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# Commentary on Jens Kjeldsen's "What makes us change our minds in everyday life?"

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## **1. Introduction**

In his OSSA paper, Professor Kjeldsen grapples with the question of how people come to be persuaded rhetorically. His essay lays out the beginnings of a stage theory of opinion change. Kjeldsen contends the way people come to reject one set of beliefs and arrive at another is that such change is a process that evolves over time. Based on discussions with people who have made such transitions, Kjeldsen describes the process as a "rhetorical working through" of a number of elements including reacting to persuasive messages, changing political landscapes, life's turning points, and ruminating about how competing opinions match up with one's own values and experiences. As Kjeldsen explains, changes in public opinion tend to be evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, and depend on individuals coming to terms with issues, evidence, and rhetorical messages through self-reflective, communal, and interpersonal activities. He argues:

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. (p. 1)

The processual nature of attitude change described by Kjeldsen reminds me of a scene from the American television program *Seinfeld* in which the lead character, Jerry, explains to his companions that ending a romantic relation, "Is like pushing over a vending machine. You can't push it over all at once, you have to rock it back and forth a few times, and THEN push it over." In his paper, Kjeldsen describes persuasion as much the same sort of process, an old attitude does not change all at once, but over time. Kjeldsen artfully integrates theoretical concepts with excerpts from interviews with people who have undergone this process. There is much to endorse about his paper and I hope everyone takes the time to read it. Below, I offer less a critique than some friendly amendments and revisions based on social science theory and research that might assist in further development of Kjeldsen's worthy project.

## **2. Comments Regarding Stage Models of Attitude Change**

In his paper, Kjeldsen lays out six phases of opinion change that are extracted from his interviews with informants who have undergone significant shifts in opinion. The model starts with a person who is committed to a particular opinion that was inculcated early in life without much deliberation in what Kjeldsen calls the "phase of pre-reflexivity." Phase 2 involves a practicing of the original

opinion in debates and other activities that solidifies the belief into a committed conviction, labeled the “phase of conviction.” At some point, a person who begins to notice discrepancies between the held attitude and some life event, interaction with others, or some other catalyst that creates doubt in the third phase “doubt and opening.” With some doubt raised, a person enters the “phase of confusion and acknowledgement” in which the person struggles with the questions raised by the discrepancy that triggered doubt. Confusion and the desire to understand alternative opinions continues with an examination of how the new belief fits with other existing beliefs and underlying values in the fifth “phase of exploration.” Finally, the person accepts the new opinion and forms a commitment to the new way of thinking in the sixth phase entitled “the phase of realization and new conviction.” In the paper, Kjeldsen provides interesting examples of three informants’ movement through these stages.

As an extension of his own examples, I was fortunate enough to find some others. Having just completed my reading of his essay, and as a matter of pure happenstance, I was scrolling through Facebook and came across a question posed by the administrator of a group I belong to that asked, “When and how have your most strongly held views changed?” What luck! The responses, sadly, are not as long or as detailed as those elicited from Kjeldsen, but many of them find a good degree of fit with his theoretical framework. For example, the following response seems to hit on many of the phases:

Respondent 1: When I was a teen (13-17) I thought juice cleanses and other food "cures" were legitimately a thing. (*phase of pre-reflexivity*) Had a personal trainer who believed in it, and had close family friends who were fanatical about it. Fully bought into the "Super Size Me" and "Fat, Sick, and Nearly Dead" documentaries. (*phase of conviction*) I recognized my error after I went to college and studied human anatomy and physiology (18-20), and after learning about modern medicine as a medic in the US military (21-25). (*phases of doubt and opening; phase of exploration*) As always, knowledge and experience trump ignorance. (*phase of realization and new conviction*)

Respondent 2: I was a Christian till I was 16-17 (*phase of conviction*) at that time I went away from Christianity but still needed something to believe in and the thought of an afterlife so I became Wiccan. (*phase of doubt and opening*) After about a year and a half I started watching The Atheist Experience and Talk Heathen and it only took a few episodes to realize I was just holding on to my belief on an afterlife and god because I was happy with the idea and didn't want it not to be true. (*phase of confusion and acknowledgement; phase of exploration*) I finally became an atheist and my world opened up. I started getting interested in science and nature more. I started respecting people more, and not taking things for granted. (*phase of realization and conviction*)

Respondent 3: I was a christian (*phase of conviction*) got a degree (*phase of exploration*) in it got over it (*phase of realization and new conviction*)

In all three responses, we can see references to the phase of pre-reflexivity. Respondents 1 and 2 both refer to their prior beliefs that were in some way indoctrinated and accepted without questions from friends and social contacts. Respondent 1 hints at the phase of conviction in which original beliefs were reinforced by documentary films. All three also suggest either doubt or

exploration as the beginnings of their attitude change, either through education as in Respondents 1 and 3 or through exploration of other religions that created doubt, confusion, and acknowledgement with an eventual landing on a belief in atheism in Respondent 2. These responses are subset of many others that often discuss their change in belief as a journey or as a process that was not sudden but instead evolved over time.

As much as there is to recommend Professor Kjeldsen's burgeoning theoretical model, I'd like to express some concerns/recommendations for theoretical development. One such consideration has to do with the nature of stage/phase models in general. Many developmental models have an underlying assumption of linearity, that people progress in a developmental fashion from one phase to the next in a way that progress is continual. By way of comparison, I will use stage/phases models of romantic relationship development as examples given my interests in interpersonal argument. There are many examples of phase/stage models of relationship development and decline such as Knapp and Vangelisti's (Knapp et al., 2014) stage model and Duck's (1982) phases of relationship decline. Although stage models can be useful in presenting a developmental representation of relationships, more recent research suggests linear stage models are somewhat over simplified. At least in personal relationships, development often goes both forward and backward with the positive and negative events serving as points of inflection over time. That is, rather than progressing smoothly through each stage sequentially starting from uncommitted acquaintances to committed relationships, people often fluctuate over time. Sometimes people skip stages, such as getting married after a few weeks, but then cycle back through the earlier stages where they develop their knowledge of each other. Other times, important events, such as big fights and dealing with a perceived rival, reduces commitment sending the partners to earlier stages or stagnating them at a particular stage. Positive events, such as spending quality time together or beginning a sexual relationship usually accelerate the relationship toward a more committed relationship (Baxter & Bullis, 1986).

An interesting approach for charting these changes over time was developed by Huston and his colleagues (e.g, Huston et al., 1981). Huston and his team investigated the movement from being uncommitted dating partners through to being a married couple and found that there are multiple trajectories toward marriage rather than a single, linear development over time. It seems likely that this is also true of the developmental progression from commitment from one belief to a competing one. As an example, one might move from the phase of confusion and acknowledgement backwards to conviction in the previously established view given exposure to particularly convincing argumentation or because of pressure from family or peers. For example, in the United States, it has been common for children raised in a strongly religious home to drift away during adolescence and emerging adulthood as they work through their doubts, confusion, and exploration of alternative beliefs. However, many will return to their original religion when they start families of their own as they overcome their doubts about their original beliefs (e.g., Stolzenberg et al., 1995). Part of the reasoning for this migration back to one's religious foundations involves comfort in the familiar and a felt need to raise children in accordance with their family's traditions, values, and rituals. Interestingly, however, this trend appears to be changing to a more permanent move away from religion in recent years (Cox et al., 2019).

With that said, it would be interesting, and perhaps helpful in developing the theory, to use a similar methodology for tracking belief change over time as used by Huston and colleagues (e.g.,

Huston et al., 1981) in tracking trajectories toward marriage. During an interview, the researcher can ask the respondent to identify the most recent date they held a particular belief about an issue on a sheet of graphing paper marking that spot 100% convinced of belief P(x). Then going forward in time (left to right on the y axis representing time) mark events that resulted in positive or negative changes in their commitment to P(x), marking dates along the way, until they arrive at 100% conviction in the belief. Looking at many of these graphs and finding communalities among them might reveal different types of trajectories rather than one particular pathway to changing an attitude. One might then examine similarities or differences in the topics of belief, life stages of participants, or other interesting features that might help distinguish among these trajectories. For example, deeply held beliefs such as religious affiliation might take considerably longer and involve many turning point cycles whereas less deeply held beliefs, such as preferences in music or food, could change easily and more suddenly. Also, issues such as age of the participant, the degree to which the issue is a defining quality of the participant's identity, or the degree to which a person's social circle is likewise committed to a belief may result in different trajectories of belief change.

### **3. Incorporation of Social Scientific Theories and Concepts**

A second friendly amendment to Kjeldsen's model involves the incorporation of social science theories in the development of the phase approach. In his essay, Kjeldsen does identify social psychological theories that might serve as motivational elements in the beginning of a transformation in beliefs. For example, he identifies consistency theories (dissonance and balance theories) as a potential explanation for sparking the phase of doubt when it appears that a focal belief is at odds (logically, ethically, or in some other way) with a larger set of beliefs. Along with consistency theories as a potential place to identify the motivation for reconsidering a belief, some other theories of persuasion might be helpful. These are not intended to replace the developmental phasic approach but might help add explanatory substance to the understanding we garner from interview methods.

One such social science concept is motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990). As a theoretical concept, motivational reasoning might be considered a "mechanism" for driving people through the phases. According to the conceptualization of motivated reasoning, people often bias their thinking in favor of the belief that best fits their goals at the time. When one notices an opinion, say maintaining chastity until marriage, no longer is consistent with one's goals, one might interpret the evidence that was originally convincing as being flawed in the present situation. Personal, psychological, social or other motivations can drive the person from conviction of an old belief through the other stages and eventually arriving at a new belief that is consistent with their personal and identity goals. The example of Carl and Tim might be explained, at least in part, by motivated reasoning. Carl and Tim were originally inclined to be against the European Union. They began changing these opinions when the Danish People's Party, affiliated with the "no" position on the E.U. The further association between the DPP and right wing nationalist politics soured Carl and Tim on the DPP and by association, the no on E.U. position. Their reasoning while reevaluating their beliefs about Denmark joining the E.U. was, perhaps at least in part, motivated by the conflict between their identity goals and how they fit with some of the positions expressed by DPP and their cofounder Pia Kjaersgaard. Although some of their original reasons for being

anti-E.U. became moot, but also arguments that once were convincing were reevaluated in light of the identity implications for accepting the DPP position. In any case, it seems all of the informants in Kjeldsen's study talked about how their affective experiences influenced their decisions to support, or not, a particular opinion. These affective experiences served as motivations for reevaluating arguments that were once convincing.

As another example, changes in beliefs might be motivated by the rewards and costs of holding particular opinions. In relationship research, changes in commitment to a relationship are, according to some theories, driven by the perceived rewards or costs of changes in commitment to the relationship (Knapp et al., 2014). For example, a larger number of aversive interactions compared to few supportive interactions might make a relationship seem too costly emotionally to be viable in the long term leading one or both partners decide to exit. The negative affect built up over weeks, months, or years of aversive experiences changes the motivation from a positive bias in evaluating their partner's suitability to a negative one. Perhaps the perceived benefits and costs to one's identity, social connections, or deeply held values constitutes the driving force behind moving through the phases of opinion change. Nora's change of opinion about the value of victory in competition as the ultimate good in youth sports could be interpreted as being driven by the emotional costs to her and her son from her holding on to that opinion. Her goal as an athlete was at odds with her goal as a mother. Some sort of mechanism that identifies how people weigh the social and identity costs of holding particular opinions might help explain why people either move from the phase of doubt forward toward acknowledgement or back toward the original conviction would be helpful. Obviously, rationalists will want to suggest that people weigh the logic and evidence in making these decisions, but as Kjeldsen's respondents seem to indicate, other factors are at work as well. Adding a concept such as motivated reasoning has the potential to add an additional layer of explanatory power. These calculi can be used to predict when, and under what conditions, a person might exit the process and revert to the original belief, the conditions under which a person remains in a state of agnosia regarding original and rival beliefs, or the conditions under which a person is likely to move through the phases eventually arriving at a new belief.

Finally, a theory of how people work through their beliefs and opinions whether they are forming them anew, reinforcing them, or changing them might be informed by thinking about the functions served by them. Some 60 years ago, Katz (1960) developed a functional approach to the study of attitudes. Katz suggested that people hold attitudes because they are useful, and so, are likely to change them only when a belief loses its utility. One function of attitudes, according to Katz, is the *instrumental/adjustment function* which suggests some beliefs are associated with the satisfaction of the person's needs. For example, most people believe that employment is a useful strategy for maintaining adequate shelter, food, and clothing. The extent to which being employed helps to satisfy these needs reinforces the positive attitude toward work. As job markets shift and employment begins to fail in satisfying these needs, a positive attitude toward employment becomes vulnerable to change. Beliefs also serve an *ego-defense function*. According to Katz, people sometimes develop and hold attitudes in order to prop up the self-image through rationalization, projection, or displacement. In other words, most people at some point feel their ideal image is not as positive as their felt identity. Negative beliefs about perceived rival groups helps maintain the illusion that one's own group is superior, and by association, the person's own image is affirmed. Gaining new insight or information that reduces the threat from a rival group

can motivate changes in attitudes based on defense of the ego. Attitudes also serve a *value-expressive function*. Beliefs and opinions that express deep seated values function to establish and reinforce a person's self-concept. Katz (1960) argued that people find satisfaction in revealing their values and beliefs to others, a claim supported by research reporting disclosure of the self stimulates reward centers in the brain (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012). Changing attitudes that serve a value-expressive function can be motivated by changes in the self-concept that evolve over time such that the attitudes no longer reflect the person's evolved self-perceptions. Perhaps for Nora, becoming a mother realigned her values so that prioritizing the emotional well-being of her child became antithetical to holding an attitude that winning is the ultimate good in sporting activities. The fourth and final function of attitudes, according to Katz (1960) is the *knowledge function*. Katz argues, "Individuals not only acquire beliefs in the interest of satisfying various specific needs, they also seek knowledge to give meaning to what would otherwise be an unorganized, chaotic universe" (p. 176). For example, stereotypes are common because they help people organize perceptions of others to make them more predictable. Consonant with consistency theories, noticing disorderly associations among attitudes can motivate a realignment into a more harmonious framework of beliefs. Holding a stereotype that white people are most often racist might require change if a person notices repeated examples that create disorder in one's knowledge set about whites. Although Katz's theory received less traction than other attitude theories, he walks through how each function influences the formation, activation, and change in attitudes. In future research and theory development, it might be interesting to look for cues in participants' accounts of belief change to the functions served by their original and changed opinions.

#### **4. Conclusion**

My comments regarding Professor Kjeldsen's essay have attempted to identify some friendly amendments to his stage/phasic model of opinion change. One of the more interesting implications from his presentation of interview data is that I did not see respondents identifying particular rhetorical messages or campaigns that were key to changing their minds. Rather, opinion change appears, from their experiences, to be socially constructed processes that include interactions with others, perhaps about persuasive campaigns at times, but mostly in working through their changes in belief to their own satisfaction. Although argumentation and reasoning plays an important role in opinion change, it may be that people eventually persuade themselves more than they are persuaded by others. Kjeldsen's essay provides additional evidence to the idea that minds are not changed as much by public campaigns or politician's speeches as they are by reinforcing and deliberating such messages with others. Certainly, people can incorporate information from such campaigns into their belief sets but perhaps it is repeating this information in informal talk with others that helps people try out their new beliefs to determine how it *feels* to express them and what it means to the person to revise an opinion. In any case, Kjeldsen's paper provides heuristic function in providing a jumping off point for both Kjeldsen's own research and also the research of future scholars interested in this topic.

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