

SEX DIFFERENCES IN OPINION CONFORMITY
AND DISSENT*¹

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SUMMARY

A self-presentational interpretation of persuasibility was investigated by measuring American college students' (48 males and 50 females) attitudes both before and after a direct persuasion attempt. Reports of attitude change supported Eagly's explanation of sex differences in persuasibility, since females—when the need to manage impressions was high—made greater use of opinion conformity in their self-presentations, while males' self-presentations included instances of opinion conformity, independence, and dissent.

A. INTRODUCTION

Eagly (1), after carefully reviewing the many studies which have contrasted the persuasibility of American women *vs* American men, suggests that these sex differences arise because females are more "concerned with social relational aspects of group situations than males are, and they are especially concerned with maintaining social harmony and insuring smooth interpersonal relations" (1, p. 103). Because attitudinal deviance can have disastrous effects on social relations and interpersonal harmony is considerably enhanced when interactants express similar attitudes, females more than males express opinions which match the attitudes of the others around them. Thus, women's attitude statements, as public self-presentations of opinion conformity (4), reflect socioemotional concerns rather than a tendency to "given-in" to others.

To test the possibility that sex differences in persuasibility are better

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understood if attitude statements are interpreted as self-presentational devices, males' and females' attitudes were measured before and after exposure to a persuasive communication. Three key variables which prior theory and research suggest are crucial determinants of the implementation of impression management—audience knowledgeability, attractiveness of audience, and personal competence in the situation—were all systematically manipulated. It was predicted that females would express greatest opinion conformity when their initial attitudes were unknown, they had lost “face” in the situation by acting incompetently, and the *E* was attractive. Males, on the other hand, were not expected to use opinion conformity as much in their management of impressions. Indeed, it was anticipated that males would prefer independence or opinion dissent, especially if their initial attitudes were public. Once a male's stance on an issue is public, he may be unwilling to change it, since doing so could seem inconsistent, yielding, and perhaps hypocritical. Under these conditions he may prefer to remain independent, or, if the audience is particularly unattractive, even dissent by displaying a “reactance” or “boomerang” effect.

B. METHOD

1. *Subjects*

Forty-eight male and 50 female introductory psychology students served as *S*s in order to fulfill a course requirement partially. Each *S* was randomly assigned to a single cell of the 2 (attractive *vs* unattractive *E*) by 2 (anonymity of initial attitudes: public *vs* private) by 2 (competence: success *vs* failure) factorial design. There were one male and one female *E* and an equal number of *S*s in each condition.

2. *Procedure*

Upon arrival, the *S* was seated facing a videotape recorder/player and playback screen. The session lasted about one hour, and during this time the *E* acted in either an *unattractive* (no eye contact, no smiling, and generally acting rude) or *attractive* manner (smiling frequently, making eye contact, and generally acting pleasantly). The attraction manipulation was similar to that used by Forsyth, Riess, and Schlenker (2).

While acting either attractive or unattractive, the *E* explained that study compared “different persuasion techniques which may be used to influence others” and that, as part of the project, *S*s would be exposed to a vid-

eotaped persuasive communication which argued against the use of seatbelts. The "demand" for persuasion was introduced as the *E* predicted "the persuasion tape will have some influence on your opinion of the use of seatbelts."

The *E* noted that before watching the videotape the *S* would need to complete two questionnaires: (a) a precommunication measure of attitudes (24 seven-point semantic differential items referring to seatbelts and a 13-point Likert-type item asking for degree of agreement with an antiseatbelt statement) and (b) an information form which all *Ss* supposedly had to complete for administrative purposes. After approximately 20 minutes the *E* returned and first picked up the attitude questionnaire. In the *public* attitudes condition the *E* glanced over all the items slowly before putting the questionnaire away. When *Ss*' initial attitudes were *private*, however, the *E* explained the questionnaire was a practice form and threw it away without looking at the responses.

Next the *E* removed the information form from the envelope and examined it. Success *Ss* were told, "Okay, everything looks fine." Failure *Ss*, however, were told they had misunderstood several of the items and had therefore completed the questionnaire incorrectly. The *E*, after pausing for a moment, stated, "That was my last form, what am I going to do? Well, I'll worry about that later."

The *S* then heard the speech, which had previously been rated by six independent judges as only slightly persuasive. Following the speech *Ss* completed another questionnaire which contained: (a) the postcommunication attitude measures and (b) items which assessed perceptions of the *E* and performance.

C. RESULTS

Perceptions of the situation were effectively manipulated. Successful *Ss* reported more satisfaction with their performance than failure *Ss* ($p < .05$), and *Ss* in the attractive *E* condition rated the researcher as more attractive than *Ss* in the unattractive condition ($p < .05$).

Ss' precommunication responses to a single 13-point item asking for degree of agreement with the statement, "Seatbelts can be dangerous and should not be worn by operators and passengers in automotive vehicles," were subtracted from their responses to this same item on the postcommunication measure. Negative scores indicate increasing acceptance of the communication and less favorable seatbelt attitudes. A two-way interaction of sex and attraction [$F(1, 82) = 5.18, p < .05$] revealed that females exposed

to the unattractive *E* became more negative toward seatbelts than females in the attractive *E* condition and males with either an unattractive or attractive *E* ($M_s = 1.08, -0.15, -0.23, \text{ and } +0.04$). Thus on this measure only, females with an unattractive *E* exhibited more negative attitudes toward seatbelts after hearing the speech [two-tailed $t(84) = 2.57, p < .05$].

The only other significant effect was a three-way interaction of anonymity of initial attitude, competence, and sex [$F(1, 82) = 5.33, p < .05$]. The means shown in Table 1 indicate that when males' competence in the experimental setting had been threatened by failure and their initial attitudes were public, they actually became *more favorable* toward seatbelts [two-tailed $t(82) = 2.14, p < .05$]. On the other hand, public-attitude/success males and those females in the private-attitude conditions yielded in the direction of the persuasive communication by becoming less favorable toward seatbelts ($p_s < .05$). Thus, males whose original attitudes were public either dissented or conformed to the position represented in the persuasive communication, depending upon their competency in the situation; females only displayed opinion conformity.

Factor analysis of the 24 semantic differential ratings in the precommunication measure revealed two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, accounting for 81.2% of the common variance prior to varimax rotations. Items indicative of *affective reaction* to seatbelts loaded highly on the first factor (e.g., good-bad, beneficial-detrimental, important-unimportant) and items relevant to *comfort* loaded on the second factor (e.g., convenient-inconvenient, comfortable-uncomfortable). Although the comfort dimension was considered to be relatively unimportant as an indicator of attitude toward seatbelts, the affect dimension seems to represent the central cognitive component of attitude. Therefore factor scores were computed by means of the factor analysis to summarize precommunication

TABLE 1
OPPOSITION TO SEATBELTS

Sex of Ss	Public		Private	
	Success	Failure	Success	Failure
Males	-.92 ^a	+.83 ^b	-.17 ^{ab}	+.17 ^{ab}
Females	-.08 ^{ab}	-.54 ^a	-1.00 ^a	-.75 ^a

Note: Means without a common single-letter subscript differ by Duncan's New Multiple Range Test ($p = .05$). The more negative the score, the greater the acceptance of the persuasive message.

attitudes and factor scores summarizing postcommunication attitudes. Next, an attitude change score was computed by subtracting the precommunication factor score from the postcommunication factor score (i.e., affect/postscore minus affect/prescore). Thus, positive change scores are indicative of increasingly favorable attitudes toward seatbelts (and rejection of the persuasive communication) and negative change scores denote decreasingly favorable attitudes toward seatbelts (and acceptance of the persuasive communication).²

Although several main effects (performance and sex) and lower-order interactions (anonymity \times sex, competence \times sex) reached significance (p s $<$.05) on the affect factor scores, they were qualified by a four-way interaction of competence, anonymity, attractiveness, and sex [F (1, 82) = 6.45, p $<$.05]. Examination of this interaction shows that females whose initial attitudes were private and had failed before an unattractive E evidenced more attitude change in the direction of the persuasive communication (i.e., became less favorable toward seatbelts) than all other conditions (p $<$.05). The change score mean for the females' seatbelts attitude was -1.12 , indicating a significant change between pre-test and posttest [two-tailed t (82) = 3.29, p $<$.05]. There were no other differences among the remaining means, which ranged only from $-.42$ and $.09$.

D. DISCUSSION

The results emphasize the importance of considering the sex of the S when predicting how individuals will respond to social influence (*cf.* 1). In general, females tended to conform to the position taken by the speaker, particularly if their prior attitudes were private, their competency and "face" in the situation had been threatened by a prior blunder, and the E was unattractive. Males, on the other hand, either conformed or dissented when they indicated degree of agreement with an antiseatbelt statement. The message produced a "boomerang" effect for public-attitude males who had previously erred, but produced opinion conformity when they had performed competently. These findings lend support to Eagly's contention that American females seem to be more easily persuaded than their male counterparts—not because their comprehension of the message or tendency

² With the use of matrix notation (*cf.* 3) the calculation of the change score for any one factor would be written $F_n = (Z2_{nv} W_v) - (Z1_{nv} W_v)$, where F is the matrix of change scores for n individuals, $Z2$ is the posttest standardized data matrix for n individuals on v variables, $Z1$ is the pretest standardized data matrix, and W is the vector of weights applied to v variables derived from the factor analysis of $Z1$.

to yield is greater but because they are more likely to employ opinion conformity as a self-presentational strategy.

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