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**THE REALISTIC JOB PREVIEW AS
A PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION**

**Paula Popovich
John Wanous**

**Research Report No. 82-2
February 1982**

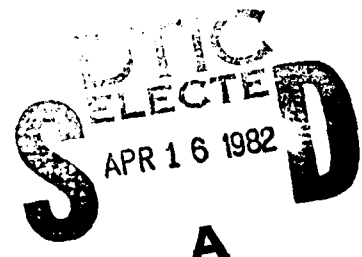
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THE REALISTIC JOB PREVIEW AS A PERSUASIVE
COMMUNICATION

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The purpose of this paper is to integrate two different research literatures. The first concerns the realistic job preview (RJP), which has been primarily associated with the disciplines of industrial/organizational psychology and organizational behavior (I/OB). The second is that part of social psychology concerned with attitude formation and change; specifically, the research on "persuasive communications."

The focus of this integrative effort is on the RJP process, per se, rather than on the link between the RJP and various job related outcomes. Thus, the RJP is viewed as one type of persuasive communication. In doing this, it is hoped that future RJP research will consider the theoretical frameworks and major research conclusions from the study of persuasive communication. There is no guarantee, of course, that this area of social psychology can be completely transferred to I/OB, because more research will be required to assess that possibility. What seems most important for now is that I/OB researchers begin to incorporate the already existing theory and research on persuasive communication into the study of RJP's.

Although social psychological research has been a major source of information for researchers in I/OB (e.g., group dynamics, cognitive consistency, and motivation), these two literatures have not previously been integrated with respect to the RJP. This is probably due to differences between the two disciplines. The RJP literature is typical of I/OB research. First, it concerns a practical problem of newcomer turnover, as it is exclusively "field" oriented. Second, it is more concerned with changing employee behavior than with attitude change. Finally, greater attention is paid to the dependent variable (turnover) than to the independent variable (the RJP).

The psychology of persuasion also reflects its disciplinary roots, but

in a way somewhat complementary to I/OB. First, it is concerned with attitude as well as behavior change, recognizing that although the two may be related in some situations, one does not invariably lead to the other. Second, it has focused on the nature of the attitude change process by being concerned with the identification and definition of basic attitude components. Much attention has been given to the process of how to change an attitude, with special attention to the independent variables that may influence the effectiveness of attempted persuasion.

One potential difficulty in transferring the persuasion research from social psychology to I/OB is that the attitude-behavior link is unpredictable in certain situations, e.g., the relationship between job satisfaction and performance. However, as Cialdini, Petty and Cacioppo (1981) have pointed out in their recent review of the attitude literature, the causal link between attitude and behavior may be stronger than previously believed. There is much current researcher interest in social psychology concentrating not on if attitudes predict behavior, but when (Cialdini, et al., 1981; Eagly & Himmelfarb, 1978).

The strength of the attitude-behavior link in the context of organizational choice and entry may be reasonably strong, in contrast to other areas of work behavior. For example, job attitudes are consistently related to employee turnover (Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979). Furthermore, individuals frequently choose the organizations they said they would, when they have several job offers (Wanous, Keon, & Latack, 1981).

Before continuing further with our discussion of how persuasion theory and research is relevant for the RJP, we need to consider two questions. First, what is the meaning and purpose of an RJP? Second, what is the

overall strength of the RJP's ability to reduce newcomer turnover? The first question is considered important background. The second is discussed because continued interest in the RJP somewhat depends on its ability to reduce turnover among new employees. After dealing with these two questions, we return to the attitude change and persuasion literature. A model for understanding the persuasion process is presented, and its components are related to the RJP. Finally, implications for future RJP research are suggested.

What is an RJP?

Job candidates typically have unrealistically inflated expectations about the organizations they consider joining (Wanous, 1980). After organizational entry, there is frequently a period when initial expectations are disconfirmed, which usually leads to dissatisfaction. In fact, both social psychology and I/OB agree that unmet expectations probably cause initial job dissatisfaction. Specifically, social psychologists Aronson and Carlsmith (1962) have shown that when an expectation of an event is disconfirmed, dissonance will be experienced, which may lead the individual to dislike the event even more so than if no initial expectations were made about the situation. From I/OB, Porter and Steers (1973) agree that unmet expectations probably contribute to initial job dissatisfaction.

As with most research findings, the disconfirmed expectations-job dissatisfaction link is influenced by several situational factors. In particular, the likelihood of dissatisfaction following unmet expectations is strongest when three conditions occur: (1) the expectation is strongly believed in (Silverman, 1968), (2) the expectation concerns something of high personal value (Locke, 1976), and (3) the individual feels personally

responsible (Carlsmith and Freedman, 1968) for the mistaken expectation (i.e., "I should have known" vs. "nobody's perfect"). Choosing a new organization would appear to meet all three conditions, and thus the RJP has been an appropriate technique for recruitment.

The RJP functions very much like a medical vaccination in its attempt to deflate newcomer expectations. That is, it is designed to prevent newcomer dissatisfaction, rather than reduce it after-the-fact. The typical medical vaccination injects a person with a small, weakened dose of germs, so that one's body can develop a natural resistance to that disease. The RJP functions similarly by presenting job candidates with a small dose of "organizational reality." And like the medical vaccination, the RJP is probably much less effective after a person has already entered a new organization.

Several criteria have been used to assess the consequences of an RJP, including: (1) job candidate expectations, (2) the candidate's choice of an organization, (3) initial job satisfaction, (4) initial job performance, and (5) turnover during the first few months (see Wanous, 1980, for a review). The primary research focus has been on reducing the turnover of newcomers.

There are several reasons why the turnover of new employees has been the main criterion of RJP effectiveness. First, as a concrete behavior, turnover is easier to measure than various job attitudes. Second, as an applied discipline, I/OB researchers have been concerned with having an impact on employee job behavior. Third, of all the criteria used to evaluate RJP's, employee turnover probably has the highest dollar consequences, which makes it of interest to organizations interested in the method.

Because the highest turnover rates typically occur among the newly hired (Mobley, 1982), the focus on turnover rather than attitudes has prevailed.

Two recent reviews of the RJP have been conducted. Wanous (1980) found 13 experiments of which 10 reported turnover data. The RJP group had lower turnover in 9 of the 10 studies ($p < .05$). Reilly, Brown, Blood, & Malatesta (in press) reviewed turnover results from the same 10 studies and added an eleventh of their own. They converted the results from each study into Z values and found the overall Z value to be 4.33 ($p < .0001$). Furthermore, they calculated that turnover rate for all RJP groups was 19.8% vs. 25.5% for all control groups -- a 5.7 percentage point difference. This means that an organization which does not use the RJP will have, on average, 28.8% higher turnover (i.e., $5.7 \div 19.8 = .288$) than one which does use an RJP.

The picture emerging from these reviews is that the RJP seems to reduce new employee turnover. The differences in turnover rates between RJP recruits and others are modest, but seem to be consistent across the studies. On an overall basis, the RJP has produced a highly significant turnover reduction. It seems reasonable to have confidence in this overall effect, since about 4500 subjects participated in the eleven experiments reporting turnover data.

What may be troubling to some is the variability of the RJP effect across studies. The average turnover reduction of 5.7 percentage points reported by Reilly, et al. (in press) does not indicate how much variance there is across studies. The main point of the present article is to focus on this variability, by suggesting that the social psychological literature on persuasive communications may help explain why the variability occurs. This seems a reasonable approach to take because there are considerable differences among the various approaches to presenting an RJP to new

recruits. More attention needs to be paid to the process of doing an RJP, which is what examination of the persuasive communication literature might provide.

By examining the RJP process as a persuasive communication, two outcomes might occur. First, there might be more consistency among RJP experiments if they are guided by a common theoretical framework. Second, the impact of the RJP might be increased by incorporating relevant findings from social psychology.

In the following sections we discuss attitudes and attitude change (persuasion) process. Finally, the relevance of the persuasive communications research for RJP is assessed.

What is an 'Attitude'?

An attitude is a learned internal predisposition toward some type of object or stimulus, e.g., a new organization in the present case. Thus, attitudes are never directly observed. Instead, they are inferred from observation of what a person does or says; an individual can assess his/her own attitudes by introspection, too.

It is generally agreed that an attitude can be thought of as having three components: (1) affect, (2) cognition, and (3) behavioral intentions (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1972). The affect component refers to a person's evaluation of, liking for, or emotional response to some stimulus. The cognition component refers to the knowledge or beliefs one has about the characteristics of the stimulus. The behavioral intention component refers to a person's willingness to take action with regard to the stimulus.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Figure 1 shows the relationships among the object of an attitude (an organization), the three different components of an attitude,¹ and some typical examples of behavior related to the attitude object. The arrows show the major relationships that have been empirically studied.²

The two-headed arrows show that attitude components and behavior are both causes and effects of each other. That is, an individual's behavior will change attitudes, as exemplified in many cognitive dissonance studies. It is also true that an individual's attitudes will influence behavior, as seen in studies of how people choose organizations. The broken lines indicate that these relationships are not always strong, nor consistent.

The RJP probably affects all three attitude components. The effects may be direct, or they may be indirect via changes in one component (e.g., cognition) that influence another (e.g., affect). For example, written RJP's (booklets) usually contain more cognitive information than affect or behavioral intentions. Thus, a written RJP probably influences affect and/or behavioral intentions indirectly. In contrast, audio-visual RJP's (T.V., films, oral presentations) may be able to affect all three components directly. This might be possible because the affect in a message can be directly communicated to a job candidate. The issue of how an RJP is communicated will be considered later.

Functions of an Attitude

Viewing the RJP as a persuasive communication implies that careful consideration should be paid to the psychological functions an attitude fulfills. Basically, the functions need to be known in order to design an effective attitude change process.

Attitudes fulfill one or more of four basic functions: (1) knowledge,

(2) adjustment, (3) ego defense, and (4) value expression (Katz, 1960).

First, the knowledge function refers to an individual acquiring a set of beliefs to give meaning to what would otherwise be a confusing, chaotic situation. During organizational entry, newcomers acquire considerable new knowledge, and the RJP clearly facilitates this particular attitude function. Second, the adjustment function refers to situations where people act to satisfy important needs. Attitudes may provide the means to achieving certain personal goals. In organizational entry terms, newcomers frequently select jobs in a rationalistic, utilitarian manner (Wanous, Keon, & Latack, 1981) exemplified by expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964). The RJP may affect this function, too, by providing accurate information for the job choices people make.

A third attitude function is to protect one's ego from external threats or unacceptable internal impulses. In organizational entry situations when a job candidate does not receive an offer, the ego is probably threatened by this rejection. The RJP may affect the ego defense function by providing an acceptable rationale for this rejection. For example, an individual seeing an RJP, but not receiving a job offer might think "it doesn't matter, since the job wasn't what I wanted anyway." The fourth function of an attitude is to help individuals express important personal values. In a sense, this function is almost opposite the ego defense function. Attitudes that defend one's ego tend to prevent an individual from revealing his or her "true nature" (Katz, 1960). In contrast, other attitudes help individuals express their most central values. In organizational entry, choosing a job with a particular organization can be a very concrete, public expression of values, e.g., joining political or religious organizations,

taking an academic not an industrial job, etc. The RJP can affect this function by providing the necessary information to use as a basis for choices that will reflect personal values.

Katz (1960) has argued that attempts to change attitudes will be futile without prior diagnosis of the function(s) an attitude has for each situation. Conceptually, this seems like a sound recommendation. Katz admits, however, that diagnosis is extremely difficult. As an alternative to Katz's recommended diagnosis, we suggest that the attitude function most relevant for the RJP is the provision of new knowledge for job candidates. By the time most candidates receive an RJP they may have already implicitly chosen the organization. Thus, the adjustive and value expressive functions may be partly fulfilled at the point of entry to a new organization. Most studies of RJPs have presented the information to those job candidates who have already received a job offer. This means the ego defense function may be less critical, since those job candidates who are rejected are usually excluded from RJP experiments.

If the RJP primarily (but not exclusively) functions as an information provider serving a knowledge function, then attempts to change attitudes via the RJP should account for this. In the next section, a framework for persuasive communication is presented which emphasizes the content and process of information as the means to attitude change.

The "Yale Persuasive Communication" Model

There have been at least five major social psychological approaches to attitude change over the last 30 years (Zimbardo, Ebbesen, & Maslach, 1977): (1) the Michigan group dynamics school, (2) attribution theory, (3) cognitive consistency theories, (4) social learning theory, and (5) the Yale

persuasive communication approach. Each of these approaches could contribute to a greater understanding of the RJP process. However, as a model for understanding the acquisition of attitudes, the Yale persuasive communication (YPC) approach is most useful. The YPC model is particularly relevant if one views the RJP as fulfilling a knowledge acquisition function for job candidates, since it is an information processing approach.

The YPC model (e.g., Hovland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953) specifies the process of persuasive communications: attention, comprehension, acceptance, ("yielding"), retention, and action (McGuire, 1969). This five stage sequence of attitude change is the outcome of the persuasion process, which includes four categories of factors: (1) the source of the message, (2) the contents of the message itself, (3) the medium used (or "channel"), and (4) the type of audience receiving the message. Figure 2 shows the relationship between the four categories of persuasion factors and the five stages of the attitude change process.

Insert Figure 2 about here

We believe the YPC model is quite appropriate for understanding the RJP itself. It implicitly assumes that the individual (e.g., a job candidate) is an isolated and (relatively) passive processor of information. These implicit assumptions have led some (Zimbardo, et al., 1977) to question the YPC's generalizability to social situations. We, too, share this concern, but we also believe the typical RJP situation fits these assumptions. Thus, the YPC is an appropriate framework for dissecting the internal processes of persuasion during an RJP. In the following sections,

selected research results from the four categories of factors in persuasive communication are presented. The review of source, message, channel, and audience factors is not intended to be comprehensive. Rather, the purpose is to present findings from YPC based research that illustrate the kinds of factors potentially relevant for understanding RJPs.

Source of Persuasive Message

The credibility of a source is a crucial element in changing attitudes. Three factors determine source credibility: (1) perceived expertise, (2) trust, and (3) liking (Hovland, et al., 1953). Furthermore, the expertise of a source must be perceived by the audience prior to receiving the message, and it must be relevant for the particular message being transmitted (Oskamp, 1977). Trust in the source is also important, particularly if there is a reason to suspect ulterior motives. Some research has shown that a source who advocates an unexpected position may be even more persuasive (Wood, Eagly, & Chaiken, 1977). Trustworthy sources are even more powerful when the message channel is audiovisual (Andreoli & Worchel, 1978)--an interaction between two of the four major factors. A person's liking of a source also increases the credibility of a message (Berscheid & Walster, 1969). This "similar-to-me effect" in interpersonal judgments is commonly found in I/OB, too (Latham & Wexley, 1981).

The determinants of source credibility probably should be incorporated in the design of RJPs. Research from I/OB (Fisher, Ilgen, & Hoyer, 1979; Sorenson, Rhode, & Lawler, 1977), suggests several guidelines for increasing source credibility. First, job incumbents are more credible than other company sources (recruiters, management, or professional spokespersons). Job incumbents are more likely to be seen as experts, since they perform

the actual work. Furthermore, they are more likely to be trusted, because their motives appear to be "pure." In contrast, recruiters are not trusted. Finally, job incumbents are credible because they are the source most similar to recruits--an important element in liking the source of the message.

Sources other than job incumbents have credibility, too, e.g., school friends majoring in the same area or profession (Fisher, et al., 1979; Sorenson, et al., 1973). These sources, however, are not readily available to an organization for use in an RJP. The fact that they are credible is consistent with the research showing lower turnover among newcomers hired by referral of job incumbents and friends (Wanous, 1980).

Most accounts of RJP experiments give insufficient detail about message sources so that RJP credibility cannot be evaluated using the above criteria; future researchers should pay closer attention and report greater methodological detail in this regard.

Message Content

The typical RJP includes both positive and negative information, in rough approximation to the number of satisfying and dissatisfying job elements. The combination of both positive and negative information has conflicting effects. On the one hand, it appears to increase the perceived expertise and trust of the source (Fisher, et al., 1979). On the other hand, negative information can induce anxiety with an attendant feeling of helplessness (Rogers, 1975). One solution to this is to strive for a moderate level of negative information. For example, Janis and Mann's (1977) work on decision making supports this notion of moderate stress induction for decision makers. Janis and Mann cite ten studies of hospital patients to support their belief that a moderate stress level is best, because

patient recovery time and requests for pain reducing drugs are both decreased. Another solution to the possible anxiety problem is to make sure that the RJP contains examples of employees effectively dealing with anxiety arousing situations.

Finally, in regard to the optimal order of presentation for positive and negative information, research has shown that persuasion is more effective when positive points are presented before the negative. For the RJP, this advice should help to reduce anxiety as well as increase the effectiveness of the preview. This is because the positive information is consistent with the inflated expectations of job candidates.

Presenting positive job information first is, however, what most job candidates probably expect to happen. Earlier it was stated that unexpected advocacy enhances persuasion. So, how can one incorporate these two apparently conflicting results. Without actually doing the research, one can never be certain, but our guess is that presentation of any negative information in the RJP is probably sufficient to be unexpected by job candidates. Thus, it may still be possible to present some positive information first (to reduce anxiety), and then present the negative information (an unexpected communication which enhances credibility).

Message Channel (Mode of Presentation)

Attitude change research has consistently shown that live or videotaped forms of communication are more persuasive than audio forms. In turn, audio communication is superior to written messages (Eagly & Himmelfarb, 1969). As the complexity of the message increases, however, comprehension is better with written forms of communication (Chaiken & Eagly, 1976).

A wide variety of methods for presenting the RJP has been used:

booklet, film, videotape, oral presentation, job visit, and work sample simulation. The choice of how to present the RJP does not seem to have been guided by previous attitude change research. For example, only one study (Haccoun, 1978) mentioned the possibility of differential effects due to message channel, and then tested for them by randomly assigning subjects to either a booklet or automatic-slide-with-audio presentation. The results slightly favored the audiovisual method, consistent with the social psychological research. One other study (Reilly, et al., in press) experimentally compared two RJP modes (film vs. job visit), but no hypothesis was made as to which might be the more effective. The job visit was slightly (but not significantly) more effective.

Results from four RJP studies using oral presentations (Gomersall & Myers, 1966; Dugoni & Ilgen, 1981; Krausz & Fox, 1979; Parkington & Schneider, 1978) seem to show that oral presentations are ineffective, contrary to what has been found in YPC research. These four studies should not, however, be considered as conclusive evidence.

In fact, there appears to be at least one major factor in each of these four studies which could easily account for the failure to find significant differences between the (oral) RJP and the control group.³ Thus, it is still possible that audio-visual or live RJP's may be effective.

A recent review of RJP experiments reporting turnover data (Reilly, et al., in press) grouped the studies by booklets vs. audio-visual. No interaction effect was found between mode of presentation and RJP effectiveness in turnover reduction. On the surface this would appear contrary to the YPC research, which suggests audio-visual may be more persuasive. There are two reasons for being cautious about drawing such a conclusion,

however. First, the YPC research concerned mostly attitude change, not behavior (e.g., turnover). Second, and probably more importantly, the Reilly, et al., analysis does not control for any other factors, such as message content, source credibility, or audience characteristics. Since these other three factors are uncontrolled and confounded in these studies, no firm conclusion can be reached at the present time.

Thus, it appears that future RJP research might benefit from increased use of audio-visual methods, although more research is clearly needed. This is particularly important if the source of the RJP is trusted, since trusted sources are even more potent persuaders when audio-visual methods are used (Andreoli & Worchel, 1978).

Audience (Receiver) Characteristics

Receiver variables refer to the state of the individual receiving the message (McGuire, 1969), and include individual difference variables as well as situational effects in the receiver. Eagly and Himmelfarb (1978) refer to individual difference variables as "enduring predispositions" and note the continued interest in McGuire's (1969) hypothesized relationship is seldom linear, but instead seems to be mediated by two processes: (1) reception (attending to and understanding the message), and (2) yielding (actually accepting the message). There may be higher reception by intelligent receivers, but a lower probability of their yielding to a persuasive message.

The RJP research seems to show a stronger preview effect using more intelligent subjects. That is, studies of life insurance agents (Weitz, 1956; Youngberg, 1963) and West Point Cadets (Ilgen & Seely, 1974; Macedonia, 1969) all found significant results. This must be regarded as a tentative

conclusion, because intelligence is confounded with job type (white versus blue collar) in these particular studies. For example, Reilly, et al., grouped RJP studies reporting turnover data into high vs. low job complexity. They found a significant interaction between type of job and RJP effectiveness in reducing turnover, i.e., RJP's seem to work better in complex jobs.

Grouping RJP studies one-category-at-a-time, as done by Reilly, et al., does not account for all of the possible ways these studies vary. Any accurate assessment of the RJP process must simultaneously account for source, message, channel, and audience characteristics, as well as interaction effects. This type of multivariate analysis is probably not possible at the present time, however, because the number of RJP studies is too small.

Finally, other individual difference variables, such as age and sex, have received attention in the attitude change literature. Although age was found irrelevant in influencibility, females initially were considered more susceptible to persuasion than males. However, a recent review of sex differences concluded that females are not more easily influenced than males, except in group conformity studies (Eagly & Himmelfarb, 1978).

Concluding Comments

The RJP is a personnel technique designed to reduce turnover among new employees. It's purpose has been to "vaccinate" expectations of recruits--typically deflating them to more realistic levels. In a broader context, then, the RJP is a particular type of persuasion process--one aimed at exchanging realistic for unrealistic attitudes about the job and organization. Because of this similarity between the disciplines of I/OB and social psychology, areas where future RJP research might profit from an

integration of relevant attitude changes research findings have been suggested.

The RJP accounts for a modest, but significant reduction in newcomer turnover. Using the "Yale persuasive communication" framework, several ways to design future RJP's have been suggested. Researchers in I/OB should pay closer attention to the RJP process itself. They should carefully evaluate the source, message, channel, and audience in any RJP study.

In this paper, we have concentrated on the factors affecting the persuasion process. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that the persuasion process itself is an essential variable in any attitude change research. The five stages (Figure 2) of this process must occur in order for a persuasive communication to succeed. So, it is important for the researcher to realize what step is concerned in any piece of research, and also that the persuasion process has not been blocked at any stage. This sequential model may also serve to help the researcher determine where there are problems in the persuasive communication process, such as a comprehension problem which would effectively prevent the message from being accepted or acted on.

Whether or not these suggestions for the RJP will have any effect is hard to predict because there are too few RJP studies to assess the effects from confounding found among the four major factors. For example, the typical audio-visual RJP uses job incumbents, whereas the typical RJP booklet is less clear about whom the message is from; this means that source and medium are confounded. Besides this, the audience is frequently confounded with the medium, as mentioned earlier. Finally, most RJP experiments do not report sufficient methodological detail so that source,

message, channel, and audience factors can all be assessed. The greatest information available today concerns channel factors, whereas message factors are probably the least well reported in the RJP studies.

Whether or not these RJP design suggestions will actually increase the impact of the preview is an open question. It is possible, for example, that the upper limit for RJP effectiveness may have already been reached. It is also possible that some future RJP study, which incorporates ideas from the YPC research, may find a greater turnover reduction among newcomers. Translating results from the lab to the field is always a risk. However, we believe the extensive research on persuasion from social psychology bears much closer attention by I/OB researchers interested in the RJP.

Footnotes

¹There is general agreement that these three components are distinct. However, there is disagreement among researchers as to whether all three are components of an attitude, or whether just the affect component should be called an attitude, as suggested by Fishbein (1967).

²Relationships among the three attitude components have also been studied. Two in particular have received considerable attention: affect/cognition, and affect/behavioral intentions.

³Gomersall and Myers (1966) presented few details of experimental procedures and did not report turnover data. Dugoni and Ilgen (1981) had severe "subject mortality" in their study. Krausz and Fox (1979) had some contamination of RJP and control groups and had high subject mortality. Parkington and Schneider (1978) conducted a lab study of short duration, so there was no way to measure turnover.

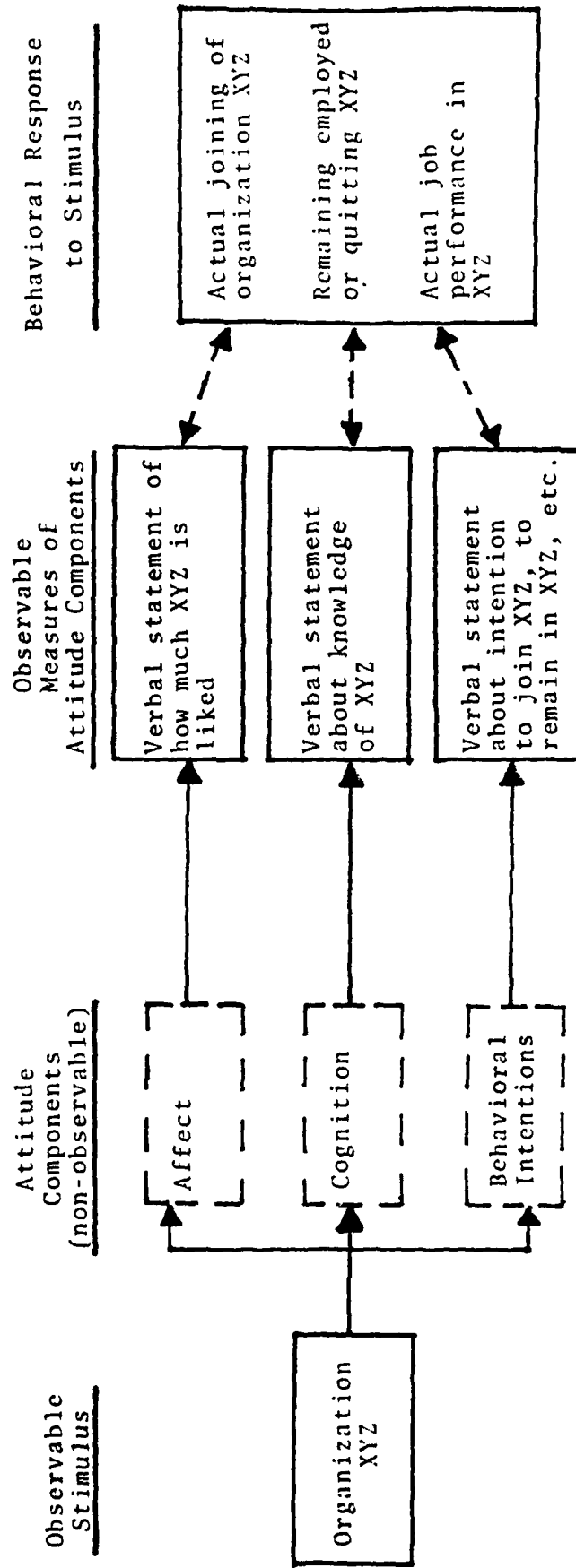


FIGURE 1
Attitude-Behavior Framework

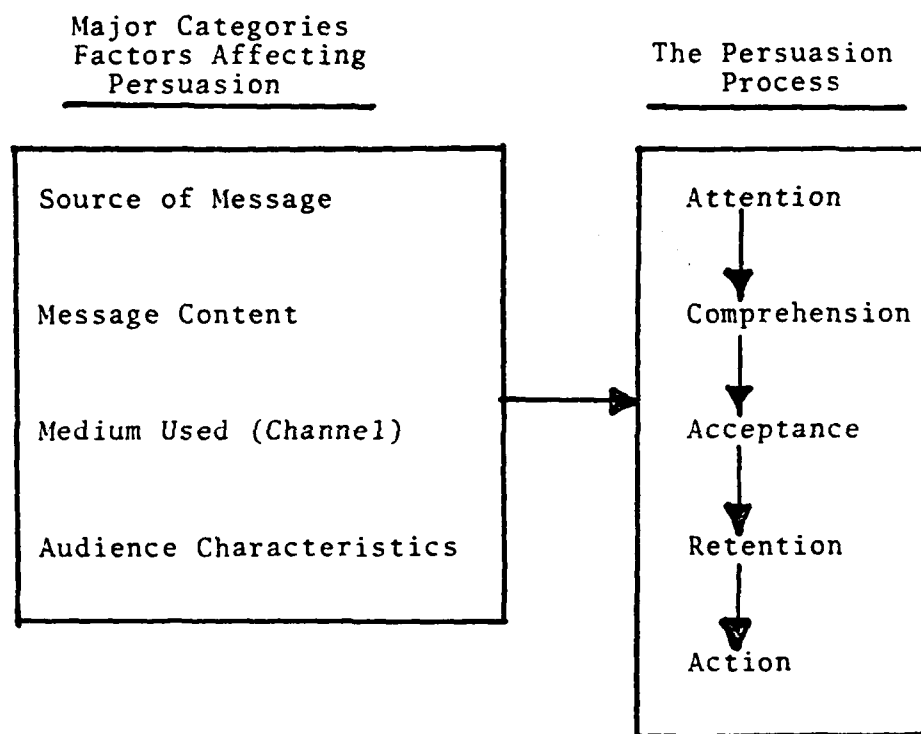


FIGURE 2

The Yale Persuasive Communication Model

Source: Adapted from Oskamp (1977)

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