COMMUNICATOR-RECIPIENT SIMILARITY AND DECISION CHANGE

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A field experiment in the paint department of a large retail store supported the hypothesis: a recipient's behavior with respect to an object is modifiable by the communicator's appeal to the extent that the recipient perceives that he and the communicator have a similar relationship to the object. A salesman, who reported his own magnitude of paint consumption as similar or dissimilar to the purchaser's, attempted to induce the purchaser (N = 88) to switch to a different price level. The findings were ordered to theories of identification (Stotland) and social comparison (Festinger).

The recipient's perception of his similarity to a communicator or model has been hypothesized to account for change toward the communicator (Back, 1951; Leventhal & Perloe, 1962), attraction to the communicator (Byrne, 1961; Byrne & Wong, 1962; Gerard & Greenbaum, 1962), for adoption of the model's preferences (Stotland, Zander, & Natsoulas, 1961), ability level (Burnstein, Stotland, & Zander, 1961; Stotland & Dunn, 1962; Stotland & Hillmer, 1962), and "anxiety" (Stotland & Dunn, 1963). These studies, which can be fitted within the framework of Stotland's cognitive theory of identification or Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison processes, do not yet sum to a set of principles shown to yield clear predictions of behavioral change in real-life situations. This shortcoming was noticed when an attempt was made, with the management of a department store, to learn more about the effects of interpersonal influence on consumer behavior.

Management assigned special value to informal, word-of-mouth endorsement (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) of a product and sought means of improving interpersonal, rather than media, promotion. It was proposed that a communicator, who is perceived to be thoroughly experienced with a product, will be more likely to influence the recipient than a less experienced communicator. Perceived expertise of the communicator was considered crucial in face-to-face contexts. To illustrate, management believed that a person about to buy a Chevrolet would be less influenced by a neighbor's approbation of his car (a Ford, say) than an equally enthusiastic endorsement by the owner of a fleet of Fords. The first hypothesis was: the more experience a communicator is perceived to have had with an object, the more likely it is that the recipient's behavior with respect to the object will be modified by the communicator's influence attempts.

The second hypothesis followed the aforementioned research on communicator-recipient similarity: to the extent that the recipient perceives that he and the communicator share an attribute, that is, have a similar relationship to an object, to that extent is the recipient's behavior with respect to the object likely to be modified by the communicator's influence attempts. The two forces, perceived communicator expertise and perceived communicator similarity, were pitted against one another by conducting a field experiment in which the communicator, for half the recipients, was perceived as similar but inexperienced while for the other half, he was perceived as dissimilar but experienced.

METHOD

In the paint department of a large retail store, salesmen attempted to induce paint purchasers to change to a different price level. There were two independent variables: the similarity of the salesman and customer with respect to the salesman's prior magnitude of paint consumption; the direction of the advocated change in price level, upward or downward. The dependent variable was whether or not the paint purchaser changed his decision concerning price level after an influence attempt by the salesman.

3 The experiment was conducted during a 5-month period in the paint department of a retail store in an Eastern city. The store is a unit in an international chain with annual sales volume greater than one billion dollars. A sine qua non for conducting the experiment was preservation of anonymity for the store and its permanent staff in any public report. The writer is indebted to the manager for his unusual accessibility and enlightened contribution to the execution of the research. Thanks are due J. Blackwood and D. Koenigsberg for their skill and objectivity in collecting the data.

1 A portion of the data was collected while the writer was at the University of Pittsburgh. The comments of Leroy Wolins are gratefully acknowledged.

2 Report completed while the author was at Iowa State University.
Procedure

The role of experimenter-communicator was taken by two part-time salesmen. The experimenter selected customers or subject-recipients for inclusion in the experiment, attempted to modify the subject’s price decision, and recorded whether or not the influence attempt was successful. Selected subjects were randomly assigned to a similar or dissimilar condition and to a higher or lower condition, resulting in a 2 X 2 design. Influence attempts were restricted to paint purchases, particularly the kinds and prices given in Table 1. In the higher condition, the experimenter advocated buying paint at prices in Column 3 rather than Column 2 in Table 1. In the lower condition, the experimenter advocated purchases at prices in Column 1 if the subject had chosen a price in Column 2, or in Column 2 if the subject selected a price in Column 3. In the similar condition, the experimenter emphasized that the magnitude of his own consumption was the same as the amount being purchased by the subject; in the dissimilar condition the experimenter reported his own magnitude of consumption to be 20 times that of the subject’s prospective purchase.4

The treatments were administered after the subject indicated he wished to purchase X units at a given price and had proceeded with the experimenter to the cash register to “ring up” the sale. At this point, the experimenter delivered himself of the following well-practiced appeal. Alternative terms for the dissimilar and higher conditions appeared in brackets.

Listen, I just thought, I wonder if I can give you some advice. I’m going to college right now and working here part-time as a salesman to meet my expenses. Two weeks ago I bought X [20 X] gallons of a to help my dad on some work like your b that we were doing. It costs a little less [more] and [just] it turned out beautifully. I also got a little of the c you want to buy, and, honestly, it didn’t work out as well at all. There just was no comparison. Those X [20 X] gallons at a have proved out terrifically for us in every way. [Pause] On the basis of my experience with X [20 X] gallons at a, I can really recommend your changing to the a if you want to. I certainly would if I were you.

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4 The multiple of 20 was chosen because the experimenters’ experience in the paint department led them to believe such a magnitude would be perceived by the typical paint purchaser as plausible but at the same time very different from his own acquisition of a gallon or two.
vaned psychology courses; the other, a chemistry major, had taken only an introductory psychology course. The experimenters did not collect data at the same time.

Selection of Subjects

A small proportion of the purchasers entering the paint department during the period of the experiment was selected as subjects. No attempt was made to collect data when: neither experimenter was on duty; the paint department or store was very crowded; there was a sale in the store, in the paint department, or in adjacent departments; remodeling was being done in the paint or adjacent departments; the sales help in the paint department was below full strength. A purchaser was excluded as a subject if: the purchaser was female or was accompanied by other persons; the purchaser was completing a project and returning for more supplies; the purchaser was not exclusively interested in the products listed in Table 1; the desired color was not available at the price level to be advocated by the experimenter; special color mixing was necessary; the purchaser did not appear to make a choice or decision concerning price but seemed to the experimenter to have had a definite price in mind before entering the paint department. The purchaser was excluded if he forced the experimenter to give information that was favorable or unfavorable to a certain price level prior to the influence attempt or in addition to the influence attempt. For example, if a purchaser wanted to know why the $6.90 Latex cost more than the $5.59 Latex the experimenter would first say “probably different chemicals in them.” In many instances this ambiguous reply was insufficient and the experimenter had to endorse or evaluate the paints. A purchaser was excluded if his price decision did not permit the experimenter to apply the higher (or lower) treatment which had been randomly determined beforehand. When the experimenter was interrupted and not allowed to complete his influence attempt, the purchaser’s data were omitted. Finally, the experimenters excluded purchasers who seemed disturbed (as reported by the experimenters) by words on the paint can label, such as “enamel.” In sum, the subject obviously made a price decision, the surround was normal and tranquil, only the products in Table 1 were involved, and the experimenter was able to apply the treatments in standardized fashion. Data collection was terminated when the experimenters completed their period of employment at the store. At this time 88 subjects had been run, 22 in each of the four conditions, higher or lower, similar or dissimilar.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before evaluating the hypotheses it was necessary to ascertain whether bias was introduced by excluding purchasers who did not make a decision about price, forced the experimenter to enlarge on the content of his influence attempt, elicited supplemental evaluation from the experimenter, or interrupted and prevented the experimenter from completing his appeal. If purchasers in these categories were disproportionately represented in the four cells of the design, the test of the hypotheses could be impugned. Appropriate analysis of the data revealed no relationship between the independent classifications (higher versus lower, similar versus dissimilar) and the frequency of subjects who made no real price decision, who forced enlargement or endorsement, or who interrupted the experimenter. All exact test and chi-square $p$ values were greater than .25.

The same pattern of outcomes was obtained for both experimenters, for cash and charge purchases, and for purchasers estimated to be over and under 40 years of age. The combined results, shown in Table 2, favored the second hypothesis. The dissimilar communicator, although presumably perceived as more knowledgeable, was less effective than the communicator whose paint consumption was the same as the purchaser’s ($p < .05$). There was an expected tendency for downward influence attempts to encounter less resistance than upward advocacy.

Note that half of the 88 subjects changed in response to the influence attempt. No base line was available for evaluating this overall frequency of change; it could be attributed to an inherent instability of price decisions or to the elaborate screening of subjects. In any case, recent research has emphasized postdecision phenomena other than decision revocation (Breiman & Cohen, 1962).

The findings add clarity to the literature in that previous attempts to demonstrate before-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direction of influence attempt</th>
<th>Similar</th>
<th>Dissimilar</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To a lower price level</td>
<td>16 (73%)</td>
<td>10 (45%)</td>
<td>26 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To a higher price level</td>
<td>12 (55%)</td>
<td>7 (32%)</td>
<td>19 (43%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note.—Cell $N = 22$ purchasers.

The exclusion of subjects might still have biased the outcome if, for some reason, the excluded types of subjects were more modifiable by a dissimilar than by a similar communicator. No rationale for this possibility could be constructed, however, and, in any event, the population, to which inferences were allowable, was defined as paint purchasers given the present treatment, nothing more and nothing less.
after change, as a function of identification with a model, yielded ambiguous results (Burnstuten et al., 1961; Leventhal & Perloe, 1962). The present test of the perceived similarity hypothesis was considered stringent because the expertise effect, to the extent that it was operative, worked against confirmation of the hypothesis. Also opposing confirmation was the presumed reluctance of purchasers in the higher condition to spend more money than they had initially decided upon. The present results increased understanding of why a face-to-face encounter may be more effective in modifying a recipient than the importunities of mass-media communicators (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955); the recipient changes toward the position of a communicator to the extent he perceives that he shares with the communicator an attribute pertinent to the dimension along which change is advocated. An interesting problem for subsequent research is whether real-life behavior can be modified as readily when the similarity attribute is irrelevant to the change dimension.

Subsequent research must also deal with a possible alternative explanation for the present findings. Perhaps the decisive factor in producing the observed differences was not the similarity of the “X gallon” communicator but the dissimilarity of the “20 X gallon” communicator. The subject may have rejected the dissimilar communicator because his experience seemed irrelevant; or the subject may have resented the experimenter’s “showing off” how much paint he used or disbelieved the experimenter’s figure and regarded it simply as a sales ploy. If these processes were operative, it would affect the interpretation that similarity is a sufficiently powerful factor to overcome the effects of expertise. Although pretesting of the communicators showed no differences in their believableness, and the dissimilar communicator was rated higher in expertise, future replications should include a control group in which the appeal to change is unaccompanied by inductions of either similarity or expertise.

The cognitive theory of identification (Stotland et al., 1961) fits the present results, but it does not specify the likely motivational factors as well as the more dynamical theory of social comparison processes (Festinger, 1954). In terms of Festinger’s theory, the purchaser wanted to evaluate the correctness of his price decision and, in the absence of nonsocial means of evaluation, would be sensitive to the judgment of other persons. The salesman, of course, provided the wanted standard but when he was perceived as noncomparable on the relevant issue of paint consumption, the purchaser was neither attracted to him nor motivated to reduce discrepancy between the chosen and advocated price levels.

Kelman’s (1962) presentation of hypotheses dealing with action and attitude change provided a third theoretical view. Kelman reasoned that gradients of approach or avoidance based on “identification” are steeper than those based on “internalization.” Hence, when the purchaser’s approach toward another price level was based on identification with the communicator, this sufficed to overcome avoidance based on internalized values such as “spend no more than necessary” and/or “take no advice from inexperienced persons.” The relationship between communicator-recipient similarity and modification of the recipient requires further research in which an attempt is made to sort out contrasting predictions from theoretical formulations such as the three here examined.

Finally, the present study showed that contemporary theories in social psychology are not necessarily inadequate to “study the powerful forces which affect people in the real social world [Katz & Stotland, 1959, p. 467].” With some noteworthy exceptions (Hovland, 1961; Schachter, Willerman, Festinger, & Hyman, 1961), the problem may lie rather in the understandable reluctance of experimenters to forgo the comfort, convenience, and methodological refinement of the laboratory.

REFERENCES


CHILDREN'S AGGRESSION, PARENTAL ATTITUDES, AND THE EFFECTS OF AN AFFILIATION-AROUSING STORY

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The major hypothesis tested was that aggression in children can be reduced by the arousal of the affiliation motive. Children of 2 age groups were exposed either to a story designed to arouse affiliation drive or to a neutral story. Aggression measured in doll play before and after the story reading was taken as a reflection of conflict effects. The results indicate that the story arousal inhibited aggression in some children, replicating earlier findings. In addition, a comparison of parental attitudes on child training and aggression showed that (a) the stricter the girl's mother the more aggressive the daughter, if the mother used physical punishment; and (b) the stricter the boy's mother the less aggressive the son, especially if physical punishment was not used.

In a previous study (Gordon & Cohn, 1963) it was found that doll-play aggression in 4-5 year old children in a publicly supported nursery school could be reduced by reading the children a story designed to arouse affiliation motivation. The present study was designed to extend the earlier findings to different populations of children: 3-4 year olds in a middle-class nursery school, and 6-7 year olds in a public elementary school.

The present investigation also examines the relationships among parental training practices, the aggression of their children in the doll play, and the children's responsiveness to the affiliation story. Our interest in parental attitudes of permissiveness for aggression, general strictness, and the use of physical punishment is based on previous work by Sears, Maccoby, and Levin (1957), whose findings concerning these variables were inconsistent in some respects, and were based on maternal reports of their children rather than direct observation.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 48 children, equally divided among males and females, young (3-4 years, in private nursery schools in Ann Arbor, Michigan) and old (6-7 years, in public elementary schools serving the same areas as the private nursery schools from which the young sample was obtained). Half of each group was assigned to the experimental (need affiliation arousal) group and half to the neutral group.

Procedures

Subjects were tested in their homes by one experimenter while another interviewed the mother and administered the questionnaires to her. The pro-