

Acceptance speech

19 June 2025

Richard E. Petty, awardee in the Social Sciences category (17th edition)

Hello everyone. To start, I would like to say how happy I was to learn about receiving this award from the BBVA Foundation. I sincerely thank the awards committee for this much appreciated honor. There are several reasons why I was delighted to learn of this award.

First, it was very meaningful to have work on attitudes and persuasion celebrated. This is a classic topic in psychology and the social sciences, and it is of special relevance in today's world. Indeed, as we sit here tonight, there are armies of bots targeting the political attitudes of young people on social media.

Recognition for scientific work in psychology is critical if humanity is to continue to advance. For example, understanding how attitudes toward science itself are formed and changed is vital – because these attitudes can govern the decisions that world leaders make.

But secondly, it was incredibly special to receive this award in concert with four other scholars that I admire greatly, and all of whom I know and value personally.

In my own work, early on in my career, I began to investigate some puzzles in the literature on attitudes and persuasion. For example, why was it that some experiments showed that people would largely rely on expert or attractive sources to form their opinions, but other studies showed that source factors were not very important – it was the arguments that mattered.

The initial research I conducted on this topic was heavily impacted by a graduate student collaborator and friend of mine at Ohio State University – John Cacioppo – but it was also influenced by the stellar faculty at Ohio State, including Robert Cialdini, Timothy Brock, and Anthony Greenwald, a co-recipient of today's award. Receiving this award was not something either Tony or I could possibly have imagined during my graduate school years.

Anyway, the work that John and I did on what we called the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion uncovered various individual difference and situational moderators of when attitude change was likely to be thoughtfully focused on the merits of the arguments, and when, in contrast, it was more likely to occur based on more superficial reasoning.

Our original two-process theory of persuasion was a precursor of many other similar dual process frameworks that were proposed later for understanding judgment and decision making.

I continued to work on this theory with a number of very talented graduate students over the first two decades of my career. Over the most recent two decades, I have still worked on attitude change, but my attention has turned to a more detailed explanation of the thoughtful side of persuasion.

We knew from our work on the elaboration likelihood model that when an issue was of high personal importance, people were very motivated to generate thoughts to the message. One surprising finding from this research, however, was that even though people were generating many thoughts when the issue was important, they were not always using those thoughts to form their attitudes.

Thus, in collaboration with Spanish social psychologist, Pablo Briñol, we have examined the many factors that lead people to use their thoughts or not. For example, we have shown that people are more likely to use their thoughts when those thoughts come to mind easily, because people believe that ease is a sign of validity.

But, there are also many other factors that are completely unrelated to the thoughts generated that can affect whether or not those thoughts are used. These include whether people are feeling happy or powerful and even whether they are induced to sit upright in their chairs with good posture.

I have only been able to outline two of the programs of research from my long career, and to mention only a few of the many important people with whom I have worked. Time does not allow me to thank them all here tonight, but I will do that privately.

As a final acknowledgement, I want to express my utmost appreciation to my wife, Lynn. I thank her for her patience, her love, and her unwavering support, not only in tolerating my work habits, but especially for her amazing collaborative efforts in raising our fantastic twin daughters, Annette and Dianna, who have added so much joy to my life.

Once again, I offer my sincere thanks to the awards selection committee and to all of the people who have been so critical to any career success I have had.