

# ORIENTATION OF THE SPECIES:

## The Psychology of Persuasion (Or How to Win Support and Influence People)

BY LARRY RÜDIGER

No matter how one might feel about same-sex marriage, I doubt any of us were surprised by Roman Catholic Bishop Kenneth Angell's recent pronouncement.

Speaking for his flock, the Bishop called for prohibition of any civil recognition of non-heterosexual couples. "Gay marriage" or domestic partnerships, Angell wants none of it. Given the prominence (by sheer number and historical influence) of his flock, this may represent the largest vote to date against the Supreme Court's recent ruling.

Even before Angell's announcement, I've watched same-sex marriage sympathizers discuss and debate strategy. These heated exchanges are supremely a matter of opinion, though to my eyes not always about what they seem.

Now, I have my own gut feelings about these things, and I'm the first to admit they color how I might marshal evidence – generally to conclusions that map on my own convictions quite neatly.

In prior articles, I've talked about behavior genetics, which mostly relies on self-reports of specific behaviors to estimate the heritability of more general dispositions. But I am also trained as a social psychologist, and it's evidence from this research tradition I'd like to consider this time.

### Smile, you're on...

Social psychology is primarily experimental. When a single factor in a social situation is predicted to have a strong influence on most people's behavior, researchers test the theory. They set up a classic design, randomly assigning subjects to experimental and control conditions, measuring their behavior, then comparing. All else being equal, differences between the experimental and control groups can be assumed to be the result of the tested factor. Competing explanations are ruled out based on careful design, consistent results when the procedure is repeated, and logical similarity to established findings.

These experiments often resemble small plays on deliberately manufactured "sets," using "casts" of experimenters (often costumed in white lab coats) and other important supporting players, called confederates. These confederates typically pretend to also be participating in the study. Of nine or ten people in the room, sometimes only one is not in on the act.

Often resembling *Candid Camera*, these little dramas have examined a wide range of topics: aggression, obedience to authority, response to stress. Some intriguing work comes from Italy, most notably from Serge Moscovici. In his experiments, experimenters and confederates put on an elaborate show. A single participant is

surrounded by individuals he assumes are just like him – in most cases, a college student in search of course credit or a little money. The alleged goal of the exercise: "unstructured" discussion on a controversial topic.

What the participant doesn't know is that it's all heavily rehearsed, and in the end, rigged. Most in the group will agree on the issue – the value of comprehensive oral examinations, the legal drinking age, or other things college students care about. But a minority will disagree with the larger group in various ways, and this is the crux of Moscovici's research. Dissenters sometimes agree with each other, presenting a unified front; other times, they are deeply divided.

That brings us to the results most germane to our current situation in Vermont: it seems that a "unified front" minority tends to have a greater influence on the real participant's opinion.

These results are consistent with Moscovici's observations of Italy's lively (and somewhat chaotic) political landscape, where many small parties vie for power. Usually unable to command a majority, they must instead rely on techniques to maximize their powers of persuasion.

### Meanwhile, back at the ranch

The history of our country's civil rights movement presents a similar example, vividly

described by Taylor Branch in *Parting The Waters*. Though there were serious disagreements among factions seeking political equity for African

the mind that it should, I would suggest the following.

First, we'd be wise to recognize a distinction between communication and self-

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Americans, tactical considerations prevailed. In general, most in the US saw decidedly – perhaps artificially – organized, cool-headed, seemingly middle-class citizens who just happened to be black. In other words, the images suggested a somewhat idealized personification of widely shared American values.

Did this maneuver hide behind-the-scenes disagreement, not to mention the "diversity" of African Americans? Absolutely. Would the results otherwise have been different, particularly those critical, early victories like the Voting Rights Act? It is impossible to know.

Similarly, it is impossible to predict the most effective strategy for securing any outcome on same-sex marriage, which may or may not resemble earlier civil rights efforts. However, to the degree that empirical evidence might bear on the issue, and I am obviously of

expression. The latter almost always feels good, enhancing our sense of authenticity; it's appealing and often fun.

But to invoke a tired and true example, there are probably few devout, traditional Catholics who see the humor and true affection for Mother Church evidenced by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence – those outrageous San Franciscan men who dress up as nuns in flamboyant drag. Do the good Sisters care? Probably not.

But remember that Rosa Parks did not spontaneously decide to sit down on that fateful bus. She had been carefully selected: a hard-working, dignified woman who could become a potent symbol of the injustice of oppression. Was, say, a black man, recently released from a prison sentence for raping a white woman, as entitled to civil rights? Of

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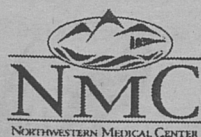
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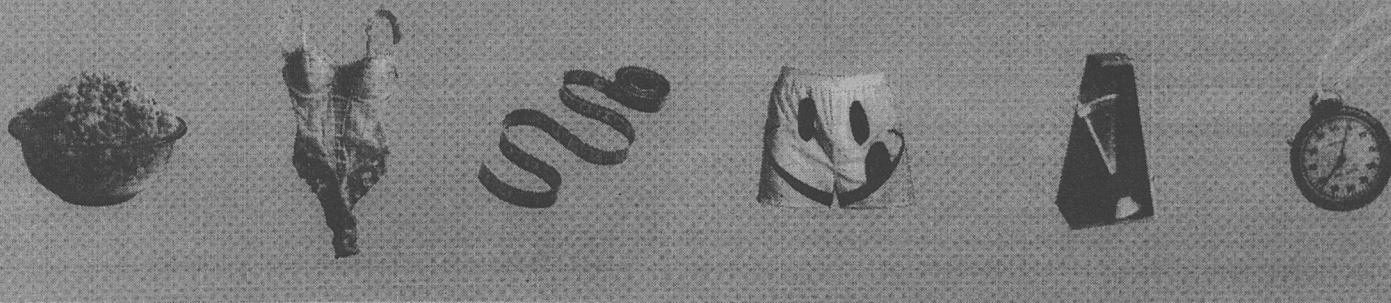
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