



When contradictions foster persuasion: An attributional perspective

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We test the effect of contradictions, or conflicting messages from the same source, on persuasion.
- Conflicting messages sometimes offer a persuasive advantage.
- This effect is driven by favorable attributions.
- We identify several moderators.

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ABSTRACT

Conventional wisdom and past research suggest that contradicting oneself, or changing one's stated opinion, should undermine one's persuasiveness. In contrast to this view, we propose that under specifiable conditions contradicting oneself might offer a persuasive advantage. Across a series of experiments, we find evidence for this *contradiction effect* and explore its mechanism and boundaries. In particular, we show that contradictions can prompt attributional processing geared toward understanding why a shift in opinion has occurred. When strong arguments are provided, they foster favorable attributions (e.g., the source thought more about the issue and/or gathered new information), which result in increased persuasive impact. When weak arguments are provided, they induce less favorable attributions, which in turn dampen or even reverse the effect. Furthermore, consistent with an attributional perspective, we find that contradictions introduce a persuasive advantage only when they come from a single source and only when trust in that source is high.

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Introduction

People hold and express opinions with varying degrees of consistency. In the political sphere, for instance, attentive voters might notice that one candidate has consistently endorsed the same position on some topic, whereas another has varied and expressed seemingly contradictory views over time. Conventional wisdom suggests that to have influence over others, it is better to be consistent rather than inconsistent in one's messaging, and that all else equal, people favor consistency in others and their opinions. In the 2004 U.S. presidential election, for example, Democratic candidate John Kerry's defeat was at least partly attributed to his inconsistency (i.e., "flip-flopping") on key issues such as the war in Iraq. Concerned voters appeared to interpret shifts in Kerry's opinion as reflecting pandering or a lack of clear conviction rather than genuine belief change sparked by the acquisition of new information. Similarly, during the 2012 campaign, presidential hopeful Mitt Romney was widely criticized for showing inconsistency in his professed opinions over time.

Supporting conventional wisdom and this anecdotal evidence, a voluminous body of research suggests that when people seek to persuade others, or gain their support, they can increase their chances of doing so by conveying a consistent message over time, or repeating their core arguments and opinions. Indeed, compared to stating an argument or opinion just once, repeating that argument or opinion can make it seem more valid or true (e.g., Bacon, 1979; Begg, Anas, & Farinacci, 1992; Dechêne, Stahl, Hansen, & Wänke, 2010; Hasher, Goldstein, & Toppino, 1977; Schwartz, 1982), and can give a persuasive message more impact (Moons, Mackie, & Garcia-Marques, 2009). The rationale is that repetition increases familiarity, which boosts the perceived validity of an argument, belief, or opinion (Arkes, Hackett, & Boehm, 1989; Skurnik, Yoon, Park, & Schwarz, 2005). In fact, repeating one's opinion can even make it seem more valid to oneself (Fazio, 1995; Petrocelli, Tormala, & Rucker, 2007). Research on hypocrisy further supports the notion that people prefer consistency in both their own (e.g., Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999; Stone, Wiegand, Cooper, & Aronson, 1997) and other people's (e.g., Barden, Rucker, & Petty, 2005; Wagner, Lutz, & Weitz, 2009) thoughts and actions.

In the current research, we question the notion that inconsistency is always bad, or harmful to one's persuasive agenda. Consider an

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example in which you are trying to decide where to go for your next vacation, and you ask a friend for advice about potential destinations. Intuitively, and based on the aforementioned research, it is reasonable to expect that the more consistent your friend is in the advice she gives, the more persuaded you will be. For instance, if you talk to your friend on two separate occasions and she offers the same advice each time (“Cancun!”), that advice would seem to carry more weight and exert more influence over your decision. In contrast to this notion, the current research asks whether, and when, your friend could gain influence by contradicting herself—for example, by first telling you not to go somewhere for vacation and then changing her mind a week later and recommending the very same spot.

The contradiction effect

The primary goal of the current research is to explore the general possibility that conflicting messages – for instance, initially opposing something and then later supporting it – might sometimes offer a persuasive advantage over both one-time messages (e.g., supporting something once) and repeated consistent messages (e.g., initially supporting something and then later supporting it again). Stated differently, we investigate a potential *contradiction effect* in persuasion, whereby changing one's stated opinion can be an effective strategy for getting people to follow one's recommendation or adopt one's point of view.

Why would contradicting oneself offer any persuasive advantage? We examine this question from an attributional perspective, positing that because contradictions are unexpected and noteworthy, they prompt attributional reasoning focused on understanding why a shift in the source's opinion has occurred. Indeed, numerous studies have shown that expectancy violations stimulate information processing (e.g., Baker & Petty, 1994; Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010), and that unexpected events tend to spark greater attributional thinking than do more expected events (e.g., Clary & Tesser, 1983; Hastie, 1984; Lau & Russell, 1980; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1981; Wong & Weiner, 1981). For instance, unexpected wins by underdog teams or losses by favored teams, surprising academic success or failure, unusual willingness or unwillingness to help and, importantly, inconsistent behavior all have been shown to trigger attributional thinking (see Weiner, 1985). The logic is that unexpected events demand explanation and, thus, that unexpectedness fosters attributional reasoning geared toward providing such an explanation.

The current research adopts this core logic and applies it to a new, heretofore undocumented, consequence. That is, we follow the same underlying principle of past research on expectancy violations and attributional processing, but use it to explore and understand the potential advantage of contradictions, or opinion shifts, in persuasion. We submit that if shifts in a message source's expressed opinion are unexpected, they will prompt attributional processing on behalf of message recipients. If positive attributions are then formed for the shift, their effect could be greater persuasive impact—that is, more persuasion elicited by the second (contradictory) message than it otherwise would have. If negative attributions are formed, the opposite effect might emerge—specifically, less impact or even reversed impact for the second message. In other words, if a contradictory message stimulates attributional processing through its unexpectedness, it might produce more or less persuasion (compared to a one-time or repeated consistent messages) as a function of the favorable or unfavorable attributions recipients generate for the contradiction. For example, when a message source first opposes a policy but subsequently supports it, a positive attribution might be that the source has gathered new information or engaged in further thought about the policy that changed his or her mind, which might enhance the impact of his or her final message. In contrast, a negative attribution might be that the source is a flip-flopper or is not thinking

enough about the policy, which should reduce or even reverse the impact of his or her message.

Based on this logic, an important question arises: What determines the direction of recipients' attributions for a conflicting message? That is, what moderators are suggested by an attributional account for the hypothesized contradiction effect? In the current research, we explore three factors: message strength, number of sources, and source trustworthiness.

Message strength

First, one important factor might be the cogency of support (or strength of arguments; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) offered for the second – contradictory – message. To the extent that strong (i.e., convincing) arguments are provided, they should foster more positive attributions that lead to favorable message responses and, ultimately, more persuasion. If weak (i.e., unconvincing) arguments are provided for the second message, however, they might undermine positive attributions, thereby dampening or even reversing the effect. In particular, strong arguments seem likely to foster the perception that the source encountered or gathered new information and engaged in further thought about the issue at hand. Recipients might therefore infer greater thoughtfulness or due diligence on behalf of a source who changes his or her previously stated opinion with compelling reasons for doing so. Weak arguments, by contrast, leave room for doubt about the source's reasons for shifting opinions and should undermine any favorable assumptions about the source's level of thoughtfulness. Indeed, specious arguments make it unlikely that the source engaged in greater due diligence or had good reasons for changing his or her mind.

Number of sources

In addition to message strength, or argument quality, the number of sources (i.e., whether the messages come from a single source or multiple sources; Harkins & Petty, 1981; Harkins & Petty, 1987) might moderate the contradiction effect. Specifically, our attributional logic suggests that the contradiction effect should be more evident when there is a single message source rather than multiple sources. To begin with, contradictions should be more unexpected, thereby initiating the aforementioned attributional reasoning, when they come from a single source. After all, people presumably receive conflicting messages from multiple sources (compared to a single source) with greater frequency; in fact, people sometimes are explicitly encouraged to seek such input (e.g., get a second opinion). Thus, a contradiction from one source should be more unusual or noteworthy than contradictions from multiple sources.

Furthermore, and perhaps more important, contradictions from single sources seem more likely to foster the impression of thoughtfulness. When one individual contradicts another, it does not necessarily imply that she has gathered new information or engaged in further thought about the target issue. She might simply hold a different opinion. Contradicting *oneself* and then offering strong arguments to support the shift, however, could induce an impression of greater information consideration and thoughtfulness, thus producing the contradiction effect.

Source trustworthiness

Finally, the contradiction effect might be especially likely to manifest when message recipients trust the source. Source trustworthiness is a dimension of source credibility defined as a source's perceived motivation to provide accurate and truthful information (e.g., Kelman & Hovland, 1953; Priester & Petty, 1995; Tormala & Clarkson, 2008). Like the number of sources, source trustworthiness might have a two-fold influence on the contradiction effect. First, contradictions might be more unexpected or noteworthy when they come from trusted sources. Perhaps contradictions from distrusted sources are more expected, making extensive attributional reasoning stemming from an untrustworthy source contradiction less likely (see Hastie, 1984). In

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