

Naïve theories about persuasion: implications for information processing and consumer attitude change

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Consumers have knowledge about persuasion that includes naïve theories about persuasion. The present work examines naïve theories with regard to whether consumers associate the meaning of persuasion as something that is either good or bad. Furthermore, naïve theories about persuasion are demonstrated to affect how consumers respond to a persuasive message. Two studies are presented, one that manipulates and another that measures naïve theories related to the meaning of persuasion. The meaning associated with persuasion is found to play a significant role in influencing the amount of message elaboration that consumers engage in. Implications for attitude change and advertising, persuasion knowledge, and the importance for further research on the meanings attached to persuasion are discussed.

Keywords: persuasion knowledge; naïve theories; attitude change; elaboration; meaning

Consumers are bombarded by attempts to persuade them on a daily basis. Brands spend billions of dollars yearly in the service of introducing consumers to new products or communicating information about existing ones. Similarly, salespeople and politicians alike engage in a host of strategies to convince consumers or voters of the merits of a product or policy. Whether persuasion attempts manifest themselves in message-based television advertising or interpersonal influence attempts, they are a ubiquitous part of our culture. In fact, persuasion has permeated so many aspects of people's lives that researchers have suggested people come to develop persuasion knowledge concerning how persuasion operates (Friestad and Wright 1994, 1995). Given the pervasiveness of persuasion, we contend people may hold naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion as something both good (e.g., information, democracy) and bad (e.g., deception, propaganda). The present research examines the impact of the different meanings associated with persuasion for advertising effectiveness.

Past research has examined the public's associations with advertising. For instance, Zanot (1984) suggested some consumers liked advertising, whereas others felt negatively toward and disliked it. Calfee and Ringold (1994) concluded that most measures of consumers' beliefs indicated advertising is perceived as deceptive and untruthful; however, other measures indicated consumers found value in advertising and perceived advertising to provide useful information. Similar findings are reported in the specific domain of television advertising (Alwitt and Rabhaker 1994; Haller 1974; Mittal 1994). In a national survey, Shavitt, Lowrey, and Haefner (1998) found 44% of respondents indicated they

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enjoyed advertising; however, sizable portions reported disliking advertising (25%) or being indifferent (31%). Finally, Coulter, Zaltman, and Coulter (2001) found portions of consumer interviews indicated positive meanings with advertising (e.g., advertising as informative, entertaining, and fuelling the economy), but other portions revealed negative meanings (e.g., advertising as manipulative, deceptive, repetitive, and annoying).

How might the meaning of persuasion and advertising matter to consumers? Shavitt and colleagues (1998) suggest that personal attitudes toward advertising likely play a crucial role in influencing consumers' exposure and attention to advertisements, political and regulatory activities. Although prior research has demonstrated both the presence and the variability in the meaning of advertising, and speculated on the impact of these different beliefs, to our knowledge little empirical evidence exists on the influence of such beliefs regarding how people respond to persuasion or advertising. The current work aims to address this issue by investigating how framing the meaning of persuasion as something good or bad, or measuring how people naturally represent persuasion, can influence the way people process and respond to persuasive messages.

The meaning of persuasion: when persuasion is viewed as good versus bad

Although the study of people's views of advertising is interesting in its own right, marketing and persuasion include many situations that do not involve, or are not identified only as, advertising. Indeed, as discussed earlier, much of people's social environment involves persuasive attempts more generally. For example, attempts at influence or change occur between various parties; bosses and employees; doctors and patients; parents and children; politicians and the electorate; corporations and consumers. We posit that individuals' naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion, whether manipulated or measured, can ultimately affect how people respond to persuasive attempts.

Work on persuasion knowledge provides initial evidence that consumers may indeed hold different meanings or associations to persuasion. Friestad and Wright (1994, 1995) suggest that through exposure to persuasion over their lifespan, consumers develop beliefs about how persuasion operates and works. For example, consumers have theories about the effectiveness and necessity of factors in advertising such as attending to, trusting, and remembering the advertisement (Friestad and Wright 1995). Friestad and Wright also suggest consumers hold beliefs as to whether a particular tactic (e.g., an attractive source) is acceptable. Given consumers think about and come to hold beliefs about how persuasion functions and operates, as well as the appropriateness of particular tactics, we speculate that people may also hold general views of persuasion as good or bad.

Research based on persuasion knowledge suggests that different naïve theories about persuasion can affect how people respond to persuasion attempts. For example, Campbell and Kirmani (2000) asked participants to imagine observing a situation in which a customer receives a complement from a salesperson. Campbell and Kirmani argued that accessible persuasion knowledge would make consumers aware that the complement was really a tactic designed to persuade the consumer rather than a sincere comment. Consistent with this hypothesis, consumers viewed the salesperson as less sincere when persuasion knowledge was accessible (see also Ahluwalia et al. 2004; Brown and Krishna 2004; Williams, Fitzsimons, and Block 2004).

We believe that just as persuasion knowledge can influence how consumers behave in response to information, so too might the meaning of persuasion. However, to date it is unclear how the meaning associated with persuasion affects

people's response to persuasion. The only evidence that suggests naïve theories regarding the meaning of persuasion might influence actual persuasion comes from work on advertising scepticism. Advertising could be viewed as one particular domain or subtype of persuasion. Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) developed a scale to measure individual differences in peoples' scepticism towards advertising. People scoring high on the scale tend to perceive advertising as deceptive and untruthful. Furthermore, people scoring high in scepticism were shown to have more negative evaluations of ads (e.g., less liking of the ad, greater disbelief of the claims, and beliefs the ad was less influential) and negative brand attitudes. One might be tempted to assume that naïve theories about persuasion may produce a similar outcome, with negative associations toward persuasion leading to a general resistance to persuasion. However, scepticism of advertising and general beliefs in the utility of persuasion might not be equivalent. For example, an individual can be sceptical about advertising claims, but nonetheless perceive persuasion to be a valuable tool. The common term 'healthy scepticism' may refer to such situations. Similarly, a person can think of persuasion negatively (e.g., it is annoying), but not be sceptical of the claims made (e.g., persuasion is annoying but the claims are usually true).

Furthermore, regardless of whether people are generally sceptical of advertising, they can hold both negative meanings associated with persuasion (e.g., untrustworthy, deceptive) and positive meanings that recognize its values (e.g., useful, entertaining and fun). Therefore, believing that an advertisement is more or less likely to be trustworthy is not the same as evaluating persuasion in general as positive or negative. In fact, people sometimes like things they know are not valid representations of reality (e.g., fiction, magic, and art) and they dislike and feel bad about things they know are likely to be true (e.g., medical reports, warning labels). In addition, even if naïve beliefs about persuasion and scepticism are related, past research on advertising scepticism focused on truth and trust in ads rather than actual influence in response to the message (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998). Whereas scepticism of advertising might directly undermine the perceived effectiveness of advertising claims and produce dislike for the ad, it might not reduce the actual persuasive impact of advertising. Finally, research on scepticism has never examined ads that differ in their quality and, as explained shortly, our hypothesis is that this variable is important for understanding the impact of persuasion beliefs on attitudes.

Finally, whereas advertising scepticism is treated solely as an individual difference, we contend that people's naïve theories of persuasion can be an individual difference as well as be malleable. Prior research in other domains demonstrate that naïve theories linking fluency with familiarity (and difficulty with novelty) can be malleable and influential in predicting truth judgments (Unkelbach 2006), motivation (Labroo and Kim 2009), and self-regulation (Job, Dweck, and Walton 2010; Wen et al. 2010). For example, Briñol, Petty, and Tormala (2006) demonstrated it was possible to make the ease of retrieving information to be perceived as either good or bad. As we will demonstrate, in addition to being a relatively stable individual difference, the naïve theories people hold towards the meaning of persuasion can also be situationally activated, which distinguishes the present approach from that of Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) and makes it more like other constructs that are instantiated both as traits and as current states (e.g., state and trait anxiety; Spielberger et al., 1983). Taken together, prior work indicates that people who have similar persuasive experiences, identical persuasive knowledge, and equivalent scepticism, may still have different evaluations of persuasion as a function of their lay theories linking these experiences with meaning (for additional examples of the importance of naïve theories see Dweck 1999; Crum, Salovey, and Achor 2013).

The meaning of persuasion: implications for message scrutiny

How might naïve theories about persuasion affect actual persuasion and advertising effectiveness? In the present and initial research examining naïve theories about persuasion, we focus on the influence of the different meanings of persuasion on the degree of message processing. Past work guided by the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) has found that under moderate thinking conditions – when individuals can either choose to process or not process information – individual and situational factors can determine whether people attend to and scrutinize a message carefully (see Petty and Briñol 2012; Petty, Briñol, and Priester 2009; Rucker, Petty, and Priester 2007). With regard to consumers' naïve theories about persuasion, the question is whether individuals will pay more or less attention to advertisements when they associate persuasion as being something good or bad. Upon examining this question, it seems possible that either positive or negative naïve theories about persuasion might be associated with greater message processing. For example, people who associate persuasion with something positive might think persuasion is something to which one should pay attention, whereas people who associate persuasion with something negative might think persuasion is something that should be ignored. Alternatively, people who associate persuasion with something negative might think persuasive attempts need to be guarded against and scrutinized carefully, whereas those who associate persuasion with something positive may believe detailed scrutiny is unneeded because persuasion is safe.

In reviewing the literature, although never directly tested, evidence seems to favour the possibility that people are likely to pay more attention to persuasion when they harbour negative as opposed to positive naïve theories about it. First, past research has found that message position influences message attention. In particular, research has demonstrated people recall more message arguments when the same arguments are framed as counter-attitudinal as opposed to pro-attitudinal, suggesting greater information processing (Cacioppo and Petty 1979; Petty and Cacioppo 1979; see also Worth and Mackie 1987). In addition, research has shown individuals take a longer time to process counter-attitudinal than pro-attitudinal information (Ditto and Lopez 1992). Applying this to consumers' naïve theories about persuasion, it can be argued that any persuasive attempt, by definition, is counter-attitudinal for those who associate persuasion with something negative; whereas the same message may be more pro-attitudinal for those who associate persuasion with something positive. This suggests that the meaning of persuasion may lead to greater message scrutiny when persuasion is viewed as something negative as opposed to positive.

In addition, Priester and Petty (1995, 2003) demonstrated that people process messages more carefully when they come from a source whose trustworthiness is in doubt rather than from one who is clearly trustworthy. Just as people who are sceptical of the message source process more carefully, so too might people who are generally less trusting of persuasive messages. Taken together, these findings suggest the possibility that associating persuasion with something negative might yield greater processing than associating persuasion with something positive.

Research overview

From prior research and theory, we know that persuasion is a pervasive phenomenon in society. We also know that consumers hold beliefs and naïve theories about how persuasion generally operates and works (Friestad and Wright 1994, 1995). Part of that knowledge includes beliefs about whether specific types of persuasion (e.g., advertising) are good or bad (Calfee and Ringold 1996; Coulter, Zaltman, and Coulter 2001; Shavitt,

Lowrey, and Haefner 1998). However, at present, it is unclear whether such beliefs have any influence at all in predicting consumer attitude change, and, if so, in what direction. The present research recognizes this gap in prior knowledge and seeks to advance the literature by examining the influence of peoples' naïve theories towards persuasion on information processing and attitude change. Specifically, we propose and test the hypothesis that such beliefs influence persuasion by affecting the amount of thought given to advertising. Enhanced thought can lead to either more or less persuasion depending on the nature of the thoughts generated (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1986).

To demonstrate the influence of these types of beliefs, consumers' associations with persuasion are examined in two experiments. As stated earlier, one key distinction of our perspective from individual differences in scepticism is that naïve theories of persuasion can be situationally activated as well as chronically stored. Experiment 1 directly tests the malleability notion by manipulating whether persuasion is seen as something good or bad and examining the consequences for persuasion. Experiment 2 takes a measurement approach and assesses the relationship between people's chronic naïve theories of persuasion and actual persuasion. Across experiments, we use situations where we expect consumers' amount of thinking to be moderate such that situational or individual factors – in this case their associations with persuasion – have the potential to affect the amount of message processing. We demonstrate that naïve theories in the form of the meaning of persuasion do influence consumers' attitudes following exposure to a persuasive message. Furthermore, we provide evidence that consumers' attitudes towards a message are influenced as a result of differential elaboration of message arguments.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 was designed to study the influence of naïve theories about persuasion on actual persuasion. In order to establish an initial causal claim about the relationship between the meaning of persuasion and amount of message processing, we manipulated participants' views of persuasion. As discussed previously, we suspected that as is the case with the meaning of ease, fluency, intelligence, and memory, consumers' naïve theories toward persuasion can be changed and influenced by contextual factors.

We expected individuals' naïve theories associated with persuasion would influence the likelihood they would elaborate upon, or carefully scrutinize, a persuasive message advertising a new social policy. Past research has gauged how carefully people attend to a message by examining the impact that the quality of information in a message has on resulting attitudes and judgments (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Specifically, the extent to which people process a message can be assessed by examining the degree to which strong versus weak arguments affect post-message attitudes (Petty, Wells, and Brock 1976). If people attend carefully to a message they should have more positive thoughts and attitudes when the underlying reasons/arguments for adopting the message are strong (e.g., valid and convincing) as opposed to weak (e.g., specious and flawed). However, when people are doing little thinking about a message, strong and weak arguments produce a smaller impact on valenced thoughts and attitudes.

For example, Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann (1983) varied participant's interest in an advertisement for the 'Edge razor' by informing them that they would receive a razor for participating in the experiment (high relevance) or a tube of toothpaste (low relevance). Subsequently, participants were exposed to a razor advertisement containing either strong (e.g., 'In direct comparison tests, the Edge blade gave twice as many close shaves as its nearest competitor') or weak (e.g., 'In direct comparison tests, the

Edge blade gave no more nicks or cuts than its competition') arguments. Petty and colleagues found larger argument quality effects (i.e., more persuasion for the strong than weak arguments) when the razor advertisement was high as opposed to low in personal relevance.

Using a similar argument quality manipulation, we expected individuals induced to view persuasion negatively would be more inclined to scrutinize the message more carefully, and thus show a greater differentiation between weak and strong arguments, than individuals induced to view persuasion positively. This should be reflected in a larger effect of argument quality on post-message attitudes when naive theories about persuasion are induced to be negative compared with positive.

Importantly, this first experiment also aims to provide evidence regarding the proposed mediating mechanism; that is, that beliefs about persuasion can affect persuasion by message scrutiny or elaboration. To test for this possibility, we instructed participants to list their thoughts. If elaboration is being affected by whether the meaning people attach to persuasion is negative or positive, participants' message-relevant thoughts should be differentially influenced as a function of their naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion, and these thoughts should mediate any effects on attitudes.

In addition to message-relevant thoughts, attitudes formed under high elaboration tend to be more accessible than attitudes formed under low elaboration (Fazio 1995; Priester and Petty 2001). Importantly, the accessibility-diagnostics model (Feldman and Lynch 1988, Lynch, Marmorstein, and Weigold 1988) and the MODE model (Fazio 1990, 1995) trumpet the importance of accessible information, such as attitudes, in judgement and decision making. Indeed, the extent to which consumers' attitudes come to mind quickly determines the power that those attitudes exert on individuals' information processing, judgements, behaviours, and the functional value of possessing the attitude (e.g., Fazio 1995). For example, attitude accessibility influences what people see by directing their attention toward specific attitude-related objects (e.g., Roskos-Ewoldsen and Fazio 1992) and affects how objects are construed by influencing the categories people use to classify objects (Fazio and Dunton 1997). Attitude accessibility is also a central component in the process by which attitudes guide behaviour. In more general terms, a variety of field and laboratory research has revealed that attitude-behaviour consistency is greater for more accessible attitudes (Bassili 1996; Fazio 1995).

Thus, in addition to using accessibility as an additional gauge of the impact of the meaning of persuasion on amount of thinking, finding post-message attitudes are more accessible for those who had negative, as opposed to positive, associations with persuasion implies a host of other possible consequences. That is, not only would differences in accessibility support the idea that the meaning of persuasion can affect elaboration, but such differences would suggest that consumers' associations regarding persuasion are consequential for the strength of the resulting attitudes (i.e., how consequential they are; Petty, Haugtvedt, and Smith 1995).

Method

Participants and procedure

Seventy-six undergraduates at the Ohio State University participated in partial fulfilment of a psychology course requirement. Students were informed they would complete several tasks. The first task was described as a 'Semantic Test', which actually served to manipulate participants' naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion (described below). After completing this task, participants were exposed to a radio

transcript arguing for a new state foster care programme. Participants were randomly assigned to receive either strong or weak arguments in favour of this new social policy. Finally, participants reported their attitudes towards the program, listed their thoughts, and were thanked and debriefed.

Independent variable

Naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion. Participants' associations towards persuasion were experimentally manipulated as follows. All participants were presented with one target word at a time on a computer screen and asked to pick three words from a list that best captured the meaning of each word provided. Sample target words provided to participants included: persuasion, change, and influence. All participants were given the same target words, but the list of potential synonyms was experimentally varied. For example, in the 'persuasion good' condition, participants given the target word persuasion were asked to choose from a list of that included the following words: communication, dialogue, negotiation, understanding, progress, flexibility, change, evolution, enhancement, wisdom, learning, growing up, improvement, promoting, mediation, solution. In the 'persuasion bad' condition participants were given the target word persuasion were asked to choose from the following list: brainwashing, manipulation, propaganda, deception, lying, politics, hiding, consume, suspicious, power-hungry, obedience, submission, vulnerability, change, rigidity. Participants were presented with a total of three target words (i.e., persuasion, change, and influence), presented one at the time, and were asked to choose up to five words from the list of more than a dozen positive or negative words.

We developed this manipulation based on the notion that the same object can be evaluated differentially depending on what type of information is activated in memory (e.g., Higgins, Rholes, and Jones 1977; see also Herr 1989). We presumed that all participants would be aware of both good and bad associations to persuasion and that this task would prime either the good or bad meanings. Consequently, we expected, just as an individual's perception of an object might be influenced by whether a positive versus negative naïve theory was activated, pairing persuasion with positive or negative meanings would influence how people respond to a subsequent actual persuasive attempt. Even if participants did not have previous chronic associations with persuasion, this manipulation could serve to influence the formation of a naïve theory about the meaning of persuasion by associative processes, such as conditioning (e.g., Gorn 1982; Staats and Staats 1954).

Argument cogency. Participants received a message advocating the implementation of a new foster care programme in the state of Rhode Island. We chose to use Rhode Island so that the proposed social programme would not have direct benefits to participants (located in Ohio). This was done to ensure that participants did not find the message so personally relevant that they would engage in message processing regardless of whether the association to persuasion was negative or positive. Specifically, research has shown that differences in message processing are likely to be observed when the amount of thinking is not constrained to be low or high (Petty and Cacioppo 1986).

The foster care programme was described as a social policy designed to take care of children from broken homes, as well as children whose parents abused, neglected, or were unable to provide for them. Participants were randomly assigned to receive a message that contained either strong, cogent arguments, or weak, specious arguments. The arguments selected were pre-tested in previous research and were shown to produce the

appropriate pattern of cognitive responding (see Petty et al. 1993). That is, the strong arguments elicited mostly favourable thoughts and the weak arguments elicited mostly unfavourable thoughts when people were instructed to think carefully about them. The gist of one of the strong arguments was that adoptive brothers and sisters are an additional source of love and support for the social development of the child. In addition, the message with strong arguments stated that the programme offers a social worker to ensure the family and child make a good adjustment, and that the child is required to maintain good grades and good behaviour in order to boost his or her self-confidence and discipline. In contrast, the gist of one of the weak arguments was that the programme recognizes children need other children to fight with, and adoptive brothers and sisters provide an ideal opportunity for this to occur. Another part of the message containing weak arguments stated that the program offered a social worker to ensure the right distance between the family and the child, and that the child is required to maintain good grades and good behaviour in order to look good to school teachers and others. Both the strong and weak versions of the ad were of approximately the same length (240 and 241 words, respectively). A full description of both messages can be found in the Appendix.

Dependent measures

Attitude. Participants' attitudes toward the foster care programme were assessed using a series of nine-point semantic differential scales (i.e., good–bad, poor–wise, against–in favour) on which they rated this new social policy. These items demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.95$), and were averaged to create a composite attitude index. Higher numbers indicated more favourable attitudes toward the social program.

Attitude accessibility. The accessibility of participants' attitudes was assessed via the mean response latency taken to complete the attitude items. Specifically, the amount of time it took participants to answer each of the three attitude items was recorded by the computer. Prior to analysis, we collapsed the reaction times for all the attitude items in order to form a composite measure of response latency for each participant ($\alpha = 0.62$). Following the recommendation of Fazio (1990), a logarithmic transformation on reaction times was also performed to correct for any remaining skewness in their distribution. This analysis yielded statistically equivalent results and thus we report the statistics based on the raw reaction time for simplicity.

Thoughts. Participants were instructed to list the thoughts that went through their minds as they read the message. Ten boxes were provided to list up to ten individual thoughts. They were told to write one thought per box and not to worry about grammar or spelling (see Cacioppo and Petty 1981, for additional details on the thought listing procedure). Two judges unaware of participants' experimental condition coded cognitive responses. Judges classified responses as favourable, unfavourable or neutral toward the proposal.

Thoughts that were irrelevant to the proposal (e.g., 'it's a bit cold in here') were excluded. The judges agreed on over 90% of the thoughts coded and disagreements were resolved by discussion. As an index of the valence of message-related thoughts, we subtracted the number of unfavourable thoughts from the number of favourable thoughts and divided the difference by the total number of message-related thoughts. Most of the attitudes research conducted in the last three decades has used and agreed upon this index of thought favourability (e.g., Briñol, Petty and Tormala 2004; Cacioppo and Petty 1981; Shavitt and Brock 1990; Wright 1973).

Results

Attitudes

Attitude items were scored such that higher values represented more favourable attitudes toward the message. The results of the ANOVA revealed a main effect of argument cogency on attitudes, $F(1, 72) = 21.47, p < 0.001$. Not surprisingly, attitudes toward the foster care programme were more favourable following the strong version of the ad ($M = 7.30, SD = 1.69$) than following the weak version of the ad ($M = 5.25, SD = 2.27$). No main effect of naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion attitudes emerged ($p > 0.10$). However, a reliable argument cogency \times naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion interaction was obtained, $F(1, 72) = 4.24, p = 0.04$. As depicted in Figure 1, when naïve theories towards persuasion were manipulated to be negative a sizable and significant difference was obtained between strong ($M = 7.37, SD = 1.57$) and weak arguments ($M = 4.40, SD = 2.33$), $F(1, 72) = 22.40, p < 0.001$. In contrast, when naïve theories towards persuasion were manipulated to be positive, individuals held similar attitudes regardless of whether the arguments were strong ($M = 7.23, SD = 1.84$) or weak ($M = 6.09, SD = 1.90$), $F(1, 72) = 3.31, p = 0.07$.

Thoughts

There was a main effect of argument cogency on thoughts, with participants receiving strong arguments reporting greater positivity in thoughts on average ($M_{\text{index}} = 0.64, SD = 0.61$) compared with participants receiving the weak arguments ($M_{\text{index}} = -0.06, SD = 0.77$), $F(1, 72) = 20.07, p < 0.001$. There was no main effect of the naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion ($p = 0.30$). However, consistent with the attitude data, a message cogency \times naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion interaction emerged, $F(1, 72) = 6.09, p = 0.02$, see Figure 2. When naïve theories towards persuasion were manipulated to be negative, individuals' thoughts to strong ($M_{\text{index}} = 0.75, SD = 0.52$) and weak arguments ($M_{\text{index}} = -0.33, SD = 0.76$) were significantly different, $F(1, 72) = 24.14, p < 0.001$. In contrast, when naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion were manipulated to be positive, no significant difference was observed between

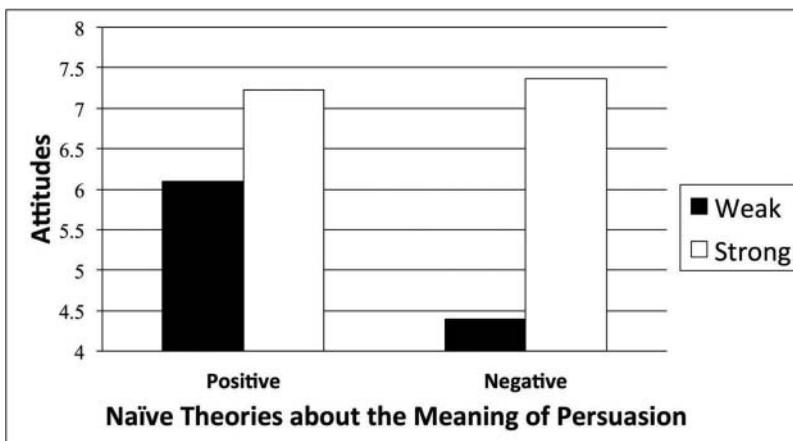


Figure 1. Naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion by argument cogency interaction on attitudes, Experiment 1.

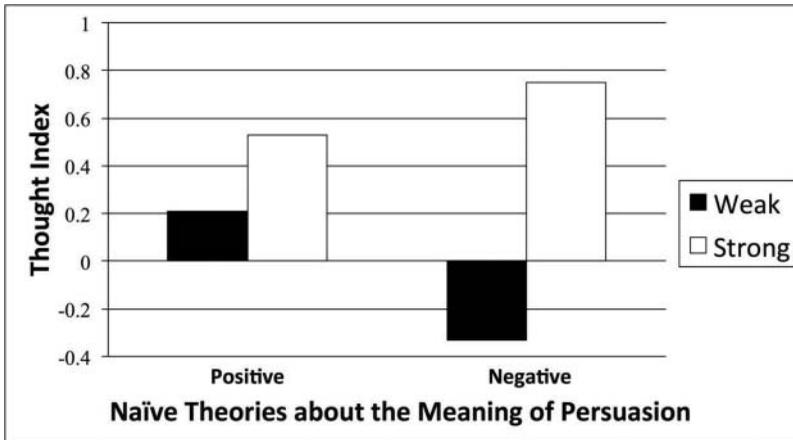


Figure 2. Naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion by argument cogency interaction on thought index, Experiment 1.

individuals' thoughts to strong ($M_{\text{index}} = 0.53$, $SD = 0.70$) and weak arguments ($M_{\text{index}} = 0.21$, $SD = 0.71$), $F(1, 72) = 2.03$, $p = 0.16$.

Attitude accessibility

Participants were faster to report their attitudes when persuasion was manipulated to be viewed negatively ($M = 3.98_{\text{sec}}$, $SD = 1.33$) as opposed to positively ($M = 4.69_{\text{sec}}$, $SD = 1.60$, $F(72) = 4.41$, $p < 0.04$). Attitude accessibility was not affected by argument cogency and no interaction emerged between argument cogency and naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion ($ps > 0.10$). This finding provides additional evidence that negative meanings about persuasion were associated with greater elaboration.

To further test the notion that holding a negative view of persuasion increased message processing, we examined whether differences in participants' attitudes were mediated by differences in their thought profiles. To examine this, we first reverse coded the attitudes and thoughts of participants who had received the weak version of the advertisement and left the attitudes and thoughts of participants who had received the strong version of the advertisement the same. Thus, higher numbers were associated with greater polarization overall – more favourable attitudes and thoughts to strong arguments, but less favourable attitudes and thoughts to weak arguments. This provides a directional test of amount of processing as greater thought polarization would be consistent with higher levels of message processing.

Consistent with the analyses reported earlier, there was an association between people's naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion and polarization such that those who associated persuasion with something bad exhibited greater attitude polarization, $\beta = 0.21$, $t(74) = 1.88$, $p = 0.06$, and greater thought polarization, $\beta = 0.26$, $t(74) = 2.28$, $p = 0.03$. However, when individuals' idiosyncratic cognitive response were controlled for, the effect of naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion on attitudes was not significant, $\beta = -0.03$, $t(74) = -.44$, $p = 0.66$. Furthermore, use of bootstrap procedures (Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes, 2007) revealed the indirect effect, the path through the mediator (i.e., thoughts), was significant (95% CI = -0.098 to -1.675).

Thus, in addition to the accessibility findings, and thought profiles, this mediational analysis further suggests that holding a negative association to persuasion increased message processing.

Discussion

Experiment 1 provides initial evidence that naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion can play an important role in the persuasion process. In particular, using a simple procedure to make individuals' associations with persuasion to be good or bad, their message elaboration was subsequently affected. Those who were induced to have negative associations with persuasion scrutinized the information presented more carefully. In fact, those induced to have more positive associations with persuasion appeared to show no reliable differentiation of strong and weak arguments. Furthermore, this experiment provides additional evidence supporting the idea of an elaboration mechanism. Both the thought listing and the accessibility of participants' attitudes provide evidence consistent with the idea that the attitude results were due to underlying differences in message elaboration.

Although the first study is compelling in demonstrating the causal link between associations with persuasion and elaboration and subsequent persuasion, it is less informative about the potential applicability of these results in more conventional settings. That is, in the first study, we experimentally manipulated associations with persuasion to be good or bad by randomly assigning participants to those conditions. Although it might be possible to administer clever treatments in the field, one may wonder whether people harbour more natural meanings about persuasion that would produce similar effects. To address this issue, in our second experiment we used a more naturalistic approach by assessing the extent to which individuals' own chronic naïve theories about persuasion are more or less negative, and testing to what extent those pre-existing associations with persuasion predict information processing and attitude change. Another advantage of this measurement approach is that it focuses more directly on meanings of persuasion. Although we designed the manipulation in the first study to be focused on persuasion, it might have affected other potentially related constructs, such as vigilance, negativity, or prevention orientation (Kirmani and Zhu 2007). By asking people to report their naïve theories about persuasion, we ensured in the next study that those meanings were the critical component under investigation.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 tested the influence of natural variations in individuals' naïve theories about persuasion on message processing and attitude change. As in Experiment 1, the extent to which people process a message was assessed by examining the degree to which strong versus weak arguments affect post-message attitudes. The critical difference is that in this study we measured natural variations in the meaning people attached to persuasion. In order to increase the generality of the present research, in this study we also examined the impact of naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion without making thoughts blatantly salient (as in the first experiment). Therefore, in this study, participants directly reported their attitude toward the foster care programme without having to list their thoughts previously.

We predicted individuals' naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion would influence the likelihood they would elaborate upon, or carefully scrutinize, a message.

Specifically, we expected individuals who naturally held more negative views of persuasion would be more inclined to scrutinize the message carefully, and thus show a greater differentiation between weak and strong arguments, than individuals who naturally held less negative views of persuasion.

Method

Participants and procedure

Seventy-eight undergraduates from the Ohio State University participated in partial fulfilment of a psychology course requirement. Participants were told they would be engaging in several tasks related to studying media and mass communications. Participants were told the first task involved their perception of a transcript for a radio advertisement for a state foster care programme. Participants then received either the strong or weak arguments from Experiment 1. Afterwards, participants reported their attitudes towards the foster care programme and then completed approximately ten minutes of filler material. The filler material was included to reduce the likelihood that participants' evaluation of the message topic itself would influence their naïve theories regarding persuasion. Following assessment of participants' naïve theories about persuasion, all participants were thanked and debriefed.

Independent variables

Argument cogency. Argument cogency was manipulated using the same manipulation described in Experiment 1.

Naïve theories about meaning of persuasion. To assess whether participants held different naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion, they were asked to express whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of four items regarding persuasion ($\alpha = 0.73$). Specifically, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following items, 'attitude change is brainwashing', 'most persuasion is propaganda', 'People should be suspicious when others try to persuade them', and 'persuasion always involves manipulation or lying to people'. Participants responded to each item on a 5-point scale where 1 indicated 'Not at all' and 5 indicated 'Extremely'. Higher numbers on the scale indicated more negative attitudes toward persuasion. These items were presented *after* participants had received the message, answered the primary dependent measures, and completed several filler items. A Confirmatory Factor Analysis was run in order to test the unidimensional nature of the model (Chi-Square = 0.347, $df = 2$ GFI = 0.99, AGFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA < 0.0001). All regression weights for individual items on the first factor were significant ($p < 0.001$). Importantly, no effects of the argument cogency manipulation on people's naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion emerged, $F < 1$. This suggests that people's naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion were not influenced by the quality of the arguments provided. Also importantly, in a separate pilot test from the same population of Ohio State University undergraduates, the correlation between these items and advertising scepticism (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998) were examined. The two constructs were significantly but only moderately correlated ($r = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$, $N = 85$). Thus, people's general views of persuasion are related to, but clearly distinct from, a general scepticism towards advertising.

Dependent measures

Participants' attitudes were assessed with the same items used in experiment 1 ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Results

We conducted a hierarchical regression analysis predicting attitudes, with naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion and argument cogency as the predictors. Prior to the hierarchical regression analysis, all variables were standardized. Initial results indicated main effects of argument cogency on attitudes, $\beta = 0.29$, $t(76) = 2.68$, $p < 0.01$. Attitudes toward the foster care programme were more favourable following the strong version of the ad ($M = 7.12$, $SD = 1.20$) than following the weak version of the ad ($M = 6.16$, $SD = 1.95$). A main effect of participants' naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion was present; more negative views of persuasion led to more negative attitudes toward the proposal, $\beta = -0.25$, $t(76) = 2.31$, $p = 0.02$. More germane to our primary hypothesis, the predicted interaction between argument cogency and naïve theories was significant, $\beta = 0.36$, $t(75) = 3.59$, $p < 0.001$. As shown in Figure 3, this interaction indicated that participants who had more negative views of persuasion were more likely to distinguish strong from weak arguments than participants who had relative less negative views of persuasion. Furthermore, simple slope analyses following the recommendations of Aiken and West (1991) indicated the argument quality effect was reliable for those who tended to have more negative naïve theories about persuasion (+ 1 SD above the mean; $t(74) = 4.58$, $p < 0.001$) but the effect was not reliable for those who tended to have less negative meanings associated with persuasion (-1 SD below the mean; $t(74) = 0.50$, $p = 0.61$).

Discussion

Using a more naturalistic individual differences approach to assess the extent to which naïve theories about persuasion were more or less negative, we conceptually replicated

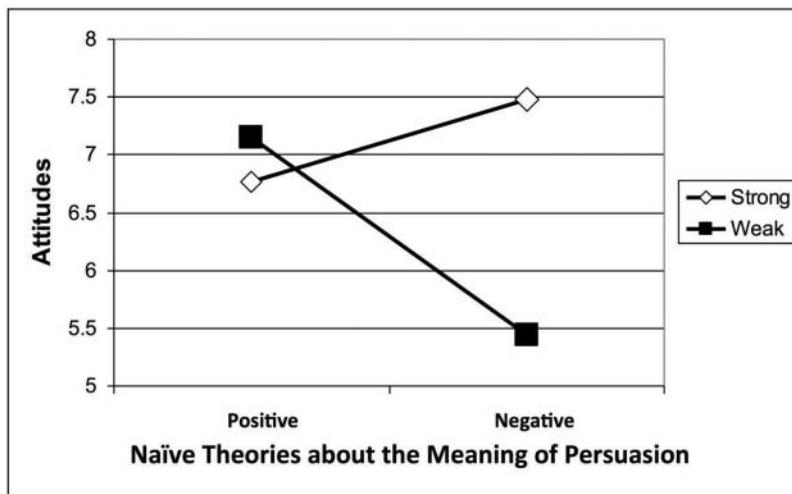


Figure 3. Two naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion by argument cogency interaction on attitudes, Experiment 2. Naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion are presented at -1 and +1 standard deviations.

the results of Experiment 1. Participants showed greater discrimination of weak and strong arguments when naïve theories about persuasion were spontaneously reported to be relatively positive as opposed to negative. This provides additional support for the hypothesis that what consumers believe about persuasion has implications for actual persuasion. As found in Experiment 1, consumers' naïve theories appear capable of determining message elaboration, such that those who were most negative towards persuasion were most likely to scrutinize the persuasive information presented. Our attitude results are consistent with prior research on scepticism overall, but importantly the interaction with argument quality clearly shows that the negative impact of negative views of persuasion only hold for the weak arguments condition. The opposite was true when the arguments were strong.

A limitation of this experiment is that our measure of naïve theories focused exclusively on agreement with items that emphasized the negative meanings associated with persuasion (e.g., 'most persuasion is propaganda'). We focused on assessing variations on the negative views since that is the side that was associated with increased processing and greater differentiation between strong and weak arguments. However, future research should include a more complete assessment of both positive and negative beliefs. We would expect that the more positive people score on positive items, the less they would process the message. One advantage of this potential avenue for future research is that it may provide an opportunity to identify individuals with ambivalent naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion (i.e., endorsing both positive and negative items; Kaplan 1972; Priester and Petty 1996).

General discussion

The present research demonstrated that naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion influence how people respond to persuasive attempts. In particular, consumers who have negative, as opposed to positive, views of persuasion are more likely to attend to and scrutinize the arguments presented to them. In many ways, this should come as a relief to marketers, as consumers' dislike of advertising or a negative view of persuasion does not automatically equate to a reduction in advertising effectiveness. Indeed, a negative view of advertising can lead to more positive views of products if the arguments presented are very cogent.

The present research has a number of important implications for theory and research. First, while some research has examined consumers' attitudes towards advertising and stressed the importance of such beliefs (Coulter, Zaltman, and Coulter 2001, Shavitt, Lowrey, and Haefner 1998), research examining how such beliefs manifest themselves in influencing the persuasion process is absent. The present research provides the first empirical evidence that such beliefs can influence persuasion by affecting argument scrutiny.

Second, little theory has been put forth to explain even how such beliefs *might* influence actual persuasion. In this respect, the present research is especially noteworthy as we propose and demonstrate that naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion can affect the extent of message elaboration. Given that the perceived meaning of persuasion can influence actual persuasion, we believe the present research introduces the importance of better understanding such beliefs for marketing academics and practitioners alike.

Third, we chose to study naïve theories about persuasion broadly, rather than advertising specifically, because the former is more general. For instance, as noted at the outset of this paper, persuasion attempts occur in the domain of interpersonal sales,

business-to-business contexts, employer–employee relationships, child–parent relationships, and political debates. Because we studied meanings attached to persuasion more generally, the present work could presumably be extended into each of these domains. For example, the present work could be used to explore the effects of attitudes towards advertising (Coulter, Zaltman, and Coulter 2001, Shavitt, Lowrey, and Haefner 1998). Specifically, work in that arena could begin by examining the influence of attitudes towards advertising on message elaboration. In fact, the observed effects on elaboration might be even better predicted by matching attitudes about the specific domain of persuasion (e.g., interpersonal sales, politics, health; see Briñol and Petty, 2006). That is, greater processing may be even more likely to occur when the specific beliefs about the type of persuasive attempt is negative.

Fourth, many aspects of the person and the situation can influence information processing and persuasion. For example, people are more likely to process information when the position is counter-attitudinal or the source is disliked or untrustworthy. Naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion can be considered as a potentially new additional variable of the recipient that can influence the motivation to process persuasive messages beyond previously studied variables of the source and the message.

Future directions

Attitude strength

In addition to the ideas already highlighted, we believe the present research findings call for a number of other future research efforts. First, subsequent research could examine how naïve theories about persuasion influence the utility of the resulting attitudes. Consistent with past research, we found that attitudes formed under conditions where elaboration was greatest were more accessible. However, several other desirable properties often accompany attitudes formed under high elaboration. Attitudes formed under high elaboration tend to be more predictive of subsequent behaviour, more persistent over time, and more resistant to attempts to change them compared with attitudes formed under low elaboration (for a review, see Petty, Haugtvedt, and Smith 1995). Given that people's naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion were shown in the present research to influence elaboration, understanding the influence of people's meanings associated with persuasion may allow us to predict whether their attitudes will be more predictive of behavioural intentions; and persist over time (Rucker et al. 2014). In particular, following past research in the domain of resistance to change, future research could explore to what extent naïve theories about persuasion can affect attitude certainty (Petrocelli et al. 2010; Rydell, Hugenberg, and McConnell 2006) and other properties of attitudes (e.g., Horcajo, Briñol, and Petty 2010).

Multiple roles for naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion

In the present work we focused on whether naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion affected people's message scrutiny or amount of information processing. However, any variable in persuasion is capable of influencing the persuasion process in a multitude of ways (for reviews see Petty and Wegener 1998). For example, in accord with the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion, emotions can influence persuasion as a cue under low elaboration, bias processing or influence the extent to which people rely on their thoughts under high elaboration, or influence the amount of processing under moderate

elaboration (Petty and Briñol, 2015; Petty, DeSteno, and Rucker 2001). Consistent with the multiple roles perspective, we believe consumers' naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion can affect persuasion in a number of ways.

In both experiments we used a message for a foster care programme that was proposed to take place in another state. We suggest this created a situation of moderate elaboration where participants had to make a choice of whether a relatively important topic in a personally irrelevant place (i.e., participants were living in Ohio) was worth processing. Had the elaboration conditions been different (e.g., if participants were distracted), instead of increasing processing, participants may have used their naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion as a cue. For example, participants with more negative meanings associated with persuasion might think, 'I didn't get a chance to really read that message, but I think persuasion is bad so I don't like that advertised programme'. Alternatively, had participants been under high elaboration conditions (e.g., if the programme were to take place in Ohio and students would have to participate in it), their naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion may have led to biased processing. For example, participants with more negative views may have biased their thinking towards counter-arguing and finding fault, leading to less positive attitudes especially when the arguments were weak, but also even when they were strong. Consequently, to better understand the influence of naïve theories about persuasion on advertising effectiveness, future research should systematically vary elaboration, and include measures to assess elaboration level.

Malleability and polarization of evaluations of persuasion

One interesting question raised by the present research concerns the malleability of naïve theories about persuasion. The results of Experiment 1 suggest that such beliefs are indeed malleable and can be context specific. However, some may be surprised by the relative ease at which they can be manipulated (see also, Petrocelli et al. 2010; Rydell, Hugenberg, and McConnell 2006). We believe this might be a result of the structure of beliefs underlying consumers' perception of persuasion. Recall that work by Coulter, Zaltman, and Coulter (2001) found that many consumers had both positives and negatives associated with advertising. As such, even those with general positive or negative meanings associated with persuasion may be aware of both the negatives and positives of persuasion. Consequently, activating a particular type of information about persuasion (aspects that portray persuasion as bad/good) may seek to emphasize those components of persuasion and shift people's naïve theories about persuasion in this direction, at least in a given situation.

An interesting possibility is that the manipulation used in Experiment 1 is most likely to influence only those who are ambivalent about persuasion. This sort of manipulation may polarize the evaluations of those who are ambivalent in terms of their naïve theories about persuasion, but be relatively ineffective in changing those who have a clear meaning associated with persuasion as something good or bad. Future research would certainly benefit from examining whether such manipulations are equally effective for those who are already polarized and those who are clearly ambivalent (see also Wheeler, DeMarree, and Petty 2007).

The structure of naïve theories about the meanings associated with persuasion and related constructs could be broadened in several additional respects. For example, future research could also examine other properties of that persuasion knowledge in terms of amount of knowledge, and complexity and degree of elaboration of those naïve theories about persuasion. In addition, research could include measures of the perceived meaning

of the key variables used in advertising studies, including naïve theories about persuasion in general (as in the present research), about advertising in particular, and even about the specific situation in which the study might take place (e.g., to what extent the situation is perceived as a persuasive scenario or not). The inclusion of multiple measures would provide a better understand of how beliefs tied to the meaning of persuasion are structured and relate to other measures (Petty and Briñol 2006; Petty, Briñol, and DeMarree 2007).

Type of elaboration: biased versus objective

Although we believe both experiments provide clear support for the idea that naïve theories about persuasion can influence information processing, it remains to be seen whether this increase in processing is completely objective or contains some bias. That is, do people with negative meanings associated with persuasion engage in more scrutiny, or do they engage in more scrutiny with an intention to find fault and just fail to do so as much when the arguments are strong? Both perspectives are congenial with the present data. That is, we found difference in information processing, but we also found that differences were particularly pronounced among the weak argument conditions. When arguments are weak individuals may find the fault they are looking for, and thus become more negative to the message advocacy; when the message is strong, individuals may attempt to find fault, but be unsuccessful in doing so, thereby leading to a more positive attitude (see Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Rucker, Briñol, and Petty 2011, for an extended discussion).

Future research should tease apart these two different types of increases in processing. However, regardless of whether the elaboration process of consumer information is relatively objective or biased, the present research clearly suggests that holding negative views towards persuasion leads consumers to greater mental activity than holding relatively positive views towards persuasion. Thus, naïve theories about persuasion influence how people think and respond to particular persuasive attempts.

Elaboration or validation

Argument quality effects in persuasion can result not only from greater elaboration but also from validation processes. From a self-validation perspective (Briñol, Petty, and Tormala 2004), in addition to affecting elaboration, it is possible that participants who associated persuasion with negativity had greater confidence in the validity of their thoughts. Specifically, to the extent that persuasive messages are perceived as a potential threat to those who view persuasion negatively, it might have activated the confidence associated with flight vs. flight responses leading people to trust their thoughts (Briñol and Petty 2009).

Although plausible, this explanation seems less likely to be responsible for the findings in the current studies for a number of reasons. First, there is evidence that variations in the valence of thoughts mediated the obtained outcome in Experiment 1, demonstrating the importance of the role of elaboration to some degree. Elaboration has not been a mediator in prior self-validation studies (see Briñol and Petty 2009a; 2009b). Second, validation processes are more likely to operate when variables are introduced after (rather than before) thinking, and when elaboration conditions are set to be particularly high (rather than moderate). To examine the possibility of validation processes, future studies could manipulate timing and elaboration as potential moderators of the process by which meanings associated with persuasion affect attitudes.

Practical implications

The idea of manipulating naïve theories to increase message processing could easily be applied in the health domain. For example, messages directed at persuading people to engage in safe sex or self-screening for breast cancer might be more effective by starting with a message frame about how some people hold negative meanings of persuasion, which could then trigger greater discrimination of the information to come. And, in a more interactive selling setting, salesman could begin their persuasive attempt by asking consumers ‘Can you tell me something you do not like about people trying to convince you?’ In answering that question, the consumer would have to activate or generate a negative view of persuasion. Even more subtly, the salesman could break the ice with a rhetorical question such as ‘you know how other marketers try to manipulate and take advantage of you, right?’ These speculative suggestions should be considered with precaution at this point since the current studies were based exclusively on a paradigm in which participants were relatively forced to be exposed to the messages. Future research should examine the role of naïve theories not only on information processing when exposed to an ad (as in the current studies) but also with regard to information exposure. That is, future studies can benefit from assessing the extent to which participants would chose to be exposed to persuasive information as a function of their beliefs about persuasion.

Conclusion

Few would disagree that persuasion has become an integral part of modern society. As such, we believe it has become increasingly important not only to understand how people respond to persuasion, but also to understand the general beliefs people hold about persuasion. Although initial steps were taken to understand the beliefs people have about the persuasion process (Friestad and Wright 1994, 1995), prior research did not examine whether consumers hold naïve theories about the meaning of persuasion itself, nor whether such meanings associated with persuasion influence the actual persuasion process and advertising effectiveness. The present research takes significant steps on both of these dimensions, and it is our hope that it will encourage researchers and practitioners to consider the implications of naïve theories about persuasion in the process of changing attitudes.

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Appendix

Rhode Island Foster Care (strong arguments)

Rhode Island's foster care program incorporates four principles.

First, the Rhode Island program recognizes that siblings are important for the social development of the child. Brothers and sisters are also an additional source of love and support for the child. For this reason, Rhode Island believes that foster parents should have other children in the family.

Second, the Rhode Island program believes it is important for children to have the support of their family when dealing with life's challenges. Therefore, in Rhode Island, children are required to stay with their foster parents until they are eighteen years old rather than the customary requirement of sixteen years.

Third, the Rhode Island program is concerned with the foster child's well-being. To aid the child's development, Rhode Island has a policy requiring foster children to maintain good grades and good behavior. Good grades will boost their self-confidence and maintaining good behaviors will help provide the discipline necessary to deal with life's stressors.

And fourth, the periodic oversight of a licensed social worker is critical to ensure that both the needs of the child and the concerns of the family are addressed in a timely manner. This is critical to head off any potential sources of conflict and to offer the parents and child with tools they need to ensure they make a good adjustment. The close relationship between family and child is the final component of the Rhode Island foster care program.

Rhode Island Foster Care (weak arguments)

Rhode Island's foster care program incorporates four principles.

First, the Rhode Island program recognizes that children need other children to fight with. Brothers and sisters provide an ideal opportunity for this to occur. For this reason Rhode Island believes that foster parents should have other children in their family.

Second, the Rhode Island program believes it is important for parents to have power and authority over the foster child for as long as possible. To accomplish this, children are required to stay with their foster parents until they are eighteen years old rather than the customary requirement of sixteen years.

Third, the Rhode Island program is concerned with its appearance. To ensure that they look good, Rhode Island requires that foster care children maintain good grades and good behavior. Decent grades will make the program look good to school teachers and maintaining positive behaviors will cause the average citizen to think the foster care program is doing a good job.

And fourth, the periodic oversight of a licensed social worker is critical to ensure that both parents and child are always focused on the fact that this is a foster care placement. This is critical in dealing with any potential sources of conflict, because both the parents and child must be prevented from dealing with each other as they would under non-foster circumstances. The distanced relationship between family and child is the final component of the Rhode Island foster care program.