Factors Affecting Behavior Toward People With Disabilities

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ABSTRACT. Two field experiments were designed to explore ambivalence-induced behavior toward people with disabilities in low-cost helping situations. In Experiment 1, confederates, who either rode in a wheelchair or walked, asked shoppers for a small sum of money and either provided a reason (positive presentation) or did not provide a reason (negative presentation) for the request. Contrary to prediction, more people with a physical disability than without a physical disability were helped, regardless of their presentation. In Experiment 2, the presence of confederates in wheelchairs resulted in significantly fewer violations of parking spaces reserved for people with handicaps.

RESEARCH ON ALTRUISM toward people with physical disabilities has produced inconsistent results; sometimes such people have been treated more favorably (Baker & Reitz, 1978; Doob & Ecker, 1970; Gibbon, Stephan, & Stevenson, 1980; Juni & Roth, 1981) and sometimes less favorably (I. M. Piliavin, Piliavin, & Rodin, 1975; Samerotte & Harris, 1976) than those without physical disabilities. The specific nature of the physical disability (Samerotte & Harris), the type of helping response called for (J. A. Piliavin & Piliavin, 1972), and the degree of personal contact the response entails (Soble & Strickland, 1974) are all factors shown to affect rates of helping. Katz and Glass's (1979) ambivalence-amplification theory of behavior toward the stigmatized suggests that the positive or negative nature of a disabled person's behavior may be a major determinant of whether he or she is helped more or less than a person without a physical disability.

Katz and Glass's (1979; Katz, 1981) theory is based on the idea that individuals often hold ambivalent attitudes (i.e., feelings of sympathy as well as hos-
tility) toward members of stigmatized groups. They postulated that three steps are taken during interactions between nonstigmatized and stigmatized actors that may lead to amplified (extremely positive or extremely negative) responses toward the stigmatized: (a) There is positive or negative input from the stigmatized actor; (b) the input contradicts one of the nonstigmatized actor's ambivalent attitudes; and (c) the actor may defend or deny the discredited attitude by responding in an extremely favorable or unfavorable fashion (Katz & Glass, 1979).

Specifically, Katz and Glass (1979) predicted that positive input from a stigmatized actor may lead nonstigmatized actors to deny their hostile feelings by responding in an extremely favorable way—for example, with exaggerated compliance to a small request. In contrast, negative input from the stigmatized actor may cause nonstigmatized actors to deny their sympathetic feelings by engaging in very negative behavior; for example, with extreme unwillingness to grant a small request. Experiment 1 was designed to test these predictions by examining compliance to a request presented in a positive or negative manner. It was predicted that individuals with a physical disability would be helped more often than those without a disability if they used the positively phrased request, and that the reverse would occur with the use of the negatively phrased request.

Experiment 2 was designed to test the prediction that the presence of actors with a physical disability near a parking space reserved for people with disabilities would result in a lowered rate of parking violations by drivers who were not disabled. Research shows that a physical disability is an attention getting stimulus that can enhance people's awareness of themselves and their environment (Langer, Bashner, & Chanowitz, 1985; Langer, Fiske, Taylor, & Chanowitz, 1976). Heightened awareness in conjunction with the arousal of sympathetic feelings would presumably account for the lowered rate of violations in the presence of confederates with a disability. In this case, obeying the law by choosing not to park in a space authorized for those with disabilities could be construed as a relatively low-cost act of helping.

**EXPERIMENT 1**

**Method**

Participants were 240 shoppers (102 men and 138 women) at two suburban shopping malls in the United States. Shoppers who were walking alone and appeared to be at least 18 years of age were selected at random (every fourth shopper) by one of 6 confederates (4 women and 2 men). Confederates, who either rode in a wheelchair or walked, asked shoppers for 10 cents (a small sum) and either provided a reason (i.e., saying the dime was for a phone call; positive presentation) or did not provide a reason (negative presentation). Shoppers were alternately assigned to either the reason or the no reason condition.
servers accompanied each confederate to record the shopper's gender, approximate age, and compliance with the request. Each confederate completed 10 trials in each of the four experimental conditions.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the mean percentage of compliance obtained in each of the experimental conditions. A $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Participant Gender $\times$ Confederate Gender $\times$ Type of Presentation $\times$ Disability Status) repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures on confederate gender was performed on the data (using 1s and 0s). The analysis yielded a significant main effect for disability status, $F(1, 4) = 23.25$, $p < .008$, which indicated that confederates in a wheelchair obtained significantly greater compliance to their request for a dime than did the confederates who did not use a wheelchair (71.66% vs. 45.83%, respectively). Thus, contrary to the initial prediction, people with a physical disability were helped more often than those without such a disability regardless of the positive or negative presentation of their request.

Evidence that the bald-faced request for a dime was perceived negatively came from the marginally significant Type of Presentation $\times$ Disability Status interaction, $F(1, 4) = 5.67$, $p < .07$, which showed that physically able confederates tended to be less successful in obtaining dimes when they did not give a reason for needing one (55.17% vs. 34.58%, respectively). The ANOVA results also revealed a significant main effect for confederate gender, $F(1, 4) = 23.93$, $p < .008$, which indicated that women obtained a higher mean percentage rate of compliance ($M = 66.87\%$) than did men ($M = 41.25\%$).

EXPERIMENT 2

Method

Participants

The participants were 300 drivers (180 men, 117 women, and 3 individuals who were not identified by gender) who parked their vehicles for longer than 10 s in parking spaces reserved for people with physical disabilities.

The confederates were 20 undergraduate psychology students (5 men and 15 women) between the ages of 20 and 44.

Procedure

Violations of handicapped parking spaces were observed under three conditions. In the bystander with disability condition, two confederates sat in wheel-
TABLE 1
Mean Percentage of Compliance in Each Experimental Condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of request</th>
<th>Type of confederate</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>71.83</td>
<td>55.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>68.83</td>
<td>34.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Table entries are based on 60 requests per cell.

chairs on the sidewalk next to parking spaces designated for individuals with physical disabilities. In the nondisabled bystander condition, two confederates stood on the sidewalk next to the handicapped parking spaces. In the third or control condition, observations of violations were made without the presence of confederate bystanders. Confederates carried out observations at three parking lots: one in a shopping center in an urban U. S. location and two in a nearby town. Four spaces were observed at each of the three locations. Observation trials took place over 30 min intervals for each of the three conditions, with a 15 min interval between each observation period. The order of conditions was randomly varied. Twelve observational periods were carried out during day and evening hours for each condition over a period of 3 weeks.

In the two bystander conditions, the gender of the confederate bystanders was varied to include an equal number of same gender and opposite gender pairs in each condition. Two confederates served as observers for each condition by positioning themselves unobtrusively near the handicapped spaces. A violation was counted if a vehicle without a handicap permit, sticker, or license plate was parked in a handicapped space for longer than 10 s. Legal users were also recorded along with the gender of the drivers.

Results and Discussion

Table 2 contains the frequency of the violations observed in the three conditions in the urban and town locations. The reliability for the observers' ratings was 98%. As can be seen in Table 2, there were fairly high rates of violations across the conditions. Of the 291 drivers observed parking in handicapped spaces in the urban location, 223 (76.63%) parked illegally. In the town locations, of the 175 drivers observed, 77 (44%) parked illegally. In keeping with the hypothesis, a chi-square analysis showed that there were significantly fewer violations in the bystander with disability condition than in the control condition (80 vs. 124). \( \chi^2(1, N = 204) = 9.49, p < .01 \). The rates of violations in the nondisabled
TABLE 2
Frequency of Violations of Handicapped Parking Spaces
by Condition and Location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Disabled bystander</th>
<th>Nondisabled bystander</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Total frequencies are based on 12 observational periods of 30-min duration.*

bystander condition compared to the control condition just missed significance (96 vs. 124), $\chi^2(1, N = 220) = 3.56, p < .06$. Finally, no difference was found in the rate of violations in the bystander with disability condition compared to the nondisabled bystander condition (80 vs. 96), $\chi^2(1, N = 176) = 1.45$.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Taken together, the findings appear to be congruent with the idea that behavior toward people with physical disabilities can frequently be characterized by a fundamental sense of ambivalence. The results of Experiment 1 showed that in a low-cost helping situation, individuals with a physical disability were treated more favorably than those without a physically disability, whether or not their request for help was made in a positive or negative manner. Although contrary to prediction, these findings are consistent with Katz and Glass’s (1979) theory. The fact that the negative presentation of a request resulted in lowered compliance for confederates without a physical disability but not for confederates with a disability suggests exaggerated sympathy toward the physically disabled. Such an overly positive response may in turn reflect denial of aversive feelings or different definitions of what is considered socially positive or negative behavior on the part of people with physical disabilities. Negative behavior (e.g., an impolitely delivered request) may be tolerated and even accepted because it is congruent with a negative stereotype.

In Experiment 2, the high rate of violations of handicapped parking spaces seems to be indicative of insensitivity or even callous disregard for the needs of people with disabilities. Conversely, the fact that individuals were deterred from violating parking spaces reserved for those with disabilities when such people were present shows that situational influences can foster more considerate behavior, even in the type of brief, anonymous, public encounter that was explored.
In conclusion, the results point to the need for further research on attitudes and behavior toward people with disabilities as well as further efforts to counter the negative stereotypes surrounding disabilities.

REFERENCES


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