The Roots of Research in (political) Persuasion: Ethos, Pathos, Logos and the Yale Studies of Persuasive Communications

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ABSTRACT

In ancient Greece, Aristotle claimed in his Rhetoric that the function of rhetoric was not to persuade, but to discover the means of persuasion in each case. It is remarkable how the empirical approach towards persuasion embedded in 'ethos, pathos, logos' of Aristotle seems to be revisited by the Yale study group in 1950s, with the aim of discovering the laws of persuasive communications in laboratory settings. The contemporary quest carried out by the Yale research program on persuasion reflects the Aristotelean tradition of examining 'the ethos, pathos and logos' aspects of persuasion closely. This article aims to draw the reader's attention to this strong influence of Aristotle's perspective on the Yale research group.

Adopting a learning theory approach, the Yale study group, led by psychologist Carl Hovland, tried to find out the stimulus-response effects of many variables concerning persuasion and thus paved the way for more elaborate research in persuasion in the years to come. The characteristics of the elements of persuasion, which have been studied by the Yale research group, are explained in this article by giving examples from their experimental research. The major contribution of Hovland and his colleagues has been the specification of an initial set of characteristics to understand the principles and processes of persuasion. Since persuasion is an important dimension of politics in general and negotiation/conflict resolution in particular, the tradition of studying (political) rhetoric deserves the attention of disciplines like political science and international relations as well.

Keywords: Political rhetoric, persuasion, the Yale studies of persuasive communications

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Introduction

Politics, at its core, is about persuasion. Various theories and explanations of persuasion have been suggested throughout the centuries. The roots of the study of persuasion can be traced in Ancient Greece. Greek philosophers were mainly concerned with the issues of ethical means of persuasion. Since Aristotle defined his principles of persuasion in his *Rhetoric,* there have been attempts at defining the principles of successful persuasion but for most of human history, persuasion has been studied as an art.

In the early 1900s, research on (political) persuasion was carried out mostly as propaganda analysis and public opinion research. Studies of propaganda in the early part of the twentieth century can be regarded as the antecedents to the social scientific study of persuasion. "After World War II, researchers stopped referring to their subject of study as propaganda and started investigating various constructs of persuasion" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 1992:122).

Experimental social psychology offered the possibility that the questions of traditional rhetoric might be solved within the framework of controlled experiments. The pathbreaking Yale studies of persuasive communications was described as constituting the new rhetoric (Smith, 1981: xii). Scientific evidence was sought to estimate how important a speaker's ethos might be, or when pathos might be effective, or what type of logos should be pursued.

In this article the results of the experimental research on the elements of persuasion -- that is research carried out by the Yale research group in the first place but later on by other researchers -- will be reviewed such as the source factors, the characteristics of the message, the receiver and context factors in persuasion, which are the rhetorical factors reflecting Aristotle's theory.

Political rhetoric: ethos, pathos, logos

Politics is often defined as the art of government; in that sense the central aim of political interaction can be stated as persuasion. It is often claimed that politics is exciting because people disagree. "They disagree about how they should live; who should get what? How should power and other sources be distributed? Should society be based on cooperation and conflict? And so on.." (Heywood, 2002: 3).

Miller defines politics as "a process whereby a group of people, whose opinions or interests are initially divergent, reach collective decisions which are generally accepted as binding on the group and enforced as common policy" (Miller, 1991: 390); thus the political process typically involves elements of persuasion in order to reach a final decision. When Aristotle stated in his *Politics* that 'man is by nature a political animal' and described politics as the 'master science', he meant that politics is, above all, a social activity, at the center of which lies a dialogue searching the ways and means of finding solutions to subjects of disagreement. Persuasion lies at the core of this activity.

The Greek city-states had a long history of democratic forms of government in which everyone had the the right to speak his mind freely on the issues of the day. "Greek philosophers attempted to describe what happened when persuasion occurred. Aristotle was the first of these students of the power of persuasion, and much of what he said on the subject is as true and vital in today's complex society as it was thousands of years ago" (Larson, 1992: 55).

Aristotle laid the basis for the study of rhetoric that was to be an important part of European education from Roman times until the nineteenth century. He approached the topic of rhetoric in an analytic manner, and defined rhetoric as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. He developed his theory by empirically observing many persuaders in Athens, in the law courts and the government and emphasized three factors to which the orator needed to pay attention: ethos, pathos and logos.

Ethos, was the first element in his theory of persuasion, which referred to the character the speaker wished to present. It could be defined as the charisma and the credibility of the speaker. As Aristotle had written in the 4th century B.C.:

"Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself. Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible.... his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses" (Roberts, 1954: translation of *Rhetoric*, Aristotle).

According to Aristotle, apart from the character, the artistic proofs a persuader used along with his/her reputation and image – all added up to create his/her charisma or ethos. Nonverbal messages like the speaker's physical appearance, as well as his reputation and the way he delivered his speech all contributed to ethos to some degree.

Pathos, was the mood or tone of the speech that appealed to the passions or the will of the audience. Aristotle's appeals to pathos were psychological appeals; they relied on the receiver's emotions. Before using these appeals, persuaders had to assess the emotional state of their audience – an ability or skill which might be called as empathy or emotional intelligence in contemporary terms. Aristotle cited some virtues like justice, generosity, courage, gentleness and wisdom as pathos or appeals to emotion. Many of these virtues were tied not only to emotional persuasion or pathos but to ethos as well.

Logos was the argument the speaker was advancing; that meant appeals to the intellect or to reason. It was dependent on the audience's ability to process information in logical ways; in order to appeal to the rational side of the audience, the persuader had to assess their information-processing patterns. Aristotle advised persuaders to use syllogistic arguments (enthymemes) in which the major premise was already believed by the audience.

As Larson has pointed out: "These ancient descriptions of what is or is not likely to persuade seem remarkably contemporary....We could argue that most contemporary persuasion research is derived from the work of Aristotle in some way or another" (Larson, 1992: 61).

The Yale studies of persuasion

Carl Hovland and his associates, who carried out the scientific studies in persuasion at Yale, were initially working for the Information and Education Division of the U.S. Army, to conduct research into the effectiveness of propaganda films during the war. The research program was continued after the war at Yale University (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949; Hovland & Weiss, 1951). The Yale research program had an ambitious goal: to discover the general laws of persuasion. "Their work led to a greater understanding of persuasion and stimulated subsequent research in persuasion for years to come" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 1992: 133).

The urge for studying persuasion more systematically was felt deeply as a consequence of the spread of the means of mass communication in the twentieth century. The wartime emphasis on the persuasive influence of the mass media was one of the reasons behind this pursuit. "Charismatic leaders such as Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt, and Churchill had demonstrated how entire societies could be powerfully manipulated through skillful persuasion....the effective persuader was reaching mass audiences in unprecedented numbers and kinds, made possible by the new media" (Larson, 1992: 81). The war-inspired fear about the power of persuasion on the masses created the motive for a more careful study of this phenomenon of social influence.

The Yale Communication and Attitude Change Program headed by psychologist Carl Hovland examined persuasion or attitude change in a variety of experimental contexts. Single-shot attitude change approach puts forward that attitudes control human behaviour; that is to say, if persuaders want to change the behaviour of their target audience, they must alter those audience attitudes that are preventing the desired behaviour. In this sense persuasion can be defined as the principles and processes by which people's attitudes and behaviors are formed or modified as a consequence of others' attempts at influence.

The Yale group examined attitude change from a learning theory perspective that was based on stimulus-response. They investigated effects of many variables in persuasion; their strategy was to treat the rhetorical variables as independent variables and to discover their effect on the dependent variable of attitude change. Hovland, Janis and Kelley had stated that this program had the purpose of "developing scientific propositions which specify the conditions under which the effectiveness of one or another type of persuasive communication is increased or decreased" (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953: v).

Since the Yale group had a learning theory and information processing approach, they assumed that people would change their attitudes if they were provided with the stimuli (or the reinforcement) for change. In order for this single-shot effect to take place, you had to motivate people to process information that would change their existing attitudes which in turn would lead to changes in their behaviour.

Elements of persuasion

One of the major contributions of Hovland's research program at Yale was the "specification of an initial set of characteristics that influence one's

acceptance of a persuasive communication" (Deaux et al., 1993:180). These characteristics can be stated as (1) the source of the persuasive communication, (2) the characteristics of the message, (3) the characteristics of the receiver and the context of the message. These factors are closely reminding us of Aristotle's analysis of persuasion in his *Rhetoric,* as ethos, pathos and logos. This strong influence of Aristotelian tradition on the Yale research group seems to be the reason why their studies of attitude change was described as constituting the new rhetoric. Moving along the lines of the Yale studies, which can be simply summarized as "who says what, to whom, with what effect?", new contributions have been made to understand the principles and processes of persuasion.

i. The source factors in persuasion

The research on persuasion has focused on the characteristics of the source of communication i.e. the communicator, and tried to figure out the influence of these characteristics on the communicator's persuasive endeavours. The communicator's credibility, expertise, likeability and similarity to the audience are some of the characteristics that have been tested by the researchers.

Perceived credibility consists of the judgements made by a message recipient concerning the believability of a communicator (O'Keefe, 2002: 181). Hovland and Weiss (1951) had hoped to show that high credibility or (good "ethos") increased persuasion; they claimed that the credibility of a source would affect the incentives for changing one's attitude. They contrasted the credibility effect of the American physicist Robert Oppenheimer with that of the Soviet newspaper Pravda by giving the same message (one with reference to Oppenheimer, the other with reference to Pravda) about the nuclear submarines; "U.S. subjects were more persuaded by the [same] message from Oppenheimer in those Cold War days"(Deaux et al., 1993: 180). This is attributed to the fact that for the U.S. subjects Oppenheimer represented high credibility with expertise, whereas Pravda was perceived as a source with low credibility with no expertise (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2008: 201).

As O'Keefe underlines both expertise and trustworthiness emerge as basic dimensions of credibility because only when these two aspects exist together can we have reliable communication. "A communicator who knows what is correct (has expertise) but who nevertheless misleads the audience (is untrustworthy, has a reporting bias) produces messages that are unreliable guides to belief and action, just as does the sincere (trustworthy) but

uninformed (low-expertise, knowledge-biased) communicator (O'Keefe, 2002: 184).

Other studies on source characteristics have demonstrated that physically attractive sources were more effective than less attractive ones. For example, Chaiken's study of messages about university dining hall menus found that attractive persuaders had a greater persuasive effect than did unattractive persuaders (Chaiken, 1979). Experiments have also shown that people are more easily persuaded if they share some similarities with the source (Goethals & Nelson, 1973).

ii. The characteristics of the message in persuasion

A persuasive message can vary in content and organization (reminding us of Aristotle's pathos and logos). Carl Hovland and his colleagues have studied variables like the order of presentation of the message (Hovland et al, 1957). It has been demonstrated that there are no clear-cut answers to the order of presentation: sometimes it seems better to present the most important part of the argument first in order – which is called anti-climax approach and sometimes it seems more effective to present it later; if the order of presentation is designed in such a way that the most crucial or important evidence is kept till the end, it is called the climax approach. "There might, on average, be some benefit from arranging arguments in a climax order, although likely so small as to be negligible" (O'Keefe, 2002: 216).

Another aspect of the message which has been studied is its structure-- whether it is more influential as a one-sided (containing only one point of view) or a two-sided message (containing pros and cons). Hovland and his associates studied whether a message given to American soldiers just after the defeat of Germany for a continued war against Japan should be one-sided or two-sided. The content of the message given to the soldiers had to be convincing so that they would be persuaded to fight against the Japanese soldiers. The question was whether the message would be more believable as one-sided (that the war against Japan would probably last another two years) or as two-sided (that it would continue for two years in line with the government's prediction plus another more optimistic prediction – such as it might end sooner).

The results of the research showed that with soldiers who were more educated and with those who opposed the government's position, the two-sided message worked best; whereas with soldiers who were less educated and with those who supported the government's position, the one-sided

argument was more persuasive (Hovland et al., 1949: 225). Other studies like Hovland's have demonstrated that two-sided messages seem to be most effective in the long run, especially when people are opposed to the persuader's point of view (Larson, 1992: 87).

When analyzing the effect of the message one has to keep in mind that receivers (or the target of the message) play an important role in this analysis (another aspect reminding us of Aristotle's pathos and logos). The issue of using appeals to the rational or emotional side of the receivers/targets has been studied. When people use rational persuasive appeals, they assume that recipients of these appeals behave as rational human beings. Although there are many types of rational appeals, a rational argument contains three components: a claim, i.e. the position a source is advocating in a message; data to support the claim, i.e. evidence that provide support for the claim; and a warrant (a propositional statement) that provides a logical connection between the data and the claim -- serving as the justification for the claim. The persuasive effects of rational appeals have been studied (especially the effects of evidence) extensively (McCroskey, 1969).

In discussing the effectiveness of evidence, one has to mention the model developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) which is called the "Elaboration Likelihood Model" or ELM for short. The ELM posits that the persuasiveness of supporting information (evidence) is dependent on the *motivation* and *ability* of message recipients to process the evidence contained in the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

In many persuasive contexts, message recievers are unable or unmotivated to effectively process rational appeals; in such cases, persuaders often turn to emotional persuasive appeals, ranging from humour to sympathy but fear appeals have received a lot of attention from persuasion scholars and practitioners (Stiff, 1993: 120).

Boster and Mongau stated that "manipulating fear does not appear to be an easy task.. what appears to be a highly-arousing persuasive message to the experimenter may not induce much fear into the recipient of the persuasive message" (Boster & Mongau, 1984: 373). Fear-arousing messages often fail because of over exaggeration on the part of the persuader. For example, "many driver's education films may fail to change attitudes toward drunk driving because their [fear] appeals are so farfetched (bodies strewn all over the road) that no one believes them. Had they used a more realistic

manipulation of fear, they might have been more successful" (Perloff, 1993: 162).

As Perloff noted, provided that the researcher has manipulated fear successfully, high-fear appeals are more effective than low-fear appeals; that means given the choice it is better to arouse more fear than less. On the other hand, personality factors pertaining to the receiver are important factors limiting the impact of fear appeals. Persons low in anxiety, who can presumably tolerate threats to their well-being, are more influenced by high-fear messages than by low-fear communications... low-fear appeals tend to be more effective among individuals high in chronic anxiety (Goldstein, 1959: 253). As Kağıtçıbaşı has mentioned those people who are highly self-confident are able to deal with a threatening message and in that sense are open to its effects; whereas those people who are not self-confident are defensive against a fear-arousing message, not knowing how to deal with it they prefer to ignore the message altogether (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2008: 217).

iii. The context of the message and the characteristics of the receiver

In addition to the content and organization of the persuasive message, the context in which it takes place such as the medium by which it is delivered has an impact on its persuasiveness. The effect of the medium depends partly on whether one wants the receiver to understand the message by systematic processing or by heuristic processing (Chaiken & Eagly, 1976). "A written message may be more effective in conveying information and initiating systematic processing, particularly information that is difficult to grasp. More direct communication such as videotaped and live presentations, tend to initiate heuristic processing" (Deaux et al., 1993: 184). So if one wants to persuade the reciever on a complicated matter, it would be wise to present it first in written format and then make an oral presentation. For simple messages, audiovisual medium leads to greater attitude change than audio channel alone; messages on the audio channel in turn produce greater acceptance and attitude change than do printed versions of the same message, as long as the message is simple (Chaiken & Eagly, 1976).

These findings have interesting implications for real-life persuasion situations, particularly politics. "Chaiken and Eagly's results plainly suggest that a president will be more effective on television if he uses simple (easy) messages rather than complex (difficult) ones. If there was one president who used simple, easy-to-understand language; it was Ronald Reagan.... now there are many reasons why Carter lost his bid for reelection in 1980,

and why Ronald Reagan was elected twice – once in 1980 and again in 1984. However, one communication-oriented explanation for these outcomes is that Reagan understood the limits and requirements of television and tailored his speeches to meet its needs, whereas Carter did not adapt his messages to fit the special needs of the television medium" (Perloff, 1993: 187–188).

The characteristics of the receiver as the target of persuasion has been studied in order to find out whether certain people are more susceptible to persuasion than others. Gender and certain personality variables such as self-esteem and intelligence have been the focus of attention of this body of research. One much studied question was 'whether women were more easily persuaded than men (in general or in specifiable circumstances), or men more easily persuaded than women?' Despite the frequently held belief that women tend to be more easily persuaded than men, research indicated that women and men have almost equal tendencies to change their attitudes (Eagly & Carli, 1981).

Early research suggested that people who have low-esteem would be more prone to be affected by persuasion but later research indicated that these initial results proved wrong when subject to a wider range of tests. The relationship between intelligence and persuasion was later analysed in a detailed manner through the lenses of the learning theory. As Kay Deaux has stated "highly intelligent people changed their attitudes more than less intelligent people when the message was complex; but when a message was weak ....people of lower intelligence were more likely to change their attitudes" (Deaux et al., 1993: 185).

The art of persuasion and negotiation

The results of these studies, in an interdisciplinary understanding, have a bearing on a wide spectrum of real world situations like negotiation and conflict resolution settings. As A. Ledgerwood and her colleagues have highlighted in a concise manner "Persuasion is an important tool in creating lasting settlements between parties in conflict....an increased understanding of the principles and processes that underlie persuasion can help improve the processes and outcomes of a negotiation....the study of persuasion, using variations of its basic paradigm, can inform us about how attitude change occurs in a wide range of conflict resolution settings. The basic paradigm and its modifications permit us to address a host of issues manageably. The leap from there to real-world conflict resolution settings is sizeable but feasible.... " (Ledgerwood, 2000: 456).

The implications of the studies of persuasion for negotiation can be traced at the strategies and skills that are advised for negotiators. One prominent example seems to be "the framing of a message" in negotiation; it is described as the art of persuasion and negotiation. L. Sussman, in her article 'How to Frame a Message: The Art of Persuasion and Negotiation' points to this link between persuasion and negotiation. One of the key issues in negotiation is framing; "the frame provides the *perspective* we want the other party to adopt, a *rationale* for the evidence we present, and the *sequential pattern* for presenting that evidence" (Sussman, 2003: 153).

Conclusion

The contemporary study of persuasion has its roots in the historical study of persuasion in Aristotle's Rhetoric. This strong influence extending from the roots of history shows that the interest in studying the art and science of persuasion has stood the test of time.

The Yale study group examined persuasion in a variety of experimental contexts. Their strategy was to treat the rhetorical variables as the independent variables and to examine their effect on the dependent variable of persuasion (attitude change). The major criticism about their research has been that it was based on a one-dimensional (stimulus-response) message learning approach, but not based on a psychological theory of thinking that could be used to make sense of the intervening psychological processes.

The 1950s Yale group had wanted to discover the governing laws of persuasion in laboratory conditions; in the event, the program produced a mass of findings, many of them unintegrated with each other and exceptions were found for each finding (Fishbein & Azjen, 1981: 339-59). Their major contributions being 'the specification of an initial set of characteristics that influence persuasion', they have stimulated subsequent research in persuasion for years to come. In that sense their research, although unable to reach the "laws" of persuasion, have led to a greater understanding of persuasion.

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