

**Application of Social Judgement Theory to Influence Public Opinion on  
Agriculture**

Kaley J. Pieper

Casper College

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Mr. Doug Hall

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### **Introduction**

The Social Judgement Theory was developed by Muzafer Sharif. This theory is in the objective socio-psychological tradition. Social Judgement stuck with me in this class because of its application towards persuasion and changing of beliefs. As an agricultural communication major, I love finding ways that I can slowly shift someone's beliefs about agriculture. Social Judgement Theory says that after hearing a message, a person will either reject or accept the message based on their cognitive map. I plan to think about the application of this theory the next time I try to change someone's negative opinion towards agriculture.

### **Latitude of Acceptance**

Subconsciously and unaware, I have already been using parts of this theory in persuasion. For example, I have a friend who is very anti animal agriculture. Her anchor position is that humans should let animals roam free, farmers are cruel, and everyone should go completely vegan. My position however, is that animal agriculture is good for the environment, beef helps feed the world, and farmers actually care about animal well-being. Both of our positions are very important to us. While these positions may seem on opposite ends of the spectrum, common ground can be found. We both care deeply about animals and their well-being. So when discussing with her the pros of animal agriculture, I start by mentioning something that lies within her latitude of acceptance.

In one instance, I told her that even though castration may seem cruel and bloody when a knife is used, it is actually the healthier and more humane way. Castration by rubber band leaves the young males sore and hurting for days longer, and there is a greater risk of infection. She conceded that maybe using knife castration is more humane than using a band to cut off circulation. I also told her that farmers love their animals. I showed her videos of me petting my pigs, bottle feeding a sick baby lamb, and trying desperately to save a cold baby calf. She sees this care and slowly loosens her hatred for farmers. Luckily, neither of us have big egos. Both of us acknowledged the good points that the other person made and were flexible in our opinions.

### **Contrast, Assimilation, and Boomerang Effects**

When selecting topics of discussion in debates, it's important to remember the contrast effect discussed in the theory. If my friend is hot on an issue, such as veganism, it's important not to "throw her in the cold water" by talking about a big juicy steak and butcher shops. This will cause more polarization and cause her to be even more likely to reject the topic in the future. Instead, I should talk about "lukewarm" subjects such as the importance of milk in people's diets, especially in third world countries. I could explain to her that cows producing milk are what many poor families survive on and they could never afford to go vegan and not take advantage of this resource. This topic of conversation would cause much less rejection. To combat the assimilation effect and confirmation bias, I could also encourage her to go outside of her regular news sources. I could give her links to fact checked articles that support my arguments without pushing her farther in the opposite direction. That would be known as the boomerang effect. The Boomerang effect is when someone continues to deny your arguments and only builds their anchor position even more. This usually happens when people refuse to think critically about the arguments.

### **Conclusion**

Pluralistic ignorance, sometimes referred to as the bandwagon effect, is when people only believe something to be true because other people believe the same thing. Pluralistic ignorance is one of the main reasons why people think farmers don't care about the environment. They hear someone say that cows ruin our air and automatically believe that it's true without using any research. To combat the bandwagon effect, it's important to use credible sources, be specific, be flexible, use kind communication, and avoid rejecting or discrediting that person's beliefs. Most of the time, stark disagreements only come from lack of helpful communication towards each other. The Social Judgement Theory is a great guide on how to persuade people towards your opinions in a kind, intelligent, and effective way. This theory can be seen in many aspects of life and politics.