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A prequel to influence

Review of '*Pre-suasion: A revolutionary
way to influence and persuade*'

by Robert Cialdini

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“I have with me two gods, persuasion and compulsion.”

~ Themistocles of Athens (as cited by Andrews, 1993, p. 894)

Persuasion is an ancient art, closely associated with the idea of democratic rule. Themistocles, it may be recalled, predates Aristotle. He (Themistocles) used the god of compulsion to repel Xerxes and the Persian fleet, but he had to use the god of persuasion to get his fellow Athenians to rally behind his plan for how to do. A fleet had to be built and the city had to be evacuated, and that was costly.

In the main, social psychology is dedicated to the service of the god of persuasion. Gordon Allport (1954) memorably defined social psychology as the study of the influence of others – real or imagined – has on our thinking, feeling, and behaving. With this definition, the study of compliance took center stage in research, and no one has contributed more to it than Bob Cialdini. With his 1984 book *Influence*, Cialdini set an example of how social psychological findings can be selected, organized, and communicated to a wide audience who would rather follow the pied pipers of the motivational speaker industry than contemplate, internalize, and apply the lessons wrested from subtle experimental design and statistical analysis. In *Influence*, Cialdini showed that compliance can be elicited with the use of six simple principles: self-consistency (as stimulated, for instance, by the foot-in-the-door effect), reciprocity (e.g., the door-in-the-face technique), liking (as anticipated by Dale Carnegie), social proof (as shown by Solomon Asch), authority (Stanley Milgram), and finally scarcity (as known by all advertisers whose “sale ends Sunday”).

A gifted experimentalist, Cialdini has always kept a foot in the real world. He coined the term “full-cycle psychology” (Cialdini, 1980) to characterize his method of learning from influence agents in the field and then putting their strategies to the test in the laboratory. The

results of his labors then flowed back to the public in his books, papers, and workshops. Professional influencers could refine their tactics given the research results and the rest of us could arm ourselves against unwanted attempts at manipulation.

Then and now, Cialdini has wrestled with the ethical implications of his work. To support the validity of an influence technique scientifically is to hand ammunition to the influencers and protection to their targets. More than most social scientists, Cialdini has given this dialectic careful thought. He knows that the blade of influence has two edges. Compliance comprises both action and reaction. Cialdini comes across as a thoughtful, moral person. One might even say he worries too much.

Influence was a hit, although Cialdini notes that there was a bit of sleeper effect. Central to the book's appeal was its organization. Cialdini methodically worked his way through the list of six principles, which was short enough to hold the readers attention and motivation. Cialdini practices what he preaches. But where does one go after a bestseller? The public wanted more and Cialdini had us on tenterhooks for 32 years. He set a high bar for himself, not wanting to write until he could produce a work of equal significance. He is, we may assume, aware of the risk of contrast effects and regression to the mediocre. During the long incubation period some intra-psychoic conflicts must have occurred. Cialdini confesses to an act of self-handicapping; he squandered a sabbatical semester that he had intended to dedicate to writing the next book but ended up teaching business students the art and science of influence.

But then he found – perhaps by *pre-suading* himself – a way to extract a second book from himself. Writing a popular book, he illuminates, comes easier if done in a place that reminds the writer of the regular people who will read it. A view of a bustling street will do.

Scientific papers are more efficiently birthed in the confines of a book and manuscript filled office with a picture of Gordon Allport on the wall.

I admire Bob Cialdini for his life's work. He is a first-rate laboratory and field scientist who has been able to popularize our field's fruits without cheapening them. His new book "*Pre-suasion*" does not disappoint when compared with other popular books on social behavior, but – and I have to say this – it does not reach the high bar set by *Influence*.

Why not? Recall that the beauty of *Influence* was its organization around six principles. *Pre-suasion* has no such organization. Instead, *Pre-suasion* comes down to one principle: the war of compliance is won or lost before it begins (*pace* Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, Machiavelli *et al.*). The key is effective stage setting in general and the suave manipulation of the target's attention in particular. Cialdini explains that "the basic idea of pre-suasion is that by guiding preliminary attention strategically it is possible for a communicator to move recipients into agreement with a message before they experience it" (p. 132). This principle moves the art of getting compliance into the vicinity of stage magic, where the (mis)direction of the audience's attention is the *sine qua non* (Cialdini's ethical qualms are coming into focus).

Compared with *Influence*, *Pre-suasion* is more cognitive and less behaviorist. Whereas *Influence* drew its energy and explanatory power from reflex arcs (*click-whirr!*) and social norms (reciprocity, authority, conformity etc.), *Pre-suasion* is about the associations among ideas and the claim that these associations can be activated without the person's awareness.

Cialdini carefully explores the role of awareness, or rather the role of attention and its constraints. Whereas working memory can keep about four units or chunks at the ready, focal

attention can operate only on one unit at a time (Oberauer & Hain, 2012). He (or she) who controls attention, controls persuasion. As a result, persuasion is no longer to be understood fully as a change in the person effectuated by the persuader (at least not necessarily), but also as the timely elevation of attention to what the persuader seeks. The material is already there. “Lying in low-level wait within each of us are units of experience that can be given sudden standing and force if we just divert our attention to them” (p. 122), Cialdini writes somewhat clumsily. This recasting of persuasion as an interaction between external invitations or “openers” (frames, anchors, primes, mindsets) and internal schemas and associations distinguishes *Pre-suasion* from the more social-behaviorist *Influence*. Once attention is drawn to these openers, their importance and causal significance will be overestimated. The reason is the reverse inference that if important and causally potent things demand attention, it is probably the case that any current object of attention is important and causally significant (Krueger, 2017).

What are the attention-grabbing stimuli we should use (or be wary of)? Cialdini reaches into the social-psychological toolbox and retrieves sex, violence, other things the individual ego cares about, unfinished business (*pace* Zeigarnik), and the mysterious (as foreshadowed by Freud’s (1919) “uncanny”). These openers work in different ways, thus complicating Cialdini’s task to integrate them conceptually. Fear appeals, for example, must be accompanied by recommendations about how to avoid adversity (which is an old idea) and allusions to the mysterious can be used to develop a narrative persuasive arc. The former is simpler than the latter, which Cialdini breaks down into a process of six discrete steps. Amid the discussion of how attention can be drawn to the message by appropriate openers, the idea emerges that in order to get attention, one may need to first disrupt it, that is, take it

away from wherever it happens to be at the pre-pre-persuasive moment. Cialdini tells the instructive backstory of Pavlov's dog who introduced us to the orienting response; the dog stopped salivating when a novel stimulus came on the scene. A waggish professor whose name I do not recall once wrote the word SEX on the blackboard. The students oriented, and the professor could get on with his lecture.

Openers work by disrupting or redirecting attention and then dock onto associations that "already lie in wait." We think because we link, Cialdini rhymes. He does not provide a full-blown review of psychological associationism all the way back to Locke, but highlights two principles, metaphor and fluency, and one contextual element, geography. Metaphors (and analogies; Hofstadter, 2001) help us understand concepts, but they can become the tools of exploitation in the hands of pre-suaders. Fluency, the ease with which we recognize or comprehend a point ("thinking is linking" and other "cognitive poetics") is also a signal of truth (Hertwig, Herzog, Schooler, & Reimer, 2008), and it can also be exploited (in reverse-inference fashion). The contextual element of "persuasive geographies," seems especially central to the book's mission and a privileged source of Cialdini's inspiration. He advises the *pre-suader*, even the self-*pre-suader*, to select or shape an environment that best affords influence at little additional cost. His own experience of writing for different audiences in different venues is illustrative.

In the last third of the book, Cialdini goes beyond the exploration of the pre-suasive effects of attention and association. In one chapter [10] he maps the six classic *Influence* strategies onto three basic psychological principles: (i) the cultivation of positive association (for the strategies of reciprocity and liking), (ii) uncertainty reduction (social proof, authority), and (iii) action motivation (consistency, scarcity). It remains unclear, however,

whether these three superordinate principles are *pre*-suasive. In the next two chapters, Cialdini explores the role of identity by distinguishing between “being together” [11] and “acting together” [12]. Social cohesion along with the experience (of “*wenness*”) and the practice thereof (e.g., by synchronized activity) have fascinated social scientists since the days of Gustave Le Bon (2009/1895) and Floyd Allport (1924). What’s new here? Cialdini notes that identity cannot be reduced to notions of similarity, which already played a prominent role in *Influence*. Identity cuts more deeply psychologically. If a *pre*-suader can activate the idea of identity and its favorable associates, audiences will open themselves to the message. Yet, the discussion of this important topic seems oddly out of place, in part because Cialdini can’t quite decide whether (the appeal to a shared) identity is to be added as the seventh technique to the classic list, or whether it primarily illuminates the story of *pre*-suasion.

In the end, Cialdini takes an unexpected turn by asking whether and how the *pre*-suasive techniques he has “revealed” may lead to lasting change. Here he may be overreaching. The very notion of *pre*-suasion is closely tied to the idea of fragility. Attention is fleeting and the fit between an opener and a “lying-in-wait” personal readiness to receive a particular message is even more fleeting. Yet, the desire to effectuate lasting attitude and behavior change provides perennial motivation for the study of applied psychology. Cialdini notes that lasting change is possible, but that it is depends on personal commitments that are active, effortful, and voluntary. One is reminded of the old joke about the psychotherapist and the light-bulb. The light-bulb must want to change. The question on the table, though, is whether it can be *pre*-suaded to have this desire.

Throughout the book, there is a tension between the provision of more examples, research findings, and anecdotes to broaden the base of the original *Influence* on the one hand, and a progressive build-up of a new paradigm on the other hand. Much of the added material (one hand) is interesting and useful. Cialdini lists about 1,000 sources and provides 112 endnotes to guide the avid reader toward further study. Many stories in the text proper, however, struggle to be relevant (e.g., Sonja Lyubomirsky's theory of happiness), and many go on too long (e.g., the historical tale of Chiune Sugihara, who saved thousands of Jews from destruction by issuing visas to Japanese-held territories). The effort to achieve a break with "the dominant scientific mode of social influence" (p. 25) (other hand) might have been more effective if that dominant mode were spelled out more fully. In particular, the reader is left wondering how *pre*-suasion stacks up to various dual-process models of influence (Chaiken & Trope, 1999). This is not too much to ask. *Pre*-suasion is advertised with the promise of achieving a revolutionary shift in our thinking about persuasion and with the promise of surpassing the author's first great effort. Judged by these high standards, *Pre*-suasion falls short, which is not to say that it should have no place in your library.¹

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¹ And then there's post-suasion in the digital world. Since I bought a copy of Bob's book on Amazon, a sponsored link, featuring Amy Cuddy's (an enthusiastic endorser) smiling face intrudes into my attentional space from the margin of my Facebook news stream. Being a reactant sort, I feel being nudged toward buyer's remorse. *Caveat pre-emptor*.

² Do not be misled by wikipedia's biographical entry for Floyd Allport, which gives "Chocolate Muffins" as his publisher (as seen on October 26, 2016).

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