Attitude Importance and Resistance to Persuasion: It’s Not Just the Thought That Counts

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This research examined individual differences in attitude importance (J. A. Krosnick, 1988a) as a moderator of resistance to persuasion. In 2 studies, individuals who favored allowing gay people to serve openly in the military were aurally presented with a counterattitudinal message. Participants who considered their attitude high (vs. low) in personal importance were more resistant to the message. Process analyses revealed that both thought listings and self-reported affect mediated this attitude importance effect. A 2nd study, which also examined message quality, showed that both high- and low-importance individuals were more resistant to a weak (vs. strong) message. This effect was explained by the fact that the weak (vs. strong) message engendered more irritation and negative affective elaborations. Results highlight the role of attitude importance in motivating resistance to persuasive communications and reveal that the resistance process is both cognitive and affective. Implications for contemporary models of persuasion are discussed.

In our daily lives we are struck not by the ease of producing attitude change but by the rarity of it. (Miller, 1965, p. 121)

Persuasion attempts pervade the fabric of social life: Everyday, TVs and radios shout at people to buy beauty and purchase prestige; newspapers tell people what to think and what to think about; friends and colleagues argue their angle and push their points. Not surprisingly, then, social psychologists have focused on the factors and processes that contribute to effective persuasion. That is, despite the observation that attitude change is difficult to produce (or, perhaps more accurately, because of it), the primary interest of the field has been on the ways and means of effective persuasion. This emphasis has led to the relative neglect of an important and perhaps even more prevalent phenomenon in the realm of persuasion dynamics: resistance to attitude change.

Although it is a widely shared assumption that some attitudes (strong ones) are highly resistant to change (e.g., Abelson, 1988; Howland, 1959; Johnson & Eagly, 1990; Miller, 1965; Petty & Krosnick, 1995; Sherif & Howland, 1961; Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965; Zanna, 1993), resistance has seldom been the focal point of investigation. Even more rare are attempts to investigate the psychological processes by which resistance occurs (for recent exceptions, see Chaiken, Giner-Sorolla, & Chen, 1996; Eagly & Chaiken, 1995; Pomerantz, Chaiken, & Tordesillas, 1995). In their comprehensive review of attitude theory, Eagly and Chaiken (1993) amplified the point: “Indeed, explaining why people are so often effective at resisting efforts to change their strong attitudes remains one of the core issues of attitude theory” (p. 680). The current research is a response to this clarion call to study the processes by which people try to resist attitude change.

To set the current investigation in its historical context, we briefly summarize the major social psychological approaches to communication-based persuasion. In an early approach, Howland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) assumed that a message must be learned and remembered for it to produce lasting attitude change. Greenwald (1968) later argued that message learning per se was less critical for effective attitude change than were the idiosyncratic responses of message recipients (see also Petty, Ostrom, & Brock, 1981). More contemporary models (Chaiken, 1987; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a) posit that attitude change can be accomplished through two distinct processes. One subsumes Greenwald’s cognitive response approach and involves relatively careful message processing, in which attitude change results from having favorable thoughts about the message. The other involves more superficial processing, in which attitude change results from the use of peripheral cues or heuristics (e.g., “experts can be trusted”).

This emphasis on the cognitive processes involved in attitude change has been highly productive. It has resulted in a vast empirical foundation for understanding the principles of attitude formation and change (see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). However, this knowledge base has been built on the use of relatively weak attitudes for which some change effects might be observed. How-
land articulated this strategy in 1959: "We usually deliberately try to find . . . attitudes which are susceptible to modification through communication. Otherwise, we run the risk of no measurable effects" (p. 10). Contemporary researchers continue to study attitudes about which people know little or care little, such as novel consumer products (e.g., a new pen) or what Zanna (1993) referred to as "parochial college issues" (e.g., comprehensive examinations for seniors). As a result of this strategy, psychologists are left with the misleading impression that attitudes are relatively easy to change (Abelson, 1988; Holland, 1959; Miller, 1965; Zanna, 1993). The obvious irony is captured in the quote at the beginning of this article.

Our goal of studying resistance and the processes by which it occurs requires that we challenge attitudes that people are motivated to maintain (Chaiken et al., 1996; Eagly & Chaiken, 1995; Petty & Krosnick, 1995). Otherwise, we "run the risk" of not finding a resistance effect. But what is a strong attitude? This question might be answered in several ways (Krosnick, Boninger, Chuang, Berent, & Carnot, 1993; Petty & Krosnick, 1995; Raden, 1985; Wegener, Downing, Krosnick, & Petty, 1995). For example, attitude strength could be defined structurally in terms of the extremity (Abelson, 1995) or accessibility of the attitude (Fazio, 1985). Alternatively, attitude strength could be defined more "motivationally" in terms of ego involvement (e.g., Sherif et al., 1965), for example, vested interest (e.g., Crano, 1995), or attitude importance (e.g., Krosnick, 1988a). We chose to focus on attitude importance as a key indicator of attitude strength.

Attitude importance has a number of properties that make it useful for studying resistance to persuasion. As defined by Krosnick, attitude importance reflects the degree to which an individual cares about, is concerned about, and attaches personal significance to an attitude (Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, & Fabrigar, 1995; Krosnick, 1988b). Krosnick has shown that important attitudes are psychologically and motivationally significant in a number of respects. For example, important attitudes are more likely to influence information processing and social judgments compared with less important attitudes (Krosnick, 1988b, 1989, 1990). They also are more likely to guide behavior (Krosnick, 1988b) and to be stable over time (Krosnick, 1988a). Finally, in both classic and contemporary theorizing, attitude importance is assumed to be associated with greater motivation to resist change (e.g., Abelson, 1988; Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, & Fabrigar, 1995; Doob, 1940; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Festinger, 1957; Kreech & Crutchfield, 1948; Petty & Krosnick, 1995; Sherif et al., 1965; Sherif & Cantril, 1947; Zanna, 1993).

A number of empirical studies generally support this last assumption (e.g., Fine, 1957; Gorn, 1975; Rhine & Severance, 1970; Sherif, Kelly, Rodgers, Sarup, & Tittler, 1973). However, each of these studies is hampered by methodological difficulties that leave the findings equivocal. For example, Fine (1957) presented participants with a persuasive communication about bioterrorist warfare and found the most resistance to change among those who considered the issue to be of greatest personal concern and importance. However, attitude importance was measured after exposure to the persuasive communication, leaving open the possibility that attitude change influenced subsequent reports of attitude importance. One purpose of our research was to document unequivocally that personally important attitudes are more resistant to change than less important attitudes following a persuasive communication. In doing so, we wanted to underscore the significance of attitude importance as a moderator of resistance to persuasion (Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, & Fabrigar, 1995; Petty & Krosnick, 1995).

Assuming, then, that high-importance people will show more resistance to change than their low-importance counterparts, our next goal was to explain this resistance effect. How do people who care deeply about their attitudes resist changing them? Currently, empirical investigations of the communication and persuasion process emphasize the mediating role of cognitive elaboration. Attitude change follows from generating favorable thoughts about the message. Even in the few studies that have focused more on resistance than on attitude change, the critical mediating process is still assumed to be cognitive elaboration (e.g., Chen, Reardon, Rea, & Moore, 1992; Petty & Cacioppo, 1977, 1979). Resistance follows from generating unfavorable thoughts about the message. As Mackie and Skelly (1994) observed, it is "difficult to overestimate the role that elaboration plays in contemporary thinking about effective persuasion" (p. 266). Clearly, however, counterargumentation is not the only available tool for resisting a persuasive message. For example, people may also deny the validity of the message, distort its arguments, tune it out, derogate its source, or get angry and irritated about it (Abelson, 1959; Abelson & Miller, 1967; Brehm, 1966; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Festinger, 1957; Janis & Terwiliger, 1962; Sherif et al., 1965; Pomerantz et al., 1995).

These strategies reflect the fact that individuals can respond to persuasive messages with both thoughts and feelings and that both types of responses can contribute to resistance. As Sherif et al. (1965) argued more than 30 years ago, final attitudes following a persuasive message are the result of both cognitively evaluating it and experiencing "pleasure or irritation at being exposed to it" (p. x). Despite this early observation, the mediating role of affective responses following a persuasive message has been largely neglected, until recently. Still, these recent studies continue to center on attitude change outcomes. Thus, positive affective responses are examined for the degree to which they facilitate message acceptance. For example, Rosselli, Skelly, and Mackie (1995) reported a process analysis showing that positive affective elaborations (e.g., "I felt sorry for the poor helpless animals," p. 176) contributed to the overall acceptance of an emotional message regarding animal research. Likewise, researchers in the consumer behavior literature have focused on how affective responses mediate positive attitudes toward advertisements and the brands they promote (e.g., Batra & Ray, 1986; Burke & Edell, 1989; Homer & Yoon, 1992).
In contrast to this recent work, some classic literature has focused more on how affective responses influence message rejection (resistance) rather than message acceptance. For example, Janis and Terwilliger (1962) examined both affective and cognitive responses to fear appeals to determine whether resistance would be greater for a high- versus a low-threat appeal. However, they conceptualized resistance solely in terms of the cognitive responses (i.e., message rejections) produced by the participants. Affective elaborations were taken as evidence of the effectiveness of the manipulations, not as evidence of resistance to the fear-based appeals. A much different study relevant to affect and resistance was conducted in a New York City park (Abelson & Miller, 1967). A presumed survey researcher elicited participation first from a passerby and then from a confederate. A survey on job discrimination against Black people was conducted orally and before long the confederate was insulting the participant for his or her views. Not surprisingly, the participant was more resistant to the confederate’s views when insulted than when not insulted. A plausible assumption is that the anger or irritation evoked by the insolent confederate contributed to the participants’ resistance. However, affective reactions to the confederate were not assessed.

This brief review of studies on the role of affect in persuasion dynamics is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it is intended to illustrate the limitations of both classic and contemporary approaches to the issues of interest to us. We suggest that the older literature is limited in its methodology and that the recent work is limited in its focus. Thus, the older studies did focus on both affect and resistance. However, Janis and Terwilliger (1962) did not treat affective responses as a cause of resistance in their analyses, and Abelson and Miller (1967) did not measure affective responses or show conclusively that anger or irritation led to resistance. By contrast, both affective and cognitive responses are measured and examined rigorously in more contemporary work. However, the focus of that work was on explaining message acceptance, not resistance. In our two studies, we investigated the affective and cognitive processes by which resistance occurs.

In Study 1, we examined motivational differences (i.e., attitude importance) that should moderate resistance to persuasion and the affective and cognitive processes that should mediate resistance. We expected that high-importance individuals would be more resistant to a persuasive communication than their low-importance counterparts. We also expected high-importance individuals, compared with their low-importance counterparts, to experience greater anger and irritation in response to the message, to generate more counterarguments, and to evaluate the source of the communication less favorably. Finally, in a process analysis, we expected both affective and cognitive responses to mediate attitudinal responses to the communication.

**Study 1**

**Method**

In a mass testing session conducted at the beginning of the semester, introductory psychology students completed a survey in which they reported their overall attitude toward allowing gays in the military (1 = unfavorable, 9 = favorable). Four items assessed attitude importance: (a) “My attitude toward gays in the military is very important to me personally,” (b) “I do not care personally about this issue,” (c) “I don’t have very intense feelings about this issue,” and (d) “I am personally very concerned about this issue.” Individuals’ responses on 9-point disagree-agree scales were averaged (after reverse scoring Items 2 and 3) to form an attitude importance index (α = .88).

**Participants and Design**

Of those who were initially favorable toward allowing gay people in the military, participants were randomly selected from among those scoring in the upper and lower third of the distribution of importance scores. Approximately 3 weeks after pretesting, eligible individuals were contacted by phone and asked to participate in a study in exchange for extra credit. Eighty-four participants (35 men and 49 women) were successfully recruited. The mean attitude score for the low-importance group was 7.67 (SD = 1.07; n = 42), and their mean importance score was 2.02 (SD = .72). The mean attitude score for the high-importance group was 8.48 (SD = 0.86; n = 42), and their mean importance score was 6.55 (SD = 1.15).

Cognitive responses are typically measured after participants have reported their attitudes (e.g., Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Petty, Schumann, Richman, & Strathman, 1993). As a result, individuals’ final report of their attitudes may influence the thoughts that they subsequently list (Miller & Colman, 1981). Given this concern, we decided to manipulate the order of assessment in Study 1. Therefore, half of the participants reported their attitudes first and the other half reported their thoughts and affective responses first. The order in which these mediators were assessed also was counterbalanced. Thus, the design was a 2 (importance: high vs. low) X 2 (attitude assessment: before mediators vs. after mediators) X 2 (mediator order: thoughts/affect vs. affect/thoughts) between-subjects factorial (n = 10 or 11).

**Procedure**

People participated in groups of 1 -7 in a room with partitions that prevented interaction. Participants were told that the study concerned measuring different aspects of people’s attitudes and opinions and that they would be given an opportunity to express their own attitudes about allowing gays in the military using “a variety of formats and scales.” They were told that a persuasive essay would be played “because we found in pilot testing last semester that some people really like hearing someone else’s opinions before expressing their own opinions. Others don’t really feel that way—and that’s okay. But we’re going to play this speech for the benefit of those people who do like to hear others’ opinions first.” Participants were then led to believe that their session had been randomly assigned to hear the tape arguing against allowing gays in the military. These instructions provided a plausible reason for playing the counterattitudinal speech while not creating an overly high demand to scrutinize the speech or a high degree of reactance (Brehm, 1966).

After the 3'/2-min message (described next), participants were given a questionnaire booklet and encouraged to respond openly and honestly, given that their responses would be completely confidential. The experimenter then paced respondents through the first three tasks (thought listing, affect, and final attitude in varying orders) and allowed them to complete the remainder of the questionnaire at their own pace.

**Message**

An essay containing five main arguments against lifting the ban on gays in the military was constructed. The main gist of each argument was: (a) “Allowing gay people in the military detracts from its effectiveness in the face of terrorism, reduces the cohesion of the military, and results in increased terror attacks. (b) “Gay militaries are less efficient than heterosexual militaries, which are more effective in combat situations. (c) “Gay militaries are also less secure because they are more likely to face internal conflict and disloyalty. (d) “Gay militaries are less disciplined because they lack the discipline and commitment of straight soldiers. (e) “Gay militaries are less effective in dealing with the military's diverse and complex challenges, which require a cohesive and unified force.”
was as follows: (a) Gays in the military undermine unit cohesion and therefore combat performance. (b) It is uncomfortable to shower, dress, and so on, in front of others who view one as a sex object. (c) The military has a distinct cultural identity and moral code that would be violated by the acceptance of gays. (d) Pushing for gays in the military is just "one more step in the 'gay agenda'" of trying to get homosexuality accepted as legitimate and normal. Yet, the "majority" of Americans think that homosexuality is wrong. (e) It is not in America's best interest to experiment with our defense forces; the military was never meant to be an agent of social change or a social science laboratory. The 568-word essay was recorded onto an audiocassette by a male voice.

Dependent Measures

Final attitude. Participants were given 45 s to report their final attitude using four 9-point semantic differentials: bad—good, wise—foolish, harmful—beneficial, and unfavorable—favorable (α = .87). Higher numbers on this final attitude index indicate a more favorable attitude toward allowing gays in the military and therefore more resistance to the message.

Thought listing. Participants were given 3 min to write in a series of "thought-listing boxes" all thoughts they had while the message was being played, whether favorable to, opposed to, neutral toward, or irrelevant to the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a).

Affect. Participants were given 3 min 15 s to indicate how they were feeling while the message was being played by rating a series of 35 adjectives (1 = does not apply at all, 7 = applies very much). This measure was adapted from Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, and Elliott (1991), who used it successfully to measure specific types of negative affect (e.g., compunction). This measure included adjectives conceptually related to irritation (i.e., agitated, angry, annoyed, bothered, disgusted, and irritated; α = .96), uncertainty (i.e., uncertain, indecisive, and confused; α = .82), and positivity (i.e., happy, optimistic, content, good, confident, proud, satisfied with myself, and pleased with myself; α = .92). Similar affect rating tasks have been used successfully in the consumer behavior literature (e.g., Burke & Edell, 1989).

Source evaluations. The fourth task in the response booklet was always a source evaluation. Evaluations were made on 7-point semantic differentials reflecting credibility (competent, credible, unintelligent [reversed; R], unreasonable [R], knowledgeable, nonexpert [R], wise; α = .90) and likability (untrustworthy [R], unfriendly [R], likable, bad [R], insincere [R], warm; α = .84). Higher scores indicate more favorable evaluations of the source.3

Results

Coding

Thoughts were initially coded as being issue relevant (favorable, unfavorable, or neutral), source directed (favorable, unfavorable, or neutral), or irrelevant (e.g., "thought about my next exam"). At least two out of three independent judges agreed on the coding of 98% of the thoughts listed. Disagreements were resolved by the third judge. Thoughts were then examined for their negative affective tone. Unfavorable thoughts directed at the source were all judged to be affectively charged (e.g., "That guy really irritates me"). Reexamination of issue-relevant thoughts also revealed some to be affectively charged (e.g., "The tape made me angry"). Others were not so charged (e.g., "Everyone in this country is entitled to equal rights"). Table 1 shows the mean number of thoughts in each category as a function of attitude importance.

Following others who have distinguished between cognitive and affective elaborations (e.g., Batra & Ray, 1986; Rosselli et al., 1995), we formed two thought indexes. First, an index of negative affective elaborations (NAEs) was created by adding all affectively charged thoughts (whether source directed or issue relevant) and then subtracting the few source-directed favorable thoughts. Thus, this index reflected affectively charged negative thoughts about the source and the message. Second, an index of negative cognitive elaborations (NCEs) was created. It was formed by taking the nonaffectively charged, issue-unfavorable thoughts and subtracting the issue-favorable thoughts. The correlation between these two indexes was small (r = -.10).

Primary Analyses

The primary hypothesis of Study 1 was that high-importance individuals would be more resistant to the influence of a persuasive communication than their low-importance counterparts and that this effect would be mediated by both cognitive and affective processes. Each dependent measure was thus examined in an Importance × Attitude Assessment × Mediator Order analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), with pretest attitude as a covariate.4 The covariate was significant only in the analysis of final attitude scores, F(1, 74) = 7.57, p < .01. For all other measures, analysis of variance (ANOVA) results are reported. As is evident in Table 2, high-importance individuals maintained a more favorable attitude toward gay people in the military than did their low-importance counterparts, F(1, 74) = 16.21, p < .001. They also produced more NAEs, F(1, 76) = 6.32, p < .02, and more NCEs, F(1, 76) = 14.09, p < .001. In addition, high-importance individuals reported being more irritated, angry, and so on, in response to the message, F(1, 76) = 29.61, p < .001. Finally, they rated the source to be less competent, F(1, 76) = 10.16, p < .01, and less likable, F(1, 76) = 15.93, p < .001. There were no additional effects on any of these measures, nor were there any effects for feelings of uncertainty or positivity.

We would like to argue that high-importance individuals (vs. low-importance ones) were more resistant to the message. However, because these groups differed somewhat in the extremity of their initial attitudes, we examined this interpretation more rigorously in an Importance × Attitude Assessment × Mediator Order × Attitude Measure (pretest vs. final attitude) mixed-model ANOVA, with repeated measures on the last variable. This analysis revealed a significant interaction between attitude measure and importance, F(1, 75) = 5.43, p < .03. Attitudes changed less from pre- to posttest for high-importance individ-

3 Three additional measures of perceived influence (cf. Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979) were included at the end of the dependent measures booklet. These measures were designed to explore the possibility that high-importance individuals would perceive being even more in favor of their original attitude following the persuasive communication than would low-importance individuals. These measures produced inconsistent results across the two studies reported. Because they were not central to the main hypotheses, we do not discuss them further.

4 Sex, also was examined in the initial analyses, but there were no significant effects involving this variable. In Study 2, the small number of male participants precluded analyses involving sex. Therefore, this variable is not considered further.
Mean Number of Thoughts in Study I as a Function of Category and Attitude Importance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source directed</th>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorable</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavorable (affectively charged)</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.60*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue relevant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorable</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavorable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonaffectively charged</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>2.50*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affectively charged</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.54*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.

itals (mean change = 0.97) than for low-importance individuals (mean change = 1.65). This analysis bolsters the claim that high-importance individuals were more resistant to the message.

Mediation Analyses

Having established that high-importance individuals were more resistant than their low-importance counterparts, the key issue concerned the processes underlying this resistance. To address this issue, we conducted a process analysis using multiple regression techniques (Judd & Kenny, 1981a, 1981b). In all regressions reported, predictor variables were centered (Aiken & West, 1991). The “basic model” included pretest attitude entered as a covariate and the seven terms constituting the full factorial design. The potential mediators used in these analyses were the irritation index, NAEs, and NCEs.

As shown in Figure 1, importance significantly predicted each of the mediators, such that the more important the attitude, the more irritation-related feelings were reported and the more negative affective and cognitive elaborations were generated. These regression results replicate the previously reported analyses. An additional effect that emerged for the NCE index was an interaction between importance, mediator order, and attitude assessment, F(1, 75) = 6.77, p < .02. This interaction suggests that when final attitudes were assessed after the mediators (see Figure 1), high-importance individuals generated more negative thoughts (β = -.59) than did low-importance individuals (β = -.14) when thoughts were listed first (i.e., before the affect rating task). By contrast, when final attitudes were assessed before the mediators (see Figure 2), high-importance (vs. low-importance) individuals generated fewer negative thoughts when thoughts were listed first (βs = -.06 and -.61, respectively).

Simple mediation The three potential mediators were tested together in a simple mediation analysis in which final attitude was regressed on the basic model, followed by NCE, NAE, and the irritation index. As expected, the main effect for each mediator was significant. A more favorable attitude toward gay people in the military was maintained as a result of generating more NCEs, F(1, 69) = 9.91, p < .01 (β = .31), as a result of generating more NAEs, F(1, 69) = 4.42, p < .05 (β = .19), and as a result of getting more irritated in response to the message, F(1, 69) = 9.53, p < .01 (β = .32). The R² associated with this simple mediation model was .59, F(1, 69) = 9.18, p < .001.

Interactional mediation. An interactional mediation analysis was conducted to test the possibility that the resistance process would be different depending on the order in which the measures were taken. For this analysis, interaction terms were created by crossing each mediator with each of the seven terms in the full factorial model. Nonsignificant higher order terms were then trimmed from the final model (Judd & Kenny, 1981a), so that the final interactional model consisted of the basic model, three main effects of the mediators, two 2-way interactions (NCE × Importance and NCE × Attitude Assessment), and one 3-way interaction (NCE × Importance × Attitude Assessment).

Both NAEs, F(1, 66) = 4.85, p < .05 (β = .19), and the irritation index, F(1, 66) = 9.66, p < .01 (β = .31), again mediated the effect of importance on final attitudes simply. However, NCEs mediated final attitudes differently depending on both importance and whether final attitudes were measured before or after the mediators, F(1, 66) = 5.39, p < .03. We consider first conditions in which final attitudes were measured after the mediators (and therefore where causal interpretations were the most appropriate). In this case, NCEs facilitated resistance to the message for low-importance people (β = .39) but not for high-importance people (β = -.23; see Figure 1). In fact, for high-importance people, such elaborations appeared to be associated with greater vulnerability to the message (i.e., less favorable attitudes toward gay people in the military). One plausible explanation for this effect is that generating many cognitive elaborations attenuated the degree of irritation that these high-importance people were feeling in response to the message, thus undermining their affective resistance to the message. In any case, because both thoughts and affect were measured before attitudes, the analysis shown in Figure 1 provides good evidence for their mediational role.

We next consider conditions in which final attitudes were measured first, before the mediators (see Figure 2). In this case, NCEs facilitated resistance for both low- (β = .40) and high- (β = .63) importance individuals. However, one cannot argue unequivocally that NCEs mediated final attitudes in this case because participants' final attitudes had already been reported before any thoughts (or feelings) were assessed. Instead, this result suggests that once the attitude is reported, all respondents are likely to generate more NCEs, possibly in order to justify their attitudes (which are contrary to the message; Miller & Colman, 1981).

Finally, a direct effect of attitude assessment on final attitudes emerged in this analysis, F(1, 66) = 4.06, p < .05 (β = -.16). This effect suggests that, overall, participants resisted the message somewhat more when given the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings first. The strength of this interactional mediational model, compared with the simple mediational model, could be gauged by comparing the amount of variance in final attitude accounted for by each. The R² associated with the interactional mediation model was .65, F(14, 66) = 8.75, p < .001, accounting for significantly more variance in
final attitude than the simple mediational model, $R^2$ change = .06, $F(1, 66) = 3.51, p < .02$. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the final path model for the interactional mediation analysis.

**Discussion**

The findings of Study 1 support the classic assumption that people will resist changing strong, personally important attitudes. High-importance (vs. low-importance) individuals were more resistant to the influence of a counterattitudinal message. In addition, high-importance individuals experienced more negative affect (e.g., anger, irritation) in response to the message; generated more negative elaborations, both cognitive and affective; and evaluated the source less favorably. Furthermore, the process analysis revealed that their resistance was mediated by both affective and cognitive responses to the message. High-importance individuals resisted more because they got more irritated and generated more negative thoughts about the message. The results of this process analysis underscore that resistance to persuasion is both an affective and a cognitive affair, particularly for those who care deeply about their attitudes.

**Study 2**

One might explain these findings by suggesting that the high-importance group processed the message more carefully than did the low-importance group (Howard-Pitney, Borgida, & Omoto, 1986). That is, the high-importance group, relative to the low-importance group, might have been more resistant solely because of cognitive processing differences between the two groups. Perhaps having given more careful thought to the message, high-importance individuals were able to uncover and
counterargue weaknesses in it. These weaknesses could have in turn made them irritated. For example, they might have thought, Why are you wasting my time with such poor arguments? and then became irritated. By this logic, one would assume that low-importance individuals did not think carefully about the message.

In contrast to this cognitive processing view, we suspect that the importance effect observed in Study 1 was attributable to motivational differences, not strictly to processing differences. In support of this position, there were no differences between low- and high-importance groups in the total number of thoughts generated in response to the message in Study 1. That is, the amount of message processing appeared to be the same across groups, although the type of thought differed (i.e., the high-importance group generated more negative thoughts). We suggest, then, that high-importance individuals counterargued more and got more irritated by the message because they cared more deeply and personally about their attitudes than did low-importance individuals.

In Study 2, we sought to address these different explanations by using a message quality manipulation. We know from dozens of studies that people who are motivated (to be accurate) and able to process message arguments will be more persuaded by strong than by weak messages (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986b). Thus, according to the cognitive processing view, high-importance individuals should be more resistant to a weak message than a strong message because they would be expected to process the messages carefully. Low-importance individuals, on the other hand, should be equally persuaded by strong or weak arguments because they will not process the messages carefully. This view, then, predicts an interaction between importance and message quality.

We did not expect to observe this kind of interaction because both groups appeared to process the message to a similar degree in Study 1. Thus, we suspected that both low- and high-importance individuals would process the messages carefully in Study 2. Consequently, low-importance individuals should be more persuaded by a strong than a weak message. What to expect from the high-importance group was less clear. A strong version of the motivational view suggests that high-importance individuals will be highly motivated to defend and maintain their attitudes. This “bulldog” resistance (Abelson, 1995) may result from the attitude being related to the self-concept or embedded in other values and beliefs (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Krech & Crutchfield, 1948; Ostrom & Brock, 1968; Sherif et al., 1965). On the basis of this strong
version, high-importance individuals should be equally resistant to both messages. If this were the case, we would expect to see an interaction such that the high-importance group would show no message quality effect but the low-importance group would. However, it is possible that in carefully processing the messages, the high-importance group would generate more counterarguments and get more irritated in response to the weak message. If so, they may be more resistant to a weak message than a strong one. This somewhat weaker version of the motivational view would predict two main effects, one for message quality and one for attitude importance. These possibilities were explored in Study 2.

Method

Design and Procedure

Participants were recruited the same way as in Study 1. Of 112 participants (26 men and 86 women), half were low importance (M = 1.90, SD = 0.62) and half were high importance (M = 6.48, SD = 1.20). The mean attitude score for the low-importance group was 7.96 (SD = 0.85); for the high-importance group it was 8.57 (SD = 0.74). The design was a 2 (importance: high vs. low) X 2 (message quality: strong vs. weak) X 2 (mediator order: thoughts/affect vs. affect/thoughts) between-subjects factorial (n = 14). The procedure and dependent measures were the same as in Study 1, except that the word persuasive was removed from all instructions when referring to the message.

Message Construction and Pilot Testing

In initial pilot testing, people generated predominantly negative responses to arguments against gay people in the military, regardless of the apparent strength of those arguments. Therefore, we defined message quality primarily in terms of how worthy the arguments were of serious consideration and how difficult the arguments were to counterargue (see also Mackie & Worth, 1989; Mackie, Worth, & Asuncion, 1990). Also, to maximize differences in message quality, we used better initial arguments and references to scientific studies in the strong message but weaker arguments and references to opinion in the weak one.

The four arguments contained in the 617-word strong message were the following: (a) Studies show that gays in the ranks can undermine and prevent unit cohesion. (b) Research shows that distinctions caused by unwanted sexual attention can increase stress and decrease job performance. (c) The majority of Americans do not support the gay rights agenda; it is unwise to force a change in military policy without majority consent. (d) The military's sole purpose is to be ready to defend the nation; it should not be treated as a social science laboratory. Arguments contained in the 638-word weak message were the following: (a) It's common knowledge that gays don't make good soldiers because they are weak and would crumble under the pressure of combat. (b) We should trust the judgment of military leaders like George Washington and others who have always considered homosexual conduct in the military to be harmful. (c) Our military, without open homosexuality, is superior to other militaries (e.g., Holland's) that do allow gays in the ranks. (d) If open homosexuality were allowed, there would be a huge influx of gays eager to enlist, and the military would become a gay social club. Both messages were recorded by a male voice.

In a pilot study, two groups of 9 read and evaluated the messages using 9-point disagree-agree scales. An index of message quality was created to say about the source of the message. Indexes of NAEs and NCEs were computed as in Study 1; their correlation was again small (r = .08). The feeling indexes for irritation, uncertainty, and positivity also were calculated as in Study 1, with reliabilities of .93, .86, and .91, respectively.

Primary Analyses

Each dependent measure was examined in an Importance X Message Quality X Mediator Order ANCOVA. As is evident in Table 4, high-importance individuals again maintained a more favorable attitude toward gay people in the military than did their low-importance counterparts, F(1, 103) = 7.68, p < .01. They also produced more NAEs, F(1, 104) = 6.98, p < .01; produced more NCEs, F(1, 104) = 4.24, p < .05; and got more irritated, angry, and so on, F(1, 103) = 3.65, p < .06. A new finding that emerged in this study concerned feelings of uncertainty, such that low-importance (vs. high-importance) individuals felt more uncertain following the message, F(1, 103) = 7.46, p < .01. Finally, as in the first study, high-importance individuals rated the source to be less competent, F(1, 104) = 4.38, p < .04, and less likeable, F(1, 104) = 3.65, p < .06.

These analyses revealed similar main effects for message quality (see Table 4) but no interactions on any variable. This pattern of findings supports the weak version of the motivational view and suggests that both low- and high-importance individuals processed the messages carefully. Thus, all participants were more resistant to the weak versus the strong message, F(1, 103) = 4.20, p < .05. Consistent with this outcome, participants felt more uncertain following the strong message, F(1, 103) = 15.44, p < .001. Participants also produced more NAEs, F(1, 104) = 12.78, p < .001, and more NCEs, F(1, 103) = 6.50, p < .01, in response to the weak (vs. the strong) message. Interestingly, there was no message quality effect for the number of NCEs generated. Finally, participants unanimously considered the source of the weak message to be less competent.

1 An alternative view would have been to expect greater resistance to the strong message because it poses a greater threat to participants' attitudes (Brehm, 1966). However, because of the pattern of affective responses observed in Study 1 (i.e., irritation-related rather than threat-related feelings) and because the weak message used in Study 2 was extremely specious (see the Method section), we thought it more likely that high-importance individuals would be more resistant to the weak message.
Mean Number of Thoughts in Study 2 as a Function of Category, Attitude Importance, and Message Quality

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Message quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source directed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorable</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavorable</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue relevant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorable</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavorable</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affectively charged</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.66*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.

F(1, 104) = 57.00, p < .001, and less likable, F(1, 104) = 11.60, p < .001, than the source of the strong message.

Mediation Analyses

Mediation analyses were conducted as described in Study 1. The basic model used in all regressions included the pretest attitude covariate and the seven terms constituting the full factorial design. Importance again predicted each of the mediators, such that the more important the attitude, the more irritation reported and the more NAEs and NCEs generated (see Figure 3). Message quality also predicted two of the three mediators. Participants reported more irritation and generated more NAEs after a weak than a strong message. However, this latter effect emerged only when the affect rating task came before the thought-listing task, F(1, 104) = 10.66, p < .002. This interaction suggests that the affect rating task primed respondents to use more affectively charged language such as "angry" and "frustrated" when writing out their thoughts about the weak message. Finally, again, message quality did not predict the number of NCEs produced.

As in Study 1, the mediators were tested together in a simple mediation analysis in which final attitude was regressed on the basic model, followed by NCEs, NAEs, and the irritation index. As expected, the main effect for each mediator was significant. As can be seen in Figure 3, high- compared with low-importance individuals maintained a more favorable attitude toward gay people in the military as a result of getting more irritated, F(1, 100) = 4.71, p = .03 (β = .19), generating more NAEs, F(1, 100) = 7.10, p < .01 (β = .25), and generating more NCEs, F(1, 100) = 19.68, p < .001 (β = .35). Figure 3 also shows that participants were more resistant to the weak message as a result of getting more irritated and generating more NAEs. NCEs, however, did not mediate the message quality effect. Finally, a direct effect for mediator order emerged in this analysis, such that participants were more resistant when they listed their thoughts first as opposed to rating their affect first, F(1, 100) = 5.12, p = .03 (β = -.17). The R² associated with this simple mediation model was .48, F(11, 100) = 8.27, p < .001. The interactional model from Study 1, in which importance and NCEs interacted to predict final attitudes, did not replicate in Study 2. Thus, we found no evidence in Study 2 that generating NCEs facilitates resistance more for low- than for high-importance individuals.

Discussion

The findings of Study 2 support the weak version of the view that high-importance individuals are more motivated to resist attitude change than are low-importance individuals. There was no evidence for the strong view that high-importance individuals would doggedly resist both messages, regardless of their quality or strength. There also was no evidence for the hypothesis that low-importance individuals would be equally persuaded by both messages because of a failure to cognitively process them. Thus, both high- and low-importance groups were influenced by the message quality manipulation, but the high-importance

Table 4

Mean Values for the Dependent Measures in Study 2 as a Function of Attitude Importance and Message Quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent measure</th>
<th>Importance</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td></td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final attitude</td>
<td>6.46</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>7.29</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>7.16</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative affective elaborations</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative cognitive elaborations</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irritation index</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source competence</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source likability</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p Means are adjusted to control for pretest attitudes.
group displayed a greater degree of resistance overall. Replicating Study 1, we again found that the greater resistance of the high-importance group was mediated by both affective and cognitive responses to the messages. In other words, they resisted more because they got more irritated and because they generated more negative thoughts than did their low-importance counterparts.

It is interesting that the message quality effect appeared to have been mediated by affective responses, but not cognitive responses (see Figure 3). Thus, the weak message evoked greater irritation, annoyance, anger, and so on, compared with the strong message. It also elicited a greater number of NAEs, at least when thoughts were listed after the affect rating task. Why did our participants show less irritation in response to the strong message? We speculate that irritation in response to the strong message might have been attenuated because the arguments were good. That is, because the arguments in the strong message could not simply be dismissed, they might have encouraged recipients to be balanced in their response to the communication. Many of the thoughts listed by both low- and high-importance individuals suggested that although disagreeing overall, they had to concede that the speaker had a good point (e.g., “Throughout the tape I was made aware of many key and interesting points to argue that side, however since I disagree with the message as a whole, the details were not enough to convince me to change my mind”). This process of conceding that the speaker’s position was not completely biased and uninformed might have attenuated their anger and paved the way for them to be more vulnerable (less resistant) to the message.

The present findings invite us to think broadly about the meaning of message quality. This construct is typically operationally defined by the types of thoughts a message elicits. Thus, a strong message is one that primarily elicits favorable thoughts and a weak message, counterarguments (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a). This operational definition implies that counterarguing occurs only in response to weak and specious arguments. However, we found that people counterargued our strong and weak messages to similar degrees, even though they were judged a priori to be of different quality and even though they led to different attitudinal outcomes. This finding is consistent with the perspective that individuals who are highly committed to their views will counterargue even the most cogent and well-reasoned arguments (e.g., Abelson, 1986; Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Festinger, 1957; Howard-Pitney et al., 1986; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Sweeney & Gruber, 1984). Thus, at least when dealing with important and meaningful attitudes, it likely will be necessary to define “message quality” in terms other than the type of thought elicited (Mackie & Worth, 1989; see Areni &

General Discussion

The results of our two studies unequivocally support the classic assumption that strong, personally important attitudes are more difficult to change than less important ones and show that the process of resistance is both cognitive and affective. Across the two studies, high-importance individuals were more resistant to a counterattitudinal message regarding gay people in the military than were low-importance individuals. Furthermore, this greater resistance was mediated by the fact that high-importance individuals got more irritated and generated more NAEs and NCEs than did low-importance individuals. This process analysis replicated across two studies and three different counterattitudinal messages.

We have argued that one key difference between high- and low-importance individuals is their motivation to resist attitude change. That is, challenging motivationally significant attitudes is the key to engaging both affective and cognitive resistance processes (Sherif et al., 1965). We suspect that the motivational significance of personally important attitudes is attributable to their relation to the self-concept. Others have similarly argued that self-defining attitudes are highly difficult to change (e.g., Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Ostrom & Brock, 1968; Sherif & Holland, 1961; Sherif et al., 1965). Although explicit links to the self-concept are not part of the conceptual definition of importance, Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, and Fabrigar (1995) argued that importance and the self-concept are inextricably bound in a causal chain (see also Boninger, Krosnick, & Berent, 1995). Thus, when personally important attitudes are challenged, the self-concept is engaged and may lead to intense affective and cognitive resistance.

Implications for Models of Persuasion

Exciting challenges face persuasion research guided by contemporary models of persuasion (Chaiken, 1987; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986b). First, a thorough investigation of the influence of preexisting attitudes on the persuasion process must be pursued (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Although contemporary models acknowledge that prior attitudes can bias cognitive responses to persuasive communications (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1986b), they are not fully articulated in this regard (cf. Zanna, 1993). Second, these models are basically silent with regard to the mediating role of affective responses to persuasive communications. However, as we have shown, affect can be an important part of the process by which individuals resist counterattitudinal messages. Indeed, it also can be an important part of the process by which individuals yield to such messages (Rosselli et al., 1995). Thus, a complete theoretical account of persuasion dynamics will need to incorporate both affective and cognitive processes.

Perhaps one reason for the underdevelopment of contemporary persuasion models with regard to the influence of preexisting attitudes and affective processes is their guiding assumption that individuals are motivated to hold accurate, valid attitudes (Chaiken, 1987; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986b). An implicit corollary of this assumption is that people are objective when processing new attitude-relevant information. However, a desire for valid attitudes need not imply objective message processing. For example, people may be motivated to protect an existing attitude that is already subjectively valid (Chaiken et al., 1996; Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989; Kruglanski, 1989; Mackie & Skelly, 1994). Continued efforts to account for the nature of the attitude being challenged and the various motives with which people approach the persuasion setting holds the promise of increasing the explanatory power of contemporary persuasion models.

Persuasion and Consistency Theory

The theoretical perspective taken in the current research parallels, in many respects, issues central to cognitive consistency theories (e.g., Abelson et al., 1968; Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958). The core of dissonance theory, for example, is that people feel psychological discomfort (i.e., negative affect; Elliot & Devine, 1994) after having performed an attitude-inconsistent behavior or when confronted with counterattitudinal information. Theoretically, this feeling of discomfort motivates dissonance reduction efforts (e.g., attitude change) and should be stronger for more important cognitions and attitudes (Festinger, 1957). Our work similarly suggests that negative affect (specifically anger and irritation) may be a critical motivator of resistance strategies (see the section on future directions) and shows that as importance increases so does resistance. It is not surprising, then, that in the dissonance paradigm, as importance increases attitude change likely becomes a less viable dissonance reduction strategy (see Hardyc, 1966; Pilisuk, 1968). Instead, people may choose other ways to reduce dissonance, such as producing attitude bolstering thoughts (Sherman & Gorkin, 1980).

Consistency theories further suggest other strategies that might be used to resist a persuasive communication. For example, one such strategy would be to avoid the offensive communication altogether (Festinger, 1957, 1964; Frey, 1986; Wilson & Brekke, 1994). Gilbert (1993) called this strategy “exposure control,” and it may well be the preferred method of resistance in naturalistic settings (e.g., on a couch with the TV remote control in hand). In experimental settings, one might expect to observe, for example, that high-importance individuals spend less time considering counterattitudinal information before rendering a confident attitudinal judgment than do low-importance individuals (Kruglanski, Webster, & Klem, 1993, Study 2; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). We encourage further investigations of such selective exposure effects that take into account personal importance as a moderator of such effects (see Berent & Krosnick, 1993). In summary, our research suggests that by focusing on both attitude importance and affective processes, researchers may begin to forge explicit connections between consistency theory and the persuasion literature.

Future Directions

Our studies raise important questions about the role of affect in the resistance process. How exactly does affect exert its effect? One possibility is that anger serves as an informational cue (Schwarz & Clore, 1988) for how to evaluate the message. In
other words, people may realize that they are angry or irritated and then take that affective information as a cue that they must be against the position being argued in the message (Bem, 1972). Another possibility is that the negative affect may serve to trigger other resistance mechanisms. For example, one's anger and irritation may instigate more counterarguing, more affectively charged thoughts, and more source derogation than might have been generated in the absence of such affect. This analysis suggests that affect mediates subsequent thoughts (cf. Kaplan, 1991). Future research could attempt to test these possibilities in an effort to further specify the role of affect in the resistance process.

Another interesting issue for future research concerns the extent to which and the conditions under which forewarnings of message position elicit negative affective responses in persuasion settings. To date, forewarnings have been assumed to be effective in conferring resistance to persuasive communications because they facilitate the production of counterarguments, attitude bolstering thoughts, or both (Chen et al., 1992; Petty & Cacioppo, 1977, 1979). Thus, it has been demonstrated that allowing time (typically 2–10 min) between the warning and the communication is essential for forewarning manipulations to effectively enhance resistance (e.g., Freedman & Sears, 1965; Hass & Grady, 1975). Typically, however, attitude importance is not considered in forewarning research (but see Allyn & Festinger, 1961). Would a time delay between warning and message be necessary when the issue is one about which individuals have strong preexisting attitudes? Our studies suggest that in this case, individuals would get irritated by and cognitively challenge counterargumentual messages regardless of whether they were warned and whether they were given time to think before hearing the message. Perhaps, then, a time delay between forewarning and message is necessary only for individuals who know or care little about the issue. We are currently examining this hypothesis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings across our two studies reveal a clear picture of the processes by which individuals try to resist a counterattitudinal message: (a) They get angry and irritated. (b) They express angry and irritated thoughts about the speaker and his message. (c) They express affectively "cool" counterarguments in response to the message. These findings are entirely consistent with the classic observation that the process by which individuals render an attitudinal judgment in response to a persuasive communication is "inextricably an affective-motivational as well as a cognitive affair" (Sherif et al., 1965, p. 6). In addition, these studies demonstrated that individual differences in attitude importance significantly affect the degree of cognitive and affective resistance displayed. Thus, we suggest that advances in the understanding of persuasion dynamics may be made by continuing to consider the motivational role of attitude importance and the mediating role of affective processes. Clearly, it’s not just the thought that counts.

References


RESISTANCE TO PERSUASION


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