

INOCULATION THEORY: MOTIVATION MECHANISM VS.
ATTACK CREDIBILITY AS MEDIATORS OF
RESISTANCE TO PERSUASION

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THESIS

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INTRODUCTION

Through the ages, much thought has been given to methods of persuading individuals in order to gain a desired response. The Greeks engaged in rhetoric, while other cultures used more violent means of "persuasion." As the power to persuade someone nonviolently took precedence in the free world, the use of communication became of utmost importance. Persuasive messages that could be used effectively in advertising, by political parties, or even by religious factions, were of great value. Not until soon after World War II, however, did anyone report on how one might create a resistance to these persuasive attacks.

Early efforts to study resistance to persuasion consisted of analyzing the effects of both one-sided and two-sided communications. One-sided communications present arguments for one point of view, without ever mentioning the opposing point of view. Two-sided communications present arguments for one point of view and then go on to mention and refute the opposing point of view.

During World War II, Hovland, Lumsdaine and Sheffield (1949) reported the first investigation of one-sided and two-sided communications. The two-sided message was more persuasive for all subgroups except a group which had less than a high school education who initially agreed with the message. Lumsdaine and Janis (1953) continued the area of study and found that subjects who received one-sided communications were more susceptible to counter messages than subjects who received two-sided communications. The authors of this study concluded that when subjects were given a two-sided message, even if arguments from the opposing point of view were mentioned, they became "inoculated" against the opposing side.

This early research led to an important series of studies on resistance to persuasion. William J. McGuire (1961) and his associates performed a series of systematic experiments to investigate message strategies for inducing resistance to persuasion. The research led to development of the inoculation theory.

McGuire and Papageorgis (1961) argued that people often avoid exposure to opinions other than their own. This selective exposure can make them more susceptible

to persuasive attacks when these attacks contain arguments against which they have heard no prior defense. With little practice and motivation to develop arguments supporting their own position, the individuals is left vulnerable to persuasive attacks.

McGuire's inoculation theory draws on a medical analogy. McGuire and Papageorgis (1962) stated that people who are brought up in a germ-free environment often fail to develop the needed resistance to infection. While seemingly healthy, these individuals are extremely vulnerable when exposed to an infectious virus. The authors stated two ways to help prevent this vulnerability. One way is by using preventive medicine such as prescribing a good diet, vitamins and exercise. This can help in creating strength, but may not necessarily guarantee a strong resistance to certain diseases. The second way is through inoculations where a weakened form of the virus is injected into the individual so that his defenses are activated, but not overcome.

McGuire and Papageorgis felt that this principle could be applied to persuasive attacks as well as viral attacks. McGuire chose what he labeled "cultural

