

DOES SINCERITY MATTER? AN EMPIRICAL TEST

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I conducted 2 experiments to test the hypothesis that participants who are given more (vs. less) sincere reinforcement will achieve criterion behavior sooner or more completely, and also tested for the Greenspoon effect. In each experiment, assistants' biases were measured and they were then asked to reinforce participants' responses under conditions where that reinforcement was either congruent or incongruent with the identified biases. Assistants' effectiveness under these 2 conditions was determined by measuring the shift in participants' responses from baseline values. In Experiment 1, 20 assistants reinforced designated responses by 40 participants to a 40-item questionnaire. Results supported a sincerity effect but not the Greenspoon effect. The results of Experiment 2 were nonsignificant, which I attribute to the use of a design resulting in less assistant-participant communication.

Keywords: sincerity, Greenspoon effect, sincere reinforcement, reinforced bias, communication.

Among Roger's (1957) necessary and sufficient conditions for helping, empathy has been extensively researched (Marshall, 1977). The condition of genuineness is even more central to many models of human interaction (Berne, 1964; Denes-Radomslis, 1976; Luft, 1969; Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1957; Shostrom, 1967), but little research has been conducted on the effects of this condition.

The literature on experimenter bias and verbal conditioning provides an approach to this needed research. Rosenthal (1966) has spoken of the need to calibrate experimenters with respect to their expectations, because they

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can influence participants' behavior through unintentional conditioning. Even Rogers (1957) has been shown to make use of subtle verbal conditioning reflecting his biases, when "nondirectively" responding to a client (cited in Truax, 1966). Per the Greenspoon effect (Greenspoon, 1955), responses tend to shift in the direction of reinforcement. In verbal conditioning, reinforcement can be thought of as a show of concurrence, approval, or positive regard.

In the present pair of experiments, I employed a powerful paradigm to test whether consciously intended reinforcement is less effective when the counselor or facilitator is insincere. *Sincerity* is construed as a state corresponding to a trait of genuineness. Reinforcement is considered insincere when it runs counter to the counselor's or facilitator's personal inclinations, even though it may be considered as the most appropriate behavior to serve the client. The researchers of experimenter bias and verbal reinforcement who suggested the present paradigm, have not heretofore explored the significance of sincerity as an interaction variable.

I hypothesized that, with other factors equated, participants who are given more sincere reinforcement will approach criterion behavior faster. In each experiment, assistants were asked to reinforce participants' responses under conditions where reinforced responses were expected to be either congruent or incongruent with assistants' previously measured biases. This operationalized assistants' sincerity. The effectiveness of reinforcement under these two conditions was determined by measuring the shift in the participants' responses from individual baseline values.

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Experiment 1

Method

Participants. Introductory psychology students took part in this study to meet a course requirement. There were roughly equal numbers of men and women. Twenty-five participants completed the preliminary test; of these, 20 were designated "assistants," and worked with 40 participants in the main experiment.

Instrument. I utilized the 40-item Traditional Family Ideology Questionnaire (Levinson & Huffman, 1955), which deals with democratic versus autocratic family ideology. Responses are made on a 7-point Likert-type scale. The instrument was divided into three sections, allowing for pretest (11 items), conditioning (11 conditioning items and seven fillers), and posttest (11 items) at one administration.

Procedure. Each assistant administered the instrument to two participants. With one participant, he or she reinforced responses more autocratic than the mean obtained on the preliminary administration, in which assistants had responded to the questionnaire. (They showed a

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generally democratic bias.) With the other participant, the assistant reinforced responses less autocratic than the mean. Scores reflecting assistants' influence were calculated by comparing participants' responses to items presented in the pretest and posttest sections of the instrument.

Results

Participants' change scores reflecting assistant influence were correlated with assistants' own scores on the instrument. Significant ($r = .468, p < .05$) and nonsignificant, albeit positive ($r = .302, p < .20$), correlations were obtained for reinforcement in democratic and autocratic directions, respectively. The more democratic the assistant, the more democratic shift the participant showed, supporting my main hypothesis. A correlated t test was used to compare shifts shown by the two participants reinforced in opposite directions by each assistant. The results failed to firmly support the presence of the Greenspoon effect, $t(19) = 1.73, p < .05$ (two-tailed), in the presence of the sincerity effect.

Experiment 2

Method

Participants. Participants were 160 nonvolunteer male undergraduates, 80 of whom with higher scores at preadministration were designated "assistants"; the rest served as participants.

Instrument. The attitude conditioned was participants' feelings about a then-current political issue. Participants indicated their agreement with the presented proposition by making a mark on a "yes-no" line scale. They were also asked to generate arguments about the proposition, and the percentage of pro arguments out of pro plus con arguments was recorded.

Procedure. A preliminary measure of participants' attitudes, using both measures, was taken by mail 1–3 weeks before the conditioning session, when participants and assistants worked together. Each assistant worked with one participant, reinforcing verbally presented arguments in only one direction—either pro or con arguments—as instructed.

Results

Change in participants' attitude was measured two ways. First, the percentage of pro arguments to total arguments generated some weeks before the conditioning session was compared with the percentage generated during conditioning. Second, participants responded to the proposition on the "yes-no" line scale both some weeks before the conditioning session and immediately following conditioning, and the difference between the two scale responses was recorded. There was no

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significant or near-significant sincerity effect or Greenspoon effect on either measure of attitude change.

General Discussion

Results obtained in Experiment 1 supported the presence of the sincerity effect, and also showed a trend in the direction of the Greenspoon effect; however, the results of Experiment 2 did not. It is very likely that this is because Experiment 2 provided for much less interaction between assistants and participants. (Informal analysis of available data suggests that the task in Experiment 2 required 1/6 as many statements from participants to assistants compared to the task used in Experiment 1.) It is also possible that differences in the task itself caused the difference in outcomes. In Experiment 2, the bias studied was less personally involving for the participants, the task was made more explicit in terms of what attitude change was being attempted, and because the bias involved was unidimensional, it may have been easier for assistants to know just how they felt about trying to reinforce pro or con arguments.

If borne out, these speculations suggest the importance of calibrating the applied psychologist, just as Rosenthal (1966) suggests calibrating the researcher. The support gained in Experiment 1 for the existence of the sincerity effect also provides an empirical basis for one axiom of humanistic psychology: the need for self-knowledge and personal investment in change agents, not only technical facility and intellectual knowledge.

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