

Inferring one's beliefs from one's behavior as a function of belief relevance and consistency of behavior*

MARK P. ZANNA, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J. 08540
and

CHARLES A. KIESLER, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kans. 66044

Ss, asked to perform attitudinally consistent or inconsistent behavior, had the implication drawn that the behavior had relevance for belief or did not. The results indicated that individuals do infer their beliefs from their behavior—when the behavior is consistent with prior beliefs and when the implication exists that behavior has relevance for belief.

Bem (1967) has recently proposed that people infer their beliefs, to some degree, from their behavior. Despite the plausibility of this notion, there is little evidence that one can point to in support of it. For example, while it is possible to explain many dissonance experiments with the notion that people infer their beliefs from their behavior, these experiments cannot be regarded as a test of the notion.

There is some evidence bearing on the hypothesis from experiments where Ss are asked to behave in a manner consistent with their beliefs—a situation in which dissonance explanations cannot be very persuasively advanced. Bandler, Madaras, & Bem (1968) have reported such a study in which Ss rated shocks they “chose” to escape as more painful than shocks they were “forced” to escape. However, work by Kiesler on consonant behavior (e.g., Kiesler & Sakumura, 1966) could also be construed as a test of the notion and seems, at least on the surface, to contradict it. In this study, Ss in control conditions were induced to read a speech consistent with their beliefs into a tape recorder. Recording the speech had no effect on Ss' descriptions of their attitudes, apparently contradicting the notion that Ss infer their attitudes from their behavior. This conclusion can be avoided, however, if we assume that Ss infer their attitudes from their behavior only when there is some kind of implication, supplied by the culture or by situational cues, that the behavior in question is relevant to their beliefs. Whereas escape behavior probably carries a strong implication that the stimulus escaped is noxious, speech-reading behavior does not necessarily imply adherence to the contents of the speech. It may be that

many behaviors are of this latter neutral sort, suggesting nothing about belief except when situational cues intervene with an implication that the behavior is relevant to belief.

A study seems called for, then, which would require Ss to engage in some kind of consonant behavior with adequate justification under conditions where the implication either is or is not drawn that the behavior is relevant to their beliefs. Where the implication is drawn, Ss should become more extreme in their belief; where the implication is not drawn, they should not become more extreme.

A study of this type might also serve as a framework within which to examine the controversy between Bem and the dissonance theorists. What if we were to imply to Ss, committed to a counterattitudinal behavior, that their behavior was relevant to their beliefs? Bem's motiveless information-processing viewpoint leads us to expect that such Ss would incorporate this information, digest it, and infer that their beliefs were more similar to their behavior than they had thought. Our position, which incorporates the motivational view preferred by dissonance theorists, does not lead to such an anticipation. Ss given adequate justification for counterattitudinal behavior do not experience discomfort and therefore are unmotivated to change their beliefs. In addition, the large discrepancy between their attitudes and their behavior should make it implausible to them that their behavior was in any way a reflection of their beliefs. Such Ss should reject a suggestion that their behavior has implications for their beliefs.

These considerations suggest that the experiment should include a pair of conditions where Ss are asked to perform, with adequate justification, some counterattitudinal behavior. For some of these Ss, the implication should be drawn that their behavior is

relevant to beliefs; for others, the implication should not be present.

In sum, we predict that Ss behaving consistently with their beliefs will become more extreme when it is implied that the behavior is relevant to belief. On the other hand, we expect the cue of belief relevance to have little or no effect when the S's behavior is inconsistent with his beliefs.

SUBJECTS

Fifty-eight Yale freshmen who had never taken a psychology course were paid \$1.50 “to serve as experimenters in an interesting study on communication and persuasion.” Ss were assigned randomly to condition upon arrival.

PROCEDURE

The E introduced the study as part of a project examining the relationship between the number of arguments used in a communication and the persuasiveness of the communication. Ss were led to believe that they would act as Es and deliver prepared speeches on an opinion topic to passers-by in the street.

CONSISTENCY OF THE BEHAVIOR

Ss in the consistent condition were told that they would argue that “air pollution is really an important problem in New Haven and right now” and that action to control it should be taken immediately. Ss in the inconsistent condition were to argue that “air pollution is really not an important problem—not in New Haven and not right now” and that no action to control it should be taken at the present time.¹ For both groups, justification for the behavior was adequate: all Ss were paid to serve as Es in a presumably valuable investigation of mass communication. Moreover, the Ss were paid upon arrival and also were not given an explicit choice to perform the behavior.

BELIEF RELEVANCE

In both consistency groups, Ss were told that the E believed in the position they were to advocate and that the topic itself was a reliable and valid one. It is the difference in emphasis given to these facts that constituted the belief-relevance manipulation. For Ss in the belief-relevant condition, it was made clear that the position they were about to advocate was dictated by the E's beliefs. The implication was thus drawn for these Ss that the behavior of an E was related to his beliefs. And, of course, in this experiment Ss believed themselves to be Es. Ss in the belief-irrelevant condition were told that, although the E believed in the position to be advocated, the selection of the topic and the position were dictated solely

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Table 1
Response to the Question, "How Important Do You Think the Problem of Air Pollution Is?," and the Rank of Air Pollution as a Social Problem (of 10)

Relationship of Behavior to Attitude	Relevance of Behavior to Attitude			
	Irrelevant		Relevant	
Consistent	7.67*	(5.27)†	9.00	(3.86)
	1.95	1.48	.84	1.30
	N = 15		N = 14	
Inconsistent	7.21	(5.00)	6.87	(5.67)
	.94	1.46	1.78	1.70
	N = 14		N = 15	

Note—The mean ranks are in parentheses. Standard deviations are presented beneath each mean.

*The higher the mean, the more antipollution the attitude; †the lower the mean, the more antipollution the attitude.

by scientific and technical considerations (i.e., because of the topic's reliability and validity). For these Ss, then, there was no suggestion that an E's behavior was relevant to his beliefs.

DEPENDENT MEASURES

Following the manipulations of consistency of behavior and relevance of belief, the E introduced the dependent measures under the guise of collecting background information for future studies. The chief dependent measures were those concerned with the problem of air pollution: how important it was and where it ranked in relation to other social problems.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the mean responses, on a scale with 11 as the maximum, to the question, "How important is the problem of air pollution?" It may be seen that the belief relevance manipulation was effective for Ss in the consistent condition. When the implication is drawn that an E's behavior is dictated in part by his belief, Ss believe the air pollution problem to be more important than when the implication is not present ($t = 2.33$, $df = 54$, $p < .05$).² In contrast, the belief relevance manipulation had no effect on Ss in the inconsistent condition ($t < 1$). Apparently, the implication that behavior is relevant to belief is unacceptable to the S whose behavioral commitment is widely discrepant from belief. The overall interaction between consistency and belief relevance is significant at the .05 level ($F = 4.34$, $df = 1/54$).

Ss were also given 10 social problems to rank in terms of their importance for society. Table 1 also presents the mean rank given to the problem of air pollution. The same pattern holds again. For Ss in the consistent condition, the belief relevance cue results in assignment of a higher rank to the air pollution problem ($t = 2.43$, $df = 54$, $p < .02$). For Ss in the inconsistent condition, the belief relevance cue has no effect

($t < 1$). The interaction is again significant at the .05 level ($F = 6.43$, $df = 1/54$).

It is apparent in Table 1 that the only real effect which is present (for both measures) is the difference between the consistent belief-relevant cell and all the others. Apparently, the consistency-inconsistency dimension and the belief relevance-irrelevance dimension are without consequence by themselves.

DISCUSSION

The results are thoroughly in accord with the proposition that individuals will, on occasion, infer their attitudes from their behavior. When Ss were committed to behavior that was generally consistent with their beliefs, a cue that the behavior was relevant to beliefs was successful in producing attitude change. The present study also provides evidence which implies that such an inference process does not account for the attitude change observed in dissonance experiments. Because Bem's motiveless information-processing view does not place any importance on an initial attitude, it suggests that a belief-relevance cue, which is effective when behavior is consistent with belief, should also be effective when the two are inconsistent. Our results indicate that this is not the case. When the behavior required of Ss was counterattitudinal, the belief-relevance cue had no effect. Evidently, when there is no motive to change beliefs, the self-supplied information that there is a wide discrepancy between behavior and beliefs overrides the E-supplied information that the behavior is relevant to beliefs.

The experiment raises the question of how potent and direct the implication of belief relevance must be in order to produce attitude change. Certainly the manipulation here was quite powerful, involving, in effect, a small sermon by the E on the importance of changing the world through action research. In a conceptual replication of the

consistent conditions, Kiesler, Nisbett, & Zanna (1969) used a more subtle and indirect cue of belief relevance. The procedure was very similar to the present experiment, except that the cue that the behavior was relevant to belief was delivered by a confederate posing as a S on a topic different from the S's. Such an indirect cue provided a very conservative test of our hypothesis and served to rule out explanations of the present experiment based on differential persuasiveness of the communications about air pollution. As in the present experiment, belief-relevant Ss were found to be more opposed to air pollution than were belief-irrelevant Ss.

So far it has been said that the belief-relevance cue was ineffective in the inconsistent condition because the large discrepancy between the Ss' attitudes and behavior rendered the cue implausible. Such a null effect, however, can also be accounted for by suggesting that the manipulation of belief relevance was itself weak and thus ineffective in the inconsistent condition. Since no data were obtained that could help to distinguish between these possibilities, this alternative explanation is not ruled out.

Our view of inconsistent behavior has implications for our thinking about consistent behavior. We have argued that Ss do not infer their attitudes from inconsistent behavior because they are certain that the behavior does not represent their attitudes. It may be that, in general, the less certain one is about his attitudes, the more likely he is to draw an attitude inference from his behavior. If so, we might expect the probability of an attitude inference to be greater under any of the following circumstances: (1) when the number of others agreeing with one's position is unknown; (2) when one is relatively uninformed about the attitude issue; (3) when the prior attitude is not solidified, e.g., by virtue of prior commitment to a particular position; (4) when there is a broad latitude of acceptance (Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965) on the issue; and (5) when the issue itself is ill-defined.

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