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**Ego-Involvement and Persuasion:
An Appreciative Look at the Sherifs'
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, uninvolved, 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

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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).¹

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).

. . . 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).

. . . 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).² 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.

¹This correlational approach has also been followed in current work on the causes and consequences of attitude importance (e.g., Krosnick, 1988, 1989).

²When the message contains pro-attitudinal information, high involvement has been associated with greater influence (e.g., Eagly, 1967; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979b).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion

Before addressing further the Sherifs' 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

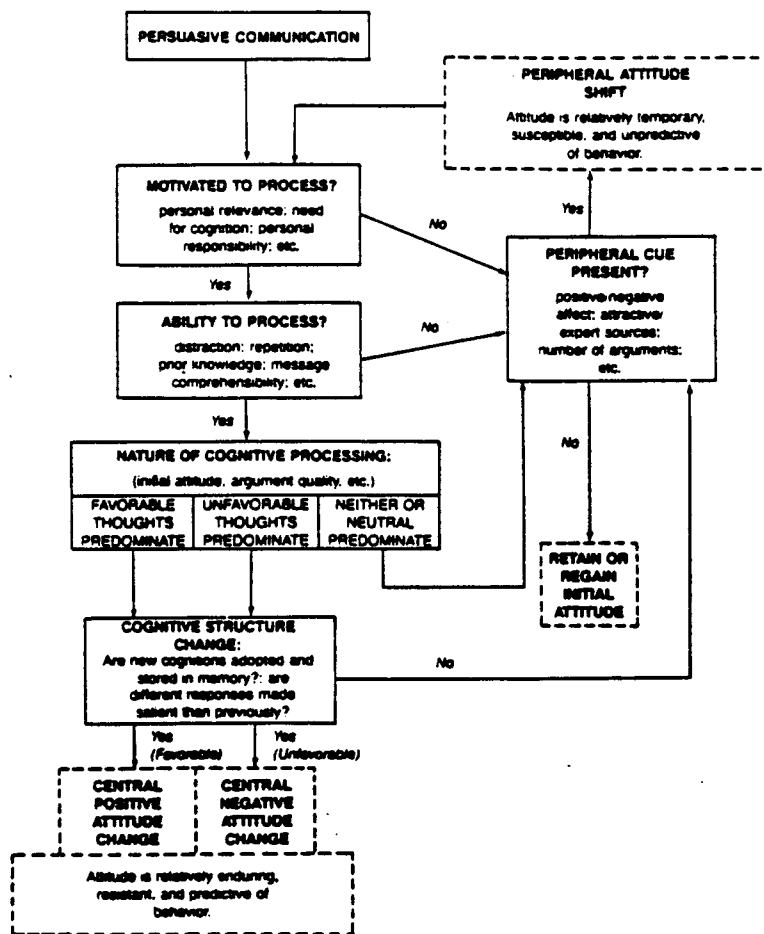


Figure 1. The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion. A schematic depiction of the antecedents and consequences of the two routes to persuasion. From *Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change* (p. 4) by Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, New York: Springer-Verlag. Copyright 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 Sherifs. 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 Sherifs, 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 Sherifs 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 indicant 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.⁵ 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 Sherifs' procedure.

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.

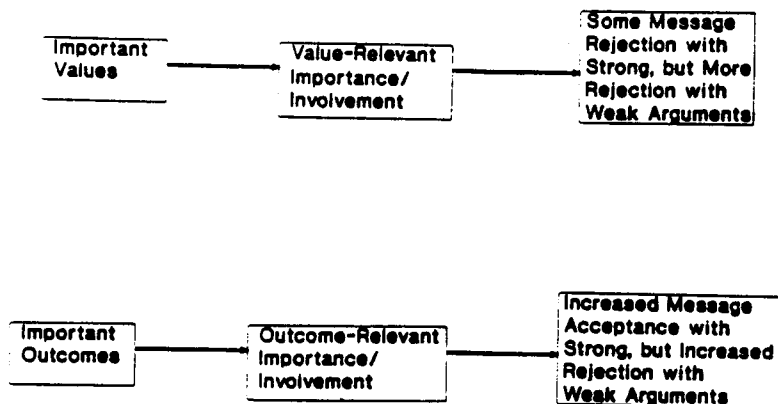
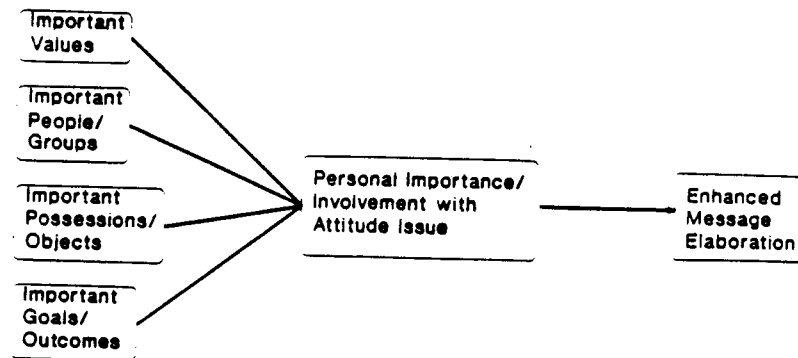


Figure 2. Two Models of Self-Relevance Effects. Top panel depicts model outlined in "Involvement and Persuasion: Tradition Versus Integration" by Petty and Cacioppo, 1990, *Psychological Bulletin*, 107. Bottom panel depicts model outlined in "Effects of Involvement on Persuasion: A Meta-Analysis" by Johnson and Eagly, 1989, *Psychological Bulletin*, 106.

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

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 Sherifs' 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).⁶

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

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

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, Haugtvedt, Rennier, & 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 countermessage 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

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

¹⁰Consistent 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).