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Explaining Theories of Persuasion



Since the mid-1930s when Dale Carnegie first published his best-selling book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, the notion of how to persuade others has been both a popular and profitable subject. Concurrently, with the rise of mass media and the pervasiveness of propaganda used in both World Wars, the study and understanding of mass-mediated persuasive messages became critical to understanding political and social change. Today, the importance of understanding the power of persuasive messages is greater than ever. According to Kilbourne (1999), “the average American is exposed to at least three thousand ads every day and will spend three years of his or her life watching television commercials” (p. 58). Clearly, we are inundated with messages of persuasion and influence in all aspects of our lives—relational, social, political, and economic. Accordingly, we believe that having an understanding of how persuasive messages work (or don’t work!) is central for surviving in today’s advertising and media-blitzed society.

❖ PERSUASION DEFINED

Persuasion is typically defined as “human communication that is designed to influence others by modifying their beliefs, values, or attitudes” (Simons, 1976, p. 21). O’Keefe (1990) argued that there are requirements for the sender, the means, and the recipient to consider something persuasive. First, persuasion involves a goal and the intent to achieve that goal on the part of the message sender. Second, communication is the means to achieve that goal. Third, the message recipient must have free will (i.e., threatening physical harm if the recipient doesn’t comply is usually considered force, not persuasion). Accordingly, persuasion is not accidental, nor is it coercive. It is inherently communicational.

Many theories in this chapter are concerned with shifts in attitude, so it is important to make clear what we mean by that term. An **attitude** is a “relatively enduring predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably” toward something (Simons, 1976, p. 80). We have attitudes toward people, places, events, products, policies, ideas, and so forth (O’Keefe, 1990). Because attitudes are enduring, they are neither fleeting nor based on whims. Yet at the same time, attitudes are *learned* evaluations; they are not something that people are born with. As such, attitudes are changeable. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, attitudes are presumed to influence behavior. To illustrate, your attitude toward a product will influence whether you buy the product.

In this chapter, we present four theories that explore aspects of persuasive communication. Although portrayed as theories of persuasion, each of these viewpoints can be applied to a wide variety of communication contexts. From well-crafted public relations campaigns designed to foster positive attitudes about a company to telling a story to convince a customer that a salesperson is honest, the theories presented highlight the varied ways to conceive persuasive messages. The four theories we discuss in this chapter include social judgment theory, the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), cognitive dissonance, and the narrative paradigm.

❖ SOCIAL JUDGMENT THEORY

Consider your personal and professional network. It is likely easy for you to come up with at least one example of a person with whom you

cannot talk about a particular topic. Perhaps your father is a die-hard Democrat who will not listen to any conservative viewpoints. Or perhaps you know that your boss is incapable of having a discussion that involves spending any money. Social judgment theory suggests that knowing a person's attitudes on subjects can provide you with clues about how to approach a persuasive effort. Created by Sherif and associates, the theory focuses on peoples' assessment of persuasive messages (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965). Research using this theory has often focused on cognitive processes, but there are numerous implications for communicators seeking to persuade others.

Social judgment theory proposes that people make evaluations (judgments) about the content of messages based on their **anchors**, or stance, on a particular topic messages (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif et al., 1965). In addition to an individual's anchor, each person's attitudes can be placed into three categories. First, there is the **latitude of acceptance**, which includes all those ideas that a person finds acceptable. Second, there is the **latitude of rejection**, which includes all those ideas that a person finds unacceptable. Finally, there is the **latitude of noncommitment**, which includes ideas for which you have no opinion—you neither accept nor reject these ideas.

A person's reaction to a persuasive message depends on his or her position on the topic (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). Accordingly, the first step in the social judgment process is to map receivers' attitudes toward a topic. This task can be accomplished through an *ordered alternatives questionnaire*. The questionnaire presents a set of statements representing different points of view on a single topic (O'Keefe, 1990). The statements are listed so that they create a continuum; the first statement reflects one extreme view of an issue, and the last statement reflects the opposite extreme view. Respondents are asked to mark the statement with which they most agree (i.e., the anchor). They are then asked to indicate statements with which they generally agree or disagree (representing the latitudes of agreement and disagreement). Statements that are neither acceptable nor unacceptable are left blank (representing the latitude of noncommitment).

To illustrate, consider attitudes about the gap between the employment of Caucasian Americans and people of color. Recent statistics indicate that the jobless rate for Blacks is twice as high as that for Whites (Hammonds, 2003). Furthermore, although 29.7% of the

workforce is classified as minority, just 14.9% of officials and managers are minorities. In contrast, White men represent 37.6% of the workforce, but 56.9% of officials and managers are White men (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). Simply presenting these statistics is likely to have sparked a response in you. For some, these figures might spark feelings of indignation about social inequities. For others, the statistics might spark irritation because we are discussing race. The fact of the matter is, your response is a perfect illustration of social judgment theory. Refer to Table 5.1, and consider the sample ordered alternatives questionnaire developed about the employment gap. By completing the instructions, you will have essentially mapped your own attitudes about the employment gap between White Americans and people of color. We will return to this questionnaire shortly.

Social judgment theory says that the map of an individual's attitudes about any given topic is a function of how **ego involved** that individual is about that topic. When an individual is highly ego involved with a topic, she or he believes that the issue is important, and the person typically holds an intense position (O'Keefe, 1990). Because the topic is one that has personal significance to the individual, it is considered to be central to their sense of self—hence, she or he is *ego-involved*.

Knowing whether a person is ego-involved allows the persuader to make certain predictions about the recipient of a persuasive message. First, *the more ego-involved a person is, the larger the latitude of rejection that person will have*. This prediction is based on logic; if you feel strongly about something, you are likely to reject anything that doesn't match your precise point of view. If you don't care as much about the topic, you are likely to be open to alternative possibilities. The second prediction is that *the more ego-involved a person is, the smaller the latitude of noncommitment*. Again, this hypothesis makes sense. If you believe a topic is important, you are likely to have thought about it, leaving little room for having no opinion or no knowledge. If you don't view the topic as important, you probably haven't spent much time crafting an opinion about it.

Our introduction of social judgment theory stated that people make judgments about messages based on their preexisting attitudes. How does this translate to the real world? Imagine that you work in the human resources department of a major corporation, and you would

Table 5.1 Ordered Alternatives Questionnaire

Read each statement, and put a ✓ next to the statement with which you most agree. Then circle the letter of all statements with which you agree, and put an X through all statements with which you disagree.

___ A.	The gap between minority employment and White employment is due to a lack of ability among many minority members.
___ B.	The gap between minority employment and White employment is due to a lack of effort among many minority members.
___ C.	The gap between minority employment and White employment is due to a lack of education among many minority members.
___ D.	The gap between minority employment and White employment is due to a lack of role models for many minority members.
___ E.	The gap between minority employment and White employment is due to a lack of training and development for many minority members.
___ F.	The gap between minority employment and White employment is due to a lack of mentoring of minority employees.
___ G.	The gap between minority employment and White employment is due to an unwelcoming working environment for minorities in most organizations.
___ H.	The gap between minority employment and White employment is due to subtle and unintentional forms of racism.
___ I.	The gap between minority employment and White employment is due to active discrimination.

like to persuade the management team to do something about the employment gap between Blacks and Whites in your company. The first thing you need to do is to determine the management teams' attitudes about the topic. Where along our ordered questionnaire do they fall as a group? How ego involved are they? Once we do this form of audience analysis, we can predict how they might respond to particular messages. Quite simply, the theory asserts that messages that fall within the audience's latitude of acceptance will be viewed positively, and messages that fall within the audience's latitude of rejection will be viewed negatively.

Social judgment explains these responses through two processes, the contrast effect and the assimilation effect (O'Keefe, 1990). The

contrast effect occurs when a message is perceived as further away from that person's anchor than it really is—the receiver subconsciously exaggerates the difference between the message's position and his or her own position. This response happens when the message falls within an individual's latitude of rejection. The **assimilation effect** is just the opposite. When a message is received that falls within the individual's latitude of acceptance, the receiver subconsciously minimizes the difference between the message's position and his or her own position. Using the ordered alternatives in Table 5.1, imagine that Manager A's anchor is at the E statement, which explains the employment gap by a lack of training and development. Statements A and B are in her latitude of rejection, C–F are in her latitude of acceptance, and G–I are in her latitude of noncommitment. If you were to seek to persuade this manager to initiate a mentoring program for minority employees (linked to statement F), this manager will be easily persuaded. In fact, she will likely *assimilate* your message and believe your solution exactly matches what she thinks ought to be done, which isn't objectively the case.

Now, picture Manager B's attitudes. Manager B's anchor is at statement B, which explains the employment gap as due to a lack of effort among minority workers. Statements E–I are in her latitude of rejection, A–C are in her latitude of acceptance, and D is in her latitude of noncommitment. If you seek to persuade this manager of your plan to initiate a mentoring program, social judgment theory predicts that Manager B will not be persuaded. In fact, *contrast* is likely to occur, and this manager may accuse you of saying that the company is actively discriminating, a case you have not sought to make. The **boomerang effect** is when the message actually causes a person to change his or her mind in the direction opposite that desired. By the way, consider how the two managers' attitudes have mapped out. Which of the two is more ego-involved with the topic?

In sum, social judgment theory proposes that persuaders must carefully consider the pre-existing attitudes an audience might hold about a topic before crafting a message. If you send a message that falls in a receiver's latitude of rejection, you will not be successful in your persuasive effort. Moreover, if you send a message that is clearly in a person's latitude of acceptance, you are not persuading that receiver, you are only *reinforcing* what she or he already believes. True persuasion can only occur, according to this theory, if the message you send is in

an individual's latitude of noncommitment or at the edges of his/her latitude of acceptance (Miller, 2002).

❖ ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL

Turning to our second theory of persuasion, the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) views persuasion primarily as a cognitive event, meaning that the targets of persuasive messages use mental processes of motivation and reasoning (or a lack thereof) to accept or reject persuasive messages. Developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), ELM posits two possible routes or methods of influence: centrally routed messages and peripherally routed messages. Each route targets a widely different audience. Accordingly, much like social judgment theory, ELM emphasizes the importance of understanding audience members before creating a persuasive message.

Slow and Steady: The Central Route to Persuasion

Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) model depicts persuasion as a process in which the success of influence depends largely on the way the receivers make sense of the message. As mentioned earlier, ELM presents two divergent pathways that one can use when trying to influence others. The more complex of the two paths is known as the **central route**, also referred to as an elaborated route. Centrally routed messages include a wealth of information, rational arguments, and evidence to support a particular conclusion. For example, during each election season, political hopefuls engage in speeches, debates, and roundtable discussions; each message is filled with elaborated and presumably rational information regarding the candidate's viewpoints, platform, and political history.

Centrally routed messages are much more likely to create long-term change for the recipient than are peripheral messages (discussed later); however, not all individuals are capable of receiving centrally routed messages. Importantly, ELM argues that centrally routed messages succeed in long-term change only when two factors are met: (a) the target must be highly **motivated** to process all of the information being given, and (b) the target must be **able** to process the message cognitively. For example, if you are not willing to sit through a 2-hour

televised debate between presidential candidates, then ELM suggests that you do not have the motivation required to process an elaborated message in this instance. Alternatively, imagine that you are motivated to watch the candidates' debate, but the politicians' messages are so filled with jargon and complex issues of international policy that you do not understand them. In this case, ELM suggests that despite your motivation, the ability to understand the highly specific and intricate messages being offered is not present. The theory states that without *both* motivation and ability, an elaborated message is of little value.

Types of Elaborated Arguments. It should be apparent that understanding one's audience is critical when choosing the appropriate route; it is also imperative to understand the audience when constructing an elaborated argument (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In other words, it isn't enough to view your audience as motivated and able when considering the central route of persuasion. You must also consider how the audience members will likely react to the quality and arrangement of the arguments presented. Elaborated arguments can be measured as strong, neutral, or weak.

Strong arguments create a positive cognitive response in the minds of receivers while also positively aligning the receivers' beliefs with those views of the persuader (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Strong arguments inoculate the audience against counter-persuasion and are most likely to create long-term attitude change that leads to predictable behavior. Repetition is thought to enhance the persuasive effect of strong arguments; conversely, interruptions will diminish their effectiveness. **Neutral arguments** generate a noncommittal cognitive response from the receiver. In other words, no attitude change occurs, and the ambivalent receiver may instead turn to peripheral cues, or shortcuts to persuasion. Finally, **weak arguments** produce a negative cognitive response to the persuasive message. This negative response will not only prevent attitude change, it may, in fact, have a reverse or boomerang effect, thereby reinforcing the opposing point of view.

Taking a Shortcut: The Peripheral Route to Persuasion

Noted earlier, elaborated messages are ineffective when targeted participants are not capable and interested in the information (Petty &

Cacioppo, 1986). Although the persuader might prefer an involved audience so as to produce enduring change, it is unreasonable to expect every persuasive target to be motivated or skilled enough to understand the barrage of influential messages put forth each day. As a result, when motivation or ability is missing from the target audience, the persuader can use the **peripheral route** to persuasion. Peripheral messages rely on a receiver's emotional involvement and persuade through more superficial means. Returning to our political campaign example, it is common for presidential candidates to air 30-second commercials that focus on portraying feel-good images of their "family values," patriotism, character, and likeability. As well, some candidates use celebrity endorsements, such as having a famous person or group give public support. For example, a number of NBA players publicly supported Bill Bradley during his 2000 run for presidential nomination. Thus, ELM predicts that when the audience is unmotivated or unable to process an elaborated message, persuaders should focus on quick and easy ways to produce change. One significant drawback is that the peripheral route leads only to short-term change, if any change at all.

Types of Peripheral Cues. Cialdini (1993, 1994) identified seven common cues that signal the use of a peripheral message: authority, commitment, contrast, liking, reciprocity, scarcity, and social proof. Using **authority** as a peripheral cue, the persuader uses the perception of authority to convince the audience to accept the beliefs or behaviors presented. Parents often use this peripheral cue with their children: "Clean up your room because I said so!" This message may influence children to straighten the covers and hide the toys in the closet before grandma's visit, but it probably won't create long-term neatness.

Peripheral messages that rely on **commitment** emphasize a person's dedication to a product, social cause, group affiliation, political party, and so on (Cialdini, 1993, 1994). For example, some people publicly announce their commitment to a certain group or cause; they attend rallies, run for office, or wear pins, hats, and other logos that symbolize the affiliation (Canary, Cody, & Manusov, 2003). Similarly, wearing a polo shirt that displays your company's corporate logo demonstrates some amount of your dedication to the organization. Other people demonstrate their commitment more privately, for example, by

sending anonymous donations to political campaigns or charitable organizations. Importantly, however, “people usually feel greater commitment to a cause if they are publicly committed to it” (p. 369).

One very common sequential procedure that underscores the commitment principle is the *foot-in-the-door* tactic (Cialdini, 1994). Here, a persuader convinces you to do something small first, like wear a campaign button. Then, the persuader asks to put a campaign sign in your yard; next the persuader may ask you to make a donation or to host a reception. The strategy is to convince you to agree to a small, seemingly innocuous request first. Once you agree and commit yourself to the campaign, it becomes harder to refuse larger requests because there is a threat of appearing inconsistent with your commitment.

Persuading through **contrast** or using **contrast effects** requires the communicator to set up uneven points of comparison (Cialdini, 1993, 1994). For example, asking a coworker if she could do you a “giant favor” and then contrasting the statement with a simple request (“Would you page me if FedEx drops off a package while I am in a client meeting?”) sets up a disparity. By inflating the coworker’s expectations for the “giant favor” requested and then contrasting it with a simple favor, it is more likely to result in compliance. Retail salespeople also use this contrast principle by “reducing” prices or by showing customers the most expensive item first (because anything else will seem cheaper in comparison).

Liking messages stress affinity toward a person, place, or object (Cialdini, 1993, 1994). That is, if we like you, we will like your ideas. Today’s sneaker and soft drink companies often rely on such messages of liking. By using Britney Spears to sell Pepsi or Michael Jordan to sell Nike Air Jordan shoes, these companies expect that if you like Britney or Mike, you will also like their product (and will, they hope, buy it).

Messages of **reciprocation** try to influence by emphasizing a give-and-take relationship (Cialdini, 1993, 1994). For example, it is easier to persuade your sister-in-law to babysit your children if you have done something similar for her. Advertisers also use reciprocation; “Buy these steak knives in the next 10 minutes, and we will give you a free cutting board!” Here, the advertiser tries to influence the receiver by throwing in some extras. If you do this for us, we’ll give you a freebie. Similarly, **scarcity** is a peripheral message that preys on people’s worry of missing out on something. This “Quick! Get it before they’re all

gone" approach creates a sense of urgency for receivers. Home shopping networks and department stores use this strategy by imposing time limits on the sale of items; presumably, you won't be able to purchase the deluxe salad spinner after the sales event expires. Realtors also use this approach; alerting prospective buyers that an offer has been placed on a property creates a sense of urgency and may start a bidding war. A house that was "of interest" now seems that much more appealing when it may disappear from the market.

Finally, the peripheral cue of **social proof** relies on the age-old notion of peer pressure (Cialdini, 1993, 1994). Although you might mistakenly believe that only teenagers succumb to "everyone's doing it" mentality, adults are also swayed by messages of social proof. Within the workplace, for instance, many corporations participate in charity drives such as with the Red Cross or the United Way. Here, employees who participate in blood drives or fundraising are given pins to wear or balloons to display, thereby gaining influence by putting subtle pressure on other employees to "get on board."

If unaware of these techniques in the past, you should now be able to identify these seven peripheral cues—they are everywhere! Again, however, it is important to stress that these peripheral messages emphasize fleeting emotional responses and are not likely to create long lasting change.

Types of Peripheral Messages. As with centrally routed arguments, peripheral messages can be evaluated as positive, neutral, or negative (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). **Positive peripheral messages** are those that are perceived favorably by the audience and create a positive affective state. Positive peripheral messages have a chance at yielding weak, positive changes in attitude. For example, if you are a fan of *The West Wing* and Martin Sheen publicly endorses Candidate X over Candidate Y, you may feel more positively about Candidate X. Notably, however, a change in attitude does not necessarily predict a change in behavior. For instance, you may believe that voting is an essential civic duty for American citizens; yet you may not vote in your local primary election because you don't think you are knowledgeable of the candidates. Here, we can see incongruence between a belief (voting is important) and behavior (failing to vote).

Neutral peripheral messages leave the receivers feeling emotionally ambivalent; they really don't know or care about the cue used to

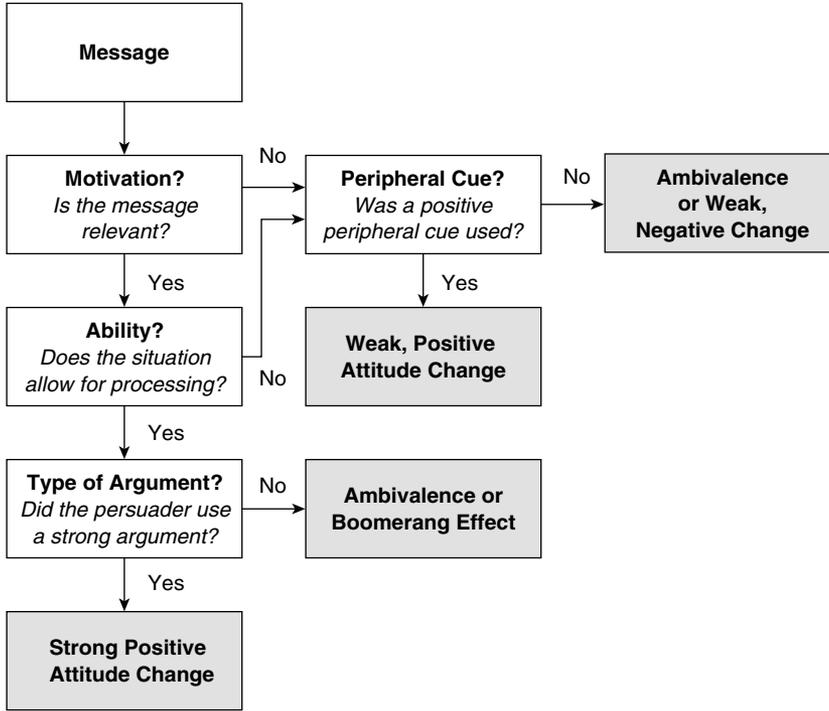
capture their interest (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). If you don't know who Martin Sheen is or really care about his political views, then his endorsement of Candidate X will not create any attitude change, nor is it likely to influence your voting behavior. Finally, **negative peripheral messages** produce negative or disapproving emotional responses within the receiver. If you can't stand *The West Wing*, then Martin Sheen's ad endorsing Candidate X will likely irritate you. Thus, you are now left with a negative impression of Candidate X because of this person's "association" with an actor or TV show that you find objectionable.

To review, ELM makes very clear predictions, which are summarized in Figure 5.1. The theory predicts that if listeners are motivated and able to consider an elaborated message, persuaders should rely on strong, factually based arguments. Arguments can backfire if they are weak or poorly presented, however. Conversely, persuaders should focus on emotionally based peripheral messages if receivers cannot or will not consider an elaborated message. Importantly, persuaders must recognize that using a peripheral route guarantees no long-term change. Instead, effects, if any, will be minimal and fleeting.

❖ COGNITIVE DISSONANCE THEORY

It is often assumed that to persuade others to do something, an outside source simply has to provide enough ammunition to change another's attitudes or beliefs. For example, public health campaigns often presume that the best way to get a smoker to quit is to infuse the smoker with information about mortality rates, health problems, and the social stigma associated with smoking in order to change the person's attitude about cigarettes. If the smoker's attitude changes, surely he or she will stop smoking, right? After all, it doesn't make sense to engage in a habit that causes premature aging, various forms of cancer, and is banned in many public places.

According to cognitive dissonance theory, this line of thinking may seem logical but is potentially incorrect, possibly explaining why there are so many smokers who acknowledge the health and social risks yet continue to indulge in the behavior. Discussed in this section, cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) explains that persuasion is not simply the result of injecting new or refined beliefs into others. Instead, CDT

Figure 5.1 Elaboration Likelihood

SOURCE: *Communication and Persuasion* (p. 4) by R. E. Petty and J. T. Cacioppo, 1986, New York: Springer-Verlag. Reprinted with permission of Springer-Verlag GmbH & Co. KG and the authors.

predicts that influence is often an intrapersonal event, occurring when incongruence between our attitudes and behavior creates a tension that is resolved by altering either our beliefs or our behaviors, thereby effecting a change.

Schemata: Creating Familiarity or Discomfort

According to Festinger (1957, 1962), when presented with a new or unfamiliar stimulus, individuals use **schemata**—that is, cognitive structures for organizing new information. Essentially, for new information to be understood or useful, we must find schemata with which to link

the new stimulus to previously understood experiences. For example, when trying frogs' legs for the first time, many people claim that dish tastes "just like chicken"; in this case, the previous experience of being familiar with the taste of chicken serves as schemata for relating the taste of frogs' legs.

Importantly, however, when newly presented information is inconsistent with our previously established beliefs (i.e., schemata), we will experience an imbalance or dissonance (Festinger, 1957). It is this dissonance that becomes a highly persuasive tool because, according to Festinger, humans feel so uneasy with holding contradictory beliefs and actions that they will make every attempt to minimize the discomfort. In other words, when individuals behave in a manner that is incongruent with their beliefs, dissonance is created; dissonance creates discomfort. Because humans do not like to feel unnerved, individuals actively seek to change the situation to restore a balance between thought and action.

The Relationship Between Beliefs and Behaviors

Three possible relationships between beliefs and behaviors exist: irrelevance, consonance, and dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Briefly stated, **irrelevance** simply refers to beliefs and behaviors that have nothing to do with each other. For example, Cory's beliefs about preserving the environment and his position on gun control are completely unrelated. Thus, irrelevance is the absence of both consonance and dissonance. Second, **consonance** occurs when two stimuli or pieces of information are in balance or achieve congruence. For example, if Cory believes that recycling is an important way to maintain the environment, and he recycles everything from plastic bottles, to Styrofoam peanuts, to junk mail, it could be said that Cory has consonance between his beliefs (recycling benefits the environment) and his actions (he avidly recycles household waste). According to Festinger (1957), individuals prefer consonant relationships; that is, we strive to feel consistency between actions and beliefs.

Conversely, **dissonance** occurs when two stimuli or pieces of information contradict each other (Festinger, 1957). Continuing the previous example, if Cory believes that the environment is a precious commodity that deserves protection yet he drives an SUV for his 40-mile commute

each day, he has created dissonance. Cory's beliefs (preserving the environment) and his actions (driving a gas guzzling SUV) are incongruent. CDT predicts that this dissonance will give Cory discomfort, at least until he can rationalize or augment the dissonance—either by shifting his belief (sure, the environment is important, but driving a car won't harm anyone) or by changing his behavior (trading in the SUV for an electric hybrid car).

Importantly, not all dissonance is created equally. That is, a *magnitude of dissonance* exists whereby some forms of incongruence produce greater discomfort than others (Zimbardo, Ebbesen, & Maslach, 1977). This magnitude of dissonance can be measured by three variables. First, the amount of dissonance one experiences is affected by the **perceived importance** of an issue. Recycling soda cans may not be as important of an issue when compared with driving while intoxicated. Similarly, spending \$5,000 on a beach rental that turns out to be a dilapidated shack is far more devastating than spending \$100 to watch your favorite football team lose. Second, the **dissonance ratio** affects the amount of discomfort one feels. The dissonance ratio is simply the proportion of incongruent beliefs held in relation to the number of consonant beliefs. If you hold a greater number of incongruent beliefs and behaviors compared with consistent thoughts and actions, you will experience more discomfort. Third, one's ability to **rationalize**, or justify, the dissonance also affects the amount of discomfort experienced when faced with conflicting beliefs and behaviors. The more you can justify these contrasting attitudes and actions, the less discomfort you endure.

A related issue is perception. Specifically, the perceptual processes of selective exposure, attention, interpretation, and retention can help minimize dissonance. CDT argues that an individual selectively perceives various stimuli so as to minimize dissonance. For example, with **selective exposure**, a person actively avoids information that is inconsistent with previously established beliefs or behaviors. Thus, a pro-choice supporter will likely avoid pro-life demonstrations and vice versa. Similarly, **selective attention** suggests that if you have to expose yourself to a situation that is incongruent with your beliefs, you will only attend to information that reaffirms your beliefs, disregarding any information that fails to support your views. Thus, if pro-choice supporters happen to come face-to-face with a pro-life demonstration, they will likely only attend to those details that support

their previously held beliefs, for example, that pro-life supporters are religious “fanatics.”

With regard to **selective interpretation**, CDT predicts that individuals will carefully decipher ambiguous information so that it is perceived to be consistent with our established beliefs. To illustrate, before Rosie O’Donnell publicly identified herself as gay, many of her fans interpreted her actions to be consistent with that of a heterosexual woman, such as her crush on Tom Cruise and her adoption of several foster children. When she revealed that she is, in fact, gay, her magazine readership dropped (O. Poole, 2002)—possibly because some subscribers could no longer hold the illusion that her ambiguous behaviors were those of a heterosexual woman. Finally, CDT maintains that individuals **selectively retain** information that upholds their viewpoints while more easily dismissing or forgetting information that creates dissonance. Accordingly, we conveniently forget how much was spent on that rundown beach house.

Persuasion Through Dissonance

By now, it should be understood that CDT assumes humans prefer congruency between beliefs and behaviors. When we engage in an action that opposes our attitudes, we experience distress known as dissonance. Depending on the importance of the issue and the degree of our discomfort, we are motivated to change our beliefs or behaviors (i.e., be persuaded). CDT is often considered a *postdecision theory*, meaning that individuals attempt to persuade themselves after a decision has been made or course of action has been enacted that the decision or behavior was okay (Gass & Seiter, 2003). The notion of buyer’s remorse is an obvious example. After spending more than you feel comfortable with on a new home, car, vacation, or some other luxury item, you probably had to rationalize, or convince yourself, that the purchase was “worth” it. Thus, you try to reduce the dissonance created after making a decision to buy. Yet the question still begs: How can communicators use CDT as a tool to persuade others?

Recall that, according to CDT, motivation results from an individual’s internal struggle to change beliefs or behaviors to restore consonance (Festinger, 1957). Consequently, if a persuader can create or exploit dissonance while also offering a solution to minimize the disparity, it is

likely that the receiver will adopt these suggested new behaviors (or change beliefs).

In the case of buyer's remorse, sellers and real estate agents can capitalize on principles of CDT by reinforcing the wisdom of making certain choices. Realtors often encourage buyers to make a list of pros and cons before even looking for that new home with breathtaking views, a gourmet kitchen, or a sunken Jacuzzi tub (Light, 2002). This way, buyers can reduce dissonance that typically occurs after their bid is accepted by reinforcing their decision to purchase with the list of advantages. Home inspections and contingency clauses in the agreement of sale also help prospective buyers feel better about their decision to purchase.

Advertisers have also been using principles of CDT for decades, convincing consumers to buy their clients' products. For instance, the diet industry has made billions of dollars by preying on the average persons' insecurities about their appearance and body image. Most adults know that they should engage in exercise or physical activity on a daily basis; yet the majority of us don't. And although we may not be motivated enough to get off the couch and onto the treadmill, we are motivated to relieve the dissonance by purchasing so-called miracle products such as fat blockers, diet supplements, cellulite creams, and even low-carb beer. Thus, by presenting an easy alternative, these manufacturers help consumers to minimize their discomfort by realigning their beliefs and behaviors, if only on a temporary basis.

Within an organizational context, CDT predicts that by increasing employee commitments and loyalties, employee turnover could be reduced and satisfaction improved. That is, "once we've invested our time and energy or poured our hearts and souls into a cause, a person, an idea, a project, or a group we find it too difficult to let go" (Gass & Seiter, 2003, p. 69). If you have already invested years, overcome financial burdens, or forged meaningful relationships with coworkers, you are much less likely to leave an organization—regardless of pay or other adverse circumstances. Instead, you suppress second thoughts about other career opportunities, rationalize your corporate loyalty, and may even intensify your efforts to prove to yourself and others that the job is worth it.

We would like to offer a few words of caution, however. Take care when trying to capitalize on others' inconsistencies as a persuasive

strategy for changing receivers' beliefs or behaviors. As Gass and Seiter (2003) noted, if you create too much dissonance, the receivers may simply create balance by changing their attitudes so as not to like you. Likewise, ethical issues abound when individuals plot to exploit consumers' or employees' dissonance for material gain. We believe that competent persuaders must think of each consumer or employee as an individual worthy of respect. If creating or magnifying another's dissonance strips that individual of self worth, then such techniques should be avoided.

In sum, CDT focuses primarily on an individual's psychological response to inconsistencies in beliefs and actions. Because dissonance produces distress, human beings seek to maintain consonance or the appearance of consonance whenever possible. This adverse effect may mean changing one's behaviors or realigning one's beliefs through some type of rationalization or selective perception. Although often a postreactive approach, communicators can use this knowledge of CDT to better target their persuasive messages. By offering a solution, product, or course of action that bridges the gap between receivers' incongruent beliefs and behaviors, communicators may influence receivers to use these methods to create cognitive harmony.

❖ NARRATIVE PARADIGM

Whereas ELM emphasizes the importance of strong, logical arguments for persuading a motivated and able audience, the narrative paradigm stresses the effectiveness of influence through narration—that is, persuasion through storytelling (Fisher, 1984, 1987). Using a more subjective theoretical orientation, Fisher argues that human beings are fundamentally storytelling creatures; therefore, the most persuasive or influential message is not that of rational fact, but instead a narrative that convinces us of “good reasons” for engaging in a particular action or belief.

Consider television advertising. Are the most memorable ads those that inundate the audience with facts about the products, or are they those that craft a memorable story? Since 1988 Budweiser has used the “Bud Bowl” saga to sell its beer during the Super Bowl. For more than 8 years, viewers watched the soap-opera story of a British woman and her attractive neighbor sipping Taster's Choice coffee.

Not all successful advertisements are long-term campaigns, however. One of the most memorable ads during the 2003 Super Bowl was Reebok's "Terry Tate Office Linebacker" ad, which demonstrated a unique way of maintaining office procedure: using a football player to handle discipline. The humorous vignette had little logically to do with athletic shoes, but it did tell a story. Current strategic marketing involves making products or brands "the central characters in their own story . . . brands within a marketplace could then usefully be conceived as romantic, tragic, heroic, or satirical" (Shanker, Elliott, & Goulding, 2001, p. 30).

As we explain subsequently, Fisher's (1984, 1987) view of communication contrasts much of Western thought that emphasizes rational decision making. Yet by juxtaposing a narrative worldview with a rational worldview, we hope that you will give some thought to this strikingly different way of considering communication and influence.

Fisher's Narrative Assumptions

Five assumptions drive Fisher's (1987) explanation of the narrative paradigm. First and foremost, Fisher proposed that what makes humans unique and distinct from other creatures is our ability and drive to tell stories. Importantly, narration, does not refer to "fictive composition whose propositions may be true or false" (p. 58); instead, **narration** includes the symbolic words and actions that people use to assign meaning. Fisher evoked the Greek term *mythos* to explain human communication primarily as a collection of stories expressing "ideas that cannot be verified or proved in any absolute way. Such ideas arise in metaphor, values, gestures, and so on" (p. 19). According to this view, not even the keenest expert knows everything about his or her area of specialization; there is an element of subjectivity in even the most "logical" of messages. Instead, your values, emotions, and aesthetic preferences shape your beliefs and actions. As such, individuals relay messages and experiences through stories as an attempt to capture these subjective experiences.

Second, the narrative paradigm suggests that because individuals' lives and understanding of reality are centered on these subjective narratives, people need a way to judge which stories are believable and which are not (Fisher, 1987). Here, Fisher argued that individuals

use **narrative rationality**—a logical method of reasoning by which a person can determine how believable another’s narrative is. Narrative rationality relies on **good reasons** as the basis for most decision making. As opposed to relying solely on argumentative logic, good reasons allow us to validate and accept (or reject) another’s narrative based on the perceived truthfulness and consistency. Thus, coherence and fidelity are two ways to make this narrative judgment of “good reasons.” When the narrative being used appears to flow smoothly, makes sense, and is believable, we say that there is **narrative coherence**. Similarly, when the narrative appears truthful and congruent with our own experiences, we say that there is **narrative fidelity**. To accept a narrative, an individual must perceive the narrative’s fidelity first; without fidelity, coherence is irrelevant.

A related third assumption is that what a person accepts as a “good reason” is based on that individual’s culture, character, history, values, experience, and the like (Fisher, 1984, 1987). In other words, what appears to have coherence and fidelity to one person may not appeal to another who comes to the narrative relationship with a different set of values and experiences.

Fourth, the narrative paradigm proposes that “rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings” (Fisher, 1987, p. 5). Rather than conceiving of reason as rooted only in fact and logical argument, Fisher argued that rationality—and therefore persuasion—stems from humans’ ability to create a coherent story. Thus, piling on the facts about a political candidate’s legislative record isn’t what is persuasive for voters; what will influence constituents is a candidate’s ability to share his or her experiences via narrative.

Finally, the narrative paradigm presumes that the world as humans know it is based primarily on sets of both cooperative and competing stories (Fisher, 1987). Importantly, individuals must use the logic of good reasons to choose among these narratives, thereby creating and recreating their social reality. Because “human communication . . . is imbued with mythos—ideas that cannot be verified or proved in any absolute way” (p. 19), Fisher believed that individuals must rely on narratives as the creation and recreation of a common understanding. The narratives we choose can fundamentally affect our life.

Table 5.2 Comparing the Narrative and Rational World Paradigms

<i>Narrative Paradigm</i>	<i>Rational World Paradigm</i>
1. Humans beings are storytellers.	1. Humans beings are rational.
2. Communication, persuasion, and decision making are based on the logic of good reasons.	2. Communication, persuasion, and decision making are based on sound arguments.
3. What one accepts as "good reasons" is determined individually by a person's culture, character, experiences, and values.	3. Strong arguments adhere to specific criteria for soundness and logic (e.g., Aristotle's use of the enthymeme).
4. Rationality is based on one's awareness of how consistent and truthful a story appears when compared with one's own (and others') lived experiences.	4. Rationality is based on the accuracy of information presented and on the reliability of the reasoning processes used.
5. People experience the world as a series of stories from which we choose. As we make these choices, we create and recreate reality.	5. The world and reality can be viewed as a series of logical relationships that are revealed through reasoned argument.

A Study in Contrasts: Comparing Narrative and Rational Paradigms

Mentioned earlier, the narrative paradigm contrasts with much of Western thought, including the Western emphasis on the rational paradigm. Table 5.2 presents the contrast between the narrative paradigm and the rational paradigm. Specifically, Fisher (1987) argued that *logos*, or purely rational arguments, have been unfairly privileged as the ultimate measure of rationality. For example, he cited Aristotle's preference for persuasion and intellectual arguments that are grounded first and foremost in *logos*. As previously discussed, the narrative paradigm assumes that little in our social worlds can be understood as purely fact; everything around us is shaded with the subjectivity of individual values and experiences. As such, "rationality is grounded in the narrative structure of life and the natural capacity people have

to recognize coherence and fidelity in the stories they experience and tell to one another" (p. 137). Consequently, Fisher posited that *mythos* (narratives) and *pathos* (emotional appeals) are more meaningful to humans and, therefore, more persuasive.

Importantly, the narrative paradigm does not exclude logic (Fisher, 1987). Instead, Fisher argued that no rhetorical proof (ethos, pathos, or logos) should be regarded as more superior than the other forms of rhetorical proof. Fisher also maintained that humans should move away from dualistic approaches (i.e., that we are either rational or narrative) and embrace more integrated perspectives (i.e., that we are both rational and narrative).

According to the narrative paradigm, then, human communication and our understanding of "reality" relies heavily on narration. What's more, Fisher (1987) believed that the narrative is a more effective means of influence than deductive arguments such as the syllogism or enthymeme. Importantly, however, only when a narrative has the logic of good reasons and narrative coherence will it be convincing enough to permeate a receiver's consciousness and become translated into a change in action.

❖ CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter examined four theories of persuasion. Both social judgment theory and elaboration likelihood model argue that persuaders must carefully consider their audience before crafting a message. According to **social judgment theory**, the audience members' preexisting attitudes are important because sending a message that falls in a receiver's latitude of rejection will not result in successful persuasion. "True persuasion" occurs only when the persuasive message falls within a receiver's latitude of noncommitment or at the edges of his or her latitude of acceptance. **Elaboration likelihood model** also emphasizes the importance of knowing your audience. In this case, however, receivers must be motivated and able to process objective, elaborated messages. When the audience is unmotivated or unable to process such messages (or both), peripheral cues should be used. **Cognitive dissonance theory** explains persuasion as a postreactive response to inconsistencies in beliefs and actions. Individuals prefer to maintain consistency between beliefs and behaviors. Persuaders can take advantage of

receivers' dissonance by proposing a solution, product, or action that attempts to close the disparity between incongruent beliefs and behaviors. Finally, the **narrative paradigm** views persuasion through a descriptive lens. That is, persuasion isn't so much a rational process as it is an emotional process based on storytelling. Importantly, narratives must have coherence and the logic of good reasons to be influential.

Case Study 5 CONNECTION Problems

CONNECT is an up-and-coming company that specializes in entertainment via telecommunications. A small business, CONNECT employs roughly 60 people and currently offers three products: a psychic network, a matchmaking service, and party-line access. Three separate product directors manage each of these three services. Ultimately, these directors are held accountable for their product as well as their staff.

Because of the company's small size, as well as the open attitude of upper management, CONNECT has created a unique environment where individual opinions are not only heard but encouraged. Employees value one another and the work they do because their own success relies on the company's success.

A collaborative work environment such as this has its downsides, however. For example, one drawback is the sheer abundance of new ideas (some good, some bad). Every idea and suggestion gets attention and needs to be researched—a time-consuming and often frustrating processes because many ideas lack the resources, practicality, and efficiency to be used.

As manager of the Media Department, Bryan Hopkins has worked for 2 years at CONNECT and currently supervises four employees. Bryan's chief responsibility is to oversee the selection and placement of print advertising. To an untrained eye, ad placement may seem simple; however, for advertising to be effective, CONNECT's procedure is fairly detailed. First, the Media Department purchases advertising space, usually in a newspaper or magazine. The Media Department then contacts the Graphics Department with an ad request, basically letting the graphics manager know what needs to be created (e.g., ad type, size, color, format) and when it needs to be completed. After completing the ad, Graphics sends the copy back to the Media Department for approval. Bryan checks each ad; only after he gives final approval is the ad then sent to the particular newspaper or magazine for publication. Although it seems tedious, Bryan designed this procedure himself and keeps it as streamlined as possible. The publication world runs on deadlines, so efficiency is critical.

Jim Martinsky, CONNECT's dating services project director, is extremely enthusiastic about CONNECT and his product. In Bryan's view, Jim is a perfectionist who tends to complicate and overanalyze things. Recently, Jim mentioned to Bryan that CONNECT might be changing its ad procedure. He wanted to schedule a meeting in the next few days to discuss the proposed changes. Jim also casually mentioned that he would like to be a part of the ad procedure process; for example, maybe the Media Department could show him each ad before giving final approval. As media manager, it was up to Bryan to determine the ad procedure, not Jim. What's more, Bryan didn't want to have someone peering over his shoulder and questioning his department's decisions.

"No way am I going to show this guy every ad that comes along!" Bryan thought to himself, "Jim will want to haggle over each comma and question mark, and it'll take months to get an ad published!"

Not wanting to appear difficult, however, Bryan decided not to say anything. He figured he would wait until the next meeting when he and the other directors could properly discuss Jim's ideas in more depth. He would bring research showing time-tables, magazine commitment deadlines, and revenue charts to show how effective their ad placement has been since he took over a few years back.

Later that same afternoon, Bryan passed by the graphics department's studio and spotted Jim talking with Alison, the graphics manager. Jim caught Bryan's eye and waved Bryan into the room.

"Hey, Bryan! Come here—just for a minute. I've worked everything out." A bit perplexed, Bryan poked his head into the graphics studio. "Hey, Jim. I'm on my way to meet with the ad buyer for *HomeLife Magazine*. What's up?"

"I'm glad we ran into you! It's all set up. From now on, your department will show all ads to me before giving final approval," Jim declared, not defiantly, but rather, as if he had just solved a major world problem.

"Jim, I thought we were going to have a staff meeting to discuss this. In fact, I'm not even sure that there *is* a problem," Bryan replied.

“Well, Bryan, you know that we are always on deadline here. I wanted to get things in place before our next series of ads is due. You know what they say! ‘Time is of the essence!’”

Bryan didn’t know what to say. Keeping in mind Jim’s overzealous approach and recognizing that his own stress level was high, Bryan answered with a quick “Uh . . . Okay, sounds good, I’ll get back to you,” and headed back out the door. Although Bryan firmly believed that Jim’s wasn’t a good idea, he also knew that discussing it while on his way to meet with an ad buyer wasn’t the proper time or place to resolve it.

Later that afternoon, Bryan e-mailed Jim a meeting request to discuss the newly proposed ad procedure. It looked like there wasn’t going to be a group discussion with the other project directors, so Bryan had to convince Jim on his own that the Media Department’s current method was a good one and that it worked. At the very least, Bryan figured they could come up with a modified ad procedure that would not inconvenience anyone who was involved.

The next day, the two men met in an unoccupied office with the door closed. Bryan started the meeting, “Hi Jim, thanks for meeting with me today to discuss your new ad placement idea. Although I think your intentions are good, as the person responsible for ad placement procedure, I have some serious concerns about the plan you suggested.” Bryan went on to say that Jim’s idea simply was not practical for their deadline-driven industry. “Media places too many ads for too many of CONNECT’s services; we can’t run around and chase down all of the project directors for their approval when ad deadlines need to be met.” Bryan expressed that Jim’s new procedure created unnecessary steps, making it inefficient.

“I have an alternative solution,” Bryan suggested, “one that combines your idea of having extra eyes look over the ads along with my belief that we shouldn’t put up additional barriers in the approval process.” Jim nodded, “Okay, I’m game—what’s your idea?”

Bryan went on to explain his idea—graphics could show each ad to the respective project director for his or her approval prior to sending it back to Media for final approval. Bryan explained,

"This way, the Media Department's flow wouldn't be disrupted as much, and it would allow for the graphic artists and the project directors to work together on getting everything just right. This way, when Media does receive the ad, we could just do our normal checking routine before sending the ad out."

Jim indicated that he originally had suggested this idea to Alison in the Graphics Department, but that she had expressed the same concerns that Bryan just did. "Essentially," Jim said, "Alison told me it's simply inefficient; Graphics doesn't have time to chase down project directors for each ad's approval either."

As Jim began to feel as though a solution to the situation was hopeless, Bryan started asking some questions aimed at finding out exactly what the "problem" was. According to Jim, he had noticed some ads that were going out for his product that did not meet his approval. Bryan pressed Jim for more details; it turned out that "some ads" was really just two ads—one was a personal preference regarding layout, and the other was due to Jim's own forgetfulness about the ad he had previously approved.

When pressed even further, it turned out that the real issue was a communication problem between Jim and Sean, the graphic artist who typically worked on Jim's ads. According to Jim, they didn't get along well. Just recently, Jim noticed a published ad where an adjustment that he had requested Sean to make was not made; Jim lost trust in the ad procedure, fearing that these errors would continue to happen unless he was involved in some way.

Based on Jim's story, Bryan quickly recognized that Jim's problem was not with Media's ad procedure, but between Jim and Sean. Bryan also knew that changing the ad procedure was not going to fix a communication problem between the two men.

By listening to Jim's difficulties with working with Sean, Bryan realized that a slight change to the ad procedure, if done correctly, could benefit everyone. Together, Bryan, Jim, and Alison came up with a joint proposal. They would set up an in-box in each project director's office and in the Media Department. Once Graphics finished an ad, they would simply drop the ad in the project director's in-box. The project directors would check their in-boxes on a daily basis. If they agreed with the look of the ad

and were happy with everything, they would sign off on the ad, and drop it in the Media in-box. Media would then check the ad as usual, give final approval, and then give Graphics the okay to send the ad. If, for some reason, a project director was not happy with an ad left in the in-box, he or she would go directly to Graphics to work out the problems. Once satisfied, the project director would sign off on the ad and then place it in the Media in-box for final approval.

This solution left the final approval in the hands of Media while also allowing all project directors to have a say in the ads, and it avoided any inefficiency in getting approvals because ads could now just be left in various in-boxes. Amazingly, all staff members involved agreed to this joint solution. A month later, all were satisfied with the new procedure.

Questions for Consideration

1. Consider the tenets of social judgment theory. How does the latitude of rejection operate within this case study? What about the latitude of acceptance? How could Jim and Bryan both have used SJT principles early on to avoid the confusion and conflict that ensued following Jim's initial proposal?
2. What peripheral strategies did Jim try to use to convince Bryan that there was a problem with the current ad approval method? Why didn't these strategies work? Would an elaborated message produce a different result? Explain.
3. In what way(s) does Bryan experience dissonance? How is this dissonance resolved?
4. It is only after Jim opens up and shares his personal experiences with the ad process that Bryan begins to understand and accept Jim's frustrations. Although not elaborated in the case study itself, imagine a narrative that Jim could have used to convey to Bryan his frustrations with the ad process and Sean, the graphic designer. Construct a narrative that demonstrates coherence and the logic of good reasons while convincing Bryan that there was a problem with the current ad approval method.

5. Which persuasion theory seems to explain the situation better than the others? Why do you believe this to be the case? Which situations might surface that would make a different theory or theories better at explaining the situation? What theories could you combine to make for an even better explanation of the encounter?