THE "SELF-PERSUASION PROJECT" ASSIGNMENT

Valerie Schneider

Texts on persuasion deal solely with efforts of the persuader to influence other people. The texts do not describe the self-persuasion situation--one in which the persuader and the persuadee are the same person.[1] Yet the self-persuasion situation, which is generally a self-improvement endeavor concerned either with getting rid of a bad habit or developing a new favorable habit, is a common type of persuasive situation.

Widespread interest in what amounts to self-persuasion is reflected in the success of such books as How to Think and Grow Rich by Napoleon Hill, Psychocybernetics by Maxwell Maltz, How to Win Friends and Influence People by Dale Carnegie, the many articles and books on dieting, physical fitness programs, and suggestions for giving up smoking as well as the success of such self-help groups as A. A., synanon, Recovery, smoke watchers, and weight watchers.

Although self-persuasion is based primarily on audience analysis and appropriate communicative appeals to the self, communicologists seem to have left this field to people who are "laymen" regarding the study of communications. Many of these "laymen" have developed very good self-persuasion ideas for the one topic that they are concerned with due to their personal experience with the problem the self-persuasion project is

designed to solve or because of specialized knowledge in a subject area related to the self-persuasion project. However, I believe that experts in the field of persuasive communication could add further knowledge to this area. Theorists of persuasion would be concerned with differences and similarities between the different topics and types of self-persuasion endeavors. Hence, more systematic, generalized guidelines for this area of communications would result from a concerted study of self-persuasion by scholars in the speech field.

It is in the hope that self-persuasion will become recognized as a valid area of both curricular study and research that I am writing this essay on the subject. My personal experience with self-persuasion relates to an assignment which I have developed for use in my persuasion classes at East Tennessee State University. The assignment which I call "Self-Persuasion Project" is explained during the first week of the quarter so my students can choose a self-improvement project and work on it during most of the term. I stress that it is not the degree of success of the project at the end of the term but the perceptiveness with which they analyze the project in the (approximately four page) written report they turn in during the last week of the quarter that will be graded. Generally thirty to forty percent of the students report that they have started some type of self-persuasive project before beginning the class, and they use the project they have already begun, usually incorporating some new technique ideas that we are

discussing in class.

Generally the most popular subject has been decreasing or giving up smoking, followed by dieting, and physical fitness programs. Other frequent subjects have been better money management, better study habits, and improvement of driving skills. I ask my students to structure their reports around the following seven questions:

(1) What was the specific goal (proposition) of your project?

(2) What motivated you to develop this particular project?

(3) How long have you been working on this project, and will it continue after turning in your report?

(4) What are the major appeals and techniques used in carrying out the project?

(5) How successful is the campaign at the point of writing the report?

(6) What could have been done or will be done to improve the success of the project?

(7) How does self-persuasion compare with efforts to persuade other people?

After stating these questions I read one or two samples of reports that students have done for previous classes. A week or so before the report is due I read another sample report and review specifics of the written report. The day the students turn in their report each gives a brief oral summary regarding the project selected and the techniques utilized.

The seventh question regarding the comparison between self-

persuasion and an effort to persuade others is an important footnote both to the discussion of self-persuasion and to the connection between self-persuasion versus the more usual forms of influence in which the persuader and persuadee(s) are different people.

It surprises me that most students conclude that self-persuasion is harder than trying to persuade others. As we discuss this point, I try to bring out the idea that other people are likely to put up as many objections and rationalizations to our messages as we are likely to do to our own, only we are not as much aware of how others are reacting to our messages. In fact, I go further and suggest that when we are concerned with persuasion as a long-lasting behavioral change the goal is to set up conditions so that as a final step our audience members see for themselves in a freely-made decision that conclusion (proposition) we are trying to present. Hence, self-persuasion by our audience is the final link in our efforts to persuade others.

After studying the results of several terms of this student project as well as reading William James' classic theoretical formulations on habit training, and reading Albert Bandura's definitive work Principles of Behavior Modification, the author feels that the following areas for selection of techniques could tentatively be regarded as the "topoi" for a successful self-persuasion project. When this project

assignment is made each student receives a handout containing these following topics.

THE PROJECT TO DEVELOP A NEW HABIT GENERALLY INCLUDES THE FOLLOWING:

(1) There is an overall plan including the final goal and the length and general procedure for the campaign.

(2) Usually there is a ceremonious marking of the campaign's beginning--marking it on the calendar, a public announcement to others, etc. This serves as a ritual which makes the persuadee more strongly committed to his project.

(3) There are rewards during the campaign for staying with it, perhaps after each day or week of compliance.

(4) Frequent messages to the self are given, reminding oneself of the need and value of completing the project.

THE PROJECT TO GET RID OF A BAD HABIT GENERALLY INCLUDES THE FOUR PRECEDING FACTORS AND THESE AS WELL:

(SINCE IT IS THE MORE DIFFICULT OF THE TWO VARIETIES)

(5) Avoidance of temptation-laden situations is helpful. For instance, a person who is dieting or giving up smoking might avoid parties, at least until the new habit pattern is fairly well established.

(6) It is helpful to make performance of the objectionable habit more difficult. For instance, wrapping rubber bands around cigarette packages, so it is more of a nuisance to get out the cigarettes.

(7) With a deeply-rooted habit it can be especially
helpful to punish oneself for performance of the
objectionable habit. This is the principle behind
drugs like Nikoban and Antabuse. A milder example
is cutting filter tips off of cigarettes so that
the persuadee will taste the tobacco when smoking.

(8) Substitution of a new habit which is as satisfying
as the objectionable habit but less harmful to the
persuadee seems necessary.

(9) It can be helpful to make public statements regarding
one's campaign or to enlist group support to bring
pride and conformity motives into play.[2] (The sociali-
zation involved in group support might also be a
substitute habit; lack of satisfying socialization
is thought to be a significant factor in the development
of addictions.)[3]

In order to detail further the use of most of these
"topoi" (techniques) and to give a clearer idea of the answering
of the seven questions (points of analysis) which structure
the report, a sample student paper is included as a conclusion
to the discussion of the "self-persuasion project."

MORE EFFICIENT LONG DISTANCE PHONE CALLS

A Self-Persuasion Project Reported By Stanley Harrison[4]

For my self-persuasion project I selected the task of trying to restructure my social and business long distance phone conversations in order to reduce the waste which results in unnecessary expenses. This project was particularly necessary this quarter (Spring, 1974) because for the first quarter in four years of college I did not have a part-time job, so there was a need to economize on my part.

In order to more fully comprehend the change required concerning my long distance phone conversation habits, my telephone bill for the month of February, 1974, should be analyzed. The long distance toll calls and the tax on them alone, not including the local service and its tax, amounted to a grand total of $25.03. This bill contained six long distance calls which average to approximately $4.17 per call. If my memory is correct, these conversations lasted from less than the three minute time period to over an hour. It should be noted also that all of those calls were placed within the state of Tennessee which is somewhat cheaper than out-of-state calls.

The major area which required the most improvement was that of long distance social calls. Most of my business calls were usually short and directly to the point with my major expense for them being due to the secretary of the party I was trying to

contact having me wait for some reason which, of course, increased the bill. This I had very little control over.

In the closing days of March, after I had decided to make this my self-persuasion project, I started the formulation of how to conduct this project which I had decided to place into effect on the first day of April and continue, hopefully, indefinitely. My two major points of preparation for this project were to first analyze past business and social long distance telephone conversations for bad habits and then obtain material from the telephone company concerning ways to save money on long distance calls. From these combined, I formulated the new techniques I would attempt to establish as habit in my self-persuasion project.

For both business and social long distance calls I decided to try to limit them in length and number whenever possible and dial direct whenever possible. These became the two basic or primary rules of the project. According to the phone company a direct dialed call would be approximately half of what an operator assisted call would cost which would help reduce the bill.

From my analysis of past business calls, which had always been limited to the day, I established three main rules to follow in the project. First of all, I decided to only place a business call in the morning because I found most businessmen I dealt with to be out of the office or in conference in the afternoons. This

improved the chances of obtaining the businessman I wanted to speak with on the first call, so fewer calls would be needed. Second, I decided not only to state my name but also my location to the secretary who answered the phone so she would know it was a long distance call and hopefully waste less time in connecting me with the one whom I wished to speak with. The last rule was to have any possibly needed data or materials, like pen and paper, with me at the phone so I would not have to waste time getting anything I might need during the conversation. This also produced more efficient business calls.

My real self-persuasion problem arose largely from my social long distance phone conversations. To fully understand this, it is necessary to recognize that all my social long distance calls are directed to a girl I am dating who is presently residing just outside of Nashville. Before I undertook this project I used the phone company's slogan, "Its the next best thing to being there," to its fullest and happily enjoyed many a lengthy and costly long distance conversations.

From my analysis of past social calls I established several more rules to follow for the project; these only concerned social calls, however. First I decided to place a dollar bill beside the phone before I made a call to help remind myself of the expense of the call. Also, beside the phone I decided to place a large pocket watch which I could set and watch to help limit the length of the call.

My analysis of past social calls revealed that part of the length was largely due to being too comfortable when the calls were made. By this I mean during the majority of them I had been laying in the bed and eating or drinking something. This relaxed atmosphere would cause me to lose track of time and talk longer than necessary, besides wasting time eating and not talking. This produced the rules of standing during a social call and not eating or drinking while on the phone.

In order to prevent a waste of time and money while waiting for her to come to the phone after I called, I decided to make it a rule to, in a letter, set a time and date for me to call so she could be close to the phone. My analysis had revealed a waste of money on calls when she had not been at the place I was calling and also a waste while waiting for her to get to the phone.

Probably the best technique I developed to limit the number of social calls to her was the use of the cassette tape recorder which we both own. A cheap tape, which may be used over and over, and a twenty cents postage fee would provide an hour long message which is a great deal better than a letter and much cheaper than a phone call. Of course, the main disadvantage is that this method is a bit one-sided.

Besides the rule of direct dialing, the phone company gave me the idea to establish a rule of making a list of what

topics I wanted to discuss in advance so that my social conversation would include more and actually take less time and be less expensive.

I obtained charts from the phone company which helped me establish the best time to place both in-state and out-of-state calls, so they would be as inexpensive as possible. From the charts I learned that the customer-dialed long distance calls are divided into four rate periods: day, evening, week-end, and night; and the operator-assisted calls divided into two rate periods: day and evening. The day calls are the most expensive, evening calls lower, week-end calls are still lower, and night (11:00 P.M. to 8:00 A.M.) calls the lowest. Also, I learned that the day rates were lower on the five holidays of New Year's, July Fourth, Labor Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. With this information I established the final rule for my project, it being to make a social call only when the night rates were in effect.

At the time this paper was produced my self-persuasion project had been in effect for almost two months. In my opinion, this project exhibits a highly effective rate of success, one of which I am very proud. The phone bill for the first month of this project recorded only two long distance phone calls. The long distance toll calls and the tax on them amounted to $3.14 which is an average of approximately $1.57 per call. This bill was approximately one-eighth of the bill for the month of February which is a marked improvement. The bill for the second month

of this project, not yet received, will be higher than for the first due to several necessary business calls, but all established rules for the project are still being followed.

Although there may be some suggestions which could have improved my project, I can not honestly find any methods that would improve the success rate other than find someone else to pay my phone bill, which would really make my bill less expensive for me.

Through this project I discovered that self-persuasion was actually more difficult than previously anticipated. The element of rationalization was a constant threat to my project and one I had to guard against. I found it to be a great deal easier to persuade others because it would not be a constant factor such as I encountered in this project. I would usually only influence others about one factor that would pass, but this project had a continuing factor. I concluded that I would rather try to influence another individual than myself.

NOTES

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1

When the term self-persuasion is used at all in textbooks, it merely refers to stronger self-commitment on the part of the persuader as he reiterates his message to others. See Thomas Schiedel, Persuasive Speaking (Glenview, Ill., Scott Foresman and Co., 1967), p. 86. However, for an example of a recent article which uses the term self-persuasion in the same sense as this essay see Louise McPherson, "Communication Techniques of the Women's Liberation Front," Today's Speech, 21 (Spring, 1973), p. 33. The author refers to the need for women to overcome the habit of a negative stereotyped view of their role in society as "self-persuasion."

2

William James, Habit (New York: Henry, Holt, and Co., 1890); James discussed specific techniques in pages 55-60 of this sixty-three page cutting from his longer work Psychology: Briefer Course. His suggestions are equivalent to topoi 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, and 9. In addition he recommends immediate cessation of a bad habit rather than gradual tapering off; Albert Bandura, Principles of Behavior Modification (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1969), pp. 217-554. Suggestions equivalent to 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 are given since Bandura's framework is a combination of punishment of undesirable behavior, substitution of more constructive habits, and reward of these constructive habits.

3

William Glasser, Mental Health or Mental Illness? Psychiatry For Practical Action (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 64-67.

4

This report is printed here with the permission of Mr. Harrison who is a 1974 graduate of ETSU and is now enrolled at the same institution in a master's degree program in city management.

WHATELY ON PRESUMPTION AND BURDEN OF PROOF

David Walker

In his <u>Elements of Rhetoric</u>, Richard Whately presents principles concerning presumption and burden of proof which continue to influence argumentation theorists. Rather than furnishing a practical tool to enable the advocate and defender to advance their causes, Whately's system actually bears evidence of being an arbitrarily conceived system for justifying his own religious beliefs. This paper will initially outline Whately's basic position on presumption and burden of proof, and then will focus on the elements that indicate the arbitrary nature of the system.

At the onset of a case, Whately declares, one should always decide on which side lies the presumption and which side bears the burden of proof. Presumption is "such a pre-occupation of the ground, as implies that it must stand good till some sufficient reason is adduced against it; in short, that the burden of proof lies on the side of him who would dispute it."[1] If a person has the presumption on his side, and can but refute all the arguments brought against his case, he has gained at least a temporary victory.[2] To illustrate his definition, Whately reminds the reader that every man is to be considered innocent until his guilt has been established. The burden of proof would rest with he who doubts his innocence. Likewise, Whately argues, there is a presumption in favor of any individuals in actual possession of property. Although they may not be the rightful owners, they will retain the property until some claim against them has been established.[3]