

Modifying Beliefs and Behavior through Self-Confrontation*

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Self-confrontation theory is a cognitive-consistency-based model of behavioral and cognitive change developed by Milton Rokeach. The theoretical origins and major concepts of self-confrontation theory are elaborated, along with a review of experimental tests and evidence supporting the theory. The sociological relevance of self-confrontation theory and research is discussed.

Introduction

Self-confrontation theory is a cognitive-consistency-based model of behavioral and cognitive change developed by Milton Rokeach. Perhaps as much as any social psychologist in our lifetime, Rokeach's work on self-confrontation theory is the embodiment of Kurt Lewin's oft-quoted dictum that "there is nothing more practical than a good theory." Throughout his highly productive career Rokeach's theoretical work was on the cutting edge of the discipline, but he was not content merely to construct and test theories. His work with self-confrontation shows a deep concern with social issues, and he characteristically applied this theory to the implementation of social change.

This article will present the basic concepts and processes of self-confrontation theory. We review the most recent experiments using self-confrontation to implement long-term changes in beliefs and behavior and discuss the relevance and some implications of the theory for sociologists. We begin by tracing the theoretical origins of self-confrontation theory.

At Berkeley Rokeach was involved in the authoritarian personality project (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford 1950) and began his own work studying the structure of belief systems. His dissertation examined the relationship of ethnocentrism to structural rigidity of thinking, a project that grew out of Rokeach's undergraduate studies with Solomon Asch. Rokeach's interests in the structure of belief systems led him to conclude that the Berkeley group's characterization of the authoritarian personality as rigid, overly conventional, and prone to the use of stereotypes was ideologically biased: "the phenomena of authoritarianism, of bigotry if you like, were phenomena that pervade all areas of human life. I saw these phenomena to be

manifest at all points along the political spectrum'' (Evans 1980, p. 115). Rokeach began work on a measure of authoritarianism or rigidity of thinking that was ideology-free, culminating in his now-famous dogmatism (or ''D'') scale (Rokeach 1960). The dogmatism scale provided a paper-and-pencil measure of open- and closed-mindedness that was independent of political ideology.

As he continued his investigations into the rigidity of thinking, Rokeach came to see that belief similarity was an important determinant of attraction, and, conversely, that belief dissimilarity was often a basis for dislike. Rokeach thought that this connection between belief similarity and attraction was actually a form of prejudice: ''liking somebody because they agree with you is no less a manifestation of prejudice . . . than disliking people because they disagree with you'' (Evans 1980, p. 116). In a series of interesting studies examining the relationship of behavior and beliefs, Rokeach and his colleagues (Rokeach, Smith and Evans 1960; Rokeach and Mezei 1966) theorized that belief similarity would be a more important determinant of interpersonal attraction than was race; laboratory and field experiments confirmed this hypothesis.

In the late 1950s and 1960s Rokeach was fascinated with the structure of belief systems, and he became particularly interested in how individuals dealt with contradictions within their belief systems. In what must be one of the most unusual social-psychological studies ever conducted, Rokeach brought together three institutionalized paranoid schizophrenics, each of whom believed he was Jesus Christ (Rokeach 1964). For two years these three men lived and worked together in a state mental facility. The purpose of this study was to ''create the maximum human dissonance I could imagine; each one had to live with two other people who constantly thought they were he'' (Evans 1980, p. 118). The observations Rokeach made during this study formed a basis for his later research on self-confrontation theory, as he observed the three men daily confronting what Rokeach felt were the most fundamental of one's beliefs: beliefs concerning one's conception of self.

The Shift Toward Values

The late 1950s and 1960s saw a tremendous volume of social-psychological research on attitude and belief formation and change. By the middle 1960s Rokeach had begun to focus his attention on values rather than attitudes. In Rokeach's model, values are single beliefs about desirable end-states of existence (terminal values) or preferred modes of behavior (instrumental values), while attitudes are collections of beliefs concerning a specific object or situation. Values are seen to transcend objects and situations, while attitudes are object- and situation- specific. Values serve as standards for judgment

while attitudes do not. The number of values is conceptualized to be relatively small—perhaps in the dozens—whereas one holds as many attitudes as there are objects, persons and situations in one's life. Values are seen as directly implicating self-actualizing or ego defense functions, while attitudes are related to such functions only indirectly.

For all of these reasons, Rokeach believed that much of the attention that social psychologists had been paying to attitudes and attitude change could be more profitably invested in the study of values and value change. The relatively small number of values, and the fact that they were single beliefs rather than collections of beliefs, should make values easier to measure. Because values transcend situations and objects, the measurement of values should have greater utility in terms of prediction and correlation. And since values were theorized to serve as standards and to directly implicate self-actualization, knowing about a person's values should tell us a great deal more than simply knowing that person's attitudes.

In order to study values and value change, Rokeach developed the Value Survey (Rokeach 1967), which consists of two lists of eighteen values each: terminal values, or end-states of existence (e.g., *equality, freedom, salvation, a world at peace*), and instrumental values, or modes of existence (e.g., *clean, honest, logical*). The respondent was asked to rank the values from first to eighteenth in order of "their importance to YOU, as guiding principles in YOUR life." The most-used version of the Value Survey had the value names printed on adhesive labels to allow the respondent to rank the values without having to use numerical ranks.

In the late 1960s Rokeach began publishing a series of studies examining the role of values as both independent and dependent variables and their effects on a wide range of factors such as religious beliefs and behavior (Rokeach 1969a; 1969b; 1970), political ideology (Rokeach, Homant and Penner 1970), the subcultures of poverty and race (Rokeach and Parker 1970), and the value gap between law enforcement officers and those they police (Rokeach, Miller and Snyder 1971). In *The Nature of Human Values* (Rokeach 1973) Rokeach published normative data for Value Survey rankings from a national probability sample of 1,400 Americans with crosstabulations by race, age, sex, religion, income, and education. In addition, value data are presented for a variety of other populations, including samples of Canadians, Australians, and Israelis; a sample of inmates at a state penitentiary, and other groups.

Toward a Theory of Cognitive and Behavioral Change

Another difference between values and attitudes was, to Rokeach, the most significant. Values were seen as occupying a more central position in the belief system than attitudes. Because of this centrality, Rokeach and others

believed that changes in values would produce changes in less central elements, particularly attitudes and opinions. In other words, value was a more dynamic concept than attitude. These ideas were first presented publicly in Rokeach's 1967 presidential address to the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (Rokeach 1968a) and more fully in his *Beliefs, Attitudes and Values* (Rokeach 1968b). Convinced that changes in one's values would produce ripple-like effects throughout the belief system, Rokeach began constructing a theory of cognitive and behavioral change focusing on the role of values.

During this time the dominant theoretical position in the field of attitude formation and change was undoubtedly Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. Rokeach was convinced that this burgeoning literature was basically the study of short-term change; rarely did such experiments report post-tests as long as a day after the experimental treatment, and most were a matter of minutes afterward. Rokeach thought that Festinger's theory was too limited because it dealt primarily with contradictions between attitudes and cognitions about behavior, and because the theory focused on short-term changes in attitudes rather than on long-term or enduring changes in attitudes, values, and behavior. Rokeach (1973, p. 233) noted that most attitude change studies attempted to induce change either by (a) exposing an individual to information about the beliefs or behavior of a significant other that were inconsistent with his own beliefs or behavior (e.g., persuasive communications studies), or by (b) inducing an individual to engage in behavior that was inconsistent with his own beliefs (e.g., counter-attitudinal advocacy studies).

Perhaps as a result of his work with the three Christs, Rokeach postulated that there was a third and potentially more effective method of inducing change: exposing a person to information about his own belief system in order to make him/her aware of chronically existing contradictions. This feedback of information should make individuals aware of previously-existing contradictions between their values and self-conceptions, and ultimately lead to a state of self-dissatisfaction. In order to reduce this self-dissatisfaction, individuals should change their values to become more consistent with their self-conceptions. Rokeach theorized that "information about contradictions within one's belief system that is perceived to be incompatible with self-conceptions should motivate cognitive and behavioral change" (Rokeach 1973, pp. 233-234).

This approach to inducing change, which came to be called self-confrontation theory, differs from other methods in the sense that it is basically education-oriented. By this it is meant that the purpose of self-confrontation is to "induce changes that will not only alleviate self-dissatisfaction but also enhance self-conceptions and facilitate personal growth and self-actualization" (Rokeach 1973, p. 234). The motivation for change comes not from some

outside agent (for example, a persuasive communicator) but from contradictions within the individual's belief system.

Tests of Self-Confrontation Theory

Rokeach began his first experimental tests of self-confrontation theory in 1966. The basic design of these studies was to provide a model for many replications and extensions of the theory for the next two decades. In the initial studies, a group of Michigan State University (MSU) students were first asked to rank the eighteen values of the Value Survey (Rokeach 1967) in order of their "importance to you, as guiding principles in your life." Next, the students were shown results of a previous study examining the value rankings of MSU students. Then, the experimenter offered an interpretation of the value rankings of this comparison group, drawing attention to what came to be known as the "target values." In these studies, the target values were *freedom* and *equality*. The experimenter pointed out that the students in the comparison group ranked *freedom* first out of eighteen values, but ranked *equality* eleventh.

At this point the experimenter attempted to arouse a state of self-dissatisfaction among the subjects by observing that the students apparently

value freedom far more highly than they value equality. This suggests that MSU students in general are much more interested in their own freedom than they are in freedom for other people. (Rokeach 1973, p. 237)

To further create this state of self-dissatisfaction, the students were asked to indicate whether they were sympathetic with the aims of civil rights demonstrators. Three options were offered: that the student was sympathetic with the aims of civil rights demonstrators, and that he or she had personally participated in a civil rights demonstration; that he or she was sympathetic, but had not been active; or that the student was not sympathetic with the aims of the civil rights demonstrators.

The students were then shown a table which reported data from a previous study relating values and attitudes concerning civil rights. This table showed that students who were active in the civil rights movement ranked *freedom* first, on the average, and *equality* second. Students who were sympathetic to the aims of the civil rights demonstrators but had not themselves participated in a demonstration ranked *freedom* first and *equality* sixth; and those who were not sympathetic to the aims of the civil rights movement ranked *freedom* first and *equality* eleventh out of eighteen values. The experimenter then offered an interpretation of these findings, suggesting that

This raises the question whether those who are *against* civil rights are really saying that they care a great deal about their *own* freedom but are indifferent to other people's

freedom. Those who are *for* civil rights are perhaps saying that they not only want freedom for themselves, but for other people too. (Rokeach 1973, p. 238).

Students in the control groups responded to the value instrument, but did not see the value rankings for other students or the data relating values to civil rights attitudes and behavior. The entire experimental session lasted approximately thirty to forty minutes; the control sessions usually lasted about twenty minutes.

The predicted result of the experimental procedure was to make certain of the students aware of previously-existing contradictions within their own belief systems. Many students who thought of themselves as egalitarian and pro-civil rights found (to their disappointment and concern) that they had ranked *equality* relatively low, which was inconsistent with that self-conception. Self-confrontation theory predicted that those students who found that their value rankings contradicted their self-conceptions should act to make their values (a less-central element in the belief system) more consistent with the more centrally-located self-conception. If values were truly determinants of attitudes and behavior, such changes should result in changes in related attitudes and behaviors as well.

In these studies students in the experimental group did indeed show significant changes in attitudes and values. Students in the experimental groups increased their ranking for *equality* an average of 1.47 to 1.68 ranks three months after the experimental session. As a partial confirmation of the mechanism by which the changes took place, subjects who were students who had ranked *equality* relatively low and indicated that they were pro-civil rights increased their ranking for *equality* an average 3.71 ranks, while those who were opposed to civil rights only increased an average of 1.65 ranks. In other words, the treatment affected different students differently; those who learned that their values contradicted their self-conceptions were more likely to change their value rankings.

These changes were especially impressive because they came so long (three to five months) after a relatively brief experimental session, and because they dealt with values and attitudes concerning an important social issue. Even Rokeach, however, was concerned about the validity of the results; he wrote that

We were extremely reluctant . . . to accept these experimental findings as evidence of real, genuine long-term changes in values and attitudes because it seems unlikely, given the present state of theory and fact in social psychology, that any single and brief experimental session could have resulted in such long-range changes. (Rokeach 1971, p. 455)

A second set of studies was then conducted, commencing in the fall of 1967. These studies included posttest measures not only of values and

attitudes but of behaviors relating to civil rights as well. The results of these studies are striking. Statistically significant changes in values and attitudes were observed for experimental subjects as long as fifteen to seventeen months after the experimental treatment; value and attitude changes this long after the experimental session are almost unheard of in the social sciences.

As impressive as the changes in response to paper-and-pencil measures of attitudes and values were, the findings regarding behavioral effects were even more convincing. Three to five months after the experimental session, all subjects received a solicitation (on NAACP letterhead) to join the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Experimental subjects were more than twice as likely as control subjects to respond favorably to this solicitation. Experimental subjects were significantly more likely to enroll in a special ethnic core program of coursework twenty-one months after the experimental session, and experimental subjects who changed majors were more likely than control subjects to change to a social science or education major.

By 1979 Rokeach counted 23 published studies using the self-confrontation technique to induce long-term change. Most of these focused on the values *equality* and *freedom* and attempted to induce changes in values and attitudes related to civil rights, but researchers had also begun to use self-confrontation in applied settings. For example, Hollen (1972) investigated changes in values and attitudes related to environmental issues with a treatment involving the value *a world of beauty*, while Greenstein (1976) produced long-term changes in the values and teaching performance of student teachers by focusing on the values *mature love* and *a sense of accomplishment*, which previous studies had shown to be related to teaching performance. Conroy (1979) used information concerning the values *self-control* and *broadminded* to induce changes in the values and behaviors of persons attempting to quit smoking, and Young (1979) produced changes in the career-planning behavior of individuals exposed to an experimental treatment concerning the values *logical* and *responsible*.

About this time Rokeach and his students became interested in a number of theoretical issues concerning the process of self-confrontation. The first of these dealt with the precise mechanism that produced change in subjects exposed to self-confrontation procedures. Greenstein and his colleagues (Grube, Greenstein, Rankin and Kearney 1977; Greenstein 1982) suspected that value change was not, by itself, either a sufficient or necessary condition for behavior changes to occur as a result of self-confrontation. They postulated that the self-dissatisfaction that motivated behavioral change was a result of the perceived inconsistencies between behavior and self-conceptions and not necessarily the result of inconsistencies between values and self-conceptions.

Using path-analytic techniques, they reanalyzed data from Rokeach's (1973) and Greenstein's (1976) self-confrontation experiments and confirmed this hypothesis, finding that the direct effect of the treatment on behavior was much stronger than the effect mediated through values.

Another problem under study was, in effect, an ethical one. With such an effective means of inducing value and behavior change available, what was to stop unscrupulous agents from manipulating values arbitrarily? Consider, for example, an individual who sees him/herself as egalitarian and open-minded, that is, someone whose self-conception is that of an egalitarian and open-minded person. Would it be possible to use self-confrontation techniques to change this individual's values and behavior to be less egalitarian and more closed-minded? Rokeach and Grube (1979) studied the problem of the arbitrary manipulation of values, and concluded that change following self-confrontation is unidirectional; that is, self-confrontation may create changes that result in *increasing* the consistency of values and self-conceptions, but not changes that would *decrease* that consistency. In other words, the direction of the changes produced by self-confrontation is determined by the individual's self-conceptions and is not subject to the arbitrary choice of an external agent. Summarizing a series of experiments to test this unidirectional hypothesis, Rokeach and Grube concluded that it seemed "unlikely that self-confrontation can be abused to initiate arbitrary changes in values, attitudes, and behavior" (1979, p. 256).

The Great American Values Test

In the mid-1970s Rokeach became interested in the possibility of using the mass media, particularly television, as a means of presenting self-confrontation treatments. Rokeach, along with sociologist Sandra Ball-Rokeach and psychologist Joel Grube wondered whether it might be possible to extend the method of self-confrontation

... to the television medium, which has the potential to influence large numbers of people at relatively little effort or cost. Could television be employed to influence viewers in their natural contexts—to make them more self-knowledgeable? to encourage changes in values, attitudes, and behaviors that are consistent with social policies concerning, say, racism, sexism, health-constructive behavior, or pollution of the environment? or to discourage the expression of opinions or behaviors that are incompatible with social policies or the welfare of people in a democratic society? (Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach and Grube 1984, p. 65)

Sanders and Atwood (1979) reported a preliminary experiment in which they studied the relative effectiveness of interpersonal (live), televised, and print media forms of presenting the self-confrontation materials and concluded that there were essentially no differences between media in terms of

the effectiveness of the treatment. Although the Sanders and Atwood study found value changes among the experimental subjects, many questions remained. Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, and Grube were concerned that most of the participants in previous self-confrontation experiments had been selected by the experimenters, unlike a naturally-occurring media event in which members of the audience are self-selected.

They were also concerned with whether the experimental results obtained under laboratory conditions were replicable in the real world. Of the two dozen or so self-confrontation studies reported prior to that time, only Greenstein's (1976) study of student teachers had been conducted in a natural setting with nonvolunteer participants. A greater problem, perhaps, was posed by the very nature of the mass media audience. Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, and Grube noted that this presented

... a challenging issue that had not been satisfactorily resolved by others interested in assessing the effects of television on viewers watching programs in the natural context of their own homes. Such viewers are always self-selected, always watch programs in privacy or with friends or members of their families, always watch programs with one or another level of attention, are never recruited in advance by others to be participants in an experiment, are never worried about being observed, always retain the option of watching and of turning off programs if they are not interested, and always reserve for themselves the right to interrupt their viewing or to be interrupted by unanticipated external circumstances. (Ball-Rokeach, et al. 1984, p. 64)

On February 27, 1979, following extensive publicity in local newspapers, televised spot announcements, and in *TV Guide*, all three television network affiliates in the Tri-Cities area of eastern Washington presented a thirty-minute program entitled "The Great American Values Test." The first half of the program presented a discussion about what values are, how they are measured, and some findings concerning values in American society based on Rokeach's previous national surveys. The second half of the program contained two different self-confrontation treatments: one dealing with egalitarianism or racism and the values of *freedom* and *equality* similar to the original studies with college students; and a second treatment concerning environmental issues and the values *a world of beauty* and *a comfortable life*.

In the presentation dealing with egalitarianism, a graphic showed that Americans had ranked *freedom* third and *equality* twelfth out of eighteen values. The host then noted that

Americans feel that *freedom* is very important. They rank it third. But they also feel that *equality* is considerably less important . . . they rank it twelfth. Since most Americans value *freedom* far higher than they value *equality*, the question is: what does that mean? Does it suggest that Americans as whole are much more interested in their own freedom than they are in freedom for other people? Is there a contradiction in the American people between their love of freedom and their lesser love for equality?

By comparing your values with these results, you should be able to decide whether you agree with the average American's feelings about *freedom* and *equality*. (Ball-Rokeach et al. 1984, p. 74)

Later, over a film of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Selma civil rights march, the co-hosts discussed reactions of Americans to King's assassination.

Thirty-five percent of all Americans reported they felt sad or angry. Another seventeen percent said they felt ashamed. But eleven percent reported they felt afraid, and more than one-third of white Americans reacted to Dr. King's assassination with "he brought it on himself."

Are there differences in human values that prompted such differences in reaction to Dr. King's assassination? The national survey revealed a number of such value differences. Two were the most revealing. Regardless of how Americans reacted, everyone uniformly felt *freedom* was an important value . . . they ranked it third.

The co-host then said

Not so with *equality*. Those who felt sad or angry about Dr. King's assassination ranked *equality* sixth on the average. Those who felt ashamed ranked *equality* seventh . . . those who felt fear ranked it twelfth, and those who reacted with "he brought it on himself" ranked *equality* thirteenth. (Ball-Rokeach et al. 1984, pp. 74-75)

The co-host then presented the same interpretation that had been presented in the earlier studies concerning racism:

This raises the question whether those who are against civil rights are really saying that they care a great deal about their own freedom but really don't care much about other people's freedom. (Ball-Rokeach et al. 1984, p. 75)

A conceptually similar presentation was done concerning environmental behaviors and attitudes and the value *a world of beauty*. A random sample of 1,199 residents of the Tri-Cities area drawn from telephone directories provided a set of experimental respondents. Telephone interviews conducted immediately following the telecast indicated that twenty-six percent of the experimental group had watched the program, and about half of these viewed the entire program without interruption. For comparison purposes, a control group of 500 persons from Yakima, Washington (where the program was not seen) also was sampled. All of the participants received mailed questionnaires containing the Value Survey and other attitudinal measures four to seven weeks after the telecast. Three behavioral measures (requests for donations) were also mailed to all of the respondents: one dealing with racism, one with sexism, and a third concerning the environment.

Analyses of the responses to the value and attitude measures indicated that there were no significant effects on the target values of the treatments (*freedom*, *equality*, and *a world of beauty*) or related attitudes, although the changes

that did occur were in the predicted direction. On the other hand, the three behavioral solicitations showed significantly greater effects for experimental participants, both in terms of numbers of responses and in terms of amount of money contributed to the organizations for which funds were solicited. Further analyses indicated that the experimental effects were strongest for those who viewed the entire program uninterrupted.

Self-Confrontation Theory and the Sociologist

Although trained as a psychologist, Rokeach's work has clear relevance for sociologists, especially sociological social psychologists. He taught in the psychology department at Michigan State for nearly a quarter of a century until he moved to the department of sociology at Washington State University. In his first lecture at Washington State he remarked that it was the first time in his career that he had taught a course that was not composed primarily of psychology students. His lectures, however, transcended traditional disciplinary boundaries. His theory and research prodded and inspired scholars from theoretical perspectives as diverse as clinical psychology and symbolic interactionism to re-examine their own theories and applications.

There are four groups of sociologists in particular who stand to benefit from an understanding of this work: sociologists interested in attitude and belief change, those involved in implementing social policy, those studying large-scale social change, and those who study the mass media.

The relevance of self-confrontation theory and its focus on long-term cognitive and behavioral change for sociologists studying the processes of attitude and behavior change cannot be overemphasized. Self-confrontation is a well-articulated and experimentally-confirmed model of the change process which has shown itself to be more durable than competing theories of belief change, particularly cognitive dissonance theory.

Rokeach's experiments and those of his students have demonstrated the efficacy of self-confrontation theory in modifying behaviors and cognitions. Applied scientists in need of a model for designing programs that attempt to produce long-term behavioral and cognitive changes might do well to consider self-confrontation as a part of a more comprehensive program. Social scientists concerned with discrimination against the elderly, for example, might employ self-confrontation in order to change beliefs and behavior.

Sociologists studying social change may profit from an understanding of this theory in terms of a general framework through which social innovations are learned and diffused. Explanations of how American society changed its beliefs and behaviors concerning divorce during the 1960s and 1970s, for example, might be phrased in terms of self-confrontation on a societal level.

Finally, Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach and Grube's "Great American Values Test" may serve as a model for further theory-based attempts to use the mass media as an instrument of change, as well as a subject of analysis for those interested in the power of television to affect its viewers' beliefs and behaviors. If television really has the power to modify the behavior of its viewers, how is this accomplished? Self-confrontation theory might provide a framework within which such behavior modification might be understood.

ENDNOTE

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