

Physical stigma, interaction, and compliance*

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A female student attempted to arrange interviews with middle-class housewives. For half the requests, she appeared physically normal; for the rest she appeared to have a deformed back. Half of the requests were for subsequent interviews with herself; for the other half, she requested subsequent interviews with a different interviewer. As expected, compliance was low when the stigmatized stimulus person attempted to arrange a future interview with herself; but contrary to expectation, compliance was not appreciably higher than in control conditions when the stigmatized person attempted to arrange the interview with a physically normal interviewer. The results were discussed in terms of the "potency" of different types of physical stigma.

An increasing amount of social psychological research has, over recent years, been directed at what in the broadest sense might be termed "altruism." In this area are such studies as those of helping (e.g., Aderman, 1972), bystander intervention (e.g., Darley & Latané, 1968), and acquiescence to a request for help from a "victim" (e.g., Langer & Abelson, 1972). Of the studies in the last of these three related areas, several consistent findings, along with a few ambiguous ones, have begun to appear in a context where the victim suffers some sort of physical "stigma." Several of them fit nicely with the statement of Goffman (1963), "In social situations with a person known or perceived to have a stigma . . . we are likely to experience uneasiness [p. 19]." In fact, Goffman says, "the very anticipation of such contacts can of course lead normals and stigmatized to arrange life so as to avoid them [p. 12]." Richardson, Hastorf, Goodman, and Dornbusch (1961) have shown that children have a consistent psychological ordering of physical stigma in terms of how much they like or dislike children with one physical handicap or another. Their findings were replicated by Alessi and Anthony (1969). Richardson and Royce (1968) even show that "physical handicap is such a powerful cue in establishing preference that it largely masks preference based on skin color [p. 467]." The work of Kleck and his associates has been particularly consistent with Goffman's hypotheses. Kleck (1966) reported on the increased arousal experienced by normals in interactions with stigmatized persons; Kleck, Ono, and Hastorf (1966), after observing encounters between normal Ss and physically disabled stimulus persons, reported that the Ss (1) showed less behavioral variability in interacting with the physically disabled stimulus person than with a normal; (2) usually terminated interactions sooner with

the physically disabled stimulus person; (3) expressed opinions less representative of their true beliefs to a disabled rather than to a nondisabled stimulus person.

Kleck (1968) extended his studies to nonverbal behavior, finding that gestural behavior (although not eye contact) was restricted in interaction with disabled stimulus persons, and more recently (Kleck et al, 1969) he has demonstrated that Ss maintained a greater physical distance between themselves and physically disabled stimulus persons than they did with physically normal stimulus persons, a finding also reported by Wolfgang and Wolfgang (1968). One may experience conflict in talking to a physically handicapped person in certain contexts. Kleck et al (1966) report that when this person is in the interaction as an interviewer rather than as simply a participant, the S is caught between a normative desire to help the stimulus person vs a desire to terminate the encounter, and he may in fact talk *longer* to him. It was with respect to this possible conflict that Doob and Ecker (1970) stated, "In the area of compliance, then, it would be argued that the kind of behavior requested would critically affect whether a person was more likely to comply with a handicapped than with a nonhandicapped person. Presumably, one important variable would be whether the S thought that compliance would necessitate interaction with the person making the request. If he thought that he would have to interact with a handicapped person, he might be less likely to comply than if he thought that by complying he could avoid further contact [p. 302]." Accordingly, Doob and Ecker varied two factors in their experiment: the characteristics of the person making the request (i.e., stigma and no stigma) and the implications of the request (i.e., whether or not the Ss thought that they would have to have further contact with the person making the request). They reasoned that when someone is faced with a request from a stigmatized individual where compliance would involve interaction, he feels that he should comply in order to help the handicapped person. At the same time, he knows that the necessary contact would be unpleasant for him. However, when

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METHOD

compliance does not involve further interaction, only the feeling of sympathy for the stigmatized individual should be in operation; there should be more compliance when the request is made by a handicapped person but does not necessitate further contact.

In the experiment designed to test this reasoning, a 21-year-old girl approached 121 housewives under the pretense of conducting a door-to-door survey. She asked half of the Ss (questionnaire condition) if they would have 15 to 20 min to spare in the next few days to fill out and mail a four-page questionnaire. The other Ss (interview condition) were asked if they had 15 to 20 min to spare to answer a few questions. For half of the Ss, the E wore a black eyepatch; the rest of the time she did not.

Doob and Ecker found essentially no difference between the eyepatch and no-eyepatch conditions in the interview condition; but in the questionnaire condition, significantly more Ss complied in the eyepatch condition than in the no-eyepatch condition. This latter result was interpreted as partly due to the fact that the E was more successful in getting Ss to accept the questionnaire in the eyepatch rather than the no-eyepatch condition and partly to the fact that Ss in the eyepatch condition who accepted a questionnaire were more likely to fill it out than the Ss in the no-eyepatch condition who accepted the questionnaire.

Another factor that may have influenced the data, as Doob and Ecker have speculated, was their choice of stigma, i.e., the eyepatch, which could be viewed by a S as reflecting only a temporary disability. In addition, the differences between interviews and questionnaires involve more than prospects of further interaction. Whereas a questionnaire can be completed in a person's spare time, the interview to which the E was asking Ss to submit had to be done immediately. If a S was busy at the moment, she may have refused to be interviewed regardless of who was asking her. In fact, the present study was a modified replication of the Doob and Ecker experiment that, first, utilized a stigma or handicap that would appear to be permanent. Rather than use both interviews and questionnaires, each S would be asked to agree to be interviewed at a later date, in order to both prevent refusals on the grounds that the S was too busy at the time and to avoid any confounding factors which may have been introduced by using both questionnaires and interviews. The factor of further interaction was varied by a contact person (the E) telling a S either that she would be conducting the interview herself or that another person would be interviewing the S.

An interaction between appearance of contact person and identity of prospective interviewer was hypothesized, such that the largest proportion of Ss would comply when the request was made by a stigmatized contact person with the interview to be conducted by another person, with the smallest proportion of Ss agreeing to be interviewed when a stigmatized contact person made the request with the interview to be carried out by herself.

The choice of which stigma to use in this experiment was limited, as it had to be visible and seem permanent to the S; it had to be fairly easy to replicate each day; and it had to be something that was essentially irrelevant to the proposed interview. Thus, a "hunchback" was substituted for the eyepatch. A cloth bag was stuffed with material and strapped to the E's right shoulder blade under a jacket to give the appearance of a hunchback. The E always stood in such a way that whoever answered the door was immediately aware of this "stigma."

Procedure

The Ss were 116 housewives living in an upper-middle-class area of Ottawa, Ontario. The E (a female student, 21 years old) went to this area of Ottawa, which had been selected because of its homogeneous socioeconomic nature, based on available census data. The E approached a house and knocked on the door. If someone answered, the S was counted in the experiment. Ss were randomly assigned to a "future interaction."

For half of the Ss (interview with self condition), the E introduced herself by saying: "Hello. I represent a company called Consumer Research Associates. We are hired by independent industries to do surveys of consumer buying habits. We will be conducting a survey in this area soon and we would like to know if you would be willing to be interviewed. If you are interested, then I will take your name and telephone number. At the first of next week, I will get in touch with you and you can tell me when it would be convenient for me to interview you."

If the Ss inquired, they were told that the interview would take from 20 to 30 min and that the questions would concern advertising, brand names, etc. Ss were told that interviews could be arranged for any time in the following month so that there would be few, if any, conflicts with summer vacations. The rest of the Ss (interview with other condition) were given the same introduction but were told that the E would give the list of names and telephone numbers of those who would agree to another representative of the company. They were told that this other person would get in touch with them and would conduct the interview. Half of the time the E had a hunchback; the rest of the time she was "normal."

A S was considered to have complied with the request if she agreed to be interviewed and gave her name and telephone number to the E. The experiment was run on 6 separate days, the stigma condition on 3 days, and the normal condition on 3 days. Since it was essential that only the hunchback should vary between conditions, great care was taken to make the E look exactly the same each day in every other way. Although the E was clearly not blind to the experimental condition, she did attempt to say exactly the same thing to each S.

The number of Ss in each of the four cells was 29.

RESULTS

The proportions of Ss agreeing to the interview appear in Table 1. To test for the anticipated interaction between stigma and identity of the prospective interviewer (self or other), recourse was made to the technique derived by Langer and Abelson (1972) in their treatment of similar data in a helping experiment of like design.¹

Computation of Z for the data in Table 1 yields a value of 2.05, significant at $p < .02$. The main contributor was the low proportion (31%) of Ss agreeing on a subsequent interview with the stigmatized girl; the anticipated willingness to agree when the interview is

Table 1
Numbers and Proportions of Subjects Agreeing to be Interviewed

Appearance of Contact Person	Prospective Interviewer			
	Self		Other	
Stigma	9/29	31%	17/29	59%
Normal	15/29	51%	16/29	55%

with someone else did not appear. Thus, although the predicted interaction was obtained, the dual hypothesis was only partially supported.

These results, although easily interpretable in terms of previous findings concerning the personal discomfort and restricted behavior of Ss confronting physically handicapped persons, are still a bit perplexing. Doob and Ecker found 69.2% of Ss agreeing to complete a questionnaire (the no-future-interaction manipulation) for their stigmatized stimulus person, as opposed to only 40% for the normal stimulus person. Parallel proportions in the present study—59% agreeing to be interviewed by someone else when approached by a stigmatized contact person, as opposed to 55% when the contact person has a normal appearance—are not nearly different. Just the reverse occurs when the prospective interview is to be with the person making the contact. Fifty-one percent agreed when her appearance was normal, as compared with only 31% when she was stigmatized, while Doob and Ecker report comparable proportions of 32% and 33.7%. Thus, Doob and Ecker got half of what they expected, and so did the present investigators—but each team got different halves.

There are a variety of reasons why these findings might have occurred, but the most plausible one lies in the type of stigma employed. It has already been suggested that an eyepatch may imply a temporary disability while a hunchback is clearly permanent. Perhaps the latter is also seen as much more severe on whatever subjective scales of physical disabilities are held by adults. It seems reasonable, at least, that the loss of

an eye may elicit sympathetic helping where no future interaction is anticipated, while not triggering differentially strong avoidance tendencies where future interaction is inevitable. The deformed back, however, may be so disturbing as to set off the avoidance tendencies to the detriment of any impulse to help. Parametric studies in which stigma value is known and systematically varied, possibly along the lines suggested by Siller (1970), are in order.

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NOTE

1. In this test, the null hypothesis of "no interaction" is tested by converting proportions via arc-sine transformation, computing $Z = (\phi_a - \phi_b)(\phi_c - \phi_d) / \sqrt{1/N + 1/N + 1/N + 1/N}$ and evaluating Z with normal distribution tables.

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