NEA

His attitudes can be changed, but how far should the research be taken?

BEHAVIOR

The utility of absurdity

by Patricia McBroom

Acting under the force of post-hypnotic suggestion, a man puts on raincoat and galoshes and walks eight blocks to buy four cartons of cigarettes. The sun is shining, cigarettes are sold next door and the man doesn't smoke. He feels absurd.

Rationalizing his actions, the man tells himself the weather has been very changeable lately, or he needs the cigarettes for a party, and the exercise does him good.

Psychologists have a phrase for this man's dilemma: cognitive dissonance. It means holding contradictory attitudes at the same time or performing acts that conflict with beliefs.

Some people wallow in cognitive dissonance all their lives and never know it. But contradictions revealed call for change; a man must explain his actions to himself; frequently the justification takes the form of new attitudes and values.

"People have a drive for consistency, a drive to convince themselves their behavior is not absurd," says Dr. Elliot Aronson, professor of psychology at the University of Texas. Using the theory of cognitive dissonance and the human tendency for self-justification, Dr. Aronson has developed new ideas on creating value changes.

The method is two-pronged. First it is necessary to raise dissonance by making someone act in opposition to his natural inclinations. Second, the pressure used must be just strong enough to cause behavior change, but not strong enough to give the man excuses for his actions.

Mild pressure is the crucial point, says Dr. Aronson. Severe threats may control behavior, but leave attitudes unchanged or even more entrenched.

"The weaker the justification provided from the outside, the more likely a man is to search for his own," he explains. "Self persuasion is much more effective in the long run."

Dr. Aronson recently demonstrated his point with an experiment on children. Following him, several other experimenters have achieved similar results. All point to one conclusion: mild threat—not severe threat—is the way to create a change of mind.

The psychologists were unwilling to interfere with the children's actual values and risk an ethical problem, so they designed a test using toys.

The goal was to induce children to decide they really didn't like one of their favorite toys. Each was asked not to play with that toy, but some of the children were given only a mild warning of disapproval, while others were severely threatened with loss of all the toys if they did not obey.

The mildly threatened children wanted to oblige (the psychologists had become their friends) but since the punishment for disobedience was so weak, they had to find their own reasons for neglecting a well-liked toy. In the end, says Dr. Aronson, they liked it less. The other children, under severe threat, liked it slightly more. *(See p. 194)*

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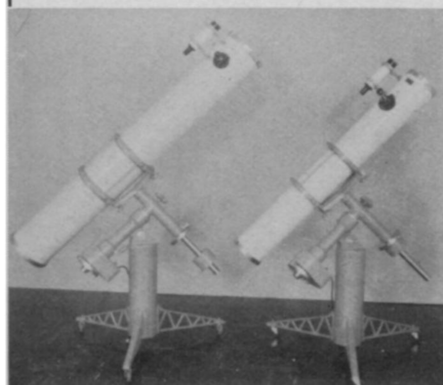

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(Continued from p. 193)

In one Stanford experiment, Dr. Jonathan Freedman induced a group of eight-year-olds to turn their backs on a battery-powered robot that threw bombs. "It was a fabulous toy," says Dr. Aronson, yet two months after a test with mild threat, the children were still ignoring the robot. Dr. Freedman even brought in a plumber to remark incidentally, while fixing pipes: "Hey, kid, why aren't you playing with that robot?" Preference for the toy dropped even further, says Dr. Aronson. The children had justified a contradiction with a change of mind.

NEA

She likes it now, but . . .

"I can't see why this would not apply to important values," says Dr. Aronson, "but someone with more guts than I ought to do the experiment."

He has touched a sensitive issue in behavioral research. Often it seems the closer a scientist gets to the heart of human behavior, the more indirectly he must proceed. A workable method of changing attitudes, for instance, could be useful not only in education, but also perhaps in handling racial prejudice and antisocial behavior. Without the direct — possibly dangerous — research, however, there is no way of knowing whether the toy effect represents a more universal human characteristic.

For the most part, psychologists are reluctant to interfere with the basic attitudes of their subjects, particularly when the subjects are children. Dr. Aronson feels he has no right to interfere with the values of other people's children. He has, however, put college students under considerable personal stress to test a second implication of the dissonance theory.

A group of 15 students had their self-esteem crushed with false results from a personality test, on the theory that people who feel unworthy will tend to act worthless. Like the loser who seeks failure, they will tend to take actions consistent with self-concepts.

In another group, students were given good news about themselves, with scores of "mature, highly creative and deep."

In a later test, the disillusioned students—unaware of any link with the testing procedure—cheated considerably more than those buoyed by good news about their character.

"It is more dissonant for someone who feels good about himself to commit an unworthy act," comments Dr. Aronson.

Dr. Aronson points out that the personality tests implied nothing about morality, yet a crushed self-esteem appeared to increase underhanded behavior.

"Some people are crooks even with high self-esteem," he says; nevertheless he believes the experiment has implications for handling lawbreakers.

Again the issue of ethics had to be faced. The Texas psychologist says he spent more time with his subjects afterwards, explaining everything and reinstating self-esteem, than he gave to the experiment itself, on the grounds that experimenters should leave their subjects in as good a shape or better than at the start.

This was essentially the position taken by a panel appointed by the President's Office of Science and Technology to investigate the conflict between individual privacy and behavioral research. The panel report, released last year, took note of the occasional need for behavioral research to encroach on individual privacy and dignity (SN: 2/18/67, p. 158).

Unlike medical research, informed consent on the part of subjects is not always possible in behavioral research, said the panel. Otherwise, results would be biased and useless. "If society is to exercise its right to know, it must free its behavioral scientists as much as possible from unnecessary restraints."

But the right of the individual to dignity and self-respect is equally strong, said the panel. "Neither principle can supervene universally," but constant adjustment and compromise must be made.

The scientist has an obligation to insure that no permanent psychological harm will result from the research and that temporary discomfort or loss of privacy will be remedied at the end.

The panel rejected any legislative controls over research and called for each university and institution to set up review procedures for behavioral work done by their scientists.

But given the deception necessary to much behavioral research, ethics may not be the only problem psychologists face. With all the work on college students, behavioral scientists could one day lose a valuable resource—naive undergraduates.