

EFFECTS OF CHOICE, RESPONSIBILITY, AND
ANONYMITY ON ATTITUDES FOLLOWING
ATTITUDE-CONSISTENT BEHAVIOR*¹

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SUMMARY

Behaving consistently with one's existing attitudes has sometimes been found to produce self-perception effects (*Ss* later express greater involvement with relevant beliefs as behavioral freedom increases) and other times self-presentational, reactance effects (*Ss* later express greater involvement as behavioral freedom decreases). To test hypotheses about when these effects occur, 208 American male and female undergraduates committed themselves to argue for a consonant issue under conditions when they (*a*) had high or low choice prior to the behavior; (*b*) had high or low responsibility for a potential failure on the task; and (*c*) were highly, moderately, or not at all anonymous. Contrary to predictions, the manipulations did not affect two direct measures of attitudes toward the issue. However, interactions on other measures indicated that when *Ss* were moderately anonymous and highly responsible, those in the high as compared to low choice condition took greater personal responsibility, desired to be more persuasive, and were more extreme toward an unrelated social issue. These results suggest a partial self-perception effect and raise questions about the generalizability of previous findings.

A. INTRODUCTION

The consequences of behaving consistently with one's existing attitudes have been the subject of a growing number of studies (2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8). Two contrasting types of effects have been hypothesized and obtained. First,

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consonant behavior that occurs under conditions of *high* rather than low choice can cause people to become more strongly committed to relevant beliefs and more extreme or polarized in their relevant attitudes (1, 4, 6). Such results may be due to a self-perception process of inferring one's attitudes from one's behavior, which should occur "when cues imply that the behavior reflects a response to one's feelings about the issue rather than a response to situational constraints" (6, p. 55). Second, important consonant behaviors that occur under conditions of *low* rather than high choice can arouse self-presentational concerns, generate reactance, and produce more polarized attitudes (3, 7). When the behavior is under the control of situational pressures, people appear to be less responsible for the important consonant act and are denied any credit that may be associated with it. They therefore polarize their attitudes to demonstrate that they engaged in the behavior because of their own strongly held beliefs rather than because of the external pressure.

The present experiment was conducted to examine when self-perception *vs* self-presentational reactance effects are obtained. *Ss* committed themselves to argue publicly for an important consonant issue under high or low choice conditions. Their task was to persuade passersby on campus to sign a petition that endorsed the issue. It was made clear that some passersby would not sign, and *Ss* were made to feel either high or low personal responsibility for potential failure. From a self-perception perspective, high responsibility should produce more polarized attitudes, since *Ss*' actions should appear even more relevant to their personal beliefs. From a self-presentation perspective, though, high responsibility for a potential failure should minimize *Ss*' desires to present polarized attitude responses, since if these *Ss* strongly endorsed the issue and then failed on the task, they would appear inept.

In addition, *Ss* participated under conditions where they were either highly anonymous (their names were never known by *E*), moderately anonymous (their names were known but they did not sign their questionnaires), or not at all anonymous (their names and questionnaire responses were publicly identified). Self-presentational pressures should be greatest in the moderate anonymity condition, where *Ss* have to respond more strongly in order to make their positions known, and least in the total anonymity condition, where *Ss* have little to gain or lose by their actions (7). Commitment pressures should be greatest in the low anonymity condition, where public identification should produce the greatest commitment to action (4).

In sum, attitude polarization should occur under conditions of (a) high choice, high responsibility, and low anonymity, since these conditions should maximize the likelihood that *Ss* will infer extreme attitudes from the behavior, and (b) low choice, low responsibility, and moderate anonymity, since these conditions should maximize the likelihood of self-presentational reactance.

B. METHOD

Two hundred and eight male and female introductory psychology students partially fulfilled a course requirement through participation. Each served in a cell of the 2 (high *vs* low choice) by 2 (high *vs* low responsibility) by 3 (low *vs* moderate *vs* high anonymity) by 2 (*S*'s sex) factorial design.

Three to five same-sexed *Ss* per session were seated in adjoining individual cubicles, which prevented visual contact, and listened to tape-recorded instructions. The instructions (*cf.* 5) explained that this "opinion research" project was investigating how the number of arguments used in a communication affected its persuasive impact. *Ss* were told they would be asked to serve as "communicators" and present standardized arguments advocating a particular opinion to passersby at selected campus locations to determine the influence of these communications on the latter's attitudes. As a measure of persuasion, the passersby would be asked to sign a petition supporting the topic. Students were supposedly being asked to serve as communicators to increase the generalizability of results.

Written instructions that contained the choice and responsibility manipulations were randomly distributed within sessions. *Ss* in the *low choice condition* read that although several different issues were being used in the project, it was desirable to keep the procedure uniform within each session. Thus, they would be required to advocate the issue: "Air pollution is becoming a major problem in the southeastern United States. Consequently, private citizens and legislators should show more concern and become more actively involved with this major environmental problem." Pilot testing indicated that this topic was attitude-consistent for virtually all students. *Ss* in the *high choice condition* also read that several issues were being used, but it was recommended that they use only the pollution issue in order to keep the procedure uniform within sessions. Choice in selecting an issue was stressed, and they were told that if they did not want to use the recommended issue, they should raise their hands. All *Ss* agreed to use it. To maximize the apparent importance and belief-relevance of the topic,

all Ss read that the issue was being used "because of its immediate importance to public welfare and because many college students are really involved in working out solutions to environmental problems like this one."

Next, Ss read that some passersby would probably refuse to sign the petition. Ss in the *high responsibility condition* read that this is because, no matter how favorable listeners are toward an issue, some are reluctant to sign their names to a petition if the communicator is unconvincing. "Thus, any difficulties you might encounter . . . would probably be related to the way you deliver the standardized communication." Ss in the *low responsibility condition* read that this is because some people are simply reluctant to sign a petition. "Thus, any difficulties you might encounter . . . would probably be related to the personalities of the people you approach rather than to anything about you or the way you deliver the standardized communication."

Before handing out the standardized materials and running through a practice procedure, *E* stated it would be helpful if Ss could give their opinions on several topics that might be used in future research projects. Baseline data were supposedly needed to aid in selecting future topics and, when time permitted, Ss were asked to complete a brief questionnaire. The questionnaire was supposedly irrelevant to their roles as communicators, and supposedly each *S* would complete a different subset of a large sample of issues that were being pretested. In actuality, all Ss were asked to give their attitudes toward inflation and air pollution. Next, they were given a second questionnaire that was described as an assessment of "students' reactions to our studies." It was explained that the questionnaire was usually completed when Ss returned from the task, but they might as well complete it now so they would not have to do it later. The questionnaire contained manipulation checks and measures of Ss' feelings about aspects of the task (15-point scales).

Ss' degree of anonymity was established at several points. Ss in the *high anonymity condition* signed up for the experiment by checking off a box on a posted sign-up sheet that corresponded to the time of their session. During the session, they completed an informed consent slip by checking off a box to indicate agreement and were told that their names would not be asked for by *E*, assuring anonymity. Finally, they were told not to sign their names to the questionnaires and to place them into a large collection box when finished. Ss in the *moderate anonymity condition* signed up by name for the study and wrote their names on the informed consent slip, but were told not to sign their questionnaires, since these would be anonymous,

and to place them into a large collection box when finished. *Ss* in the *low anonymity condition* signed up by name, wrote their names on the consent slip, and were told to sign their names across the top of the questionnaires and hand them to *E* when they finished.

C. RESULTS

The manipulations were effective in inducing the desired perceptions. *Ss* reported greater choice in selecting an issue in the high than low choice condition [$p < .001$ ($M_s = 7.2$ and 3.0 , respectively)]; felt more anonymous in answering the items as anonymity increased [$p < .001$ ($M_s = 7.9$, 11.4 , and 12.7 , respectively)]; each M differed from the others ($p < .05$), and felt their personal ability, attitudes, and personality would more greatly determine whether people signed the petition in the high than low responsibility condition ($p < .05$).

An anonymity main effect [$F(2, 184) = 5.94$, $p < .01$], qualified by a three-way interaction of anonymity, choice, and responsibility [$F(2, 184) = 5.15$, $p < .01$], was obtained on ratings of how responsible *Ss* felt for any persuasive consequences of their behavior. *Ss* felt least responsible in the moderate than low or high anonymity conditions [$p_s < .05$ ($M_s = 7.8$, 9.3 , and 9.7 , respectively)]. Means comprising the interaction are shown in Table 1. The simple interaction of choice and responsibility was significant only when moderate anonymity existed ($p < .02$). *Ss* who were moderately anonymous felt more responsible when they had high choice and high responsibility than when they had either high choice and low responsibility or low choice and high responsibility ($p_s < .05$). In addition, when high anonymity existed, no effects of choice were obtained; instead, *Ss* felt more responsible in the high than low responsibility condition ($p < .01$). No effects of choice or responsibility were obtained in the low anonymity condition.

Three items tapped how persuasive *Ss* desired to be when inducing people to sign the petitions: how hard they would try to be persuasive, how much they would use intonation to be persuasive, and how much they would use gestures to be persuasive. An anonymity main effect [$F(2, 184) = 5.40$, $p < .01$] and an interaction of anonymity by choice by responsibility [$F(2, 184) = 2.77$, $p < .07$] were obtained on the average rating on the items. *Ss* expressed a greater desire to be persuasive in the low than the moderate anonymity condition ($p < .05$), with the high anonymity condition falling intermediate ($M_s = 10.3$, 9.0 , 10.0 , respectively). The interaction (see Table 1) exactly paralleled the one obtained on feelings of

TABLE 1
INTERACTIONS OF ANONYMITY BY CHOICE BY RESPONSIBILITY

Condition	Responsibility	Persuasiveness	Attitudes toward inflation
Low anonymity			
High responsibility			
High choice	9.3	10.2	5.7
Low choice	8.9	10.0	6.0
Low responsibility			
High choice	9.8	10.9	5.7
Low choice	9.1	9.9	5.4
Moderate anonymity			
High responsibility			
High choice	10.1	10.7	6.1
Low choice	5.9	8.3	5.6
Low responsibility			
High choice	6.7	8.3	5.7
Low choice	8.6	8.6	6.1
High anonymity			
High responsibility			
High choice	10.7	10.5	6.0
Low choice	10.6	10.8	6.2
Low responsibility			
High choice	8.8	9.8	5.9
Low choice	8.6	9.1	6.0

Note: Higher means indicate greater responsibility or persuasiveness or more negative attitudes.

responsibility. The simple interaction of choice and locus approached significance only in the moderate anonymity condition ($p < .08$). Once again, Ss in the moderate anonymity condition said they would try harder to be persuasive when they had high choice and high responsibility than when they had low choice and high responsibility or high choice and low responsibility (p s $< .05$). Also, Ss who were highly anonymous expressed a greater desire to be persuasive when they had high than low responsibility ($p < .05$).

Two sets of items assessed Ss' attitudes: (a) the average rating of air pollution of 18 seven-point bipolar adjective scales; and (b) the average rating of four items that asked how strongly Ss felt about the issue, how much the issue corresponds to Ss' personal beliefs, how important the issue was, and how important Ss felt their participation in the study was. Surprisingly, given the effects on feelings of responsibility and persuasiveness, no effects were obtained on either average or on any of the individual items in *b* above.

As filler items, Ss rated inflation on 18 seven-point bipolar adjective

scales. Since they did not commit themselves to argue for this issue, no effects were anticipated. However, an anonymity main effect [$F(2, 184) = 3.20, p < .04$] and an interaction of anonymity by choice by responsibility [$F(2, 184) = 5.05, p < .01$] were obtained on the average rating. *Ss* rated inflation less favorably in the high than low anonymity condition ($p < .05$), with the moderate anonymity condition falling intermediate ($M_s = 6.0, 5.7, \text{ and } 5.9$, respectively). The interaction (see Table 1) paralleled some of the effects obtained on the feelings of responsibility and persuasiveness items. Tests of simple effects revealed that *Ss* who were moderately anonymous were less negative toward inflation when they had low choice and high responsibility than when they had high choice and high responsibility or low choice and low responsibility ($p_s < .05$). Also, *Ss* who were not anonymous were more negative in the low choice, high responsibility condition than in the low choice, low responsibility condition ($p < .01$).

No effects were obtained on *Ss*' evaluations of how beneficial-detrimental the consequences of their actions would be or on their ratings of the competence, professionalism, helpfulness, or courteousness of *E*.

D. DISCUSSION

The results did not show definitive evidence of either self-perception or self-presentation on attitudes toward the major issue. Although ceiling effects may have obscured possible attitude change on the bipolar ratings of pollution ($M = 6.3$ on a seven-point scale), this was not the case on the other attitude items which assessed strength of feelings, importance of the issue, etc. ($M = 10.9$ on a 15-point scale). Thus, manipulations that prior research indicated should have produced the polarization of attitudes did not clearly do so.

At the same time, the manipulations did affect *Ss*' feelings of responsibility, desires to be persuasive, and attitudes toward an unrelated social issue. Given high responsibility and moderate anonymity, *Ss* in the high as compared to low choice condition took greater personal responsibility, expressed a greater desire to be persuasive, and were more extreme toward the unrelated issue. It might be argued that these results provide partial support for the self-perception predictions, since feelings of responsibility and the desire to be persuasive can be viewed as indices of involvement with the topic. Yet, it is unclear why the effects were limited to the moderate anonymity condition, did not show up on more direct measures of involvement, and generalized to an unrelated issue.

A frequently used procedure in the attitude literature has been to make

Ss moderately anonymous (i.e., their names are known but their questionnaires are unsigned) and feel personally responsible for possible failure on an attitude-consistent task: precisely the conditions under which the partial self-perception effect occurred. The present results raise several questions about the generalizability of such research. First, to what degree can such effects be obtained consistently under other combinations of choice and responsibility? Second, to what degree are "filler" items unrelated to the topic of the commitment nonetheless affected by commitment manipulations? Since filler items may be only occasionally analyzed (and rarely reported), such effects may be more prevalent than the literature indicates. If so, to what degree do reports of attitude change represent real change in cognitive structure caused by the commitment *vs* temporary effects produced by the manipulations but linked to mood shifts, the desire to impress *E*, or other transient states?

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