

Chapter 16: The Ethics of Persuasion

Key Terms and Concepts

the duty to persuade ethically	ethics and the use of threats
prosocial nature of persuasion	ethics and the use of fear appeals
analogy to persuasion as a tool	culture of fear
the role of motives in persuasion	ethics and the use of emotional appeals
ticking bomb scenario	ethics and the use of ingratiation
ethics and central versus peripheral processing	ethics and the use of visual persuasion
ethics and cultural preferences in persuasion	social responsibility
indirect and direct strategies	ethics and the use of subliminal persuasion
codes of ethics for different professions	approaches to ethics (Box 16.1)
characteristics of ethical influence; intentionality, conscious awareness, free choice/free will, language and symbolic action	ends versus means
persuaders as lovers	consequentialism/teleological ethic
seducers and rapists versus lovers	deontological systems/duty ethics
respect	amoralism and/or Machiavellianism
equality	situational ethics/relativism
tolerance	universalism
bunglers, smugglers, and sleuths	egalitarianism/Golden Rule
ethics and credibility	free market ethics/caveat emptor
ethics of persuasion involving children and/or vulnerable receivers	utilitarianism
ethics and the use of deception	virtue ethics

Chapter Summary

- I. The power to persuade carries with it a corresponding duty to persuade ethically.
 - A. Persuasion is not the antithesis of cooperation.
 - 1) Persuasion can be a prosocial method of addressing and/or resolving perceived differences.
 - 2) Persuasion can and does produce mutually satisfactory outcomes.
 - 3) Persuasion can be likened to a tool, such as a hammer. The tool itself isn't good or bad, but rather the end or purpose for which the tool is used.

- II. Gass & Seiter's position is that the motives color the means. Table 16.1 illustrates how the "good" and "bad" motives color the means of persuasion.
 - A. A proper assessment of the ethics of a given influence attempt can't be made without considering the persuader's motives.
 - B. The quality of a persuader's motives tends to "rub off" on the strategies used.
 - C. Even highly coercive strategies may be justified, given the right set of motives.

- III. Determinations about the ethics of persuasion are inherently culture-bound.
 - A. The Western preference for linear, rational thought places greater emphasis on central processing.
 - B. In other cultures, peripheral processing might be considered more appropriate (indirect or direct strategies, fitting in, saving face, etc.).

- IV. Persuasion researchers are ill-equipped to answer ethical questions regarding various persuasive strategies.
 - A. Their focus is on how and why persuasion works, not what persuasion should be used for.
 - B. The inability of persuasion researchers to differentiate good and bad applications of persuasion is similar to the dilemmas faced by researchers in other fields.
 - C. Persuasion researchers are more interested in knowledge for its own sake. They merely want to know how it works.

- V. A number of ethical implications can be seen as emanating from Gass & Seiter's model of persuasion.
 - A. A reliance on an "intent" criterion to define persuasion may let persuaders off the hook for harmful, unintended consequences of their persuasion.
 - B. Persuasion which takes place with the conscious awareness of the parties involved tends to be more ethical than persuasion that does not.
 - C. Persuasive attempts that allow persons to make free choices are clearly ethically superior to those that do not.
 - D. Persuasion that takes place via language or clearly codified symbols is generally more ethical than persuasion via nonverbal or behavioral means.

- VI. Brockriede's concept of "arguers as lovers" can be extended to persuasive encounters as well.
 - A. Like arguers, persuaders can also be cast into the roles of rapist, seducer, and lovers.
 - B. The attributes of ethical persuasion which flow from Brockriede's metaphor are that:
 - 1) Persuaders should demonstrate respect for one another.
 - 2) Persuaders should emphasize equality and strive to minimize status and power differences.
 - 3) Persuaders should exhibit tolerance for one another's points of view.

- VII. Robert Cialdini characterizes persuaders as bunglers, smugglers, or sleuths.
 - A. Bunglers fail in the influence attempts because they use ineffective strategies.
 - B. Smugglers may succeed in the short run, but they rely on unethical strategies which tend to fail them in the long run.
 - C. Sleuths strike a balance between effective strategies and ethical strategies.

- VIII. A number of ethical questions arise from the variables and strategies discussed in earlier chapters.
 - A. Because credibility tends to function as a peripheral cue, it tends to short-circuit thoughtful deliberation. Appeals which foster central processing are generally preferable to those which foster peripheral processing.
 - 1) A source should be qualified; in other words, possess expertise in the area in which she or he is giving advice or endorsing a product.
 - B. Persuaders have a greater ethical responsibility when they target highly vulnerable receivers such as the very young or very old. There are three basic guidelines that influencers should follow when targeting children.
 - 1) They should ensure that they have permission from parents or legal guardians before attempting to persuade.
 - 2) They should communicate using words and concepts that children can understand.
 - 3) They should have the children's best interests at heart.
 - As for the very old, it is best to display intercultural and interpersonal sensitivity by considering others' feelings and avoiding the temptation to prey on others' fears, weaknesses, or vulnerabilities.
 - C. Deception isn't necessarily unethical. The goal of deception may be to benefit another.
 - 1) Self-serving lies are believed to be the least ethical.
 - 2) "Honesty is the best policy" only when certain conditions exist.
 - D. Threats should be viewed as a strategy of last resort because they are inherently damaging to relationships.
 - E. The use of fear appeals is acceptable, but only if the harmful consequences alluded to are real. Two guidelines are necessary when attempting to persuade through fear appeals.
 - 1) Specific recommendations for avoiding the harmful consequences must be provided to individuals.
 - 2) Individuals must be provided with concrete recommendations for how to react (e.g., danger control).
 - F. Emotional appeals are ethically defensible if they serve as a complement to, rather than substitute for, reasoning and proof.
 - G. Ingratiation is ethically justifiable if the praise is sincere.
 - H. Images are powerful tools of influence. Images, however, can be misleading. In the case of corporate sponsorship, it can be difficult to distinguish philanthropy from advertising.
 - I. Since there is no hard evidence that subliminal messages work, we aren't bothered by their use.
 - J. (Box 16.1) Various approaches to ethics are identified.