

BEHAVIORAL INFLUENCE AND CHANGE: PERIPHERAL VERSUS FUNDAMENTAL

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Abstract

This paper proposes bases for considering influence to be aimed at affecting peripheral or fundamental elements, a task that requires analysis of the nature of action and of persuasive assignments. Three kinds of persuasive task are discussed in light of a general model of action, as is use of the terms, peripheral and fundamental, to characterize behavioral elements.

Introduction

Two somewhat contradictory notions of behavioral change lay claim to a share of mind among psychologists and consumer psychologists. Authors discuss behavioral change as though considering it to be a unitary phenomenon, yet may characterize specific kinds of attempted influence as less or more difficult. Both concepts -- unitary phenomenon and differentially difficult assignments -- remain largely unexamined. No one appears to have analyzed the nature of action or of persuasive tasks in a way that would explain why some assignments may be more difficult than others. If it were possible to propose a plausible basis for distinguishing peripheral and fundamental behavioral change, and to classify assignments according to which kind of change is attempted, authors would likely speak less often about undifferentiated "behavioral change" -- an outcome that may be conducive to progress in our field.

Excluded, herein, is the question of trying to change an individual's capacities as patient and as agent. Accordingly, attempting to change an individual's capacity to receive and understand stimulation and to generate and effect action is not at issue here. Changing some aspect of an individual so that the formerly blind may see, bedridden may walk, or dumb may speak, fundamentally affects an individual's quality of life but such changes are excluded from present consideration as are major change in skills such as the ability to use a language other than one's parent tongue. Here I discuss bases for distinguishing peripheral and fundamental behavioral change, taking deployable capacities as fixed -- an assumption that is presumably present, though unarticulated, in much of the psychological literature.

Are there degrees of difficulty in attempting to change behavior? Compare the assignment of getting nondonors of blood to donate with that of getting blood donors to donate to organization A rather than B; or the task of getting individuals who value having many children to practise birth control, with that of getting people who already use contraceptives to use a brand we shall design; or the task of getting people who do not attend operas or symphony concerts to do so, with that of getting patrons of opera or concerts to attend a particular performance that we shall offer; or the task of getting people who do not chew gum to do so, with that of getting those who do to buy a brand we shall make available; or the task of getting a sated rat to run a maze where food has been available with that of getting a hungry rat to turn right or left at a choice point; or any of these with the assignment of getting child abusers or litterers to desist. Are all of these assignments best viewed as instances of undifferentiated "be-

havioral change" or should we consider that some may implicate a kind of change that is different in significant ways from that involved in the others? Two more fundamental questions are: 1) Do conceptualizations exist that permit trying to address such issues, and 2) What kinds of conceptualization would be helpful?

To shed light on these matters, we must approach the problem from both sides, trying to understand the nature of action and of persuasive tasks. To influence action, would-be persuaders need some idea of what must be different from the way it now is if a target individual is to show the recommended behavior. That means knowing both the theoretical conditions for action and the kinds of changes in conditions currently prevailing among target individuals that must be effected if certain persuasive objectives are to be realized. My plan for the remainder of this paper is to describe, first, three major kinds of persuasive task and, after that, my view of the nature of action. Finally, I consider how my analysis contributes to distinguishing between fundamental and peripheral behavioral change.

Three Persuasive Tasks

Behavioral objectives such as those mentioned above may be considered in light of each of three kinds of persuasive task: 1) MODIFY, in which influence agents accept the essential thrust of what individuals are attempting to do and plan to affect the form their action takes e.g., if you chew gum, use Brand A; if you plan to attend graduate school, choose College X; if you donate to charity, give to Cause P. 2) STOP, in which change agents attempt to induce individuals to stop (or not start) performing some action e.g., stop smoking cigarettes/abusing children/littering, and 3) START, in which change agents attempt to induce individuals to start (or not stop) performing some action e.g., start attending live theatre, giving blood, practising birth control. The influence agent's essential message is different in each of the three tasks. In MODIFY, it is: Choose mine -- it's been designed to suit your circumstances. In STOP, it is: Your action's consequences are harmful to yourself, others, or society in general. In START, it is: Failing to perform this action results in harm to yourself, others, or society in general.

Influence agents implicitly classify a particular assignment as either a MODIFY, STOP, or START task. But for analysis and planning, it can be a useful exercise to construe a task in alternative modes. For example, construing a START task as MODIFY, prompts change agents to consider whether or not there may be some action already in place for which the recommended action could be viewed as a substitute. Construing a START task as STOP, prompts one to consider what may be occurring at those times/places where the target "should" perform the action-to-be-started, in other words, to consider what is competing with the recommended action. Construing a STOP task as MODIFY, leads to considering whether or not some action that is acceptable to the persuader may be substituted for the action to-be-stopped. Behavioral implications of the different kinds of persuasive task will become clearer in light of a conceptualization of action, to which I now turn.

Conceptualizing Action

Figure 1 COMPONENTS OF A BEHAVIORAL EPISODE

CHANGE COUNTERCHANGE? LEARNING

One way of thinking about action is the three-part behavioral episode that is depicted in Figure 1. The episode begins with a change in relationship between the person and the environment i.e., change in Figure 1, the result of which is unpleasant to the extent that the individual allocates resources to effecting a counterchange. In Figure 1, counterchange is followed by a question mark to indicate that what is an issue here is attempted counterchange, which may or may not succeed. In either event, learning is envisaged i.e., a record of the episode remains in the individual. For example, I find myself feeling uncomfortably cold. Thought and action are two kinds of resources I can draw upon to deal with this state of affairs. Initially, I may reexamine my feeling of discomfort and conclude that I am not seriously uncomfortable after all. The episode may end right there. More likely than not, I shall again feel uncomfortably cold in about ten minutes and this time I may take some action to restore a comfortable state. My attempt to effect a counterchange may or may not succeed. In either case, I shall add the outcome to whatever else I may previously have experienced in association with the particular means of counterchange I used.

purchase or use of a brand as R. In effect, they think of S-R in the context of counterchange. From the present perspective, that manner of speaking is deficient from both a behavioral and a marketing viewpoint. Behaviorally, activating change is the natural context for any discussion of elements relevant to counterchange. From a marketing perspective, activating change is the context in light of which marketers must choose the attributes of their brands and the corresponding claims they make in their ads (Fennell, 1986).

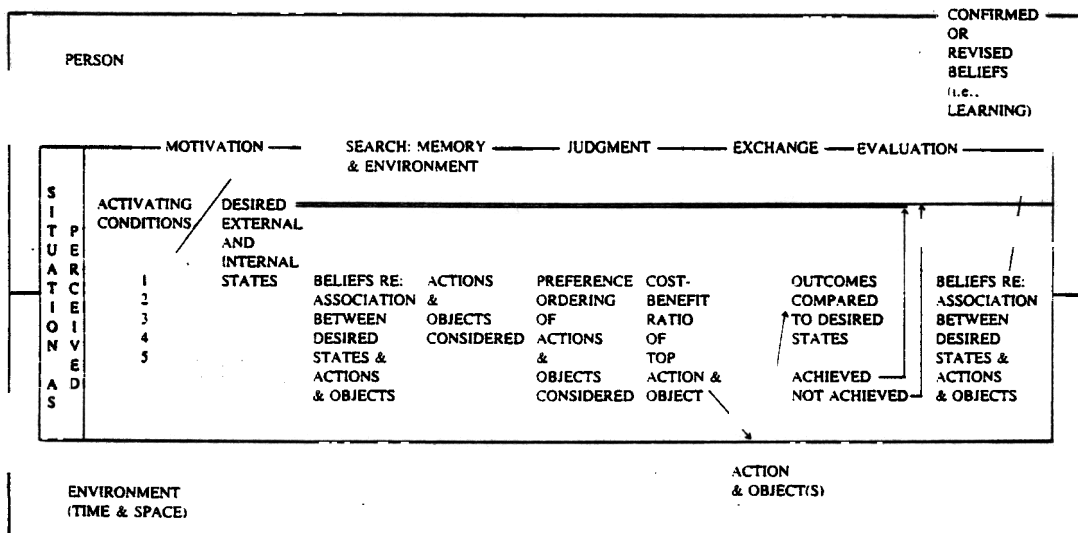
There are two points to be emphasized. Already, with this simple model, we may raise the issue of peripheral versus fundamental behavioral change. Are influence agents trying to affect elements involved in counterchange or in change i.e., in activating change? For example, accepting that I feel uncomfortably cold in certain circumstances, when those circumstances arise are influence agents attempting to have me reach for a particular kind of woollen sweater? Or, are change agents attempting to affect whether or not I feel uncomfortably cold in the first place i.e., trying to change the conditions that trigger my allocating resources to effecting a certain kind of counterchange? Shall we say that influence directed to elements involved in counterchange is peripheral, while that directed to elements involved in activating change is fundamental?

A more detailed behavioral formulation raises additional considerations. Presented as a general model of action in Figure 2, it represents a person in a space/time environment. Activating conditions initiate a situation. Elements in the person and the environment combine to produce activating change, which instates action tendencies. Reading across Figure 2, to comment briefly on each term in the model: Behavioral activation exists when individuals' present state is unpleasant to the extent that they imagine a state lacking that unpleasantness. They wish to experience that imagined state and allocate resources to its realization (desired states). Their thought processes search information stored in memory for actions/objects that were previously useful in bringing about the desired states and that are accessible in the current environment (beliefs). They may generate one or more options for acting (actions/objects considered); if more than one, they order them (preference ordering). Since action is costly, they assess costworthiness in relation to the degree of activating discomfort (cost-benefit ratio). After performing the action, they experience the results (outcomes) and evaluate the extent to which they realized their desired states i.e., the extent to which the activating change has been neutralized or remains operative (achieved/not achieved). Learning occurs as confirmed or revised beliefs.

Second, consider the classic stimulus-response (S-R) paradigm in the context of the formulation of Figure 1. In the literatures of marketing and consumer behavior, authors may speak of a brand as S, or an ad as S, and of

A couple of points of similarity and difference should be noted between this general model of action and models of decision making or choice belonging to the ex-

Figure 2 GENERAL MODEL OF ACTION



expectancy-value family. Terms that are roughly equivalent to expectancy (i.e., beliefs) and value (i.e., desired states) play a different role here. Beliefs and desired states contribute not only to ordering action alternatives, as in expectancy-value formulations, but also to generating action alternatives. Furthermore, in the present model the term, activating conditions, represents terrain that is upstream from that which expectancy-value formulations embrace. It represents the basis for what is valued in the particular situation of interest. For example, the fact that I am uncomfortably cold leads to my valuing actions/objects with warm-making properties. Two more points about activating conditions are in order. The small numerals stand for seven kinds of activating conditions, which I have based on the classic experimental arrangements of the instrumental learning laboratory. In the five simple cases these are: escape; avoidance; deprivation; presentation of complex stimuli; presentation of taste-appealing, nonnutritive substances (e.g., saccharine). In each of the two complex cases, in addition to elements from one or more of the simple kinds of activation, a countervailing tendency is present: approach-avoidance and frustration, respectively (Fennell, 1978, 1980). In the context of research with humans, activating conditions may implicate one or more of a wide range of elements, as listed in Figure 3. Much of the qualitative research (e.g., focused group/individual depth interviews) that is done in marketing practice is aimed at identifying such activating elements in the domain of substantive interest.

Implications for Influence

The MODIFY Task

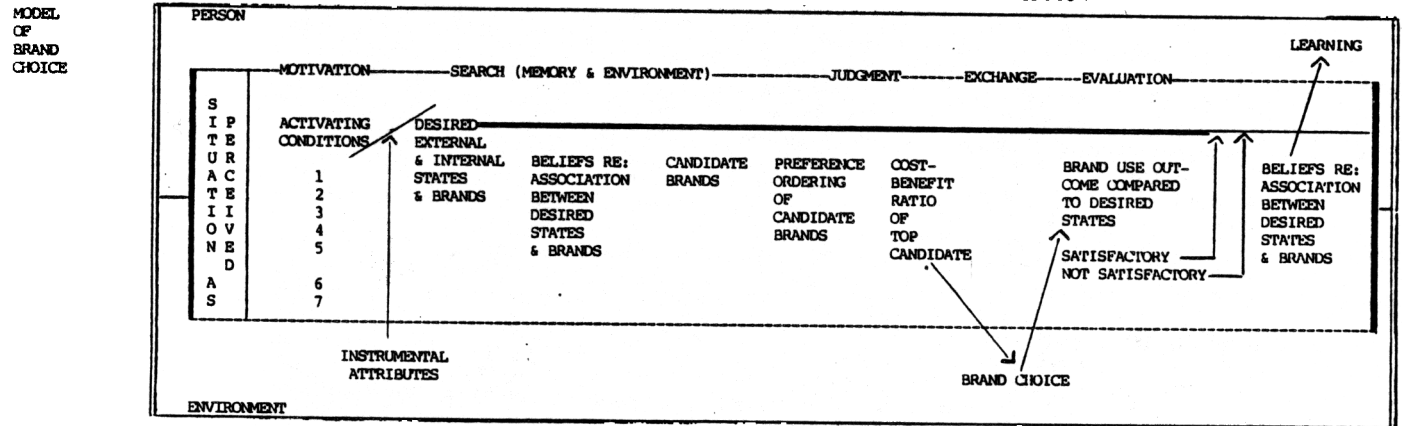
We may now consider how the general model of action may be used to guide an influence agent's preparation for attempted persuasion. As an example of its use in the MODIFY task, consider the marketer's adaptation of the general model of action for the special case of brand

Figure 3 ELEMENTS IN BEHAVIORAL ACTIVATION

- SENSATIONS
- INFORMATION THAT HARM/DANGER IS IMMINENT
- IMAGINED REACTIONS OF OTHERS
- RULES
- BELIEFS (e.g., what is beneficial, harmful)
- FEELINGS OF DISCOMFORT
- IMAGINED BETTER STATE
- WISHES THAT THINGS WERE OTHERWISE

choice and, in particular, two respects in which the rectangle in Figure 4 differs from that in Figure 2: 1) There is a new term, instrumental attributes i.e., attributes of goods/services that will help people realize their desired states, 2) "Brands" is substituted where "actions/objects" appears in the general model. In the general model, the individual is represented as exchanging resources for a changed organismic state -- an exchange that activating change makes necessary. Here, the marketer plans to participate in that exchange and in the individual's attempt to restore an acceptable state. Instead of relying solely on their own efforts, individuals are willing to engage the aid of another -- in this case the marketer -- to effect a counterchange. Such a grounding of the marketer's model in naturally-occurring action is the key to appreciating the difference between the MODIFY task, on the one hand, and STOP and START tasks, on the other. In the present view, marketing is represented as an activity that taps into an ongoing process. It accepts the direction in which naturally-occurring activating conditions have allocated prospects' resources and provides goods/services appropriate to counterchanges that (some) prospects want to make. As the lower portion of Figure 4 shows, marketing's domains of strategic choice (i.e., the traditional four ps that McCarthy, 1978, identifies plus a fifth p, prospects, which the present model suggests), are readily coordinated to the model of brand choice, as are the major kinds of marketing research in everyday use for diagnostic and evaluative purposes.

Figure 4 MARKETER'S ADAPTATION OF THE GENERAL MODEL OF ACTION



DOMAINS OF STRATEGIC CHOICE:	PROSPECTS (POSITIONING DECISION)	PRODUCT	PROMOTION	PRICE	PLACE (PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT)					
DIAGNOSTIC AND EVALUATIVE INFORMATION:			BRAND AWARENESS, BRAND BELIEFS, PERCEPTUAL MAPPING	BRAND CONSIDERATION SET	PREFERENCE RANKING, PURCHASE INTENT RATING, CONSTANT SUM SCALE	VALUE RATINGS	OUT-OF-STOCK REPORTS	SALES DATA	BRAND-IN-USE RATINGS, (PRODUCT TESTING)	BRAND KNOWLEDGE e.g., BRAND BELIEFS among USERS & TRIERS

In their approach to persuasion, then, marketers try to influence action by promising and delivering value to targets (i.e., prospects chosen for attempted influence); "value" takes the form of goods/services whose attributes help targets to effect the counterchanges to which their resources are already allocated. The marketer's business objective is to gain a share of exchanges that yields an acceptable return on investment. In the context of the present model, a straightforward application of the marketing concept -- "Don't sell what you happen to make; make what the customer wants to buy" -- means that marketers accept the direction in which the resources of their prospects are already allocated (what the customer wants), and attempt to achieve their business objective by identifying, promoting the availability of, and delivering, attributes that are appropriate to the action tendencies of targets. It is a form of influence that is directed to the counterchange portion of a behavioral episode (Figure 1), and that operates mainly by affecting availability, costworthiness, and outcome of action (i.e., beliefs, cost-benefit ratio, outcomes in Figures 2, 4).

The STOP Task

In order to understand the behavioral implications of a STOP assignment we must return to consider the general model of action (Figure 2). As regards an action-to-be-stopped, all of the elements of the general model are, presumably, in place: Conditions exist that allocate an individual's resources to securing certain desired states, for whose attainment the individual generates, judges costworthy, and performs, the to-be-stopped action, and evaluates its outcomes to be satisfactory. For a universe of interest, change agents need to obtain information on the actual real world elements that correspond to the terms of the general model. Individuals in the universe of interest may be differentially susceptible to influence directed to various aspects of the general model. Persuaders who use "fear appeals" seem to believe that their targets lack information about the harmful outcomes, which they themselves find so compelling and that, upon targets' being informed of these outcomes, they will judge the action-to-be-stopped as unduly costly (cost-benefit). Disappointing findings in much of the "fear appeals" literature suggest that the proportion of individuals who are thus susceptible to influence may be small. Change agents who are guided by the present model of action are likely to be in possession of information that is custom-tailored to the circumstances of individual targets. By comparison with the typical "fear appeals" experiment, where the message that warns of harmful consequences is cast in very general terms, they may be able to tailor their message in ways more personally relevant to targets.

The present model suggests yet other strategies. There may be some targets who already regard the outcomes of performing the to-be-stopped action as something of a mixed bag (outcome evaluation), in whose case it may be possible to augment the negative elements they already experience. There may be other individuals who would be responsive to being told of some action other than the action-to-be-stopped (beliefs/candidate actions), which they could use upon experiencing the activating conditions and desired states. There doubtless will be some individuals for whom none of these approaches is effective and who would need to be rendered impervious to the behavioral activation (activating conditions) that currently leads to their performing the action-to-be-stopped. As they plan to try to affect one or more behavioral antecedents, change agents should not forget

the option of attempting to change the relevant environment. As a means of cutting down, which is beyond their own power, some cigarette smokers welcome the prohibition by law of smoking in certain places.

The START Task

The general model of action may likewise be helpful in clarifying the ramifications of START assignments. Considering an individual who is not currently performing the recommended action, change agents face the possibility that Figure 2 is blank except for three terms -- person, environment, and actions/objects. The change agent's assignment may well be to instate or recruit, from elements in the person and the person's environment, action tendencies appropriate to the recommended behavior. As in the case of the STOP assignment, people who use "fear appeals" seem to believe that their targets need only to receive information about the harmful consequences of not performing the recommended action, for them to allocate resources to its performance. But, for the majority of nonperformers of the recommended action, chances are that considerably more in the way of personal or environmental change will be necessary.

STOP/START versus MODIFY

Compared to MODIFY, would-be persuaders addressing STOP and START assignments face a problem, in that they often lack a reliable means of affecting the outcomes that targets experience upon performing the recommended action. In this respect, influence agents in MODIFY tasks are better situated. By participating in exchange with the target, their good/service is a means of communicating additional to the symbolic communication of persuasive messages. Accordingly, having done their best to ascertain what the target hopes to obtain by engaging in exchange, they can bend their efforts to ensuring that the target's hopes are realized. We may examine this difference in the context of an example of each of the three persuasive assignments in the substantive domain of animal trapping.

Assume that as producers of trapping equipment we have undertaken the MODIFY assignment of inducing trappers to select our goods rather than those of our competitors. Realistically, this assignment translates to that of inducing some trappers to choose our brands of trapping equipment, supplies, and accessories, over competing offerings. First, we identify the attributes of offerings that would help (some) trappers to attain (some of) their desired states. We work with production management to ensure that goods/services with such attributes are produced. We then arrange for targeted trappers to receive announcements of the availability of our offerings. Assume that we succeed in engaging in exchange with some of our trappers, who now buy and use our brands. Understanding, ahead of time, the significance of users' having at least an adequate experience upon following our recommendation (e.g., to buy/use our wares), we shall have done our best to tailor our brands for our targets, and will have engaged in extensive research to check and recheck the degree to which we are succeeding. Whether or not we are, in fact, successful, we have had a shot at ensuring a satisfactory outcome for our targets i.e., in terms of Figure 2, at influencing outcome (evaluation), as well as pre-action beliefs and assessment (search and judgment).

Consider the contrasting circumstances of change agents in either STOP or START assignments. There, in the absence of the further opportunity for communication that

Delivering a good/service provides, the main burden of behavioral change rests on the persuasive message. For example, change agents may arrange to have trappers receive highly cogent arguments for desisting (STOP) and may even, thereby, induce some trappers to forgo an opportunity for trapping, but they have no means of influencing what the trappers feel like, upon following the recommendation. Similarly, change agents may arrange to have nontrappers receive highly cogent arguments for engaging in antitrapping measures (START) and may even, thereby, induce some nontrappers to do just that, but they have no means of influencing how the nontrappers feel as a consequence. The distinction I emphasize here is this: In MODIFY assignments, whether or not we succeed in securing our objective of a satisfied customer, the good/service that we give in exchange for money provides us with an opportunity to try to do so, because it is directly involved in the outcome that the target experiences upon following the persuasive recommendation. In STOP and START tasks, the likely absence of exchange between change agent and target means that persuaders must rely mainly on disseminating persuasive messages and are left without ready means of attempting to gain control over the outcomes that targets experience upon following their recommendation.

Options for Attempted Influence

The present analysis provides some conceptual pegs on which to hang discussion of the nature of attempted behavioral change. With regard to a particular assignment, we may ask whether it is directed to affecting elements involved in change or in counterchange or, to say the same thing with slightly greater specificity, to affecting action tendencies, on the one hand, or the availability, costworthiness, and outcomes, of action, on the other. With still greater specificity, we may ask to which components of a general model of action (Figure 2) or of the brand choice adaptation of that model (Figure 4), attempted change is directed. With regard to any of these, persuaders may consider attempting to affect elements in the target's environment or in the target, both of which have characteristics that may be further classified as relatively enduring or transitory. Finally, we may consider the nature of the persuasive task, whether it is a MODIFY, STOP, or START assignment.

As suggested above, if we construe action in terms of the simple behavioral episode of Figure 1, then it may make sense to regard as "peripheral," influence that is directed to affecting the manner in which counterchange is effected, and to regard as "fundamental," influence that is directed to affecting whether or not activating change occurs in the first place. Or, to regard as peripheral, influence directed to affecting the availability, costworthiness, and outcomes of action, and as fundamental, influence directed to affecting action tendencies. The general model of action (Figure 2) permits us to take a more differentiated look at the same question. We could regard as "peripheral," influence that is directed to changing an individual's information or beliefs concerning the likelihood that certain actions/objects are associated with attaining desired states (beliefs) and as "fundamental," influence that is directed to changing the elements that constitute activating conditions. That leaves, unassigned to either category, the terms: desired states, preference ordering, cost-benefit ratio, and outcome evaluation. Because they implicate activating conditions as a standard of comparison, is influence directed to such components properly regarded as invol-

involving "fundamental" or "peripheral" change?

The context in which such a question is asked must be clarified. It may exclude changes that occur along with the passage of time. Would-be persuaders must make their plans on the basis of research and analysis that have been conducted at a particular time. Ethical concerns may require that they consider the impact over time of their proposed persuasive efforts. But, from the viewpoint of attempted influence their plans are based on a time-bound description of a substantive domain. Even within such a static context, it is not entirely clear that, where behavior is concerned, we may speak of a standard of comparison, or of reference conditions, that exist in total independence of the availability and costworthiness of means for effecting counterchange. Space limitations require postponing discussion of this provocative subject until another occasion.

One thing is certain. To speak of undifferentiated "behavioral change" does less than justice to the many and qualitatively various antecedents of action, among which the distinction between peripheral and fundamental is both plausible and useful.

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