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Situational Influence in Persuasive Communication

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to determine the effects of situational variables in persuasion. One hundred and forty subjects were used. Subjects were given two hypothetical situations involving compliance in inter-personal and non-interpersonal situations, and were told to state the various strategies they will use in gaining compliance in both situations. The results found that to change the negative work attitude of the Nigerian public, coercive power of threat and aversive stimulation play crucial roles, but that power alone cannot be effective if not supported by friendly persuasion of compromise and reward. Individuals in inter-personal situation, however, resort only to friendly persuasion.

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Influence des Circonstances dans la Communication de Persuasion

Résumé

L'objectif de cette étude est de déterminer les effets des situations variables dans la persuasion. A cette fin, un groupe de 140 personnes a été utilisé. L'on a soumis aux personnes en question deux situations hypothétiques dans lesquelles on faisait intervenir l'élement réaction aux situations interpersonnelles et non-interpersonnelles et on leur a demandé de formuler les diverses stratégies qu'elles pourraient utilisées dans les deux situations.

Les résultats étaient que pour changer l'attitude négative du public nigérian envers le travail, le pouvoir coercif de l'intimidation et la stimulation pouvaient jouer des rôles cruciaux, mais que le pouvoir tout seul ne pouvait être efficace s'il n'était pas accompagné d'une persuasion amicale de compromis et de récompense, toutefois, des personnes dans la situation interpesonnelle n'avaient d'autre stratégie à appliquer que celle de la persuasion amicale.

Introduction

In the past several years, Nigeria has been engaged in various attitude change campaigns employing several persuasive strategies. Despite the relative success of some of these programmes, there is still need to empirically investigate the best strategies in communicating positive work attitude to the Nigerian public.

Communication of positive work attitude involves compliance gaining in non-interpersonal situation which may or may not be different from strategies used in gaining compliance in interpersonal situations such as the family. The goal of this study, therefore, is to assess if individuals in non-interpersonal situation choose different message strategies in gaining compliance, compared with individuals in interpersonal situation. It also seeks to determine the best persuasive message strategies that can be used to communicate positive work attitude to the Nigerian public and those that can be used most effectively in gaining compliance in family situation.

Situational influence in persuasive effectiveness has been studied by researchers such as Liska, 1978; Miller and Burgoon, 1973; Miller, Boster, Roloff and Seibold, 1977; and Sillars, 1980. These researchers, among other things, found that situational differences affect persuasive effectiveness. This implies that the type of relationship between the persuader (source) and the persuadee (receiver) affects the type of message choice that can be used for maximum persuasive effectiveness. Feather (1964), Morgan and Morton (1953), have established that receivers' prior attitude towards the source and the issue of persuasion affects compliance.

Compliance Gaining Message Strategies

Compliance gaining message strategy is a message-based approach to persuasion research. African traditional communication system is basically an oral message-oriented one, hence the need to study the influence of message design in persuasion in the Nigerian context. The strategies for this study were deducted from Marwell and Schmitt (1967) and Schenck-Hamlin *et. al.* (1982), compliance studies in addition to two other strategies which the present author found to be relevant to the Nigerian context, making a total of 13 strategies. The strategies were subjected to pilot study, involving 110 college students, to validate the categories of compliance that is used for this study. The 13 strategies and their definitions are given below:

Threat: This includes all those message designs that propose negative consequence for the target if he/she fails to comply. Among these are suggestions of firing, violence, blackmailing and cessation of love or friendship.

Compromise: Includes those situations where both actors and targets give and take in order to achieve success. Accordingly, gains and losses are perceived in relative terms. A target's promise of better housing, transportation, monetary awards, gifts, etc, for compliance, is one example.

Ingratiation: *The persuader offers goods, services and sentiments before* making request for compliance. This may include obvious ingratiation formular of 'apple polishing' or 'brown-nosing' to gift-giving, supportive listening, affection and favour-doing.

Allurement involves the use of message approach whereby the motivation for targets compliance comes from sources outside the actor or the target. 'People will always respect you if you comply' is an example.

Debt: In this situation, the persuader based his message by recalling obligations owed him or her by the target and using this to induce the target to comply. This may include past debts, such as loans, love favours or the general indebted statement of 'after everything I have done for you'.

Esteem involves persuasion that leads to increase in the target's self-worth. The persuader promises this increase in the areas of success, power, status, attention, and competence.

Guilt is a situation where the actor tells the target that failure to comply will lead to automatic cessation of self-worth. This may include professional incompetence to ethical transgressions. An actor telling the target to do this for the country, or the person that loves him/her so much is an example.

Aversive Stimulation involves a strategy where the actor continues to punish the target until he/she complies. Examples include situations where the target withdraws workers' leave allowance and then informs them that only those who comply can have access to it, or where the actor starts sulking, pouting, crying, acting angry, whinning and giving 'the silent treatment' until the target complies.

Legitimation (Third Party Interference) involves a strategy where the actor uses third party influence and power over the target to get the target to comply. This includes using father, mother, brothers, sisters, relatives, higher government officials, etc., to get the target to comply.

Altruism: The actor requests the target to comply not because it will benefit the target but because it will benefit the actor. It is based on empathy and sympathy and, therefore, on emotion. This type of appeal can be manipulated by making the target feel generous, unselfish, helpful, heroic or good-natured.

Moral Appeal: The actor requests the target to comply based on moral or ethical considerations. For example, telling Nigerian workers that it is

morally wrong for anybody not to put in a good day's work while receiving a full salary for it.

Physical Aggression involves the use of any form of physical force or violence to get the target to comply. For example, placing people in uniform in government ministries to physically discipline any worker who does not comply.

Explanation: Compliance strategies that are based on reasons fall under this category. This includes inference from empirical evidence, logic, experience and credibility. Giving the target reasons based on evidence and logic why he/she should comply falls under this category. Based on these categorizations, the following research questions were formulated:

Research Question 1:
Do strategy choice selections vary across the inter-personal and the non-interpersonal situation?

Research Question 2:
What are the most and the least preferred strategies in gaining compliance in changing the work attitude of the Nigerian public?

Research Question 3:
What are the most and the least preferred strategies in gaining compliance in family situation?

Method

One hundred and forty randomly-selected subjects served as the sample and were drawn from different population with the following distribution: Seventy percent were males, 30 percent were females. Sixty percent were civil servants, 30 percent were business people and 10 percent were professionals. Their ages ranged from 19 to 60 years with school certificate as the median academic qualification.

Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire. Subjects were given two hypothetical situations involving compliance in inter-personal and non-interpersonal situations and told to state the various strategies they will use in gaining compliance in both situations.

The inter-personal situation involves the mother and spouse relationship while the non-interpersonal situation involves changing the non-challant working attitude of the Nigerian public. Detailed instruction were given on the cover sheet of the questionnaire to achieve greater validity, and reliability of response from the respondents. The instruction read as follows:

> The situation below involves a position where one person is trying to do something. That is, where one individual is trying to influence others to gain compliance. Imagine that in this situation you are the person who is trying to persuade the other(s). List and explain the various strategies you are likely to use to gain this compliance.

Two separate questionnaires were constructed for the two hypothetical situations. Each subject completed either of the two separate questionnaires for the two situations. The two situations were described as follows:

Situation No. 1:

Non-Interpersonal Work Situation:

Imagine that you are the commissioner of a state ministry in Nigeria. You have been given the power, the authority, and the responsibility of changing the work attitude of individuals in that ministry. You observe that as a people, Nigerians in general have perculiar non-challant and relaxing attitude towards work, which have eaten deep into their consciousness, and which have been found to be dysfunctional to the progress of the entire Nigerian nation. What are the various compliance strategies that you are going to employ to get the workers to change their work attitude from a negative to a positive one?

Situation No. 2:

Interpersonal Family Situation:

Imagine that you are presently engaged to a man or woman whom you loved much. In the course of the engagement you discovered that your mother whom you also loved much has a negative and irritating attitude towards your fiance/fiancee and this attitude you find very unpleasant and distressing. Since you love both your mother and your fiance/financee and want to keep both relationship, what are the various strategies that you will most likely employ to get your mother to change her negative attitude towards your fiance/fiancee into a positive one?

Subjects were then given enough space to list the various strategies. This elicited 140 responses from the initial 150 respondents, making a response rate of 93 percent. Three trained coders content analysed the responses in terms of the categories elicited from the pilot study. The unit of analysis was the specific segment of the content of the message that characterized a given category. Coders were instructed to find the strategy that best described each unit and to mark 'other' if none of the listed categories is found suitable. The strategies or categories were listed and defined for each coder with some exemplary materials taken from the pilot study illustrating each strategy.

Reliability:

Both unit by unit and aggregate reliability were conducted. Aggregate reliability was conducted by assessing the differences in the number of

units obtained by each coder. The average difference was found to be .021, meaning that the number of units obtained by the three coders were about equal in number, since co-efficient of zero represents perfect accuracy. Based on this result, aggregate reliability was achieved. Unit by unit reliability was assessed by computing the average percentage of agreement of unit placement among the coders. A 90 percent unit placement agreement was achieved between the three coders.

Validity:

Content validity was performed by assessing the percentage of answers in the 'other' category. Coder one has 4.3 percent, coder two, 3.1 percent and coder three, 2.9 percent. Based on these low percentages, one can say that content validity was achieved, that is, the content of the responses represents areas of compliance-gaining messages.

Results

Research Question One seeks to assess if choice of strategy varies across situation, with the exception of explanation strategy. The results showed situational influence on the likelihood of strategy use. Friendly, persuasive strategies were more likely to be used in the inter-personal situation, while a combination of friendly and unfriendly strategies were chosen in the non-interpersonal situation.

Research Question Two seeks to determine the most and the least preferred strategies in compliance gaining in the work situation. The results showed that threat, compromise, reward and aversive stimulation were listed as the most likely to be used strategies, while esteem, guilt and altruism were listed as the least (see Table 1).

Research Question Three seeks to determine the most and the least preferred strategies in gaining compliance in family situation. The results showed ingratiation, legitimation, altruism and esteem to be the most preferred strategies, while physical aggression and aversive stimulation were cited as the least preferred strategies (see Table 2).

Table 1: Strategies Most and Least Likely to be Used in the Non-interpersonal Work Situation (Changing the Working Attitude of the Nigerian Public).

Most Likely Strategies			Least Likely Strategies		
Strategies	Frequencies	%	Strategies	Frequencies	%
Threat	42	25.4	Esteem	1	.06
Compromise	36	21.8	Guilt	1	.06
Reward	24	14.5	Altruism	2	1.2
Aversive - Stimulation	19	11.5			

$X^2 = 97.0 \quad P < .05$

Table 2: Strategies Most and Least Likely to be Used in the In erpersonal Family Situation (Changing the Attitude of Mother Towards Fiance/Fiancee).

Most Likely Strategies			Least Likely Strategies		
Strategies	Frequencies	%	Strategies	Frequencies	%
Ingratiation	40	24.2	Physical Aggression	1	.06
Legitimation (Third party)	32	19.3	Aversive Stimulation	1	.06
Altruism	27	16.4			
Esteem	17	10.3			

$X^2 = 83.7 \quad P < .05$

Explanation strategy was cited as the strategy most likely to be used across the two situations.

In the non-interpersonal situation, explanation was cited as the strategy to be used to invoke the power of knowledge by the use of enlightenment to teach the Nigerian public about the dignity of labour, while in the inter-personal situation, it is to be used to explain to the mother why she should like the fiance/fiancee.

The finding in this study concerning explanation probably suggests that in the Nigerian context, explanation may not be perceived as a strategy but as a communication tactic, a peculiar and specific communication device used in persuasive communication across all situations and common to all strategies in the Nigerian environment. This is more so since an examination of the concept of explanation as used by respondents in this study embraces information and knowledge, and the communication of certain ideas and beliefs associated with the actor, the target and the issue of compliance. The ideas and beliefs asserted by the actor and/or the target, therefore, provides the control for the behavioral change. In the Nigerian context, cultural ideas, or stereotypes, including general beliefs and attitudes, may provide actors and/or targets, reasons or explanation for compliance or non-compliance.

Discussion

The result of this study suggests that people shy away from bold negative, punishing, aggressive message strategies in gaining compliance in inter-personal situation. While in the non-interpersonal situation, a balance of both punishing aggressive message strategies was chosen at par with rewarding, non-threatening strategies.

A major goal of this study was to determine the best strategies for communicating positive work attitude to the Nigerian public. The finding indicated that threat came first, followed by compromise, reward and aversive stimulation. This suggests that to change the negative working attitude of the Nigerian public, coercive power plays a crucial role, but that power alone cannot be effective if not supported by friendly persuasion. This result reveals two unfriendly persuasion strategies of threat and aversive stimulation sandwiched between two friendly persuasion strategies of compromise and reward.

Threat and aversive stimulation are punishment-oriented compliance strategies that are not attractive to the target. The locus of behavioral control in these two strategies lies with the power and credibility of the actor to carry through the proposed sanction, which can occur either in the present, as in aversive stimulation, or in the future, as in threat. Accordingly, to change the negative working attitude of the Nigerian public, using control message strategies, the following persuasive steps should be undertaken.

First, the actor or the persuader should use threat, a future negative

reinforcement for failure to comply. Threat centres on fear appeal. It can be suggestion of firing, retrenchment, demotion, and salary reduction for workers who fail to comply. It is believed that the psychological discomfort caused by this unfriendly persuasion strategy will motivate the workers to comply. This then will be followed by compromise, a friendly strategy, attractive to the target, where the locus of control or the factor responsible for the behavioral change now shifts from the actor to the target.

Compromise occurs when the actor promises future goods and services, to the persuadee in exchange for a more positive work attitude. Compromise can also be viewed as a trading-off strategy. After compromise, the actor applies reward, a strategy where the locus of behavioral change continues to depend on the target of persuasion. In this instance, the actor no longer makes future promises but positively rewards in the present the targets who comply through the awards of those promises made earlier in compromise situation. For instance, awards for outstanding service, promotion based on hard work, merit award certificates, monetary awards, etc, can be given to deserving individuals on a monthly, quarterly or yearly basis as the case may be, as a sort of motivating incentives, while provision of recreational facilities, transportation, accommodation, etc, can be given to deserving departments.

While this is going on, the actor should now use another strategy — aversive stimulation — to continuously punish the targets who continue to refuse to comply, making cessation contingent upon compliance. This can include cessation or reduction of salaries, acting angry, or payment according to active hours spent on the job.

Changing the negative working attitude of the Nigerian public, therefore, seems to centre on a combination of friendly and unfriendly persuasion strategies. In the present instance, future inducement or motivations for compliance and the future consequences for non-compliance will be provided which will be later reinforced by actually rewarding and punishing the deserving targets. Reward and compromise strategies can, therefore, be seen as motivation strategies while threat and aversive stimulation can be viewed as the consequences for non-compliance. Avoidance of such negative strategies, therefore, provides motivation for compliance. Since these four strategies deal with reward and cost, it suggests that strategies based on sanction can be used effectively in changing the negative work attitude of the Nigerian public.

The preference for ingratiation, legitimation (third party), altruism and esteem in the inter-personal situation, suggests subjects preference for friendly persuasion over unfriendly ones in such family situation. This can probably be explained by suggesting that perhaps such choices were preferred to avoid strategies that may damage the relationship.

Over all, ingratiation, a strategy that places the persuadee in positive

frame of mind before persuasion was mostly chosen, suggesting that in inter-personal relationship, friendly persuasion is superior to an unfriendly one. Ingratiation involves generous offer of goods, services, or sentiments to the persuader before asking for compliance. Such may include expensive gifts, physical and psychological proximity, expression of verbal and non-verbal positive behaviours or utterances, love, or affection, to showing respectful behaviours. The basis of behavioral change, therefore, lies with the persuader, in his/her communication skills, power, influence and control over the target.

Legitimation, or third party interference, the second most cited strategy is any attempt to seek third party influence in compliance situation. Such legitimising forces are usually individual(s) who are trusted, respected and have power and influence over the target of compliance. Majority of the respondents stated that besides ingratiation most of them will seek the help of father, brothers, sisters, relatives and family friends to get their mother to comply and change her negative attitude towards his/her fiance/fiancee as the case may be. This perhaps is an African phenomenon, especially as it manifested prominently in the inter-personal family situation. Most respondents are ready and willing to exploit this African communication strategy by stating that in situation where his/her father likes his/her fiancee/fiance they conspire with him to use his power over his/her mother to veto her negative attitude. The use of collective decision and opinion, a traditional African compliance strategy, is here being extended to compliance in the inter-personal African family situation.

Altruism, the third most cited strategy in the inter-personal situation, is based on the actor satisfying the need of the target based on sympathy and empathy. It is an emotionally laden strategy which does not involve reward, punishment or justification for compliance but based entirely on human kindness of doing favour. This can be achieved by exploiting the targets' weak points through continuous pleading for sympathy combined with constant crying, including other verbal and non-verbal sympathy gaining behaviours. The basis of compliance in altruism, therefore, lies in the norms that govern the individual behaviour. According to Schneck-Hamlin (1982), 'Every individual possesses certain rules, conventions or norms that serve as general guidelines, describing how he/she should act with respect to a broad (range) of categories of instances' (p. 97).

Individuals who are soft hearted can be easily manipulated through this strategy by appealing to their sense of sympathy. An actor's knowledge of the psychological sympathetic level of the target(s) becomes important here, including the personal relationship between the actor and the target. Where close personal relationships exist, the actor can always resort to this strategy to gain compliance from the target in interpersonal situation.

Esteem, the last strategy centres on appeal to conscience. The targets compliance will lead to increased self-worth.

In conclusion, the result of this study suggests that individuals in inter-personal relationship use different forms of strategies in gaining compliance compared with individuals in non-interpersonal situation. While individuals in inter-personal situation resort to friendly persuasion, in non-interpersonal situation, sanctions are mostly used, or a combination of punishment and rewarding strategies.

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