

THE EFFECT OF BEHAVIORAL COMMITMENT AND ABILITY DISCREPANCY ON ATTITUDINAL PERSISTENCE

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Behavioral commitment and negative task discrepancy were manipulated in a 2×2 between-groups factorial design in order to observe their effects on attitudinal persistence on feminist issues and perceived threat of a trivia test score. Results indicated that non-active feminists perceived a greater threat from a discrepant test score than active feminists. Non-active feminists also showed greater agreement to a feminist point of view than active feminists as a result of experiencing discrepancy on a self-relevant task.

Keywords: behavioral commitment, ability discrepancy, attitudinal persistence.

There is often a great deal of discrepancy between action and attitudes of people in daily life. However, in most cases where the discrepancy is not particularly unpleasant, this discrepancy goes unnoticed and the person learns to live with it. Impression management and defensive techniques such as behavioral matching, self reinforcement, misattribution of causality, selective attention, and projection are used in order to avoid or escape from the threatening implications of one's own actions that contradict central beliefs (Barley & Goethals, 1980; Olson & Zanna, 1979; Pyszynski, Greenberg, & LaPrelle, 1984; Tetlock & Manstead, 1985).

Early researchers demonstrated that a major way of reducing dissonance caused by counter-attitudinal behavior is to change original attitudes in the direction of the discrepant behavior (e.g., Aronson & Carlsmith, 1963). However, when the original attitude is especially strong, central, and linked to other self-relevant cognitions, attitude change towards the discrepant behavior is unlikely (cf. Festinger, 1957). If individuals can be confronted with undeniable evidence of this discrepancy between their action and a related central self-relevant belief, then behavior and opinions may be adopted that will attempt to reestablish prior attitudes, in an attempt to reduce dissonance. For instance, Frey (1981) had participants estimate their own intelligence followed by having them take an actual test of intelligence. He then provided participants with fictitious test results, which were negatively discrepant from their prior estimates. Frey (1981) then asked participants to choose one of several articles, some of

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which supported intelligence tests while others did not. He found that as he increased the negative discrepancy of the test feedback, so did the relative choice for articles that viewed these tests negatively.

Researchers have shown how threat to one's sense of self, along various domains such as race, ethnicity, political and religious values, and traits, can result in a manifestation of even stronger affirmation of those previously held beliefs about the self on the part of the negatively discrepant individual (Anderson, Lepper, & Ross, 1980; Bond & Cheung, 1984; Dutton & Lake, 1973; Frey & Stahlberg, 1986; Halverson & Pallak, 1978; Judd & Harackiewicz, 1980; Pallak & Sullivan, 1979; Steele, 1975).

This effect of bolstering one's sense of self by reaffirming self-relevant beliefs rests on the assumption that the individual has a considerable amount of affective investment (Judd & Johnson, 1981) or prior commitment (cf. Kiesler, 1971) towards maintaining that belief about the self. Furthermore, the more one carries out behaviors that are consistent with one's beliefs, the greater will be one's ego-involvement (Halverson & Pallak, 1978; Sherif, Kelley, Rodgers, Sarup, & Tittler, 1973). It follows that the greater one's ego-involvement, the greater will be the threat experienced when faced with negative discrepancy between one's beliefs and actions and the greater the persistence of those prior beliefs.

However, a question may well be raised regarding the nature of such behavioral commitment. As Kiesler (1971) quite correctly assumed, commitment is not a dichotomous concept. Behavioral commitment may lie on a continuum that ranges from private affirmation of ideas, public endorsement of beliefs (e.g., signing a petition) to actually partaking in behaviors that are central to that belief (e.g., making a speech). How can different types of commitment affect attitudinal persistence in the face of negative discrepancy on a self-relevant task? In the present study we address this question.

In the following study we utilized two groups of participants who varied in terms of their behavioral commitment to a feminist ideology – self-proclaimed feminists who did not belong to any feminist group and feminists who did belong to a feminist group. Each female participant was asked to partake in a trivia test that entailed naming as many women authors, scientists, and athletes as possible within 90 seconds. During feedback, the participant was informed that her score was either discrepant from a feminist norm or that it was average. The participant was then asked to make agreement ratings on 12 statements (6 anti- and 6 pro-feminist) that dealt with issues of childcare, abortion, employment and education, and gender image. Therefore, the independent variables were behavioral commitment and ability discrepancy, while the dependent variables were the total rating on the 12 statements and perceived threat of the test score.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Forty female self-proclaimed feminists, aged 18 years and over, recruited at the University of Toronto campus participated. There were 20 active feminists and 20 non-active feminists.

MATERIALS

The 12 statements administered after the trivia task dealt with four feminist issues: gender image, employment and education, childcare, and abortion. Each issue had three statements each, adapted from Deckard (1983). There were 6 anti-feminist and 6 pro-feminist statements in the whole set. The statements were randomized in order to prevent order effects from taking place. Participants were to provide ratings on a 9-point *agree/disagree* scale following each statement. Ratings on the negative set were reversed during scoring so that a high total rating on the 12 statements indicated strong agreement to feminist attitudes.

PROCEDURE

Two groups of 20 participants each were recruited in terms of their behavioral commitment to feminism, through advertisements posted throughout the University of Toronto campus. There were 20 active feminists (those who belonged to a feminist group of organization) and 20 non-active feminists (those who did not belong to a feminist group or organization). This constituted the manipulation of the behavioral commitment factor.

Participants were told that the study was part of a larger one concerned with changes in feminist attitudes. They were provided with a piece of paper and pencil for a trivia test that entailed writing down the names of as many female scientists, authors and athletes as possible within 90 seconds. A similar type of test was utilized by Judd and Johnson (1981) in order to differentiate feminists from non-feminists.

Upon completion of the trivia task the ability discrepancy manipulation took place. Regardless of how well the participant performed, she was told that either her score was 5 points below a fictitious feminist norm (discrepancy present) or that her score was more or less average compared to other feminists ± 0.4 (discrepancy absent). The participant was then asked to provide agreement ratings on a 9-point scale following each of the 12 statements on feminist issues. The participant was finally asked to rate the extent to which the score obtained on the trivia test had posed a threat to her sense of self on a 9-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *very much*. The intentions of the study and the fictitious nature of the trivia task was then divulged to the participant.

DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

Behavioral commitment with two levels (active feminist vs. non-active feminists) was crossed with ability discrepancy with two levels (discrepancy present vs. discrepancy absent) in a 2 x 2 between-groups factorial design. The two dependent variables were the total rating on the feminist-issue statements and perceived threat rating. Analyses of variance were carried out for both dependent measures.

RESULTS

During recruitment, all participants were asked to rate themselves as feminists on a 9-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *very much*. There was no significant difference between the mean ratings of the active and non-active feminists [$t(38) = .44, p > .1$].

FEMINIST ATTITUDES

There was a main effect of ability discrepancy [$F(1, 36) = 25.20, p < .0001$] on feminist-issue ratings. Those participants whose trivia test scores were reported as being below average, rated higher on the feminist-issue statements ($M = 105.30$) than those who were reported as having performed average ($M = 99.70$). There was also a main effect of behavioral commitment [$F(1, 36) = 21.73, p < .0001$]. The total rating of statements was greater for active feminists ($M = 105.10$) than for non-active feminists ($M = 99.90$). There was a significant discrepancy x commitment interaction effect obtained as well [$F(1, 36) = 12.86, p = .001$]. The effect of discrepancy on feminist ratings was greater in the non-active feminist group than the active feminist group.

PERCEIVED THREAT

There was a main effect of ability discrepancy on threat perceived by the participant [$F(1, 36) = 7.28, p = .01$]. Those feminist participants in the discrepancy present conditions perceived greater threat from their trivia test scores ($M = 3.70$) than those in the discrepancy absent conditions ($M = 2.65$). There was a main effect of behavioral commitment obtained as well [$F(1, 36) = 5.96, p = .02$]. The non-active feminist group appeared to perceive a greater threat as a result of the score obtained on the trivia task ($M = 3.65$), than active feminists ($M = 2.70$). There was a marginally significant discrepancy x commitment interaction effect upon perceived threat [$F(1, 36) = 4.77, p < .05$]. The effect of discrepancy on perceived threat was greater in the non-active feminist group.

DISCUSSION

In this study it was demonstrated that indeed beliefs are like possessions (cf. Abelson, 1986), where discrepancy on a central self-relevant task led to feelings of threat and extreme agreement to pro-feminist attitudes. This effect was generally greater in the case of non-active feminists in the present study. These feminists who may have subscribed to such beliefs initially due to reasons of social desirability, appeared to have been vulnerable to threat posed by the discrepant test scores. As a result, their attitudes toward feminist issues escalated to greater extremes relative to active feminists.

In the case of active feminists, the discrepant test results did not engender as much threat as it did to the non-active feminists because the former may have already developed a strong sense of self built through a history of behaviors which have been consistent with their beliefs (e.g., to be a member of a feminist group). Self-actualized individuals, as the active feminists in this study are purported to be, probably treat such discrepancies as anomalous experiences that are not critical tests of their abilities as active feminists. There are probably other salient cues in their daily lives upon which they could judge their own integrity as feminists. Thus, their agreement towards pro-feminist statements remained relatively unchanged as a result of task discrepancy.

Therefore, public declaration of commitment to a self-relevant belief does not necessarily lead to further bolstering of attitudes when faced with ability discrepancy. Individuals who have developed and maintained in a robust self-schema do not appear to be vulnerable to attitude change simply by virtue of discrepant performance on one task, unless that schema lacks a behavioral basis.

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