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What makes us change our minds in our everyday life?
Working through evidence and persuasion, events and experiences.

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Abstract: We know almost nothing about the reasoning that makes people change their minds in everyday life. Which role do arguments play in contrast to personal relations and ethos? Are people persuaded to change, or does change rather follow personal experiences? This paper examines the epistemologies people use to rhetorically work through their opinions, when moving from one conviction to another. The paper is based on research interviews with people who have changed their minds.

Keywords: Argumentation, change, conviction, vernacular rhetoric, opinion, persuasion, reasoning, rhetoric, rhetorical working through

1. Introduction
How can we explain the change that rhetoric brings about? How, for instance, do we explain the role of rhetoric in the shift that gave women the right to vote? The answer to such questions, I suggest, is closely connected to the question of how ordinary people engage rhetorically with public issues in everyday situations.

In modern, democracies, citizens are continuously confronted with details of public issues. Still, the average citizen has few opportunities to engage with formal decision-making processes. The enactment of modern citizenship is complex and rarely coincides with the course of political elections and formal decision-making processes.

Unfortunately, we have limited understanding of the relevance of everyday life to public opinion formation and formal deliberative processes. Proponents of the “deliberative turn” in the social sciences have promoted studies of conversations and discussions among citizens as a vital piece missing from theories of public deliberation (e.g. Eveland, 2004). For the average citizen, public life takes the form of an interpersonal and everyday activity, where the public is inseparable from the semi-public and private. People do not only engage in “external-collective” deliberation, but also in “internal-reflective” deliberation (Goodin, 2000). Despite the rise of social media, only a limited number of people are active participants in public deliberation, simply because large-scale mass societies cannot practically make possible that every individual will have a say. Even if mass societies could in fact let everyone talk, it would still be impossible to let everyone be heard (ibid.). Still, people deliberate. The individual’s engagement with public issues is a continuous, on-going process, where the development and articulation of opinions and values are inseparable from the social relations and situations in which the issues are dealt with. I conceptualize this process as rhetorical working through (cf. Kjeldsen, 2016, 2018b). I see such engagement where citizens make sense of issues at hand, while also dealing with other people’s opinions and values, their relations to each other, and their sense of self as such a form of rhetorical working though. Thus, the perspective of this paper is not on public opinion as a product, but on the rhetorical process of actors dealing with viewpoints and values, social relations, and identity.

This is directly connected to the question of why and how people change their minds. In trying to elucidate such matters, historians may describe historical developments, chronologies and general trends. Social psychologist may attempt to develop general rules for persuasion. Social scientists may use surveys, seek to establish the public opinion, and seek to
explain how it develops. Rhetoricians and argumentation theorists tend to look at specific instances of rhetoric, concrete utterances delivered in specific situations.

On the one hand, the historical developments, the general rules of persuasion, or the measuring of public opinion largely leaves out the infinite number of actual utterances that are necessary for rhetorical change to happen. On the other hand, no single utterance alone leads to either individual nor societal change. Instead, such changes are caused by continuous rhetorical exchanges: the fights and the agreements, the arguments and the emotions, the negotiations of social relations we engage in. These continuous, rhetorical movements and adjustments engage people in an unending, constitutive conversation akin to the one the rhetorician Kenneth Burke (Burke, 1941b, pp. 110-111) describes in his parlour-metaphor. Here, a society and its rhetorical processes is likened to a conversation that is more than the individual voices talking, that was already ongoing before each arrives, and that will continue long after they leave.

As humans that are part of societies, we engage in such an ongoing, constitutive conversations that has no endpoint, because the conversation never stops. I refer to this collective rhetorical process as rhetorical working through.

In these rhetorical exchanges and processes, we do more than persuade others or reach agreements: Through our common rhetorical working through, we continuously nudge (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009) each other, make appeals, acknowledge opponents and positions; test our own arguments – and those of our opponents. As a theory of rhetoric, working through allows us to move beyond the situational in order to understand rhetorical change as more than the changing of minds in specific circumstances. It allows us to see rhetoric as a diverse force continually changing humans and societies.

Changes in public opinion must necessarily be based on changes in individuals since public opinion is nothing more than an aggregate of the opinions or many individuals. So, to explore the rhetorical working through of everyday rhetoric, the kind of influence it has, and change it brings about, this paper turns to the everyday experiences and interpretations of ordinary people. I examine their reports of how and why they have changed their minds.

2. Rhetorical working through
If we think of all the voices participating in rhetorical interactions about certain issues – in public as well in private, we see that all these voices come together in an ongoing rhetorical conversation akin to Burke’s parlor: a rhetorical working through. This is similar to how we approach events represented in television. Events we experience from television, media scholar John Ellis argues, “demand explanation, they incite curiosity, revulsion and the usually frustrated or passing desire for action. We need in other words, to work them through” (Ellis, 2000, p. 80). Rhetorician Kenneth Burke points to the same kind of working through in his description of literature as “equipment for living”. Burke describes proverbs as “strategies for dealing with situations” (Burke, 1941a, p. 296) and argues that the same can be the case for literature in general. We use literature to understand and deal with the world and ourselves. In this way literature and art forms can “be treated as equipment for living, that size up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes” (Burke, 1941a, p. 304). The same can be said about television and other phenomena of popular culture.

Such working through will never exist as a final act; it will never be done, because television – as literature and rhetoric – cannot offer completeness, and even if it could, this completeness would escape any single viewer. Television is “at once both continuous and incomplete” (Ellis, 2000, p. 83). This is even more the case for rhetoric and life, and it has been enhanced with the development and growth of the Internet and social media.
Rhetorical working through, then, is ongoing conversations that not only adjusts people to ideas and ideas to people (cf. Bryant, 1953), but also adjust people to other people. Rhetorical working through is a parallel to Ehninger and Brockreide’s (2008 (1963), p. 22) description of a debate as a cooperative enterprise working as a form of critical inquiry and a “generic mode of collective decision-making”. Though debaters may have conflicting aims, their engagement with each other still constitutes an examination of issues and an attempt to negotiate the path towards actual or potential decisions. However, rhetoric as working through is more than deliberative rhetoric, and more than rhetoric of inquiry, because adjusting people to each other involves more than arguing and critical thinking.

As rhetorical minds, we work through issues, positions and relations both individually and communally: We argue about what to do (deliberative), we judge acts already done (forensic), we praise and criticize, and we establish our common values (epideictic). In our individual thinking, our public conversations, discussions and debates, in all our rhetorical exchanges, more is being done than just solving a problem, persuading a person or reaching an agreement.

What is being done collectively is a kind of rhetorical working through were we not only test our arguments – and other people’s arguments, but also discover and learn, nudge each other, move each other around, feel each other, associate and disassociate ourselves with others. These are the kind of continuous rhetorical movements that cannot easily be located through rhetorical criticism, but which – I suggest – are the movements that make possible the small changes, which larger societal changes builds upon.

Naturally, the rhetorical working through of the deliberation in the public sphere is the most obvious kind. Gerard Hauser and Robert Aasen have both argued for a rhetorical understanding of public sphere, public opinion, and citizenship. Aasen considers citizenship “a mode of public enactment“ (Asen, 2004, p. 191), a “fluid, multimodal, and quotidian process” (Asen, 2004, p. 203). Hauser (1999, pp. 90-91) has explored vernacular rhetoric in many texts and argues that the discourses by which public opinion are expressed, experienced, and inferred:

- includes the broad range of symbolic exchanges whereby social actors seek to induce cooperation, from the formal speech to the symbolically significant nonverbal exchange and from practical argument to aesthetic argumentation.

These exchanges are part of an ongoing dialogue in which an active society critiques, negotiates, associates, and ultimately constitutes its interests and opinions on the issues confronting them. Each contribution speaks the claims of difference and affiliations that allow us to recognize, discriminate, and interpret meanings within the socially negotiated limits that define social membership.

This is an accurate description of working though in rhetorical deliberation. However, the rhetorical work is not done when a political decision has been made. Rhetoric is still needed to make people live with the decision – and each other. In this way, working through also entails the negotiation of social relations and identity. Impression management and face-work (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1959, 1982), for instance, affects how we interact with others when discussing deliberative matters. We may want to persuade, but we also want to project a positive impression of ourselves and avoid face threats to other people.

So, rhetorical working through is process. It is individual and public thinking. It is discursive adaption and rhetorical action carried out in many different modes and forms of expression. Some genres, such as political speeches, debates, and discussions, function as institutionalized formats of deliberative working through.
Others are not as obviously deliberative, because we also influence people by simply making them understand, experience or simply consider something. One example of such rhetorical working through is offered by Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites’ book *No Caption Needed* (2007, p. 18) which argues that photojournalism is an important technology of liberal-democratic citizenship. From this perspective, one can consider how any particular photo equips the viewer to act as citizen, or expand one’s conception of citizenship, or otherwise redefine one’s relationship to the political community.

Hariman has provided a similar argument about political parody, arguing that parody contributes to “the ongoing, substantive articulation of political thought” (Hariman, 2008, p. 253). Parody externalizes, introduces ambiguity and makes us see agreed upon doxa in new ways, thus functioning as “resources for sustaining public culture” (Hariman, 2008, p. 248). Parody and political comedy are levelers turning the serious into the silly, kings into fools and fools into kings. In other words: parody is a form of *dissoi logoi* (Sprague, 1968), a two-fold argument, that introduces the other side of an issue, thereby performing a rhetorical working through of the issue. It not only offers a working though of issues, but also of our views of democratic society and ourselves.

Genres such as parody show that things could be otherwise, it introduces a multiplicity of discourses into society, thereby not only providing different viewpoints, but also displaying the possibility and actuality of a dialogic rhetoric and a polyvocal public culture.

So, in rhetorical working through of humans constantly do communicative labor in at least three kinds of dealings: 1) We deal with issues by seeking understanding, putting forward arguments and responding to counter argumentation. 2) We deal with social relations by adjusting ourselves to others and fitting our dealings with issues into these adjustments. 3) We deal with identity and self by using our dealings with issues and relations to confirm, adjust – and on rare occasions moderate – our self-conceptions.

*Rhetorical working through*, then, signifies the process of rhetoric as a continuous, open-ended, and active persuasive co-engagement, whereby humans, in spite of their different intentions, conflicting positions, and immediate personal goals, engage in rhetorical interactions dealing with issues, social relations, and identity. Doing this will simultaneously influence, sometimes even change, the participating humans, their relation to each other, and the issues.

This process consists of more than deliberative argumentation. As a human activity rhetorical working through can be done in many ways and perform functions such as providing argumentation, establish identification, create feelings and trust, establish a basis for action, position people to each other, create order of importance and significance and make personal commitments clear (e.g. signify how important positions, opinions, emotions and values is the actors), provide information and create enlightenment, and create legitimacy (for people, positions and attitudes, and other things). These kinds of working through occur – and can be studied – on at least three different levels:

1. The individual: The internal and external thinking, arguing and emotional positioning of individuals
2. The situational: The direct rhetorical interaction between agents (individuals and groups)
3. The societal: The public, societal and historical rhetorical patterns which the individual and situational working through is based on, reacts to, confirms, challenges, creates, and continuously reform.
In this paper, I examine the individual level in order to find out, how we as individuals rhetorically work through issues and situations that finally lead to a change of mind. I seek to describe the processes and reasons of attitude negotiation and change.

3. Understanding individual rhetorical working through via qualitative interviews
There are many possible ways of attempting to understand how and why people change their minds. Most studies, however, seem to only address if people have changed their views or proposing theories of attitude change by the use of experiments. While these approaches provide important insights, they are unable to provide understanding for the processes and phases of attitude change as experienced by the people who change their mind.

The best way to understand this is through qualitative interviews with people who had changed their minds. Thus, for this paper I have carried out three individual interviews of approximately 90 minutes length, and conducted one group interview with two informants lasting approximately 45 minutes. The informants for the individual interviews were found through a Facebook-post where I asked people to get in touch if they had changed their mind on an issue and would like to share it. The informants for the group interview, were asked to share their views during a longer transport in Europe that we all participated in.

The three individual interviews were all with Norwegians living in three different large cities in Norway. The first informant was Nora. The interview was carried out though a telephone call. Nora is a woman around fifty, with a degree in business administration. She has worked in different companies, but now has her own company that specialises in communication courses. She is an avid handball player and coach. Nora lives with her husband and kids. The second informant was Lars. The interview was carried out though a telephone call. Lars is man around forty, who works as a senior researcher at a private research institution. Lars lives with his wife and kids. The third informant was Olaf. The interview was carried out in person at my office at the university. Olaf is a man around fifty-five, who works as CEO for a large company. He is also board leader of a company and works as board member in several other companies. Olaf is interested in football. Olaf has traditionally belonged to the right of centre in Norwegian politics. He lives with his wife and kids. I had previously met Olaf at a communication course.

The group interview included two Danes living in Copenhagen. The interview was carried out in a car on a several hour’s long travel. Tim and Carl are good friends and both are around fifty. Tim is a musician and music teacher. He lives with his wife and son. Carl works at a school in central Copenhagen. Besides this job, he is also a musician. Carl lives with his wife. His adult children also live in Copenhagen. Both Tim and Carl belong to the middle or left of center in Danish politics.

4. Changing your mind over time. Analysis of individual interviews
So, one of my informants is Nora, who was convinced that sports was about winning. She was of the firm opinion that sports practice and club activities should be should organized towards the aim of winning. She said:

Back then, I had a somewhat old-fashioned view that we practice to become the best, and matches are meant to be won. That is the whole point of sports, winning.

As a coach, she once told a parent to a kid in a team that:

If you do not think it is important to win, then your kid ought to join the scouts or the school band.
Today, she has completely changed her mind about this. From thinking that sports is all about winning, she now says that the meaning of sports is: “to develop whole people, making them capable of mastering adult life”

How did this change of mind happen? Why did it happen? What characterizes such a process of attitude change? Let us begin with the initial situation: the established position of conviction. When Nora describes this initial position, she talks about something that has been “acquired from childhood.” The view that sports is about winning is not a position she had consciously chosen or been persuaded to hold, but rather a view that was automatically cultivated in her.

Another respondent, I call him Lars, expressed the same experience. Lars was convinced that biology neither could nor should be used to explain social phenomena such as gender, identity, desire and everyday moral issues such as child upbringing. Instead, he relied on a social constructivist understanding of such issues. In formulations similar to Nora, Lars explained his original position this way:

I don’t know, I would call it …not exactly childhood knowledge, […] the view I had acquired was pretty basic, and had become a type of orthodoxy in the period when I went from being a child, and had no clear … kinda theory or argumentation” (Lars, p. 9)

I call this initial phase for the phase of pre-reflexivity, because it is characterized by holding an opinion that one has naturally lived into - or been cultivated into - without reflecting much about it. I borrow the phrase from the informant Lars, who described his own initial conceptions of biological explanations as “pre-reflective assumptions” (Lars, p. 4).

Another, informant, we can call him Olaf, described this stage as disengaged. He had moved from voting for the Conservative party to voting for the Green Party. In being disengaged and or uninvolved, he said, he did not really have an opinion, but more an understanding. Of course, we become reflexive about our understandings, views and opinions when they are challenged, but as we know from research on confirmation bias (Mercier & Sperber, 2011, p. 63f.), the responses in such situations generally are instinctive defences of our established positions.

In such situations, we look for counter arguments, and flaws and mistakes in the arguments of our discussants and adversaries. When Lars’ views were challenged by a television programme on the role of biology, he had, he said:

an emotional need, but also an intellectual, to find weaknesses in that programme. […] I was trying to save my salvage my conviction” (Lars, p. 5).

This phase of defending established positions I call the phase of conviction or perhaps even closed conviction. Here, the pre-reflexive is made conscious through discussing with people of a different mind, however this does not lead to a change of mind, at least initially. Most often, it leads to a strengthening of the original position. Nora describes herself as “closed” during this stage. However, my informants all experienced something that moved them from defending to doubting.

Both Lars and Olaf saw documentaries that opened them up for a rethinking of their positions. Lars saw a television series featuring a famous Norwegian celebrity and comedian which challenged the social constructive view Lars held. Olaf saw two Netflix documentaries Cowspiracy and What the health. These programs lead each them into a phase of doubt and opening. They tentatively let their rhetorical defence down and opened for the possibility that
they had been wrong. Nora was led to this through a personal experience. As a child, her son was a star at his handball team, she told me that he “scored half the goals, and was assist in the other half”. But then his game deteriorated, or perhaps the other players became better. At the age of 12, he began struggling and was afraid of failing. That forced Nora to rethink her positions on the meaning of sports. These instances and experiences did not change the perspectives of my informants, but the experiences did create in each of the informants an opening, a small crack in their rhetorical defence.

In the phase of conviction Nora had discussed the issue of sports and winning with her son’s coach and with her friend. She did not really listen to the coach; however, she had respect for her friend. Still, her friend’s arguments did not change her view. Not until her son’s problems began. After this happened, encounters with persuasive people of opposite views began making an impression. Still, the encounters did not make her change her mind, but they did influence her. She says:

… it is a little like an itch, a little bit like a mosquito bite. When you work and is busy, you do not think about it, however, when you have a leisure moment, then thoughts appear in your head, which lies there and itch a little bit; which forces you to think about it (p. 8)

This happened when she discussed and argued with her friend, who was very clear and outspoken with her beliefs.

It was not that I immediately fell for her arguments. Something weird happens in your head, when people are clear. They say things, and even if you disagree with it there and then … it sort of stays and spins around in your subconscious. […] Then you read something in the newspaper, or hear someone say other things in the same line as she said. And then, … it is sort of a process of tenderizing […] it is difficult to describe, but it is like the window is reluctantly opened more and more and more. (p. 7-8)

This mental tenderizing, the process of opening and slowly changing her view, began with the phase of doubt and opening, and then led to the phase of confusion and acknowledgment. This phase is characterized by the confusing and painful recognition and that one’s original point of view may not be the correct or best view. Nora says that when her son’s problems started, she was “forced to start thinking about why he had become so afraid of failing” (Nora, p. 4)

Lars had a similar experience. The television programmes, he said, “opened up for a type of doubt, which made me receptive later for … that type of arguments” (Lars, p. 5). Such letting go of convictions is not easy. First, one becomes confused about the value of one’s existing convictions. Then, one acknowledge that one is probably wrong. This, Nora explained,

was so painful […] I had been thoroughly convinced that I was right, and then still my head is confused, because I am thinking, sports is about winning, everybody knows that (Nora, p. 4).

She experienced that “suddenly realizing that I had been wrong was very frustrating” (Nora, p. 10). Acknowledgement, however, does not immediately lead to a change of view. Instead, it instigates a phase of exploration. Curiosity about opposing views is awaken, an urge to explore and investigate the new is created. This leads to a search of information and viewpoints, a testing of perspectives and a negotiating between the old and the new.
Nora started reading and researching, discussed with her friend. She contacted an author, who had written a book about coping mechanisms, and she compared her views on sports with other aspects of her life. Olaf engaged in the same kind of exploration in his movement towards the Green party:

I read a lot. Many articles. And I tried to learn more about it, and understood that this was not extreme (Olaf, p. 9)

Lars first explains this as “a sort of phase of negotiation …where I explore the new view, that is the perspective (p. 15), “a sort of testing, exploration of a new way of thinking” (p. 16). For all three informants, the initial openness was triggered by an experience and a significant rhetorical utterance: Nora experienced her son failing and read a book on coping mechanisms. Olaf saw to documentaries, and Lars saw a documentary series and later read the book *Sapiens* by Yuval Harari. This then, led to exploration, and along the way, the exploration turned into realization: an accept of the new view and a change of conviction.

This I call the *phase of realization and new conviction*. It begins with a realization that one has actually changed opinion and transforms into a feeling of clarified certainty. The informants speak of the realizations, almost as a religious experience. Olaf calls the change “a revelation”. Lars (p. 13) finds the new situation absorbing and involving, especially in discussions with people who hold his previous view: “I know the counterarguments very well, because I used to have the opposite viewpoint” (Lars). Nora calls her change “seeing the light” (Nora, p. 11, 15) and becoming an “evangelist” for the new view. She had moved from the “grieving process” of losing her initial conviction to the joy of finding a point of view, where she “sincerely feels and believes that I am at the right place” (Nora, p. 23).

5. Six phases opinion change, and the power of the emotional and vivid
It should be clear from the analysis above that all three informants went through the same six phases towards their realization and new conviction.

1. **Phase of pre-reflexivity**: Naturalized, intuitive, unquestioned, or unthematized views and positions. The holding of opinions and viewpoints that are established without explicit reflexive thought or argumentation.

2. **Phase of conviction**: The pre-reflexive is solidified in the phase of conviction. Information is conformed to the established view. The formed attitudes and opinions are defended, when meeting counter views.

3. **Phase of doubt and opening**: Experiences and/or utterances raise doubt and opens up for views, which one has previously rejected. The unthematized is thematised, and previous views are challenged.

4. **Phase of confusion and acknowledgement**: The painful and confusing recognition that one’s original point of view may not be the correct or best view

5. **Phase of exploration**: Curiosity about opposing views are awoken, an urge to explore and investigate the new is created. This is a phase of testing perspectives and negotiating between the old and the new.

6. **Phase of realization and new conviction**: It begins with a realization that one has actually changed opinion, and transforms into a feeling of clarified certainty.

More research needs to be done in order to establish the general application of these phases, however so far, it is clear that change takes time. When Lars saw the television series *Brainwash* in 2010, he did not acknowledge biology as a relevant frame of explanation. The programme put a doubt in him, but it was not until he read *Sapiens* in 2018, eight years later, that he really entered the phase of confusion and acknowledgement and the phase of
exploration. The book made him think and rethink. For Lars, then, the change of view has taken at least nine years.

For Olaf, the change has come over a somewhat shorter period. He saw the documentaries, which created doubt in 2017, and he finally changed his mind and his party in 2019. For Nora, the change of view took between four to six years. Her pre-reflexive phase had been with her as long as she can remember and was probably solidified in her teenage years.

As a grown woman and mother, her phase of conviction became pronounced in the years 2013 to 2016, where she would discuss with her son’s coach and her friend. Doubt came around 2016, when her son’s game deteriorated, the following confusion and acknowledgement let to exploration in 2016 and 2017. Her change of opinion, then, took at least 5-6 years.

My Norwegian informants, then, clearly acknowledge that they have indeed changed their minds in the sense that they have moved from one conviction to another. So, the first lesson of my study is that change takes time, as people go through the different phases of finding a new position. Of course, not all change takes years. In practical matters of decision, we often change our view quickly and without resistance. However, in the case of attitudes connected to the self, or to our worldview, change has to be worked through over time.

The second lesson of my study is a confirmation of the ancient old rhetorical view that emotional and vivid experiences are particularly central for creating change (Kjeldsen, 2003; Kjeldsen & Andersen, 2018). My analysis of their accounts revealed a pattern of cognitive and emotional movements leading them from one position to another. In all three instances, this move was initiated or pushed forward by an emotional and vivid personal experience. Initially, Nora was not moved by the arguments put forward by her friend, the coach, or others. However, witnessing what happened to her son, provide a different understanding of the perspective she had previously been offered argumentatively. This changed her – and her position.

6. Changing your mind or adapting to a changed world. Analysis of group-interview

My group interview with the two Danish informants turned out to mainly deal with how both informants had changed their view on the European Union. Both mentioned this as their most considerable change of mind. While my analysis of this interview did reveal a process of change in position, these informants did not express as many and as clear phases as the individual interviews did. Instead, the Danish informants only appeared to experience three phases: 1) Phase of conviction, 2) Phase of doubt and opening, and 3) Phase of new conviction. Carl talks about a “phase of transition” (53), between 1 and 3 (see phases above), but find it difficult to establish clear phases of change, which is the phase I term “doubt and opening”. Tim never verbalizes any clear phases. The reason for the resistance to thinking in phases, as I shall demonstrate, is that neither of the informants feel that they have changed their mind in the traditional understanding of the word. This appears rather surprising, because they both used to be against the EU, but now they are both for the EU. They voted no in 1992, but would vote yes today.

In order to understand this, some basic knowledge about the debate on the European Union in Denmark is required. In 1973, Denmark became part of the European Economic Community (EEC), which later developed into the European Union. In 1991, the nations of the EU signed the Maastricht treaty, aiming for further European integration by creating a common monetary union, a common foreign and security policy, and increased cooperation in the fields of justice and home affairs. As one of few countries, Denmark put it to the vote in 1992, where 50,7 percent voted “no”, and 49,3 voted “yes”, thus rejecting the treaty. This created a crisis, because the adoption of the treaty required ratification of all members.
International and national discussion ensued; then adaptations were made in the Edinburgh-treaty, letting Denmark opt out of four areas: European Monetary Union, the Common Security and Defence Policy, Justice and Home Affairs, and the citizenship of the European Union.

When the issue was put to the vote again, 56.7 percent votes “yes”, and 43.3 percent voted “no”. Following this, the Edinburgh-treaty was signed in December 1992. The opponents of the EU had long considered it a bureaucratic, intricate, organization, working far removed from the lives and interests of ordinary people. Many Danes, including my informants, saw the handling of the referendum, as yet another sign that the EU was an elite organisation for politicians and corporate interest, and that the Danish government did not take a “no” for a “no”.

More referendums followed. In 1998 55.1 of the Danes voted “yes” to the Amsterdam-treaty, while 44.9 voted “no”. In 2000 53.2 of the Danes said “no” to join the European Currency (EURO), while 46.8 voted “yes”. Finally, in 2015 Denmark held a referendum on removing the opting out of the exception to justice and home affairs. The Danes rejected the proposal: 53.11 percent voted to keep the opt out, 46.89 voted to remove it.

In these years, and still today, the main resistance to the EU came from an unholy alliance of two groups. On the one hand, the nationalist and immigrant critical right wing populist party Danish People’s Party (DPP). On the other hand, the left wing socialist parties Socialist left Party and the Red-Green Alliance. All other parties in parliament recommend the Danes to vote pro-EU.

Both Tim and Carl were critical to the EU in the early 1990s, and both voted “no” to Maastricht. For them, and many Danes, this was a victory for the people and a celebration of the values of Danish society. In June the same year, this patriotic sentiment was fueled by the Danish victory in the European football championship in Sweden.

In those years, Carl and Tim saw good arguments for rejecting the Maastricht-treaty, and being critical to the EU, especially after the national renegotiation and following adaptation of the Edinburgh-treaty. Carl said: “That was really something that solidified my opposition to EU, that dammit, we can’t even be allowed to vote no” (5). Tim agreed: “This is the project of the politicians. It is not the people’s project. Actually, they do not care what the Danes think” (6). He expressed his anti-EU sentiment in a way that Carl agreed with, which also represents the general concerns of many Danes towards the EU. They saw EU as being:

about trade benefiting the big multinational corporations […] and not really benefiting the common man […]. And, it was incredibly complicated […] and difficult to find out what EU really was about (4)

mostly it was about the free movement of the market forces, which appeared to be paramount [to the EU]. Whether this would do anything good for the people was rather doubtful. […] there were laws [from the EU] that were pressed upon us. For instance, […] we had more strict regulations for the environment (22).

Tim and Carl both felt that the EU was a “step backwards for Denmark” (24). It was the “everyday things”, Tim said, “I do not think the EU was helping in these […]. I thought Denmark had better laws and better regulations” (26).

Carls and Tim’s views on EU, however, changed on the basis of two main things. Firstly, the uncomfortable association with the DPP in the common resistance toward the EU. Secondly, the development of right-wing nationalism in Europe and Denmark. For both of them, the first crack or opening in their resistance to EU came with Pia Kjærsgaard and DPP claiming the referendum ending with a “no” as their victories. Both were concerned with the
“growth of nationalism and right-wing politics in many European countries” (28). In Denmark, Tim says, the several rejections of EU-treatises at national referendums gave DPP “one victory after the other, and it was difficult for me to celebrate opposition to the EU with the Danish People’s Party” (28). The no-votes to the referendums in 1992, 2000 and 2015 was celebrated by DFF as a “nationalistic” victory, Tim says, “in which I could not recognize myself” (10). Carl as well said that he began to change “after Pia had triumphed a couple of times in a row” (80):

you wake up after such an EU-referendum and see Pia Kjærsgaard talk everywhere, where she is just triumphing. [...] that is very hard to lend one’s name to, [...]. seeing people deep in the eyes and say “I voted no”; for me that was difficult. (79)

I could not bear in my heart to see another headline saying: Pia Kjærsgaard triumphs! (81)

Tim agrees: “You really wanted to see Pia suffer a defeat” (82).

So, Carl and Tim both found themselves in uncomfortable company, and their resistance to be associated with DPP and Pia Kjærsgaard made them rethink their relation to the EU. This, however was only one part of their rethinking of their position. The other was the increasing right-wing nationalism in Europe and the way the EU appeared to be able to handle this. Tim expresses his change of view in this way:

it sort of came sneaking upon me in the 00s, and [...] the big thing for me was the refugee crisis [in 2015, JK]. People were so terrified because refugees were walking on the highways in Denmark, and it seems that the only sensible politician in Europe was Merkel. She gets up and tries to fix things. Previously, Merkel was the major EU-politician, and she still is, but now she becomes the voice of sense in Europe. (12)

so, I think damn, there really is something that the EU can do. It, it ehm, keeps nationalism at bay; and at the time, it seemed that this was our biggest problem. So, I thought, well, darn, perhaps it [i.e. EU, JK] is not that stupid anyway. Maybe this is what we need the most.

Both Tim and Carl describes a world that has changed in a way that have made EU more relevant and needed. In a world with increasing nationalism, right wing populism and xenophobia – as they see it - EU suddenly appears a possible means to approach these problems. This is what makes both informants express that it has been easy to change, because they do not feel that they have changed in a substantial way. They certainly do not believe that they now mean the opposite of what they used to. Instead, it is the world that has changed. Carls says: “I think it has been natural [to change viewpoint], because I have not really changed”. (44) Tim says: “The world has changed, I do not feel that I have changed” (53). In contrast to Nora’s painful personal change, the change of position for Tim and Carl seem to have been easy and unpainful.

Furthermore, independent of each other most of their friends and acquaintances appeared to do the same movements simultaneously: “we have sort of moved as a crowd, you are not the only one, suddenly changing to that [...] we are not alone in changing our view in this, I think, [it is] the whole left wing” (33). For them, the fact that they voted no in 1992 and would vote yes today, does not signify a change of mind. Because the world has changed, a true change of mind would only be the case, if they now feel that they should have voted yes already 1992.
Carl and Tim still have reservations towards the EU, the problems of bureaucracy and elite-rule that made them critical remain. However, now the EU also presents itself as a solution to more pressing problems. Furthermore, they both feel that they have changed in the sense that they are now less invested in the issue of EU.

7. Conclusion

It is clear from my interviews that the change of opinion, which my informants experienced were all attempts to rhetorically work through an issue in relation with their social relations and identity. Tim and Carl could not bear to be associated with the nationalist viewpoints and rhetorical style of DPP and Pia Kjærgaard. This consideration of identity and social relation influenced their view on the issue of EU. At the same time national and international politics changed in a way that made the EU a possible solution to problems they found even more urgent and fundamental. The change was relatively easy and unpainful because, they were never put in a situation, where they had to defend their changed position to people, who used to believe the same as them. Friends, acquaintances, and most of the political left wing, had did the same movement simultaneously. In contrast to this, change was painful for Nora, because her initial position on sports was closely connected to her identity and the way she perceived her son.

This may also be the reason that Tim and Carl had difficulties in determining phases for their change of mind. If change comes without pain, it is less conscious and less worked through. It may even be the case that easy change has fewer phases, since such phases of change are really different forms of rhetorical working though. Tim and Carl never went through the kind of rhetorical working through, which is done in the *phase of confusion and acknowledgement* and in the *phase of exploration*.

As it was the case for Nora, Lars and Olaf, change also took time for Tim and Carl. In a sense it spanned from the 1990s when they first experienced the uncomfortable feeling of seeing DFF and Pia Kjærgaard triumph for Danish nationalism, to around 2015 with the referendum on removing the exception to EUs justice and home affairs and later the refugee crisis.

The main insights from my individual interviews, then, are also valid for the group interview: Change *takes time*, and *emotional and vivid experiences* are particularly central for creating change. The most significant value of the kind of interview studies and rhetorical reception studies, I have carried out here, however, is not short statements like these. The insight such studies provide are the thick descriptions (cf. Geertz, 1973) of the experiences, processes and phases humans go through when changing their views, and the way they rhetorically work through this change.

The traditional social psychological theories of persuasion may help us explain parts of the changes my informants say they went through. The theory of cognitive dissonance (O'Keefe, 2002, p. 77 ff.), for instance, appears expedient in order to explain the dissonance Nora felt between her views on sports and her personal experience with her son.

Similarly, Heider’s balance theory appear to be able to explain Tim and Carl’s incentive to change their view of the European Union. In the POX-triad (Benoit, 2008, p. 164 ff.) my informants (P) could not live with their previous kind of resistance to EU (X), because the right wing party Danish People’s party and their leader, Pia Kjærsgaard, framed the “no vote” as a nationalist victory. According to the theory, one thing has to change. That ended up being my informants’ view on EU.
While such theories clearly have a power of explanation that we should utilize, they provide only superficial understanding of the processes that people go through, when reconsidering or changing their positions and attitudes. I believe that the kind of rhetorical reception studies (Kjeldsen, 2018a) I have presented in this paper, offers a fruitful path to the understanding of how humans rhetorical work through, when they are in the process of changing their minds.

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