

Social distance reactions to black and white communicators:

A replication of an investigation in support of belief congruence theory

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The present investigation is a partial replication of a previous study which demonstrated that race is given negligible weight for the determination of a social reaction (adjective generation) to a communicator when communicator-reactor belief congruence is at a high level. The present study demonstrated that, even when communicator-reactor belief congruence is at a high level, race is a much more important criterion for social reaction than belief congruence when the highly personally involving social distance reaction is employed.

Allen (1970)¹ noted that previous attempts by proponents of belief congruence theory to support their interpretation of social reaction demonstrated that, while race is an important criterion for social reaction, in general, belief congruence is a more important criterion (see Rokeach, 1961). Allen (1970) tested the more stringent belief congruence position that, given an especially high level of belief congruence between communicator and reactor, race is given negligible weight in the determination of social reaction directed to the communicator. This latter position was supported with the use of a more personally involving reaction than those employed by previous belief congruence researchers. However, Allen (1970) noted that while the adjective generation reaction he employed was probably more personally involving than those used previously, it is apparently not as involving as the social distance reaction for which race had repeatedly been shown to be the more important criterion (e.g., Triandis, Loh, & Levin, 1966). The present study was an attempt to demonstrate that the degree to which a reaction is personally involving is critical, such that when the maximally involving social distance reaction is employed, race is more important than belief congruence, even when communicator-reactor belief congruence is at an especially high level. Except for the following, the present study employed the same procedures and communication-questionnaire booklets as Allen (1970): (1) an additional congruent communication was used, and (2) the Triandis social distance reaction was employed as the dependent variable

rather than the adjective generation reaction.

METHOD AND RESULTS

Because the present study is an almost exact replication of previous research, the reader is referred to Allen (1970) for details of procedure. In brief, each S was exposed to one of three communications, two of which were known to be congruent and one of which was known not to be congruent with their beliefs, which was either attributed to a black communicator or to a white communicator (six conditions, six independent groups; $N = 294$). Ss were required to react to communicators by responding to social distance items (Triandis et al, 1966). As in the first study, Ss were more accepting of communicators attributed with the congruent communication, although the differences were slight ($F = 3.47$, $df = 2/288$, $p < .05$). However, contrary to the results of Allen (1970), Ss were much more accepting of white than of black communicators ($F = 23.30$, $df = 1/288$, $p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

In support of belief congruence theory, it had been shown (Allen, 1970) that, when an effort was made to establish an especially high level of belief congruence between communicator and reactor, race was given negligible weight in the determination of the adjective generation reaction. However, the present replication of Allen (1970) yielded results which indicated that race is given more weight than belief congruence for the determination of the social distance reaction.

Jonathan Freedmen (personal communication) has made the valid point that researchers of the belief congruence school have frequently supported their position under circumstances wherein information about belief congruence is prominent

relative to information about race. This criticism would appear to apply to any study which involves an "especial effort to establish a high level of belief congruence," as in Allen (1970) and the present study. However, if the sheer prominence of belief information relative to race information rather than the level of belief congruence per se accounted for the results of Allen (1970), then the belief effect should also have been stronger than the race effect in the present replication of Allen (1970). The latter should be the case because belief information was just as prominent in the replication as in Allen (1970), due to the use of the same communication booklets as Allen (1970, plus the additional congruent communication mentioned above).

As it was, the belief congruence effect observed in the present study, though significant, was considerably smaller than the race effect and was comparable in terms of proportion of variance accounted for to the belief congruence effect reported by Triandis (1961) under circumstances where belief congruence information was definitely not more prominent than information about race and the social distance reaction was also employed. Thus, the prominence of belief information relative to race information could not have fully accounted for the results of Allen (1970). Given these observations, it appears reasonable to conclude that in comparing belief congruence and race as criteria for social reactions which do not entail a high degree of personal involvement, belief congruence may be given almost total weight *when communicator-reactor belief congruence is at an especially high level*, although this will not necessarily be the case when highly personally involving reactions are observed.

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NOTE

1. A revision of Allen (1970) is in press. Copies of Allen (1970) are available from the author upon request.

* A version of this paper was read at the Southwestern Psychological Association meeting, 1970.