

COMMUNICATOR DISCREPANCY, PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY, AND OPINION CHANGE¹

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How credible and at what level of discrepancy a source should be in order to be sufficiently influential is examined in this study.

PROCEDURE: Perceived credibility and communicator discrepancy were manipulated. 100 Ss, who were found having different perception of the source, made judgements about their degree of agreement with the communicator at different levels of discrepancy. **RESULTS:** (1) Trend analysis showed curvilinear relationship between discrepancy and influence for MBA sample only. (2) Significant differences in the overall influence effect between the two samples were found, which was explained in terms of their perception of the source. (3) Prediction that the means between the two samples will show significant differences at some levels of discrepancy was not supported.

Research in the area of influence and communicator discrepancy, by and large, has demonstrated contradictory results. Some studies have found increasing influence effect with increasing discrepancy (Chen, 1933; Ewing, 1942). Some other studies have found decreasing opinion change with increasing discrepancy (Cohen, 1959; Hovland, Harvey & Sherif, 1957). Still some other studies have found a curvilinear relationships between influence and discrepancy (Insko, Murashima, & Saiyadain, 1966; Brewer & Crano, 1968).

How to reconcile these inconsistent findings? Hovland (1959) has suggested that involvement with the issue and source credibility may account for these inconsistencies. Decreasing change with increasing discrepancy is more likely to occur if the issue is highly ego-involved or if the communicator is negative. On the other hand, increasing change with increasing discrepancy would be more probable mode if the issue is such in which people are not committed and if it is communicated by a credible communicator.

This generalization seems to be based on the assumption that keeping communicatee constant one communicator may be positive, the other negative; one communication may be highly ego-involved, the other may not be. In other words, his generalization assumes that nature of communication and the credibility of the communicator are independent variables. Present study is an attempt to manipulate communicatee keeping credibility and involvement with the issue constant. We essentially ask the question how positive a source has to be positive in order to be sufficiently influential. A positive source in terms of being credible may not always be effective as far as influence is concerned. The effectiveness would directly be a matter of how positive a source is perceived.

For purpose of this study three hypotheses were formulated. First, there is a curvilinear relationships between communicator discrepancy and influence. Second, the total amount of influence is greater for the communicatees that perceive the source more credible than those who perceive it less credible. Third, the differences between the means of the two samples would be greater at some points than other along

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TABLE 1
Means and standard deviation estimates

Levels of discrepancy	MBA		ULS	
	Means	SD	Means	SD
20%	6.1	2.70	6.3	2.83
40%	7.9	1.51	6.9	2.62
60%	8.4	2.06	8.4	2.01
80%	7.7	1.49	8.7	1.73
100%	5.9	2.66	9.1	1.58

the discrepancy scale.

METHOD

The ultimate sample consisted of fifty undergraduate liberal arts students (ULS) and fifty graduates students in Business Administration (MBA). They were given a one-page reading-comprehension test. To provide further support to the cover story the reading was timed. The reading time was ten minutes. Both samples were given the same reading material arguing that, despite the evil forces, some peace on earth could be achieved. The communication was supposed to be written by a doctor. After the reading time was over, they were asked to turn the page and answer some questions. Among many filler questions was embedded the crucial question, referring to the degree of agreement with the author.

Independent Variables:

There were two independent variables, the samples and the communicator's stand on the communication. A pretest revealed that MBA accord less prestige to the Doctor as compared to ULS. Ratings on a five point scale showed statistically significant differences in their means ($t=2.34, p<.05$). The discrepancy was manipulated by assigning different percentages of peace that could be achieved, which in fact represented the communicator's stand. These stands were in five steps of 20 per cent each. In a pretest it was found that when a controlled group was asked to indicate the amount of peace that could be achieved, the average judgement was 19.35 per cent. We rounded it to 20 per cent and with the constant increase of the same

TABLE 2
Analysis of variance

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F
Discrepancy	59.84	4	14.96	2.84*
Groups	21.56	1	21.56	4.09*
Interaction	40.84	4	10.21	1.94
Within	474.60	90	5.27	—

* $p < .05$

percentage ended up with five steps of 20, 40, 60, 80 and 100 percentages. Thus there were five levels of discrepancy which remained constant for both MBA and ULS.

Dependent Variable:

Dependent variable was the degree of agreement with the author. It was measured on a 10 point unidimensional scale.

RESULTS

Actually 58 in MBA group and 55 in ULS group were tested. However 3 and 1 Ss from MBA and ULS groups respectively were eliminated because they had some idea that the experiment was concerned with influence effect. Another 9 were randomly eliminated to get equal number of Ss ($N=10$) in each of the 10 cells. The means and standard deviation estimates are given in Table 1.

Consistent with our first hypothesis, the means of MBA increase with increasing discrepancy upto 3rd level and then drop down showing a curvilinear trend. However means of ULS consistently increase with increasing discrepancy. Standard deviation estimates for ULS progressively get reduced showing increasing lack of disagreement among Ss.

Table 2 gives analysis of variance F values in Table 2 support our first two predictions. There is a significant discrepancy effect ($F=2.84, p<.05$). Similarly, ULS perceive the source more influential than MBA ($F=4.09, p<.05$). However our third prediction does not hold true. We hypothesized that the differ-

TABLE 3
Trend analysis (ULS)

Source	Sums of squares	df	Mean squares	F
Linear Trend	54.76	1	54.76	10.51**
Deviation	14.12	4	3.53	.68
Quadratic Trend	1.83	1	1.83	.35
Deviation	67.05	4	16.76	3.22*
Within	234.40	45	5.21	—

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

TABLE 4
Trend analysis (MBA)

Source	Sums of squares	df	Mean squares	F
Linear Trend	3.60	1	3.60	.70
Deviation	47.20	4	11.80	2.29
Quadratic trend	50.40	1	50.40	9.81**
Deviation	.40	4	.10	.19
Within	231.20	45	5.14	—

** $p < .01$

ences between the means of two groups would be greater at some levels of discrepancy dimension than at other. Our results, however, do not support the assumption ($F=1.94$).

More directly related to our hypothesis are trend analyses. Table 3 gives values for ULS.

We predicted that there would be a curvilinear relationship between communicator-communicatee discrepancy and opinion change. For ULS the assumption does not hold true. Trend analysis shows a linear trend ($F=10.51, p<.01$) meaning thereby that the greater the discrepancy the greater the influence. This is further supported by significant deviation from quadratic trend ($F=3.22, p<.05$).

This however is not the case with MBA. Here trend is quadratic ($F=9.81, p<.01$). This means that for MBA the communicator remains credible upto a point beyond which his credibility vanishes.

A visual presentation of these two curves is given in Fig. 1. The dotted line (ULS) keeps going up while solid line (MBA) drops down at the 4th level of discrepancy.

DISCUSSION

The curvilinear relationships between communicator discrepancy and influence is supported for MBA only ($F=9.81, p<.01$). They, it seems, go along with the communicator upto a point beyond which his stand on the issue starts conflicting to their

stand. Since the discrepancy creates a dissonance MBA reduce it by doubting the credibility of the communicator (i.e. derogating the source) and consequently regress back to their initial position. This is not the case with ULS. Here the inconsistency is reduced by accepting and agreeing to what is communicated and hence a linear relationship.

Results support our second prediction. There is greater overall influence for ULS than for MBA ($F=4.09, p<.05$). The effectiveness can directly be a matter of how the source is perceived. The results can be interpreted partly with reference to Sampson (1963) status congruence and consistency theory. Status is a worth of a person as estimated by the group. It arises out of the comparison of rewards. Status congruence is a condition on which

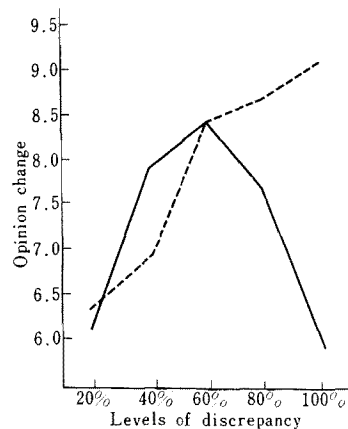


FIG. 1. Mean influence curves solid line (MBA) ; dotted line (ULS).

all the stimuli presented rank higher, equal or lower. Because of the tendency to maintain status congruence, change is resisted, more so, when the agent of change is of low or equal rank. On the other hand high rank source carries greater effort potential for low rank because it provides a functionally important backdrop to them. By identifying and agreeing with high rank, low rank gain some measure of control over them.

Coming back to our results, for MBA Doctor may not be as positive source as for ULS. Of many images, one and probably most important image of doctor, in this society is an economically well off profession. The economic status of the source is not an asset to MBA who are more secure in terms of well-paid jobs while ULS still have a long way to go. The reason is MBA has technical qualification so much needed in an industrializing society and, therefore, has more value than ULS who is still at an undefined stage. For purposes of generalization, therefore, we conclude that any influence attempt has to identify the audience before any guarantee to its success could be predicted. A highly credible source may not be as credible for an audience that ranks equal or higher to him than otherwise.

Our third prediction that the two curves would interact is not supported by data. Theoretically it means that the differences of means between ULS and MBA remain constant at all levels of discrepancy.

SUMMARY

Ss made judgements about their degree

of agreement with the source at different levels of discrepancy. A curvilinear relationships between discrepancy and influence was found for MBA only. The results showed significant overall influence effect between the two samples which was explained in terms of their perception of the source. Third prediction that the means between two sample will show significant differences at some levels of discrepancy, was not supported by the results.

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