signify the ability of inoculation to strengthen negative attitudes toward smoking. Burgoon, Pfau and Birk (1995) empirically investigated issue/advocacy advertising campaigns. Results postulated that issue/advocacy advertising can inoculate against attitude slippage by issuing media releases on debates of contention. This can be related to the multinational beer, wine and spirits company Diageo who regularly participate in promoting alcohol awareness campaigns and fund alcohol research. Recently, Diageo recruited Formula One driver Lewis Hamilton for an anti-drink driving campaign (Penman, 2008). Inoculation can thus be applied to this multinational company which attempts to look after consumer loyalty by issuing media releases on controversial topics. More recently, Jalnawala and Wilkin (2007) examined the processes of inoculation under the context of pharmaceutical marketing on direct to consumer advertising. The study was conducted to examine the effect of sidedness of appeals and argument types in comprehending beliefs formed after exposure with advertisements. Participants exposed to the inoculation condition, which is a

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two-sided persuasive message, showed smaller changes in their beliefs and intent in planning to enquire following a negative experience than subjects exposed to 1-sided appeals (Jalnawala & Wilkin, 2007). Research has shown two-sided presentations to be more persuasive if your audience will be exposed to conflicting views (Myers, 2008). Moreover, a two-sided message is seen as a more fair and balanced view as it incorporates both the pro and con side of an argument. Jalnawala and Wilkin (2007) recognised that inoculation can increase the tenacity of consumers's beliefs by complying with the 'fair-balance' requirement. Political campaigns, smoking prevention and commercial advertising are just some of the avenues that have applied the social psychological concepts of forewarning and inoculation. Research into the practical application of forewarning and application is expanding and sure to yield further interesting findings.