Effects of prior information and initial attitude on susceptibility to emotional appeals

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In order to examine variables that mediate susceptibility to emotional appeals, 80 Ss received a positive or negative appeal concerning a little-known country. In addition, one-half of the Ss also received neutral information about the attitude object prior to the appeal. Results of a 2 by 2 by 2 analysis of variance (Positive Appeal vs Negative Appeal by Prior Information vs No Prior Information by Favorable Initial Attitude vs Unfavorable Initial Attitude) showed two significant interactions. First, negative appeals effected more change among Ss with initially favorable attitudes ($p < .01$), and second, the presence of prior information increased the effectiveness of negative but decreased the effectiveness of positive appeals ($p < .05$). The findings suggest that positive and negative appeals may identify separate processes of change, but that communicator credibility should be examined in further studies.

Despite the existence of several conflicting findings, surprisingly few studies have systematically examined the effects of fear-arousing appeals in the context of other variables. Even fewer studies have compared the effects of positive and negative appeals on attitude change, and none have considered the possibility that the effectiveness of different appeals might depend on different variables, which imply different processes of social influence.

To consider but one well-known study concerning fear-arousing appeals, Janis & Feshbach's (1953) finding that mild rather than severe appeals produced more attitude change in favor of dental hygiene has provoked a number of interpretations. Nunally & Borben (1959), for example, have demonstrated that Ss may be less attentive to emotional appeals that arouse high levels of anxiety. On the other hand, Hovland, Janis, & Kelley (1953) raise the possibility that Ss may attend to severe threats, but that Ss also discredit the communicator and his communication. Finally, nearly all interpretations are consistent with balance theories of attitude change, especially with statements that consider both affective and cognitive components of attitudes (e.g., Rosenberg & Abelson, 1960).

Despite differing interpretations of fear-arousing appeals, a few studies (Janis, 1951, 1958; Lewan & Stotland, 1961) have consistently called attention to the role of prior information in reducing the effectiveness of negative appeals. In perhaps the most rigorous study, Lewan and Stotland identified the

presence of prior neutral information as one variable that might separate effective from ineffective emotional appeals. Lewan and Stotland suggested that if Ss possess little or no information concerning an attitude object, then fear-arousing may lead to more change than when Ss are relatively knowledgeable about an attitude object, such as dental care.

In order to test the hypothesis that prior information might "anchor" attitudes and render them more resistant to emotional appeal, Lewan and Stotland provided some Ss with prior information and others with no prior information before exposing all Ss to a negative emotional appeal that used an unfamiliar country as the attitude object. As expected, Ss who received prior neutral information showed less change in the direction of the negative appeal than did Ss who received no prior information. One interpretation of Lewan and Stotland's findings suggests that prior information stabilizes or anchors the original attitude. This interpretation, in turn, leads to the expectation that, prior information confers more resistance to change for all types of emotional appeals. In other words, Ss who receive neutral information prior to a positive emotional appeal might show less change than Ss who receive no prior information.

However, a second interpretation of Lewan and Stotland's findings predicts the opposite results for positive emotional appeals. As a result of increased familiarity with an attitude object, Ss may also identify with it, and prior information would confer a resistance that is limited to negative emotional appeals. If so, the presence of prior information would leave informed Ss more susceptible to a positive appeal.

A final modification in the present

study follows from Lewan and Stotland's finding that original attitude position was not related to the amount of attitude change. That Ss did not change in proportion to the amount of change advocated raises a number of considerations. In particular, Aronson, Turner, & Carlsmith's (1963) more recent findings concerning communicator credibility and attitude change raise the possibility that Lewan and Stotland's communicator might not have been highly credible.

The present study, then, attempts to identify the effects of prior neutral information on the susceptibility to positive and negative emotional appeals. By using the same attitude object and procedure employed by Lewan and Stotland, the effects of introducing prior neutral information should be quite evident. A before-after design was used to observe interactions between the two manipulated variables and the favorability of initial attitude for a highly credible communicator.

METHOD

All procedures and materials were copied from Lewan & Stotland's (1961) study.¹ The administration of the experiment can be described in four steps: (1) Ss received neutral information describing the country of Andorra or an unrelated country, (2) initial attitudes were obtained, (3) Ss received either a positive or negative emotional appeal, and (4) final attitudes were obtained.

SUBJECTS AND INSTRUMENTS

The Ss were 80 undergraduates enrolled in introductory psychology classes at the University of Nevada, Reno. Participation in the study partially fulfilled course requirements. Attitudes towards Andorra were obtained from two scales, each comprising 22 items. Likert scaling provided four alternatives per item, permitting total scores between 22 and 88 on each scale. Form A and Form B of the scale are correlated $r = +.93$, original and final attitudes were obtained by the administration of alternate forms, and the order of presentation of the scales was counterbalanced within each treatment combination.

PROCEDURE

The Ss were run in four group sessions, one session for each treatment combination. The study was introduced as an investigation of attitudes towards unfamiliar countries.

Information manipulation. Two groups assigned to the prior information treatment received an information sheet that was abstracted from *Collier's Encyclopedia* (Lewan & Stotland, p. 451). The information sheet described the geography, agriculture, industry, language, fiscal,

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Table 1
Pretest and Posttest Means for Positive and Negative Appeals,
Prior Information, and Initial Attitude

		Initial Attitude			
		Favorable		Unfavorable	
		Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Positive Appeal	Prior Information	65.1	69.0	56.6	63.0
	No Information	65.2	72.3	56.4	66.9
Negative Appeal	Prior Information	64.5	50.8	56.5	47.6
	No Information	63.8	51.5	57.5	54.7

Note—Higher scores indicate attitudes favorable to Andorra

and political systems of Andorra in a nonevaluative context.

Two groups assigned to the no prior information treatment received information of a similar nature on the country of Etruria. The information for Etruria was also abstracted from *Collier's Encyclopedia*, and both sheets required approximately 7 min of reading time.

Appeal manipulation. Following the administration of the first attitude scale, Ss were introduced to a speaker who purported to be a former member of the United States Peace Corps and to have recently served in Andorra. The speaker's recent affiliation with the Peace Corps was stressed in order to provide a high level of communicator credibility. Two groups who received the negative appeal heard the speaker read a communication designed to present a minimum of factual information and a highly unfavorable opinion of Andorra (Lewan & Stotland, p. 452). The two remaining groups, who received the positive appeal treatment, heard the speaker present a communication designed to produce a favorable opinion of Andorra. The positive appeal, included among other evaluations, lavished praise of the Andorrese people as educated, moral, democratic, deserving of American economic aid, and a strong bulwark against communism and fascism in Europe.

The speaking time required for each appeal was approximately 15 min. Immediately following the appeals, the final attitude measures were obtained.

RESULTS

In order to classify the original attitudes, Ss in each of the four treatment combinations were classified as initially favorable or unfavorable on the basis of a median split. Table 1 shows the pretest and posttest attitude measures for positive and negative appeals, the presence or absence of prior information, and favorable and unfavorable initial attitudes. As seen in Columns 1 and 3 of Table 1, Ss in the four treatments show virtually

identical attitudes on the pretest measures. Two separate analyses of variance on the pretest scores yielded nonsignificant F ratios, and the analysis of attitude change was run on the posttest measures. First, all positive appeals produced change in favor of Andorra and all negative appeals resulted in unfavorable changes. However, the amount of change induced by each appeal is also affected by the variables of prior information and initial attitude favorability. Ss with favorable initial attitudes showed the most change for negative appeals, and Ss with unfavorable initial attitudes changed more in response to positive appeals ($F = 8.86$, $df = 1/72$, $p < .01$). In addition, prior information also interacted with the type of appeal ($F = 4.98$, $df = 1/72$, $p < .05$), and examination of Table 1 shows that prior information decreased the amount of attitude change for positive appeals but increased the effectiveness of negative appeals. All remaining F ratios were nonsignificant.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that the hypothesis of anchoring rather than identification with prior neutral information may be the more appropriate interpretation of attitude changes induced by positive emotional appeals. Since attitude change also varied directly with the amount of change advocated, the credibility of the communicator was probably reasonably high. The assumption of different credibility, in turn, might also account for the finding that prior information produced more change for negative appeals in the present study, but that prior information produced less change in Lewan and Stotland's Ss.

According to this interpretation, a perfectly credible communicator might "shift" much prior neutral information into a negative context, and attitude change might then be directly proportional to the amount of prior information. A study that varied both credibility and prior neutral

information before a negative emotional appeal would predict a direct relationship between amount of information and attitude change for credible communicators, but an inverse relationship for noncredible communicators.

The findings concerning the role of neutral information prior to positive emotional appeals raise the possibility that each type of appeal depends on somewhat different variables. However, at least one alternative interpretation suggests that Ss may attribute less credibility to a former Peace Corpsman who speaks favorably rather than unfavorably of his host country. Steiner (1970), for example, cites several studies which show that Ss attribute more sincerity, and perhaps increased credibility, to speakers who advocate opinions that are somewhat discrepant with their past behaviors. In the present study, Ss might reasonably expect that former members of the Peace Corps will more likely praise than criticize other nations. If so, the experimental design might have inadvertently reduced the credibility of the favorable communicator and established an inverse rather than a direct relationship between amount of prior information and attitude change.

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