

# Student attitudes toward David Duke before and after seeing the film "Who is David Duke?"

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Both before and after seeing the Public Broadcasting System film "Who is David Duke?" 94 college students indicated like or dislike of Duke and indicated whether or not they thought he was a racist. The film provided evidence of Duke's current racism, anti-Semitism, and pro-Nazi leanings. Nevertheless, the majority of the students did not change their attitudes after watching the film. As in a previous study (Eisenman, 1992), just over 50% of the students liked David Duke. All black students were anti-Duke. Of those who did change their attitudes after seeing the film, 23% of the women but only 8% of the men became more negative toward Duke. Other findings are discussed, and the reason for the popularity of Duke, a former leader of the Ku Klux Klan, is considered.

David Duke is one of the most interesting politicians of recent times. A former head of the Ku Klux Klan and a former Nazi sympathizer, he has denied his racist past, and he says that he has changed. He is a member of the Louisiana House of Representatives who ran a strong race for the United States Senate, in which he gained about 45% of the total vote and more than 50% of the white vote in Louisiana (Eisenman, 1992). A study of why people like him may throw light on the psychology of prejudice or on how attitudes are formed. Duke's denial of his past is a clever position, because it allows people to say they are for him without having to admit to having racist attitudes. It makes sense for a person with some past stigma to deny that the stigma currently exists (Eisenman, 1991; Goffman, 1963; Jones et al., 1984). Yet Duke's constant attack on blacks, whom he labels with code terms such as *welfare cheats*, allows his followers to share an implicitly racist view without overtly acknowledging it. Today, it is usually not acceptable to be overtly racist in the United States, although indirect expression of racism is often prevalent.

Although Duke claims he is not a racist or a Nazi and that he no longer sympathizes with such people, the Public Broadcasting System film "Who is David Duke?" shown on the program "Frontline" provides a different picture. In this film, people say that when they talk with Duke in private, a totally different view of him emerges, in contrast with his public stance of not being a prejudiced person. In private, people say, he condemns blacks and Jews and says that the holocaust never happened, and he has advised a Nazi to be less obvious in what he is saying. Such advice seems to indicate that Duke may be following the same path: he has exchanged his Ku Klux Klan robes and overt hatred for a business suit and a disguised

racism. Would students who see this film change their views of Duke? A previous study indicated that just over 50% of students in a Louisiana university liked Duke (Eisenman, 1992). If similar findings might be obtained before students viewed the film, perhaps the content of the film would cause a change in their view of Duke. On the other hand, much of Duke's appeal seems to be more emotional than ideological, with whites seeing him as something of a savior, especially in a state that is suffering economic poverty from the decline of the previously prosperous oil industry. If an emotional appeal is the basis of Duke's popularity, perhaps the film would have little or no effect.

## METHOD

### Subjects

The participants were 94 students at a state university in Louisiana. These students were in a large introduction to psychology class, from the same university as were students in the previous study (Eisenman, 1992), who were also in an introduction to psychology class.

### Procedure

The students indicated like or dislike of David Duke on a sheet of paper and indicated "yes" or "no" in response to the question, "Is he a racist?" both before and after seeing the Public Broadcasting System film "Who is David Duke?" which was originally shown on the program "Frontline." Since the film was 1 h long and the class met for 50 min, the film was shown over two consecutive class periods, which allowed time for both the showing and the answering of the two questions. The students were also asked to indicate their gender and their race: black, white, or oriental. There were 39 white females in the class, 38 white males, 11 black females, 3 black males, 1 oriental male, 1 white who failed to list gender, and 1 student who listed neither gender nor race.

## RESULTS

All statistical results reported are two-tailed binomial tests. The major finding was that students tended not to

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change their views after watching the film. Those who liked Duke beforehand liked him afterward, and vice versa. Specifically, only 23% of the women and 8% of the men showed any negative change toward Duke after watching the film, with negative change being defined as indicating either dislike after having first indicated like or "yes, he is a racist" after previously indicating "no, he is not a racist." Only 9 of 39 white females showed any change of this nature and only 3 of 38 white males. Thus, the attitudes tended to remain the same ( $p < .01$ ). All black students and the one oriental male indicated dislike of Duke and "yes" to the racist question both before and after the film ( $p < .01$ ). Specifically, 5 women changed from like to dislike after the film and 5 changed from "no" on racism to "yes" on racism after seeing the film. For men, 1 changed to dislike after the film and 2 changed to "yes" on racism. Surprisingly, a few students changed in the direction of being more positive to Duke after seeing the film. One white student who did not list gender changed from disliking Duke and seeing him as a racist to liking Duke and seeing him as not being a racist. One white female changed from dislike of Duke before the film to like afterward, and 1 white male who listed himself as undecided on both the like-dislike and racist-not-racist questions changed to like and not a racist after viewing the film.

Seeing Duke as a racist did not necessarily mean that students disliked him. Eight of 39 white females and 8 of 38 white males said, before seeing the film, that they liked Duke and considered him racist. Before seeing the film, 7 of the 39 white females who liked Duke said he was not a racist. For the male students, 15 of the 38 white men indicated that they liked Duke and considered him not a racist.

## DISCUSSION

The results show that even though the film "Who is David Duke?" seemed to expose Duke as anti-black, anti-Semitic, and pro-Nazi, students who had favorable attitudes toward him before the film maintained their views after seeing the film. At least some of these students were likely overt racists themselves, as indicated by those who said that they liked Duke even though they saw him as a racist. Others might have been covert racists, who found Duke's statements to their liking. Of course, before a film or any persuasive message can have an effect it must be understood. It is possible that these young students did not understand the film, did not pay attention, or otherwise missed the message. Others may have been so racist or so pro-Duke that they got the message but rejected it. In a discussion after the research, some students said that they were not racist and that they liked what Duke was saying about some things even though he might be racist and they might not like all that he said or stood for. This position is either a rationalization or consistent with the view that these students were basically

nonideological, finding Duke to their liking because of his charismatic appeal. Duke is young (aided in his appearance by plastic surgery), and he does not come across as the typical politician. People seem to have a negative view of government (Katz, Gutek, Kahn, & Barton, 1975; Sirgo & Eisenman, 1990), so someone who runs for political office as an apparent outsider may have much appeal. This may explain, at least in part, the appeal of Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot in his 1992 bid for the presidency of the United States. People seem to like Perot, even though (because?) they know little of what he stands for.

Duke's appeal would seem to reflect a new kind of prejudice, different from the overt prejudice and racism of the authoritarian personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) but having much in common with it. Duke and his followers can deny being overtly prejudiced but still maintain views critical of marginalized groups in the United States: blacks, the poor, people on welfare, and criminals. Duke's campaign statements have attacked all these groups, and such attacks may serve a scapegoat function for people who feel threatened by bad economic times in the state, and who perceive blacks as getting special breaks from the government, such as affirmative action hiring ("Many Turnings," 1991). Also, anti-black attitudes may often coincide with support for conservative candidates (Eisenman & Sirgo, 1992).

The support for Duke found in the present sample was just over 50% for the white students, which is consistent with a previous study at the same university also done with introduction to psychology students (Eisenman, 1992) and with Duke's actual white vote in the 1990 United States Senate race, which he lost by getting about 45% of the total vote in Louisiana but about 55% of the white vote (Freemantle, 1990). Thus, these students may accurately reflect how people in Louisiana feel about Duke.

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