Foreword

This Foreword contains primarily a bit of the history of how the ideas which form the core of this book arose. This chronological form is the best way to acknowledge properly the assistance received from others—assistance which was considerable and crucial—and at the same time to explain how this book relates to the purposes which originally motivated it.

In the late fall of 1951 the writer was asked by Bernard Berelson, the Director of the Behavioral Sciences Division of the Ford Foundation, whether he would be interested in undertaking a "propositional inventory" of the substantive area of "communication and social influence." A large body of research literature exists in this area that has never been integrated at a theoretical level. It ranges all the way from studies on the effects of the mass media to studies on interpersonal communication. If a set of conceptual propositions could be adduced that tied together many of the known facts in the area, and from which additional derivations could be made, this would be of obvious value.

The notion of attempting such a theoretical integration

is always intellectually attractive and challenging, although it seemed clear to everyone concerned at the time that even if successfully accomplished, it could not hope to cover the whole of the designated area. A plan that seemed to promise some useful results was to start out with some narrowly defined problem within the general area of "communication and social influence" and attempt to formulate a specific set of hypotheses or propositions that would adequately account for the data. If this worked out, then another narrowly defined problem could be considered, and the theory extended and modified. Admittedly, one would be confronted again and again with bodies of data with which no progress could be made theoretically. It was to be hoped that one would quickly recognize the dead end and move on to other data.

Funds provided by the Behavioral Sciences Division of the Ford Foundation made possible the collaboration of May Brodbeck, Don Martindale, Jack Brehm, and Alvin Boderman. Together we began the job by selecting the spreading of rumors as our first narrowly defined problem to work on.

The chores of collecting an exhaustive bibliography of research literature on rumor spreading, of reading the material, and of sifting fact from supposition and conjecture were comparatively easy. More difficult were the problems of integrating the material and of getting some theoretical hunches that would begin to handle the data in a satisfactory way. It was easy enough to restate empirical findings in a slightly more general form, but this kind of intellectual exercise does not lead to much progress.

The first hunch that generated any amount of enthusiasm among us came from trying to understand some data, reported by Prasad, concerning rumors subsequent to the Indian earthquake of 1934. This study is described in detail in Chapter Ten. The fact reported by Prasad which puzzled

us was that following the earthquake, the vast majority of the rumors that were widely circulated predicted even worse disasters to come in the very near future. Certainly the belief that horrible disasters were about to occur is not a very pleasant belief, and we may ask why rumors that were "anxiety provoking" arose and were so widely accepted. Finally a possible answer to this question occurred to us—an answer that held promise of having rather general application: perhaps these rumors predicting even worse disasters to come were not "anxiety provoking" at all but were rather "anxiety justifying." That is, as a result of the earthquake these people were already frightened, and the rumors served the function of giving them something to be frightened about. Perhaps these rumors provided people with information that fit with the way they already felt.

From this start, and with the help of many discussions in which we attempted to pin the idea down and to formalize it somewhat, we arrived at the concept of dissonance and the hypotheses concerning dissonance reduction. Once the formulation in terms of dissonance and the reduction of dissonance was made, numerous implications became obvious. Following these implications through soon became the major activity of the project. For a while we continued to pursue the original notion of the "propositional inventory" and to explore the implications of the notion of dissonance; but the extraordinary difficulty of the former, together with our excitement concerning the latter, served more and more to focus our efforts.

The development of the theory did not, of course, proceed in the order in which it is presented in this book. Here the material is arranged so that the first chapters deal with relatively simple situations and later chapters become more and more concerned with complicated problems. Actually, the first implications of the theory of dissonance that we

explored were those involving problems of voluntary and involuntary exposure to information. These occurred to us first, of course, because they were related to the area of communication with which we were basically concerned. These implications also were suggested by the rumor study itself. If people sought information that would fit with how they were already reacting, certainly this process would not be confined to rumors but would also extend generally to information-seeking processes. The implications from the theory that suggested themselves, however, soon extended beyond the bounds of "communication and social influence." Nevertheless, we felt it was more fruitful to follow the leads of what now seemed to be a promising theory than to adhere rigidly to a prior plan and a designated content area.

Fortunately for the development of the theory of dissonance, we were not restricted to finding relevant data in the existing research literature, but were able to conduct our own studies specifically designed to test derivations from the theory. With funds and assistance provided by the Laboratory for Research in Social Relations of the University of Minnesota, and with some funds available from a personal grant-in-aid from the Ford Foundation, we were able to collect our own data. All the people who assisted in these studies will not be named here, since they are acknowledged in the pages of the book itself where these studies are described.

According to some points of view, the writer should have waited another four or five years before writing this book. By that time many more studies of relevance to the theory would have been made and many unclarities would have been eliminated. But piecemeal journal publication seemed a poor way to present the theory and the variety of data relevant to it. One of the important aspects of the theory of dissonance is its ability to integrate data from seemingly different areas, and this aspect would be largely lost if it were

not published in one unitary volume. Also, the writer feels that there are sufficient data now relevant to the theory to warrant communicating it to others, and sufficient corroboration of the theory to hope that others will also pursue it.

One final word of thanks is due those who in various ways helped in writing and rewriting the chapters of this book, notably, Judson Mills, Robert R. Sears, Ernest R. Hilgard, Herbert McClosky, Daniel Miller, James Coleman, Martin Lipset, Raymond Bauer, Jack Brehm, and May Brodbeck. Assistance from many of these people was possible because they and I were resident fellows at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences while most of the writing on this book was done.

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