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Resisting Persuasion by Counterarguing: An Attitude Strength Perspective

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Prologue¹

My approach to the topic in this chapter, and to social psychology more generally, is compatible with Bill McGuire's contextualist/perspectivist framework. According to this view, almost every finding in social psychology depends on some contextual factors that moderate when the finding occurs, when it does not, and when it reverses. Because a contextualist already knows that nearly anything is possible, it becomes particularly important to understand *when* various phenomena occur. In order to understand when something will occur, one often has to understand *why* it occurs—and to understand why something occurs, it is often useful to understand when it occurs. Thus, my work has focused on the moderation and mediation of social phenomena—especially in the area of attitudes.

Exhibit 1 in this regard is the Elaboration Likelihood model of persuasion—a theory of moderated mediation (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty & Wegener, 1999). That is, the theory specifies how social psychological variables (e.g., source credibility, mood) can produce different outcomes via different mediating mechanisms depending on the context. When introduced, this contextualist theory stood in contrast to what was perhaps the more natural and appealing inclination of attitude theorists: to postulate that variables had one true effect and one true process by which the effect was achieved (Petty, 1997). However, the contextualist approach was necessary to understand the diversity of research findings obtained.

A danger of contextualist frameworks is that they can become meaningless by simply postulating that anything can happen. With this philosophy, one can never be wrong! Thus, the most useful contextualist studies and theories are careful to specify which contexts produce which effects and for which reasons. When this is accomplished, contextualism provides a powerful

¹The prologue to this chapter was written by Richard E. Petty.

framework for understanding the complexities that are inherent in social behavior.

This chapter is about people's attempts to resist persuasion by counterarguing and the consequences of that attempted resistance for the strength of the resulting attitudes. Counterarguing is not the only way in which people try to resist, of course, but it is the most commonly studied. Thus, it is useful to understand the implications of trying to counterargue as a starting point for understanding the implications of trying to resist persuasion more generally. Our approach to this topic is a contextualist one: We hold that a diversity of outcomes is possible depending on the particular contextual factors present.

Our framework can be stated simply in three propositions. First, when people attempt to counterargue a message, sometimes they resist the message and attitudes do not change, but at other times, despite the attempted counterarguing, attitudes are changed in the direction of the advocacy. Second, when people do not change attitudes following counterarguing, sometimes their confidence in their old attitudes is increased, but sometimes confidence in their old attitudes is decreased. Third, when people change their attitudes despite attempted counterarguing, sometimes confidence in the new attitudes is increased compared with situations in which the attitudes are changed the same amount but without attempted counterarguing, but sometimes confidence in the new attitudes is decreased compared with situations in which counterarguing was not attempted.² Because numerous outcomes are possible, our objective in this chapter is to outline the conditions under which each of these effects is likely to occur and to present some preliminary research on the topic. In the first phase of our research program, we have focused on cases in which confidence in one's old or new attitude is likely to be increased as a result of attempted counterarguing.

Understanding the consequences of attempted counterarguing for attitudinal confidence is potentially important because the more confidence people have in their attitudes, the stronger those attitudes are. During the 1990s, attitudes researchers clearly showed that the valence of an attitude is not the only important factor in persuasion situations. This is because attitudes of the same valence (e.g., +2) can also vary in their strength (Petty & Krosnick, 1995). The concept of attitude strength recognizes that all attitudes of the same valence are not equally consequential. In general, the stronger the attitude is, the more resistant it is to subsequent attacks, the longer it endures over time, and the greater the impact it has on judgments and behavior (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). An attitude's overall strength is determined by a number of features such as how accessible the attitude is (Fazio, 1995), how much prior thought was devoted to it (Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995), how much confidence one has in it (Gross, Holtz, & Miller, 1995), and so forth. In

²It is also possible for people to show attitude change in the direction opposite to the advocacy (i.e., a boomerang effect). We suspect that the level of confidence in these attitudes would be quite high and that variations in confidence would follow from the same principles that we outline for attitudes that are unchanged following attempted counterarguing.

our work, we focus on the confidence or certainty with which people hold their attitudes, because this is a reliable determinant of attitude strength and is something people are likely to reflect upon following attempted resistance.

Before turning to our recent work, it is useful to review some background information on resistance research. Early on in the study of attitude change, investigators were concerned primarily with making persuasion work. It was not until the early 1960s that researchers began to systematically investigate resistance to persuasive communications. Indeed, in his 1964 paper, Bill McGuire noted that "little was being done on ways of producing resistance to persuasion" (p.192). Sparked by McGuire's inoculation theory (McGuire, 1964; McGuire & Papageorgis, 1961), however, a new interest grew in the exploration of resistance, and this interest continues today (e.g., see Knowles & Linn, 2004). Attitude researchers have used the term "resistance" in a variety of ways over the years. We address these next.

The Multiple Meanings of Resistance

Perhaps the dominant use of the term resistance is as an *outcome*. As an outcome, resistance refers to the absence or attenuation of attitude change. That is, resistance can imply zero attitude change, reduced attitude change in one condition relative to another, or even reversed attitude change (i.e., boomerang). Although zero attitude change is often construed as resistance, it is important to note that this outcome can be obtained for reasons that have little to do with resistance processes or resistance motivation. For example, zero attitude change can stem from simple failure to attend to or understand a message (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953).

As a *motivation*, resistance refers to having the goal of resisting attitude change or the desire to keep one's current attitude. Such motivation may or may not result in the outcome of resistance. Several specific motives that can instill a desire to resist persuasion or defend one's attitude from attack have been identified. For example, *reactance* involves the motivation to restore freedom (Brehm, 1966). Thus, when people believe someone is attempting to influence or persuade them, they may react against that attempt and stubbornly refuse to change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979a). *Consistency* motives have also been implicated in this regard. According to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), for example, people are motivated to resist changing their attitudes when doing so will result in inconsistent beliefs or attitudes that are inconsistent with prior behavior. It is perhaps surprising that increasing *accuracy motives* might also make people more defensive of their current attitudes if they are highly confident that those attitudes are correct (Petty & Wegener, 1999). Indeed, our subjectively correct attitudes are presumably most worthy of defense.

Resistance *processes* refer to the specific mechanisms by which resistance outcomes can be obtained (e.g., counterarguing). Sometimes these resistance processes stem directly from resistance motives, but at other times, resistance processes can occur naturally in the course of thinking about a message objectively (e.g., when a person motivated to be objective finds that the message arguments are weak and therefore counterargues them; Petty & Cacioppo,

1986). When studying resistance as a process, researchers move beyond trying to understand whether a variable (e.g., low source credibility) ultimately reduces persuasion and focus on *how* that variable reduces persuasion. Researchers have identified a number of mechanisms through which resistance occurs. For example, generating *counterarguments* or *unfavorable thoughts* has typically been found to reduce or prevent attitude change (e.g., Brock, 1967; Killea & Johnson, 1998; see Petty, Ostrom, & Brock, 1981). This mechanism is the focus of the current research and is especially likely to operate when processing motivation (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1979a) and ability (e.g., Wood, Rhodes, & Biek, 1995) are high, such as when the topic is one that is important to the person. In addition, people have been shown to resist through *attitude bolstering*, meaning that they selectively generate or recall information or beliefs that support their attitudes (Lydon, Zanna, & Ross, 1988). Resistance can also occur by *derogating the source* of a persuasive message (e.g., Tannenbaum, Macauley, & Norris, 1966). Furthermore, resistance can occur through *selective attention* to or *avoidance* of attitude-congruent information (Frey, 1986; Gilbert, 1993). Also, *negative affect*, or irritation, has been found to enhance resistance outcomes (e.g., Cacioppo & Petty, 1979; Zuwerink & Devine, 1996).

Finally, research on resistance as a *quality* examines the types of people or attitudes that are resistant to change. Certain types of people (e.g., those high in authoritarianism; Rokeach, 1960) are more difficult to persuade than others. They are resistant individuals (see Briñol et al., 2004). Similarly, certain types of attitudes are more resistant to persuasion than others (Petty & Krosnick, 1995). For example, attitudes that are accessible (Fazio, 1995) or formed with much thought (Petty et al., 1995) are more resistant than those that are inaccessible or formed without much thought. Most germane for the current research is the idea that attitudes held with high confidence are more resistant to change than are attitudes held with low confidence (e.g., Bassili, 1996).

McGuire's Inoculation Theory

Inoculation theory (McGuire, 1964) is an outstanding example of research on resistance because it exemplifies all four of the meanings of resistance we have outlined. To review briefly, inoculation theory draws on the common medical practice of immunizing people against disease by exposing them to an initial weak dose of the disease. Exposure to the weak disease inoculates the body by causing the formation of antibodies that help people resist more serious exposures to the disease later on. McGuire (1964; McGuire & Papageorgis, 1961) argued that just as the body can be inoculated against diseases, attitudes can be inoculated against persuasive messages, that is, exposure to a *mild* persuasive attack that could be refuted would help people resist a stronger persuasive attack in the future.

In the original test of inoculation theory, McGuire and Papageorgis (1961) gave people persuasive messages attacking cultural truisms—beliefs that are widely shared in a society and rarely, if ever, attacked (e.g., "It's a good idea to brush your teeth after every meal."). Such truisms should be highly vulner-

able to persuasive attacks because people have little or no experience defending them: These attitudes have no "antibodies." In their study, McGuire and Papageorgis (1961) first assessed participants' endorsement of several cultural truisms. In one condition, participants then read several paragraphs containing arguments supporting the truisms (support condition). In another condition, participants were exposed to several arguments against the truisms and then read paragraphs refuting each of the arguments raised (inoculation condition). In a third condition, participants were given no information at all (no defense condition). Two days after participants had been exposed to the treatment conditions, they were presented with persuasive messages attacking each truism. McGuire found that the attitudes of participants in the no-defense and support conditions evinced substantial change toward the position of the persuasive message. Participants in the inoculation condition, however, showed significantly less change (i.e., attitudes were more resistant). It is important to note that in the inoculation approach, the initial arguments refuted do not have to match the arguments presented in the follow-up persuasive messages, that is, exposing participants to an initial weak attack confers increased resistance even if the second attack contains completely different arguments (see Papageorgis & McGuire, 1961).

Inoculation theory addresses each of the four aforementioned aspects of resistance. First, McGuire's objective with inoculation theory was to demonstrate a powerful way to reduce attitude change (i.e., to produce a resistance outcome). He accomplished this goal by providing and eliciting counterargumentation to an initial mild attack (i.e., resistance as a process). The initial mild attack was intended to instill a desire to resist a later message by showing people that an important attitude was vulnerable (i.e., resistance as a motivation). In addition to instilling some resistance motivation, the initial attack gave people some preliminary practice in defending their attitudes. Finally, the inoculation treatment rendered the initial attitude more resistant to subsequent attempts to change it (resistance as a quality).

Implications of Attempted Counterarguing for Attitude Strength

In McGuire's work on inoculation, the resistance quality of an attitude was changed by providing people with an inoculation treatment. In his research, the inoculation treatment was designed to be relatively weak so that it would not undermine people's initial attitudes but would simply make them more resistant to future attacks. As noted previously, the mechanism by which the attitudes became more resistant was presumed to be that the inoculation treatment enhanced the motivation and ability of recipients to counterargue future attacks.

In this chapter, we describe an alternative mechanism by which attitudes can become more resistant to future attacks as a result of attempting to resist an initial message. The research is presented in two parts. First, we describe a program of research in which people attempt to resist a message and are successful—that is, their attitudes are unchanged (Tormala & Petty, 2002). Next, we describe a program of research in which people attempt to resist a message

but are unsuccessful—that is, their attitudes are changed (Rucker & Petty, in press). In each line of research, we are interested in how the resistance attempt, whether successful or not, can lead to enhanced attitude confidence. Finally, we outline a model of when successful and failed resistance might lead to reduced as well as enhanced attitude confidence.

Successful Resistance

The first program of research, on successful resistance (Tormala & Petty, 2002), expands on some possibilities first raised in McGuire's inoculation theory. First, consistent with McGuire's findings, we believe that resistance to initial persuasive attacks may sometimes confer greater resistance to later attacks as well. We depart from the specific mechanism proposed by inoculation theory, however. Most important, we argue that an attack on one's attitude has potential consequences for the strength of the attitude attacked. We postulate that the increased resistance induced by inoculation treatments and other persuasive messages need not stem exclusively from increasing a person's motivation and ability to counterargue. Rather, such resistance could arise from fundamental changes in the underlying confidence with which the person holds the initial attitude. If there is a change in attitude confidence, it follows that there should be a change not only in terms of the extent to which the attitude is resistant to subsequent persuasion attempts but also in other consequences, such as the ability of the attitude to predict behavior. Finally, we postulate that changes in attitude strength come about through a metacognitive mechanism whereby people perceive their own resistance and form inferences about their attitudes.

To illustrate the metacognitive process we propose, consider a person who is strongly opposed to animal testing and is presented with a pro-testing advocacy. He or she might want to resist persuasion and thus actively counterargue the message and avoid any attitude change. Given the importance of the topic and the active nature of this resistance, it is likely that the individual is aware of his or her counterarguing and recognizes that this effort was effective in preventing persuasion. We posit that when people try to resist a message and perceive that they were successful in resisting the message, the confidence with which the person holds the attitude can increase because successful resistance implies attitude validity. This newly acquired sense of validity or confidence should lead the individual to be more resistant to future persuasion and more likely to behave in accord with the attitude in the future (Fazio & Zanna, 1978).

Our metacognitive analysis allows for a unique prediction about the nature of the message a person resists. Specifically, the stronger the person perceives the resisted message to be, the more confidence that person should develop in his or her attitude. Perhaps it was not salient before the successful resistance that one's position was so good that it could withstand a strong attack; if the attitude can withstand a strong attack, however, it is reasonable to infer that the attitude must be valid. On the other hand, if people successfully defend their attitudes against a weak attack, confidence in the attitude

should not increase. When resisting a weak attack, one cannot be certain that the attitude would have survived a strong challenge. Under these circumstances, one's successful resistance is less diagnostic regarding the validity of the target attitude. Thus, varying the perceived quality of the arguments that people resist provides one way of testing whether the metacognitive processes we propose are operating. We next describe a series of studies designed to explore these possibilities.

STUDY 1. To examine whether our metacognitive framework held any promise, we conducted an initial study in which students were presented with a proposal from their university's board of trustees to institute a policy requiring college seniors to pass a comprehensive exam in their major area in order to graduate (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1979b). All participants received a message that contained two strong and two weak arguments on the issue. An example of a strong argument was that implementing the exam policy would increase the starting salary for graduates. An example of a weak argument was that implementing the exam policy would allow students to compare their scores with students at other universities (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The students were also told that in order to get reactions to all kinds of arguments in favor of the exam policy, we were presenting some students with strong arguments and some with weak arguments. In the *perceived strong arguments* condition, the students were told that the experimenters included only the strongest of all the arguments raised in favor of the exam policy. In the *perceived weak arguments* conditions, they were told that the experimenters included only the weakest of all the arguments in favor of the exam policy.

To encourage resistance to change, all students were told to try to counterargue the message. They then read the message, listed their counterarguments, and completed the key measures—attitudes toward the issue and confidence in their attitudes. A control group consisting of students who did not receive a message was included so that we could determine the direction of any confidence effects that emerged.

The results of this study revealed that the counterargument instructions were successful in getting students to resist persuasion. Neither the group that received the arguments labeled strong nor the group that received the arguments labeled weak differed in attitudes from the no-message control group. However, the confidence measure showed a different pattern. When people resisted what they thought was a strong message, their attitude confidence increased compared with that of the perceived weak message and control groups; that is, when people successfully resisted strong arguments, their attitude confidence increased. When these people successfully resisted weak arguments, attitude confidence did not increase. This finding is consistent with our metacognitive framework: People only gained confidence when their resistance was diagnostic.

STUDY 2. Study 1 demonstrated that confidence in one's initial attitude can be increased by metacognitive processes that follow successful resistance—but is this enhanced confidence in one's initial attitude meaningful? For example,

does it render the attitude more resistant to subsequent attacks? Such an effect would parallel what McGuire (1964) was able to show with his inoculation treatments. We examined this possibility in our second experiment.

After participants counterargued an ostensibly strong or weak message and reported their attitudes (as in Study 1), we had them engage in a 15-min filler task and then exposed them to a second, stronger message containing new arguments in favor of the same issue (comprehensive exams). Participants were told to try and counterargue the first message but were not told to counterargue the second. As in Study 1, there were no differences in attitudes after the first message. As expected, though, participants who had initially resisted a message believed to be strong showed significantly *less* change in response to the second message than did participants who had initially resisted a message believed to be weak. Thus, it appears that resistance to future attacks is enhanced when people initially resist an attack that is believed to be strong. In other words, the group that presumably developed the most confidence in the initial attitude was most resistant to a future attack. Because the perceived strong and weak groups actually received the same initial attack on their initial attitudes and resisted it to the same degree, the inoculation approach would predict the same level of subsequent resistance from these groups. Because we found differences in subsequent resistance, however, our metacognitive perspective increases understanding of when inoculation-type effects are most likely to occur.

STUDY 3. In a third study, we sought to test whether the new attitude strength that results from resisting a message perceived as strong could have implications beyond future resistance. We tested the possibility that the increased attitude confidence we observed would strengthen attitude-behavior consistency. To examine this notion, at the end of an experiment that was essentially identical to Study 1, we told participants that the university would be holding a student vote on the issue raised in the message (comprehensive exams), and we asked them how they planned to vote. The key new result was that compared with a control group, attitudes were more highly correlated with voting intentions after participants had resisted a message they believed to be strong than after they had resisted a message believed to be weak. These findings illustrate that our attitude strength perspective permits predictions unanticipated by inoculation theory. In addition to increasing resistance to subsequent attacks, initial successful resistance can enhance the relationship between attitudes and intended behavior.

SUMMARY. In our first series of studies (Tormala & Petty, 2002), we showed that getting people to resist an initial attacking message can cause an increase in attitude confidence. This only occurs, however, to the extent that people believe they resisted a message that was reasonably cogent. People who successfully resisted a message perceived as weak did not show an increase in attitude confidence even though their initial resistance was in fact the same. Furthermore, analysis of the counterarguments listed by participants in the strong and weak conditions of each study demonstrated that the counterarguments generated were equivalent in number, quality, and focus (i.e., which

arguments in the messages they addressed). The only difference appeared to be the inference they drew about their attitudes based on their resistance.³

Unsuccessful Resistance

In the studies described so far, counterarguing produced successful resistance. This was ensured because the initial messages participants confronted contained a mix of strong and weak arguments. But what if people were trying to resist by counterarguing and were not successful? What would happen if the arguments in the message were so strong that despite people's best efforts, they could not generate counterarguments? Under these conditions, attitudes would be expected to change in the direction of the message advocacy. In this section, we describe a program of research by Rucker and Petty (in press) that examines cases in which people try to counterargue a message but are unsuccessful in doing so. These individuals are compared with people who change their attitudes to the same degree but who are not trying explicitly to resist.

Much prior work in the attitude change literature shows that if you can get people to think carefully about strong message arguments, attitude change will follow from the favorable thoughts that they generate toward these arguments (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Ostrom & Brock, 1981). Is there any possible advantage to persuading people by encouraging them to try to counterargue a strong message rather than to simply think about it? Our metacognitive framework makes a unique prediction in this respect. First, recall from our first series of studies (Tormala & Petty, 2002) that if people are trying to counterargue a message and feel successful, they have greater confidence in the attitude they just defended. If people are trying to counterargue and fail, however, we expect them to have more confidence in their *new* attitudes than if their attitudes changed *the same degree* as a result of more objective (undirected) thinking about the topic.

Why would this be? The reason for this is that if people are just thinking naturally about strong arguments, they will presumably be generating favorable thoughts toward the message and attitudes will change because of the favorable thoughts generated. If people specifically are trying to counterargue but can only come up with favorable thoughts, however, they will realize both that there are favorable thoughts *and* that there are no viable counterarguments against the position. This additional inference should enhance confidence in the new (changed) attitude.

STUDY 1. In our first study on this topic, we instructed some college students to try to counterargue an advertisement and others to simply think about it carefully. All participants were told that they would be receiving some facts about a familiar brand of aspirin. After receiving the "counterargue" or "think" instructions, participants received a message about the aspirin that contained some very compelling facts (e.g., "clinically proven to outlast all

³Additional studies in this paradigm further suggested that the same effects occur when participants are presented with messages that are actually strong or weak rather than merely labeled strong or weak. This suggests that people will naturally make inferences about the strength of the message they resisted and helps rule out various alternative explanations for the data.

other brands of aspirin by 4 hours"). Following the message, each of the persuasive arguments was presented to the participants separately on a computer screen and the participants were told to use the keyboard to enter a "thought" or a "negative thought" (i.e., counterargument) depending on condition. If no appropriate thoughts came to mind, participants were told that they could type the word "none." The latter instruction was included so that participants in the counterargue condition were "allowed" to fail if they really could not generate any negative thoughts. A group that did not receive any message or any thought instruction was included as a control.

On the attitude measure that followed the message and thought listing task, both the thought and the counterargue groups showed the same favorable attitudes toward the new aspirin. As expected, these groups were both more favorable than the control group, indicating that attitude change had occurred. However, the ratings of attitude confidence showed that participants who tried to generate negative thoughts had more confidence in their favorable attitudes than did individuals who simply thought about the strong arguments.

STUDY 2. Our hypothesis is that trying to counterargue and failing is critical to producing increased confidence in one's new attitude, but we have only compared trying to counterargue with trying to think. Counterarguing is an attempt to generate a particular kind of valenced thought, whereas thinking allows free reign. Perhaps trying to generate any kind of valenced thought leads to more confidence than freely thinking does. If so, then instructing people to generate favorable thoughts should produce the same results as instructing people to counterargue. In addition, in this study we wanted to determine if the enhanced certainty we have obtained was consequential. Thus, in addition to measuring attitudes, we assessed behavioral intentions regarding the product (i.e., purchase likelihood).

The procedure for this study was basically the same as for Study 1, though we used a new and unfamiliar aspirin product so that behavioral intentions would not be based on habitual patterns. Participants were told that they should try to think about, try to generate negative thoughts about, or try to generate positive thoughts in response to an advertisement about a new brand of aspirin. A control group that received no message was also included. As in Study 1, the strong arguments were successful in producing the same amount of attitude change relative to the control for all groups. However, only the group trying to counterargue showed enhanced confidence in their new attitudes. Furthermore, the attitudes of individuals trying to counterargue were more predictive of their behavioral intentions ($r = .80$) than were the attitudes of those simply thinking ($r = .39$) or generating favorable thoughts ($r = .31$) to the message.

STUDY 3. In a third study, we wanted to examine mediation of the confidence effect. Our postulated mediator is a metaperception that there are few counterarguments that can be generated against the advocated product. People who counterargue and fail should have this metaperception, whereas the other thinking groups should not. The groups are not expected to differ in their perception regarding the number of favorable thoughts that were provoked by the message. The procedure of this study was close to that of Study 1, with the key addition of a measure of people's perceptions of how many counterarguments

were available against the advocated position as well as a measure of how many favorable thoughts were available in support of the advocacy.

As in our prior studies, the thought group and the counterargue group showed the same favorable attitudes toward the aspirin relative to the control group. However, the counterargue group held these favorable attitudes with more confidence than did the group instructed just to think. In addition, the two groups did not differ in the actual number of counterarguments they generated (each group generated very few counterarguments). The group that was attempting to counterargue, however, had the perception that there were fewer counterarguments available. Important to note, subsequent analyses revealed that the effect of the manipulation on attitude confidence was mediated by people's perception of the number of counterarguments available. It was not mediated by the actual number of counterarguments or favorable thoughts generated or by the perception of the number of favorable thoughts available.

SUMMARY. In our second series of studies (Rucker & Petty, in press), we showed that people who attempted to counterargue a message but failed changed their attitudes to the same extent as people simply thinking or trying to be favorable, but we showed that they had more confidence in their new attitudes. In these studies, people who tried to counterargue had the perception that fewer counterarguments could be made against the message. Because these individuals are surer that there are no flaws in the advocacy, they can be more confident in their new attitudes.

These studies show that the act of counterarguing an initial message can have an important impact on people's attitudes even when the counterarguing fails. Just as successful resistance can increase confidence in one's old attitude (Tormala & Petty, 2002), unsuccessful resistance can enhance confidence in one's new attitude. This confidence can increase the overall strength of the new attitude, as is evident in the enhanced correlation between attitudes and behavioral intentions.

Being Unimpressed With One's Resistance or Lack of Resistance: Future Directions

In this chapter, we briefly reviewed two lines of research in which people were asked to try to counterargue a persuasive message. In the first line of research, by Tormala and Petty (2002), we examined cases in which people were able to counterargue the message successfully. These individuals resisted, and when they were impressed with their resistance, such as when they resisted arguments believed to be strong, confidence in their initial attitudes increased. In the second line of research, by Rucker and Petty (in press), we examined cases in which people had difficulty counterarguing when attempting to do so. These individuals succumbed to the persuasive message. When they were impressed with how hard it was to counterargue and how few counterarguments they could generate, they became more confident in their new attitudes than did people who were undirected in their processing of the

message. What these two lines of research have in common is that people were impressed either with their ability or their inability to counterargue the message. Being impressed with one's resistance led to increased confidence in one's initial attitude, but being impressed with one's failure to resist led to increased confidence in one's new attitude. But what if people were not so impressed with either their resistance or their lack of resistance? Under these conditions, we might expect a very different pattern of effects.

Being Unimpressed With One's Resistance

Consider first the case in which a person is able to counterargue and resists the message but believes that his or her resistance was ineffective or lacking in some way. That is, even though resistance may have been successful in the sense of preventing attitude change, an individual might still perceive that the resistance was flawed or very difficult (e.g., "Whew! I resisted by the skin of my teeth."). We postulate that even when resistance is successful, if people feel that their resistance was in some way flawed or very difficult, the strength of their initial attitude will not increase. On the contrary, it will stay the same or could even decrease. A decrease in attitude strength would suggest that although the persuasive message did not produce attitude change per se (in terms of outcome), it was partially successful in that it weakened the targeted attitude. Such an attitude would then be rendered more susceptible to future attempts to change it and less predictive of behavior than it was previously (see Petty & Krosnick, 1995).

Being Unimpressed With One's Failure to Resist

Just as people might be unimpressed with their resistance, they might sometimes be unimpressed with their failure to resist: Rather than being impressed with how hard they tried to resist but failed, they may have the feeling that they did not try very hard to resist, that there were distractions present preventing effective resistance, or that the few counterarguments they generated were quite good. In such cases, confidence in the new attitude might be reduced below what more objective thinking would foster.

A Model of Attempted Resistance

Figure 4.1 presents a summary of the key ideas presented in this chapter. We recognize in our model that when attempting to counterargue a message, people can either succeed or fail in their attempt and they can either be impressed or unimpressed with their success or failure. The model outlines how one's metacognitions about one's resistance or failure to resist can either enhance or undermine confidence in one's initial (unchanged) attitude or can enhance or undermine confidence in one's newly changed attitude. The model is clearly a contextualist one in that all things are possible. Important to note,

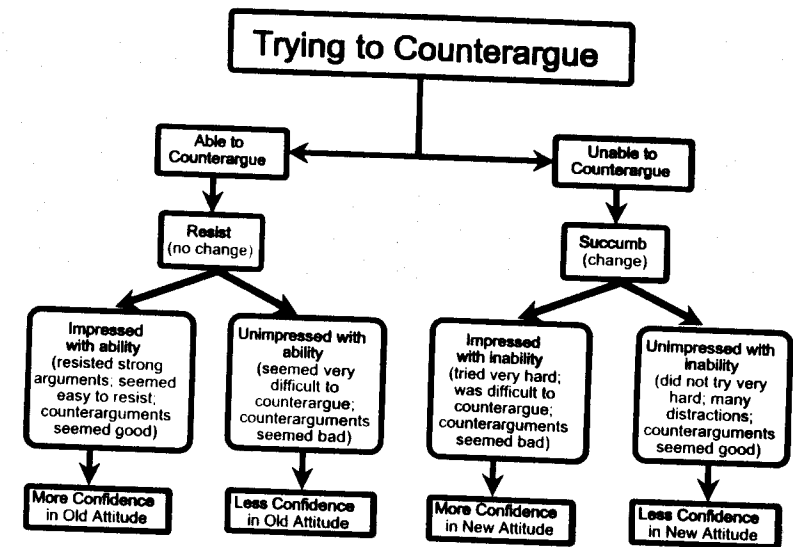


Figure 4.1. Implications for attitude confidence of attempted counterarguing of persuasive messages.

however, we attempt to specify in the model the general conditions under which the various outcomes occur.

Our model indicates that the process of trying to resist by counterarguing can enhance the strength of an existing attitude if the person feels that the counterarguing was effective against a strong attack. This enhanced confidence will not only help the attitude in future resistance but will also help the attitude to guide behavior immediately. This process is potentially important for any attitude that is already optimal in valence but not in confidence. This outcome is bad news, however, for would-be persuaders who had assumed that a failed attempt at persuasion at least did no harm to their cause. Second, attempting to counterargue may also enhance the strength of a changed attitude over the same persuasion produced by more objective thinking. Thus, when arguments are very strong, recipients might be challenged to counterargue rather than think about the message. The amount of change produced will be the same, but the directed counterarguing technique may produce stronger new attitudes.

As we noted previously, our strength model of attempted resistance addresses issues similar to those in McGuire's classic work on inoculation theory. The work on inoculation theory dealt largely with cultural truisms. Confidence in these attitudes was presumably very high prior to the presentation of an attacking message. Inoculation treatments showed individuals that their cherished beliefs were susceptible to attack, thereby motivating them to marshal defenses against future attacks. In the language of attitude

strength, the inoculation treatment might first undermine confidence but then restore it to a high level along with the tools to defend the attitude. For attitudes that are nontruisms, such as those used in the discussed research, it is presumably rare to be at a state of maximum confidence initially. Therefore to instill future resistance for these attitudes, it might make sense to give treatments that enhance confidence, thereby motivating people to resist in the future. It is important to note that enhancing attitude confidence should also produce consequences beyond increased resistance—such as enhanced attitude-behavior consistency.

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