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Differences in Susceptibility to Influence in Mexican American and Anglo Females

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To further evaluate the hypothesis of relatively greater susceptibility of influence in Mexican Americans, 30 Anglo and 30 Mexican American females were given the task of responding to a select set of Rorschach cards together with either an Anglo or a Mexican American confederate. All subjects observed the card and wrote down "three best responses," after which they showed each other their responses. Then subjects were asked to once more give two responses and "perhaps" include something that they had not seen in their original observation. Although Mexican Americans were not more generally susceptible to influence, they were more susceptible to influence when placed with an Anglo confederate. The findings throw further doubt on the general hypothesis of greater Mexican American susceptibility to influence. However, the results are consistent with the hypothesis of a tendency to greater conformity in members of a less powerful group when paired with members from a more dominant segment of society.

Differences have been reported in the susceptibility to influence dependent on ethnic and cultural variations. For example, Diaz-Guerrero (1975) reported that people of Mexican origin are more easily influenced by the behavior of others than are Anglos. In addition, support for the idea of greater Latin susceptibility to influence has been found through field observations (e.g., Lewis, 1951; Redfield, 1930), laboratory experiments (Avellar & Kagan, 1976; Kagan & Madsen, 1971, 1972a, 1972b; Kagan, Zahn, & Gealy, 1977; Madsen & Shapira, 1970), and phenomenological evaluations (e.g., Heller, 1966; Madsen, 1964).

Melgoza, Roll, and Baker (1983) conducted a study in response to what they saw as methodological flaws in previous studies. The most frequent error in the studies had been a confound of cooperation and competition. In their attempt to separate out various types of susceptibility to influence, they had the surprising results that the Mexican American subjects were not more susceptible than Anglos to pressure to conformity or cooperation.

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A review of the Melgoza et al. (1983) study suggests one possible reason for the failure to find the "easily susceptible Chicano." In their study, subjects in the conformity condition were asked to conform by being told that on an inkblot "other subjects frequently saw a particular type of content" (namely, either hostile or living things). In the condition to stimulate cooperation, Anglo and Mexican American females were simply asked to help the examiner by reporting either hostile or living things content. It is noteworthy that in both the conforming and cooperation conditions, there was a very weak interpersonal interaction. The experimenter simply read the instructions. At no time did the subjects have to confront or disagree with the experimenter or other subjects.

The role of the face-to-face interaction is especially important because of reported differences between Anglos and Mexican Americans in adherence to a preference for interpersonal interactions and collectivist attitudes on the part of Anglos. For example, Brenneis and Roll (1976) found that Mexican Americans include more interpersonal relations in their dreams than do Anglos. Brenneis and Roll hold that the content and organization of a dream is a useful summary of a dreamer's world, representations of self, and representations of interactions with the work. In addition, dreams also depict the dreamer's internal motives and experience. Their study of dream patterns found that Mexican Americans' dreams, when compared to Anglos' dreams, contained more people and more interpersonal interactions. In addition, Mexican Americans identify more people as being important in their lives than do Anglos. These findings support the generalization that Mexican Americans prefer more interpersonal interactions. In addition to personal preference, there is evidence that Hispanics have a relatively more collectivist attitude (Abrahams, 1983; Hofstede, 1980; Kwasi, 1980) and that Anglos have a relatively more individualistic attitude (Hofstede, 1980; Inkeles, 1983). Compared to individualist cultures, collectivists' attitudes place emphases on group values and norms and cooperation with other group members. Diaz-Guerrero (1984) reports that collectivists tend to engage in cooperative behavior whereas individualists emphasize competition.

Predictions

It was our position that the failure to find the predicted susceptibility to influence in the Melgoza et al. (1983) study was due in part to the refinements in methodology and, more importantly, to the fact that the context in which conformity or cooperation was measured was a highly sterile one. The data were gathered in groups; there was no personal or face-to-face interaction.

The conformity was to an anonymous “norm.” This certainly was not the kind of context that would pull for or activate strong pressure to conform or cooperate. If anything, the highly personal context would be less meaningful for the Mexican American subjects than it would for the Anglo subjects and thus mask or contaminate the differential susceptibility to conformity.

A design that would allow us to test our explanation of the Melgoza et al. (1983) results and that would provide a more meaningful test of the Mexican American susceptibility to conformity would include face-to-face personal interaction in which the pressure would be to conform to the results of a particular person with whom there was personal contact. To test this hypothesis, a methodology was developed that involved the use of Anglo and Mexican American confederates and the use of a modified Consensus Rorschach.

The specific predictions are based on the premise that Mexican American and Anglo females will manifest different levels of conformity and that the degree of conformity will depend in part on the ethnicity of a confederate. The predictions are as follows.

1. Anglos would be less conforming than would Mexican Americans when interacting with an Anglo confederate.
2. Anglos would be less conforming than would Mexican Americans when interacting with a Mexican American confederate.
3. Anglos would be more conforming with an Anglo confederate than they would with a Mexican American confederate.
4. Anglos would be no more conforming than would Mexican Americans when each is interacting with a confederate of her own ethnicity.
5. Mexican Americans would be more conforming when interacting with an Anglo confederate than they would when interacting with a Mexican American confederate.

Method

Subjects

The 60 subjects in this experiment were 30 Anglo and 30 Mexican American females from psychology courses at a large university. Only females were used to reduce variance due to male-female differences and to reduce design complication. Also, Mexican American females tend to manifest their cultural traditions more so than do Mexican American males (Roll & Brenneis, 1975). Subjects were not informed of the role of ethnicity in the study until after the experiment was completed when they were then asked to list their ethnicity. If subjects reported being something other than Anglo or Mexican American, their data were not used.

One Anglo confederate and one Mexican American confederate were used. Each confederate was trained to provide predetermined answers to four Rorschach inkblots and given practice until she could do so correctly. The experimenter had a name that could have been Anglo or Mexican American and had facial features that would have readily been identified as either Anglo or Mexican American; that is, the experimenter, who is not Hispanic, had dark hair and eyes, which kept her from fitting the local stereotype of Anglo. Further, an informal survey of research assistants who did not know the experimenter agreed that, although she might be Mexican American, she might as easily not be.

Procedure

Subjects participated in one-on-one with either an Anglo or a Mexican American confederate. The confederates' role was to pretend that they were also subjects and to provide answers that were supposedly spontaneous. Their answers all were predetermined good form responses of relatively high frequency according to the Beck norms. Both confederates were trained to provide three responses to each of four inkblots (I, II, VII, VIII). In Card I, they reported seeing cliffs with trees, a shark fin, and a pelican. In Card II, they saw rabbits, a toy top, and a butterfly. For Card VII, they saw clouds, horns, and a vase. In Card VIII, they saw a castle on a hill, a tree, and flower petals. The confederates provided these answers for each subject and provided them in the order just given.

Instructions

Each subject and confederate pair was given the same oral instructions by the experimenter, as follows.

I would like both of you to write down on a piece of paper what you consider to be the three best responses as to what you think the card looks like. Once you are done writing down those responses, I would like each of you to show each other what you saw in the card and where you saw it. When you are done doing that, I would like you to individually write two additional responses, perhaps something new that you see this time in the card which you did not see when you first wrote down your responses.

A synopsis of the instructions was again presented verbally and the phrase "perhaps something new that you see in the card" was quoted as in the previous instructions.

So, subjects and confederates alike provided three answers to the inkblots and verbally told each other what they saw. Afterward, each was asked to

write down two additional responses (which, in reality, only the subject did and the confederate pretended to do). These two additional responses were not shared between the confederate and the subject. Every time that the subject adopted one of the responses from the confederate, it was counted as a conforming response.

Results and Discussion

The dependent variable, or measure of susceptibility to influence, was the number of times the subjects adopted the confederates' responses to the inkblots. The independent variables were the ethnicity of the confederate (Mexican American or Anglo) and the ethnicity of the subjects (Mexican American or Anglo). The data were analyzed to explore the differences in susceptibility to influence of Mexican American subjects when the confederates were either Mexican American or Anglo and of Anglo subjects when the confederates were either Mexican American or Anglo.

The mean susceptibility score for Mexican American subjects with the Mexican American confederate was 1.8, whereas the mean score of the Mexican American subjects with the Anglo confederate was 3.3. The mean score of Anglo subjects with the Mexican American confederate was 2.3, whereas the mean score for Anglo subjects with the Anglo confederate was 2.0.

The prediction that Mexican American subjects would be more susceptible to cues of conformity from an Anglo confederate than they would to cues from a Mexican American confederate was statistically significant. The value of $F(1, 2.30)$ was .34, $p < .05$. Mexican Americans conformed more to an Anglo confederate than they did to a Mexican American confederate.

Are Mexican Americans generally more easily influenced than Anglos? Although Mexican American subjects are more susceptible to cues of conformity from an Anglo confederate than they are to those from a Mexican American confederate, the remaining comparisons proved statistically insignificant. Mexican American subjects were not more conforming when the cues came from a Mexican American confederate.

Melgoza et al. (1983) created a study that was more controlled than the previous studies, which had found evidence of more easily influenced Mexican Americans. They allowed for varying degrees of cooperation, as compared to just cooperation or noncooperation, and the task to be completed was ambiguous. In their study, the easily influenced Mexican American disappeared.

Our study was fashioned after the Melgoza et al. (1983) study. We allowed for varying degrees of cooperation by measuring the number of responses

taken from a confederate, and we used an ambiguous stimuli, the Rorschach. In addition, we had Anglos and Mexican Americans interacting on a personal level because there is evidence in Mexican American culture that interpersonal modes of interaction are more salient.

The prediction that Mexican Americans would be more susceptible to influence than would Anglos was not generally supported. As in the Melgoza et al. (1983) study, the more susceptible Mexican American failed to materialize. The failure to support the hypothesis that Mexican Americans are more susceptible to influence does not, by itself, mean the various hypotheses offered about the more cooperative and more conforming nature of Mexican Americans are incorrect. However, the negative findings in the Melgoza et al. study, together with the results of the current study, suggest that at least it is time to seriously question the overall hypothesis about Latinos, in general, and Mexican Americans, in particular, being more susceptible to influence. This is especially the case in light of the fact that, in the present study, the pressure to conform was increased by having an immediate, interpersonal, face-to-face model to which to conform.

In contrast to the general lack of conformation for the "susceptibility to influence" hypothesis, there was one finding that supports the hypothesis. When faced with an Anglo confederate (as opposed to a Mexican American confederate), there was slightly more, but statistically significant, conformity on the part of Mexican Americans. Why the increased conformity in the face of an Anglo confederate? This finding is reminiscent of one of the very first (if not *the* first) experimental study of group difference in conformity. Abel (1943) reported that in an institution for mentally retarded girls, the African American girls were clearly dominant within the institution. In an experiment of race and conformity in that context, the White girls followed the lead of the African American girls twice as often as the African American girls followed the lead of the White girls.

Roll and Abel (1993) reviewed the concept of identification with the aggressor and applied it to reactions of members of minority groups vis-à-vis values of members of the dominant society. It is their contention that, to a greater or lesser extent, there is a tendency of members of minority groups to respond to their relative lack of power by taking on the attitudes and behaviors of members of the dominant society. In the Abel (1943) study, the African American girls, within the confines of that institution, clearly were the dominant and more powerful group. There the White girls conformed more to the opinions of African American girls. In the present study, Mexican Americans were not generally more conforming but did conform more in the presence of members of the dominant society.

This study intentionally was limited to women subjects. The question immediately arises about the role of gender and whether the dominant, favored position of men in the society would produce the same kind of increased conformity in women subjects, and questions arise about the role of gender and culture interactions.

In sum, using a modified Consensus Rorschach methodology, we explored the hypothesis that Mexican Americans are relatively more susceptible to influence. There was no overall finding of greater susceptibility to influence. However, there was greater conformity on the part of Mexican Americans when presented with an Anglo confederate. These findings throw further doubt on the general hypotheses about Latinos in general, and Mexican Americans in particular, being more susceptible to influence. The finding of greater conformity of Mexican Americans in the presence of an Anglo confederate is consistent with the concept of identification with the aggressor.

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