

Undermining Self-regulation Ability as a Means of Reducing Resistance to Persuasion

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Resistance to persuasion depends both on features of the attitude under attack (e.g., its accessibility or importance) as well as characteristics of the message recipient (e.g., his or her motivation and ability to resist the persuasive appeal). Although much is known about characteristics of the attitude that make it more resistant to change, less is known about factors that influence individuals' ability to resist counterattitudinal messages. In particular, the extent to which engaging in counterargument requires and is influenced by self-regulatory ability has not yet been explored.

The most studied and most well understood means for resisting persuasion involves generating counterarguments. Contemporary research has identified a variety of individual and situational variables that can influence resistance to persuasion by affecting the generation of counter-arguments. For example, people form more favorable attitudes when they are in a positive than in a neutral mood (Petty et al. 1993) and when the message is presented by a source of high rather than low credibility (Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994). In this research, we sought to identify a new variable, ego-depletion, that could, instead of serving as a cue or biasing factor, interfere with individuals' ability to resist weak and specious counterattitudinal messages.

Research on self-regulation suggests that self-regulatory ability is a finite resource that can be diminished with exertion (Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister 1998). This state has been called ego depletion. Engaging in tasks requiring self-regulation in one situation (e.g., resisting a tempting plate of chocolate chip cookies) can make it more difficult to subsequently complete a seemingly unrelated self-regulatory task (e.g., holding a hand grip for as long as possible). These types of tasks are proposed to be depleting because they require one to effortfully override one's initial or default responses (i.e., reaching for the cookie and letting go of the hand grip once it becomes difficult). Interestingly, these types of results are not due simply to the amount of effort required to complete the task. For example, avoiding thinking about a forbidden topic has been found to reduce subsequent self-regulatory ability, whereas solving equally challenging multiplication problems has not (Muraven et al. 1998).

Resisting persuasion is another type of task that could draw on limited self-regulatory resources, and therefore, resistance processes could be impaired by previous self-regulation tasks. Much work on self-regulation suggests self-regulation failure can increase acquiescence (Baumeister and Tice 1988), and acquiescence is often a passive and low-effort response strategy (Krosnick 1991). Counterarguing persuasive messages involves actively processing information in the message, retrieving or generating contradictory information, and applying it in order to refute the message. All of these processes require active control processes in order to defend the pre-existing attitude from attack. These processes meet the criteria used to identify processes involving self-regulation—specifically, they involve engaging processes to reach a desired state (Carver and Scheier 1998) and overcoming a default or natural tendency (i.e., to agree with the supported position; Baumeister 1996). If counterargument requires self-regulatory ability, then engaging in self-regulatory tasks that deplete such a resource should impair the ability of individuals to subsequently resist

counterattitudinal appeals. This should occur primarily in those conditions under which counterargument would normally occur, namely when the arguments fail to provide compelling support for the advocated position. The present research tested these hypotheses.

Participants engaged in an initial task designed to deplete or not deplete their regulatory resources. This task involved detecting the letter "e" on a page using a rule that was learned and habitual (i.e., crossing out every "e"; non-depleting) or using a different rule that required overruling previously established habits (i.e., crossing out only selected "e"s after practicing crossing out every "e"; depleting). Following the depletion manipulation, participants read a message in favor of a counterattitudinal policy. Within the message, argument quality was manipulated such that some participants read strong and compelling arguments and other participants read weak and specious arguments.

Results indicated that resistance to the message was lower among individuals who had previously engaged in the depleting self-regulation task, but only for the weak arguments in the message. Cognitive responses showed the same pattern and mediated participants' attitude formation. Additional analyses showed that participants reported putting equal effort into reading the message. Furthermore, their perceptions of the difficulty of, enjoyability of, interestingness of, effort toward, and fatigue after the depletion task did not account for the results.

These findings suggest that engaging in counterargument requires self-regulatory resources and indicate that controlling attitude formation and resistance processes may draw on the same limited self-regulatory resources as other tasks involving willpower. Additionally, they point to a new means of altering the cognitive response profiles and attitudes of message recipients and lowering resistance to advertisements and persuasive messages. These effects occur primarily when arguments are weak and specious and are consistent with the notion that depletion of self-regulatory resources inhibits the ability to generate unfavorable cognitive responses to counterattitudinal messages.

These findings expand understanding of how situational factors can affect the generation of cognitive responses. Previous research has shown that factors such as distraction in the immediate environment or time pressure can interfere with the processing of persuasive messages. This research shows that, even when individuals are free to take their time to read persuasive messages in a non-distracting environment, they may still lack the ability to accurately assess the merit of and reject weak and specious arguments. Hence, the effects of situational variations may sometimes move beyond the immediate environment and carry over to subsequent ones.

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