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Culture, Persuasion and the Management of Environmental Attitudes

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Abstract

This article explores a message-based persuasion theory within the Nigerian cultural context. It argues that strategies based on coercion or sanction may result in more compliance behaviour than those based on explanation, need and circumvention. But, at the same time, environmental factors such as hunger, frustration and depression can, in isolation or combination, also affect an individual's capacity to persuasive communication. It, therefore, calls for persuasion research in Nigeria to make available data on which to base policies for change programmes and strategies.

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Culture, persuasion et gestion des attitudes

Résumé

Cet article analyse une théorie de la persuasion basée sur le message dans le contexte culturel du Nigéria. L'auteur soutient que les stratégies fondées sur la coercition ou la sanction pourraient donner des résultats plus probants en matière d'obéissance que celles qui se fondent sur l'explication, le besoin et la circonvension. Mais dans le même temps, des facteurs sociaux tels que la faim, la frustration et la dépression, peuvent, ensemble ou isolément, aussi affecter la capacité d'un individu vis-à-vis de la communication de persuasion. C'est pourquoi l'auteur demande que des recherches sur la persuasion soient menées au Nigéria qui permettraient de formuler les politiques des programmes et stratégies visant à amener des changements.

One of the many ways people achieve control over others is by designing messages that depend on compliance — gaining strategies. Compliance centres on the message an individual chooses in an attempt to effect a particular preconceived response from others (Miller and Steinberg 1975).

Persuasion research has evolved over the years. The 'source characteristics' approach has received attention from several communication scholars (Addington 1967, Applbaum and Anatol 1973, Berlo *et al.* 1969, McCroskey 1966, Miller and Baseheart 1969, Whitehead 1968). Channel characteristics has also been extensively investigated (Chen 1935, Cody *et al.* 1982, Fontes and Bundens 1980, McCroskey *et al.* 1973a). Other communication scholars such as Burgoon and Bettinghaus (1980), Burgoon and Steward (1975) Cody and McClaughlin (1980), McLaughlin, Cody, Michael and Carl (1980), Miller, Boster, Roloff and Seibold (1977), Moscovici (1976), Roloff and Barnicott (1978) and others, have argued for a message-centered theory of persuasion.

As conceived by Miller *et al.* (1977) the source and channel approaches are limited by their relative lack of concern with the message choices made by persuader(s). This is a significant shortcoming because individuals in a persuasive situation must choose from among a set of message strategies in trying to exert communicative control over their environment. For instance, the statement: 'any moral and ethical citizen should pay his tax', and 'if you don't pay tax, you go to jail' seek the same persuasive goals, but the message strategies for achieving those goals are remarkably different. In the first instance, the message strategy was based on moral appeal, while the latter was based on potential punishment or threat. The key argument lies in the fact that message design affects persuasive receptivity in most control situations.

Theoretically, persuasive message strategies can be grouped into four main categories: (i) strategies based on sanction or coercion, (ingratiation, debt, promise, esteem, allurements, threat, warning, guilt, aversive stimulation); (ii) strategies based on need (altruism, etc.); (iii) strategies based on explanation (direct request, explanation, hinting); and (iv) strategies based on circumvention (deceit, etc.).

The Nigerian governments, over the past 17 years, have tried to introduce several changes in the country, starting with the currency change in 1971, through the Operation Feed the Nation in 1976 to the recently launched Mass Mobilization for Social Justice, Economic Recovery and Self-reliance (MAMSER) in 1987. Some of these change programmes have met with success, while others have not been so successful. There are people who would like to rationalize failures in some of these change

programmes with allusions to 'public apathy'. Applied to the study of communication, the term 'apathy' is used to refer to non-reaction to change campaigns, suggesting the receivers of the message were at fault for the lack of effect, rather than the message source, or the message content (Mendelson 1973). But should the receivers really be blamed? The key question is: what can we learn about effective persuasion by making serious, conscious effort to incorporate our culture into theoretically grounded communication principles in message centred persuasion theory?

Nigeria lacks empirical data that can add to this theory. However, information based on attitude change theories, related empirical evidence accumulated from other countries, and personal observations, suggests that persuasive campaigns in Nigeria have relatively higher chances of success if: (1) they are planned around the assumption that socialization plays a key role in message receptivity, including attitude and behavioural changes within any society. By implication then, we should start asking: what message choices are related to the characteristics of the Nigerian audience that when used effectively can exert communicative control over certain areas of our environment? (2) The objectives of the change programme are spelt out clearly, explicitly, specifically and realistically, so that assessment of the persuasive effectiveness of these programmes can be facilitated.

Persuasion and Socialization

Persuasion in the African sense is nothing short of coercion. Traditional Nigerian persuasive strategies are deeply ingrained in coercive theory. Our socialization processes from family to school, to churches and various social organizations, show evidence of our coercive nature in compliance situations. Traditional Nigeria uses folktales and age grades as agents of socialization. Through folk tales and age-grades, our youths learn to associate punishments and rewards with compliance and non-compliance, respectively. Nwuneli (1987) hinted on this stating that 'our youths are mobilized by age grades. Every level of development in the life of the child is associated with specific indoctrination on the expectation of the society from the individual. Failures to comply with indoctrinating messages are met with sanctions, some wild, others very steep' (p. 2).

Modern Nigerian persuasive ideology is not different from this. All forms of coercion can be observed in present-day Nigeria. Any visitor to this country will attest to this. The large numbers of armed military men guarding our airports and cities and the economic sanctions of the Structural Adjustment Programme are different faces of the same coercive

coin. Yet some people will argue that persuasion as typically conceived in Western societies should not involve direct coercion, because such is in conflict with the way persuasion is supposed to function in a democratic society. Direct coercion implies direct control. Kelman (1961) defines coercion as 'means of control', i.e. any situation where the persuader uses punishments and rewards to gain compliance from the people he/she is trying to influence. Opponents of coercive appeal will also argue that change through coercion is temporary and anchors on behavioural change as the target of the persuasive message will revert to his/her old behaviour as soon as the coercive stimuli are removed from the environment.

Social psychologists such as Rokeach and Range (1971) and Fishbein (1967) have empirically demonstrated that behavioural change can equally lead to attitude change, not only vice versa. In the Rokeach and Range study, the authors induced the subjects to engage in behaviours that were inconsistent with their attitude and values and found significant attitudinal changes following this exposure. Accordingly, the Nigerian public can be induced to keep their compounds and surroundings clean through reward-and-punishment strategies. This is more so since environmental attitudes are more peripheral in comparison with deep-seated attitudes such as attitude towards religion and women which are deeply anchored in belief and value systems and are, therefore, more resistant to change. As peripheral attitudes, environmental attitudes can be adequately managed through sanctions to gain compliance as long as the environmental planning and protection division of the relevant ministry was able to maintain the ability and can be trusted to give out the rewards and the punishments as the case may be. Sanctions are one of many strategies used in some developed countries to control environmental pollution. In the United States of America, for instance, the sanction can run from a few dollars to hundreds of thousands of dollars. Of course, the key to the success of such strategy lies in the credibility of the punishment and rewards offered by the source.

As regards the ideological differences between the use of coercion and the politics of democracy, any serious thinking individual will realize that African cultures are not the most democratic in the world. Leadership, as African culture dictates, is strongly embedded in the constructs of power, control, dominance, influence and authority. Are these what true democracy should be made of?

Perhaps the greatest avenue to our understanding of the relationship between coercion and persuasion in the Nigerian culture lies in the examination of the dominant Nigerian institutions of socialization. Our family system, the school system, the church, and other agents of socialization, teach rewards and punishments as motivational stimuli for

compliance. For instance, the statements: 'Do your home work, or I will suspend your allowance', 'Go and fetch water, or I will spank you', deal with compliance through reward and punishment strategies. Threats of spanking or allowance withdrawal by either teacher or parents are various forms of coercive power used daily in our families and schools today. The average Nigerian parent or teacher spends more time issuing threats, commands, and punishments than in explanation as means of getting compliance. 'Obey before complain', a popular phrase used by authority figures in most Nigerian institutions, attests to this allegation. By implication, then, explanation strategies will be most inappropriate in environmental attitude compliance situations, because explanation demands thinking with the people, and not for the people.

North American scholars such as Roloff and Miller (1980) and Simons (1974) have argued convincingly that coercive potential influences the relative impact of most persuasive messages. Opubor (1985) after reviewing the success of the various change programmes introduced in Nigeria since 1971 declares that 'if you want to guarantee success, don't give people any alternatives. Through legislation, economic and political sanctions, constrain everybody to adopt the ideas or practices you have introduced' (p. 162).

Another approach which depends upon coercive power is the 'fear appeal' strategy. Several researchers, for example, Chu (1966), DeWolfe and Governale (1964), Janis and Feshback (1953), Janis and Terwilliger (1962), Jones and Burgoon (1975), and Miller (1966), have examined the impact of fear-arousing communication in receptivity to persuasive messages. These researchers all agree that fear appeal affects persuasive effectiveness. Fear arousing communication has been used extensively in compliance situations in traditional Nigeria. The crux of fear appeal lies in the assumption that the emotional stress that results from the fear communication will leave the individual more open to beliefs and recommendations advocated by the source of the communication. Our ancestors exploited this assumption to their advantage with high compliance success. They probably realized that, sometimes, it is more effective not to give facts but to scare the receiver into compliance. In a society where the importance of persuasive appeals of punishment and rewards has been extended to include the sanctions and assistance of dead ancestors in solving physical, social and economic calamities, it will be a mistake not to explore this area.

Persuasion and Environmental Factors

Besides socio-cultural factors, environmental factors also affect persuasive

effectiveness. Environmental factors of hunger, frustration and depression can, in isolation or in combination, affect an individual's receptivity to persuasive communication. Bostrom (1980) takes a physiological approach to explaining the relationship between these variables and persuasive communication. He views them as altered physiological states that upset the central nervous system, thereby influencing persuasive effectiveness in interpersonal situations. I prefer to view them as environmental, even though they have strong ties to physiological states because the environment, to a large extent, determines the degree of hunger, frustration and depression existing within a given society, which affects receptivity to persuasive influences.

A society experiencing relatively high levels of hunger frustration and depression may also be high in the 'D.D.D. Syndrome'. This is the acronym which Faber, Harlow and West (1957) use to refer to the factors of debility, dependence and dread that can interact to influence persuasion. It may be possible that an interaction of these factors can operate to make a society less susceptible to persuasive influences as in the management of one's environment.

Persuasion Research in Nigeria

Effective persuasion requires, among other things, empirical evidence on which to base the action strategies. Yet persuasive research efforts in Nigeria are far from being based on empirical data. When the war against indiscipline (WAI) was raging in the early 1980s, little empirical evidence was available for borrowing. Now that MAMSER is here, research is needed to provide the solid foundation on which to lay implementation strategies.

It is, therefore, necessary tht the planners of change programmes in Nigerian society articulate properly the role of research in any change process, be it attitudinal, behavioural or information campaigns. Campaigns, therefore, must be designed to adequately reflect empirically-grounded Nigerian mass communication theories and principles. A systematic effort to achieve this can be realized through the creation of a Mass Communication Research Centre anchored within one of the universities offering mass communication degrees. It also requires a mental, physical and social environment that is shared by both communication practitioners, (writers, editors, producers and directors, including relevant staff of the major media organizations) and communication strategists, as well as social science researchers in relevant fields. As strategists (researchers) and practitioners learn to work with each other, the interactive process will become routine. With time, media

practitioners will begin to internalize social science strategies and principles while researchers will begin to appreciate and understand the potentialities, realities and constraints involved in working with the different Nigerian media.

Summary and Conclusion

Attitude and behavioural change through compliance is the main theme of this paper. It is argued that compliance can best be achieved through sanctions. Compliance in persuasion is most effective on attitude changes that are not deeply anchored in the belief system, such as environmental attitudes. The attitude of cleanliness, of keeping one's environment healthy, can be classified as a peripheral attitude that can best be achieved through sanctions. The resultant behaviour, however, will only continue to exist as long as the source has the credibility and resources to give punishments and rewards.

It will be worthwhile to empirically examine the assumptions made in this paper. If empirical evidence supports the proposition that a positive environmental attitude can be created through sanction strategies, then we can start speculating on, and investigating, the best persuasive approach to change the prevailing work attitude in present-day Nigeria.

Future research should investigate the best persuasive strategies for changing attitudes that are deeply embedded in the belief system. Since research has suggested that such change should be based on identification and internalization processes, the question is: what message strategies can best be used to achieve such changes? Should it be strategies based on explanation, circumvention or need? The relevance of each strategy should be determined in relation to our socialization processes and the object of change.

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