

## Chapter 5: Prevalence of influence methods

This chapter uses ideas about why people select particular influence methods to answer two questions:

- If reason and fairness are so effective, why does it seem that tricks and abuses of power are common?
- What factors predict the effort needed to keep a discussion reasoned and fair?

### Why not reason and fairness always?

It can seem that manipulation (use of tricks and abuses of power) is common. This is partly an illusion created by the extra attention that manipulative methods get but is also because people sometimes use them despite the superiority of reason and fairness.

### Actual and apparent prevalence

The apparent and actual prevalence and effectiveness of different influence methods are almost certainly very different. Specifically, reason and fairness are quietly effective and applied to most issues but manipulation generates noise and heat, and takes longer, often to little effect.

In our everyday discussions we investigate, think through, discuss, and decide many issues with reason and fairness. Problems come up, we talk about them reasonably, and we move on. Engineering problems get solved, business plans are revised, picnics are organized, and so on and on, mostly with little drama. However, occasionally somebody wants more than is fair or tries to get their way using tricks or by abusing power. Then there is often a protracted argument, tempers flare, people turn their attention to the battle and the matter may drag on for days. Consequently, this relatively ineffective form of persuasion gets much attention and time.

Similarly, on social media logical, informed posts that reach a clear conclusion tend to get little attention – perhaps a handful of ‘likes’ and a reply like ‘Well said.’ In comparison, a post pushing for more than is fair or using manipulation (often ridicule, intimidation, or trick arguments) gets many ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’, often sparks a long series of replies, and gains attention over several hours or days. The website’s managers and other users see the higher user ‘engagement’ as a result of these bad-tempered rows and are often pleased by the high numbers of comments and ratings. Most comments will be tricks and attacks, making them seem the most

popular types when, in reality, the most effective posts (per item) are those few that are reasonable and fair.

Likewise, if the matter is important enough then news media occasionally report on good decisions by politicians and others reached through reason and fairness, usually without much fuss. In contrast, news media often report at length and persistently when something unfair is being contested using manipulation. Even trivial rows can dominate the headlines and bulletins for days. Online journalists can see that when they post a fair story about a sensible decision reached through informed, cooperative discussion the reaction online is much less than if they post a twisted story, or a story about bitter conflict. This encourages them to write more about conflict and even stoke conflict by the stories they write.

Because of these mechanisms, manipulative methods tend to get a lot of attention even though they are not used on many issues and are poor for reaching conclusions, let alone good ones.

Nevertheless, tricks and abuses of power do occur often. Why?

## Copying

We tend to copy the behaviours of others, particularly those on our side of a dispute now and in the past. We copy the words used, points made, themes, and stances taken. So, without much thought, we tend to copy influence methods used.

E.g. Opponents of Prime Minister Boris Johnson claimed on countless occasions that he could not be trusted. It may have been a conscious choice by a campaign strategist at some point, perhaps a rival in the Conservative Party or Labour Party. However, almost certainly most people who have repeated this attack did not get their instructions from a campaign strategist; they just saw others use the tactic and copied.

## Selfishness

Sometimes people know they are cheating to get more than is fair. Criminals in court who are truly guilty have tried to get away with it. Sales representatives for uncompetitive products and services have resorted to lies and bribes.

On other occasions people who know they are cheating to get more than is fair will support (e.g. by funding) someone else who sincerely believes something untrue. For example, a large company might fund researchers who believe the company's activities are not harmful even though they are. Those researchers develop an emotional and career commitment to promoting a particular result and this leads them to select evidence, pursue particular lines of inquiry, and challenge other research in a systematic way that resists the advance of truth.

E.g. In the 1950s early evidence suggested a link between eating sugar and coronary heart disease. In the 1960s and 1970s the sugar industry funded research that systematically cast doubt on the role of sugar while laying blame on fat. In this way, attempts to combat the health effects of sugar were delayed. It may have been that the researchers and perhaps even sugar company executives sincerely held their beliefs, at least at first. As time went on and the evidence of

harm built up there was probably a time when the executives, and even the scientists, realized their activities were costing lives. Details on the way research was skewed are given by Kearns, Schmidt, and Glantz (2016).

## Unreasonably held beliefs

There are also people who hold factually incorrect beliefs for flawed reasons. Examples include people born into a religion and teenagers pulled into a political ideology by their desire to fit in with friends.

To promote these ideas they may use tactics that were effective on them, which is again copying. Also, as they explore new tactics, they may shy away from good reasons that undermine their beliefs, assuming they are mistaken, and prefer arguments that reach the expected conclusions. Accepting a correct line of reasoning could disrupt an entire network of their cherished beliefs and, potentially, lose them social contacts and support if they found they could no longer go along with their old beliefs.

## Mistaken beliefs about influence methods

Another reason for not sticking to reason and fairness is the mistaken belief that other methods are more persuasive. Many apparently authoritative books and papers argue for other methods. Typically, these do not consider the risks of backlash or arguing for the wrong conclusion.

The manipulative behaviour we see others using is 'social proof' that these methods are effective and accepted. Social proof is the evidence provided by many people seeming to agree on something and is not really proof at all.

For some people the preference for manipulation may go back many years, even to childhood.

## Mistaken beliefs about decision-makers

RF/FP is ineffective when:

- the decision-makers are selfish and powerful; and
- will not listen to reasons that suggest alternative actions that would be better, even from their selfish point of view; and
- the influencer has little or no ability to use power fairly; and
- there is no higher authority to turn to.

These are narrow conditions and rarely met in the UK. More often, people mistakenly believe they are met when, in reality, decision-makers are less selfish and more open to reason than they seem (perhaps with variations between people), influencers have more legitimate power than they realize, or higher authorities are more approachable than assumed.

## Moral self-justification

I suspect most people think reason and fairness are the right way to influence but still lapse occasionally. When they lapse they often excuse themselves so they can still see themselves as good people, perhaps thinking that:

- it's not really a cheat/trick; I just have good social skills or I'm just making a point – though selectively;
- the end is enough to justify this tiny cheat or abuse of power; or
- the other person probably did it first.

## Predicting effort needed

When we prepare for a discussion, several indicators should shape our expectations about how much effort will be needed to keep the discussion reasonable and fair.

### Directly relevant past experiences

The most obvious indicator is how similar discussions have unfolded in the past. Is good influencing characteristic of the topic, the participants, or the occasion?

E.g. Committees that meet regularly to discuss a slowly changing range of issues give participants plenty of opportunities to learn what to expect, even down to particular arguments by particular people on particular issues. The overall level of discussion and adherence to reason and fairness can be learned well.

Sometimes the track record of a participant is most indicative. Some people are such consistent tricksters that we can call them sophists. Today this word refers to people who use cleverly constructed but false arguments, sometimes combined with honest arguments. It can seem that, no matter how clear, logically correct, and conclusive your analysis the skilled and determined sophist will behave as if nothing conclusive has been said. The sophist will calmly keep talking, weaving a web of superficially plausible, rather confusing claims. Consequently, although they rarely win an argument they avoid appearing to have lost. Their supporters often claim victory even as most people are shaking their heads in wonderment and frustration. The abilities of a skilled sophist allow them to extend a debate so that no clear result is achieved and that is often all they need.

E.g. Anjem Choudary is a former lawyer who went to prison in the UK for inviting support for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. This is probably a tiny part of the terrorism he had been involved with, at least rhetorically. He had clearly stated in public on many occasions his wish for the UK to be put under a caliphate governed by Islamic law. Freedom and democracy are not good for us according to Anjem Choudary. However, this did not stop him criticizing the UK as undemocratic, complaining that British Muslims are oppressed, that he was being demonized, and that Muslims are not free in the UK.

His approach to discussions and interviews was consistent and predictable. He dismissed awkward questions by saying they were irrelevant or started a long

statement that never answered the question. Inconvenient facts put to him were dismissed as lies. Whatever he or his supporters had done he preferred to talk about the limitless evil doings of the British and American governments. He could and did talk at length and with impressive vocabulary on the unfair debating tactics of the British government, interviewers, and Muslim opponents.

Choudary's ability to keep talking and respond in a superficially plausible way to challenges was incredible. (As examples, see Anjem Choudary with Jeremy Paxman, 2010, and with Cathy Newman, 2013.) This seems to have pleased his supporters but was bizarre and exasperating to most other people. Perhaps his greatest achievement is to have incited criminal violence so often without prosecution.

E.g. In his dedication to making Christianity seem reasonable, William Lane Craig works hard to deploy a range of sophisticated arguments. However, his main approach is an intellectually styled Gish Gallop. His answers to questions are usually long and complicated, yet seemingly patient and reasonable thanks to his plausible manner. He's usually subtle but if you stop and think carefully and critically you should be able to find a trick or two in almost any 60-second recording of William Lane Craig debating.

Indeed, the very high frequency of his subtle tricks is one reason why he is so difficult to deal with in debates. There simply isn't time to explain and debunk them all. Fortunately, William Lane Craig is consistent. People who agree to public debates with him should know exactly what to expect.

## The participants

Even when no similar discussion is available to provide historical evidence, some characteristics of participants and the expected discussion can be predictive.

### *The number of participants*

The sheer number of participants drives the effort needed to keep a discussion reasoned and fair. The greater the number of participants the greater the expected number of people who will try a manipulative tactic (or would if not discouraged). Having more participants also increases the probability of at least one person trying a manipulative tactic at some point, other things being equal. This means you will need more people pushing for reason and fairness throughout or those who do will have to push harder.

It is very hard for a single participant in a large meeting to keep the rest of a group focused on reason and fairness, even if that single participant is the chairperson of a formal meeting. Usually, more people are needed.

### *The cognitive abilities of participants*

Research has shown that the ability to think logically and critically (but not necessarily the determination) is somewhat correlated with general cognitive ability and numeracy in particular (e.g. Stanovich, 2009). If the discussion involves only

very intelligent people, they are more likely to have the ability to think logically but not necessarily the determination or even willingness to do so.

A person can also increase their ability to discuss particular issues using only reason and fairness if they work at it. With experience and coaching a person can improve.

### *Preferences of participants*

Research has shown that some aspects of logical, critical thinking are not correlated with general cognitive ability (e.g. Stanovich, 2009). They are perhaps more driven by our determination to focus on reason and fairness. Some people are more determined than others.

Not everyone uses reason and fairness as their main or only approach to influencing others. Probably only a very small percentage of the population, even in the United Kingdom, sticks to reason and fairness all or nearly all the time. More often people regularly use reason and fairness on some matters but not others. For example, an excellent mathematician might use rationality less often when talking about politics. Some people seem almost incapable of applying reason and fairness to anything and do not use them for influence.

E.g. Magicians today are people who do conjuring tricks in a context where everyone knows it's a trick that baffles, amuses, and impresses us. Uri Geller maintains that he has genuine psychic powers. He became famous for bending spoons on television. With the camera close up, he would gently stroke the neck of the spoon and very slowly it would bend and eventually often break off. I remember seeing it as a child and it seemed real at the time. Geller's extraordinary determination to maintain the pretence of being a genuine psychic has been tested severely.

Magician James Randi is famous for exposing fake psychics. Randi guessed that Geller was secretly bending the spoon before the trick to fatigue the metal. In 1973 he collaborated with Johnny Carson, host of The Tonight Show, to expose Geller. Geller came on expecting to give an interview but not perform. He was surprised and visibly unhappy to see, as he came on camera, a table in front of his seat loaded with small metallic objects including spoons. He was asked if he would demonstrate his powers. He delayed and made excuses. He complained about being misled about the content of the show. He said he was too tired. He tried but could not bend anything. (Uri Geller, 1973)

The interesting part of this devastating demonstration of fakery is that his career was enhanced by it, not ruined. Geller has faced criticism repeatedly but has an answer for just about everything, occasionally backed by legal action. As an illusionist, he's good; as a sophist, he's excellent and incredibly persistent.

### *Group associations and preferences*

Some groups persistently use alternatives to reason and fairness for persuasion.

A group can gain greater influence if members work together. Working together and being organized is not itself wrong but many tactics groups use today are

manipulative, through deception and other means. For example, they can make it seem that many people support a position when only a well-organized minority does.

(The problems posed by these manipulative organized groups and some ideas for tackling them are discussed in Chapter 11.)

People do not have to be formally linked to a group to support it and work with it. When people see someone doing something they agree with they will sometimes join in without explicit planning or organization. If they join in with unreasonable, unfair persuasion activity then they are autonomous accomplices in that bad behaviour. The result can look like a huge conspiracy even though nobody conspired. A manipulative, organized group may be small but many of its supporters may become autonomous accomplices, greatly increasing the impact of the group. Unreasonable groups can themselves become autonomous accomplices, mobilizing massive numbers of people.

## The issues considered

Obviously, some topics tend to spark more bitter controversy than others. Religion, politics, and unfair discrimination are three topics strongly linked to frequent use of trick arguments and bullying.

## The discussion format

A formalised, controlled discussion with a chairperson is likely to be better behaved than a drunken free-for-all.