Ego-Involvement and Persuasion:  
An Appreciative Look at the Sheriffs’ Contribution to the Study of Self-Relevance and Attitude Change*

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It has been 30 years since Sherif and Hovland's (1961) Social Judgment volume in the Yale series on attitude and communication was published. This text, which was the fourth and final monograph in the highly influential Yale series, represented a significant departure from the previous books on at least two grounds. First, the volume provided a new theoretical framework for understanding attitudes. While the previous volumes were loosely organized around learning, drive, and reinforcement notions, the new theory was based on the idea that the principles of human judgment uncovered in studies of psychophysics could be applied to understanding attitudes and persuasion. Of particular importance was how a person judged the position advocated by the communicator—was the position judged to fall within the person's latitude of acceptance, rejection, or noncommitment? Placement of the communication was a critical determinant of the amount of attitude change expected.

Second, rather than the mundane, uninvolveing, and hypothetical persuasion situations employed in many of the previous studies in the Yale program (e.g., exposing college undergraduates to a message on problems in the steel industry; Hovland & Weiss, 1951), the Sherif and Hovland volume emphasized situations dealing with more important attitudes—attitudes in which people had considerably more knowledge, experience, interest, and self-investment (e.g., presenting messages in favor of or opposed to the prohibition of alcohol shortly after a state-wide referendum on the topic to people with rather extreme opinions; Hovland, Harvey, & Sherif, 1957). In short, a second major theme

*This chapter was supported in part by National Science Foundation grant BNS 90-21647. The authors are grateful to Jon Krosnick for comments on an earlier version of this chapter.
highlighted in the volume was that a comprehensive understanding of attitudes required a consideration of varying degrees of issue importance, self-relevance or ego-involvement.

The two themes outlined above were highlighted in the name subsequently chosen for the new attitude theory—the social judgment-involvement approach (Sherif & Sherif, 1967). In this chapter we will briefly review the Sherifs’ approach to message judgment and involvement, present our own framework for understanding the effects of these variables, and then compare the two approaches.

The Sherifs’ Approach to Social Judgment

Fundamental to the Sherifs’ approach to attitudes and persuasion was the idea that judgments of social stimuli, such as persuasive communications, could be displaced with respect to a salient anchoring stimulus in a manner similar to the displacements observed for physical stimuli (e.g., Sherif, Taub, & Hovland, 1958). With the person’s own attitude serving as an anchor, some communications would be displaced toward one’s own opinion (assimilation), whereas others would be displaced away from it (contrast). More specifically, recommended positions tended to be assimilated if they were seen as falling in the person’s latitude of acceptance (positions in addition to one’s preferred stand that were generally acceptable) but were contrasted if they were seen as falling in the latitude of rejection (positions that were offensive or objectionable). Recommended positions falling in the latitude of noncommitment (those classified as neither acceptable nor objectionable) were less susceptible to distortion.

Attitude change, according to the theory, depended upon how the position recommended in the communication was classified by the recipient: "the way that a person appraises a communication and perceives its position relative to his own stand affects his reaction to it" (Sherif & Sherif, 1967, p. 129). In brief, the Sherifs proposed that increasing discrepancy within the latitude of acceptance was associated with increasing attitude change, but increasing discrepancy within the latitude of rejection was associated with decreasing attitude change.

Although considerable research has accumulated in support of the Sherifs’ judgmental notions as applied to the categorization of social stimuli including persuasive communications, little support has emerged for the view that the judgmental processes of assimilation and contrast typically precede and are responsible for changes in attitudes. Instead, it appears as likely that placement of a communication and attitude change are either independent processes, or that one obviates the need for the other (Eagly & Teelak, 1972; see reviews by Insko, 1967; Kiesler, Collins, & Miller, 1969; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). For example, in a relevant study by Granberg and Campbell (1977), subjects were exposed to a communication from another person that varied in its discrepancy from the subject’s view and its ambiguity. Judgments of the communication (assimilation) were affected only by the ambiguity of the communication, but
opinion change was influenced only by discrepancy. Overall, the correlation between assimilation and opinion change was not different from zero \( (r = .05) \). Within-cell correlations, however, showed that in some conditions assimilation and opinion change were positively correlated, in others they were negatively correlated, and in others they were uncorrelated. Because of the inconsistent results regarding message judgments and opinion change, current studies of assimilation and contrast effects tend to focus on the eliciting conditions and meaning of these judgmental distortions per se rather than on their role as mediators of persuasion (e.g., see Eiser, 1984; 1990).

The Sherifs’ Approach to Ego-Involvement

The second of the Sherifs’ themes, ego-involvement, was of long-standing interest (e.g., see M. Sherif, 1936; C. Sherif, 1980), was applied to a variety of phenomena (e.g., see Sherif & Cantril, 1947), and continues to captivate scholars today (e.g., see Greenwald & Breckler, 1985; Johnson & Eagly, 1989). After briefly discussing the Sherifs’ conceptualization of involvement and its application to attitude change, we turn to our own analysis of the role of involvement in persuasion.

In using the term ego-involvement, the Sherifs’ intent was not to invoke Freud’s notion of ego, but rather to refer more generally to the "involvement of self or personal involvement" (C. Sherif, 1980, p. 4). Sherif and Cantril (1947) wrote that:

> the components of the ego include the individual’s body and physical characteristics; the things he learns belong to him, such as his clothes, his toys . . . his sweetheart, his children; together with a whole host of social values he also learns and with which he identifies himself—his country, his politics. . . (p. 117)

That is, issues could be ego-involving because they were linked to possessions, people, and values that were part of the self. Sherif and Cantril recognized that there are "enormous individual differences . . . in . . . the definitions people give to self-interest" and that "the ego will have different components for individuals living in different social systems and cultures" (p. 98). At the most general level, however, ego-involving topics were those that had "intrinsic importance" (Sherif & Hovland, 1961, p. 197) and "personal meaning" (C. Sherif et al., 1973, p. 311). When involvement was low, "the self was slightly affected" (C. Sherif, 1980, p. 59). Important or involving issues were those that had self-relevance.

Because the Sherifs felt that the major components of the self (personal goals, values, possessions, etc.) were often derived from groups with which the person identified, ego-involving attitudes were sometimes studied by examining issues linked to group membership. That is, individuals who were members of groups
associated with extreme positions were compared to non-members. At other
times, the presumed correlates of ego-involvement were used to categorize
people without regard to group membership. Thus, people with extreme attitudes
were compared to those who held more moderate positions, and those with wide
latitudes of rejection or narrow latitudes of acceptance (indicating high
involvement) were compared to those with more narrow latitudes of rejection
and/or wider latitudes of acceptance (see Sherif, 1960; Sherif, Sherif, &
Nebergall, 1965). This naturalistic or correlational approach was preferred over
an experimental one, despite the problems of interpretation that it engendered
(discussed further below), because Sherif argued that "it is extremely difficult
to manipulate . . . involvement experimentally." Thus, the empirical foundations
of the social judgment-involvement approach to persuasion rely largely on "the
effects of high involvement achieved naturally through life experiences" (Sherif
& Hovland, 1961, p. 197).\footnote{This correlational approach has also been
followed in current work on the causes and consequences of attitude
importance (e.g., Krosnick, 1988, 1989).}

The Sherifs have succinctly summarized the expected effects of
ego-involvement on persuasion:

The greater the ego-involvement with an issue on which the person has
an established attitude, the narrower the latitude of acceptance and,
consequently, the less the likelihood of opinion change through
communication (Sherif & Hovland, 1961, p. 196).

\ldots Regardless of the discrepancy of the position presented, we predict that
the more the person is involved in the issue (the more important it is to
him), the less susceptible he will be to short-term attempts to change his
attitude (Sherif & Sherif, 1967, p. 133).

\ldots It is the less involved person, therefore, who is more prone to
be swayed by situational appeals or constraints (C. Sherif, 1980, p. 58).

In support of this general hypothesis, the accumulated research has rather
consistently shown that when ego-involvement or importance is examined in the
correlational manner advocated by the Sherifs, greater involvement is associated
with increased resistance to influence, at least when the messages employed are
counterattitudinal (see reviews by Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Kiesler et al., 1969;
Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965).\footnote{When the message contains pro-attitudinal
information, high involvement has been associated with greater influence (e.g.,
Eagly, 1967; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979b).} The reduced attitude change associated
with high involvement was thought to be due in part to the larger latitudes of
rejection for high involvement issues and in part to the greater assimilation and
contrast effects that occurred under high involvement.
The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion

Before addressing further the Sheriffs' conceptualization and research findings on attitude change, we present an alternative framework for understanding the roles of self-relevance and opinion latitudes in persuasion. This approach stems from a general model of attitude change that we have developed called the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; 1986b). The ELM represents an attempt to integrate the many seemingly conflicting findings in the persuasion literature under one conceptual umbrella by specifying a finite number of ways in which source, message, recipient, and other variables have an impact on attitude change (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, for a detailed treatment and explication of the propositions of the model). The ELM assumes that people want to form veridical and appropriate attitudes (i.e., those that will prove useful in functioning in their environment) but that there are a variety of ways in which a reasonable position may be acquired.

The most effortful procedure for evaluating an advocacy involves carefully scrutinizing and elaborating the issue-relevant arguments in the persuasive message along the dimensions that are perceived central to the merits of the attitude object (referred to as the central route to persuasion). Importantly, it is neither adaptive nor possible for people to exert considerable mental effort in processing all of the persuasive communications to which they are exposed (cf. Miller, Maruyama, Beaber, & Valone, 1976). Indeed, people often act as "lazy organisms" (McGuire, 1969) or "cognitive misers" (Taylor, 1981). This does not mean that people never form attitudes when motivation and/or ability to scrutinize a message are low, but rather that attitudes sometimes may be changed as a result of relatively simple associations (as in classical conditioning; Staats & Staats, 1957) or inferences (as in self-perception; Bem, 1972; or the use of decision heuristics; Chaiken, 1987). Attitude changes that occur in this manner are referred to as following the peripheral route to persuasion. The two routes to persuasion are depicted in Figure 1.

Our discussion of the two routes to persuasion points to several ways in which variables (such as the attractiveness of a source) can have an impact on attitudes. First, variables may serve as persuasive arguments, providing information as to the central merits of an object or issue. Second, variables may serve as peripheral cues, allowing the formation of a favorable or unfavorable attitude in the absence of a diligent consideration of the true merits of the object or issue. In addition, variables can have an impact on persuasion by affecting the extent of argument elaboration (i.e., the extent to which the person is motivated and/or able to evaluate the central merits of the issue-relevant information presented) or the direction of elaboration (i.e., whether thinking proceeds in a relatively
Figure 1. The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion. A schematic depiction of the antecedents and consequences of the two routes to persuasion. From Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change (p. 4) by Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, New York: Springer-Verlag. Copyright 1986 by Springer-Verlag New York Inc. Reprinted by permission.
favorable or unfavorable manner). Variables affecting the extent of elaboration moderate the route to persuasion and determine whether attitude change will occur as a result of argument processing, the use of peripheral cues, or not at all. Finally, the ELM holds that any one variable can serve in multiple roles, though in different situations. That is, a variable such as source attractiveness may serve as a simple cue in one situation but affect the extent of thinking in another.3

**ELM Analysis of Ego-Involvement**

We have argued that an important determinant of the route to persuasion is the perceived personal relevance of the communication (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979b; 1986b).4 Since holding an incorrect opinion on an issue of high personal relevance or importance (i.e., one linked to important values, people, objects, and/or goals) is likely to have rather deleterious cognitive, affective, and/or behavioral effects, people will typically be willing to engage in the cognitive work necessary to think about and elaborate available information on the topic. Thus, when personal relevance is high, attitude change is postulated to be based more on the cogency of the arguments presented in a persuasive communication than when relevance is low. An intriguing implication of this is that high relevance is not invariably tied to message rejection, as proposed by the Sheriffs. For example, if a message presented highly compelling arguments, the greater elaboration induced by high relevance could lead to increased persuasion. On the other hand, if the message presented arguments that could be counterargued

3Importantly, the ELM holds that any one variable may serve in each of these roles under specific conditions (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1984b, 1986b, Petty & Priester, in press, for details).

4Because of the various meanings that the term "ego-involvement" has come to represent in social psychology (cf. Breckler & Greenwald, 1986; Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; Johnson & Eagly, 1989), we have found it useful to refer to personal relevance or self-relevance in describing those situations in which the communication is on a topic of personal importance and/or addresses an important attitude. Of course, the personal relevance of a persuasive communication can be judged in terms of a variety of dimensions such as the number of personal implications, the magnitude of the implications, their temporal duration, and the number of self-relevant components (e.g., values, possessions, etc.) implicated by the advocacy. Although this conceptualization of self-relevance includes situations identified as ego-involving by the Sheriffs, it also highlights situations in which personal relevance is more transient and context specific (e.g., attitudes toward changing the U.S. income tax may become more personally involving around April 15 or election time). The Sheriffs also recognized that involvement could be situationally aroused but did not focus their own research on this (cf. Sherif, 1980).
easily by an audience that was motivated to process, increasing involvement would be associated with decreased influence. This model is depicted in the top panel of Figure 2.

When personal relevance is low, attitude change is more likely to be based on variables in the persuasion context serving as positive or negative cues (e.g., the mere number of arguments in the message may be used as an indicator of validity), since people will be unmotivated to engage in the cognitive work required to assess the quality of the message's arguments. Again, this means that low relevance is not necessarily associated with susceptibility to influence. For example, if a low relevance message containing reasonable arguments was presented by an inexpert source, people would be likely to reject the message based on the negative source cue.

To summarize, the ELM proposes that when relevance is high, the arguments in a message should be a stronger determinant of persuasion than when relevance is low. On the other hand, when relevance is low, peripheral cues in the persuasion context should be a stronger determinant of persuasion than when relevance is high. In this view, it is possible for people to show the same amount of change to a message containing positive cues and strong arguments under both high and low personal relevance conditions. Under high relevance, however, the change would be based primarily on argument processing whereas under low relevance the change would be based primarily on the positive cues.

Importantly, the ELM outlines different consequences of the two routes to persuasion. As depicted in Figure 1, attitude changes that occur in response to high relevance communications (central route) should be more persistent, resistant, and predictive of behavior than similar changes that occur in response to communications of low relevance (peripheral route). These consequences are thought to occur because attitude changes that occur under high relevance are the result of considerable issue-relevant information processing activity that is likely to yield an attitude schema that is extensive in its informational base and internally consistent and an attitude that is highly accessible and held with great confidence. Before reviewing some research designed to test the ELM hypotheses regarding self-relevance, we compare the method we have used to study self-relevance to the Sherif's procedure.

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5The ELM focuses on persistence, resistance, and behavioral prediction as consequences of central route to persuasion as these are the defining features of "strong" attitudes. The other qualities that attitudes might possess as a result of central route processes (e.g., accessibility, confidence, etc.) are important mostly to the extent that they are relevant to (e.g., are mediators of) the three consequences above.
Methodology

As Sherif anticipated (cf. Sherif & Hovland, 1961), the correlational approach to ego-involvement was critiqued as failing to control for various factors that were possibly confounded with individual differences in involvement. For example, in various studies, ego-involvement was confounded with attitude...
extremity, and was potentially confounded with "intelligence, open-mindedness, age, and a variety of other characteristics" (Kiesler et al., 1969). Some of the other likely confounds with ego-involvement when different "extreme" groups are compared include commitment to, knowledge about, and familiarity with the issue (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a; Wilmot, 1971). Nevertheless, Sherif criticized attempts to manipulate involvement in the social psychology laboratory (e.g., Zimbardo, 1960) for sensitizing people to their role as research subjects and possibly "mask[ing] any importance which his opinion on the issue might have for him outside the laboratory" (Sherif & Hovland, 1961, p. 172).

Following Hovland's (1959) suggestion that "there is no reason why more complex and deeply involving social issues cannot be employed in experiments rather than the more superficial ones more commonly used" (p. 15), some investigators attempted to manipulate involvement in the lab by randomly assigning some subjects to a personally relevant issue (e.g., raising tuition at the university of the message recipients), while others were assigned to an issue with few personal implications (e.g., increasing park acreage in a distant city; Rhine & Severance, 1970). Although this procedure holds various subject factors (e.g., intelligence), constant across involvement conditions (and represents involving issues as they occur in the real world), it allows many of the extraneous issue-specific factors mentioned above (e.g., topic knowledge and familiarity) as well as other factors (e.g., message discrepancy and argument strength) to confound the design and affect the extent of influence.

In our own research, we have employed a technique introduced by Apsler and Sears (1968) in which subject and message factors are held constant across involvement conditions. With this procedure, subjects are randomly assigned to high and low relevance conditions and receive an identical communication; however, high involvement subjects are led to believe that the advocacy will affect them personally, whereas low relevance subjects do not believe that the advocacy has direct implications for them. For example, in a number of studies we have exposed college undergraduates to a message advocating that seniors should be required to pass a comprehensive exam in their major area as a requirement for graduation (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1979b; 1984). In the low relevance conditions, the students are told prior to message exposure either that the plan is to implement this new exam policy at their university 10 years in the future or that it is planned immediately but for a distant university (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979a). In each case, the students are aware that the advocacy has no personal consequences. In stark contrast, in high relevance conditions the students are told that the new exam policy is being advocated for their own university and, if implemented, will begin next year. In this case, the personal implications are considerable.

The topic of implementing senior comprehensive exams was selected for our initial research on self-relevance and persuasion for a number of reasons. First, students' pre-message attitudes are generally moderately opposed to the proposal. This allows a test of the hypothesis that increasing involvement can enhance persuasion even for messages that are counterattitudinal. Second, the
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high relevance version of the issue relates directly to the subjects’ current self-schemas as college students, and has implications for one of their current primary goals in life—to graduate from college. Recall that messages linked to self-definition were thought to be high in ego-involvement in the Sherif’s conceptualization. Third, the topic is one for which subjects’ prior knowledge and familiarity are relatively low, and therefore novel and compelling arguments (i.e., difficult to counterargue) can be developed.

One possible concern about manipulating self-relevance is that the self-relevance manipulation might invoke different initial attitudes in subjects. Importantly, for the senior comprehensive exam issue and other topics of low familiarity and knowledge, it seems quite unlikely that people would have existing initial attitudes on the topic to retrieve. In fact, research has supported the view that college students do not express different attitudes to the low and high relevance versions of the senior comprehensive exam topic (Brickner, Harkins, & Ostrom, 1986; Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981). On the other hand, it is possible that with sufficient time to think, subjects would construct different attitudes. Given the counterattitudinal nature of the topic, mere thought (as induced by high involvement) could lead to more negative opinions (Tesser, 1978). It seems unlikely, however, that subjects would construct new attitudes just prior to the presentation of the persuasive message unless they were given an explicit forewarning of the message topic and time to reflect upon it (cf., Petty & Cacioppo, 1977).  

Evidence

*Personal relevance and message processing.* In our initial studies on personal relevance, we attempted to document the critical ELM proposition that increasing involvement enhanced message elaboration and could result in either enhanced or reduced persuasion depending upon the cogency of the arguments contained in the message. For example, in one study (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979b, Experiment 2), we developed a set of relatively compelling and a set of relatively specious arguments in favor of instituting comprehensive exams. The strong arguments were developed in pilot testing so that when subjects were

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6In addition to mere thought, another way in which different levels of relevance could lead to different attitudes is if the message arguments have very different implications depending upon the relevance condition. For example, it seems unlikely that subjects would generate different reasons to favor or not favor a message advocating changing the color of paper on which college exams are printed at their own (high relevance) or a distant (low relevance) university. On the other hand, it seems quite likely that people would generate different reasons to favor or disfavor imposing marshall law in the U.S. (high relevance) or in some rebellious third world nation (low relevance).
instructed to think about them, the thoughts they listed after message exposure were predominantly favorable. The weak arguments were developed so that they elicited mostly unfavorable thoughts under the same conditions. This manipulation of argument quality was combined with the manipulation of personal relevance that we described in the last section. Following presentation of the appropriate message over headphones, subjects reported their attitudes toward comprehensive exams on a variety of scales (e.g., good-bad) and then listed the thoughts they had while listening to the taped communication.

As anticipated by the ELM, relevance interacted with argument quality in determining persuasion. High relevance was associated with less favorable attitudes than low relevance when subjects were able to counterargue the communication (i.e., the message arguments were weak), but high personal relevance was associated with more favorable attitudes than low relevance when the message arguments were not susceptible to counterarguing (i.e., the message arguments were strong). The results from the thought listings provided additional support for the elaboration hypothesis. Increased relevance led to the production of more counterarguments when the arguments were weak, but increased relevance led to more favorable thoughts when the arguments were strong.7

**Personal relevance and the use of peripheral cues.** In several follow-up studies we attempted to show that just as argument processing becomes a more important determinant of persuasion when personal relevance is increased, attitudes are based more on simple peripheral cues when personal relevance is decreased. For example, in one study we varied the credibility of the source along with argument quality and personal relevance (Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981). Source credibility provides a means for subjects to judge the acceptability of an advocacy without requiring them to personally process the message arguments presented. This study was similar to our initial investigation except that some subjects were led to believe that the senior comprehensive exam message was based on a report prepared by a professor of education at Princeton University (high credibility), whereas others were led to believe that message was based on a report prepared by a local high school class (low credibility). This experiment replicated the results of our previous study (i.e., as relevance increased, attitudes were more affected by the quality of the message arguments) but also provided support for the view that simple peripheral cues are more important determinants of persuasion when relevance

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7The interaction of self-relevance and argument quality has now been replicated by several investigators at different institutions (e.g., Johnson, 1988; Leippe & Elkin, 1987). Importantly, other manipulations of self-relevance have also been shown to lead to enhanced message processing. For example, Burnkrant and Unnava (1989) phrased strong and weak message arguments in either a self-relevant (e.g., "you may remember feeling . . .") or neutral (e.g., "one might have felt . . .") manner. Replicating our research, self-relevance increased persuasion when the arguments were strong, but reduced persuasion when the arguments were weak.
is low rather than high (see also Axsom, Yates, & Chaiken, 1987; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). 8

*Personal relevance and attitudinal consequences.* In a third series of studies, we have obtained support for each of the postulated *consequences* of attitude changes that take place under conditions of high rather than low personal involvement. For example, in the relevant conditions of one study (Petty, Heesacker, Haugvedt, Reñner, & Cacioppo, 1990, Experiment 1), we induced attitude changes in favor of the institution of senior comprehensive exams under conditions of high relevance in one group of students and comparable changes in another group under conditions of low relevance. About two weeks after message exposure, the students were contacted again and their attitudes toward the exams were assessed. The major result of this study was that attitude changes induced under conditions of high relevance *persisted* over the time period, but attitudes changed to the same degree under low relevance conditions did not endure.

In a second study (Petty et al., 1990, Experiment 2) employing similar procedures, we assessed the *resistance* of the attitudes to counterpersuasion shortly after they were formed. In this study, subjects were confronted with a message antagonistic to comprehensive exams a few minutes after their attitudes had been changed in the favorable direction under conditions of either high or low personal relevance. 9 The attitudes changed under high relevance were more resistant to the countermesssage than were the attitudes changed comparatively under low relevance.

We have shown that attitudes formed under conditions of high relevance are more predictive of behavioral intentions than attitudes formed under conditions of low relevance. Specifically, intentions to purchase a new consumer product were more congruent with attitudes toward that product when product evaluations were based on an advertisement processed under conditions of high rather than low relevance (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983; see also Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986).

**ELM Analysis of Message Position (Opinion Latitudes)**

In preceding sections we focused on the concept of involvement or personal relevance and reviewed some of the evidence for the ELM hypotheses. The

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8The fact that simple cues are more important determinants of persuasion under conditions of low than high relevance has been replicated with a variety of different cues and for a variety of message topics (e.g., see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a; Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989, for reviews).

9Distraction was also employed in this study to further inhibit message processing in the low relevance conditions (see Petty & Brock, 1981).
ELM may also be useful for understanding the role of message position on information processing and persuasion, although little explicit research has been conducted on this topic. The ELM analysis of message position makes use of the idea that any one variable can take on different roles in different situations. For example, previous research has shown that source and recipient factors play different roles in the persuasion process depending upon the elaboration likelihood conditions (see Petty, & Priester, in press). To understand the multiple roles for message position, it is useful to consider the postulated effects of message position under various personal relevance conditions.

Effects of Opinion Position Under High Personal Relevance

Earlier we provided evidence that when personal involvement in an issue is high, people are typically motivated to engage in the cognitive work necessary to evaluate the arguments in the persuasive communication. That is, increasing personal relevance enhances information processing intensity. Consider, however, how the nature of that processing might be different when the message takes a position contrary to the recipient’s attitude rather than a congruent one.

First, all else being equal, people would undoubtedly prefer to learn that the positions that they already assume to be acceptable are defensible and valid, whereas the positions that they presently hold to be unacceptable are flawed and incorrect (Festinger, 1957; Lowin, 1967). A reasonable implication of this is that perception of a communication as falling in one’s latitude of acceptance is likely to produce a motivated positivity to information processing, whereas perception of a communication as falling in one’s latitude of rejection is likely to produce a motivated negativity to information processing. All else equal, communications falling in the latitude of rejection are threatening since they suggest that one’s own opinion may be incorrect, whereas communications falling in the latitude of acceptance are rewarding since they suggest that one’s current position is shared by others.10 Compared to this relatively biased processing, messages falling within the person’s latitude of noncommitment should be more likely to induce relatively objective processing, since people

10 Consistent with this reasoning, research has shown that espousing a position in one’s latitude of rejection produces the aversive state of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) but expressing a position in one’s latitude of acceptance does not (Fazio, Zanna, & Cooper, 1977).
have neither claimed nor disclaimed these positions as their own. Thus, these positions are neither particularly threatening nor rewarding.

Second, consider that the information that people have on an issue tends to be biased in favor of their own opinions. This should enable them to counterargue opposing communications (those falling in the latitude of rejection) and elaborate upon the positive features of congruent one (those falling in the latitude of acceptance). The fact that people tend to cognitively bolster agreeable communications and see flaws in discrepant ones has been demonstrated repeatedly. For example, Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall (1965) reported a study in which reactions of Republican and Democratic partisans to the 1960 Presidential Debates were assessed. This study found that people’s own stands on the candidates consistently biased their ratings of which candidate performed better in the debates (see also Hastorf & Cantril, 1954).

Importantly, people who have a more highly integrated attitude structure should be better able to engage in biased processing of two opposing communications. For example, in a recent study, Fazio and Williams (1986) studied reactions of partisans to the 1984 Presidential debates. Two results from this study are relevant here. First, consistent with previous research, attitudes toward the Presidential candidates predicted how well people thought the candidates performed in the debates. More interestingly, however, this relationship was stronger for people who had highly accessible attitudes. If we make the reasonable assumption that more highly integrated and knowledgeable attitudes are more accessible than attitudes that are relatively undeveloped (cf. Fazio, 1986), then these results provide support for the view that biased processing is facilitated by a well-developed attitude schema (see also Cacioppo, Petty, & Sidera, 1982; Houston & Fazio, 1999; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model provides a framework for understanding the effects of the perceived position of a persuasive communication under different relevance conditions. The anticipated effects of message position under high relevance are summarized in Proposition 1 below.

**Proposition 1:** When personal relevance is high, messages falling in the latitude of acceptance (i.e., consistent with one’s attitude) are processed in a relatively favorable manner, whereas messages falling in the latitude of rejection (i.e., inconsistent with one’s attitude) are processed in a relatively unfavorable manner. Messages falling in the latitude of noncommitment are processed in a relatively unbiased fashion.

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11Zanna (in press) has argued that in general people engage in more biased processing of messages falling in their latitudes of rejection than in their latitudes of acceptance. This seems reasonable. The critical ELM proposition is that message position will bias processing mostly when the elaboration likelihood is high. When moderate or low, message position is expected to serve in other roles.
This postulate, of course, suggests that it will typically be very difficult to change people's attitudes on highly involving issues by presenting them with counterattitudinal messages since although the high personal relevance will intensify information processing, the counterattitudinal nature of the message will motivate and typically enable message rejection via counterargumentation. We have been able to produce persuasion in the laboratory with counterattitudinal messages on involving topics because we have developed novel message arguments that are difficult to counterargue and because we have used issues to which people have not given much previous thought.

It is interesting to note that Sherif and Hovland (1961) warned against overgeneralizing their conclusion that communications on ego-involving issues would be ineffective. They noted that "the communications through the mass media probably do not convey factual evidence of overwhelming weight . . . they are primarily attempts at persuasion . . . without the support of incontrovertible factual evidence" (pp. 198-199). This leaves open the possibility, of course, that communications with strong (incontrovertible) arguments could be effective under high involvement as delineated by the ELM and found in our research (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1979b).

Effects of Opinion Position Under Low Personal Relevance

In contrast to the situation when involvement is high, when the personal relevance of a message is quite low, people are typically unmotivated to devote the effort necessary to process the arguments in the communication. Instead, they are more reliant on simple cues in the persuasion situation. A hypothesis consistent with the ELM is that the perceived position of a message (whether it is perceived as falling into one's latitude of acceptance, rejection, or noncommitment) may serve as a simple acceptance or rejection cue when people are unmotivated or unable to process the issue relevant arguments in a communication. This idea is stated more formally in the proposition below.

Proposition 2: When personal relevance is low, the latitude of acceptance (or a favorable attitude) may serve as a simple agreement cue, whereas the latitude of rejection (or an unfavorable attitude) may serve as a simple disagreement cue. The latitude of noncommitment (or a neutral attitude) is relatively neutral as a cue.

Although no research has examined the cue value of one's attitudes under high and low relevance conditions, some research has supported the view that prior attitudes serve as simple decision cues when the motivation and/or ability to think about an issue are low (e.g., Jamieson & Zanna, 1989; Sanbonmatsu & Fazio, 1990). There are a number of implications of Postulate 2. First, if a message position falling in the latitude of acceptance has some positive cue value
simply due to the position advocated (i.e., the message is seen as correct), other equally salient positive cues (e.g., the mere number of arguments presented; credible source) may have less cue value than they would have had in the latitude of rejection. Conversely, if a message falling in the latitude of rejection has some negative cue value simply due to its position, other equally salient negative cues (e.g., a low credible source) should have less impact than they would have had in the latitude of acceptance. Since messages falling in the latitude of noncommitment have no cue value due to their position, other positive and negative cues should be maximally effective for messages falling in this region.

Effects of Opinion Position Under Moderate or Uncertain Personal Relevance

So far we have addressed the implications of the ELM for opinion latitudes when personal relevance is either very high or very low. However, in many persuasion situations, the personal relevance of the communication may be ambiguous or uncertain. When personal involvement is ambiguous or uncertain, people may be unsure as to whether or not they should devote the effort necessary to process the message arguments. In these situations, various factors in the persuasion context may determine the extent of processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986a, 1986b). We have already argued that the greater the potential personal consequences of a message, the more likely it is to be elaborated. Consider the potential personal implications of a message portending that one's attitude is correct versus one suggesting that one's attitude is incorrect. Since people tend to overestimate the extent to which their opinions are shared (i.e., the "false consensus" effect; Ross, 1977), it is probably more surprising to be confronted with a message from an unfamiliar source in one's latitude of rejection than one in the latitude of acceptance.\(^{12}\) Additionally, the consequences of accepting a message in the latitude of rejection are typically greater than yielding to a message in the latitude of acceptance (Cacioppo & Petty, 1979b). The former may require considerable cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes, whereas the latter does not. The next proposition addresses the implications of this.

**Proposition 3:** When personal relevance is moderate or uncertain, messages from unfamiliar sources falling in the latitude of rejection (i.e., inconsistent with one's attitude) will receive greater elaboration than messages falling in the latitude of acceptance (i.e., consistent with one's attitude).

\(^{12}\)A consideration of balance theory (Heider, 1946) suggests that when a person knows and dislikes the source, it is probably more surprising to find that the source has an agreeable position.
Discrepant messages are more threatening and will tend to have greater implications for the individual if they prove to be correct. Thus, they will tend to arouse more attention than congruent messages and be associated with greater scrutiny (see also Cacioppo & Petty, 1979a; Schwarz, 1990). There are several possible exceptions to this simple principle. First, at some point the message may become so discrepant that it appears ludicrous (e.g., an advocate of the death penalty who urges that not only should the perpetrator be put to death but so too should all relatives). Messages that fall in this "latitude of incredulity" would likely be rejected with little thinking due to their inherent implausibility. Also, at some point the message may become so threatening that processing is terminated in the interest of self-protection. Third, messages falling in the latitude of noncommitment may receive greater scrutiny than messages falling in the latitude of rejection, because they are the most ambiguous. Although these speculations require additional research, the important point here is that under conditions of ambiguous or uncertain relevance, the position of a message is postulated to serve as a determinant of the extent of message processing.

Comparison of ELM and Social-Judgment Approaches to Persuasion

Now that we have presented both the social judgment and the ELM approaches to involvement and message position it is useful to compare and contrast these frameworks. In particular, it is instructive to focus on what may appear to be the most anomalous of our findings (cf. Greenwald, 1982)—that increasing personal relevance may be associated with increased influence even if a message advocates a counter-attitudinal position (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979b). Given that we (e.g., Petty et al., 1981) and others (e.g., Leippe & Elkin, 1987) have replicated this finding several times, it is important to understand why this result stands in apparent contradiction to the general conclusion reached by the Sherifs—that increasing involvement should decrease influence. Two solutions to this ostensible inconsistency have been proposed, that we address in turn.

Solution 1: Two Kinds of Ego-Involvement

One solution to this controversy, proposed by Johnson and Eagly (1989), is that the different results are due to the fact that different kinds of involvement are present in the social judgment and the ELM studies. They argued that one type, value-relevant involvement (VRI), occurs when the topic of a persuasive communication is "linked to important values" (p. 290). This type of involvement was studied largely before 1975 in investigations inspired by social judgment theory. A second type of involvement, outcome-relevant involvement (ORI), occurs when the message topic is linked to a recipient's "currently important goals or outcomes" and is the type of involvement studied in the last
decade under the auspices of the Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion. A meta-analysis conducted by Johnson and Eagly (1989) of the studies categorized as invoking each type of involvement was said to have uncovered "distinctively different effects [of each type of involvement] on persuasion" (p. 290). That is, the ELM-inspired ORI studies tended to show that increased involvement could be associated with increased or decreased persuasion depending upon argument quality, but the social-judgment-inspired VRI studies tended to show that increased involvement was associated with reduced persuasion (though more so for studies employing weak rather than strong arguments). This analysis is depicted in the bottom panel of Figure 2. Thus, it may be that two kinds of involvement exist with different effects in persuasion settings.

Solution 2: Integrative View of Ego-Involvement

In a comment on the Johnson and Eagly (1989) meta-analysis and conclusions, we argued that their proposed categorical distinction between outcome and value involvement was premature and that the ELM provided a more parsimonious and integrative manner in which to view the effects of involvement on persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1990). That is, we proposed that:

where the topic of a message falls on the personal importance continuum is more critical for understanding persuasion processes than whether the communication topic is one that deals with important values, goals, people, or objects. In all cases, as the personal importance of the topic increases, recipients are postulated to become more motivated to allocate their limited cognitive resources to processing the message (p. 368; see top panel of Figure 2).

How then does the ELM account for the different results found in the ORI and VRI categories of studies? The solution stems from the various confounds that we outlined above as likely to be present when ego-involvement is studied in a correlational manner. Although linking a message to self-relevant values would lead to enhanced information processing activity just as would linking a message to self-relevant goals, the confounding variables would likely bias the nature of the information processing activity that took place. For example, if involvement is associated with more extreme attitudes (Sherif & Hovland, 1961), then the message position would be more discrepant for high than low involvement

13A third type of involvement referred to by Johnson & Eagly as impression-relevant involvement and by others as response involvement (e.g., Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Zimbardo, 1960) is widely accepted as occurring when the self presentational consequences of one's attitude are salient (cf. Cialdini & Petty, 1981) and is not relevant to the current controversy.
subjects which could motivate increased counterarguing. Furthermore, if involvement is associated with increased attitude-consistent knowledge (Lutz, MacKenzie, & Belch, 1983; Wood, 1982), then high involvement subjects would be more able to counterargue the message than low involvement subjects. In our research on involvement, we have attempted to isolate the effects of personal relevance per se from the effects of its "natural" confounds so that there would be no unfavorable bias present in the high involvement conditions that was absent in the low involvement cases.\footnote{Other confoundings would also work toward inhibition of persuasion in the high versus low involvement conditions. For example, the fact that people have already considered in depth their positions on involving issues makes it less likely that they will carefully attend to and process subsequent communications on the topic (thereby reducing the likelihood of influence). More knowledge may also instill greater confidence in one's opinion, enhancing the threshold for change. The more involving an issue, the more probable it is that people have become publicly committed to a particular position, making the expression of attitude change difficult for a variety of self-presentational reasons (cf. Kiesler, 1971; Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971).}

Figure 3 depicts the attitude results predicted by the ELM when both the intensity of processing and the direction of processing bias are considered along with the quality of the arguments in a message. The left panel depicts a situation in which the enhanced processing proceeds in a relatively objective manner and the right panel depicts a situation in which the enhanced processing has an unfavorable bias. When the processing is relatively objective, more favorable attitudes are expected when strong arguments receive greater scrutiny, but less favorable attitudes result when weak arguments are evaluated. In contrast, consider a person who is motivated (e.g., because the message takes a very discrepant position) and able (e.g., because the person possesses considerable attitude-consistent knowledge) to counterargue the message. This person's task is advanced to the extent that the message contains weak rather than strong arguments.

If our analysis is correct, we would expect the unconfounded (ORI) studies to show the pattern depicted in the left panel of Figure 3 and the confounded (VRI) studies to show the pattern depicted in the right panel. When Johnson and Eagly separated the VRI and ORI studies (and conditions within studies) into those that employed relatively strong and relatively weak arguments, they found that involvement interacted with argument quality in both data sets. In the ORI studies, increased involvement was associated with more persuasion for strong arguments but with less persuasion for weak arguments. In the VRI studies, increased involvement led to reduced persuasion for both strong and weak arguments, but the reduction was greater for weak than for strong arguments. That is, the ORI studies produced a pattern consistent with the left panel of Figure 3, but the VRI studies produced a pattern consistent with the right panel.
of Figure 3. In short, the evidence from Johnson and Eagly's (1989) meta-analysis is consistent with the ELM view that increasing personal relevance enhances message elaboration but that confounding factors in the correlational VRI studies were responsible for the greater message rejection observed. If so, the ELM is capable of explaining the results from studies inspired by social judgment theory as well as the more contemporary work on personal involvement.

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter we have outlined the Sherifs' approach to the role of ego-involvement in persuasion and have compared it to our own conceptualization of self-relevance or importance. Although the models disagree in the processes presumed to mediate the effects of self-relevance and message position on attitude change, the frameworks agree that increasing involvement will typically be associated with reduced persuasibility when the message takes a counterattitudinal position. Whereas the Sherifs took a perceptual approach and focused on the judgmental distortions that ego-involvement was thought to enhance, the ELM employs a cognitive approach and has emphasized the manner in which personal relevance influences processing of the persuasive communication itself. Specifically, the ELM holds that increasing personal relevance increases the intensity with which issue-relevant arguments are processed. However, the nature of this processing is determined by other variables. For example, the information processing activity under high involvement would be expected to proceed in a relatively objective manner when a communication falls in a person's latitude of non-commitment and issue-relevant knowledge is low or balanced. When a message is either strongly congruent or incongruent with an individual's own position and attitude-consistent knowledge is high, it is expected that the person will be motivated and typically able to cognitively bolster a consonant communication but counterargue a dissonant one.

15Johnson and Eagly (1990) objected to our depiction of their results as an "unreasonable" inference from their meta-analysis. In contrast, we think that our depictions represent the only reasonable ways to graph the ORI and VRI interactions that they described. Alternative depictions would require the unreasonable assumption that subjects are actually more persuaded by weak than by strong arguments under low involvement conditions. This is inconsistent with common sense and available data.
Another reason that change in response to a counterattitudinal message is typically more difficult under conditions of high than low relevance is that simple peripheral cues are generally ineffective when involvement is high. However, our research has shown that when strong and compelling arguments are available that a person has not considered previously, attitude changes may be greater under high than low relevance conditions, and these changes will be temporally persistent, resistant to counterpropaganda, and predictive of behavior.

In a review of their program of research on attitudes and ego-involvement, Carolyn Sherif (1980) described the typical social psychological study of
persuasion as "confined to elaborately designed experiments in which a college
sophomore read, heard, or wrote something on a topic of slight interest" (p. 16).
This description of the accumulated persuasion research is informative, thought
provoking, and shared by others (e.g., Sears, 1986). In fact, much of the
research in cognitive social psychology over the past 30 years can be
characterized similarly. However, social psychologists in the past decade showed
renewed interest in studying self-relevant topics and issues and the links between
personal relevance and information processing. It is now abundantly clear that
cognitive processes and outcomes are quite different depending upon the degree
of personal relevance of the task. People are motivated to engage in cognitive
work when relevance is high, but judgments are more dependent on simple cues
when relevance is low (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979b; Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman,
1981). Moreover, the different cognitive processes under high and low relevance
identified by the ELM appear to hold not only in the domain of persuasion (cf.
Chaiken & Stangor, 1987; Cialdini, Petty, & Cacioppo, 1981; Cooper &
Croyle, 1984), but also with regard to attributional processes (e.g., Borgida &
Howard-Pitney, 1983), person perception (e.g., Fiske & Pavelcheck, 1986),
choice processes (Sanbonmatsu & Fazio, 1990) and other domains of social
cognition (cf. Cantor & Showers, 1983; Higgins & Bargh, 1987). Although we
concur with Hovland's (1959) assessment that personal involvement can be
studied in the social psychology laboratory with externally valid results, the
renewed enterprise is only in its beginning stages. We can be grateful to the
Sherifs for calling our attention to the importance of this endeavor.

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