

Persuasion Methods Behind Mass Manipulation

Gabriella Kreuter

Green Hope High School

ABSTRACT

Persuasion is used each day by millions of people, however, often these methods are misused for harmful manipulation. Practices such as the foot-in-the-door method and the low-ball method are analyzed within white supremacist websites such as those supporting the Ku Klux Klan group. By providing minimal information initially, influential individuals succeed in attracting millions of people to support their view. With the availability of the internet, mass manipulation has become increasingly achievable and dangerous. Therefore, it is important that society is aware of the most common strategies used. Psychologists studied the persuasion methods and trends between 4-6 year olds, revealing that humans of all ages have the knowledge and urge to persuade. Throughout an individual's complicated life they train this skill repeatedly, and many use it to gain power and influence.

Topic Introduction

Even though “persuasion” and “manipulation” have two very different connotations, they are often assumed to be synonymous. However, they have different definitions. Persuasion is explained as “to prevail on (a person) to do something, as by advising or urging; to induce to believe by appealing to reason or understanding” (Dictionary.com. (n.d.)). Manipulation, however, is “to manage or influence skillfully, especially in an unfair manner; to adapt or change to suit one's purpose or advantage” (Dictionary.com. (n.d.)). Claimed “persuasion” techniques can often be recognized as being used to manipulate large masses of people. Examples of this occurrence have been seen over and over throughout history. Powerful individuals, notably those involved with their country's government, have been notorious for their manipulative behaviors. Researchers and psychologists have recognized multiple common methods behind this skill. These influential people will dig deep into the three main types of persuasion (ethos, pathos, and logos) as well as the frequently used “foot-in-the-door” and “low-ball” methods. They determine the perfect recipe of manipulative practices to get exactly what they want.

Significance

The contents of this research study hold importance in categorizing persuasion tactics into two main categories, revealing the commonly and famously used methods by many influential people throughout history as well as providing evidence that the urge and knowledge of persuasion come at a very young age, and possibly with birth. The beginning of research regarding this topic can catapult many psychologists into focusing on this complicated and impressive subject. With more information, it can be analyzed whether persuasion is innate and just how easily mass persuasion can be achieved.

Research Methods

A study performed by Georgie Weatherby and Brian Scoggins utilized a combination of meta-analysis and naturalistic observations to author a paper. Focusing on white supremacist websites, they identified a few of the major persuasion

methods used in order for these groups to gain the following they currently have. The websites they analyzed included those of the Ku Klux Klan group, Neo-Nazis, and the Christian Identity Movement.

These researchers had gathered previous information recorded through separate studies, including one by psychologists Freedman and Fraser regarding the foot-in-the-door method as well as the workings of the low-ball method, coined by Robert Cialdini. They also explored separate studies focusing on hate websites but found the information was very vague and broad. By visiting the previously mentioned websites, Weatherby and Scoggins studied the phrasing, layout, and carefully chosen information shared. They identified several commonly used methods, present throughout each website.

During a separate study performed in Turkey by psychologists Hilal H. Sen, Aylin C. Kuntay, and Tarcan G. Kumkale, they used 90 same-sex friend pairs as the participants. All the participants ranged between 4 and 6 years old with the mean age being 64 months (Sen et al., 2021). The children were brought into a room, unaware of the purpose of the experiment, with two tables, each covered with either toys or craft supplies. Use of the table holding an assortment of toys was permitted while the other table, holding craft supplies, was forbidden.

The children were told they would be playing games together, that they were not allowed to touch the forbidden table or the supplies on it, and asked to make sure they understood the instructions. Throughout the experiment, only one pair of participants were in the room at a time. Once they entered the room, they were alone for 1 minute until an experimenter entered the room and played with the items on the forbidden table for 1 minute (with no direct interaction with the kids) in order to increase the children's temptation. The experimenter then left. Then the children were alone for the rest of the experiment, lasting a total of 8 minutes. Throughout the 8 minutes, the experimenters observed the persuasion methods used by the children when one of them would attempt to use the forbidden toys (Sen, Kuntay, Kumkale, 2021).

Limitations to Research

Weatherby and Scoggin's experiment exploring the persuasion methods of white supremacist websites contained few limitations. However, their findings could have been biased by focusing solely on the persuasion methods that had already been discovered. Instead of exploring for new methods, they may have attempted to fit aspects of each website into the already established methods. Also, a meta-analysis consists of summarized data which could skew the results of this study because of inaccurate comparisons between this study and the studies from which the information had been gathered from. Additionally, because it was a naturalistic observation, they could not specify a cause and effect for the actions of those who visited the websites. Because there was not a control and experimental group, the researchers could not determine that any actions aligning with beliefs of white supremacy were caused by the information shared on these websites.

The results of the study observing persuasion methods by 4–6-year-olds could've been affected by multiple possible confounding variables which would restrict the replicability of the experiment. These include the children having no interest in crafts, and therefore having no urge to use the forbidden supplies, only using children from Turkey, the societal and economic backgrounds of the children, and any undiagnosed or not listed mental disorders of the participants. Additionally, the children could've been affected by the Hawthorne effect, causing them to act differently once they realized they were being observed. This could've caused participants to attempt to persuade their partners to abide by the rules when otherwise, they would not have spoken up.

Results

Weatherby and Scoggin determined that a combination of the foot-in-the-door method and the low-ball method are typically used in order to achieve the most effective mass manipulation. The Foot-in-the-door method is defined as a person being more likely to agree to a request if they previously agreed to a smaller, related request (Weatherby,

Scoggins, 2005). This method was famously used by the Nazis in order to spread racism as well as by the Koreans during brainwashing practices. The low-ball method is accomplished when “compliance is gained by not telling the person the whole truth”, or only sharing one side of the situation.

Cognitive dissonance occurs when a person holds two views that are in conflict with one another (Weatherby, Scoggins, 2005). This creates anxiety for the person. The anxiety will force them to make a decision to lean towards one view. Manipulators acknowledge this step in persuasion and will combine both previously mentioned methods. The low ball technique is often used when extremists are trying to attract a mainstream crowd. They will purposely appear welcoming and downplay their beliefs. Once the person has become more interested and agreed to some small aspects, they will include more and more information (foot-in-the-door method) which the person will then be more inclined to also agree to because they have already agreed to smaller things.

Within the studies of the 4-6-year-olds, by Sen, Kuntay, and Kumkale, persuasion events occurred in 54 out of 88 of the pairs of children, with a total of 340 persuasion events (Sen, Kuntay, Kumkale, 2021). The participants used gentle control (defined as reiterating the rule or distracting the peer) in 130 events (38%), negative control (defined as protesting, criticizing, punishing, or tattling) in 118 events (35%), and non-engagement in 92 events (27%) (Sen, Kuntay, Kumkale, 2021). The psychologists found that “gentle control strategies were more effective in inducing peer compliance than negative control and non-engagement strategies” (Sen, Kuntay, Kumkale, 2021).

Patterns and Trends

Since neither foot-in-the-door or low-ball include punishing or any examples of the formerly mentioned negative control, they would be considered gentle control.

Throughout the children study, researchers observed the participants utilizing some persuasion methods and not achieving the intended result. By comparing these two studies, it can be recognized that persuasion is used so often throughout an individual’s life they are able to fine-tune their approaches from the time they are 4 years old to when they are an adult and able to utilize the highly-achieving methods discussed within the white supremacist’s websites study. The children begin with simply reiterating the rules, hoping to convince their peer to follow them. However, as their brain matures and their frontal lobe develops, they expand the “gentle control” category into what is observed by powerful individuals utilizing foot-in-the-door and low-ball. The elementary methods and the detailed, highly manipulative methods are all connected and morph into each other as the brain develops. This is shown by the results gathered when testing and analyzing persuasion by different age groups.

Application

The findings from this research will aid many individuals in decreasing their susceptibility to manipulation. Methods such as foot-in-the-door and low-ball are so successful because they are difficult to identify while in the process of being used. With improved knowledge regarding these topics, people can become more aware as to what kind of information they are viewing while simply scrolling through Instagram, Tik Tok or even a news thread. With so much material being available on the internet, it is important that society can determine what are facts and what is manipulation. Viewers will be more practiced at identifying trends within the share of information. For example, instead of falling for the trap of slowly agreeing to more and more aspects, an educated individual can protect themselves from the trickery and recognize the foot-in-the-door method instead.

Additionally, by people better understanding the processes of manipulation and how successful it can be, many past moments can be explained. For example, following the holocaust, it was determined that Hitler used the foot-in-the-door technique to gain the alliance of millions of followers. Having this explanation helped the world to

understand how such a large group of people could commit such horrible actions. On a smaller scale, this understanding could potentially help individuals when being sentenced for a crime they committed when they were mentally deceived and manipulated into doing something they normally would never deem acceptable.

Relevance

As proven in the study of 4-6 year olds, persuasion is used by not only experienced adults, but also young children. Psychologists can use this information to study human's innate nature to persuade. They can perform additional naturalistic observations as to avoid bias or the change of behaviors by the participants. By continuing to analyze children's actions this way, psychologists can determine what aspects of persuasion are nature opposed to nurture. Additionally, with deeper exploration of methods used by historically successful mass manipulators, psychologists can reveal just how simple or complicated it can be to accomplish such a task. Determining whether the ability depends on a child's temperance, the presence of an authoritative parenting style (allowing the child to negotiate or persuade the parent) or even a biological factor.

Conclusions

Two main persuasion methods used for mass media are the well-researched foot-in-the-door method and the low-ball method. These were recognized on many white supremacy websites, controlling the beliefs and actions of millions. Turkish psychologists, Sen, Kuntay, and Kumkale, studied 180 children between the ages of 4 and 6. They observed the children's ways of persuading their peers to abide by the set rules. The tactics used by these participants showed connections with the more advanced methods previously mentioned. This supports the idea of persuading actions beginning at very young ages and advancing as the individual matures, eventually providing them with the skill to manipulate millions as seen in the past.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mrs. Pyland for providing me with this opportunity and always encouraging me to do my best. I learned many valuable lessons, not just regarding psychology, but also regarding myself throughout my semester with her.

References

- Dictionary.com. (n.d.). *Manipulate definition & meaning*. Dictionary.com. Retrieved December 17, 2022, from <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/manipulate>
- Dictionary.com. (n.d.). *Persuade definition & meaning*. Dictionary.com. Retrieved December 17, 2022, from <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/persuade>
- Şen, H. H., Küntay, A. C., & Kumkale, T. G. (2021). Peer persuasion strategies during rule following in 4- to 6-year-olds. *Social Development, 30*(4), 957–972. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12525>
- Weatherby, G. A., & Scoggins, B. (2005). A Content Analysis of Persuasion Techniques Used on White Supremacist Websites. *Journal of Hate Studies, 4*(1), 9–31. <https://doi.org/10.33972/jhs.31>