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# LABORATORY AGGRESSION WHERE THE VICTIM IS A SMALL DOG

KNUD S. LARSEN, JIM ASHLOCK, CHRIS CARROLL, SUSAN FOOTE, JOHN FEELER, ERNEST KELLER, GORDON SEESE, AND DAVE WATKINS
*Oregon State University*

Earlier experiments in laboratory aggression have demonstrated the willingness of participants to shock human victims as functions of obedience and situational conformity processes. In this experiment, 30 undergraduate college students shocked a small dog. The hypothesis that participants would shock this vulnerable victim less was confirmed. Females shocked the dog significantly less than males, a difference which does not occur for human victims. This difference may be attributed to different empathy levels, and different roles that pets play for the two sexes. Rationale supporting the shocking behavior evolved around the belief that punishment is legitimate and the dog received fair treatment.

*Keywords:* laboratory aggression, victim, small dog, obedience, situational conformity processes.

Previous researchers (e.g., Milgram, 1963, 1964) have studied the willingness of participants to punish human beings by shocking a supposed victim after the victim made a wrong choice in a learning paradigm. The importance of situational pressures in producing varying levels of laboratory aggression has been clearly indicated (Larsen et al., 1972; Larsen & White, 1973). In several of these studies, the subjects were told that the victim had volunteered and was paid for participating. In addition, the human victim could presumably make a choice and leave the situation if it became unbearable. A human victim must consequently be seen as less vulnerable when compared to a small animal, for whom the choice of leaving the situation is not possible.

Larsen et al. (1972) showed that no differences existed in the shocking levels administered by males and females to a human victim. It is however, possible that sex differences exist in the level of empathy with a more vulnerable victim. Also pets play different roles for males and females, and this may influence attitudes toward punishment.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

Thirty-two students enrolled at Oregon State University during summer term, 1973, were recruited haphazardly from the campus cafeteria. After the experiment was explained to them,

Correspondence and reprint requests should be addressed to: Knud S. Larsen, PhD, Department of Psychology, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon 97331, USA.

two participants refused to shock the dog. Of the remaining participants, 14 were male and 16 were female.

In this study the "victim" was a male dog of mixed breed, mainly Welsh Corgi, weighing approximately 20 pounds. He was placed inside a cage 15 x 20 x 28 in. which contained three geometric shapes of wood and a light corresponding to each shape. In addition, the box contained switches from which electrodes were attached to the dog. As in the previous experiments the victim was not actually shocked.

#### POSTEXPERIMENT PROCEDURES

Upon completion of the experiment, the participants were asked to respond to a 12-item survey form with Likert-type response categories from *agree strongly* to *disagree strongly*. In addition, the participant was asked whether he had or had not owned a dog. The participants were then debriefed and thanked for their cooperation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The overall mean voltage was 101.6 for the mean duration of 1.05 seconds. This compares to the 132V administered to the human victim in the control condition in the Larsen et al. (1972) study. The highest mean voltage (out of 30 trials) was 141.7, compared to 208 in the 1972 study using a human victim. In this study we wanted to investigate differences between males and females in administering shock to the dog. The mean (highest shock) for males was 200.5V, and for females 92.5V. The mean difference is highly significant ($t = 2.92$, variance male = 4946.8, variance female = 7246.6; $p < .01$). Perhaps a small and defenseless animal evokes more tenderness and empathy in females. Another explanation is that dogs traditionally play different roles for the sexes. For the male, the role of a dog as a pet may frequently be associated with aggressive and/or vigorous pursuits such as hunting or "roughhouse" playing. On the other hand, for females a dog may be a source and subject of affection. Partial support for this rationale is found in the correlation between being female and the survey item "training dogs is a disagreeable task" ($r = 0.36$, $p < .05$). That empathy plays a role is suggested by the fact that subjects who have not owned a dog tend to shock the animal for a longer duration ($r = 0.36$, $p < .05$). Rationalization of participation is evident from the responses to the survey items. The more voltage applied ($r = 0.35$, $p < .05$), the more the participant was likely to agree that the dog learned as a result of the experiment. Since the rate of correct responses was randomly 50%, this belief may be viewed as an apparent justification for using shock as punishment. The view that the animal actually learned from the experiment was correlated with agreement that punishment is acceptable ($r = 0.43$, $p < .05$), that the participant was an important part of the experiment ($r = 0.37$, $p < .05$), and to feelings that the animal was treated fairly ($r = 0.64$, $p < .05$).

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