

AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE
CONVERSATION OF GESTURES*

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Current studies of attitudes have relied upon written responses and the most obvious form of communication, the verbal. This study explores the nature of authoritarianism as expressed through body and head positions in interaction. Measures of role embracement were developed and evaluated. High authoritarians were found to be more rigid across situations than low authoritarians and to embrace the leadership role more often when subordinated than did low authoritarians.

In his classic work, The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals (1896), Charles Darwin concluded that the postures and gestures he observed were innate. While investigating the courtship habits of the great crested grebe, Sir Julian Huxley (1914) discovered that certain movement patterns lose their original function and become symbolic ceremonies. The ritual, rather than its component movements, functioned in the mating process. George Herbert Mead focused on gestures, both verbal and non-verbal, and their function in interaction ritual. He was careful not to entirely reject Darwin's notion of a tie between gestures and the emotion. However, contrary to Darwin, Mead did not assume gestures merely give evidence of a state of emotional consciousness but considered them to be a part of language and the communication process (1964: 127-132).

According to Mead, attitudes "determine how we are going to approach the object, and the steps in our early manipulation of it (1964: 125)." An attitude, manifested in the gesture, is part of the act rather than a direct expression of an emotion. The importance of gestures is that ego's gesture can elicit a response from alter which, in turn, becomes a stimulus for ego. A conversation of gestures takes place, a mutual adaptation of behavior. For Mead, consciousness emerges from such behavior rather than being a precondition of it.

The nonverbal manifestation of attitudes has been investigated primarily in abnormal psychology.¹ Anthropologists have opted to stress the inter-relationships of the verbal and nonverbal (Hall, 1959 and Birdwhistle, 1962) acknowledging the variation in nonverbal communication. Yet Davitz (1964: 16-18) has noted the prediction of non-verbal behavior has been feasible given knowledge of the situation. For one, Birdwhistle (1960: 58-64) reports of a group leader that had one of the lowest word count percentages in his peer group. His leadership seemed to be primarily nonverbal. At least in the leadership role, nonverbal lines of action have been observed and recognized by an observer. For our purposes, a standardized situation with the subject in the leadership role seemed appropriate to intensify nonverbal communication.

As Goffman (1961: 106-110) has observed, the individual may perform the activities proscribed by the role but disidentify himself from it. The act of separating oneself from a role is termed role distance. The opposite, role embracement, includes "a visible investment of attention and muscular effort." Goffman implies two determinants of the performer's position, the predispositions of the individual and the real or anticipated responses of others. In the present study the subjects were exposed to two encounters that differed in one respect, the response of others. Authoritarian attitude and stake in the outcome of the encounter were the two measured predispositions.

Our interest was in the subjects' nonverbal behavior in the leadership role.

Questionnaire studies may be interpreted as evidence that the high authoritarian assumes the other person has attitudes similar to his own. On the other hand, low authoritarians usually rate the other as average on authoritarian traits (Secord and Backman, 1964:80-81). While the high authoritarian assumes consensus, the low authoritarian is more likely to perceive differences between himself and others. With a task at hand, the high authoritarian should be less adaptive to the responses of others in interaction.

Hypothesis I: High authoritarians are more likely to embrace the leadership role than are low authoritarians.

Deutsch (1970) found the initial gesture of high authoritarians in a game context to be exploitatively oriented while low authoritarians were trusting. High authoritarians have also been shown to be aggressive toward others, particularly those in a status lower than their own (Epstein, 1965, 1966). In all three studies, the responses of others were not provided so we do not know if the high authoritarian would maintain his orientation in interaction or not. The rigidity attributed to high authoritarians remains to be tested in interaction (see Brown, 1963).

Hypothesis II: High authoritarians are more likely to be rigid across situations than are low authoritarians.

If the individual has something to gain or lose from the encounter, he is more likely to engage others in his own best interest and less likely to withdraw.

Hypothesis III: Individuals are more likely to embrace the leadership role when they have a high stake in the outcome of the encounter than when the stake is low.

Procedure

The 64 male subjects were students enrolled in Introductory Sociology courses at Vanderbilt University. Early in the course it had been announced that all students would be required to work on a project outside the class. A revised version of the California F scale was administered to all class members to measure authoritarianism.² F scale scores were dichotomized at the mean. Half of the subjects were drawn from the population with high F scale scores and half from the low scoring population. Within each of these two groups, half of the subjects were given a stake in the outcome of the encounters by being told they would be given a grade equivalent to one of six short papers required for their course.³

In addition to the between subjects variables above, altercasting (Weinstein and Deutschberger, 1963) was introduced as a between subjects variable, the only repeated measure of the design. Each subject was required to participate in two different "work sessions" with two different "students" in each session. The students with whom the subject worked were confederates, or stooges, of the experimenter. In one session, one pair of stooges were programmed to cast alter, the subject, into a superordinate role. In the other session, the other pair of stooges was programmed to altercast the subject into a subordinate role. Each subject was exposed to both types of altercasting. The order of stooge pairs and stooge behavior were counterbalanced for order so that one stooge pair used each type of altercast as many times in the first session as in the second.

The stooges were programmed to maintain an identity as undergraduates as well as perform the appropriate altercast in several role playing sessions. In either work session, they acted as a pair to produce the programmed condition. They were instructed not to direct all their questions and suggestions to one another. The purpose of their behavior was to involve the subject in the interaction as an equal. In both sessions, the task was to be placed in jeopardy rather than the involvement of the subject. In the superordinating session, the stooges contributed little if anything. The subject had to take the lead if anything was to be accomplished. In the subordinating session, they attempted to "take over" the situation, not readily allowing the subject to lead. For example, one stooge would immediately direct the subject to take notes. The stooges' behavior was found to be acceptable in two additional combined pilot sessions.

The Experimental Situation

The subjects reported individually to an outer office adjacent to the laboratory. While waiting, two stooges arrived separately, both dressed as undergraduates though they were actually graduate students. Work groups are commonplace at Vanderbilt so it is unlikely the subjects were acutely suspicious. The experimenter met the group, checked their names, and led them into the laboratory seating them at a table equidistant from each other. Then all were introduced and told each was from a different Introductory Sociology section.

A standard set of instructions was read by the experimenter. The subject was then appointed leader and given his duties. The task required the group to make up a list of attitude items dealing with the social aspects of campus life or academic life on campus.⁴ The group was told to discuss the items jointly and submit a single list of items by the end of the 15 minute work session. The experimenter asked for questions and left the room. After the session, he returned, collected the list of items, and dismissed the two stooges reminding them of future appointments for a second session.

As soon as the stooges had left, the experimenter administered a post-experimental questionnaire designed to measure the subject's evaluation of his co-workers. The experimenter then asked the subject to wait in the laboratory while he brought two other "students" from the outer office. The second pair of stooges were introduced as having worked in one session previously. Omitting the general instructions, the second session was conducted the same as the first using the alternative topic for a task to the one used in the first session. Upon completing a second questionnaire, the subject was dismissed.

Measurement of the Dependent Variables

Mead has been criticized for failing to provide a method for researching his scheme (Meltzer, 1967: 22). The operational link between Mead's gesture and empirical behavior can be borrowed from ethology. Lorenz (1961) proposes that behavior should be studied by observing releaser organs that send out stimuli to which others respond. After leaving the laboratory at the beginning of each session, the experimenter took a position behind a two way mirror in an adjoining room where he was unable to hear the conversation of the work group. This mirror was camouflaged in the laboratory by a bookcase with a rivet-sized hole drilled in the back for observation through the mirror. Head and body positions for the subject were recorded at three minute intervals with the experimenter restricted to 10 seconds for each of five observations per session.

One of the requirements of being leader was to engage the other participants in working on the task. Face position was categorized as (1) looking at another; (2)

looking at the task; or (3) looking elsewhere. Looking at another was taken as an indicator of role embracement based upon Exline's finding (1963) that affiliative persons frequently exchange glances in non-competitive interaction. A change rate of zero was taken as an indicator of maximum rigidity.

Measures of engagement were also devised for the body. Body position was classified as (1) leaning forward, defined as forming an acute angle with the table; (2) sitting erect, forming a right angle with the table; or (3) leaning back, an obtuse angle. Since leaning forward placed the subject closest to the interaction, permitting the most visible use of nonverbal releaser organs, the forward position was used to operationalize embracement. Again, a change rate of zero for body position indicated rigidity.

Findings

One of the main purposes of the study was to evaluate the nonverbal measures themselves. The central concern in examining the intercorrelations among measures was the possibility that the measures themselves were not independent of one another. Table I indicates there is no reason to suspect any extreme overlap of measures.

Table 1. Intercorrelations Among Nonverbal Measures^a

Measures	1	2	3
1. Looking at Others			
2. Body Forward	-.34		
3. Head Mobility	.21	-.12	
4. Body Mobility	.30	-.86	.09

^aUnit of analysis is the subject

Stooge effects. The post-experimental questionnaire confirmed the subjects perceived no differences between the stooges either as individuals or as pairs. A significant difference between the pairs was found depending on whether they were using subordinate or superordinate altercasting. This difference validates the programming of the stooges.⁵

Substantive findings. Before turning to the results of the analysis of variance for the measures of role embracement and rigidity, it should be mentioned that this is an exploratory venture. Equating measures of head and body positions with role embracement is both interpretive and open to debate. The assumption is made explicitly that these measures are tapping role embracement, and our interpretations both reflect and qualify that assumption. That other interpretations are possible is clearly recognized.

Personality effects. To test for the effects of authoritarianism, stake, altercasting, and the order of treatment, an analysis of variance was performed for each of the four measures independently.

High authoritarians were found to be more rigid across situations ($F=4.62$, $d_f=1/48$, $p<.04$) as measured by body position in support of hypothesis II as shown in Table 2. It is essential to point out the interview protocols for The Authoritarian Personality (1950) suggested the subject who is intolerant of ambiguity is prone to use limiting and qualifying symbolic language forms. Also, intolerance of ambiguity and rigidity were coded together but never separately: they were treated as equivalent, generating considerable confusion (Brown, 1965; 505-509).

Table 2. Means for Body Mobility by Authoritarianism

	Hi F	Lo F
	0.67	1.14

In our data, rigidity of the body was present across situations. If the body is a releaser organ as we claim, rigidity may limit and qualify the gesture released similar to symbolic language. When the stooges tried to subordinate the leader, making his role ambiguous (see Kahn, 1964), the high authoritarian remained more rigid ($F=6.13$, $d_f=1/48$, $p<.03$) and asserted his role embracement by leaning forward more often than low authoritarians as shown in Table 3 ($F=4.97$, $d_f=1/48$, $p<.04$). This behavior could be interpreted as intolerance of ambiguity. Table 4 adds strength to this interpretation. Since a change in session brought a change in stooges introducing a new altercast, a fresh ambiguity was present in the change itself. The high authoritarian increased his embracement somewhat while the low authoritarian evidently was more prone to display role distance ($F=6.69$, $d_f=1/48$, $p<.02$).

Table 3. Means for Body Mobility and Body Forward by Authoritarianism and Altercasting Order

		Hi F	Lo F
Body Mobility	Superordinate	0.41	1.31
	Subordinate	0.94	0.97
Body Forward	Superordinate	4.44	3.75
	Subordinate	4.16	4.25

Table 4. Means for Body Forward by Authoritarianism and Session

	Hi F	Lo F
Session 1	4.16	4.32
Session 2	4.44	3.69

The relationship between authoritarianism and altercasting order for looking at others would, at first glance, seem contradictory. Turning to Table 5, when high authoritarians met the subordinating altercast first, they looked at others less than when the altercasting order was the reverse ($F=4.10$, $d_f=1/48$, $p<.05$). Analysis of the interaction of stake and altercasting order discussed below indicates our operationalization of role embracement as looking at others was in error. An interpretation of looking at others as an information-seeking act provides a better fit with the data.

Table 5. Means for Looking at Others by Authoritarianism and Altercasting Order

	Hi F	Lo F
Sub-Superordinate	1.59	2.06
Super-Subordinate	2.06	1.63

The stake produced no main effect nor did it interact with authoritarianism. But a consistent pattern of interaction effects emerged between stake and altercasting order. There were three way interactions between authoritarianism, stake, and altercasting order for both body mobility and leaning forward. These interactions are not reported here since they merely show the variability of low authoritarians under two conditions.

Table 6 shows subjects in general were less likely to embrace the leadership role when the stake was high and when they were initially subordinated than when altercasting order was reversed ($F=4.73$, $d_f=1/48$, $p<.04$). They also showed more body mobility ($F=5.94$, $d_f=1/48$, $p<.02$) and looked at others more ($F=4.69$, $d_f=1/48$, $p<.04$) than when the altercasting order was reversed. The lack of embracement for the body combined with mobility suggests looking at others was more likely to be an effort to seek the responses of others than the expression of engagement implies by embracement.

Table 6. Means for Body Forward, Body Mobility, and Looking at Others by Stake and Altercasting Order

		Hi Stake	Lo Stake
Body Forward	Sub-Superordinate	3.84	4.34
	Super-Subordinate	4.44	3.97
Body Mobility	Sub-Superordinate	1.25	0.69
	Super-Superordinate	0.59	1.09
Looking at Others	Sub-Superordinate	2.09	1.56
	Super-Subordinate	1.63	2.06

Summary and Conclusions

In summary, the study had two main purposes. The first, to evaluate the measures, was accomplished. The measures themselves did not overlap. Change in body position showed no differences under treatment. Role embracement fits in interpretation with the forward body position. Finally, looking at others was reinterpreted from role embracement to information-seeking.

Exploring some hypotheses was the second purpose. High authoritarians were found to be more rigid across situations than were low authoritarians in support of Hypothesis II. Main effects were not found in support of hypotheses I and III. However, high authoritarians were found more likely to embrace the leadership role in the face of subordination than low authoritarians.

Mead's conception of the interdependence of attitudes and gestures has been useful. Past studies have concentrated on written response as a measure of attitude. Interaction experiments have dealt with the most obvious response, the verbal. We contend a thorough statement on an attitude would also include nonverbal behavior. Variations of the present study would provide such needed information about authoritarianism and other attitudes that predict behavior in interaction.

Footnotes

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¹For examples see Sarbin and Hardyck (1955); Mahl, Danet and Norton (1959); and Eckman (1964).

²See Adorno, et al. (1950). Fifteen of the item reversals were derived from Christie, Havel and Seidenburg (1958). The reversals corrected for the acquiescent response set, a major criticism of the original scale.

³Subjects were informed of the deception in a "cooling out" lecture after the experiment was completed.

⁴Topics were counterbalanced for order between subjects.

⁵The procedure of analysis and findings for the post-experimental questionnaire are reported by Beckhouse (1969).

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