CHAPTER 10

Characteristics of Persuasive Settings

LOOKING AHEAD . . . This chapter examines three situational characteristics that influence the persuasion process. We begin with a discussion of the relative effectiveness of various communication modes used in presenting persuasive appeals, including an examination of the large and growing literature on persuasive communication in online settings. After this, we explore the influence of distracting stimuli on the persuasiveness of a message. The chapter concludes with a discussion of group influences in the persuasion process.

In the preceding four chapters, we used Berlo's (1960) Source–Message–Channel–Receiver (i.e., SMCR) Model to parse the influence of source, message, and receiver characteristics on persuasive transactions. To explicate Berlo's model completely, this chapter might focus singlemindedly on the effects of persuasion channels. Although we examine various persuasion channels (including the recent literature on persuasive communication in online settings), our scope is broader and includes *all* the settings in which persuasive messages are communicated.

We begin with a discussion of traditional modality research and review the relative effectiveness of video, audio, and written modes of presenting persuasive messages. Next, we focus on the burgeoning literature that examines *online persuasion* through a variety of social media outlets. Then, we review the distraction literature, which encompasses the influence of distracting stimuli on the comprehension and effectiveness of persuasive messages. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the persuasion process

within small groups. Though few persuasion textbooks consider the persuasive effects of small groups, a considerable portion of persuasive activity occurs in group settings. We review two avenues of research that reflect important social and informational influences of groups on individuals' attitudes and behaviors. Our review of these context effects is necessarily less integrated than the research literature reviews in previous chapters, but we believe that each distinct literature warrants consideration. Persuasion in interpersonal settings is then treated in Chapters 11 and 12.

TRADITIONAL MODALITY RESEARCH

Perhaps the most fundamental decision facing would-be persuaders is how best to present their persuasive appeals. With a wider variety of technological alternatives available to persuaders, this choice has become somewhat more complicated in recent years. Advertisers, politicians, business organizations, and relational partners routinely choose among several methods of message presentation. Sometimes these choices are based on research, but more often they reflect personal preferences based on prior persuasive success. Since the mid-1970s, for example, television has been the media staple of politicians seeking to present their positions and cultivate their images. This trend was marked by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980—Reagan was a former actor with a strong television persona. Recent campaigns have seen an increase in the use of the Internet by candidates (e.g., Atkin & Rice, 2013; Benoit, 2007; Kaid & Bystrom, 1999). Advertisers and relational partners have also expanded to social media as an important conduit for communication.

Although these choices often become routine, one might question their effectiveness. Is television the most effective method for outlining the political positions of a candidate? When are various forms of media effective for achieving the particular goals of advertisers? Are face-to-face interactions the most effective method for making persuasive appeals to relational partners? Most likely, these questions require complex answers that depend on a variety of source, receiver, and message characteristics. Nevertheless, a growing body of research provides some preliminary insights into the persuasive merits of various modes of message presentation.

Research on the effects of message modality has found no simple effects for any mode of message presentation. That is, no overall persuasive advantage exists for live, video, audio, print, or computer-mediated messages. Instead, message modality serves to influence other factors, including the salience of the source and message comprehension, which in turn determine the effectiveness of a persuasive message.

Message Modality and Source Salience

Early on, two studies (Andreoli & Worchel, 1978; Worchel, Andreoli, & Eason, 1975) found that live and video messages were more effective in focusing receivers' attention on the characteristics of the message source than were written messages. When the source was perceived as trustworthy, this attention enhanced the persuasiveness of the message presentation. However, when the source was perceived as untrustworthy, this heightened attention decreased the persuasiveness of the message.

Chaiken and Eagly (1983) also investigated this issue and found similar effects. They argued that video presentations would make communicator-based cues more salient to message receivers than audio or written messages. Consistent with this hypothesis, they found that a video presentation presented by a likable source was more effective than the same message presented in audio or written format. Conversely, for unlikable sources, audio and written message presentations were more persuasive than video message presentations. Moreover, Braverman (2008) found that informational messages were most effective when they were delivered through a written rather than audio mode, because the written presentation provided greater opportunity for message elaboration. However, testimonials were more effective when they were delivered through an audio mode because the latter contained vocal information like emotion that could not be conveyed in a written format.

Taken together, these investigations provide a consistent pattern of effects. Live and video presentations focus more attention on the source of the message than audio and written presentations do. If the source's attributes are evaluated positively, this attention should enhance the effectiveness of the message. However, if the source lacks trustworthiness or is for some reason unlikable, then the use of a live or video presentation may inhibit the persuasiveness of the message. Although the findings from some individual studies are more complicated (e.g., Booth-Butterfield & Gutowski, 1993), research on modality effects provides a straightforward set of recommendations for persuaders: live or video presentations should be most effective for favorable message sources, whereas sources who are viewed less favorably should be more persuasive when using written and audio presentations. Moreover, written messages permit cognitive elaboration for those interested in more systematic processing of the content.

Modality and Message Comprehension

Message modality has also been related to message comprehension. Once again, however, the persuasive effects of this relationship are not straightforward. Chaiken and Eagly (1976) argued that the relative persuasiveness

of video, audio, and written messages depends on the difficulty of the message content. In one study they manipulated message complexity by creating one message that contained sophisticated language but was equivalent in all other respects to a more easily understood second message. After presenting these difficult and simple messages in alternative video, audio, and written formats, they found that *comprehension* of the simple message did not vary across the three presentation modes. However, the difficult message was best comprehended when it was presented in a written format, as compared to the audio or video format. This finding should come as no surprise when one considers that messages presented in written format afford receivers the opportunity to reread portions of the message that are not initially understood. Similarly, Braverman (2008) found that informational messages were more convincing when delivered in writing, because written messages provide an opportunity to more carefully review and consider the message.

Given the positive relationship between message comprehension and message acceptance, these findings are easy to interpret: the difficult message was more persuasive when presented in a written format because message comprehension was highest in that format. The finding that the video presentation was most effective for the simple message may reflect an increased salience of favorable source characteristics or increased attentiveness to the message when it was presented in a video format.

Consistent with this information processing explanation of media effects, Grabe, Kamhawi, and Yegiyan (2009) found that a message receiver's level of education interacts with presentation medium to affect one's recall of the information. Specifically, less educated recipients (i.e., those with no more than a high school education) demonstrated greater recall of news presented on TV than in newspapers or on the Internet. In contrast, highly educated recipients (i.e., those with an advanced degree such as a PhD or JD) had greater recall of news information when it was presented in written formats (whether in newspapers or on the Internet) than on television (Grabe et al., 2009).

Summary of Modality Effects

In combination, research on source salience and message comprehension provides a clear description of the persuasive effects of message modality. When a source's attributes are favorable and likely to engender attitude change, video and live message presentations are the effective ways to emphasize these characteristics. If a source's characteristics are unfavorable and likely to inhibit persuasion, written and audio message formats appear most effective, because they do not accentuate these qualities.

A similar interaction effect was found for message comprehension. Written messages afford receivers the opportunity of reviewing and elaborating the content, making that format generally more effective for difficult content. However, the receiver's level of education also determines the effectiveness of the medium of presentation. Less educated message receivers have better recall of television messages than written messages, while highly educated receivers recall written content better than video content.

ONLINE PERSUASION

Over the past two decades, the Internet has emerged as an important tool of persuasion for communication professionals and ordinary people alike. Technological advances have created an ever widening array of options for sending messages designed to shape, reinforce, and change target audiences' responses. While Facebook and Twitter may have originally been intended primarily as social media, they have become a powerful organizational tool for tech-savvy political activists. For example, during the 2008 Obama presidential campaign, supporters were actively recruited to use the campaign's social media site to create their own web pages, post their own content, and disseminate information to their social media "friends" (Dutta & Fraser, 2008). The Occupy Wall Street protests against income inequality that occurred during the fall of 2011 were another set of events that demonstrated the power of social media as a source of persuasive communication. The movement began in New York City on September 17, 2011, and aided greatly by people's prolific use of Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube—quickly spread to many cities in the United States and elsewhere around the world (Schwartz, 2011).

In the preceding edition of this textbook, we made two predictions about online persuasion: first, that research in this area would increase dramatically; and, second, that summarizing it would prove difficult. We were correct on both accounts. The research literature on online persuasion is large, varied, and confusing (Atkin & Rice, 2013). Because it addresses a variety of questions stemming from a variety of theoretical frames (see, e.g., Portnoy, Scott-Sheldon, Johnson, & Carey, 2008; Webb, Joseph, Yardley, & Michie, 2010), it is naturally next-to-impossible to summarize coherently. Even cataloging the wide array of *modalities* falling under the rubric of "online communication" is a daunting task. Websites (both static and interactive), Facebook (and other social media such as Twitter, Tinder, Tumblr, etc.), YouTube, chat rooms, text messaging, and email are just some of the computer-mediated communication channels available to people creating social influence messages. The traditional modality research reviewed above provides some insights into the potential perils of

online persuasion. Specifically, countless online analogues to traditional print (e.g., Twitter), audio (e.g., podcasts), and video (e.g., YouTube) media sources are routine in the modality research. A key issue in online persuasion research is the extent to which online media differentially focus more attention on the source rather than the message itself. Text-based blogs, for example, are unlikely to focus readers' attention on the source, while YouTube videos typically emphasize the source characteristics over message content. Of course, the nature of the information contained on a website (as well as the nature of the website itself) is likely to affect message processing. For example, perusing a medical website for information on cancer prevention is likely to generate a different set of cognitive, emotional, and persuasive outcomes than reading a cancer survivor's blog or participating in an online cancer-survivor support group.

Platforms such as YouTube, however, also enable users to *respond* to persuasive messages (e.g., political speeches and advertisements) by posting their own video messages for others to view and critique. Thus, a higher level of *perceived interactivity* between the message source and receivers is another important feature of online communication. McMillen and Downes (2000) suggest that perceptions of interactivity are a function of two factors: the directionality of the communication between the message source and receiver (i.e., one-way vs. two-way) and the actual amount of control that the message receiver has over the communication process.

BOX 10.1. Social Media and the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring revolutions that began, first in Tunisia and then Egypt, in December 2010 quickly spread to Libya and ultimately Yemen. Both Twitter and Facebook served as important catalysts for these uprisings, as they provided real-time electronic forums for exchanging political views, organizing protests, and disseminating information to thousands and even millions of people instantaneously (Wolman, 2013). These uprisings were decentralized in that there was no formalized opposition party or preappointed leader who could be held accountable by the government authorities. Instead, the most popular social media platforms became powerful tools for organizing and persuading people en masse to join the insurrections. More recently, ISIS has exploited media sources such as YouTube to promote its cause and parade its acts of brutality against its perceived enemies, seeking thereby to recruit new members. Social media sites are very effective tools of persuasion and have become, in effect, "the great equalizer" in that they are readily accessible to all and provide for the unfettered exchange of information and opinions.

Interactivity is important to how today's social media have revolutionized online persuasion. Thanks to social media, audience members are no longer passive receivers of messages but, rather, active participants in creating, transforming, and passing along persuasive messages. The term *Web 2.0* was coined to emphasize the role of user-generated content in this transformation. For example, consumers routinely use company websites (in addition to independent ones like Yelp) to rate products, services, restaurants, and hotel accommodations. On the other hand, such practices limit a company's control over persuasive appeals and content on its website.

Additionally, such platforms as Facebook enable message receivers to endorse ("like") and disseminate ("share") messages created by message sources through a simple mouse click. Personalized testimonials or accounts, such as consumer reviews, can be quite compelling and value-added. Such researchers as Berthon and colleagues (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012; Pitt, Berthon, Watson, & Zinkhan, 2002) have reported that consumers typically value other consumers' input more highly than the promotional information posted on commercial websites. Campbell and colleagues (Campbell, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2011) have developed a typology of these consumer-generated messages, arguing that they can be arrayed along two dimensions, cognitive versus affective and collaborative versus oppositional. In this typology, cognitive responses are primarily concerned with questions about how the ad was created or came to exist, while emotional responses reflect affective (positive or negative) responses to the consumer-generated comment. The collaborative versus oppositional distinction reflects the extent to which the consumer either agrees with or is antagonistic toward the original ad's creator (Campbell, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2011).

While technology has radically transformed the modern face of social influence, investigations of persuasion via these social media have nonetheless relied primarily on traditional theories of persuasion. For example, Chang and colleagues used the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; see Chapter 5) to investigate the effects of online post popularity, source attractiveness, and argument quality on the usefulness of information and intention to share the information with other users (Chang, Yu, & Lu, 2015). Steyn and colleagues (Steyn, Ewing, Ven Heerden, Pitt, & Windisch, 2015) also relied on the ELM to make predictions about the credibility of both consumer-generated ads and those created by an advertising agency. Meanwhile, Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001) has also been used to study selective exposure to online appeals (Knobloch-Westerwick & Sarge, 2015).

Research about online persuasion remains in its infancy and to this point has focused primarily on product advertising and health communication messages. For example, Campbell and colleagues (2011) examined the

messages that consumers generate in response to online product advertisements, while Knobloch-Westerwick and Sarge (2015) investigated selective exposure to online weight-loss messages. To date, traditional theories of persuasion appear capable of handling most of the questions about effective online messages, including the roles of interactivity and consumer-generated messages, the perceived credibility of source attribution, and strategies for processing affective and emotional content. What remains to be seen is whether traditional models of persuasion will be helpful in understanding the loss of control that a source concedes when allowing message recipients to play an active role in creating, commenting on, and disseminating persuasive appeals. It is too early to determine whether current models of persuasion will prove sufficient—or, alternatively, whether models focused specifically on questions related to online persuasion will become necessary to fully understand the dynamic nature of persuasion via social media (for a discussion of theoretical challenges, see Okazaki & Taylor, 2015).

Another feature of some persuasive situations is the presence of distracting stimuli. The next section describes two types of distracting stimuli and examines their influence on persuasive outcomes.

PERSUASIVE EFFECTS OF DISTRACTING STIMULI

When he was a college student in the 1970s, Jim went shopping for a waterbed and experienced firsthand the use of distraction as a persuasive strategy. He entered a waterbed store and was immediately approached by a slick salesperson who was eager to describe the line of waterbeds the store had to offer. After listening to his sales pitch for several minutes, Jim had some questions about the reliability of the mattress and heating element. Just as the salesperson stopped to ask if Jim had any questions about the beds, another salesperson came over and told them a joke that was in poor taste. After the second salesperson left, the first one asked, "Well, are there any more questions I can answer before you make a decision?" When Jim reminded him that his partner's rude interruption had prevented him from asking any questions at all, the salesperson looked somewhat disappointed. Luckily, Jim was able to recall the questions he had intended to ask before the interruption. Afterward, Jim was wondering to himself whether the interruption had been a planned distraction. After talking with several friends who were former salespeople, however, he became convinced that the sudden interruption was indeed a deliberate ploy. Most of these former salespeople indicated that planned interruptions were part and parcel of their sales pitches, and most of them believed that these distractions actually benefited their sales performance.

Fortunately, a large body of scientific research provides some insights about the practical application of distraction techniques. Since a seminal investigation by Festinger and Maccoby (1964), many persuasion scholars have examined the effects of a variety of distracting stimuli on the attitudes and behaviors of persuasive targets.

A cursory review of these investigations reveals that researchers have created a wide variety of stimuli that act as distractions in their studies. These various manipulations can be simplified by placing them into two relatively distinct categories of distraction research, namely, *external distractors* and *communicator-relevant distractors*. External distractors are stimuli that are outside the message presentation itself, such as using flashing lights (Osterhouse & Brock, 1970), playing audio feedback (Zimbardo & Ebbesen, 1970), or having receivers eat while they read a persuasive message (Janis, Kaye, & Kirschner, 1965). These distractors are thought to divert attention away from the message presentation and toward the source of the distraction.

In contrast, communicator-relevant distractors are behaviors intentionally manipulated by the speaker that cause receivers to shift attention away from the content of the message and toward characteristics of the speaker (Buller, 1986). Manipulations of this type include varying the synchrony of a source's nonverbal behaviors (Woodall & J. K. Burgoon, 1981), violating interpersonal distancing expectations (J. K. Burgoon, Stacks, & Burch, 1982), and using intense language (M. Burgoon et al., 1978).

Studies employing external or communicator-based distractors reflect researchers' fundamentally distinct questions about persuasive communication. Studies of external distractors are primarily concerned with the effect of divided attention on message processing and subsequent attitude change. Conversely, studies of communicator-relevant distractors are primarily concerned with the effect of unusual or off-putting communicative behavior on perceptions of source credibility and subsequent attitude change.

Examining the Effects of External Distraction

Researchers have developed a number of explanations for the persuasive effects of external distractions. However, two types, the *Cognitive Response* and the *Information Processing* theories of persuasion, have received the most attention. Cognitive response explanations were initially invoked to explain the findings of Festinger and Maccoby's (1964) seminal investigation. In that study, college students in an "ordinary film" condition watched a movie of a professor presenting a message denouncing college fraternities. In the "distraction" condition, students *heard* the professor give the same speech, but an "amusing and absorbing short film" (*Day*

of the Painter) was shown instead of video of the professor. Festinger and Maccoby hypothesized, and found, that students listening to the speech while watching the amusing but topically irrelevant video would be distracted from generating thoughts to counter the position advocated by the speaker (and thus be more susceptible to persuasion). Shortly thereafter, McGuire (1966, 1969) applied information processing theories as an alternative explanation of distraction effects.

Consistent with these competing explanations, a number of investigations provide support for the prediction that distraction hinders the creation of counterarguments and message comprehension. For example, Osterhouse and Brock (1970) found that, in the case of counterattitudinal messages (i.e., those that receivers disagree with), external distractors reduced the number of counterarguments generated by receivers and increased attitude change. More recently, Jeong and Hwang (2012) found that multitasking (for example, surfing the Internet while watching television or performing a household task while watching television) reduces both message comprehension and counterarguing.

Kupor and Tormala (2015) conducted five studies that examined the effects of *interruptions* on curiosity, thought favorability, and behavioral intentions. Using a variety of interruptions (e.g., a confederate interrupting a presentation to ask for directions, a pause in a video presentation that simulated the loading of content in an online presentation), these authors found that interruptions were positively related to thought favorability, which was positively related to behavioral intentions. Moreover, the interruption also had a direct positive effect on behavioral intentions. While Kupor and Tormala argued that the external distractions produced curiosity and hedonic reactions that resulted in favorable thoughts about the message, their findings are also consistent with the hypothesis that the interruptions interfered with counterarguments, resulting in more favorable evaluations of the message.

In the next two sections, we consider the evidence supporting cognitive response versus information processing explanations for the effects of external distractors. Both explanations focus on how distractors have evolved in our thinking and how distractors can interfere with the processing and integration of information in persuasive messages.

Cognitive Response Explanations

As we discussed in Chapter 5, cognitive response approaches to persuasion assume that the thoughts that receivers generate during message processing contribute significantly to the effectiveness of the persuasive appeal. If receivers actively process a message, they generate their own favorable or unfavorable impressions about the message that combine with the

information presented in the message itself to influence their postmessage attitudes.

According to a cognitive response explanation, distracting stimuli interfere with cognitive processing that would otherwise be expected to occur. For instance, when the message recommendation is counterattitudinal, the predominant cognitive response in the message recipient, under normal conditions, would be to generate counterarguments. Since distracting stimuli inhibit the formulation of counterarguments (Festinger & Maccoby, 1964; see also Osterhouse & Brock, 1970, and Zimbardo & Ebbesen, 1970), distracted recipients should therefore experience more attitude change than they might otherwise (Festinger & Maccoby, 1964).

On the other hand, when the message recommendation is consistent with the recipient's preexisting attitudes, distractors are hypothesized to limit the generation of favorable thoughts (Harkins & Petty, 1981; Insko, Turnbull, & Yandell, 1974; Petty, Wells, & Brock, 1976). Because they cannot formulate as many positive cognitive responses as they could have without the distraction, recipients will exhibit less attitude change in reaction to an appealing message than recipients who are not distracted.

Thus, the number of positive thoughts and counterarguments generated by message recipients are important variables that mediate the relationship between distraction and attitude change. While both positive cognitions and counterarguments are important components of cognitive response explanations, most distraction studies measure only counterarguments, if they measure cognitive responses at all.

Information Processing Explanations

A second category of explanations stems from Information Processing Theory. Information processing explanations suggest that in order for messages to be persuasive, the supporting arguments and evidence must be received and understood by recipients. The failure to appreciate the arguments underlying a recommendation should reduce the effectiveness of the persuasive appeal (McGuire, 1969).

According to information processing explanations, external distractors interfere with message comprehension and hence reduce the persuasiveness of the message. Because distractors divert attention away from the message, receivers have greater difficulty understanding the supporting arguments and evidence and committing them to memory (Haaland & Venkatesen, 1968; Vohs & Garrett, 1968). Message comprehension, rather than self-generated thoughts about the message, is the important intervening variable in information processing explanations of the persuasive effects of distraction. Specifically, both message recall and attitude change should be negatively correlated with distraction.

Specific Predictions and Supporting Evidence

In short, both the cognitive response and information processing explanations posit that distractors divert one's attention from message processing, but the specific hypothesized effects of this distraction differ, depending upon the explanation. Cognitive response theorists argue that distractions aimed at counterattitudinal messages inhibit counterarguments, thereby enhancing acceptance of the message's recommendations. However, distractions interfering with congruent messages diminish receivers' favorable impressions, thus inhibiting the persuasive effects of the messages.

Evidence for the proposition that messages consistent with a recipient's preexisting attitudes will be less persuasive when a distraction is present, however, has been limited. Petty and colleagues (1976) did find that distractions enhanced attitude change when the message presentation was counterattitudinal and inhibited message acceptance when the message was pro-attitudinal. However, this investigation found no positive relationship between distractions and the production of favorable thoughts and counterarguments, thus diminishing confidence in the cognitive response explanation.

While the research provided mixed support for the cognitive response explanation, certain studies of distraction effects produced findings that are consistent with Information Processing Theory. Studies supporting this explanation found that distractions reduced message recall (an indication of learning) and led to less acceptance of message recommendations (Haaland & Venkatesen, 1968; Vohs & Garrett, 1968).

Although the findings from these studies are contradictory, a meta-analytic review of this literature revealed some support for both explanations. However, support for the information processing hypothesis was somewhat stronger than for the cognitive response hypothesis (Buller, 1986). Across studies employing various manipulations of external distractions, Buller (1986) consistently found that both the number of counterarguments and the degree of message comprehension were negatively correlated with attitude change. However, Buller also reported a consistently stronger negative relationship between distractions and message comprehension than between distractions and the generation of counterarguments. This finding provides stronger support for the information processing explanation than for the cognitive response explanation. Although the strength of the relationship varied depending upon the type of external distraction used, in general Buller's analysis also found that distractions were negatively related to attitude change, providing additional support for the information processing explanation.

Thus, although some individual studies provide evidence for each of these explanations, a cumulative summary of these studies suggests that

the persuasive effects of an external distraction are mediated primarily by the distraction's negative effect on message comprehension. However, several researchers have noted (see Buller, 1986) that a significant distraction is needed to create the reduction in message comprehension necessary to reduce message effectiveness. That is, rather small distractors are unlikely to produce the significant reduction in comprehension necessary to reduce one's acceptance of message recommendations.

Examining the Effects of Communicator-Relevant Distractions

A second category of distraction studies has produced much more consistent findings. Investigations of communicator-relevant distractions hypothesize that the distractions divert attention away from the content of the messages and toward the characteristics of the communicator. Information processing and cognitive responses are not central to this phenomenon. Instead, the persuasive effects of communicator-relevant distractions are more dependent on the specific features of the source that created the distraction in the first place.

Buller's (1986) review found that communicator-relevant distractions enhanced attitude change when the source was highly credible and decreased attitude change when the message source lacked credibility. For example, over the years Jim has observed many witnesses whose persuasiveness was affected by such distractors. In one case, the male jurors in a mock trial focused attention on the attractiveness of a former beauty queen who testified about her marketing activities for a cosmetics company. In another case, a computer engineer tended to blink excessively, and the jurors ended up by focusing more on that distraction than his testimony about the technology he had developed—and, consequently, his testimony was rendered ineffective.

Buller (1986) found the correlation estimates for these effects were directionally consistent across studies, though small in size. Specifically, the difference between the persuasive effect of communicator-relevant distraction among high-credibility (average $r = .15$) and low-credibility ($r = -.10$) sources provides compelling support for the importance of this explanation. In addition, Buller found that communicator-relevant distraction was unrelated to counterarguing (average $r = .00$) and message recall ($r = -.02$), providing further evidence of the distinction between source-based and external distractors.

More recent research on the effects of speaker disfluency (Carpenter, 2012) is consistent with the findings of this meta-analysis. Carpenter found that disfluencies by a speaker produced cognitions related to the source of the message. These source-related cognitions (labeled "attitude defensive cognitions") undermined judgments about the speaker's competence and

the persuasiveness of the message. Speaker disfluencies affected message processing when the message was presented by high-reward sources but not when presented by low-reward sources.

Summary of Distraction Effects

Differences in the persuasive effects of external and communicator-based distractions underscore the importance of the differences in manipulations created by researchers across studies. More importantly, they provide a fuller understanding of the situational features underlying the persuasion process. Both internal and external distractors can divert attention away from the message. If the distraction is external, it limits processing of the message, and as a result attitude change is reduced. If the distraction is source-related, the receiver's focus shifts from the message content to the source. If the source's characteristics are favorable, the distraction enhances persuasion, but if they are negative, then message acceptance is diminished.

PERSUASIVE INFLUENCES OF COLLECTIVES

Another important situational factor that influences persuasion is the presence of others. Every day, we spend a considerable amount of time working and socializing with others. Whether we communicate in large organizations or small groups, we are rarely immune from the social influences of collectives (i.e., groups). Although communication scholars and social psychologists have sought to understand the persuasive effects of social and work collectives, these social effects are routinely neglected in persuasion textbooks. While a complete discussion of these effects is beyond the scope of this book (see Andrews, Boster, & Carpenter, 2013, and Forsyth, 2010, for recent reviews), the remainder of this chapter examines two types of influence that various group dynamics exert on individual members. This section begins with a discussion of conformity effects and concludes with an examination of the persuasive effects of group discussion.

Conformity Effects

Most of the communicative messages that are exchanged in small groups and organizations are expressions of the values, beliefs, and goals of the people in those entities. Over time, these individual expressions are codified into a collective set of values, beliefs, and goals that establish the norms of acceptable behavior for individual group (or organization) members. Once these norms have been established, social pressure is exerted on individual members to adopt and maintain them. Pressures toward attitudinal

and behavioral uniformity in collectives have been well documented (for a review, see Forsyth, 2010). *Conformity,* a general label for this type of social influence process, is commonly defined as "a change in attitude, belief, or behavior as a function of real or perceived group pressure" (Aronson, 1999, p. 17). People often conform because they perceive that the collective (or its individual members) is exerting pressure on them to behave in a particular manner. However, overt pressure is not necessary to produce conforming behavior: all that is required is the *perception* of group pressure.

The Asch line experiments provide a compelling example of the influence that groups can have on their members. Solomon Asch (1955, 1956) was interested in the effect of apparent group consensus on individuals' judgments. His experiment involved several confederates who played the role of research participants and one actual research participant who did not know the real purpose of the study. Asch presented the confederates and research participant with a series of 18 card pairs. For each pair, one card contained three lines, each of a different length. On the other card was a single line that was the same length as one of the lines on the first card. The task was to determine which line on the first card was the same length as the line on the second card.

When participants completed this task alone, they made correct judgments over 99% of the time. However, when they were placed in a group setting, their decisions were influenced by the confederates' choices. Asch (1956) secretly (in concert with the confederates) identified 12 of the 18 trials as critical trials. For critical trials, all confederates were instructed to choose the same *wrong* response; however, on noncritical trials they were to choose the correct response. The experimenter asked each confederate for their judgment before asking the only true research participant (because he was seated at the end of the row).

On each trial, the confederates' judgments established a group norm. For critical trials, this norm was obviously incorrect. Those participants who made these judgments alone were correct over 99% of the time, indicating that the correct response was obvious. Asch (1956) was interested in knowing how often research participants would choose the incorrect response in order to conform with the group norm. The findings were remarkable. He found that more that 75% of the participants conformed to the group norm on at least one of the 12 critical trials. In fact, over 35% of the total judgments made on critical trials were wrong! While only a very small percentage of people conformed to the group norm on all 12 critical trials, once the real participant conformed on one critical trial, it was much more likely that he or she continued to conform on all subsequent trials.

It is worth noting that the confederates and each true participant in this study did not form a "group" in the everyday sense of the term. That is,

there was no group history, no group leader, and no anticipation of future group interaction. It also bears mentioning that the confederates exerted no overt pressure on the one true research participant; they simply established a norm by unanimously choosing the wrong response. As a consequence, conformity rates in the Asch (1956) studies likely underestimate conformity in actual functioning groups. While the true participants had little commitment to the group and were subject to no overt pressure to conform, nonetheless the pressures of an established group norm influenced them. Subsequent research has demonstrated that group norms can be quickly established, and once that happens members tend to maintain the norms even when members are no longer present (M. Sherif & C. W. Sherif, 1956). These studies demonstrate the pervasive effects of conformity influences on individual behavior.

Conformity occurs in a variety of ways—when an employee agrees to work late at the boss's request, for example, or when teenagers wear a particular style of clothing or college students engage in binge drinking just to be like their peers. Kelman (1958) provided a conceptual framework for categorizing conformity behavior by identifying *compliance, identification,* and *internalization* as three distinct types of conformity processes.

Compliance

When compliance occurs, people accept influence from a group or organization in hopes of attaining some future reward or avoiding some punishment. Festinger (1953) defined this type of influence as public conformity without private acceptance. That is, compliance does not require an actual change in attitude, but rather only a change in observable behavior. People routinely engage in conforming behavior without necessarily changing their underlying attitudes or beliefs. For example, many car drivers routinely exceed the posted speed limits so long as they are unconcerned about being stopped for speeding. Sighting a highway patrol vehicle, however, triggers an immediate reflex action in most people's driving behavior. The sudden appearance of a compliance agent increases the likelihood of sanctions for noncompliance, causing drivers to stay within the speed limit or exceed it only by an acceptable margin. The fact that so many drivers routinely disobey posted speed limits suggests that they privately believe that the limits are unreasonable. In this case, only surveillance and the threat of a fine or other penalties can assure compliance with the law.

Compliance, however, can be motivated less by a desire to avoid punishment than to gain or reap rewards. A young professional may work overtime in hopes of impressing his or her supervisor and gaining the inside track on an upcoming promotion. Hospital volunteers follow the rules and procedures of their assigned hospital in order to enjoy emotionally

rewarding work with patients. College students may agree to participate in a persuasion experiment in order to gain extra academic credits. Although behaviors like these are motivated by the rewards they offer and not by the threat of reprisal, they are still considered a form of compliance because the behavior being performed is considered the means to a specified end.

Regardless of the motivation, however, the fundamental characteristic of compliance processes is that they are motivated by one's desire to *avoid punishment* or *gain a reward*. As a result, compliance is only effective so long as the controlling agent is likely to apply sanctions for noncompliance or offer rewards for compliance. Although we have focused chiefly on the ways that groups or collectives enforce this type of conformity, compliance processes are also prominent in interpersonal interactions (which is the key focus of Chapter 11).

Identification

A second type of conformity identified by Kelman (1958) is identification, which occurs when people accept influence from a controlling agent in order to "develop and maintain a favorable self-defining relationship with the controlling agent" (p. 35). These self-defining relationships allow people to construct favorable self-images. Identification processes are sufficiently subtle that they often go unrecognized by sources and targets of influence. For example, college fraternity and sorority members often cultivate similar hair styles or wear similar clothing that effectively reinforces their membership in the organization. Although the decision to purchase and wear clothing bearing certain labels is clearly an identification process, few people would argue that this form of influence is a conscious effort to promote conformity among a given organization's members. Nevertheless, these identification processes do represent a type of conformity that facilitates the adoption of collective norms and values.

Though frequently subtle, identification processes can also be quite explicit. More than a dozen years after he ended his NBA career, for example, Michael Jordan continued to advertise men's underwear in national ads. Though often less explicit than Jordan's, most ad campaigns that involve a prominent sports figure's endorsement derive their effectiveness from identification processes.

Kelman (1958) observed that the success of identification appeals depends to a significant extent on maintaining a favorable social relationship between the source of the influence and the target audience. As people get older over time, their relative attraction to various reference groups changes, thus altering the effectiveness of persuasion agents that rely on identification processes. Because the social attractiveness of an individual, group, or organization can be subject to sudden and dramatic change,

influence stemming from identification processes may not persist for extended periods of time.

Internalization

Kelman's (1958) third type of conformity was labeled internalization. Internalization processes are similar to traditional conceptions of attitude change. When people internalize a particular behavior, they do so after careful consideration of the reasons offered to adopt it for themselves. This type of conformity may be likened to Festinger's (1953) concept of public conformity with private acceptance. That is to say, internalization involves concurrent changes in both behaviors *and* attitudes. In this regard, internalization reflects the use of rational message appeals (treated in Chapter 7) that are the cornerstone of Information Processing Theory (discussed in detail in Chapter 9).

Internalization is the most stable form of Kelman's three types of conformity in that internalized behaviors stem from a person's own beliefs and values and thus are likely to persist in the absence of a controlling agent. Whereas behavior change created by compliance is dependent upon the continuing presence of a controlling agent, behavior change created by internalization will endure so long as one's attitudes, beliefs, and/or values remain intact.

Summary of Conformity Effects

Regardless of their specific characteristics, conformity processes are a prominent form of social influence in groups or collectives. Normative expectations emerge from interactions with other people, and, once formed, they exert pressure on people to conform with them. Although compliance, identification, and internalization are qualitatively distinct forms of conformity, they all stem from the desire of individuals in collectives to behave in a uniform or predictable fashion. The pressure exerted toward uniformity is most apparent in group discussions that require a single decision. In the next section, we extend the discussion of group influence by examining the effects of group discussion on the attitudes of individual members.

POLARIZATION IN GROUP DECISIONS

Investigations of group decision-making processes shed further light on the influence of group interactions on the attitudes and behaviors of individual members. Beginning in the 1960s, social psychologists examined what was initially labeled the "risky shift phenomenon," the tendency for groups to

make riskier decisions than individuals. The discovery of the risky shift was surprising, because it was generally believed that groups are cautious and less willing than individuals to make bold and risky decisions.

Investigations of the risky shift relied primarily on the methodology of choice dilemma items (Kogan & Wallach, 1967). This methodology presents research participants with a problem and two potential solutions. One solution is almost certain to resolve the dilemma and has a moderately rewarding outcome. The probability of success for the second alternative is less likely, but if successful it will provide a much more rewarding outcome. Perhaps the adage "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" represents the dilemma created by items like these. Respondents must choose between a certain but less rewarding alternative and an uncertain but potentially more rewarding alternative. For example, financial planning often involves choosing between a safe investment that almost certainly will produce moderate profits and a risky investment that if successful will produce much greater returns but if unsuccessful will lose money.

Researchers investigating this phenomenon typically ask research participants to read a choice dilemma scenario and make an individual choice prior to participating in a group discussion of the dilemma. A risky shift is said to occur when the group decision, or average postdiscussion choices of individual group members, is riskier than the average prediscussion decision choices of the individual members.

Using this methodology, several early investigations found that small-group discussions produced riskier decisions than those made by individuals (Dion, Baron, & N. Miller, 1970; Kogan & Wallach, 1967). Subsequent research, however, found evidence that groups may also make more cautious decisions than individuals (Baron et al., 1974; Stoner, 1968), leading researchers to relabel the risky shift phenomenon as the "polarity shift phenomenon." That is, groups tend to make more extreme (or polar) decisions—more risky or cautious ones—than individuals. When the group is somewhat cautious to begin with, group discussion will generally produce cautious shifts, but when the group is somewhat risky initially, discussion generally produces a risky shift.

Since these initial investigations, several studies have provided evidence of a polarity shift phenomenon in group discussions (for reviews, see Andrews et al., 2013; Boster, 1990; Lamm & Myers, 1978). How can these opinion shifts be explained? The most likely explanation stems from the influence of group interactions on the attitudes and judgments of individual group members. Although a wide variety of explanations have been offered, two theoretical explanations that emphasize group communication have received the most attention from researchers. Consistent with Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) distinction between normative and informational social influence, researchers have examined the merits of the *social*

comparison and *persuasive arguments* explanations of the polarity shift phenomenon.

Social Comparison Explanations

Social normative explanations of the polarity shift phenomenon evolved from both Festinger's (1954) description of Social Comparison Theory and Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) concept of normative social influence. Social Comparison Theory posits that people are concerned about the correctness or appropriateness of positions they hold, and this concern motivates them to validate their positions through interaction with others. In highly ambiguous situations, people are less certain about the validity of their positions, and so in these situations social comparison processes become more important.

Social comparison processes occur in daily interactions. For example, college students often engage in social comparison processes after an exam when they gather just outside the classroom to discuss their impressions about the test's difficulty, fairness, and the like. The reason students engage in this comparison process is to reduce their uncertainty about the exam. Social pressure to conform to a normative position about the perceived difficulty of the exam may be limited, but a normative position is likely to emerge during discussions like these. That is, students participating in these discussions may collectively conclude that the exam as a whole was too difficult or that a particular question was unfair.

In much the same fashion, group discussions are social comparison processes that produce normative positions about the issue under consideration. As group members begin discussing an issue, they quickly assess the preferences and opinions of one another, a group norm emerges, and social pressure develops to conform to the norm.

The fundamental assumption of Social Comparison Theory is that people view themselves individually as better than the average group member in terms of the abilities, traits, and attitudes valued by the group (Lamm & Myers, 1978, p. 176). Lamm and Myers (1978) provide considerable evidence to support this assumption, including findings that most business people view themselves as more ethical than the average business person (Baumhart, 1968) as well as research indicating that most people believe they are less prejudiced than the average person (Lenihan, 1965). But, as Lamm and Myers (1978) point out, people's perceptions that they are superior to the average person are distorted (not to mention self-serving), because "the average person is not better than the average person" (p. 176).

Applied to the polarity shift phenomenon, a social comparison (or normative influence) explanation posits that initially (i.e., before the discussion) group members will report a position that they assume is more

favorable (i.e., extreme in the right direction) than the group norm. Group discussions, according to this explanation, disconfirm this assumption. If discussion reveals that the group is more cautious than was originally expected, then members striving to maintain the perception that they are more favorable than the average group member will advocate a position that is more cautious than the group norm. On the other hand, if group discussion reveals a riskier norm than was expected, members will endorse a position that is more risky than the group norm. The result of social comparison processes is to cause individuals to endorse a more extreme position than the group norm (whether more risky or cautious). The result of these individual position shifts is a postdiscussion position that is more extreme than the prediscussion position of the group.

Persuasive Arguments Explanations

A more straightforward explanation of the polarity shift phenomenon has also been proposed. The persuasive arguments explanation posits that group discussions expose members to novel arguments that are persuasive. Consistent with Information Processing Theory (discussed in Chapter 9), this explanation holds that if the group norm represents a cautious position, then the distribution of these novel arguments is likely to be skewed in the cautious direction. That is, a greater proportion of novel arguments will favor a cautious position than a risky one. On the other hand, if group members favor a risky position, then a greater proportion of novel arguments are likely to favor risk more than caution.

The informational influence of these novel arguments is hypothesized to produce opinion shifts in group discussions. Group discussions produce more reasons for advocating the normative group position than individual members could develop on their own. Armed with these additional new arguments, individual members become more confident in their judgments and advocate a more extreme position following group discussion. Thus, when the group norm favors caution, group discussion should produce a more cautious decision than the average prediscussion decision of individual group members. However, if the normative position is risky, group discussion should produce a decision that is riskier than the average prediscussion position of individual group members.

Testing Competing Explanations

Examining the validity of these two explanations is a difficult task. Social comparison explanations posit that all that is required to produce a group shift is knowledge of the positions held by group members. Persuasive arguments explanations assert that it is novel informational content, not

the normative positions of individual members, that is responsible for the polarity shift phenomenon.

Unfortunately, these two explanations are difficult to differentiate because the two forms of information contained in them (i.e., group members' attitudes versus the arguments supporting those attitudes) are confounded in naturally occurring group discussions. As Boster (1990) aptly noted, any argument offered during the group's discussion includes both types of information: it provides knowledge of which members advocate which positions on the issue as well as their individual reasons for advocating those positions. Thus, if a given argument is persuasive, social comparison theorists might conclude that it more likely reflected the source of the opinions and arguments and not the quality of the arguments. However, persuasive arguments theorists would contend that the arguments themselves were persuasive. If a person offered an opinion statement with no explicit argument to support it, social comparison theorists would argue that any persuasive effects were caused by the normative information in the opinion statement. However, persuasive arguments theorists might conclude that opinion statements include implicit arguments and that these arguments, rather than group pressure, are responsible for the persuasive effects of the message (Boster, 1990).

To examine each of these explanations, researchers have employed a variety of experimental procedures that systematically control group composition and the number of risky and cautious arguments that emerge during the group discussion. For example, one study created groups with either a risky or cautious majority by selecting members on the basis of their prediscussion responses to a choice dilemma item. These groups then discussed an issue that tended to produce either a risky or a cautious shift (Boster, Fryrear, Mongeau, & Hunter, 1982). These researchers argued that a group's composition and the specific type of choice dilemma item they discussed would together influence the number of risky and cautious arguments that emerged during group discussion. Boster and Mayer (1984) employed a more direct manipulation of persuasive arguments and normative influences by having research participants observe videotaped discussions that varied both the number of arguments favoring a risky and a cautious position *and* the proportion of group members with risky and cautious positions. Although this procedure did not involve research subjects in a group discussion, it more precisely controlled the social normative information and persuasive arguments to which they were exposed.

Investigations like these have examined the relative merits of the social comparison and persuasive arguments explanations (for reviews, see Lamm & Myers, 1978; Mayer, 1986). Support for the social comparison explanation has been found in studies where participants altered their positions after being exposed solely to the positions of others. Evidence of this *mere*

exposure effect was found in a meta-analysis of group polarization experiments. Isenberg (1986) reported that the average effect of social comparison processes in these studies was substantial (average $r = .44$).

Considerable support has also been found for the persuasive arguments explanation. In fact, Isenberg's (1986) review found the average effect of persuasive arguments processes was extremely strong (average $r = .75$). Indeed, further support for the persuasive arguments explanation has emerged from studies employing the Linear Discrepancy Model (see Chapter 9) to explain group polarization effects (Boster et al., 1982; Boster, Mayer, Hunter, & Hale, 1980).

Evidence supporting both explanations might cause one to question whether social comparison or persuasive argument influences are responsible for group polarization effects. Most likely, both social normative and informational influences affect polarity shifts in group discussions (Boster, 1990). One study that was designed to examine the relative importance of both processes found evidence supporting both explanations, although the persuasive arguments explanation accounted for more variance in polarity shifts than did the social comparison explanation (Mayer, 1986). This finding is consistent with Isenberg's (1986) meta-analytic review, which found a much stronger persuasive arguments effect, though the influence of social comparison processes was also large. Furthermore, a strong correlation between the persuasive arguments and social comparison effects led Isenberg to conclude that "at this point in time there is very good evidence that there are two conceptually independent processes even though outside of the laboratory they almost always co-occur" (p. 1149). Regardless of the relative contributions of these theoretical processes, investigations of the polarity shift phenomenon provide compelling evidence for the influence groups have on their individual members.

What Do Persuasive Arguments Look Like?

While there is substantial research consistent with the persuasive arguments explanation of polarization (Isenberg, 1986), relatively little of this research helps us to identify what aspects of group discussions are most persuasive. Renée Meyers and her associates (e.g., Meyers, 1989; Meyers, Brashers, & Hanner, 2000; Meyers & Seibold, 1990) spent a considerable amount of time trying to understand the interactive processes that create persuasive argument effects in group discussions. In the Meyers et al. (2000) study, 15 groups were asked to discuss and reach consensus on three issues. The researchers categorized group members as holding a view that was accepted by the majority (labeled "attitudinal majority") or holding a minority viewpoint (labeled "attitudinal minority"), based on their

prediscussion opinions. They also identified the winning and losing factions by identifying the subgroup that held the attitude that was consistent with the group's final decision. Adapting the Conversational Argument Coding Scheme (Canary, Brossmann, & Seibold, 1987), Meyers and colleagues investigated the arguments made by the winning and the losing factions on each issue.

Consistent with prior research, the researchers found that the initial attitudinal majority "won" the discussion (i.e., the eventual group decision was consistent with their initial positions) nearly 80% of the time. They also found some important differences between the arguments made by the attitudinal majority and minority subgroups. Majority factions used more statements indicating agreement with other group members (i.e., bolstering: "That's a good point, Jim, I agree with you") and fewer statements of disagreement as compared to minority faction members. Statements of agreement reinforced the perception of majority faction unanimity (what they referred to as "tag team arguing") because, while just one person might present an argument, other faction members could validate it with bolstering comments. Tag team arguing can also occur when one member extends the argument begun by another faction member. This bolstering and tag-team arguing is, in itself, persuasive, because it reflects both social comparison and persuasive arguments processes.

Members of the minority factions, on the other hand, were less likely to use agreements and spent more time disagreeing with the majority faction. If you are the lone dissenting voice in a group, you have no one to agree with, and your only choice may be to disagree with the larger majority. This suggests that attitudinal minority factions will be more persuasive when they have at least two members. Minority factions with multiple members can use the same bolstering and tag-team arguing that is typical of majorities' behavior.

Meyers and colleagues (2000) also found differences in the arguments made by winning and losing factions. Their findings regarding winning minorities were particularly interesting. It has long been suggested that, in order to be persuasive, attitudinal minorities have to be consistent in the way that they present their arguments (e.g., Moscovici, Lage, & Naffrechoux, 1969). Confirming this belief, Meyers and colleagues reported that the attitudinal minorities that ended up convincing the initial majority were those who argued most consistently. In order to win the argument, however, a consistent minority had to be pitted against a less consistent majority. Moreover, the more consistent the arguments presented by a particular faction, the less likely those faction members were to change their attitudes during the discussion. This was particularly true for losing, as opposed to winning, subgroups.

BOX 10.2. Group Majorities in Jury Deliberations

In the classic 1957 movie *12 Angry Men* Henry Fonda immortalized the role of a single juror faced with the prospect of having to convince 11 other jurors to change their minds and find a defendant not guilty of murder. In the 2003 movie *Runaway Jury,* John Cusack played the role of a juror who cunningly sways the opinions of his fellow jurors to deliver the verdict he wants. Although these actors defied the odds in their respective movies, that outcome is extremely rare in real life (Davis, Kerr, Atkin, Holt, & Meek, 1975). While it is true that a single juror can force a hung jury verdict in cases where a unanimous one is required, a single juror is rarely able to persuade the majority to change their minds. The key to a successful process is for the initial minority member to gradually enlist *lieutenants* who in turn change their position to agree with the minority member.

The far more common outcome is for the one or two minority members to ultimately concede their position because they simply do not have the staying power to sustain repeated arguments from the majority. Indeed, after conducting more than 550 mock jury research projects, Jim has consistently observed that the size of the majority at the outset of deliberations (i.e., 10–2 vs. 7–5) is often much more important than the quality of the arguments advanced during the deliberations. Once one or two members of a minority coalition waiver in their opposition, the momentum created by the concession makes it extremely difficult for the remaining minority group members to maintain their position (for a recent review, see Laughlin, 2011).

SUMMARY

This chapter examined the characteristics of persuasive situations that influence the attitudes and behaviors of persuasive targets. The persuasive effects of any given mode of message presentation are moderated by the characteristics of both the message and the message source. Live and video presentations focus attention on message sources and enhance the persuasiveness of highly attractive and credible sources, while written presentations are more effective for complex messages that require more effort on the part of the audience to comprehend.

Distracting stimuli are situational factors that also affect the persuasiveness of messages. Distractions external to the message source effectively interfere with message learning, restricting the persuasiveness of the message. However, the effect of communicator-based distractions is to direct attention toward the message source, either enhancing the persuasiveness of highly credible sources or limiting the effectiveness of less credible ones.

Finally, investigations of conformity effects and the polarization of individual attitudes provided clear evidence of the influence that groups or collectives have on their individual members. Conformity research suggests that social norms are developed in the presence of others. Once these norms are established, groups and organizations exert influence on their members to adopt them. Investigations of the polarity shift phenomenon reflect a different type of influence that groups have on individual members. These investigations found that group discussion causes individuals to advocate more extreme positions (either risky *or* cautious) than they did prior to group discussion. Social comparison effects and the influence of novel persuasive arguments are two prominent explanations that help to account for these outcomes.

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