

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

A series of monographs, treatises, and texts

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A Theory of Psychological Reactance

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Preface

Why is it that a child sometimes does the opposite of what he is told? Why would a person sometimes dislike receiving a favor? Why is propaganda frequently ineffective in persuading people? And why would the grass in the adjacent pasture ever appear greener? There may be no single explanation for any one of these questions and surely there is no single explanation for all of them together. Nevertheless, it is possible to construct an explanation which, in effect, ties together these rather heterogeneous phenomena. The purpose of this monograph is to propose one such explanation along with relevant experimental evidence.

Because the explanation to be outlined concerns the notion of freedom, and many disciplines have a vested interest in this notion, it may be well to indicate at the beginning some of the things which this monograph is not. It is not a philosophical treatise, a political, legal, or economic essay, nor a sociological analysis of social movements. It is not even intended as a psychological analysis of "freedom demonstrations," although there is a coincidental relationship. With these traditional treatments of freedom ruled out, what can this monograph be concerned with? The answer is simple: the multifarious freedoms of daily living and how the individual responds when these freedoms are threatened or eliminated.

If there is anything surprising about a theory concerning how people respond to elimination of freedom it is that such a theory has not been proposed earlier. For given the historical concern of our culture for freedoms of one kind or another, and given the current plethora of freedom demonstrations, it seems obvious that concern for freedom should have some general psychological implications. But perhaps the concern for freedom has been so dramatic that it has obscured the possibility of less obvious and more general implications. After all, it is quite apparent that humans are frequently upset when they feel deprived of major political and economic freedoms — and this is neither surprising nor in apparent need of explanation. What may not be so obvious is that less salient restrictions of freedom are a pervasive aspect of daily life.

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CHAPTER I

A Theory of Psychological Reactance

Freedom of behavior is a pervasive and important aspect of human life. People are continually surveying their internal and external states of affairs and making decisions about what they will do, how they will do it, and when they will do it. They consider their wants and needs, the dangers and benefits available in their surroundings, and the ways in which they can accomplish various ends. This is not to say that behavior is always freely selected. It will frequently be true that individuals perform given acts without quite knowing why, and it will also be true that they perform acts because they knew they were not free to do otherwise. Nevertheless, most of the time people will feel that they are relatively free to engage in a variety of different behaviors and that they can select among these as they please.

There is good reason for the belief that one has freedom of action. Objectively there frequently are multiple possibilities, and subjectively there are frequently multiple needs, none of which demands immediate gratification. Thus, subjectively at least, it seems that one scans the possibilities and their effects, and then decides which of the several possibilities to take. Whether or not a person "really" has freedom, he can and almost certainly will believe that he has.

The freedom to choose when and how to behave is potentially beneficial. To the extent a person is aware of his needs and the behaviors necessary to satisfy those needs, and providing he has the appropriate freedom, he can choose behaviors so as to maximize need satisfaction. An individual, for example, who felt more thirsty than hungry and who, at the moment, was free to go either to a soda fountain or a restaurant, could satisfy his dominant need by choosing to go to the soda fountain.

Without the freedom to select behaviors appropriate to various needs, the satisfaction of needs would be a more haphazard affair which would not only fail to maximize need satisfaction but could frequently result in extreme deprivation, pain, and even death. Given some minimal level of valid knowledge about oneself and the environment, freedom to choose among different behavioral possibilities will generally help one to survive and thrive.

It is reasonable to assume, then, that if a person's behavioral freedom is reduced or threatened with reduction, he will become motivationally aroused. This arousal would presumably be directed against any further loss of freedom and it would also be directed toward the re-establishment of whatever freedom had already been lost or threatened. Since this hypothetical motivational state is in response to the reduction (or threatened reduction) of one's potential for acting, and conceptually may be considered a counterforce, it will be called "psychological reactance." The purpose of this volume, then, is to delineate a theory of psychological reactance and to report and examine relevant evidence.

Before presenting a formal theoretical statement, it may be well to consider two hypothetical examples of the arousal and reduction of reactance. Picture first Mr. John Smith, who normally plays golf on Sunday afternoons, although occasionally he spends Sunday afternoon watching television or puttering around his workshop. The important point is that Smith always spends Sunday afternoon doing whichever of these three things he prefers; he is free to choose which he will do. Now consider a specific Sunday morning on which Smith's wife announces that Smith will have to play golf that afternoon since she has invited several of her ladyfriends to the house for a party. Mr. Smith's freedom is threatened with reduction in several ways: (1) he cannot watch television, (2) he cannot putter in his workshop, and (3) he must (Mrs. Smith says) play golf. According to the present view, Smith would be motivationally aroused to re-establish these threatened freedoms. We might therefore expect to hear him protest that there was an important television program he wanted to watch and that he had planned to do some special work in his shop. We might also expect to hear him say that he is tired of golf, that the course is not in good condition, and so forth. If the amount of reactance aroused were great, we might indeed expect Smith to spend the afternoon watching television, perhaps with the volume turned unusually high.

For a second hypothetical example, let us consider a person who is looking for a pack of cigarettes, and let us suppose that this person normally smokes Camels but also occasionally smokes Kools. Let us further suppose that on this occasion he would prefer to have Camels, and that he locates a vending machine which contains both Camels and Kools. After depositing the necessary amount of money in the machine, he is just about to reach out to pull the lever for Camels when the machine dispenses a pack of Camels. Since the machine could not have divined his preference, the individual's freedom to select his own brand has been pre-empted and he should experience reactance. We might expect this person to find suddenly that he is not so eager to have Camels, that if he now had his choice he might well select Kools or some other kind, and that he is displeased with vending machines. He might even put more money in the machine in order to select a pack of Kools.

It is important to note that neither of these hypothetical examples involves simple frustration, i.e., blocking of the person from his preferred goal. Mr. Smith was likely to play golf anyway, and we may even make it a condition of the example that he intended to play golf prior to his wife's announcing that he had to. Similarly, the man seeking Camels received just what he was looking for. But in both cases, according to the present proposal, these people should be motivationally aroused to resist doing or taking what they originally intended. We shall return to this point again. For the present, since a better picture has been gained through these examples of somewhat trivial events of what is meant by reactance, let us turn to a formal statement of the determinants and consequences of psychological reactance.

The Theory

It is assumed that for a given person at a given time, there is a set of behaviors any one of which he could engage in either at the moment or at some time in the future. This set may be called the individual's "free behaviors." Free behaviors include only acts that are realistically possible: smoking a cigarette could be a free behavior, while walking to the moon could not. Behaviors may become free in a variety of ways. A person may become free to spend company money for lunches by formal agreement between himself and the company; a person may acquire the freedom to read a book by learning how to read; one may feel free to spit on the walk because one always has done so; and one

may feel free to vote because the right is guaranteed by law. In general, we may say that for specified behaviors to be free, the individual must have the relevant physical and psychological abilities to engage in them, and he must know, by experience, by general custom, or by formal agreement, that he may engage in them.

It should be noted that the concept of "behavior" is intended to include any conceivable act. A behavior might consist of selecting a choice alternative, thinking that Roosevelt was a good president, or not watching television. More generally, behaviors may be characterized as "what one does (or doesn't)," "how one does something," or "when one does something."

It will not always be clear either to an objective observer or to the individual himself whether or not he has the freedom to engage in a given behavior. This can happen because the individual has inadequate relevant information, as when he lacks experience in attempting to engage in the behavior in question and neither does he know any formal relevant rules. Lack of clarity about freedom can also occur because there is conflicting information. A jaywalker, for example, may feel free to jaywalk because he frequently does so but he may not feel free to jaywalk because to do so is illegal. While these unclarities about when a behavior is or is not free may constitute serious difficulty for the analysis of practical problems, they do not preclude clear and adequate experimental tests of the theory, for it is possible to construct situations in which specified behavioral freedoms are relatively unequivocal.

Given that a person has a set of free behaviors, he will experience reactance whenever any of those behaviors is eliminated or threatened with elimination. That is, if a person felt free to engage in behaviors A, B, and C, and then learned that he could not engage in, for example, A, he would experience reactance.

The magnitude of reactance is a direct function of (1) the importance of the free behaviors which are eliminated or threatened, (2) the proportion of free behaviors eliminated or threatened, and (3) where there is only a threat of elimination of free behaviors, the magnitude of that threat. Let us consider each of these determinants in somewhat greater detail.

1. Given that a certain free behavior has been threatened or eliminated, *the more important is that free behavior to the individual, the greater will be the magnitude of reactance.* The importance of a given behavior is a direct function of the unique instrumental value which

that behavior has for the satisfaction of needs, multiplied by the actual or potential maximum magnitude of those needs. By unique is meant that no other behavior in the individual's repertoire of behaviors would satisfy the same need or set of needs. In other words, the importance of a free behavior derives from its necessity for the reduction of potentially important needs. However, it is *not* necessary for the relevant needs to be of great magnitude at all times for the free behavior to have high importance at all times. It is only necessary that the individual believe he *might* have the needs in question. This may become more clear if we recall the example of Mr. Smith, who was told by his wife to go play golf, and who according to the present view should therefore experience increased motivation to watch television or putter in his workshop. It was noted then, and may be reiterated here, that Smith may actually have preferred to play golf prior to his wife's pronouncement and, further, he may not, on that particular Sunday, have had an active interest in watching television or puttering. But to the extent that he believes he *might* have wanted to do either of these things, the freedom to engage in them is important and the loss of that freedom should arouse reactance.

1a. The magnitude of reactance is also a direct function of the relative importance of the eliminated or threatened behavioral freedom compared to the importances of other freedoms of the moment. Considering all of a person's free behaviors at a given time, and holding constant the absolute importance of the one which is eliminated or threatened, its relative importance increases as the absolute importance of the other freedoms decreases.

In illustration, let us suppose that a person has rated several items on an equal interval scale where 0 equals no attraction and 100 equals very high attraction, and that the items A, B, etc., have received the following ratings: A = 10, B = 20, C = 30, X = 70, Y = 80, and Z = 90. Here the absolute attractiveness of X, Y, and Z is greater than that of A, B, and C, and if a person had the choice alternatives X, Y, and Z, and then lost Z, he would experience more reactance than if he had the alternatives A, B, and C, and then lost C. But if the absolute attractiveness of the eliminated alternative is held constant, then its relative attractiveness will determine the magnitude of reactance. If the individual had the choice alternatives A, B, and C and then lost B, he would experience more reactance than if he had the alternatives, A, B, and X, and then lost B. When one's choice alternatives are an orange,

an apple, and a pear, he should experience a noticeable degree of reactance when someone swipes the apple; but when the choice alternatives are an orange, an apple and an automobile, one will not care much about the loss of the apple.

2. Given the individual's set of free behaviors, *the greater is the proportion eliminated or threatened with elimination, the greater will be the magnitude of reactance*. If a person believed himself free to engage in behaviors A, B, C, and D, all of which have some importance, then the elimination of both A and B would create more reactance than would the elimination of either A or B alone. Or, given that behavior A is eliminated, if the original set of free behaviors consisted of A and B there will be more reactance than if the original set consisted of A, B, C, and D.

3. Given that an important free behavior has been threatened with elimination, *the greater is the threat, the greater will be the magnitude of reactance*. A threat becomes greater as the likelihood increases that it could and would be carried out. A threat of the elimination of a free behavior will frequently be located in a social source, i.e., another person. When the threat is social, the question of how great the threat is will center on the formal and informal relationships between the threatener and the person threatened. Those who have equal or greater amounts of social power than oneself can issue threats of relatively great magnitude to one's own free behaviors, while those with less power would be relatively unable to muster serious threats.

3a. When a person's free behavior, A, is eliminated or threatened with elimination, there may also be the implication to him that other free behaviors, say B and C, or the same behavior on future occasions, A₂ and A₃, will also be eliminated. That is, by the loss of a single free behavior there may be by implication a threat of elimination of other free behaviors either in the present or in the future. This proposition assumes, of course, that the free behaviors in question are ordered such that the loss of one implies the loss of others. The ordering may be as simple as membership in a class. For example, if a secretary were informed she was not to chew gum while at work, she might easily imagine that other similar behaviors, such as smoking and sucking on candies would also be eliminated. Or, the dimension of implication might be such that elimination of a given behavior would imply the loss of some but not all related behaviors. Imagine, for example, a set of perquisites which correlates with job status at a hypothetical college.

Assistant professors have unlimited library privileges, associate professors have the same plus an office all to themselves, and full professors have these two advantages plus a graduate assistant to help them in their work. Under these conditions if a full professor were informed that he would no longer have an office to himself, he should also feel that his having a graduate assistant was in jeopardy though he would presumably feel there was relatively little threat of his losing library privileges.

3b. Just as a free behavior may be threatened by virtue of elimination of or threat to another free behavior, so a free behavior may be threatened by the elimination of or threat to another person's free behavior. The implication in this case relates the observed person to oneself; if the loss of a free behavior to an observed person could just as well happen to oneself, then one's own free behavior is threatened. When an observed person loses a free behavior similar to a free behavior for oneself, the greater is the implication that the loss could as easily have happened to oneself, the greater will be the magnitude of the reactance. If, for example, co-equal secretaries worked together in an office and normally felt free to go to the water cooler for a drink whenever they felt like it, the elimination of this freedom for one should threaten the same freedom for others, leading to their experiencing reactance.

Justification and Legitimacy

If Mr. Smith says to Mr. Brown "You cannot have Betty for babysitting this evening," when Mr. Brown might have wanted Betty, then Brown should experience reactance. It will be obvious, however, that Brown's reaction will be affected by the justification and/or legitimacy of Smith's interference. If Smith adds that Betty's mother has gone to the hospital for an emergency operation, thus justifying the restriction, Brown will not show a strong negative reaction. If Betty is a young teenager and Smith happens to be her father, then Smith can legitimately control Betty's activities and again, Brown is not likely to show a strong negative reaction.

Justification and legitimacy, however, are complicated variables from the point of view of reactance theory. They tend, on the one hand, to affect the magnitude or reactance aroused by the loss of a freedom, and they tend on the other hand, to affect restraints

against the effects of reactance. Let us consider these in turn.

When person A tells person B what to do, and thereby threatens a specific freedom of the latter, there may or may not be further freedoms threatened by implication, as we have already seen. One possible effect of justification is to limit the threat to a specific behavior or set of behaviors. So if Smith says that he is interfering with Brown's expectations because of a personal emergency, this keeps Brown from imagining that Smith will likely interfere on future occasions as well. Fewer of Brown's behavioral freedoms have been threatened. In a similar way, legitimacy may indicate the set of behaviors threatened since there will be a general presumption that illegitimate interference with one's freedoms is less likely to occur. There is an additional implication in the notion of legitimacy of behavioral restriction that one's freedom was equivocal anyway. In the above example, if Betty is a young teenager, then Brown could never have been sure of his freedom to have her babysit since she is normally subject to restrictions from her parents. Conversely, an illegitimate attempt to restrict one's freedom may be capable of arousing a great deal of reactance since it may imply a threat to a large number of free behaviors. If Smith is *not* the father of Betty and has no more legitimate control over her than does Brown, then Smith's attempted interference (without justification) also carries the implication that Smith may well attempt similar interferences on future occasions. From Brown's point of view, if Smith gets away with this, what can't he get away with?

Although justification and legitimacy may be seen as affecting the magnitude of reactance aroused by a given elimination or threat, lack of justification and legitimacy are not necessary conditions for the occurrence of reactance. A loss of freedom no matter how well justified, should still create reactance. And if we bear in mind that legitimacy (formal rules, agreement, etc.) is only one of several sources of freedom, we can also say that a loss of freedom, no matter how legitimate, can also result in reactance.

How a person responds to reactance will doubtless be affected by both justification and legitimacy. In general, these conditions will create restraints against direct attempts at restoration of freedom. For this reason, these conditions will tend to give rise to attempts at indirect restoration of freedom, such as through behavioral or social implication, when that kind of restoration is possible.

In the above discussion we have attempted to show that although

justification and legitimacy are powerful determinants of the magnitude of reactance, their total effects are complicated. They are therefore not particularly useful tools for the demonstration of reactance effects in research and they have not been employed in the research reported in this volume. Rather, our attempts have been to test reactance hypotheses with justification and legitimacy held constant.

THE EFFECTS OF REACTANCE

Psychological reactance is conceived as a motivational state directed toward the re-establishment of the free behaviors which have been eliminated or threatened with elimination. Generally, then, a person who experiences reactance will be motivated to attempt to regain the lost or threatened freedoms by whatever methods are available and appropriate. It should be helpful, of course, to be somewhat more specific about the effects of reactance, and in the following paragraphs we shall indicate several distinguishable possibilities.

The Phenomenology of Reactance

While there is no assumption that a person will necessarily be aware of reactance, it should be true that when he is, he will feel an increased amount of self-direction in regard to his own behavior. That is, he will feel that he can do what he wants, that he does not have to do what he doesn't want, and that at least in regard to the freedom in question, he is the sole director of his own behavior. If the magnitude of reactance is relatively great, the individual may be aware of hostile and aggressive feelings as well. In this connection it may be noted that reactance can be an "uncivilized" motivational state since it frequently is directed against the social acts of others. For this reason it would not be surprising to find that a person in whom reactance has been aroused would tend to deny that he was either motivated to restore freedom or upset, and he might even convince himself of this. This tendency to defend against reactance can be expected to extend to nonverbal behavior as well. As will be seen, the studies in support of reactance theory have tended to use measures which do not require people to be uncivilized, or they have measured relatively subtle uncivilized responses.

When reactance does not lead to "uncivilized" or antisocial behavior,

it should tend to result in some awareness of one's increased motivation to have what was lost or threatened. That is, a person's desire for a given behavior, A, should increase as a consequence of its being eliminated, or threatened with elimination, from his set of free behaviors. Correspondingly, behavior A should appear to increase in attractiveness.

Direct Re-establishment of Freedom

The greater is the magnitude of reactance, the more will the individual attempt to re-establish the freedom which has been lost or threatened. However, attempts at re-establishment can be expected to occur only to the extent that there is a realistic possibility of succeeding. In general, reactance will result in attempts at restoration of freedom when there is some equivocality about the elimination of the free behavior in question, or, in other words, where there has only been a threat of elimination. When the loss of a free behavior is irreversible, as when one's left arm has been amputated or one has been told to do something by a person with immense power over oneself, there will not normally be attempts at direct restoration.

Direct re-establishment of freedom means engaging in that behavior which one has learned one cannot or should not engage in. If behavior A has been free and one is then told not to engage in A, the resultant reactance will lead the individual to engage in A. If one's set of free behaviors consisted of A and B and one were then told to do A, the direct restoration of freedom would consist in doing B.

Where freedom is threatened by social pressure, reactance will lead one to resist that pressure. If an habitual smoker, for example, were told by a friend that he should stop smoking, the resultant reactance would operate against the otherwise persuasive effects of the friend's advice. Continuing to smoke at the same rate or at a greater rate would re-establish the freedom to smoke. Quite obviously, however, the direct social influence might be greater than the magnitude of reactance, in which case a compromise response of reduced smoking would occur.

Re-establishment of Freedom by Implication

When there are restraints against the direct re-establishment of

freedom, attempts at re-establishment by implication will occur where possible. Consider again, for example, the secretary who has learned she can no longer chew gum on the job. She can re-establish her freedom by engaging in other behaviors of the same class, e.g., sucking on candy or smoking, or better yet, she can engage in what she would assume to be even less acceptable behaviors such as putting on lipstick, combing her hair, or eating candy bars.

Freedom can also be re-established by social implication. If a person has lost a free behavior through social threat, then the engagement in a similar free behavior by another person like himself and "in the same boat" will tend to re-establish his own freedom. In terms of our earlier example of the co-equal secretaries who felt free to go for a drink of water whenever they wanted, if secretary A has been told she can no longer do this and secretary B's freedom has thereby been threatened by implication, the freedom of A will be re-established by implication if secretary B proceeds to have a drink as she pleases. We might plausibly expect that when possible, one of the effects of reactance will be for a person to try to get someone else to engage in a threatened or eliminated behavior.

The Role of Importance

As has been stated, the magnitude of reactance aroused by the loss of a given freedom is directly proportional to the importance of that freedom to the individual. But though importance therefore helps to determine the amount of reactance aroused, it does not serve in the reduction of reactance. This is because reactance is defined *not* simply as an unpleasant tension which the individual will reduce in any way that he can, such as reducing the importance of any freedom which he happens to lose, but rather as a motivational state with a specific direction, namely, the recovery of freedom. Indeed, the only reasonable expectation about the effect of reactance on the importance of a lost free behavior is that importance may increase.

Voluntary versus Involuntary Elimination

Although the hypothetical examples used to illustrate the theory and the research to be reported all concern eliminations of freedom or threats which are involuntary, this is not meant to imply that threats and

eliminations must be involuntary in order to arouse reactance. The reason that voluntary eliminations or threats have not been used in examples and research is that they involve a decision process, that is, a giving up of one or more alternatives in order to select something, which in turn would involve various conflict type and postdecisional psychological processes. While reactance theory may eventually have something of interest to say about conflict and postdecisional processes, it would seem premature to attempt such articulation here in view of the current theories which already deal with these processes (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Janis, 1959), and in view of the absence of relevant data.

Related Concepts

The notion that people will be motivated to re-establish freedom which is threatened or eliminated is probably not new but it has not been utilized in current experimental research in psychology. For this reason we have tried to show in our examples that this theoretical formulation deals with a special set of problems and is not to be identified with various theories which deal with somewhat similar problems such as frustration, social power, etc. Nevertheless, there are theoretical concepts which are related to reactance and it may help the reader to locate the present theory if these related concepts are indicated.

While theories concerning frustration and aggression (e.g., Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears, 1939) are peripherally relevant since they deal with the blocking of goal attainment, which will sometimes also involve elimination of freedom, the most relevant concepts are those which have to do with social power. French and Raven (1959), for example, distinguish between "resisting forces" and "opposing forces" as factors which operate against positive social influence. Their definition of resisting forces as motivation instigated by the inducing force but opposite in direction is conceptually similar to the reactance formulation. However, the bases they suggest for the instigation of resisting forces are coercive measures to obtain compliance, and especially illegitimate coercion. It is only with regard to coercive inducing forces, then, that there is a close parallel between the approach of French and Raven and that of reactance theory.

Other views of social power, of course, would also tend to be relevant. For example, the analysis of power and counterpower by Thibaut and Kelly (1959) could in part be translated into terms of freedom, freedom reduction, and ways of re-establishing freedom. At the same time, one fundamental difference between their approach and reactance theory is that they do not posit a motivation to gain or recover power but rather concern themselves with the reward-cost outcomes of various kinds of power relationships.

The concepts of "personal weight" and "weight reduction" (Horwitz, 1958) seem particularly relevant and close to reactance theory. Personal weight is defined as the expected power which a person has in a given social relationship. When two people disagree, the legitimate outcome of the disagreement is a function of their weighted desires. When the actual outcome deviates from the legitimate outcome there is the implication that the disfavored member's weight has been reduced. Horwitz explicitly assumes that if the disfavored person does not redefine what is legitimate, he will generate a tension system for restoring his power to its expected level. As may be seen, this formulation is quite similar to reactance theory where personal eliminations of or threats to freedom are concerned. It is obvious, of course, that the concept of personal weight was not formulated to handle impersonal events. A second point worth noting is that while enhancement of personal weight is assumed by Horwitz to be satisfying, there is no assumption in reactance theory about reactions to increases in freedom where there has been no prior reduction.

The intention of this brief discussion of related concepts is to indicate the kinds of theoretical conceptions to which it is related, not to explore these conceptions and relationships exhaustively. While there is other relevant literature, such as Heider's (1958) discussion of "retribution," this review should suffice to locate reactance theory among previous theoretical ideas.

Testing the Theory

It should be clear from the above presentation that reactance will frequently occur in response to restrictions or threats thereof imposed by social entities, and that the general effect of reactance is to produce tendencies to oppose the actual or threatened restrictions. That is,

some kind of force is exerted upon a person and this gives rise to reactance, which may be seen as a second force opposing the first. This opposition of forces complicates the testing of the theory since it makes necessary that one somehow partial out the effects of the instigating force in order to detect the effects of reactance.

To illustrate this problem more concretely, let us imagine a person who has put a coin in a vending machine and is now trying to decide whether to take candy bar A or candy bar B. Let us further imagine that a stranger then walks up and says, "Take A." This example will be recognized as a typical social influence situation in which a "persuasive communication" has been transmitted from a communicator to a communicatee. But according to reactance theory the chooser's freedom may be threatened by the attempted social influence: the more pressure is put on the person to comply, the more his freedom not to select A and to select B is threatened. Since freedom may be re-established by selecting B (doing the opposite of what was suggested), it may be predicted that the greater is the magnitude of reactance aroused, the greater will be the chooser's tendency to select B. But with the importance of the freedom to select B held constant, the magnitude of reactance should be a direct function of the pressure to comply with the influence attempt. That is, as the pressure to comply increases, the pressure not to comply also increases and the resultant effect on the individual's final response is difficult to predict. In addition, where the magnitude of reactance is less than the pressure to comply, the individual will do what is suggested but less enthusiastically than if no reactance were experienced. Unfortunately, any decreases in the resultant strength or enthusiasm of compliance could be due to *resistance* against compliance just as well as to a *motive* against compliance, and resistance might easily occur independently of reactance. To demonstrate only resistance to compliance, then, will generally be more equivocal evidence for reactance than to demonstrate non-compliance, e.g., doing the opposite of what is suggested or "boomerang" attitude change. Thus, one general difficulty in testing for reactance effects from social pressure is that the magnitude of reactance must somehow be made greater than the pressures which give rise to the reactance.

In addition as the reader has probably noticed, the above social influence situation is nowhere nearly as simple as we have assumed. For the chooser may imagine that the attempted influence is because

the communicator wants B for himself (and therefore B is better than A), or, accepting the communication as an indication that the communicator prefers A, the chooser may decide he does not want to be like someone who gives unsolicited advice and he would therefore tend to choose B. So even if it could be shown in this relatively simple situation that people would do the opposite of what was suggested to them, that in itself would not yield completely unequivocal evidence in support of reactance theory.

The problems are not altogether eliminated by testing the theory in impersonal situations. This may be seen if we recall the earlier example of the individual who wanted a pack of Camel cigarettes. In that case, after money had been placed in the vending machine, a pack of Camels was dispensed without the individual's having a chance to make his selection. Although there should be no imputation of motives or preferences to the machine, psychological processes other than reactance can still occur and obscure the effects of reactance, or make interpretation difficult. Specifically, the individual has invested his money in the machine and has been stuck with the pack of Camels regardless of any reactance he may experience. Because of his investment and the subsequent commitment to the pack of Camels, he may be resistant to derogating Camel cigarettes, as reactance would lead him to do. Similarly, if a person were about to choose one from several attractive choice alternatives and suddenly discovered that for quite impersonal reasons one was no longer available, he would be impelled by reactance to want that one even more, but at the same time, he might find it painful to want something which he clearly could not have.

In summary, the testing of reactance hypotheses is relatively complicated and difficult. Nevertheless, we hope to show in the pages which follow that not only are there interesting implications of reactance theory, but also that relatively unequivocal tests can be made.

Summary and Plan

The theory stated in the preceding pages holds that when a person believes himself free to engage in a given behavior, he will experience psychological reactance if that freedom is eliminated or threatened with elimination. Psychological reactance is defined as a motivational state directed toward the re-establishment of the threatened or eliminated freedom, and it should manifest itself in increased desire to

engage in the relevant behavior and actual attempts to engage in it. Basically, the magnitude of reactance is a direct function of (1) the importance of the freedom which is eliminated or threatened, and (2) the proportion of free behaviors eliminated or threatened.

The theoretical statement is sufficiently broad to include impersonal events, as well as personal, among those which can eliminate or threaten freedoms. It is important to demonstrate that this breadth is justified and we have therefore chosen to address this basic question before turning to implications for social processes. Chapter II therefore deals with the basic question of whether or not quite impersonal eliminations of freedom result in reactance effects. From there we proceed to a consideration of personal eliminations of freedom in Chapter III, personal threats to freedom in Chapter IV, and impersonal threats to freedom in Chapter V. Chapter VI breaks away from this scheme to give special consideration to the problem of persuasion and attitude change, an area which holds particular difficulties for application of the theory. Finally, Chapter VII summarizes the evidence and some of the lessons learned.

CHAPTER II

Impersonal Elimination of Freedom

The theoretical statement presented in the preceding chapter places no limit on the manner in which an elimination of freedom takes place: reactance will be aroused to the extent that the eliminated freedom has importance to the individual. That reactance arousal and its effects are so general may not be obvious and for this reason it is important to demonstrate that reactance effects occur with completely impersonal eliminations of freedom. This chapter, then, will indicate how impersonal eliminations of freedom can occur, what the consequent reactance effects may be, and, finally, evidence that reactance effects do in fact occur when impersonal eliminations of freedom take place.

The significant aspect of an *impersonal* elimination (or threat) is that an individual cannot easily perceive it as having been *directed* at himself. Rather, his loss of freedom could just as well have happened to someone else. That is, the elimination of his freedom is at least in part fortuitous and occurred only because of some set of circumstances which has nothing to do with him, personally. For example, the individual might notice, while shopping at a supermarket, that the particular kind of coffee he sometimes buys is out of stock. That other people have bought this kind of coffee and that the supermarket did not have a larger supply could hardly have been done in order to eliminate his freedom and he will not be likely to think that this elimination of his freedom was directed at him personally.

Unless an impersonal elimination is justified—i.e., explained as due to an unusual set of circumstances—it can sometimes carry the implication of future threats to one's freedoms. For in the absence