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SITUATIONAL PRESSURE, ATTITUDES TOWARD BLACKS, AND LABORATORY AGGRESSION

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The importance of the situational context in producing discriminatory behavior cannot he overlooked. This experiment on laboratory aggression investigated the effect of racial attitudes on the willingness to shock a black victim. A second purpose was to compare 2 groups in the shock levels administered to a black or a white victim. The results showed that attitudes toward blacks are not related to the level of shock administered to blacks. A black victim is shocked less than a white victim. This discriminatory behavior can be understood as a function of the social pressures of the university community as influenced, for example, by the affirmative action programs.

Keywords: situational pressure, context, attitudes toward blacks, laboratory aggression.

In two previous experiments (Larsen, Coleman, Forbes, & Johnson, 1972; Larsen & White, 1973), the pressure of the situations the subject found himself in was indicated as the predominant variable in predicting laboratory aggression. Attitudes have been thought a central concept in social psychology. Yet the correlations between attitude measures have usually accounted for little of the behavioral variance (Larsen et al., 1972). LaPiere (1934) found drastic discrepancies between stated behavior and actual attitudes. One obvious reason is that in measuring attitudes toward the object, the predominant social pressures of the situation are overlooked. From the aforementioned discussion, it may be expected that no relationship will be found between attitudes toward blacks and laboratory aggression where a black is the victim. Rather, the norms of the broader social situation the participant is a part of will determine any discriminatory behavior. The college situation creates social pressures for white students to treat blacks deferentially. In addition, the black image connotes aggressiveness to many whites. We therefore hypothesized that there would be no relationship between attitudes toward blacks and shock level administered. Our collateral hypothesis was that a black "victim" would be shocked less than a white "victim" by white students.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Forty male introductory psychology students at Oregon State University, Winter, 1972, were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Members of Group 1 were asked to "shock" a white

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"victim", whereas members of Group 2 were asked to "shock" a black "victim" following the paradigms of Milgram (1963), and the control procedure of Larsen et al. (1972).

APPARATUS AND PROCEDURE

The apparatus and procedure were identical to that used in the control procedure of the Larsen et al. (1972) study. The experiment proceeded with 40 trials of supposedly paired-comparison problems, with the possible responses right or wrong, which were indicated to the participant by the light flashing on the panel. Actually the experimenter responded with a random 50% right – 50% wrong answers. The participant was asked to shock the victim for the "wrong" answers. Approximately two weeks later, another experimenter unfamiliar to the participants approached each participant with the Steckler Anti-Negro Survey (1957). There is no reason to believe that the participant connected the survey with the experiment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In laboratory aggression, both the level of shock and the length of time shocking reflect the participants' willingness to shock a victim. The participants' shock score was therefore calculated by the level of shock administered, multiplied by the duration of the shock. A test was carried out between participants who scored in the top half of the Steckler Anti-Negro Survey, versus those who scored in the bottom half. The *t* test ($t = 0.74$) was nonsignificant. It can therefore be concluded that attitudes toward blacks are not related to laboratory aggression for the whole group. When the two groups separately were divided into top and bottom halves on the Anti-Negro Survey, the results were insignificant both for Group 1 (white victim, $t = 0.11$), and Group 2 (black victim, $t = 0.21$). This would suggest in the case of Group 2, that attitudes toward blacks do not predict behavior toward blacks in the laboratory situation. Apparently the situation is compelling regardless of attitude.

Group 1 had a mean score of 305.17 Vsec ($SD = 214.41$), and Group 2 a mean score of 124.16 ($SD = 97.97$). The *t* test yielded a value of 3.43 ($p < .01$). The range for Group 1 was 887.70, for Group 2, 319.70. The participants in Group 2, therefore, shocked the black victim less, and were much more homogeneous in their shocking behavior when compared with the participants in Group 1 (white victim). This behavior can best be understood within the context of social pressure generated toward racial equality within the modern university system, and appears unrelated to attitudes toward blacks. It is simply the "proper" thing to treat blacks deferentially under the social pressure of the affirmative action programs. There may also be fears on the part of the white participants to appear racially prejudiced. Add to this the possibility that the black image connotes aggressiveness and may have provoked fear in such a situation. In any event, this experimental shock technique cannot be used as an appraisal of the partici-

pant's racism. Any discriminatory behavior occurring in this experiment must largely be understood as a function of the social pressures of the university community. The evidence from this and previous experiments on laboratory aggression is quite clear. The social pressure generated by the situation is the predominant variable determining the willingness to shock a victim.

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