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# Regulatory Fit, Processing Fluency, and Narrative Persuasion

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Running head: REGULATORY FIT, FLUENCY AND NARRATIVE PERSUASION

Regulatory Fit, Processing Fluency, and Narrative Persuasion

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### Abstract

For millennia, people have used narratives to inform and persuade. However, little social psychological research addresses how and when narrative persuasion occurs, perhaps because narratives are complex stimuli that are difficult to vary without significantly changing the plot or characters. Existing research suggests that regulatory fit and/or processing fluency can be varied easily and in ways completely exterior to narrative content but that nonetheless affect how much narratives engage, transport, and persuade. We review research on narrative transportation and persuasion and then discuss regulatory fit and its relationship to processing fluency. Afterward, we discuss how regulatory fit and processing fluency may affect psychological engagement, transportation, and persuasion via narratives.

*Keywords:* promotion, prevention, transportation, metacognition, feelings-as-information

## Regulatory Fit, Processing Fluency, and Narrative Persuasion

Many people have experienced the power of narratives. Some believe that narratives can persuade in a positive way, such as parents who read their children Aesop's fables. Others believe that narratives can negatively persuade, such as those who try to ban certain books from public libraries. Persuasive narratives certainly are not limited to those in books. For example, in May, 2010, when the 8-year run of the TV show "24" ended, numerous journalists wrote about how the show had affected viewers' beliefs about the effectiveness of torture. On the show, the main character often saved the US by using torture to extract information from terrorists. Some journalists noted that the "show had a huge influence on the debate over torture, with several conservatives, including Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, citing the show's vivid depictions of 'ticking time bomb' scenarios" (The Week, June 11, 2010, p. 21). Several years earlier, Mayer (2007, 2008) had reported evidence that "24" was promoting unethical and illegal behavior among young American interrogators and soldiers. To the dismay of experienced military and FBI interrogators, these young personnel believed they were acting appropriately, given what they saw on the show each week (Mayer, 2007).

Persuasion via narratives is a timeless phenomenon; Aesop used fables, the Buddha and Jesus used parables, and Aristotle (330 BCE/1987) wrote about the importance of poetry (as fictional narrative) for imitation and learning. It is perhaps surprising, then, that more research in social psychology has not addressed how narratives can impact attitudes and beliefs. Part of the difficulty may be in varying psychological involvement or engagement with narratives without profoundly affecting their contents. Narratives are complex stimuli that are difficult to manipulate while maintaining the integrity of the plot and characters (Green, 2008). We describe research on a source of engagement that can affect the processing of narratives even when the

source is not the narrative itself. It is regulatory fit/nonfit, the experience of doing something in a way that fits or does not fit one's orientation to a goal (e.g., Higgins, 2009). This experience can come from an initial event exterior to a focal task (e.g., Cesario, Grant & Higgins, 2004).

To experience what regulatory fit and nonfit are like, you can try this. First think of something you ideally would like to gain. (For example, you might like to see one of your old friends more often.) Now think of five ways to *avoid anything that could go wrong* as you try to accomplish this goal (e.g., don't let weeks go by without calling, don't skimp on money for air fare...). As you bring these five strategies to mind, how engaged do you feel? If our guess is right, your answer is something like, "Not very." Now you can try this: think of five ways to *make sure everything goes right* as you try to accomplish this goal (e.g., call them this week, start saving money for air fare...). Our guess is that you feel more engaged this time. If so, you've just experienced the difference between regulatory nonfit (with the first set of strategies) and regulatory fit (with the second; this procedure is from Vaughn, Harkness & Clark, 2010; also see Freitas & Higgins, 2002). We will describe regulatory fit in more detail shortly. For now, it is enough to say that compared to regulatory nonfit, regulatory fit can enhance engagement with any activity or idea that happens to be in mind at the time, including later activities or ideas that did not cause the regulatory fit/nonfit experience (e.g., Higgins, 2009).

In this paper, we begin by discussing narratives: what they are, how people can process them, how narratives may persuade, and challenges in varying narrative persuasion. Then we introduce our regulatory fit and processing fluency approach to studying narrative processing and persuasion, describing what regulatory fit is (using fit with promotion and prevention orientations as our main example), how regulatory fit relates to processing fluency (the subjective ease of processing information), how feelings associated with regulatory fit and

processing fluency may enhance engagement with whatever else happens to be in mind, and summarizing evidence that regulatory fit can enhance narrative persuasion. Finally, we suggest how this approach could be extended in various ways: to different types of regulatory fit, to other sources of processing fluency, and to situations where regulatory fit or processing fluency could reduce rather than enhance narrative persuasion.

## **Narratives**

A narrative can be defined in many ways. In a sense, it is just a story with “an identifiable beginning, middle, and end that provides information about the scene, characters, and conflict; raises unanswered questions or unresolved conflict; and provides resolution” (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007, p. 778). Another kind of definition focuses more on the content that supports unique aspects of narrative processing (Mar & Oatley, 2008): a narrative is a somewhat-abstract model of part of the social world, a model designed to transport the audience through a mental simulation of what it is like to be in the mind of a character who is experiencing complex thoughts, feelings, goals and intentions in relation to other characters (Mar & Oatley, 2008). What would it be like to love your dog as your best friend but be trapped with him on an iceberg and have to contemplate killing him for food – and know that your dog is probably feeling and contemplating the same about you (as in “Two Were Left”; H. B. Cave, in Berger, 1956)? What would it be like to be injured and likely to die alone in the wilderness without the person you love the most knowing how you feel about him or her (as in “Crossing Spider Creek”; D. O’Brien, in Thomas, Thomas & Hazuka, 1992)? To clarify the human intentions of characters engaged in these and other storylines, authors carefully incorporate only the details they consider important (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Thus, although many narratives have highly complex

storylines and character experiences (e.g., the TV show, “24”), stimuli in a narrative are still somewhat simpler and more abstract than real-world social stimuli (Mar & Oatley, 2008).

The abstractness of narratives compared to real social life may help explain why narratives are so transporting: “We have to project ourselves into a story world in order to understand what the characters are thinking and feeling” (Mar & Oatley, 2008, p. 178).

Transportation is defined as the process of becoming emotionally and cognitively immersed in a narrative, in which we lose track of the real world as the story-guided mental simulation of the story events unfolds (Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2000). It is a highly-engaged, flow-like state of absorption in the story (cf. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974), in which people devote nearly complete conscious attention to constructing emotional and cognitive meaning from story events (e.g., Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). This often occurs with the help of narrative-prompted autobiographical memories (Dunlop, Wakefield & Kashima, 2010; Mar & Oatley, 2008). The Transportation Scale (Green & Brock, 2000), which we have used in each of our narratives studies, measures this experience. It contains items about ease of imagining story events, emotional involvement, attention to the story, feelings of suspense, unawareness of one’s surroundings, and vividness of mental imagery.

Many models of narrative impact posit that transportation is a key factor in narrative persuasion (e.g., Dal Cin, Zanna & Fong, 2004; Green & Brock, 2002; Moyer-Guse, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Studies often show a positive relationship between transportation and subsequent story-consistent attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Dunlop et al., 2010; Escalas, 2004, 2007; Green, 2004; Green & Brock, 2000; Vaughn, Hesse, Petkova & Trudeau, 2009; Wang & Calder, 2006, 2009; though see Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010). There are various ways transportation could result in narrative persuasion. Narrative transportation is an enjoyable state people are

motivated to continue (Green, Brock & Kaufman, 2004), and it takes active participation of the target audience, leaving less attention than usual for critically evaluating information (e.g., Green & Brock 2000, 2002). Together, these processes could reduce motivation and ability to argue against persuasive subtexts in the narrative (e.g., Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Dal Cin et al., 2004; Green & Brock, 2000, 2002; Moyer-Guse, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Additionally, transportation is positively related to psychological involvement with characters (e.g., Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010), which itself could contribute to persuasion via narratives (e.g., Bandura, 2004; Cohen, 2001; Dal Cin et al., 2004; Moyer-Guse, 2008; Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010; Slater, 2002; Slater & Rouner, 2002; Sood, 2002). Moreover, the structures of narratives that aid in transportation (such as plotlines about not-entirely-predictable social interactions) often result in implicitly persuasive subtexts rather than in explicitly persuasive statements, which means that there are often no specific arguments to refute within the narrative (e.g., Slater & Rouner, 2002, Dal Cin et al., 2004; Moyer-Guse, 2008).

If transportation is crucial to persuasion via narratives, then developing methods to vary narrative transportation (as well as other aspects of narrative involvement) is important to moving research forward on how and when narratives can persuade. Yet these methods have remained somewhat elusive. Sometimes varying prereading instructions (e.g., to relax and read the narrative vs. to focus on the writing style and reading level) has affected transportation and persuasion (Green & Brock, 2000, Study 4) and sometimes it has not (Green & Brock, 2000, Studies 2 & 3; Green, 2004). Experimentally varying fact versus fiction labeling of narratives does not affect transportation (Green & Brock, 2000) or persuasion via narratives (Green & Brock, 2000; Strange & Leung, 1999). Other research has shown that people randomly assigned to receive information in narrative form rather than as a list of statements can be more



transported and persuaded (e.g., Dunlop et al., 2010; Escalas, 2004, 2007; Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010; though see Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). However, many differences exist between these forms of communication, which makes it hard to use this approach to pinpoint what makes narratives persuasive.

### **Regulatory Fit and Processing Fluency Approach**

If we approach varying narrative transportation and persuasion from the perspective of how to vary engagement itself, it opens another way forward. Our regulatory fit and processing fluency approach to studying how narratives engage and persuade is based on two simple ideas: (1) transportation is important to narrative persuasion, and (2) it is possible to vary transportation without varying the story. To get a sense of how this could occur in the real world, imagine someone named Sally who is reading *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown, 2003). Actually, it is not so much like reading; when she is into the book, she feels so close to the events and main characters that it's almost like the events of the narrative are happening to her. Although she often is not conscious of this as she reads, the insights she gains into the intentions of the characters and events in the story world feel intuitively engrossing and right. Sally also now understands why so many conservative Christians were upset about the book and why so many people have written books debunking the conspiracy it portrayed. Everything in the book seems so plausible. But about two-thirds of the way through, something changes. She can't figure out exactly what about the book is different, but she is more aware of herself and her surroundings as she reads, second-guesses what she imagines, and finds it harder to immerse herself in the story. As narrators of this story, we can tell you that the book's effectiveness isn't what has changed. Sally has just started a new project at work that requires taking more risks than she usually prefers. This lack of fit between Sally's normal way of thinking about goals (as ways to ensure

security) and the ways she needs to think about pursuing goals in her new project (Be eager! Take risks! Think outside the box!) creates a vague, uncomfortable lack of ease that doesn't quite feel right. It lingers beyond the time she is consciously aware of it and – in part because it is still there as she reads *The Da Vinci Code* - she attributes it to the story.

We have not varied fit exactly like this in our research, but this example is consistent with our thinking and findings about how regulatory fit and processing fluency (i.e., processing ease) can affect transportation and persuasion via narratives. As we mentioned earlier, regulatory fit occurs when someone's way of thinking about a goal is consistent with how he or she is thinking about pursuing it. Our research on regulatory fit has focused on the fit between promotion (vs. prevention) self-regulatory orientations toward goals and eager (vs. vigilant) ways of pursuing them, so we will summarize what regulatory focus theory says about them. According to regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998; for reviews see Forster & Werth, 2009; Higgins & Spiegel, 2004; Higgins & Molden, 2003; Molden, Lee & Higgins, 2007), people in a promotion focus tend to think about goals in terms of opportunities for self-realization. People in this focus are especially sensitive to gains and nongains (e.g., successfully gaining versus not gaining more time with old friends). Eager strategies (e.g., making sure everything goes right) are a good fit for their desire not to miss anything good. (When we first asked you to imagine what regulatory fit and nonfit are like, it was fit and nonfit with promotion focus.) According to regulatory focus theory, people in a prevention focus tend to think about goals in terms of opportunities for security and protection. People in this focus are especially sensitive to losses and nonlosses (e.g., losing versus successfully not losing touch with old friends). Vigilant strategies (e.g., making sure nothing goes wrong) are a good fit for their desire to not make mistakes. (Sally experienced nonfit with prevention focus.) A promotion or

prevention focus can be activated by a current situation (as when we asked you to think about something you ideally would like to gain or improve on), and it can become chronically accessible if activated enough. (Sally tends to experience prevention more strongly.) Situational and dispositional variations in regulatory focus have the same effects on thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Higgins, 1999). Accordingly, fit can occur with either situational or dispositional regulatory focus.

Regulatory fit results in greater processing fluency than regulatory nonfit (Lee & Aaker, 2004; Vaughn, 2010); it is easier to process information in a way that fits your current regulatory focus than in a way that doesn't. Fit with promotion and prevention orientations also produces a variety of responses associated with processing fluency (for reviews of processing-fluency research, see Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Reber, Schwarz & Winkielman, 2004). These include feelings of pleasantness (Higgins et al., 2003), enjoyment (Freitas & Higgins, 2002), confidence (Cesario et al., 2004), and rightness or correctness (e.g., Camacho, Higgins, & Luger, 2003; Cesario et al., 2004; Cesario & Higgins, 2008; Freitas & Higgins, 2002; Freitas, Liberman, & Higgins, 2002; Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel & Molden, 2003; Vaughn et al., 2010; Vaughn et al., 2009; Vaughn, Malik, Schwartz, Petkova & Trudeau, 2006; Vaughn, O'Rourke, et al., 2006). It is not clear when processing fluency from regulatory fit precedes feeling right from regulatory fit or vice-versa (Higgins, 2009). Regardless of the causal sequence in a specific situation, it appears that these experiences can affect a wide variety of judgments.

Many kinds of feelings and phenomenal experiences – including regulatory fit and processing fluency - can affect judgments and task engagement through helping people answer the (often implicit) question, “How do I feel about this?” (e.g., Cesario et al., 2004; also see Clore, 1992; Schwarz & Clore, 2007). This is especially clear, for example, in regulatory-fit

experiments that set up an initial experience of regulatory fit/nonfit that affects participants' later task engagement (e.g., Cesario et al., 2004; Vaughn, Malik, et al., 2006). People can be unclear about the source of their feelings, and if their current feelings seem relevant to what they are currently thinking about, they tend to assume their feelings are caused by what they have in mind (e.g., Clore, 1992; Schwarz & Clore, 2007). Asking people how right an initial regulatory-fit task made them feel eliminates regulatory-fit effects on later activities by clarifying that the initial event caused these feelings (Cesario et al., 2004; Vaughn et al., 2010; Vaughn et al., 2009; Vaughn, Malik, et al., 2006; Vaughn, O'Rourke, et al., 2006; also see Clore, 1992; Schwarz & Clore, 1983).

Regulatory fit can enhance engagement strength (Higgins, 2006; Higgins & Scholer, 2009) when people (implicitly) attribute feelings of regulatory fit to what they are currently doing or thinking. In many cases, this enhancement may occur because people assume that a current activity, thought, or feeling is causing desirable experiences of rightness and/or fluency when, in fact, regulatory fit is causing these experiences. This can occur even if a manipulation of regulatory fit is completely exterior to a focal task (e.g., Cesario et al., 2004; Vaughn et al., 2010; Vaughn et al., 2009; Vaughn, Malik, et al., 2006; Vaughn, O'Rourke, et al., 2006). If so, varying regulatory fit in an initial task could vary engagement in transportation with a later-encountered narrative. Remember Sally: when she read the last third of *The Da Vinci Code*, she did not feel entirely right or confident as she mentally simulated the story events and the intentions of characters and did not consider how events at work could be causing her to feel this way. So to her, this lack of rightness, confidence, and fluency was caused by the story – otherwise, why would she be feeling this way when she read it? Attributing this lack of rightness to the story kept her from becoming absorbed in it. If numerous theories about narrative

persuasion are correct (Green & Brock, 2000, 2002; Moyer-Guse, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002) this reduced transportation could also reduce the likelihood of being persuaded.

Our reasoning suggests that varying regulatory fit – even in a way that is exterior to a subsequently-presented narrative - could vary narrative transportation and persuasion. Several experiments provide support for this hypothesis (Vaughn et al., 2009). In one study, we manipulated regulatory fit in an initial task exterior to a narrative (similar to how we asked you to imagine regulatory fit/nonfit earlier, e.g., Cesario et al., 2004; Vaughn, Malik, et al., 2006) then randomly assigned participants to read one of two short stories, after which they completed the Transportation Scale (Green & Brock, 2000). Regardless of the story, participants were more transported when they had experienced regulatory fit in the initial task. Our second experiment extended this investigation to narrative persuasion: if regulatory fit can enhance transportation and transportation enhances persuasion via narratives, then regulatory fit could enhance persuasion via narratives. Additionally, it examined a variable that could moderate the effect of initial regulatory fit on narrative transportation and persuasion: whether participants get a question at the end of the regulatory-fit task about how right the task made them feel. Previous research has found that this question eliminates effects of initial regulatory-fit manipulations on subsequent behavior and judgments (Cesario et al., 2004; Vaughn et al., 2010; Vaughn et al., 2009; Vaughn, Malik, et al., 2006; Vaughn, O’Rourke, et al., 2006), apparently by clearing up where this feeling came from. Results of our second study confirmed these hypotheses: participants were more transported and persuaded when they had experienced regulatory fit in the initial task, the fit effect on transportation statistically accounted for the fit effect on persuasion, and these effects disappeared among participants who received the question about how right the initial regulatory fit task made them feel.

## **Future Extensions**

The approach we took in this initial research could be extended in many ways. For example, researchers could target experiences of regulatory fit/nonfit more specifically to parts of a narrative. Imagine varying the placement of a commercial that elicits an experience of regulatory fit or nonfit (e.g., Cesario et al., 2004; Lee & Aaker, 2004) so it comes before an especially plot-intensive versus an especially character-intensive part of a televised program. The subjective experience of fit or nonfit from the commercial could carry over to affect the level of engagement with the narrative program when it resumes, especially if the commercial is not too distracting (Wang & Calder, 2006, 2009; though see Nelson, Meyvis & Galak, 2009). If plot is more important to persuasion via that narrative, then varying regulatory fit just before the plot-intensive part could have a greater impact.

Another way to extend this approach is to examine the impact of fit experiences and sources of fluency other than regulatory fit with promotion and prevention. There are many other ways psychological fit can occur (e.g. Avnet & Higgins, 2003; Higgins, Cesario, Hagiwara, Spiegel & Pittman, 2010; Hong & Sternthal, 2010; Kim, Rao & Lee, 2009; Lee & Aaker, 2004; Mannetti, Giacomantonio, Higgins, Pierro & Kruglanski, 2010; Vaughn, Baumann & Klemann, 2008). Research suggests that many – if not all - forms of psychological fit enhance processing fluency and, very likely, a desirable sense of rightness or correctness (e.g., Hong & Sternthal, 2010; Kim et al., 2009; Lee & Aaker, 2004; Vaughn, 2010; also see Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009). These experiences could affect later judgments if people are not thinking about what actually caused the experiences.

Research also shows that effects of fit and/or fluency are not limited to experiences carrying over from an initial event exterior to a later task. Effects of fit and fluency often come

directly from people's engagement with a focal task (for general reviews, see Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Higgins, 2005, 2006; Reber et al., 2004). As a result, there are many possible manipulations of fit and/or fluency that could affect narrative engagement. We will mention two. Imagine varying regulatory fit within people's experience of a story without using commercial breaks and with a different self-regulatory orientation than prevention or promotion. If you primed participants to think about moving quickly from activity to activity (a "locomotion" orientation; Kruglanski et al., 2000), they may be more absorbed and persuaded by a filmed narrative shot from lots of camera angles than by exactly the same narrative shot just from one angle (cf. Mannetti et al., 2010). Researchers with a talent for film could try this. Something we have done is to vary the ease of processing a written narrative by manipulating the contrast of the font in which it is printed (white vs. light gray against a darker-gray background; cf. Reber & Schwarz, 1999; Unkelbach, 2007). If processing fluency enhances engagement with a narrative, then participants who receive a story written in easier-to-read, higher-contrast font could be more transported. This effect could be eliminated by giving participants an initial question about how easy it is to read the font, which would help them decide the font, not the story, is causing their feelings of ease or difficulty. Preliminary results have supported these predictions (Vaughn, Petkova, Hesse, Trudeau & Ozses, 2007). Future research could extend this to narrative persuasion.

Thus far, we have only noted examples of how regulatory fit and/or processing fluency could enhance engagement with and persuasion via narratives. This assumes there is nothing wrong with the narrative. But what if there is – or one perceives that there is? For example, imagine watching a scary movie that's carrying you along; it's almost as if you're with the main character as she slowly pieces together that there could be a serial killer in her house. She hears

something in the basement. A storm outside has knocked out the power. Wearing only her underwear and carrying only a lighted match, she slowly descends the creepy stairs to investigate. You squirm and mentally yell, “Don’t go down there!” (You’re transported!) But suddenly you think, “Hm. I’m not sure anyone would really go down to that creepy basement in just their underwear.” Now you are not as transported, but you are no less engaged in narrative-related processing. You are reality-checking what you see against your understandings of the world, a process that is bringing more of yourself and your own thoughts to mind (Buselle & Bilandzik, 2008). These thoughts about your own thoughts are metacognitions, which people can hold with more or less confidence (Petty, Brinol, Tormala & Wegener, 2007). Because you feel not entirely confident about your story critical-thought (“I’m not sure...”), you may be more likely to re-engage in narrative transportation than if you think: “Hm. I’m sure no one would really go down to that creepy basement in just their underwear.” The confidence of this latter metacognition could cause you to have another: “I am *so* not into this movie.” If so, the significance of a narrative subtext (“Don’t go down to the basement alone!”) would probably be lost on you.

Both regulatory fit and processing fluency enhance feelings of confidence (e.g., Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Cesario et al, 2004), and research suggests that confidence from fit or fluency can increase engagement with whatever thoughts, feelings, or behavioral tendencies people have at the time (e.g., Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Cesario et al., 2004; Idson, Liberman & Higgins, 2004; Vaughn, Malik et al., 2006). The highly-absorbed, flow-like state of transportation would occupy most, if not all, of people’s currently-available attention (e.g., Green & Brock, 2002; Slater & Rouner, 2002). If the most salient thing to someone is the guided imagery of the events and characters of a story, regulatory fit and processing fluency



could enhance transportation. However, if someone is questioning the realism of the story, regulatory fit or processing fluency could enhance confidence about not being “into” the story, making further transportation less likely.

Our initial research on this hypothesis suggests that regulatory fit and greater processing fluency sometimes can reduce transportation relative to nonfit and less processing fluency. This research used stories we knew were not very transporting. One experiment (Vaughn, 2010) first primed regulatory focus by randomly assigning some participants to write about their current hopes and aspirations (consistent with promotion focus) and others to write about their current duties and obligations (consistent with prevention focus). Then participants read one of two versions of a story about an ancient king who was making a difficult decision about who to select as his general (based on Gardner, Gabriel & Hochschild, 2002). Some participants read a version in which the king made a choice that would further his individual hopes and aspirations (fit with promotion, nonfit with prevention), and others read a version in which the king made a choice that would honor his familial duties and obligations (nonfit with promotion, fit with prevention). Counterintuitively, participants who read a version of this story that fit their primed regulatory focus were *less* transported than those who read a version that did not fit. Another experiment (Vaughn et al., 2007) varied processing fluency by manipulating font clarity (white vs. gray against a darker-gray background) and had participants read a 106-word short story (J. Jaramillo, in Allen, 2006). Again counterintuitively, participants who read the story in the more fluently-processed, white font were *less* transported than those who read the story in the gray font. Although neither of these studies assessed persuasion via narratives, the positive relationship often found between transportation and persuasion suggests that there could be similar effects on narrative persuasion.

This prediction also is consistent with research on metacognition and persuasion through advocacy messages (for reviews see Petty & Brinol, 2008; Petty, Brinol, Tormala & Wegener, 2007). Advocacy messages are explicitly intended to persuade and are comprised of clear, logical and specific arguments. (They are often found in advertisements, political speeches, and journal articles.) This research shows that people who are more confident about their positive thoughts about a message are more persuaded, and that people who are more confident about their negative thoughts about a message are less persuaded. Similar findings have occurred in research on regulatory fit and persuasion through advocacy messages (Cesario et al., 2004). Recall that regulatory fit enhances thought confidence (Cesario et al., 2004) and processing fluency (Lee & Aaker, 2004; Vaughn, 2010). In one study (Cesario et al., 2004, Experiment 4), some participants learned before reading a message that they would be asked how they felt about the message itself. Directing participants to their own thoughts about the message caused regulatory fit to enhance persuasion when thoughts about the message were positive and decrease it when thoughts about the message were negative. Future research could assess whether similar processes can affect persuasion via narratives.<sup>1</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Although transportation and persuasion via narratives are clearly important phenomena, social psychological research on them has been limited. This may be due to challenges in experimental manipulation. Varying regulatory fit and/or processing fluency is one established method that makes it easier to manipulate narrative engagement and persuasion without having to vary the often-complex content of individual narratives. This approach opens new research avenues, and it may even help practitioners develop better ways to reach target audiences (e.g., to teach morality through Aesop-style fables) and help audiences understand how and when

narratives they find entertaining (e.g., the TV show, “24”) could impact their beliefs and attitudes more than they anticipate.

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## Footnote

<sup>1</sup> Low narrative transportation could result in less persuasion when – as may usually be the case - messages are implied, and using one’s imagination to fill in parts of a story during transportation is what lets the story convey a message (e.g., Green & Brock, 2002; Mar & Oatley, 2008). However, if an author includes a set of explicit advocacy statements in a story, people may process these arguments as they do other advocacy messages, with stronger advocacy arguments resulting in more persuasion if people are more engaged in critical thinking (e.g., Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). With that said, people tend to find advocacy messages inserted into narratives intrusive and to develop negative attitudes about these messages (Wang & Calder, 2006, 2009). Certainly, more research is warranted on this important intersection of narrative and advocacy-based persuasion.

### Short Biographies

Leigh Ann Vaughn is Associate Professor of Psychology at Ithaca College, in Ithaca, NY. Her research is on social judgment, motivation, phenomenal experiences, attribution, and social influence. She is a member of several professional organizations, including the Society of Experimental Social Psychology and the Society for Personality and Social Psychology. She holds a BA in psychology from Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts (1991) and a PhD in social psychology from the University of Michigan (1998), and she completed a postdoctoral research fellowship in social psychology at the Ohio State University (2000). With her undergraduate research students, she has published numerous articles in journals such as *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *Journal of Research in Personality*, and *European Journal of Social Psychology*.

Kathryn Childs earned her BA in psychology from Ithaca College in 2010. She plans to earn a PhD in social psychology in hopes of becoming a professor with research specializing in identity, group conflict and social justice.

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