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**Threat Explication:
What We Know and Don't Yet Know about a
Key Component of Inoculation Theory**

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Abstract

Many contemporary persuasion scholars consider threat to be a prerequisite for conferred resistance to influence through the process of attitudinal inoculation. Yet, despite its significance, we know very little about the nature or function of threat. This essay focuses attention on this single variable, arguing that a better understanding of threat leads to better understanding of how attitudinal inoculation confers resistance. Directions for future research are offered.

This is an essay about one variable in one theory in one subset of persuasion scholarship: threat in attitudinal inoculation theory in resistance to influence. Such a singular focus could call into question this essay's utility for the larger community of communication and persuasion theorists. But as I'll argue in this essay, plucking a key variable from an established theory of influence, inspecting the variable from both conceptual and methodological perspectives, and then crafting future research propositions from these findings is more than an intellectual exercise. Acts of theoretical and conceptual explication—particularly intensive study of prerequisite variables—return us to fundamental interests of theory development and understanding. A better understanding of inoculation theory particularly means a better understanding of communication generally.

Inoculation theory was only about thirty years old when Eagly and Chaiken (1993) dubbed it “the grandparent theory of resistance to attitude change” (p. 561). But this youthful grandparent is, as Compton and Pfau (2005) put it about a decade later, “far from retiring” (p. 116). Contemporary scholars continue to build robust research programs on this theory, making great strides in understanding how inoculation works and in identifying optimal conditions for its efficacy. Recent research is taking the theory into new domains, like front group stealth campaigns

(Pfau, Haigh, Sims, & Wigley, 2007), and into new types of resistance, including resistance to spiral of silence effects (Lin & Pfau, 2007). As we look ahead to future inoculation research inquiries, I join scholars (Pfau, 1997; Compton & Pfau, 2005) who have encouraged inoculation researchers to take another look at this grandparent's early years, returning to its infancy for a better understanding of how, and under what conditions, inoculation works as a resistance to influence strategy. No other fundamental inoculation construct is more fitting for such scrutiny than threat. Inoculation hinges on threat, yet there is much about it we don't yet know.

Threat was there from the beginning, in one of McGuire's (1964) earliest explanations for how inoculation works:

[T]o be effective the prior defense...presumably should be threatening rather than reassuring about the belief. An obvious way of threatening him is by pre-exposure to weakened forms of the attacking arguments. (p. 201)

Years later, Pfau (1997) called threat "the most distinguishing feature of inoculation" (p. 137) and he and a colleague concluded: "[I]noculation is impossible without threat" (Compton & Pfau, 2005, p. 101). When inoculation messages successfully generate threat, inoculation treatments usually work. When messages fail to elicit threat, inoculation treatments usually fail.

One might think that, because threat serves as a requisite for inoculation, we would have a nuanced understanding of what threat is, how threat functions, and how threat plays into the process of resistance to influence. But even as we have more nuanced understanding of how inoculation confers resistance—with some of the most recent scholarship exploring underlying attitude constructs like attitudinal nodes (Pfau, Ivanov, et al., 2005)—we know comparatively little about threat.

Why? What has caused threat to slip under the radar in much of the inoculation scholarship? How could one of the most fundamental features of inoculation—no, perhaps *the* fundamental feature of inoculation—be one of the least understood? One answer may be the theory's namesake—the medical analogy.

Medical Analogy: Clarifies and Confounds

Inoculation theory's namesake offers an elegant, creative explanation for how attitudes can be rendered resistant to subsequently stronger persuasion attempts. The medical analogy sums up the theory neatly: Just as a medical inoculation confers resistance by introducing a weakened virus to an otherwise healthy body to spur the production of antibodies to make the body's defenses stronger, exposure to weakened counterattitudinal arguments triggers the production of counterarguments to make the mind's defenses stronger. Medical inoculations lead to bodies that resist viruses; attitudinal inoculations lead to minds that resist persuasion. The medical analogy functioned as an explanatory beginning with the earliest descriptions of the theory (e.g., McGuire, 1964), and in the subsequent decades, scholars continued to use the analogy to explain how inoculation confers resistance.

McGuire intended for the analogy to do more than name his theory; he also meant for the analogy to guide further theoretical development (Compton & Pfau, 2005). In one early study, for example, McGuire and his colleague encouraged "pursuit of the medical analogy" (McGuire & Papageorgis, 1962, p. 34). Where the analogy excels is in creating an explanation for the counterarguments thought to play an active role in conferred resistance. Counterarguments are like antibodies, so making more strengthens the attitude, much like making more antibodies strengthens the body. But it is more difficult to find the connection between medical inoculation and threat, or the motivation for counterarguing. With the medical inoculation, the healthy body's response to the offending agent is an automatic response of a healthy immune system. But with attitudinal inoculation, the threat component is more deliberate—motivated, it seems, by the conscious awareness that a position might soon be under attack. Perhaps this is why threat received scant attention in the early decades of the theory. Its medical counterpart was an automatic, assumed process, so the attitudinal component was also assumed.

If the inoculation analogy led scholars to this assumption, the analogy may have limited early theoretical development of inoculation. It wouldn't be the first time. Other scholars have pointed out that a close reading of the analogy limits inoculation scholarship (e.g., Rogers & Thistlewaite, 1969; Wood, 2007), and Compton and Pfau (2005)

observed some "monumental findings about the process of inoculation...do not closely fit the medical analogy" (p. 124).

The analogy likely affected early directions of inoculation research, leading inoculation scholars into different avenues of inquiry. The analogy may have also influenced how inoculation was treated in early inoculation research: as a primitive concept, assumed but not measured.

Early Research: Threat as Primitive Concept

Threat was offered as one of the earliest explanation for how inoculation triggers a process of resistance. Yet surprisingly, despite its importance in theory development, inoculation researchers largely ignored threat in their research designs. "Its presence was only assumed in McGuire's inoculation research and in all inoculation studies during the 20 years that followed" (Compton & Pfau, 2005, p. 126)

Inoculation researchers began measuring threat in the late 1980s, with Pfau and Burgoon (1988) making the first effort. A version of their threat scale (based on another scale developed by Burgoon and his colleagues (1978)) continues to be the standard measure of elicited threat in contemporary inoculation scholarship. The threat scale usually consists of five bipolar adjective pairs: nonthreatening/threatening, not harmful/harmful, unthreatening/intimidating, not risky/risky, and safe/dangerous (e.g., Pfau, Compton, et al., 2004), and the scale boasts impressive reliability, often ranging from 0.88 and 0.97 (Wan & Pfau, 2004). While most inoculation studies use this scale or a close variant, some contemporary inoculation studies continue to assume threat and do not measure it (e.g., Banerjee & Greene, 2006; Jainawala & Wilkin, 2007).

These two characteristics of early inoculation research limited our early understanding of threat in the inoculation process of resistance: the inoculation analogy and treatment of threat as a primitive construct. Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing through more than 20 years of inoculation research, scholars measured for threat, using its presence as a manipulation check for assessing inoculation's efficacy. Threat became the indicator for whether inoculation "took." But there's more to know about threat than if it merely is. The more important question: *What is it?*

So, What Is Threat?

Two kinds of threat are purportedly at work during inoculation. When McGuire first began talking about threat in his explanations for how inoculation confers resistance, he was talking about "inherent threat" (McGuire, 1970, p. 63). Inherent threat is generated by the mere presence of counterattitudinal content, resulting in the jarring effect of encountering arguments that challenge an existing belief, attitude or position.

In subsequent studies, McGuire introduced a second type of threat—explicit threat in the form of a forewarning that an existing attitude would likely be assailed. With forewarning, inoculation messages didn't just present counterarguments; inoculation messages also warned of future attacks against existing beliefs, attitudes or positions. McGuire and Papageorgis (1962) conducted the first inoculation study to incorporate explicit forewarning, and their results confirmed that forewarning enhances inoculation's efficacy. Inherent plus explicit threat confers optimum resistance.

Many contemporary inoculation studies focus on explicit threat more than inherent threat. For example, in one study by Pfau and his colleagues, threat was "operationalized as a forewarning of one or more impending challenges to attitudinal integrity" (1997, p. 189). In another, the researchers note in their description of the inoculation message: "The first paragraph [forewarning] of the inoculation messages was designed to elicit threat" (Pfau et al., 2008, p. 311). With this approach, threat is forewarning, or explicit threat.

Inoculation research does not measure the two separate sources of threat—inherent threat generated by the mere presence of counterattitudinal content and explicit threat elicited by a forewarning of an impending challenge. It is unclear which is more responsible for inoculation's elicited threat. Wood (2007) recently pointed this out in her study: "[E]licited threat is likely a result of exposure to both the warning and the counterarguments, but it is unknown from the current methodology how much each contributes" (p. 373). We know successful inoculation messages generate threat. We don't yet know the precise sources of this threat—or if the sources matter.

Further, the most commonly used threat measurement (a Likert-type scale using bipolar adjective pairs) measures participants' awareness

of their feelings of vulnerability to an impending attitude attack. We know less about the affective dimensions of threat. What does threat feel like for those inoculated? One leading inoculation scholar argued that inoculation's threat is not the same thing as fear generated by a fear appeal (Pfau, 1995). If the threat in inoculation is not like fear—an argument that, while sound, needs empirical validation—then what is it? Pfau and his colleagues' (2009) recent finding that anger-based inoculation messages confer more threat than happiness-based inoculation messages suggests dynamic affect features are at work in the process of inoculation. Surely threat, the motivating force in inoculation, has some dynamic affect features as well. Future scholarship should consider what affect is involved when inoculation messages generate threat.

The seemingly simple question—*What is threat?*—has a complex answer. Threat can be both inherent and explicit, but scholarship up to this point hasn't teased out which type of threat does what in the process of resistance (Wood, 2007). In fact, we don't have strong empirical validation that both exist. From the time inoculation scholars began measuring threat in the late 1980s, studies have employed inoculation messages with both forewarning (explicit threat) and preemptive refutation (inherent threat). We also know more about the cognitive dimensions than the affective dimensions of threat. Indeed, although threat is the most affect-rich component of inoculation, it is usually treated as a cognitive dimension, as a way "to get people to acknowledge the vulnerability of their attitudes to potential counterattitudinal influence" (Pfau et al., 2009, p. 76). This tells us more about what people think about threat than what they're feeling during threat. Future inoculation research should consider both types of threat (inherent and explicit) as well as more components (affective and cognitive) of threat.

We can add one additional layer to this discussion of threat: individual differences. Most inoculation research that measures threat looks only at two groups—those inoculated (experimental condition) and those not (control condition). But threat may affect individuals differently. One recent study found, for example, that inoculated females experienced more threat than inoculated males (Pfau, et al., 2008). Another found that elicited threat is affected by pre-existing attitudes toward the issue and attitude certainty (Wood, 2007). We may need to

modify our question from the simple *What is threat?* to *What is threat for whom?*

When Does Threat Matter?

In his early writings, McGuire (1964) suggested that threat's impact is strongest during the interim between the inoculation message and the eventual attack message. He writes: "[T]he motivational stimulation from the threatening refutational defense would result in the believer's accumulating more supportive material for the truism *during the week following the attack*" (McGuire, 1964, p. 209, emphasis added). Contemporary inoculation research also points to this interim as a critical part of the inoculation process (e.g., Pfau et al., 1997). With this take on threat, threat matters most *after* the inoculation message, motivating those inoculated to prepare for the impending persuasive challenge.

McGuire (1964) offered another explanation for threat's impact when considering explicit forewarning as threat. He writes:

[A]ny extrinsic threat to the truism (e.g., a forewarning that it will be attacked), presented to the believer before the defense material, should increase his motivation to assimilate the material and hence enhance its immunizing effectiveness. (McGuire, 1964, p. 210)

When an explicit forewarning is used to launch an inoculation message, threat works by motivating a close reading of the remainder of the message. With this approach to threat, threat matters most *before* and *during* the inoculation message. This contrasts with the earlier argument that threat is most important *after* the inoculation message.

If we stop here, we have a rather clear-cut explanation for the two times threat matters during inoculation, and the explanations seem clearly linked to the two types of threat. With inherent threat, threat matters during the interim between the inoculation message and the eventual attack message. With explicit threat (forewarning), threat matters before and during the inoculation message.

But a closer reading of McGuire's early writings suggests that there is not such a clear distinction. McGuire (1961) explains: "...[T]he shock value of the contemporaneous presentation of the refutational defense, which suggests to him that his beliefs are not as invulnerable as he thought, serve to provoke his interest in and utilization of the

supportive arguments" (p. 185). My reading of this explanation leads me to believe that both inherent and explicit threat affects motivation to attend to the information presented in inoculation messages. Perhaps we can make a similar argument about the interim between the inoculation message and the subsequent attack message: Both inherent and explicit threat are at work during this interim as well.

We should also consider an additional point of time when threat may function during the inoculation process: the attack. Inoculation messages warn about the attack message, so when it comes, it's likely that people are having strong reactions to it. They presumably recognize it as a threat and experience threat. Extant inoculation scholarship has not measured threat at the moment of attack, during the attack, or after the attack. We've ignored threat at the time we're assessing whether inoculation worked.

To this point, I've treated threat as an either/or event—it either exists or it doesn't exist after the inoculation message. But I think threat is more dynamic than static, that it ebbs and flows during the inoculation process. For example, Compton and Pfau (2005) wondered if implicit threat might accumulate with each refuted counterargument in the message—an additive effect. If one counterargument is threatening, perhaps two counterarguments are even more threatening. Threat likely varies during the interim as well.

Together, these explanations indicate that explicit threat (forewarnings) and inherent threat (presence of counterarguments) affect how an inoculation message is processed, and that threat, in general, is at work during the interim between the inoculation message and the attack message and perhaps even beyond the attack message. Which type of threat matters at what point in the process is unclear (Wood, 2007). We also don't yet know whether threat levels fluctuate during the process of resistance—and if so, whether threat levels at various points in the process of inoculation matter in terms of optimal resistance. To figure this out, research could model a study (Pfau et al., 2006) that looked at how counterarguing output changes during the interim between the inoculation message and the attack. By assessing counterarguing output during the post-inoculation message delay, the researchers were able to determine that counterarguing output was robust. In addition to measuring counterarguing output, researchers could also measure threat levels during the interim. It is possible that, because threat is assumed to

be the catalyst for counterarguing, and counterarguing output remains robust during the interim, elicited threat may also remain robust. Future research should delve further into the process, looking at threat during various points of the inoculation process—pre-inoculation message, during the inoculation message, after the inoculation message, during the interim, pre-attack message, during the attack message, and after the attack message. Such research would involve interrupting inoculation and attack messages for measurements (Pfau et al., 2009), which might be complicated, but the findings would greatly add to our understanding of threat.

A more complete understanding of what threat is (inherent and explicit, cognitive and affective) and when threat matters (before, during, and after the messages and interim) are two ripe areas for future inoculation scholarship. Pursuit of these two areas also raises additional questions about threat in inoculation, and some of these questions are explored in the remainder of this essay.

What Would *More Threat Do*?

How much threat is optimal for resistance? The threshold is unclear (Compton & Pfau, 2005), although some have speculated that more threat leads to more resistance (Wyer, 1974). McGuire (1964) described the ideal amount of threat this way: "threatening enough to be defense-stimulating, but not so strong as to overwhelm the truism" (p. 202). It's an important standard. If the counterattitudinal content is too strong, or too convincing, the inoculation message could boomerang. But if it's not strong enough, it won't trigger the work necessary for resistance. Further, we have to consider incidental effects of stronger threat. For example, Pfau and his colleagues (2004) found that greater threat lowers attitude certainty, perhaps thwarting resistance efforts.

Contemporary inoculation research has tried to pinpoint the ideal degree of threat with more precision. One study in particular has implications for our understanding of threat. Compton and Pfau (2004) created four types of inoculation messages: strong counterarguments with strong refutations, weak counterarguments with weak refutations, strong counterarguments with weak refutations, and weak counterarguments with strong refutations. They predicted that the matched argument strength would be more effective than mismatched

argument strength in conferring resistance, and they found some evidence that it was. But a more important finding in the context of this essay related to threat. They reasoned that the weak/strong condition would not generate sufficient threat. Contrary to their prediction, all four conditions generated threat. The authors reasoned that the explicit forewarning in each condition was enough to generate threat— independent of the varying strengths of counterarguments and refutations. While Compton and Pfau's (2004) study offers more insight into argument strength and its relationship to inoculation's efficacy, much more work needs to be done to discover how argument strength influences threat and resistance.

Scholars often point to low levels of threat as explanations for when inoculation doesn't "take hold" as well as expected (e.g., Godbold & Pfau, 2000). Yet, other research indicates that successful threat manipulations can lead to weak inoculation effects. In one study, threat was significantly greater with those inoculated, yet impacts of inoculation treatments were, as the researchers put it, "anemic" (Pfau et al., 2008, p. 316). In the Compton and Pfau (2004) study, four separate inoculation conditions elicited threat, but only one condition conferred ultimate resistance to the attack message in terms of attitude toward the issue. While elicited threat seems to be a requisite for inoculation (Pfau, 1997, but see Wood, 2007), it is not sufficient to confer optimum resistance.

We should bear in mind that in two decades of measuring threat levels in inoculation, we haven't seen inoculation treatments elicit more than moderate levels of threat, or threat levels much beyond the mid-point on the measurement scales (Compton & Pfau, 2005). In some studies, elicited threat rises above significance levels (when compared to control groups), but is still quite weak (e.g., Pfau, Compton, et al., 2006). We don't know what would happen if inoculation messages were to trigger strong levels of threat (Compton & Pfau, 2005). Would we find a simple positive relationship, whereas more threat leads to more resistance? Or, is it possible that high threat levels would lead to a boomerang effect? We already know that threat lowers attitude confidence—would strong levels of threat obliterate it?

Then there are methodological questions about increasing elicited threat. How would we manipulate stronger threat levels in inoculation scholarship? In an early study, McGuire operationalized *high*

threat as four counterarguments and *low threat* as two counterarguments in inoculation messages, and in another, he manipulated threat by refuting some counterarguments but not others (McGuire, 1964). Compton and Pfau (2005) wondered if visuals might be used to increase the threat component, much the same way Nabi's (2003) research used visuals to elicit stronger affect in the process of inoculation. A recent inoculation study used a photograph to accompany a print-based inoculation treatment (Pfau, et al., 2008). Researchers could also design video inoculation messages that visually depict someone's attitude challenged, e.g., a group of pre-teens trying to get another pre-teen to smoke a cigarette.

Scholars should also take a closer look at the content of forewarning messages. Burgoon and his colleagues (1976) found that that when there's a 50-50 chance an attitude attack might occur, threat is higher. Some of the most recent inoculation scholarship has moved from warning about impending arguments to warning about impending argument strategies. For example, Pfau, Haigh, and colleagues (2006, 2008) warned against visuals as a persuasive medium in their inoculation messages, an inoculation strategy they called "generic preemption of the influence of visual images" (2006, p. 154). When warning about the effects of news photographs, the threat manipulation didn't take (Pfau, et al., 2006); when warning about the effects of news visuals, the threat manipulation did take (Pfau, et al., 2008). Inoculation messages could include explicit mentions of the cognitive and affective dimensions of the impending attack message, under the assumption that a combination of cognitive and affective arguments is more threatening (Ivanov, Pfau, & Parker, 2009).

At this point, we have limited understanding of what happens if we add strong threat to the inoculation process. A more fundamental question might be: *How* do we add strong threat to the inoculation process? Using visuals and modifying the forewarning component of inoculation messages could be viable options.

What Else Does Threat Do?

McGuire and other early inoculation pioneers assumed that threat motivated counterarguing, an explanation consistent with information processing research (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1989). But

more recent inoculation scholarship is suggesting a much more nuanced—and active—role for threat in the process of resistance. Pfau and his colleagues (2004) did not find a direct link between threat and counterarguing. Instead, threat enhanced involvement levels, which then impacted counterarguing. Further, threat had a direct impact on attitude accessibility, which then facilitated resistance to the final attack message. In another study, threat was linked to elicited anger, which then promoted resistance (Pfau, et al., 2001). Other research reveals that threat derogates the image of the source of the attack message (Pfau et al., 2000), increases irritation (Jacks & Devine, 2000), and decreases attitude certainty (Pfau et al., 2004). We are accumulating an impressive body of research that suggests threat is doing more than motivating counterarguing. Threat has side effects. Some of the side effects appear to enhance the process of resistance (e.g., attitude accessibility and issue involvement), while others may thwart the process (e.g., attitude certainty).

Compton and Pfau (2009) recently proposed that threat might also be affecting behaviors. They posited that inoculation messages—and particularly the threat component of inoculation messages—lead people to turn to their social networks for dialogue and reassurance. Perhaps, Compton and Pfau (2009) surmise, this dialogue serves to strengthen the inoculative effects of the treatment message and spread some of the inoculation to others along social networks, something they call “spreading inoculation” (Compton & Pfau, 2009, p. 10). Their work moves discussions of inoculation theory from intrapersonal to intrapersonal considerations, suggesting threat affects more than what goes on in peoples’ minds during the process of inoculation.

Future research should look at a larger picture of threat in the inoculation process. Although the link to counterarguing is important to a better understanding of the traditional explanation for how inoculation confers resistance, much more seems to be at work when we introduce threat to this resistance to influence strategy.

Conclusions

Threat is a critical component in attitudinal inoculation, yet threat is also a mysterious process. As we move forward with inoculation scholarship, taking it into new domains and delving deeper into its

mechanisms, we can't neglect its fundamental components. Inoculation theory warrants the label Eagly and Chaiken (1993) gave it: “the grandparent theory of resistance to attitude change” (p. 561). Tracing its ancestry shows that threat played an important role in this grandparent's childhood, and I believe that threat will continue to play an important role in this grandparent's golden years.

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Giving Voice: The Use of Interactive Theatre as Professional Development in Higher Education to Reduce Alienation of Marginalized Groups

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Abstract

This case study focused on the use of Interactive Theatre as professional development in higher education. The guiding question centered on how Interactive Theatre, as professional faculty development, gave voice to marginalized individuals in higher education, as viewed through the lens of Critical Race Theory. Findings articulated the need for innovative professional development, such as Interactive Theatre, to address the issues of diversity. What the researcher found particularly striking was the impact not only on the faculty and teaching assistants who participated in the workshops but also on the members of the Interactive Theatre troupe. The implications of this inquiry could impact K-12 and higher education institutions as they address the issues of diversity and giving voice to the marginalized, thus creating truly inclusive campus climates.

Introduction

University and college faculty members are not systematically prepared either through their graduate education or ongoing on-campus faculty development programs to manage difficult interpersonal situations which are driven by diversity issues (Bell, Washington, Weinstein, & Love, 1997). Daniel (2007) found African American and Latino/a students' experiences in higher education to be characterized by feelings of marginalization and conflict. Consequently, Daniel contended an inclusive environment is not attained simply through the recruitment and selection of students of color but postulated that higher education institutions must look beyond the statistics of racial identification. Furthermore, Chenoweth (1999) argued that higher education institutions have realized admitting a diverse student population is only the start of building a diverse campus. Nonetheless this realization, as Chenoweth